

Polarization in Online Spaces: Distinguishing Forms of Polarized Politics

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Abstract

Political campaigning often takes place against the backdrop of intense polarization, especially as it has shifted towards digital and social media spaces. This shift towards online spaces populated by a diverse range of participants, and away from the mass media arena of conventional political debate, has further complicated our understanding of the drivers and dimensions of such polarization, as affective and identity-based dynamics and other aspects are recognized alongside more traditional ideological and issue-based differences as promoting polarization. Reviewing the literature from political science and media and communication studies, this article notes that a substantial number of studies investigate polarization without sufficiently defining and conceptualizing the concept, and that this lack of conceptual definition is reflective of continuing disagreements in the field. This can lead to the conflation of different forms of polarization in the design and findings of empirical studies; the over-diagnosis of problematic and pernicious forms of polarization instead of mere disagreement and antagonism; and the unquestioned adoption of technologically determinist perspectives in the search for scapegoats and solutions. We argue for a better demarcation between these concepts in the study of political polarization as a threat to democracy, especially in the context of political campaigning, with particular attention to determining the point at which such forms of polarization turn destructive.

Keywords

polarization, populism, ideology, affect, destructive polarization

Introduction

At least since Howard Dean's much-noted but ultimately unsuccessful campaign for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination in the United States, online and social media in their various forms have been used in political campaigning. While Dean's campaign embraced the then state-of-the-art social media technology of blogs (Hindman, 2005), subsequent campaigns around the world have engaged with other popular platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, as well as more recent entrants such as TikTok, WhatsApp, and Telegram. Further, in addition to such mainstream social media platforms, campaigns and candidates seeking to engage with specific segments of the voting public have also variously explored niche platforms catering to distinct ideological groups (such as Gab or Parler, for far-right voters), ethnic communities (such as WeChat, popular especially with ethnic Chinese voters), or even Grindr (a dating platform with a substantial LGBTIQ+ userbase; Shepherd, 2022). Indeed, famously banned from his preferred platform Twitter, disgraced former US President Donald Trump started his own social media platform, Truth Social.

The use of social media in political campaigning holds a number of key attractions for parties and politicians. First, it enables them to speak directly and regularly to their followers and voters, without mediation by journalists and news outlets. This "has changed the power structures in political communication" (Broersma and

Graham 2016: 90) by enabling politicians rather than journalists to set the news agenda: in the absence of conventional, critical media interviews and their potential for “*negotiation-through-conversation*” (Broersma and Graham 2013: 449), journalists are forced to report more stenographically and without direct engagement on the social media statements of politicians, thereby disseminating and amplifying those statements further. Second, politicians using social media also benefit from the instant amplification and dissemination of their posts that their often very large follower bases provide. This is true even where followers engage critically with those posts, rather than simply sharing them on without question; arguably, for instance, although the discussion following his posts on Twitter was often controversial and critical, the exceptional level of social media (and, by extension, journalistic) attention paid to Donald Trump firmly cemented him as the leading contender for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination. Third, the increasingly sophisticated social media analytics tools now available also enable a rapid assessment of how well specific political messages resonate across their intended target audiences, and can therefore also be used to further influence campaigning strategies and advertising expenditure, on social media and through other channels.

Especially where such strategies and tools are employed by divisive, populist, and unscrupulous politicians and party organizations, however, they can also be deeply problematic. Arguably, short-message platforms like Twitter are better suited to pithy slogans than in-depth policy debate; highly visual spaces like Facebook and Instagram lend themselves more to politician selfies and political memes than factual discussion; and audiovisual platforms like YouTube or TikTok are more likely to attract viewers to engaging campaign videos than dry news content. Such features may thus be exploited more easily by campaigns that present a clear, simplistic, and affective ‘us vs. them’ narrative than by parties that propose a careful rational debate on complex political challenges. However, the same has been observed also in the adoption of earlier electronic media such as radio and television: the perception of immediacy and interpersonal engagement that the aural and audiovisual modes of such media create has been similarly exploited to present candidate personas rather than policies, and to promote populist candidates and divisive ideologies. Online campaigning is thus not necessarily categorically different from campaigning in other media contexts (cf. Mazzoleni 2014).

