Polarisation

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Abstract

Polarisation is now a key focal concept across disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, with a recent boom in research attention. However, for the most part the concept remains ill-defined: several core types (issue-based, ideological, and affective polarisation) have been identified in the political science and media and communication literature, and these in turn may lead to further patterns of polarised action and interaction (group, perceived, and interpretative polarisation), while not all such polarisation dynamics necessarily have negative and destructive effects, and some can indeed be positive and productive of greater clarity on policy options. Supporting future work in the field of conflict studies, this chapter provides a systematic review of the major types of polarisation that have emerged in the current literature; exemplifies their distinctions and interrelations through a brief case study of the Brexit debate in the UK; and challenges the view of polarisation as inherently problematic by introducing a distinction between productive and destructive levels of polarisation.

Introduction

Polarisation in a political sense has been a concern in public and scholarly debate for many decades, yet arguably foundational questions regarding what constitutes polarisation, and delineations of when it should be considered a problem and even a threat for democratic societies, are still evolving. This ongoing fluidity also reflects broader advancements in our understanding of the drivers and dynamics of political debates, and of social and political conflict in general.

While earlier discussions focussed on polarisation as a growing distance between positions on specific policy issues or broader ideologies, an affective turn in scholarly research since the 1990s has complemented this by paying greater attention to the role of identity, affect, and emotions in the engagement of individuals and groups with political debates. A new perspective has also provided new explanations for the growing influence on democratic polities of populism, propaganda, and mis- and disinformation – all of which tend to rely more on affective rather than rational appeals. The electoral successes of populists like Jair Bolsonaro or Donald Trump, and the impact of mis- and disinformation on the campaigns for Brexit and against COVID-19 vaccinations, are only some of the most prominent examples for a much broader trend, observed in a wide variety of contexts across established and emerging democracies.

Yet such high-profile cases of substantial polarisation in public debate and electoral politics have also led to exaggerated moral panics that see democratic systems overwhelmed by runaway political polarisation, and – in spite of the complex and fine-grained set of definitions of different types of polarisation (Bruns et al., forthcoming) – to a blanket categorisation of all forms of polarisation as inherently problematic. More nuanced analyses, by contrast, seek to distinguish between benign and pernicious (McCoy & Somer, 2019), productive and destructive (Esau et al., 2023) polarisation, pointing out that mild levels of polarisation, especially on specific issues, can encourage the development and discussion of distinct policy options for the solution of the issue at hand, and can result in an agonistic but respectful public evaluation of these options. Additionally, some scholars have pointed out that in certain contexts – for instance, where substantial historical or contemporary injustices remain unresolved – deep polarisation between those clinging to the status quo and those seeking to change it can be entirely justified, and that concerns over such polarisation (and the incivility it may engender in public debate) are distracting us from the more important work of redressing the underlying structural injustices (Kreiss & McGregor, 2023).

This chapter introduces and critiques the concept of polarisation. We discuss the various forms or types of polarisation that have been identified in the literature – from issue-based and ideological polarisation to affective and identity-based polarisation, and beyond – and, using Brexit as an illustrative example, examine the questions of whether and when polarisation should be seen as pernicious or destructive in the first place, and whether a focus on polarisation as the central concern distracts from an analysis of the underlying social and societal causes of political divisions and disagreements. We close with a further outlook on key next steps for this field of research.

Evolving and Diversifying Definitions of Polarisation

In social and political conflict studies, polarisation refers to the act or state of accentuating divisions within social or political groups into opposing groups or extremes. The term's use as an empirical and analytical tool in research has been limited by its multifaceted and mainstream use over the past centuries, and its roots in hyperbolic, figurative speech. This restriction is further exacerbated within academia, with different disciplines seeking to ameliorate this issue with layers of different conceptualisations and terminology. One major traditional distinction is between political polarisation and social polarisation; however, these distinctions continue to blur as political affiliations become drivers for social polarisation and vice versa, and studies of affective polarisation consider both to be influencing each other (Iyengar et al., 2012).

The origin of the term *polarisation* is in the physical sciences, where it refers to the action of reflecting light at an angle, with the degree of polarisation describing the magnitude of the effect. This impactful image of splitting light was taken up almost immediately after its discovery in the early 1800s, used figuratively in varied ways by writers to describe ideas "presented in opposite & correspondent forms" (Coleridge, 1826), or understood in charged and particular (Holmes, 1859) or unified (Bushnell, 1868) ways. The specific sense of polarisation as a general condition, rather than a singular event or regarding sporadic concepts, was in use by the 1860s, as "that wretched polarization of our whole national thought, since 1688, into the two antagonistic currents of common Whiggism and common Toryism" (Masson, 1862, p. 87).

