

# Introduction

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**A**t the end of the twentieth century, many political observers assumed that the coming decades would be a time of democratic triumph, with the remarkable democratic wave of the 1980s and 1990s coming to full fruition. Instead, democratic stagnation and setbacks have marked the first two decades of this century to such an extent that today, talk of a global democratic crisis is widespread. New and old democracies alike are confronting a daunting array of internal and external challenges, from the crumbling of public support for long-established political parties and the swelling popularity of illiberal politicians to the growing assertiveness and influence of authoritarian powers and ideas across borders. Recent developments in democracies around the world make clear that political polarization—manifested in increasingly harsh divides between opposing political camps and diminishing shared political ground—is a crucial part of this troubling picture.

Political polarization, particularly in the United States, tends to be studied as a unique national pathology. Yet as this volume demonstrates, it is a widespread phenomenon, with common negative consequences for democracy across diverse national contexts. It routinely weakens respect

for democratic norms, corrodes basic legislative processes, undermines the nonpartisan stature of the judiciary, and fuels public disaffection with political parties. It exacerbates intolerance and discrimination, diminishes societal trust, and increases violence throughout the society. Moreover, it reinforces and entrenches itself, dragging countries into a downward spiral of anger and division for which there are no easy remedies.

A quick global tour highlights how pervasive polarization is among democracies today and how serious its effects frequently are. After a period of generally low political polarization in Latin America during the 1990s, high levels of divisive partisanship are damaging various Latin American democracies. Venezuela was for decades one of the most stable democracies in the region, but an intense, irreconcilable split between the governing forces of the left and the opposition has torn the society apart. Bolivian politics have undergone a profound change in the past decade, as the collapse of many traditional parties has reconfigured political competition around a deep cleavage based on ethnicity and culture. Colombia has become bitterly divided over the 2016 Peace Accord between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. With the 2018 election of President Jair Bolsonaro, a far-right populist who ran a stridently polarizing campaign, Brazil may have entered a phase of serious polarization. Latin America specialist Steven Levitsky argues that Chile, El Salvador, Mexico, and Peru also show signs of growing polarization.<sup>1</sup>

South and Southeast Asia exhibit multiple serious cases of political polarization. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has experienced increasingly polarized conflict between a sociopolitical vision rooted in Hindu nationalism and a more secular and pluralist alternative. During the past two decades, neighboring Bangladesh has descended into harsh polarization between two staunchly opposed political camps. Before the 2006 and 2014 military coups, Thailand's democracy was wracked by a profound fissure between two competing sides, popularly known as the "yellow shirts" and "red shirts," that were split by social class, region, and other identity markers. Although Indonesia has enjoyed a generally positive democratizing run since the fall of strongman President Suharto in 1998, recent elections have been marked by an upsurge in divisive and exclusivist Islamist rhetoric.

In the Middle East, some of the political forces and energy released in

the 2011 Arab Spring have resulted in bitterly polarized polities. Egypt's brief episode of open multiparty competition after the fall of President Hosni Mubarak in 2011 descended into profound and violent polarization between Islamist political forces and their opponents. The eruption of protests against Syrian president Bashar al-Assad in 2011 triggered a hellish descent into civil war. Despite hopes that the rise of the Islamist Justice and Development Party in Turkey might usher in a period of inclusive democracy, Turkish politics have instead become a domain of intense division, anger, and conflict between the ruling party and its opponents. Competitive party politics in Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, and Palestine have also been marked by significant levels of polarization.

Various sub-Saharan African countries have lived for decades with intense polarization, sometimes within democratic frameworks and sometimes within authoritarian or semiauthoritarian systems. An example of the former is Kenya, where a political system dominated off and on by contending tribal groups erupted into serious electoral violence in 2007. The country has lived since then with a precarious political settlement between two deeply divided sides. Burundi, Cameroon, Uganda, and Zimbabwe all exemplify the latter pattern. An especially serious case is Côte d'Ivoire, where divisions along religious and regional lines over the issue of Ivorian national identity have been mobilized in two civil wars.<sup>2</sup>