If social media are therefore not to be blamed as the root cause of polarization in politics, but instead constitute simply the latest mediated space for antagonistic political struggle between campaigns, it is nonetheless important to examine how exactly such antagonism and polarization unfolds within their specific contexts, and how it is encouraged or mitigated by the different styles and features of both political campaigning itself, and by journalistic reporting about political campaigning on social media. To do so is of critical importance given the increasingly urgent warnings about the deleterious consequences of entrenched and intractable political polarization (McCoy and Somer 2019: 258) – consequences that include political and policy gridlock, the delegitimization of political and state institutions, and in extreme cases even attempts by fringe hyperpartisans to violently overthrow the current political system altogether. Despite its unique features that do not translate directly to other political systems around the world, recent political history in the United States serves as a cautionary tale for each of these developments; additionally, there are growing concerns that such polarization is spreading to democracies around the world (cf. Carothers and O’Donohue, 2019).

Presenting these as broadly linear steps along a path towards democratic decline, McCoy and Somer (2019: 246-7) outline ten features of such unhealthy, “pernicious” polarization:

- a) formation of two antagonistic political camps that are hostile towards each other;
- b) transformation from political to social identity in these camps;
- c) formation of political standpoints around these identities;
- d) use of moral terms (‘good’ and ‘evil’) in describing each camp;
- e) mutual exclusion between members of both camps;
- f) growing internal cohesion within and external conflict between the camps;
- g) growing stereotyping and prejudice towards the opposing camp;
- h) decline of a moderate center and definition of all issues on binary terms;
- i) capture and domination of societal institutions by one camp or the other;

j) spatial and psychological separation of the two camps.

This general list of key features is valuable in identifying and investigating polarizing tendencies specifically in political campaigning, too: in conducting empirical studies of campaign rhetoric, such these features can be operationalized by manual and computational analysis approaches that explicitly seek to detect the presence of hostile (a), moralizing (d), or binary (h) language, for instance.

Yet beyond such a merely descriptive analysis, the study of polarized (and polarizing) political campaigning is complicated by the proliferation of forms of polarization that have been identified in the scholarly literature, and by the corresponding lack of agreement about how these should be defined and distinguished from one another. While we may relatively easily detect the presence of antagonistic language in a campaign, the question of its intent, and of whether and how it achieves its intended effect, is considerably more difficult to answer: does it simply demonstrate inter-party policy differences on specific issues, highlight more fundamental ideological divisions between camps, or affectively position the other side as morally corrupt for adopting a particular stance? Relatedly, as polarization describes a process as much as a state of division between different (political) groups, we must also ask at which point this division becomes genuinely problematic: while the mere existence of diverging political views, ideologies, and parties indicates some level of polarization, it is also a fundamental feature of multi-party political systems and not inherently damaging; presumably, it comes to threaten democratic processes only once divisions deepen to the point that finding consensus with, or at least tolerating the existence of, opposing perspectives, is no longer possible. If the ten features outlined by McCoy and Somer (2019) already indicate the effects of “pernicious” polarization, what might be the corresponding features of benign or at least tolerable levels of political polarization, and how may they manifest in political campaigning?

This chapter, then, addresses these questions by first defining the major forms of polarization that have been identified in the literature; we focus here in particular on ideological, issue-based, interpretive, affective, and perceived polarization. Further, for these forms of polarization we also explore the question of when they shift from ordinary to problematic. Next, we connect these fairly generic definitions of polarization with the specific context of (online) political campaigning; this demonstrates that the heightened energy and attention directed to political campaigning is especially likely to produce political polarization, and that the design of some political systems may in fact actively reward potentially destructive forms of polarization. Finally, we conclude this chapter by mapping out a number of key challenges for future research in this field.

