



Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities

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Jennifer McCoy¹, Tahmina Rahman¹, and Murat Somer²

Abstract

This article argues that a common pattern and set of dynamics characterizes severe political and societal polarization in different contexts around the world, with pernicious consequences for democracy. Moving beyond the conventional conceptualization of polarization as ideological distance between political parties and candidates, we offer a conceptualization of polarization highlighting its inherently *relational* nature and its instrumental *political* use. Polarization is a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of “Us” versus “Them.” The politics and discourse of opposition and the social–psychological intergroup conflict dynamics produced by this alignment are a main source of the risks polarization generates for democracy, although we recognize that it can also produce opportunities for democracy. We argue that contemporary examples of polarization follow a frequent pattern whereby polarization is activated when major groups in society mobilize politically to achieve fundamental changes in structures, institutions, and power relations. Hence, newly constructed cleavages are appearing that underlie polarization and are not easily measured with the conventional Left–Right ideological scale. We identify three possible negative outcomes for democracy—“gridlock and careening,” “democratic erosion or collapse under new elites and dominant groups,” and “democratic erosion or collapse with old elites and dominant groups,” and one possible positive outcome—“reformed democracy.” Drawing on literature in psychology and political science, the article

¹Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA, USA

²Koç University, Istanbul, Turkey

Corresponding Author:

Jennifer McCoy, Georgia State University, 38 Peachtree Center Avenue SE, Atlanta, GA 30303-2514, USA.

Email: jmccoy@gsu.edu

posits a set of causal mechanisms linking polarization to harm to democracy and illustrates the common patterns and pernicious consequences for democracy in four country cases: varying warning signs of democratic erosion in Hungary and the United States, and growing authoritarianism in Turkey and Venezuela.

Keywords

polarization, democratic erosion, democracy, authoritarianism, populism

Introduction and Overview

Polarized societies make democracies vulnerable. Stark examples of the negative consequences of severe polarization for governability and democracy abound around the world today: from the growing concentration of power and democratic erosions in Turkey, Venezuela, Poland, and Hungary; to paralysis and gridlock followed by the election of an inexperienced populist in the United States; to careening and collapse of democracy in Thailand and Egypt. The surprises reflected in the victory of the Brexit vote, the defeat of the peace referendum in Colombia, and the strength of populist candidates in recent elections in France and Austria also reflect polarized societies.

Political polarization benefits democracy by mobilizing political participation, simplifying political choice for voters, and strengthening political parties. Yet in today's world, severe polarization threatens both governability and social cohesion, and in turn, support for democracy in advanced and developing democracies alike. Compared with the 20th-century Cold War, where the main fault lines were based in the Left–Right ideological spectrum, the issues dividing people today are more variable and less easily captured by conventional distinctions.

Much of the literature on polarization focuses on single case studies (largely the United States), regional analyses, or specific thematic aspects such as political party system polarization, ethnic/linguistic fragmentation, or social polarization and income stratification.¹ We argue, however, that common patterns of political mobilization in severely polarized countries produce similar intergroup conflict dynamics across very different contexts. We seek to identify and explain these patterns in order to better understand their consequences for democracy. In a separate project, we identify the conditions that are likely to produce the different regime outcomes from severe polarization we identify here.²

The following sections of the article present our theoretical argument about the common characteristics and dynamics of severe political and societal polarization, followed by an unpacking of the causal mechanisms linking such polarization to harm to democracies. We conclude with brief illustrations of the common patterns and pernicious consequences for democracy in four country cases: varying warning signs of democratic erosion in Hungary and the United States, and growing authoritarianism in Turkey and Venezuela.

Theoretical Argument: The Pattern and Dynamics of Severe Polarization

Democracy is intended to be a system of governance to manage competing interests in a society in a peaceful way, following agreed-upon rules of contingent consent (Przeworski, 1986). Democratic politics also provide opportunities for newly emerging or previously excluded, in an objective and/or subjective sense, segments of the population to strive for and reach political power. Today, however, many democracies, old and new, are straining to include these new groups without succumbing to a pernicious pattern of political and societal polarization.