Rising polarization is not just a developing world story. Decades-old patterns of relatively consensual competition in Europe between center-right and center-left parties are giving way to greater political polarization as populist forces challenge traditional political actors and norms. Poland, for example, has surprised many political observers by moving from what looked like a relatively smooth process of democratic consolidation into severe polarization. Escalating tensions there between a right-wing populist party and the antagonized opposition camp pose a serious threat to the independence of the Polish judiciary and other vital democratic institutions. In France, a multiparty system long characterized by alternation of power between moderate forces on the left and right dissolved in the presidential elections of 2017, which resulted in a polarizing contest between a new centrist formation, *En Marche*, and the right-wing National Front (as of 2018, National Rally). In Great Britain, the 2016 referendum on whether the nation should leave the European Union opened up a

startlingly deep divide between “Remainers” and “Leavers” and threw the country into what has become protracted political conflict and dysfunction. Other European democracies have also witnessed serious polarization recently as a result of rising populist forces, as in Greece and Hungary, or have long been mired in communal divisions, as in Belgium and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In North America as well, rising levels of partisanship and polarization along left-right lines have unsettled democracies long known for their relative political stability. In Canada, particularly since the reconsolidation of the country's party system in 2004, the parties have grown further apart ideologically, and partisan animosities have ramped up throughout the society. The United States is suffering to an even greater extent from a widening political and social divide that has grown acute in recent years. For many American political observers, polarization underlies many of the maladies afflicting U.S. democracy, from institutional gridlock to diminished sociocultural trust. In the words of former U.S. senator Jeff Flake, “Tribalism is ruining us. It is tearing our country apart. It is no way for sane adults to act.”<sup>3</sup>

To be sure, polarization is not everywhere in the democratic world. In East Asia, Japan has avoided severe polarization, whether as a result of certain sociocultural traditions, electoral rules, or the structure of the party landscape. In Latin America, Ecuador's president, Lenín Moreno, has made notable strides to rebuild consensus and temper political divisions that his predecessor aggravated. In the Middle East, Tunisia stands out as a case in which competitive electoral politics have not devolved into irreconcilable divisions. In Europe, some countries, like Ireland, Norway, and Portugal, show few signs of growing polarization. Yet the relative scarcity of positive cases attests to how widespread and consequential political polarization in democracies has become globally.

### **Analytic Complexities**

At first view, political polarization appears to be a relatively straightforward concept: a country's political life is polarized to the extent that competing political forces diverge in their ideas and actions and lack any significant common ground. Nonetheless, upon closer examination it pres-

ents significant analytic complexities. One important puzzle concerns the line between positive and negative levels of polarization. A certain amount of polarization in a democratic system is normal given that parties compete hard with each other, seek to build their own loyal constituencies, and frequently distinguish themselves by having distinctive programmatic agendas. Especially in new and emerging democracies that are trying to build stable party systems, some degree of polarization may be useful. As Noam Lupu argues:

Party polarization may strengthen party brands and clarify voters' choices. . . . Presented with a clear set of choices among parties, citizens may also form stronger party attachments. In developing democracies—where democratic competition and party attachments are nascent—clear choices and stronger party attachments may bolster electoral stability.<sup>4</sup>

However, when polarization reaches a certain degree of intensity, it can corrode democratic systems in the ways described above. Some ideological difference between competing parties is normal, but when does the breadth or depth of the divide become harmful? Partisan loyalties and differing programmatic visions among voters can help stabilize a party system, but when are these loyalties so unchanging and visions so antithetical that they undermine democracy? Not only is any easily identifiable measuring stick for differentiating helpful from harmful polarization elusive, but also the answer will surely depend upon the national context.<sup>5</sup> In Great Britain, for example, the polarization in the 1980s between Thatcherite conservatism and the opposing Labour camp did not tear down the walls of British democracy. Yet that same degree of ideological distance and societal division might well have provoked violent conflict in a society with weaker institutions and a less-established tradition of democratic pluralism.

Another complexity is that polarization can exist at different levels. Political scientists distinguish between elite polarization and mass polarization, an intuitively clear distinction.<sup>6</sup> The parameters of these categories, however, are difficult to define. Elite polarization usually refers to polarization among formal political actors—political parties and politicians—or institutions populated by these actors, such as legislatures. Yet the bound-

aries of this elite category are fluid. Some analysts persuasively note that the label of elite should include organizations that advocate or lobby for political agendas, as well as prominent media figures—such as talk radio hosts in the United States—or other opinion makers who influence political life.<sup>7</sup> Some such organizations and individuals are identifiably elite, but others may be grassroots-based or grassroots-oriented, and thus fall more ambiguously within this category. Here, too, different national contexts will have different conceptions of what is considered the domain of elite polarization.

The category of mass polarization, also referred to sometimes as societal polarization, similarly presents definitional issues.<sup>8</sup> Some analysts distinguish the politically informed and engaged public from the less informed and less engaged public.<sup>9</sup> Intense polarization might occur among politically informed citizens of a country, while large numbers of less engaged citizens might well remain mostly unaffected by such divisions. Looked at with a focus on engaged citizens, the country could be said to suffer from considerable societal polarization, yet the society as a whole might not appear to be all that polarized. National differences in the potential meaning of key terms such as the “informed” or “engaged” public are vast here as well, and a single concept of mass polarization would stretch uneasily across varied contexts.