Forms of Polarization

For a concept that is central to much of the research in political communication and related fields, polarization remains remarkably ill-defined, and its use in the literature is often unsystematic (cf. Kreiss and McGregor, 2023). This conceptual slippage is also indicative of the changing scholarly perspectives on polarization over time: while earlier work might have focused especially on (apparently) rationally founded differences in political views on specific issues, or on more fundamental ideological disagreements that span multiple distinct issues, a more recent affective turn has highlighted that such differences are often founded in less rational perceptions of self-identity, and emotional attachment to certain political and ideological views (cf. Boler and Davis, 2018). Further, at a psychological level such rational as well as affective factors also manifest in different interpretations of the political perspectives of the various political camps, and in different perceptions of the overall breadth and depth of polarization in society. In order to better address this complex interplay of different forms of polarization, we present more distinct definitions in the following.

First, *ideological polarization* traditionally refers to a growing divide between societal groups holding diametrically opposed political beliefs and party identities (cf. Yarchi et al. 2021). As a process, ideological polarization therefore occurs when, in a collective movement, people position themselves to form two or more groups with high internal ideological alignment and great external ideological distance; this may then result in a state of polarization in which common ground between political beliefs and ideologies no longer exists, and

compromise is therefore no longer possible. But there is disagreement on the observable extent of such ideological polarization, and about how it should be assessed (Lelkes, 2016). For the US, maximalists like Abramowitz (2010) argue that ideological polarization has increased dramatically in recent years, describing for example a growing divide between Democrats and Republicans on a range of policy issues. They see polarization as a fundamental shift, with each party becoming more ideologically homogeneous and less willing to compromise. In contrast, minimalists, as represented by Fiorina and Abrams (2009), argue that polarization is often overstated. They suggest that while there may be differences between the parties on certain issues, these differences are not as all-encompassing as maximalists suggest. Minimalists argue that the public is not as polarized as some might believe, with most individuals ultimately still holding centrist political beliefs. As Lelkes (2016) has argued, however, this debate hinges centrally on how polarization is measured; in particular, such measures may overlook asymmetrical polarization dynamics – where only one side of politics is drifting further towards extreme views – and thereby introduce a false equivalence between stably moderate views on the one side and increasingly radical views on the other (Freelon et al. 2020). More generally, because of its systemic idiosyncrasies, the specific measures at the center of the US polarization debate may not translate well to other democratic systems. Rather than measuring ideological polarization as a form of fundamental ideological divergence, then, it might be measured by assessing the consistence of partisans’ beliefs across a multitude of distinct issues.

Second, then, *issue polarization* can be defined as a type of ideological polarization that occurs when groups become increasingly divided on specific political issues (e.g., policy positions such as their stance for or against climate action), rather than on more fundamental political ideologies (Lelkes, 2016; Leifeld and Brandenberger, 2019). In this sense, issue polarization can be seen as a subset of ideological polarization; however, the more issue-specific nature of this form of polarization also allows for a more fluid system of allegiances where partisans who are strongly polarized against each other on a specific issue (such as women’s reproductive rights) show very few meaningful differences in their views on various other issues. Further, such issue polarization may also be clearly distinguished from ideological polarization when divisions on specific issues (such as Brexit) are orthogonal to conventional ideological fault lines (e.g. those between the UK’s Labour and Conservative Parties; cf. Cooper and Cooper, 2020). At the same time, however, recent studies show that at least in the unique political environment of the United States issue and ideological polarization patterns have been gradually converging, at least amongst the most politically engaged citizens (Fiorina and Levendusky, 2006; Lelkes, 2016). This points to the emergence of distinct partisan identities, founded on an affective identification with specific political leaders and groupings, that transcends issue-based and ideological polarization.