Some level of political polarization is theorized to be beneficial to a democracy in terms of providing voting heuristics or clues to help voters choose among candidates, mobilizing supporters, strengthening political parties, and providing programmatic choices (Campbell, 2016; Carlin, Singer, & Zechmeister, 2015; Enyedi, 2006, 2008; LeBas, 2011, 2018). Polarization is also conceived of as a neutral concept encompassing and measuring the natural differences and different expectations from democratic institutions and processes within any democracy (Katsambekis & Stavrakakis, 2013; Slater, 2016).

We are concerned, however, with the polarization that occurs when these differences become aligned within (normally two) camps with mutually exclusive identities and interests (Lozada, 2014; Somer, 2001, 2016a). It is the alignment of opinions under a single identity, rather than the radicalization of opinion, that “crystalizes interests into opposite factions” and threatens to undermine social cohesion and political stability (Baldassari & Gelman, 2008).

Hence, contemporary polarizations often start when a previously disunited or marginalized segment of society becomes politically united and mobilized to achieve social, economic, cultural–ideological, or institutional goals. This typically happens when political entrepreneurs effectively highlight and activate underlying cleavages in a society, bringing to the fore, constructing or reinventing a dominant cleavage around which other cleavages align. Purposefully or not, polarizing rhetoric and political tactics in this process become instrumental to uniting and strengthening these groups and either disarming their opponents, or producing a backlash in an opposition counter-mobilization. Thus, we maintain that the constitutive trait of severe polarization is its inherently *relational* and *political* nature: it suppresses “within-group” differences and collapses otherwise multiple and cross-cutting intergroup differences into one single difference that becomes negatively charged and used to define the “Other.”

We therefore define polarization as a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become instead reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of “Us” versus “Them.” The pernicious consequences of severe polarization follow from these features as they make compromise, consensus, interaction, and tolerance increasingly costly and tenuous for individuals and political actors across the opposite sides of the polarization. Electorates lose confidence in public institutions and normative support for democracy may decline.

At the extreme, each camp questions the moral legitimacy of the others, viewing the opposing camp and its policies as an existential threat to their way of life or the nation as a whole (Garcia-Guadilla, 2016; Pew Research, 2016; Schmitt, 1996). They come to perceive the “Other” in such negative terms that a normal political adversary with whom to engage in a competition for power is transformed into an enemy to be vanquished. Categorization extends to all aspects of life, not just political, and peaceful coexistence is no longer perceived by citizens as possible (Lozada, 2014; McCoy & Diez, 2011). Strong emotions of antipathy and distrust toward opposing parties, candidates and social groups make this extreme polarization particularly pernicious.

Consequently, the severe polarization we examine includes a significant affective dimension, when distance between groups moves beyond principled issue-based differences to a social identity (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). As Tajfel (1970) and Tajfel and Turner (1979) argue, social identity leads group-members to hold positive sentiment toward in-group members and negative sentiment toward out-group members. The more salient the identity, the stronger the loyalty toward in-group members and the prejudice and antipathy toward out-group members tend to be (Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993).

Once a polity is severely polarized, very different countries face similar dynamics, resulting in similar problems. Situations of deep polarization create problems of governance as communication and trust break down and the two camps prove unwilling and unable to negotiate and compromise. Political gridlock paralyzes government, and in some cases, results in instability and careening between policy choices if neither side can prevail in the long run and seeks to overturn the predecessor’s policies at every chance. Economic and civil initiatives across party or group lines diminish, generating potential losses of overall investment and growth, public goods provision, macroeconomic management and growth, and socioeconomic development, while the likelihood of intergroup hostilities or violence increases (Alesina, Baqir, & Easterly, 1999; Algan & Cahuc, 2013; Rodrik, 1999).

Alternatively, one camp may become hegemonic and curtail liberties, tend toward authoritarianism or even establish an autocratic regime. At the societal level, citizens become divided spatially and socially. They come to believe they can no longer coexist in the same nation. Finally, the backlash and conflict arising from extreme polarization can also lead to democratic collapse if former elites and dominant societal groups, often allied with military forces, retake control with undemocratic means.