### **A Focus on Severe Polarization**

The chapters in this volume investigate and assess when and how polarization becomes a negative force in democracies, with a special focus on the phenomenon of *severe polarization*. To help define what constitutes severe polarization (as opposed to lesser though still potentially harmful polarization), this study draws upon the path-breaking recent work on comparative polarization by Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer.<sup>10</sup> These authors define severe, or what they also call “pernicious,” polarization as “a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in the society increasingly align along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of ‘us’ versus ‘them.’”<sup>11</sup> In this definition, “the key feature of polarization is not necessarily ideological or social distance, which most

conventional definitions emphasize. Rather, it is how the process of polarization simplifies the normal complexity of politics and social relations. *Polarization does so by aligning otherwise unrelated divisions, emasculating cross-cutting cleavages, and dividing society and politics into two separate, opposing, and unyielding blocks* [emphasis added].<sup>12</sup> In a related article with Tahmina Rahman, they note that in cases of severe polarization, “distance between groups moves beyond principled issue-based differences to a *social identity* [emphasis added].”<sup>13</sup>

This definition pinpoints the key feature of the sort of polarization gripping many democracies today: a single cleavage dominating pluralistic political life, overriding other cleavages, effacing countervailing links among political and societal actors, and creating a powerful dynamic of irreconcilable opposition between camps that question or even deny each other’s legitimacy. This definition, however, does not provide a straightforward empirical basis for distinguishing between severe and nonsevere cases of polarization. It is difficult, for example, to assess and measure the extent to which cross-cutting cleavages have weakened.

To help reach these judgments about when polarization has become rooted in social identities and become severe, this volume uses three criteria that are part of or follow from McCoy and Somer’s definition. These criteria provide useful observable indicators for determining whether polarization is severe. First, severe polarization *fuses elite and mass polarization*, creating large opposing blocks that comprise both elites and nonelites. Thus, acrimonious rivalries within the political elite alone do not constitute severe polarization. A crucial component of this first criterion is that severe polarization has a *strong affective dimension* at the mass level. That is, the opposing camps differ rancorously not just in their specific political opinions but more broadly in their sociocultural outlooks, to the extent that individuals dislike those on the other side and feel they cannot peacefully coexist with them on a personal level in friendships or marriages.

Second, severe polarization is structured around a *binary division*, meaning that a country has become split into two large camps that dominate political life. Each camp need not fall under a single party banner and may instead consist of multiple parties, united by little more than their opposition to the other side. Crucially, however, countries where a small extremist party or group emerges yet remains at the edges of political life,

deeply at odds with the mainstream, are not severely polarized by this volume's definition. In Germany, for example, the divide between the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany party and the traditional German parties represented in the Bundestag is wide yet does not make up a binary division dominating political life. Of course, polarization at the edges may develop over time into binary polarization. If German politics for example were to evolve as Polish politics have, with the right-wing populist party winning a growing share of the vote, and electoral contests revolving primarily around the divide between that party on the one hand and its opponents on the other, then the country likely would be on a trajectory toward severe polarization.

Finally, being rooted in clashing social identities, severe polarization tends to be *sustained*, lasting beyond a specific polarizing event and usually beyond the rule of a specific polarizing leader. For instance, even though Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez was for years the driver of polarization in his country, the core *chavista* versus *anti-chavista* divide persisted after his death, having become deeply entrenched within Venezuelan society not just politically but socioculturally. When leaders rule in a divisive fashion that splits the society between their supporters and detractors, but does not foster or draw upon an identity-based cleavage, the polarization they create may fade not long after their departure from power. Thus, for example, Indonesia and Taiwan experienced polarizing leadership under President Abdurrahman Wahid (1999–2001) and President Chen Shui-bian (2000–08), respectively. But after those leaders left the scene, the degree of divisiveness in political life diminished notably.<sup>14</sup> A crucial question with which this volume grapples is whether severely polarized countries—in which divisions are entrenched at the societal level and show few signs of abating—can sustain functional democracies over the long term.

### Case Studies and Questions

The authors in this volume examine nine case studies: Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Poland, Turkey, and the United States. All are countries that meet or recently have met the minimum criteria for “electoral democracy.”<sup>15</sup> In their geographic diversity, these cases span the multiregional landscape of polarization. They are experiencing varied de-



degrees of polarization, including both clear cases of severe polarization and contexts that are marked by a significant political fissure but do not meet the abovementioned three criteria for severe polarization. They also exhibit significant variation in their political institutions, societal makeup, and levels of economic development, thus providing a strong foundation for comparative analysis of the roots and drivers of polarization.