Thirdly, *affective polarization*, often in conjunction with *identity-based polarization*, is a form of polarization that divides people along lines of how they understand and what they feel about themselves versus others (Iyengar et al., 2012). It constructs in- and out-groups, which plays on a human tendency to associate with others we feel connected to or aligned with. Thus, by focusing on inter-group differences and similarities, affective polarization is a force which works to increase the perceived (and thereby over time also the real) distances and differences between groups along lines of identity. It is worth noting that identity here thus also comes to cover ideologies and issues, as these become increasingly congruent with identities (e.g. climate activism or vaccine skepticism as important identity markers for those passionate about such topics). Affective polarization has been described as an intensifying trend in the US and a number of other countries, though this is not uniform across all established democracies (Garzia et al., 2023) and is harder to measure in multi-party systems, requiring different approaches (cf. Wagner 2021).

The above forms of polarization describe differences between individuals’ and groups’ political views, values and beliefs, regarding either a specific issue or a broader ideological stance. By contrast, *interpretive polarization* refers to their interpretation of the events and information they encounter, where individuals and groups may “conceptualize the same topic in such vastly different terms that meaningful conversation between groups is almost impossible” (Kliger-Vilenchik et al., 2020: 2). While this is often straightforwardly observable in single-issue debates, in extreme examples the disagreements may be more difficult to map in the same space, as different groups fundamentally diverge in their definition of the issue itself, rather than in their preferences for

one or another of a set of bounded solutions; this has been demonstrated most prominently by the ‘alternate facts’ and ‘post-truth’ discourses since the mid-2010s. The instinctive differences in interpreting information and events that are highlighted by interpretive polarization may be affected by cultural and environmental factors, sometimes to the level of cognitive processing (e.g. Nurse and Grant, 2018); indeed, such interpretive differences may also be influenced by platform affordances (Kliger-Vilenchik et al., 2020: 9). A significant cause as well as consequence of such interpretative polarization is also a decline in the trust and a delegitimization of key societal institutions (parliaments, news media, courts), once their actions are increasingly interpreted from polarized perspectives (Bennett and Livingstone, 2018).

Our fifth and final form of polarization is *perceived polarization*. This describes “the degree to which the mass public perceives the parties and their followers to be polarized” (Lelkes, 2016: 399), and is thus also influenced by the extent to which individuals detect signs especially of issue, ideological, and affective polarization in others as well as in themselves. However, Lelkes points to evidence that suggests that such perceptions tend to exaggerate the depth of ‘actual’ polarization that exists within a society, often for reasons that are themselves ideological: “respondents exaggerate party extremity as a way to criticize the other side and engage in partisan cheerleading” (2016: 400). Such perceived polarization is also directly related to interpretive polarization, of course: if political and societal groups and institutions are perceived to be deeply polarized on issue, ideological, or identity lines, then any statements they make and actions they take are also likely to be interpreted against this context. The same is true for news reports, if a news outlet comes to be seen by the partisans of one or another side of a given debate as supporting or opposing their cause. An individual’s interpretive polarization as related to specific issues and topics therefore results at least in part from how they perceive polarization within society as a whole. As Enders and Armaly warn, perceived polarization may thus “exacerbate actual polarization, particularly of the affective sort” (2019: 837).

Even so, however, such tendencies towards greater polarization, taking any of the five forms we have outlined here, may still not result in the severe and “pernicious” levels of polarization that McCoy and Somer (2019) warn us about. A certain degree of polarization is fundamental to all multi-party political systems, and especially during political campaigns enables citizens to understand their choices at the level of policy issues, party ideologies, *and* politician identities. As McCoy and Somer’s list of features for pernicious polarization demonstrates, however, such polarization can become heightened and entrenched to a point that it undermines the functioning of a healthy democracy and promotes backsliding and illiberalism. In everyday political communication, and especially during elections and similar political campaigning, we see such destructive political polarization as indicated by the following five symptoms (cf. Esau et al., 2023):

- a) breakdown of communication;
- b) discrediting and dismissing of information;
- c) erasure of complexities;
- d) exacerbated attention and space for extreme voices;
- e) exclusion through emotions.

We explore in the next section how these forms of polarization, in their benign and destructive versions, manifest in political campaigning.

