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A Review of Recent Political Science Literature on the
Misguided Nature of Our Divide

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POLARIZATION IS A BUZZWORD. It's used frequently to describe the general atmosphere of the United States, from contested elections and Congressional gridlock to fraught interpersonal relations. We hear it from politicians, the media, and at social gatherings as one of the main reasons why we feel a sense of resignation about the state of our nation.

To uncritically presume political division as a fact is concerning, however. It deters us from creating space to critically examine whether we are—as a public—so ideologically disparate, what responsibility those in power hold in fomenting strife, and what the possibilities are to propagate a healthy national identity. The narrative of citizen polarization as an intractable conflict with little chance for progress is a dead-end, and in some cases, a distraction from the “elites” and political structures which allow and uphold illiberal behavior.

Drawing from recent published literature, the following discussion clarifies the characteristics of U.S. public polarization, examining the general lack of evidence for an ideological divide while confirming the dislike and distrust of partisan counterparts, a phenomenon called affective polarization. Since partisan loyalty is not decreased by reductions in affective polarization, as explained below, additional complicating factors such as the malleability of ideological beliefs and the lure of partisan-motivated reasoning help explain why politicians who participate in illiberal behavior have garnered electorate support in recent years.

Start from the Top: Defining Destructive Polarization

McCoy, Rahman, and Somer define polarization as: “A process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society

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in terms of ‘us’ vs. ‘them.’”¹ This definition elucidates the toxic simplification of destructive polarization. U.S. citizens increasingly align themselves along dividing lines of single identity labels – conservative or liberal – which have created a vacuum for other salient social identities and multidimensional human behaviors.

While competition is an integral component of a healthy democracy, polarization becomes harmful when an exclusionary “us” separates itself from an unappealing “them” along lines which simplify the complexity of politics, identity, and social relations.

While competition is an integral component of a healthy democracy, polarization becomes harmful when an exclusionary “us” separates itself from an unappealing “them” along lines which simplify the complexity of politics, identity, and social relations. The division conjures an opposition composed entirely of those who pose a threat to democracy. When this mindset is all-encompassing, citizens tend to rely on stereotypes to understand the “other,” begin to dislike them as a group, and avoid socializing with them. For those in power, to interact and cooperate with the other side is often viewed as political suicide.²

It is true that political “elites,” or those in positions of power, have become polarized ideologically and that this polarization has been asymmetrical. Since the 1960s, Congressional Republicans have moved further to the right on the political spectrum, while Democrats have not moved as far left.³ The highest standard to evaluate Congressional partisanship,

DW-NOMINATE, created by Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal, tracks Congressional voting behavior along a scale from very conservative (+1) to very liberal (-1). Republicans received a score of .25 in the 87th Congress (1961-1962) and .51 in the 117th Congress (2021-2022), an increase of 104%. Democrats came in at -0.3 in the 87th Congress and -0.37 in the 117th, an increase of only 23%.⁴ “Elite” polarization is not a straightforward indicator of citizen ideological polarization, however; scholars have failed to show a causal link between elite polarization and mass polarization.⁵ People may elect those with increasingly extreme views due to a lack of moderate candidates or a sense of choosing the lesser of two evils.

Making Sense of Public Polarization

Affective Polarization: The “Us” vs. “Them” Mindset

Political affiliation is a powerful identifier. It is often acquired at a young age through social cues and rarely changes throughout one’s life. Additionally, the major political parties are

1. Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer, “Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 1 (January 2018): 18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218759576>.
2. Murat Somer and Jennifer McCoy, “Déjà vu? Polarization and Endangered Democracies in the 21st Century,” *American Political Scientist* 62, no. 1 (February 2018): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218760371>.
3. Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts, “Polarization in American Politics,” in *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (New York: Oxford Academic, 2018): 303, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190923624.003.0010>.
4. Jeffrey B. Lewis, Keith Poole, Howard Rosenthal, Adam Boche, Aaron Rudkin, and Luke Sonnet, “Congressional Roll-Call Votes Database,” Voteview, accessed October 3, 2022, <https://voteview.com/parties/all>.
5. See Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, “Polarization in American Politics,” 301 and Shanto Iyengar, Yphtach Lelkes, Matthew Levendusky, Neil Malhotra, and Sean J. Westwood, “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 22 (May 2019): 131, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034>.

becoming more internally ideologically homogenous. Republicans are mostly conservative and Democrats are generally liberal, meaning there is less ideological diversity within each party.⁶ In a 2022 Gallup poll, 74% of Republicans self-reported as conservative and 22% as moderate; 50% of Democrats identified as liberal and 37% as moderate.⁷ When groups become homogenous in this way, they are more likely to view the opposition as socially remote and rely on stereotypes to understand the “them.”⁸ Such sorting does not necessitate more extreme ideological stances in the electorate, however.⁹ Political sorting in the United States may have more to do with the growing linkages between partisanship and other salient social identities, including religion and race.

