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Reducing Pernicious Polarization

by Jennifer McCoy

Political polarization is rising around the world, generating concerns about its detrimental impact on politics and society. The threats posed by pernicious polarization—the division of society into two mutually antagonistic political camps—are especially concerning for democracies as they are correlated with democratic backsliding.¹ It is therefore urgent to determine how to reduce these tensions.

In a study of depolarization episodes in all countries since 1900, my coauthors and I learned that depolarization occurred most often after a systemic shock: a foreign intervention, independence struggle, violent conflict, or regime change (primarily in a democratizing direction).² In only a quarter of the cases, countries depolarized within a given regime structure, whether democratic or autocratic. Notably, the study found no cases of depolarization from pernicious levels among liberal democracies, most likely because very few countries classified as full liberal democracies have ever reached pernicious levels; the United States stands out today as the only wealthy Western democracy with persistent levels of pernicious polarization.

Within Europe, pernicious political polarization in the 21st century is concentrated in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, though Italy joined those ranks in 2020 and 2021.³ Of the perniciously polarized European countries rated as full liberal democracies in the V-Dem database at some point in this century, three of the four were also downgraded in their regime category to the lesser electoral democracy rating – Hungary, Slovenia, and Poland (Italy retained its liberal democracy rating through 2021). None of those countries has depolarized to date.

Therefore, we face a major challenge in determining effective strategies to reduce, or at least manage, polarization while also protecting democracy. The task becomes particularly challenging because pernicious polarization is elite-driven, that is, by political entrepreneurs who calculate that demonizing, enemy-identifying, and anger-appealing messages is a winning electoral strategy, and by opponents who reciprocate in kind. When these political leaders then decide to retain power by concentrating power in the executive and/or by changing

the rules to the advantage of their own party, it becomes more difficult to check democratic erosion. If we expect citizens to provide a check on polarizing democracy-eroders, we may be sorely disappointed: studies show that voters give their own parties a pass when it comes to democracy-eroding behavior when their own party is in power, particularly when they view the opposing camp as an existential threat.⁴

What can be done? The answer depends in part on the degree of polarization and the degree of democratic erosion already experienced. If political polarization has been pernicious for some time, then citizens and political parties are likely polarized around the very concept of whether their democracy is improving or deteriorating, and in their trust in institutions. For example, in the United States, citizens across the board see democracy as being threatened, but Republicans tend to believe that election fraud conducted by Democrats has occurred and is a major threat, while Democrats believe that election restrictions imposed by Republicans are a major threat.⁵

If democratic erosion is advanced to the point that normal accountability mechanisms like judicial review, impeachment, or even investigative journalism are made impossible with politicized courts, polarized views about the democratic commitments of political parties, or polarized or closed media, then more extraordinary and innovative strategies will be required.

Nevertheless, we can identify some strategies to reduce or contain polarization:

1. **Changing incentives for political leaders and citizens.** Majoritarian, winner-take-all electoral systems are particularly prone to pernicious polarization, especially in presidential systems. These include

single-member district systems (such as the United States), and proportional representation systems with a high winner compensation (such as Hungary) or a high threshold for entry (such as Turkey). Political primaries may also be particularly polarizing, as evidenced in the U.S., where only the most partisan voters are likely to vote and often choose extreme candidates. Changing these methods can not only improve representation, but also potentially brings greater civility to campaigns and reduce partisan animus.

The dilemma is how to change the rules when the politicians themselves benefit from them, and citizens themselves may not be interested in the abstractions of democratic principles not tied explicitly to social and economic outcomes affecting their everyday lives. Starting locally with citizens educating other citizens about the benefits of better representation and responsiveness from political parties, and the negatives of rewarding politicians engaged in perniciously polarizing behavior, may offer one beginning. Cross-sectoral movements involving business, technology, academic, media and arts leaders, along with grassroots organizing, can pressure political leaders to make changes.⁶

2. **Political and cultural elites distancing themselves from anti-systemic and violent supporters or members.** It is crucial that political actors as well as leading media and cultural influencers condemn and distance themselves from violent and anti-system groups within and without their own organization.⁷ For example, the Italian Communist Party

1 Somer, Murat, Jennifer L. McCoy, and Russell E. Luke. "Pernicious Polarization, Autocratization and Opposition Strategies." *Democratization* 28, no. 5 (January 12, 2021): 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1865316>.

2 Jennifer McCoy, Benjamin Press, Murat Somer, Ozlem Tuncel. "Reducing Pernicious Polarization: A Comparative Historical Analysis of Depolarization." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 5, 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/05/05/reducing-pernicious-polarization-comparative-historical-analysis-of-depolarization-pub-87034>.

3 Michael Coppedge, John Gerring, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Staffan I. Lindberg, and Jan Teorell et al., "V-Dem Dataset Version 11.1," V-Dem, March 2021, <https://www.v-dem.net/en/data/archive/previous-data/v-dem-dataset/>

4 Simonovits, Gabor, Jennifer McCoy, and Levente Littvay. "Democratic Hypocrisy and Out-Group Threat: Explaining Citizen Support for Democratic Erosion." *The Journal of Politics* 84, no. 3 (July 2022): 1806–11. <https://doi.org/10.1086/719009>; Graham, Matthew H., and Milan W. Svobik. "Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States." *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 2 (May 2020): 392–409. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420000052>.

denounced the violence of the far-left Red Brigade, and joined the Historic Compromise with the Christian Democrats in the 1970s, during Italy's "Years of Lead". In the United States today, political rhetoric from former president Donald Trump and some current members of Congress and prominent media figures appears to have encouraged some lone individuals to carry out mass shootings, as well as organized militias to participate in violent acts like the January 6, 2020 attack on the U.S. Capitol.

3. **Address grievances leading to political polarization.** When in power, political parties must address the socio-economic and socio-cultural grievances that lead to receptivity to polarizing messages in the first place. A major motivation for support to polarizing populist candidates and political outsiders is a lack of responsiveness by major political parties. Acknowledging mistakes and proposing and adopting policies toward greater inclusion, social and economic equity and access to justice can help to reduce pernicious polarization. Chile's current attempt to draw up a new social contract through a constitution-writing

effort, in response to mass protests in 2019 to growing economic inequality, is an example of such an effort.

4. **Political adaptation to internal and external change.** Political parties must be responsive to changing conditions in order to bolster democratic resilience, and to sustain depolarization once it is achieved. If a broad political agreement or power-sharing pact depolarizes a society during a democratic transition, but then becomes frozen in place, not allowing new political groups or new generations of leaders to be included, as in Venezuela in the 1970s–80s, then political polarization and rejection of those parties is likely to result. Changing demographics, economic sectoral changes, changing values around sexual and gender identity, women's rights, ethnic identities, secularism and religion require inclusive adaptation rather than exclusionary, nativist, and authoritarian responses. Democratic innovations such as citizen's assemblies, ranked choice voting, or even national unity governments during a crisis period, may contribute to depolarization and greater citizen satisfaction with democracy.

⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/03/1069764164/american-democracy-poll-jan-6>

⁶ Putnam, Robert D., and Shaylyn Romney Garrett. *The Upswing*. Simon & Schuster, 2021. <https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/The-Upswing/Robert-D-Putnam/9781982129156>.

⁷ Bermeo, Nancy Gina. *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times: The Citizenry and the Breakdown of Democracy*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, c2003., 2003. <https://www.amazon.com/Ordinary-People-Extraordinary-Times-Citizenry/dp/0691089701>.

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