Since then, the use of polarisation in political rhetoric and fearmongering has only increased. As with similar terms such as 'echo chambers' and 'filter bubbles' (Bruns, 2019), without analytical specificity or empirical benchmarks, it is easy for anyone to make generalised public claims of increasing polarisation, and point to any particular thing as the cause or solution (Esau et al., 2023). The ambiguity is exacerbated by differences in how the term *polarisation* is interpreted across academic fields. Multiple reviews have found that mentions of "polarisation" or similar terms (e.g., echo chambers, fragmentation) in articles are more often than not only present in titles, abstracts, and introductions, used rhetorically rather than analytically, and, when used analytically, frequently lack definition and empirical measurement (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). Many studies also do not make clear distinctions with respect to what behaviour or area they study, describing, for instance classifying both ideological and affective polarisation simply as political polarisation (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). Claims of increasing polarisation may thus actually refer variously to greater polarisation amongst elected representatives (i.e. elites) or within the general populace (i.e. the masses); or to greater polarisation between proponents of different policies on a given issue, between groups adhering to diverging political ideologies, or between individuals and groups who harbour a different affective attachment to particular issues, ideologies, or identities.

In response, many fields have developed their own adjectival descriptors of polarisation to differentiate between both different *kinds* of polarisation, and polarisation amongst different groups; much of this is also in direct reaction to public discourse about polarisation. In the following, we therefore provide summaries of the most commonly discussed types of polarisation, as relevant for studies of social and political conflict. Through this systematic review of polarisation types, and their application to the case of Brexit as a major recent example in the latter part of this chapter, we contribute to conflict theory by providing a much-needed overview of

polarisation patterns and dynamics in their many interconnected forms, which future studies of polarisation from a conflict-theoretical perspective can build on.

Political and social, elite and mass polarisation

There is a distinction in the research between political and social, and elite and mass polarisation, with increasing acknowledgement of their mutual influences. Broadly, political polarisation involves the divergence of political attitudes, observed among the political elite and/or the general public. Social polarisation pertains to divisions between societal groups, such as those delineated by economic disparities (e.g., rich vs. poor). For political polarisation, changing voting patterns – such as decreases in crossing the floor and similar cross-partisan actions by elite political representatives – have served as prominent data to support mainstream claims of a growth in political polarisation and a decline of centrist politics. This focus on elite voting behaviours stems both from the inherent newsworthiness of parliamentary decision-making and from the high visibility and ready accessibility of longitudinal data on legislative votes. Mass voting trends are of similarly high interest and accessibility and have been utilised widely, particularly in comparative studies of polarisation across party systems. Yet the resulting claims of growing polarisation often conflate these analyses or simply lack clarity between elite and mass polarisation (Hetherington, 2009); direct comparisons show, for example, how partisan political polarisation in American political elites is well-documented, but the same cannot be said with certainty for the populations they represent (Lelkes, 2016).

Issue polarisation

Issue polarisation can be considered as a type of polarisation that divides groups over specific political issues, rather than fundamental ideologies (Leifeld & Brandenberger, 2019; Lelkes, 2016). Such divisions are more likely to be limited and resolvable as long as they remain rooted in direct disagreements on the scope of appropriate policy solutions. However, stances on specific issues may be influenced by underlying ideological beliefs or affective attachment to certain identities – if so, such issue polarisation also aligns with and contributes to ideological and affective polarisation dynamics. These dynamics can also come into conflict with one another: issue polarisation can outweigh ideological polarisation when divisions on certain issues (e.g., Brexit) cut across traditional ideological lines (e.g., between the Labour and Conservative Parties in the UK) and instead align with other, affectively defined identity markers (e.g., feelings of 'Britishness' or 'Europeanness'; cf. Cooper & Cooper, 2020). Issue polarisation thus allows for fluid allegiances between campaigners who otherwise have few ideological positions in common, yet can be subsumed into ideological polarisation where strongly polarised partisans on one issue (e.g., women's reproductive rights) also align in their polarised stances on other topics. In the US, studies show a convergence between issue and ideological polarisation in recent decades, especially among politically engaged citizens (Fiorina & Levendusky, 2006; Lelkes, 2016); this is further cemented by a growth in populist rhetoric. This suggests the rise of partisan identities rooted in emotional connections to leaders, surpassing issue-based and ideological divides. It remains an open question to what extent these observations can be translated to other political environments, however – especially to those that (unlike the US) do not feature an inherently bipolar party system.