Social identities tied to political affiliations create intense divisions and personal, emotionally fraught conflict. Mason showed those with aligned religious, racial, and partisan identities have stronger emotional reactions to “information that threatens their partisan identities or issue stances.”¹⁰ When emotions are high in a conflict, opponents often enter a hyper-vigilant state, unable to think about anything but the conflict itself. Most people become defensive and attack involuntarily, which makes democratic compromise and bipartisan agreement nearly impossible.¹¹

As a result, citizens increasingly dislike and distrust those from the opposing party. People have begun to view the “other” as hypocritical, selfish, close-minded, and extreme. Since the mid-1990s, the percent of Democrats and Republicans with a highly unfavorable view of the opposing party has tripled.¹² In 2022, 62% of Republicans labeled Democrats as lazy and 83% of Democrats pegged Republicans as close-minded.¹³ This dislike and distrust of members of the other political party absent of major ideological shifts is called affective polarization.

Perceptions of Extreme Ideological Differences

A major impact of affective polarization is a reliance on stereotypes to understand each other. We have created a typecast of the “other”: Republicans are white, wealthy, and Christian and Democrats are non-White, young, and urban.¹⁴ But not all these perceptions are reliable or accurate. In a 2018 survey, participants believed 32% of Democrats were members of the LGBTQ+ community, but the percentage

6. See Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, “Polarization in American Politics,” Iyengar et al., “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization,” and James N. Druckman, Erik Peterson, and Rune Slothuus, “How Elite Partisan Polarization Affects Public Opinion Formation,” *The American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (February 2013): 57-79, <http://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055412000500>.

7. Lydia Saad, “U.S. Political Ideology Steady; Conservatives, Moderates Tie,” Gallup, January 17, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/388988/political-ideology-steady-conservatives-moderates-tie.aspx>.

8. Iyengar et al., “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization,” 134.

9. See Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, “Polarization in American Politics,” 301 and Iyengar et al., “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization,” 131.

10. Liliana Mason, “I disrespectfully agree: the differential effects of partisan sorting on social and issue polarization,” *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 1 (March 2014): 128–45, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12089> and Liliana Mason, “Ideologues without issues: the polarizing consequences of ideological identities,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 82, no. 1 (March 2018): 280–301, <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfy005>; quoted from Iyengar et al., “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization,” 134.

11. Advanced Consortium on Cooperation, Conflict, and Complexity, “Navigating Political Polarization in Times of Crisis: Lessons from the Difficult Conversations Lab,” Columbia Climate School, September 2018, <https://news.climate.columbia.edu/2018/09/28/navigating-political-polarization-times-crisis-lessons-difficult-conversations-lab/>.

12. “Two decades of rising partisan antipathy,” Pew Research Center, August 5, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/08/09/as-partisan-hostility-grows-signs-of-frustration-with-the-two-party-system/pp_2022-08-09_partisan-hostility_00-05/.

13. “Republicans and Democrats increasingly critical of people in the opposing party,” Pew Research Center, August 9, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/08/09/republicans-and-democrats-increasingly-critical-of-people-in-the-opposing-party/>. See also “Growing shares of both Republicans and Democrats say members of the other party are more immoral, dishonest, close-minded than other Americans,” Pew Research Center, August 5, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/08/09/as-partisan-hostility-grows-signs-of-frustration-with-the-two-party-system/pp_2022-08-09_partisan-hostility_00-01/.

14. Iyengar et al., “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization,” 140.

was six, and 38% of Republicans make over \$250,000 a year, when the actual percentage is two.¹⁵

People also tend to hold exaggerated beliefs about the ideological stances of the opposing party. In 2019, Democrats and Republicans believed over half the members of the opposing party held extreme beliefs, when about 30% did.¹⁶ When it comes to divisive issues, citizens disagree on policy far less than what most people may assume. About 60% of Americans believe abortions should be legal in all or most cases and between 80% and 90% of U.S. citizens support universal background checks for gun purchases.¹⁷

Yudkin et al. asked Republicans and Democrats to share personal opinions on policy and then estimate oppositional support on the same issues. The results show a misguided understanding of the other's policy preferences:

- 85% of Republicans agreed “properly controlled immigration can be good for America” but Democrats estimated Republican support at 52%.
- 71% of Democrats rejected an open boarder immigration policy, Republicans thought only 30% of Democratic would.
- 65% of Republicans agreed the government should do more to stop “guns from getting into the hands of bad people” but Democrats estimated agreement at 47%.
- 68% of Democrats agreed law abiding citizens should have the right to bear firearms, Republicans thought only 44% would.¹⁸

Beyond divisive issues, most Americans are also concerned about the state of democracy itself; in a 2022 New York Times/Siena College poll, 71% of the U.S. electorate said democracy was at risk.¹⁹

Somer and McCoy posit polarization may be enhanced by groups with conflicting understandings and expectations of democracy.²⁰ But, according to 2021 data from Bright Line Watch, Trump supporters and opponents are in general agreement on most principles of a strong democracy. The percentage gap between Trump approvers and detractors was greater than ten in only two of the 30 principles (60% of Trump supporters ranked “government effectively prevents private actors from engaging in politically-motivated violence or intimidation” as important or essential while 80% of non-supporters did; 55% of Trump approvers ranked “politicians who lose free and fair elections will concede defeat” as important or essential while 78% of disapprovers did).²¹ Another set of studies by Pasek et al. found no statistically significant partisan difference between Democrats and Republicans who rated the value of democratic characteristics.²²

While the two sides do have some fundamentally different views, we are not as ideologically distant as the reliance on stereotypes—a side effect of affective polarization—would have us believe. We are deeply distrustful of the opposition, however, and believe our group is the right side of democracy.

15. Douglas Ahler and Gaurav Sood, “The Parties in Our Heads: Misperceptions about Party Composition and Their Consequences,” *The Journal of Politics* 80, no. 3 (July 2018): 965, <https://doi.org/10.1086/697253>.

16. Daniel Yudkin, Stephen Hawkins, and Tim Dixon, “The Perception Gap: How False Impressions are Pulling Americans Apart,” *More in Common*, June 2019: 6, <https://perceptiongap.us/media/zaslaroc/perception-gap-report-1-0-3.pdf>.

17. Hannah Hartig, “About six-in-ten Americans say abortion should be legal in all or most cases,” Pew Research Center, June 13, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/06/13/about-six-in-ten-americans-say-abortion-should-be-legal-in-all-or-most-cases-2/> and Rani Molla, “Polling is clear: Americans want gun control,” Vox, June 1, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/23141651/gun-control-american-approval-polling>.

18. Yudkin et al., “The Perception Gap,” 15.

19. “Cross Tabs for October 2022 Times/Siena Poll of Registered Voters,” *New York Times*, October, 18, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/10/18/upshot/times-siena-poll-registered-voters-crosstabs.html>.

20. Somer and McCoy, “Déjà vu? Polarization and Endangered Democracies in the 21st Century,” 6.

21. “American democracy at the start of the Biden presidency,” *Bright Line Watch*, accessed September 28, 2022, <http://brightlinewatch.org/american-democracy-at-the-start-of-the-biden-presidency/>.

22. Michael H. Pasek, Lee-Or Ankori-Karlinsky, Alex Levy-Vene, and Samantha L. Moore-Berg, “Misperceptions about out-partisans’ democratic values may erode democracy,” *Scientific Reports* 12, 16284 (September 2022): 1-10, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-19616-4>.

In two studies conducted by Pasek et al., Americans thought their own party members supported democratic values vastly more than their counterparts in the opposing party. Democrats believed others in their party supported democratic values by 56% and 77% more than Republicans in two studies respectively. Republicans thought other Republicans supported these characteristics more than Democrats by 82% and 88%.²³ The belief that the opposing party does not support democratic values and is thus likely to commit norm violations is dangerous. It can be used to justify illiberal behavior to secure the party's interests against impending violation and therefore sustain support for political "elites" who disregard democratic norms.

Affective Polarization and Commitment to the Party Line

When scholars began unpacking affective polarization, there was a hypothesized causal link between affective polarization and anti-democratic attitudes. It followed that if affective polarization was reduced, there would be less tolerance for democratic norm violations, like the restriction of voting rights and rejection of confirmed election results, and less support for politicians who employ such practices.²⁴

Voelkel et al. found that while mitigation tactics effectively reduce affective polarization, the results did not translate to reduced support for anti-democratic tactics or party loyalty. Affective polarization is not, therefore, the main cause of political support for those perpetuating illiberal behavior.²⁵ There are more complex factors creating the conditions in which political actors who conduct such behavior are elected and re-elected.