Political Campaigning and Polarization

The forms of polarization that we have outlined here have usually been defined in relation to everyday political processes, rather than with an explicit focus on political campaigning. However, their dynamics of polarization are likely to be further increased in the high-attention context of political campaigns. Indeed, specific aspects of political campaigning (and campaign reporting) may be linked directly to particular forms of political polarization.

First, the campaign context necessarily serves as a platform for the various political parties in a given democratic system to delineate and advertise their defining differences from their political opponents. This usually occurs, in the first place, at the level of the political party, as progressives, centrists, and conservatives (or their more specific equivalents in particular countries) seek to encapsulate clearly both what are the core attributes of their own party, and how these differ from those of the other parties. These are usually expressed in the form of broad ideological nostrums ('strong economy', 'law and order', 'personal freedoms') rather than specific policy settings, and therefore correspond fairly directly to the ideological level of polarization. Indeed, the need, for campaigning purposes, to claim clear distinctions between party ideologies even where these differences are far less clear-cut can be seen as furthering ideological polarization: it may lead campaigners to adopt more extreme positions than they have previously held, in order to present voters with a more clearly delineated choice.

The same is true also for campaigning on specific issues, to the extent that distinct issues are actually addressed at all in a given campaign. Such issue-based campaigning (e.g. on climate policy or gun control) corresponds in obvious ways to issue-based polarization processes; and again, the need to distinguish themselves from their opponents may lead candidates and parties to embrace more distinct positions than they had held previously, and to adopt a divergent position only in response to their opponents' stance on the same issue. Here, too, we see the interplay between ideological and issue-based polarization, and their connection with identity-based polarization: over time, specific issues and overarching ideologies can become aligned – a process Fiorina and Abrams (2008: 578) describe as "party sorting" – to the extent that specific issues are widely seen as 'owned' by a particular party and that the representatives of other parties instinctively adopt converse positions – creating the "ideological consistency" that Lelkes positions as one potential measure of polarization (2016: 394). As issue positions and ideologies are thus increasingly aligned, those issues that depart from this pattern – such as Brexit – stand out especially starkly. A likely further consequence of this party sorting and its equation of possible policy settings on specific issues with fundamental ideological positions is then also that political compromise across party lines even on specific issues is becoming harder to find: if compromise on a given issue no longer implies simply finding the right policy settings, but rather means giving ground on core ideological beliefs, this will serve as a powerful disincentive for consensus.

Indeed, the affective aspects linking ideology and identity come to the fore here, and are heightened in political campaigning especially by populist campaigns that inherently center on the personal identities and attributes of candidates and their followers than on rational choices between available ideological and policy options. Such campaigning – from what are often called 'presidential-style' campaigns that foreground the party leader's persona to fully developed personality cults as evident in the Trump 2020 campaign, but also including similar campaigning that equates whole parties with distinct societal groups – is clearly linked to, and actively promotes, affective polarization; like all populism, it encourages divisions between 'us' and 'them' to justify inequitable and exclusionary policies. Affective polarization in political campaigning often appears through shorthand statements and soundbites (e.g. blaming or othering a specific demographic), and by its affective nature can bypass, sideline or fundamentally change more ideological or issue-based political debates (e.g. turning a debate over tax reform into an attack on 'lazy jobseekers' or 'welfare-seeking immigrants'). This form of campaigning is likely to be especially effective in political systems whose design promotes the formation of a limited number of major party blocs rather than more fine-grained multi-party structures, or in political systems that condense complex electoral choices to the direct election of a single presidential candidate – or in systems that, like the United States, combine both these features. From this perspective, US politics was thus always likely to develop signs of deep affective polarization.

Beyond the political campaigning itself, however, polarization may also be heightened by the nature of the journalistic reporting about the campaign. Here, a journalism that consistently emphasizes the ideological and identity differences between the candidates, their parties, and their electoral constituencies, that unquestioningly echoes or even actively endorses their affective, socially divisive rhetoric, and that focusses on procedural or 'horse race' reporting of the campaign contest and its interplay with public opinion polling rather than on the political issues and proposed policies themselves is highly likely to contribute to the electorate's

perception of deep polarization, although the actual ideological differences between parties are considerably less pronounced. Put simply, if an election campaign is covered predominantly as a contest between parties and personalities rather than over ideas and solutions, it is difficult for the public to avoid perceiving it as a polarized, single choice rather than a complex weighing of diverse options.