It is striking that even with very different underlying cleavages and institutional and economic development, and subsequent variation in the regime outcomes, the dynamics of polarizing mobilization and backlash remain similar. Examples range from transitional Egypt with the election of Morsi’s Muslim Brotherhood government and subsequent ouster by coup; to Second and Third Wave polarized polities under Chávez in Venezuela, Erdogan in Turkey, Thaksin in Thailand, and Mugabe in Zimbabwe; to polarized EU member polities such as Hungary and Greece, and the United Kingdom in the process of Brexit; to the arrival of the first African American to the U.S. presidency, followed by the Trump outsider candidacy championing a resentful White working class in the United States.

Reconceptualizing Polarization as a Relational Process and Identity-Transforming Group Conflict

Political polarization is conventionally measured in terms of issue positions or attitudes, as the ideological distance between political parties, political elites, or voters in a society. The classic work of Giovanni Sartori (1976) identified polarized party systems based on ideological distance between political parties, with some situations producing centrifugal extremes and erasing the center that Anthony Downs' (1957) centripetal dynamics would predict. Studies of political polarization at the elite level tend to focus on legislative voting (Hacker & Pierson, 2015; Kaol 2015; Poole & Rosenthal, 1997) or perceptions of ideological distance between political party positions in the legislature (Abramowitz, 2010, 2015; Brewer & Stonecash, 2015; Campbell, 2016; Hetherington, 2001; Motyl, 2016), or in party manifestos (Comparative Manifesto Project, 2017). Other scholars examine political polarization at the mass level, examining the degree to which voters sort themselves into increasingly homogeneous political parties (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Hetherington, 2001; Niemi, Weisberg, & Kimball, 2001) or move further apart on policy issues or self-placement on an ideological scale (Abramowitz, 2010; Campbell, 2016).

We argue, however, that in today's world, additional important cleavages underlie contemporary polarization not easily measured with the Left–Right ideological scale: globalist/cosmopolitan versus nationalist; religious versus secular; urban versus rural; traditional versus modern cultural values; and participatory versus representative democratic models.³ An increasingly common polarizing rhetoric today is populism's juxtaposition of the people versus elites. Populist discourse serves to link a series of unsatisfied demands and forms a collective identity around “the people,” in opposition to an elite accused of frustrating their interests (Stavrakakis, 2016; Hawkins, Riding, & Mudde, 2012). The populist's winning electoral strategy of polarizing the electorate attributes a Manichean and moral dimension to a presumed divide between nefarious elites and the virtuous (homogenous) people. It paints conflict among groups in black and white, good and evil terms. A populist candidate may use any of the aforementioned cleavages to identify the establishment elite in constructing his or her People versus Elite appeal.

This protean nature of the formative cleavages underlying polarization across different examples in the world, we would argue, reflects the political and instrumental roots of polarization. The different socioeconomic, cultural–ideological, historical, or contemporary cleavages on which polarization thrives in particular cases are of course important to study and explain. But they do not necessarily change the common patterns and dynamics we observe in widely different social–cultural and historical–institutional contexts.

When polarization in the political sphere extends into other aspects of social relations, we refer to it as societal polarization.⁴ Following Lozada (2014) in her description of Venezuelan social polarization, we define societal polarization as processes of group categorization and polarization in the context of social conflict that extend to spaces of social coexistence, “such as families, schools, churches, and communities,

and that take on the same exclusion, rigidity and confrontation present in the political struggle” (p. 4). The partisan rivalry affects social life in Hungary as well, where seemingly nonpolitical associations like groups of bird-watchers or fishing anglers are embroiled in this unhealthy practice of debasing people with different political opinions (Lengyel & Ilonszki, 2010, p. 165, as cited in Vegetti, in press).

An even more extreme form of societal polarization extends to geographic sorting. For example, in the case of Venezuela, political polarization extended into the social sphere by segregating neighborhoods and social spaces by political identity, literally dividing the capital city of Caracas. In this artificially “essentialized” struggle, people are being polarized not only on the psychological plane over political matters, but also on a spatial–physical plane over social matters (García-Guadilla & Mallen, 2016; Mallen & García-Guadilla, 2017). In the United States, studies have shown geographic sorting where liberals and conservatives seek out neighborhoods to live with like-minded ideological positions (Bishop, 2009; Motyl, 2016).