Ideological polarisation

One of the most prominent and traditional dimensions of polarisation pertains to the distinctions between political ideologies. Ideological polarisation advances beyond disagreements on specific individual issues, and operationalises the polarisation of individuals' and groups' stances on multiple policy issues as an indicator for their positioning along ideological spectra. Different approaches focus on either *divergence* between opposing partisans' stances (DiMaggio et al., 1996; Fiorina & Abrams, 2008), or *convergence* amongst consistent positions of partisans, as evidence for ideological polarisation (Lelkes, 2016). This gradual partisan sorting points to a growing alignment of issue perspectives along ideological party lines (Hill & Tausanovitch, 2015) that corresponds to empirical measurements of, for example, correlations between individuals' positions on issues and their party identification (e.g., Abramowitz, 2010; Fiorina & Levendusky, 2006). Taking the US as an example, some political scholars argue that such ideological polarisation has deepened (e.g., Abramowitz, 2010), with Democrats and Republicans each becoming more ideologically consistent and less compromising, while others suggest that differences on specific issues might still not be as all-encompassing as purported, and that such polarisation is overstated (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). This ongoing debate also substantially revolves around how polarisation is measured (Lelkes, 2016), as current methods may overlook asymmetrical polarisation dynamics and might not apply to democracies other than the US.

Group polarisation

Running in parallel, the dynamics of divergence *between* groups and convergence *within* groups on issue or ideological positions – or affective beliefs or behaviours – are explored in social psychology as *group polarisation*. The fundamental assumption of this research is that individual positions among group members can, under specific conditions, become more extreme after interacting and deliberating collectively, in response to social dynamics and other processes of group communication. Group polarisation has been investigated with reference to citizens' juries and other group deliberations (Goodin, 2009; Myers & Lamm, 1976). In these scenarios, polarisation signifies the tendency for individual positions to aggregate either in favour of or in opposition to a distinct outcome. Such studies shed light on the contextual factors and mechanisms that drive polarisation within or between groups, and on how group communication processes shape individual and collective viewpoints and decisions.

Affective polarisation

Following the affective turn in the humanities and social sciences more broadly, the study of affect in polarisation has increased in volume and interest. Affective polarisation regards how affective responses manifest amongst polarised groups, and examines their role in driving polarisation. In contrast to the seemingly rational types of issue-based and ideological polarisation, affective polarisation constitutes an affect- or emotion-driven reaction intertwined with negative or positive sentiments directed towards constructed in-groups or out-groups (Hobolt et al., 2021; Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2015). Prominent case studies for affective polarisation include the emotional and identity-led divergence in attitudes between Republican and Democrats in the United States; the identity-driven bifurcation of UK society in the struggle over Brexit (see example below); as

well as debates and disagreements over women's rights, Indigenous rights, or immigration, especially when they are inflamed by populist rhetoric that pits an established in-group (the people, the masses) against a demonised out-group (the elite, minorities, foreigners). Importantly, affective polarisation is not necessarily correlated with ideological polarisation, with studies demonstrating increases in affective polarisation in isolation from ideological shifts (Iyengar et al., 2012; Lelkes, 2016).

Perceived polarisation

Partially a critique of polarisation research, and partially a type of polarisation in its own right, perceived (Lelkes, 2016) or psychological (Settle, 2018) polarisation refers to the difference between actual polarisation – in terms of measurable ideological or behavioural differences – and the distance to other groups that ordinary citizens perceive for themselves and the groups they identify with. Perceptions of polarisation, influenced by many shifting individualised and social factors as well as by news coverage that foregrounds political conflict and divisive rhetoric over attempts to find compromise or build consensus, may drive the destruction of social ties between opposing partisan groups far ahead of other empirical polarisation markers (Lee, 2022).

Interpretative and epistemological polarisation

Closely associated with perceived polarisation, *interpretative* and *epistemological polarisation* have both separately been posited as new types of, or perspectives on, polarisation. Interpretative polarisation emphasises how issues are contextualised and understood differently by individuals and social groups on different sides of issue, ideological, and affective divides (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020): their pre-existing partisan and polarised attitudes colour how such individuals and groups interpret news, information, and even their first-hand observations of the world around them. Further, epistemological polarisation refers to a group of issues related to both knowledge equity and something akin to interpretative polarisation – for example, the rising threshold of expertise required to parse public discourse (Landry, 2021, p. 185), or a tendency to view the intellectual traits of in-group members positively and out-group members negatively (Tanesini & Lynch, 2020). Epistemological polarisation might thus also serve to explain why individuals adopt interpretatively polarised world-views.