Further, some news outlets are genuinely and others will at least be perceived to be aligned with parties and candidates on specific issues or overall ideology; these perceptions may also be amplified by candidates and their supporters criticizing and attacking journalists and news outlets for their supposedly biased coverage. To the extent that such perceptions take hold (that in the US case, for example, *Fox News* is seen as aligned with the far right, or the *New York Times* with liberal perspectives), this becomes the basis for interpretive polarization: although the supporters of opposing political camps will still encounter the same news reports, their reading of this content will differ widely based on their pre-existing views about the political leaning of the news source. Such interpretive polarization, then, comes to affect both the news outlet itself (as partisans will habitually distrust specific sources), and the news topics it covers (as partisans distrust even accurate reporting just because they first encountered it in an outlet they distrust).

This may be understood as a further extension of ‘party sorting’ that connects parties, their supporters, and their preferred news outlets; if the end result of these dynamics is that there are no more news outlets left that are seen as ideologically neutral by partisans of all political sides, then this creates a state of deep fragmentation across society. If and when it reaches such extremes, it can also be diagnosed as the first of the five key symptoms of destructive polarization that we have outlined above: a *breakdown of communication* between opposing sides in politics. Notably, however, in some contexts such interpretive polarization may be impossible to avoid: for example, it is not possible to report accurately about Donald Trump’s political campaigns without attracting accusations of ‘anti-Trump bias’ from his supporters. Especially in the context of political campaigning, therefore, interpretive polarization may be understood more as a symptom of other forms of polarization – chiefly, of ideological or affective polarization – than as a form of polarization that can be addressed directly.

Such deep interpretive fragmentation – where supporters of different ideological camps can no longer agree on a shared interpretation of observable reality, and read political motives into its journalistic coverage – provides an obvious example for the *discrediting and dismissing of information* that we have identified as the second of our five key symptoms of destructive polarization. In a campaign context, it may be expressed for example in unrelenting arguments over the correct interpretation of economic and other indicators; in the outright dismissal of unfavorable opinion polls; and (most problematically) in the discrediting of reported election results. These examples also highlight the fact that there is no one point at which tolerable polarization turns destructive, but rather that there is a sliding scale of severity: economic indicators and opinion polls *can* be critiqued in a principled, productive way, for instance, yet this turns problematic when the arguments are no longer based in evidence or open to challenge, and when the focus of the debate is thus no longer on the best approach to a specific issue, but on more fundamental ideological and identity differences.

Indeed, one of the key rhetorical strategies associated with this move is the *erasure of complexities*, which we identify as the third of our five symptoms for a slide towards destructive polarization. In a campaign context, this manifests for example in the use of simplistic statements and slogans and the misleading and self-serving operationalization of cherry-picked factoids and statistics. These are operationalized (or indeed weaponized) by campaigners to construct a negative overall image of their opponents that contrasts with the positive portrayal of their own side, and results in sweeping characterizations (e.g. “taxes will always be lower under a Liberal government”) that ignore the very specific contexts of particular achievements (e.g. global economic pressures). As the complexities of policy positions on specific issues are thus erased, this elevates them from issue-specific choices to matters of core ideological belief, and even to questions of party (and partisan) identity; this move substantially raises the stakes in any political debate or negotiation, as finding compromise is now no longer a matter of merely giving ground on a specific issue, but means giving up a part of one’s personal or collective ideology identity.