The tendency to avoid all kinds of social communication and physically cut off the “Other” from one’s own life is exemplified in Turkey as people belonging to opposing camps (supporters of opposing political parties) begin to declare that they would not even consider marrying into each other’s family (Corporate Social Responsibility Association of Turkey, 2016; Somer, 2016a). As social psychology tells us, intergroup conflict produces a propensity to view the opposing group as essentially homogeneous and treat the members of that group according to some stereotypical notion. This social distance and intolerance hinders social interaction and blocks channels of communication between antagonistic groups, making depolarization a difficult task. Once the forces of polarization are set in motion, they take on a life of their own: in terms of social and political incentives, it becomes increasingly more convenient for individuals to go along with polarization, and, if and when a critical mass is reached, powerful cascade (bandwagon) effects can be activated (Somer, 2001).

Sharp polarization means lesser social interaction between groups, which means further polarization. As a result, even the presence of polarization may become a polarized issue whereby different camps view each other’s claims and perceptions as ill-intentioned. Hence, a recent study showed that the Turkish elites were polarized over the question whether there is polarization in the country. Participants of the study who were “members or supporters of the opposition parties” pointed to empirical evidence and complained about polarization as “the most critical issue for Turkey,” while pro-ruling party participants denied its existence, some of whom attributed the discussion about polarization to “foreign and media provocation” (Aydın-Düzgit & Balta, 2017, p. 11).

As García-Guadilla and Mallen (2016) argue, polarization is a process, rather than a situation. “Polarization requires societies replace pragmatic politics, calculated risks, rational behavior, tolerance and plurality with a Schmittian-styled existential struggle” (p. 5). It is this idea of existential struggle between “friends” and “enemies” and the need to protect one’s way of life from “the enemy” that is at the core of the politics of extreme polarization (Schmitt, 1996).

Thus, identity, interest, and attitudes become linked in the politics of polarization. Although polarization manifests itself in the form of a struggle between mutually exclusive identity-based groups, these identities are often mere vehicles to drive certain conflicting interests forward. The expression of those conflicting interests requires group-based identity markers⁵; some of these markers may be long-existing in a society, and some may be novel creations.

Polarization's Negative Consequences for Democracy: Causal Mechanisms

We identify below a chain of causal mechanisms to demonstrate how the dynamics of political polarization as social identity may lead to negative outcomes for democracy, while also recognizing that these mechanisms may at times occur simultaneously.

Polarizing Discourse and Rise of Affective Polarization

No matter the origins of political polarization—whether a consequence of demographic change and party realignment (Abramowitz, 2010; Campbell 2016), institutional change (Iyengar, 2016) economic or state crises (Handlin, 2017), or deep grievances and resentment about perceived injustice or inequities that mobilize a group to demand change (Cramer, 2016; McCoy & Rahman, 2016), we can identify common dynamics and potential consequences for democratic support and social cohesion. Whether mass or elite-led, it often begins with a discursive element deepening, or even exploiting, existing social cleavages and/or resentments.

We have conceptualized a polarizing society as one in which cross-cutting cleavages are flattened and a single boundary begins to divide societies into two camps, with political identities becoming social identities. Polarizing political entrepreneurs, especially populists, are adept at exploiting grievances and addressing resentment using rhetoric identifying *someone* (rather than *something*) to blame for a particular grievance. This rhetoric thus creates an Us versus Them dynamic. As polarization deepens, the cleavage often becomes one around pro- and anti-incumbent sentiment, such as the *chavistas* and anti-*chavistas* in Venezuela.

Negative campaigns differentiating one party or candidate from another by attacking the integrity of the opponent are found to increase negative partisanship and affective polarization (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Iyengar et al., 2012). As Abramowitz and Webster (2016) find in the United States, negative views of the opposing political camp contribute to “a vicious cycle of mutually reinforcing elite and mass behavior” (p. 22). Amplifying the delegitimizing messages of negative campaigning, the media play an important role as well. Various studies have identified a number of mechanisms through which media has influenced affective polarization in the electorate, including journalists' use of polarized exemplars (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2013), and diversification and proliferation of media sources allowing the formation of “information bubbles” (Kleinberg & Lau, 2016; Prior, 2007; Duca & Saving, 2012).