Current research

Contemporary research in polarisation is shaped by theoretical and technological advances in communication and media studies. New research uses digital trace data and other tools to investigate the effects of news content on polarised public debate, including exposure to particular news frames and viewpoint diversity, and relates this to the divergence and convergence of ideologies (e.g. Valenzuela et al., 2021; Wojcieszak, 2010) and to the effects of polarisation of individual news curation. This explores, for instance, the influence of partisanship on engagement with diverse news and information sources (e.g. Recuero et al., 2022), opinion polls , and scientific and government advice (e.g. Allcott et al., 2020). Similarly, affective polarisation can be observed at large scale in social network analyses of inter-group communication on polarised issues or amongst polarised communities. This has also led some researchers to identify yet another type of

polarisation – *interactional polarisation*, describing the variously homophilic or heterophilic networks between the different groups engaged in polarised debates on digital and social media platforms (Yarchi et al., 2021). However, such interactional patterns should mainly be seen as a communicative symptom of other underlying types of polarisation, rather than as a type of polarisation in its own right.

Illustrative example

A prominent example illustrating several kinds of polarisation and their intersections is that of Brexit, the United Kingdom's decision to exit the European Union. While the Brexit campaign was spearheaded by prominent voices within the Conservative Party, including later Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the Brexit cause was not initially a partisan issue and remains a multi-party concern, though partisanship has somewhat consolidated in the aftermath of the 2016 referendum vote and the enactment of Brexit in 2020. Subsequent research points to complex reasons for the vote, with some disagreement about correlating factors (Becker et al., 2017; Henderson et al., 2017; Lees, 2021; Matti & Zhou, 2017). Indeed, as we approach the decade mark since the referendum, public debate in the UK still returns to key points of division from the referendum campaign with regularity, not least to the Leave campaign's electoral promises suggesting that the UK would be far more prosperous outside the EU, and that leaving would not impinge on the movement of people and goods.

Brexit can be understood as a clear example of issue polarisation: a split between groups standing for and against a particular policy – EU membership. But with proponents and detractors on both major sides of the UK's political spectrum, Brexit is not a clearly partisan issue: divisions between Leavers and Remainers did not map neatly onto ideological divisions between the Conservative and Labour Parties in the UK, but instead caused considerable internal disagreement within either political camp. Ideological alignments were also complicated for minor parties in the UK, and especially for parties representing key regional interests in Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland.

Arguably, then, any underlying ideological components of polarisation on Brexit (such as the traditionally more conservative-aligned pursuit of national self-determination, or the more progressive-aligned interest in participating in a rules-based international community of nations) were substantially overshadowed by much stronger affective components, whose presence was further heightened by the sometimes emotional and often populist language used by key campaigners on both sides of the debate. In spite of the fact that the campaigns were themselves led by well-established political elites in the UK, this also mapped onto divisions between elites (portrayed as faceless EU bureaucrats in Brussels and their enablers in Westminster) and the masses (depicted as the great British public, who would regain their national independence and wealth).

Such rhetoric, and its amplification by media reporting that focussed on these divisions, may also have contributed to greater group polarisation, further inflaming the language used by either camp; in turn, for many citizens, this likely contributed to an increased perception of the depth of polarisation present in their country. These dynamics persisted well beyond the immediate aftermath of the vote. Disparagement of opponents continued, seeing them as fundamentally

different along lines of age or geography, as Brexit proponents trended older and more rural, and their opponents younger and more urban; such polarising dynamics are exemplified in use of the term 'remoaners', levelled at those who despaired at the loss of EU membership. With the governing Conservative Party's commitment to deliver Brexit, ideology gradually also emerged as a stronger aspect of polarisation in the years after the referendum, even if a pro-EU group of MPs remains active in the Conservative Party, and consecutive Labour leaders have refrained from directly opposing the finalisation of Brexit, or from explicitly stating an intent to seek readmission to the EU.