Each case study examines four main issues and related questions:

*Roots:* What is the basis of polarization in the country? When did polarization emerge, and why? What are the key differences between the opposing sides?

*Trajectory:* How has polarization changed over time in terms of its intensity, dividing lines, and sociopolitical manifestations? What factors—such as political leadership, conjunctural political events, political system design, economic performance, and changes in the media and information space—have influenced the trajectory of polarization? Is polarization confined to the elite level, or has it spread more widely in the society?

*Consequences:* What are the political and societal effects of polarization? How is it affecting the functioning of the political system—for example, with respect to legislative processes, policymaking, and the integrity of democratic institutions? What kinds of social tensions and conflicts is it producing?

*Remedial actions:* What efforts have been made to reduce polarization? From which parts of society have these efforts originated—from groups and persons operating within the polarized political system, or outside of it? Have they had any noticeable success?

To provide an analytic framework for the volume as a whole, the case studies have been divided into four categories, two containing cases that meet this volume's definition of severe polarization and two containing cases that do not. Part I examines the turbulent experiences of two countries—Turkey and Kenya—gripped by severe polarization that has contributed to the breakdown of democratic institutions, whether currently or in the recent past. In the Turkish case, Senem Aydın-Düzgit ex-

plores how the deep cleavage between secularists and Islamists has made Turkey one of the most polarized nations in the world. Despite hopes of mutual accommodation during the early 2000s, the political leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan proved deeply divisive, as his government increasingly utilized polarizing and ultimately authoritarian tactics. Particularly remarkable is how rapidly polarization has eroded public discourse, divided Turkish society, and undermined democracy. In the Kenyan case, Gilbert Khadiagala explores why the country's politics have become so intensely polarized between two ethnic groups—the Kikuyu and Luo—that prior to Kenyan independence did not have a history of conflict. His analysis highlights how elite entrepreneurs, political centralization, and economic inequalities have amplified ethnic divisions, causing the degradation or collapse of democratic institutions at various points since Kenya's independence. Troublingly, remedial actions such as political decentralization and international intervention have been unable to tame polarization and at times have been counterproductive.

Part II turns to the cases of the United States, India, and Poland, also countries beset by severe polarization, but where the degradation of institutions has not resulted in a full democratic breakdown. The United States, as Thomas Carothers highlights, is in crucial respects a unique case. The current polarization first emerged more at the societal level than at the elite level and then seeped into the political parties and national political life over the span of several decades. Furthermore, whereas in most other highly polarized countries a single identity-based cleavage involving religion, race, or ideology divides the society, in the United States all three of these divisions compound one another. Niranjana Sahoo's chapter on India underscores that while many cleavages exist within the world's largest democracy, Hindu nationalism is the one dividing issue that can pose an existential threat to Indian democracy. He argues that skilled but divisive leadership within the Hindu nationalist camp, coupled with the failings of the secular Congress Party, have caused polarization to escalate markedly since the 1980s. In the Polish case, Joanna Fomina traces how a populist and nationalist party has risen to power by raising highly contentious issues related to Polish national identity. The result has been asymmetrical polarization, in which the populist camp is cohesive and mobilized but its opponents are fragmented and reactive. Political tensions have fueled in-

tolerance and undermined democratic accountability, as well as disrupting Polish foreign policy.

In the other cases, polarization does not qualify as severe based on this volume's definition, because it has not become rooted in contrasting social identities and remains largely confined to the elite level. Nevertheless, intense conflict among political elites is causing worrisome political and societal consequences. Part III examines the cases of Colombia and Bangladesh, in which polarization has become intense at the elite level but has not deeply divided these societies along racial, religious, or ideological lines in recent years. In Colombia, Andreas Feldmann shows that polarization has flared up over one particular but powerfully important issue: the 2016 Peace Accord negotiated with the country's largest rebel group. Rivalries within the political elite, rather than clear ideological differences, have been the primary driver of this polarization. Bangladesh, Naomi Hossain writes, poses a puzzle: partisan conflict there is bitter and intense, but it does not appear to be strongly rooted in any substantial programmatic or identity difference between the opposing sides. Rather, it is primarily a naked competition for political power, in a context where the victor is subject to few checks and balances, that has fueled political acrimony. Efforts to mitigate polarization, such as the military's intervention and creation of a nonparty caretaker government, have arguably exacerbated the problem.