This necessarily also introduces increasingly affective elements into political campaigning, and contributes to what we have described as an *exclusion through emotions*. Such campaigning no longer primarily addresses

policy decisions on specific issues, or presents principled and consistent ideological frameworks, but instead positions support for particular candidates or parties more viscerally as a matter of core personal identity as defined by economic and social status, ethnicity, geography, and other factors. Taken to its extremes, this campaigning approach implies that voting for anyone other than the candidate or party who ‘naturally’ represents one’s own identity would be a betrayal of one’s in-group – but by extension also that such a candidate, once elected, would similarly betray their party and the voter demographics it represents if they were to engage in any political negotiation or compromise with their political opponents. This consequence of exclusionary affective campaign rhetoric for polarizing campaigners themselves is demonstrated for instance by partisans’ attacks on ‘moderate’ Republican lawmakers in the United States as ‘Republicans in name only’, or RINOs.

If polarization in political campaigning has thus progressed to such an extent that the exclusion of alternative and moderate voices from party orthodoxy becomes self-reinforcing, this serves to promote *exacerbated attention and space for extreme voices*, which we have introduced as the fifth and final symptom of destructive polarization. In a campaign situation where even the more moderate and consensus-seeking members of one’s own party are seen as insufficiently firm in their ideological beliefs, only those who are willing and able to articulate the most orthodox and extreme positions will be able to flourish. Arguably, this spiral of orthodoxy is visible in the contemporary Republican Party in the United States, whose ‘freedom caucus’ now wields an outsized influence over party direction; however, similar tendencies are also evident in many of the smaller extremist parties on the fringes of European multi-party systems, where members who express a willingness to work with establishment parties in order to implement their policy ideas are often pushed out in favor of those who embrace a more fundamentalist opposition to the established political system. This dynamic is not limited to political processes alone, however: the rise of such extreme voices within party organizations and political movements is also driven by, and in turn drives, increased attention to these voices in journalistic reporting.

Conclusion

Our discussion in this chapter has only been able to briefly sketch out the key forms of polarization that have been identified in the literature, to apply them to the specific context of political campaigning, and to outline the symptoms that indicate that polarization is reaching destructive levels. This chapter necessarily presents only a broad summary of a considerably more complex field of research; we acknowledge, most centrally, that research on polarization has been dominated by studies of the situation in the United States, whose idiosyncratic political and media system introduces a range of unique challenges that do not translate in any direct way to multi-party parliamentary democracies with a strong history of public broadcasting, for instance, or even to other two-party presidential systems with a corporatist media environment.

We also agree with Kreiss and McGregor’s forceful provocation (2023) that too much of the research on polarization simplistically positions all polarization as problematic, posits social cohesion as a desirable alternative, and thereby frustrates progress on the resolution of persisting social inequalities and injustices. For this reason, we have specifically highlighted the symptoms of *destructive* political polarization; by contrast, where they pit those who want to entrench and perpetuate existing inequalities against those who seek to reduce and resolve them, some forms of polarization can be productive and pro-social, not least by throwing the different issue, ideological, and identity positions in the debate into considerably sharper relief. This dynamic is especially prominent in the context of political campaigns, of course, whose very purpose is to present voters with a clear choice between the different candidates and/or parties: arguably, polarization – at least in its benign and productive forms – is an intrinsic and intended feature of political campaigning, and the absence of polarization from a campaign (for instance as candidates refrain from making clear policy statements in order to avoid potential controversy) is as much a sign of political dysfunction as the presence of destructive polarization.

The question that emerges from this discussion, then, is how we might define appropriate and productive levels and forms of polarization, in political debate in general and in political campaigning in particular. Against this background, Kreiss and McGregor also remind us that these are likely to be context-specific: they note, for

instance, that “polarization does not provide a normative or even conceptual way of distinguishing between White supremacists and racial justice activists, despite their asymmetrical relationship to liberal democracy” (2023: 10). The implied, and potentially controversial, consequence is that different rules may apply for different political groups: while there are justifications for embracing the language of extreme and exclusionary polarization against groups that actively seek to oppose and undermine democratic systems and institutions, the same language is not acceptable when it is used against those who fight for social justice and equality. Echoing similar debates in journalism studies about journalistic objectivity when it comes to reporting on populists and polarizers, there is, in other words, a need to incorporate moral judgments into the study of polarization, rather than to maintain a merely neutral and disinterested scholarly stance.

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