Overall, Brexit thus combines elements of issue, ideological, affective, group, perceived, and interpretative polarisation, and studies of the social media debates associated with the referendum have also pointed to a resulting polarisation in interactional patterns (Bastos et al., 2018). But Brexit also demonstrates that these different aspects of polarisation do not always neatly align with each other: instead, while issue and affective polarisation may have blended as a result of the populist rhetoric used by some campaigners, ideological fault lines often ran orthogonal to the Leave/Remain question, and politicians who would otherwise have been firm ideological opponents found reason to make common cause for or against Brexit. Similarly, the Leave campaign in particular also managed to paint their own political elites as representatives of the masses, engaged in a struggle against yet other elites in Brussels. Notably, none of these divisions were resolved with the outcome of the referendum in 2016, or the eventual disassociation of the UK from the EU in 2020: as the long-term economic and social impacts of Brexit become clearer, polarisation over the issue continues, and perhaps even continues to deepen.

Critical examination

In our review of the definitions of polarisation, we illustrated how the understanding of polarisation can become complex and ambiguous, especially when approached from a multidisciplinary perspective. Using the example of Brexit to illustrate the interplay of different types of polarisation, we demonstrated how this complexity deepens when we consider the real-world dynamics of polarisation. In the Brexit example, different conceptualisations of polarisation can be used to analyse different aspects of the process. The existence of multiple types of polarisation (and competing terms to name these types) raises three main concerns and criticisms for contemporary studies of political polarisation: the blurriness of definitions; the overestimation of the problem; and the lack of attention to context.

The first major concern with the field of political polarisation studies, the lack of clear definitions, applies especially to empirical research. When dealing with the conceptual complexity of polarisation, many studies fail to make explicit exactly what type or aspect of polarisation they seek to measure, and based on what understanding of the concept. This lack of clarity surrounding the definitions of political polarisation can give rise to extended disputes and contradictory findings regarding the presence and extent of polarisation within a particular context. A famous example is the disagreement within political science about polarisation within the US population in recent decades: while some researchers show evidence of increased mass political polarisation (Abramowitz, 2010; Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017), others show the opposite (Fiorina, 2017; Fiorina et al., 2008, 2011; Fiorina & Abrams, 2008).

The evidence is contradictory because what is being called polarisation in the two literatures is different (Lelkes, 2016). While some studies measure how much more strongly the population has become aligned with two distinct groups (Republicans and Democrats) with crystallised positions on specific issues, others observe whether these positions are growing bimodal and more extreme (Lelkes, 2016). This problem is even more pronounced in studies of political polarisation in the field of media and communication. These often borrow polarisation concepts from political science, but recent systematic reviews show that in doing so the vast majority of studies neglect to define what exactly they are calling polarisation (Esau et al., 2023; Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021).

To address this concern, studies of political polarisation should thus be concerned with making it clear and evident what type of polarisation they are investigating, how they conceptualise it, and how the empirical evidence that they build on can be understood from their chosen perspectives.

This absence of clear conceptual definitions also gives rise to a second significant concern within polarisation studies: disagreement over the extent to which polarisation truly poses a challenge to democracy. Some degree of polarisation seems to have beneficial effects on democratic systems: for instance, it enables citizens to better differentiate between the positions advocated by various parties, candidates, political groups, or ideological camps, thus potentially leading to more informed decision-making (Layman et al., 2006; McCoy et al., 2018). Moreover, a certain degree of polarisation appears to enhance the level of political participation among citizens (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2005). These and other benefits raise the question of whether polarisation should receive so much focus from researchers: to address other problems, such as inequality, may be more central to the defence of deteriorating democracies (Kreiss & McGregor, 2023).

To address this second concern, some contemporary studies have proposed a differentiation between levels of polarisational severity, or identified distinct attributes that make polarisation dangerous or destructive to democracy (Esau et al., 2023; McCoy et al., 2018). By identifying such specific characteristics and highlighting potential tipping points, we may better understand at what point polarisation becomes destructive to democratic communication.

A third and final concern revolves around the lack of attention to (a) who the individuals or groups undergoing polarisation are, and (b) the underlying reasons for their polarisation. The absence of substance and context regarding the *who* and *why* of polarisation can make invisible what would otherwise be significant dynamics of power, oppression, and violence. Characteristics of polarisation – for example, ideological distance, negative feelings for the opposing group, disrupted communication, etc. – must be considered within the context under study. By not doing so, we run the risk of equating very different groups that are polarised for very different reasons: equating, for example, Black Lives Matter movements against discrimination with white supremacist movements promoting racism (Kreiss & McGregor, 2023).