The belief that the opposing party does not support democratic values and is thus likely to commit norm violations is dangerous. It can be used to justify illiberal behavior

The Malleability of Ideological Beliefs

One such complication is the impressionable nature of the electorate; most citizens do not possess consistent ideological beliefs. People tend to align themselves first with a political party (or a politician they like), follow the cues and frames from the elites, and then adopt ideological stances to rationalize their partisan identity. These "ideological innocents" are estimated to outnumber those with strong policy opinions and stances by five to one.²⁶

Policy opinions tend to be more "situational than intrinsic;" the opinions of citizens shift depending on partisan identity, the current state of national politics, and who holds power.²⁷ In a Pew Research Center poll, 66% of Democrats agreed increasing the power of the president was too risky under the Obama administration in 2016; under President Trump in 2017, this figure rose to 87%. Contrarily, 82% of Republicans viewed it as too risky in 2016 but only 65% did so in 2017.²⁸

Bright Line Watch, as mentioned above, found Americans generally agree on the 30 principles of a strong democracy. Opinions between Democrats and Republicans began to diverge, however, when participants rated U.S. performance in these principles. Under the Trump presidency in 2018, Trump supporters evaluated U.S. democratic performance at about 60 on a 100-point scale. Their perceptions

23. Pasek et al., "Misperceptions about out-partisans' democratic values may erode democracy," 3.

24. David Brookman, Joshua Kalla, and Sean J. Westwood, "Does Affective Polarization Undermine Democratic Norms or Accountability? Maybe Not," OSF Preprints (December 2020): 1, <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/9btsg>.

25. Jan G. Voelkel, James Chu, Michael Stagnaro, Joseph Mernyk, Chrystal Redekopp, Sophia Pink, James Druckman, David Rand, and Robb Willer, "Interventions Reducing Affective Polarization Do Not Improve Anti-Democratic Attitudes," OSF Preprints (May 2021): 1-40, [10.31219/osf.io/7evmp](https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/7evmp); Thomas B. Edsall, "How much does how much we hate each other matter?" *New York Times*, September 29, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/29/opinion/political-polarization-partisanship.html>.

26. Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, "Polarization in American Politics," 305.

27. John M. Carey, Gretchen Helmke, Brendan Nyhan, Mitchell Sanders, and Susan Stokes, "Searching for the Bright Lines in the Trump Presidency," *Perspectives on Politics* 17, no. 3 (September 2019): 705, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759271900001X>.

28. Ibid.

rose in all categories during the Trump presidency, with strong spikes in principles like “government agencies are not used to monitor, attack, or punish political opponents,” and investigations of public officials are not compromised.²⁹ During that same time, Trump opponents ranked U.S. performance at around 50, highlighting low performance in principles including fraud-free elections and government protection of the right to peaceful protest. These results inverted between Trump approvers and disapprovers in 2021 under the Biden administration. Ratings dropped among Trump supporters from 60 to 47 with perceptions in importance rising in categories like “elections should be free from foreign influence” and “the judiciary can limit executive power.” Conversely, perceptions of U.S. democratic performance rose for Trump disapprovers from 50 to 58.³⁰ Political events are viewed as democratic norm violations or an effort to uphold American values, depending on partisan attachments, who is accused, and who is in power.

The Reliance on Partisan-Motivated Reasoning

In addition to malleable ideological beliefs, those in the electorate are susceptible to partisan-motivated reasoning. People engaged in partisan-motivated reasoning seek information which confirms prior opinions (confirmation bias), view arguments which bolster prior beliefs as strong (prior attitude effect), and argue against information that contradicts prior beliefs, no matter the confirmed accuracy (disconfirmation bias).³¹ Partisan motivated reasoning creates an appeal for the policy stances of our preferred party.³² “Elites” can utilize partisan-motivated reasoning with cues, frames, and endorsements

that do not necessarily rely on substantive arguments and objective facts.³³

Partisan motivated reasoning creates an appeal for the policy stances of our preferred party.

Robison and Mullinix tested the hypothesis “framing of polarization as problematic mitigates partisan-motivated reasoning” with a survey experiment on the DREAMS Act. When partisanship was framed as problematic, participants increased their support of bipartisanship and viewed the opposing party’s argument for or against the DREAMs Act as more effective. In the control group, participants average rating of the opposing

argument was 3.43 out of 7, but in the group for which polarization was criticized, the average rose to 4.21. Despite these shifts, the experiment showed no changes in partisan position-taking or party preferences; participants still concluded with support for or against the DREAMs Act along party lines. People are more likely to vote in accordance with their political affiliation at the behest of the “elites” who provide them with cues to support or oppose a particular policy, than to change their behavior based on pleas for bipartisanship.³⁴

The Complexity of Human Behavior Creates an Allure for the Ease of Partisanship

There is a paradox here which highlights the complexity of human behavior: we are not so ideologically disparate, but we do not have consistent ideological beliefs and often rely on partisan cues to make political decisions. In a survey experiment without partisan prompts, Americans can find common ground on policy. When partisanship is introduced into a study experiment, results shift toward in-party support.³⁵ In the affectively polarized environment of real-world politics, we are bombarded with partisan cues and frames and susceptible to partisan-motivated reasoning, which sways our opinions in alignment with our party identity.