Finally, the chapters in Part IV look at two countries that have stayed clear of severe polarization despite increasingly contentious electoral competition in recent years and sociopolitical features that might incline them toward such an outcome. In Indonesia, Eve Warburton explores how certain sociopolitical shifts, including a gradual Islamization of the society, created an environment ripe for populist figures employing exclusivist Islamist rhetoric. Although polarization remains relatively shallow and limited to periods surrounding elections, deepening political divisions have nonetheless contributed to a worrisome decline in democracy. The incumbent government has increasingly used illiberal tactics against its political opponents, and relatively secular leaders have chosen to accommodate majoritarian agendas rather than defending pluralism. In the Brazilian case, Umberto Mignozzetti and Matias Spektor explore why—despite recent political upheaval and a societal tableau vulnerable to polarization—levels of ideological and partisan polarization remain surprisingly low. They

argue that paradoxically, institutional arrangements facilitating undemocratic, oligarchic politics have tempered polarization but also fueled the rise of the populist Jair Bolsonaro, whose victory in the 2018 presidential election may have set Brazil on a path of rising polarization.

The concluding chapter distills some cross-cutting findings and conclusions from the case studies as well as from the experiences of other divided democracies. Behind the diversity of the countries examined herein lie both some striking similarities, and revealing particularities, in patterns of polarization. Overall, a sobering picture emerges. Polarization roots itself with equal tenacity in multiple types of social identities, including ones built around religion, ethnicity, and ideology. Given the fact that a turn toward identity politics is a powerful trend across the democratic world—for reasons that political analysts are only starting to probe—the seeds of still wider and deeper polarization are continuing to spread. Additional global trends are fueling the pervasive rise of polarization, like the growth of social media and its tendency to magnify extreme sociopolitical views and to make it easier for citizens to live within separated information bubbles. The negative effects of severe polarization are often profound, not just for the functioning of core political institutions, but for societal cohesion generally. Remedial actions to limit or contain the phenomenon remain tentative at best in most polarized countries, often bouncing off entrenched processes of mutual division and delegitimization.

The authors and editors of this volume hope that the analysis contained herein will help political actors and observers across the democratic world to better understand the challenge that polarization presents to democracy globally and to find more effective ways to respond to it.

## NOTES

1. Steven Levitsky, "Latin America's Shifting Politics: Democratic Survival and Weakness," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 4 (2018): 102–13.

2. Adrienne LeBas, "Can Polarization Be Positive? Conflict and Institutional Development in Africa," *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 1 (2018): 59–74.

3. Thomas L. Friedman, "The American Civil War, Part II," *New York Times*, October 2, 2018 ([www.nytimes.com/2018/10/02/opinion/the-american-civil-war-part-ii.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/02/opinion/the-american-civil-war-part-ii.html)).

4. Noam Lupu, "Party Polarization and Mass Partisanship: A Comparative Perspective," *Political Behavior* 37, no. 2 (2015): 332.

5. LeBas, for instance, highlights the balance of forces between political camps and the absence of a history of formal group exclusion as two key factors that determine whether the overall impact of polarization is positive or negative. See LeBas, “Can Polarization Be Positive?”

6. See, for instance, Matthew Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrats and Conservatives Became Republicans* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).

7. David Karol, “Party Activists, Interest Groups, and Polarization in American Politics,” in *American Gridlock: The Sources, Character, and Impact of Political Polarization*, eds. James A. Thurber and Antoine Yoshinaka (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 68–85.

8. For a definition of societal polarization, see Jennifer McCoy, Thamina Rahman, and Murat Somer, “Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Politics,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 1 (2018): 20–21.

9. In the U.S. context, see Alan I. Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

10. Most notably, McCoy and Somer have made excellent recent contributions as the editors of two special editions of academic journals on the subject of political polarization. See Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, eds., “Polarization and Democracy: A Janus-Faced Relationship with Pernicious Consequences,” Special Issue, *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 1 (2018); Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, eds., “Polarizing Politics: A Global Threat to Democracy,” Special Issue, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681, no. 1 (2019).

11. Murat Somer and Jennifer McCoy, “Déjà Vu? Polarization and Endangered Democracies in the 21st Century,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 1 (2018): 2.

12. *Ibid.*, 3.

13. McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, “Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy,” 19.

14. Dan Slater and Aries A. Arugay, “Polarizing Figures: Executive Power and Institutional Conflict in Asian Democracies,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 1 (2018): 92–106.

15. Following Larry Diamond (1999), we employ a minimalist definition of electoral democracy as “a civilian, constitutional system in which the legislative and chief executive offices are filled through regular, competitive, multiparty elections with universal suffrage.” See Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 7–10.