Intergroup Conflict Dynamics: Us Versus Them

We argue that an aspect of severe polarization key to understanding its impact on democratic resilience and cohesion is the group identity that models an intergroup conflict dynamic. Theories of evolutionary biology and psychology explain intragroup cooperation and intergroup competition and conflict in terms of biological and cultural influences (see, e.g., J. Greene, 2013; Sapolsky, 2017). Social psychology theories of intergroup conflict tell us that members of a group tend to exhibit sympathy and loyalty to other members of their group, while they tend to exhibit antipathy and prejudice toward members of the out-group. Theories of social identity reinforce the notion that partisan social identity contributes to the bipolarity of perceptions favoring members of the in-party relative to those of the out-party. In turn, people attach with more intensity to groups they feel the most similar to and when other groups feel very different (S. Greene, 1999; Iyengar et al., 2012; Lupu, 2015; Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Severely polarized democracies, then, exhibit the tribal nature of intergroup dynamics, in which members become fiercely loyal to their “team,” wanting it to win at all costs, and strongly biased or prejudiced against the other group (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002; Mason, 2015). The psychology of polarization becomes fundamental as mechanisms of dehumanization, depersonalization, and stereotyping all contribute to the emotional loathing, fear, and distrust of the out-partisans. As Cristancho and Firat (2017) note, the affective component underlying group identities and affiliations, therefore plays a major role in creating and sustaining polarization through shaping attitudes, behavior, and discursive practices.

Natural in-group favoritism does not automatically result in the hatred and dehumanization of the out-group (Brewer, 1999; Lozada 2014). When the other is put in a culturally invisible domain, however, it becomes easier to dehumanize others. Instead of referring to others as “you,” people begin referring to the out-group as “them.” This change in language reflects and reinforces the politics of alienation and exclusion in social arenas. Just as in the political arena, people holding middle ground in the society also find the ground beneath them shrinking quickly. Whether one supports a particular camp or not, in a highly polarized society, individuals are forced to choose a side or be labeled by others as belonging to one side or the other (McCoy & Diez, 2011).

Political elites can intentionally and unintentionally intensify the consequences of these psychological mechanisms. Polarization as a discourse-driven process exaggerates differences between groups to activate exclusive identity markers and alignments. The rhetoric and symbols used in the politics of polarization create the sense of an “us” versus “them” conflict with mutually exclusive identities. Such depiction of the out-group also instigates the stereotypical idea that these conflicting groups are homogeneous in their own make-up, meaning members within each group are similar in terms of opinion, attitude, and behavior along with other more visible features like race/ethnicity/religious orientation/economic status, and so on. In cases where polarization takes a physical-spatial form like that in Venezuela or the United States, such stereotypical notions get a further boost by physical segregation and feeds on the existing feeling of antagonism.

When people are exposed to “convincing” polarizing thoughts and ideas through repeated and frequent interactions with like-minded people, they begin to form a coherent, broad-based, solid, and extreme position that pits one group against the other (Baldassari & Bearman, 2007). This helps us understand why and how individuals with extreme opinions can influence the group dynamics. Somer’s (2001) analysis of ethnic polarization in Yugoslavia using the cascade model describes this process where private individuals sharing certain opinions can solidify their “divisive image” of the society coming into close contact with people sharing similar views:

By the logic of cascade processes, if the social and political significance of the initial advocates of an action, belief, or norm reaches a critical level, the balance will tip in favor of that action, belief, or norm for a greater number of people, who will change their behavior accordingly. Therefore, in the case of ethnic polarization, divisive ethnic entrepreneurs constantly try to tip the balance of incentives in favor of holding the divisive image and undertaking actions that directly or indirectly promote it . . . If they succeed, they trigger a chain reaction of individual responses. People who previously were indecisive about or opposed to the behavior in question jump on the generated bandwagon along with those who had been advocating it all along. (p. 130)

Effect on Behavior: Collective Action, Geographic and Social Sorting, and Distancing

Communication and social interaction are at the heart of crystallization of polarizing opinions, worldviews, and identities. Social interactions, when conducted only within a seemingly homogenous group, can actually increase the distance between groups that are at conflict in society. Homophily, or seeking out people with similar traits, leads people to decrease interaction with the out-group and increase it within the in-group (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2000; Costa & Kahn, 2003; Letki, 2008).