29. Carey et al., “Searching for the Bright Lines in the Trump Presidency,” 712.

30. “American democracy at the start of the Biden presidency,” *Bright Line Watch*.

31. Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus, “How Elite Partisan Polarization Affects Public Opinion Formation,” 59.

32. Joshua Robison and Kevin J. Mullinix, “Elite Polarization and Public Opinion: How Polarization Is Communicated and Its Effects,” *Political Communication* 33, no. 2 (May 2016): 263-264, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2015.1055526>.

33. Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus, “How Elite Partisan Polarization Affects Public Opinion Formation,” 57.

34. Robison and Mullinix, “Elite Polarization and Public Opinion,” 271. The analysis relies on survey participants who self-identified as Democrats because the sample of Republicans was low, but Republican participants produced similar results.

35. See Carey et al., “Searching for the Bright Lines in the Trump Presidency,” Robison and Mullinix, “Elite Polarization and Public Opinion,” and Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus, “How Elite Partisan Polarization Affects Public Opinion Formation.”

Malleable ideological stances and the lure of partisan-motivated reasoning in polarized environments may help explain why reductions in affective polarization do not translate to decreased support for anti-democratic norms or party loyalty. People tend to adjust ideological stances to fit their partisan identity—which is increasingly connected to their social identity—and vote along party lines.

Where This Leaves Us

While reduction in affective polarization does not necessary translate to reduced support for anti-democratic norms or partisan preferences, efforts to reduce affective polarization are not in vain. Evidence suggests that such reduction can positively influence social and personal interactions by creating a more empathetic and accepting view of the “other.”³⁶ Affective polarization can be reduced by correcting misguided beliefs about the opposing party, including incorrect stereotypes and perceived extreme beliefs, and by enhancing the status of our common identity as Americans.³⁷ Some innovative programs have begun to experiment with intergroup contact theory, bringing Democrats and Republicans together to share personal stories and discuss politics through facilitated discussions.³⁸

There is individual civic responsibility to reduce affective polarization within social circles, to stay informed on policy, and to become aware of the lure of partisan-motivated reasoning. When it comes to individual responsibility, however, there are two important caveats. First, most people with the time and energy for such efforts tend to possess a privilege available to those who have benefited from the institutional status quo. Second, a focus on the citizen without a critical analysis of the impact of “elite” polarization and the political systems which uphold anti-democratic behavior is imprudent.

That politicians who have advanced illiberal behavior are being elected and re-elected is not enough to presume most citizens are supportive of such behavior. There is a lack of literature dissecting whether the American population is indeed supportive of illiberal tactics. Perhaps the phenomenon is explained better by a lack of moderate candidates and an electorate inundated and exhausted with “elite” partisan rhetoric. If there is widespread support for illiberal behavior, it likely stems from the belief that the opposing party is an extreme threat to American democracy.

“Elite” polarization may have a greater impact on citizen polarization than vice versa. Given the malleability of ideological beliefs and the power of partisan-motivated reasoning, “elites” have sway over forming public opinions and stoking partisan commitment. We are not so ideologically different, but we’ve been primed to view the other as untrustworthy and so unlike ourselves.

It is necessary to revitalize our analysis of those in power who rely on partisan rhetoric to create conflict and ask why it might benefit them that the chasm between the electorate continues to grow. The failure to curb the uptick in “elite” illiberal behavior is likely caused by complex factors in our political system—including, but not limited to, voter suppression tactics, the spread of disinformation, undisclosed campaign donations, and bad-faith actors and power-grabbers – rather than by citizens themselves.

36. Sean J. Westwood and Erik Peterson, “The Inseparability of Race and Partisanship in the United States,” *Political Behavior* 44 (October 2020): 1125-1147, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-020-09648-9>.

37. See Ahler and Sood, “The Parties in Our Heads” and Matthew Levendusky, “Americans, not partisans: Can priming American national identity reduce affective polarization?” *The Journal of Politics* 80, no. 1 (January 2018): 59–70, <https://doi.org/10.1086/693987>.

38. See the [America in One Room](#) program from the Stanford Deliberative Democracy Lab.

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