In response to this critique and concern, studies of political polarisation must seriously consider the power dynamics involved in the contexts they investigate, and reflect on their own positionality in the political and ideological struggles they examine. This does not mean giving up on the study of polarisation altogether, but requires researchers instead to refrain from considering it as a phenomenon in isolation, separate from the other social dynamics within which it – and they

themselves – are embedded. It may mean, in fact, taking sides in favour of one or another of the parties in a polarised conflict, if there are principled and compelling reasons for doing so: for instance, if one side of an asymmetrical conflict clearly embraces abusive, hateful, inhumane, and/or antidemocratic perspectives.

Conclusion and future directions

In this chapter we addressed three major points: first, we have critiqued the often vague and insufficiently defined concept of polarisation, providing a systematic review of the major, distinct and divergent types of polarisation that have been identified in the political studies and media and communication literature; we have focussed, in particular, on defining and distinguishing issue-based, ideological, and affective polarisation, and highlighted group, perceived, and interpretative polarisation as phenomena that arise largely as consequences of the divisions described by the first three types.

Second, we illustrated the operation, alignment, and (sometimes) conflict between these types of polarisation by exploring the UK's pre- and post-Brexit debates as a rich case study of polarisation; what Brexit shows, in particular, is that these types of polarisation are not always operating in parallel, that they cannot be reduced to simple disagreements between parties arranged along an ideological spectrum from left to right, and that polarisation does not suddenly disappear once the initial cause of polarisation has been resolved in one form or another.

But these different types of polarisation (and a number of other, additional concepts that have also been proposed by researchers, but which have as yet not found widespread acceptance in the scholarship) are not always as painstakingly defined and distinguished in the relevant literature. As a third point, then, we have noted that the concept of 'polarisation' is often mobilised only in a vague, generic sense, and sometimes serves as little more than a synonym for 'debate', 'disagreement', or 'division'. This is problematic if, at the same time, we are to take seriously the concerns about polarisation as a potentially pernicious (McCoy & Somer, 2019) or destructive (Esau et al., 2023) phenomenon that threatens the very functioning of democratic polities and the societal cohesion of nation states. Here, we have argued that future research into the patterns and dynamics of polarisation, must take better care to clearly articulate which specific types of polarisation it seeks to observe and address; must offer a more considered picture of the processes by which these types of polarisation might generate productive or destructive outcomes for the individuals, groups, and societies experiencing them; and must pay more attention to the underlying historical and socioeconomic factors that may drive polarisation dynamics.

It is not the purpose of this chapter, nor does available space permit us, to do more than note in passing also the various alternatives to the concept of polarisation that such research could also operationalise. Complementing polarisation and its focus on two or more opposing poles that stand in inherent opposition to one another, the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe offers a potentially more nuanced picture of variable discursive alliances between agonistic groups that might make common cause against a shared antagonistic opponent; indeed, as long as it does not turn irretrievably irresolvable, such antagonism can encourage productive competition between diverging political ideas and ideologies: democracy actually requires such (restrained) antagonism in order to identify and facilitate the contest between competing groups (Mouffe, 1993). Le Bas (2018) describes such 'generative conflicts' as a specific type of conflict that can contribute to

democratic consolidation. Political conflicts, antagonism, and even polarisation are thus not always problematic by definition, and we ought to do more to establish this perspective in both scholarship and broader public debate.

Conflict studies as a field clearly has a critical role to play in this endeavour; it, too, should reflect on how it engages with polarisation theory (as well as the available alternatives), and on whether it clearly distinguishes between different types and levels of polarisation or uses the term 'polarisation' merely as another popular synonym for 'conflict'. Our systematic review of the various definitions of distinct types of polarisation, and our consideration of the symptoms that indicate a deterioration from mild and productive to severe and destructive levels of polarisation in public debate (cf. Esau et al., 2023), are intended to support such a more careful and nuanced analysis of polarisation patterns and dynamics, and our brief example of Brexit points to how this might be undertake in practice.

This, then, also addresses Kreiss & McGregor's (2023) deliberately provocative critique of our focus on polarisation as a concept in the first place. They instead encourage us to pay more attention to the underlying causes of such polarisation, and to the unequal power relations between different societal groups that they reveal, and to dedicate a greater part of our efforts to redressing and overcoming such inequalities. We agree with this goal, though we believe that to do so should not be seen as a call to give up on the concept of polarisation altogether: polarisation, in all its types, remains a useful indicator that points to the presence of deeper and potentially more pernicious problems. The study of polarisation, and of the conflicts through which it is expressed, is thus a means to an end, and not an end in itself.

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