In processes of deepening polarization, then, we see greater identification and interaction with in-group members and concomitant distance from the out-group ones (Esteban & Schneider, 2008; King & Anderson, 1971). Affective political polarization tends to increase social distance as well (Iyengar et al., 2012). Using Emory Bogardus’ (1925) social distance scale to ask respondents about the acceptability of marriage or having as neighbor’s members of the opposing or least-liked political party, studies have found growing social distance among partisans in the United States and Turkey (Corporate Social Responsibility Association of Turkey, 2016; Pew Research Polarization Project, 2016). Such social distance in turn impedes the direct and meaningful social interaction that social contact theory finds should reduce stereotypes and provide greater positive feelings about out-group members (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, 2008).

We expect that the intergroup conflict dynamics characterizing severe polarization lead to the perception of zero-sum interests replacing positive-sum interests, impeding joint collective actions and reinforcing the perception of mutually exclusive identities in a vicious feedback loop. One causal mechanism that links identities to perceived interests is collective actions (Somer, 2005). The more people hear in a polarized

political–discursive environment that they have zero-sum interests, where if “they” win, “we” lose, the less they seek joint collective actions and have shared experiences, thereby perceiving more group difference and tending to develop “rival” (mutually exclusive) perceptions of their identities. Alternatively, the flow of causality may flow from identity to interest.

People whose dominant discursive-conceptual environment tells them that they are mutually exclusive “others” do not seek joint collective actions. The less they undertake joint collective actions, the more their perceptions of difference, and the more likely it is that they will perceive their interests to be zero-sum. (Somers, 2005, p. 120)

Weakening Democratic Norms and Institutions

We expect that growing social distance and negative partisan affect in turn lead to a greater questioning of the moral legitimacy of political leaders from the out-group. As Iyengar et al. (2012) note,

those who impugn the motives and character of political opponents are less likely to treat as legitimate the decisions and policies enacted when the opponents control government, and may also be less satisfied with institutions that respond to popular will. (p. 428)

Attaching moral convictions to issues or leaders can lead to resistance to compromise and disdain for those who do (Kreps, Laurin, & Merritt, 2017; Ryan, 2017); perceived illegitimacy of political systems and leaders when they fail to deliver moralized ends (Skitka, 2002; Skitka, Bauman, & Lytle, 2009); and the abandonment of due process and the rule of law as any means are justified to pursue a moralized end (Skitka, 2002; Skitka & Houston, 2001).

The consequences for democratic stability and cohesion are profound: Increased zero-sum perceptions and reduced willingness to cooperate and compromise in seeking solutions to shared problems produce problems of governance: either gridlock—the inability to make and implement effective policy decisions or the unilateral imposition of policies by the majority on the minority. Either outcome is likely to reduce public confidence in democratic institutions.

In the extreme, perceptions of the out-party as a threat to the nation or way of life if they were to come to power or stay in power lead to violation of democratic norms. Government supporters grow increasingly tolerant of illiberal actions to tamp down dissent and of extra-constitutional (or at times anti-constitutional) measures to extend an incumbent’s term in power. Oppositionists contemplate extra-constitutional (or at times anti-constitutional) measures to remove the incumbent group from power when they view its actions as threatening and are unable to influence those actions through democratic means.

Causal Chain Linking Polarization to Democratic Erosion

We thus hypothesize the following causal mechanisms linking polarization to harm to democracies in a cascading effect:

- A polarizing society, or one that is open to polarization, whether from demographic change and political realignment, state or economic crises, or deep grievance and perceived injustice causing resentment, may be politicized by a leader or movement to mobilize political action from above or below.
- Polarizing political rhetoric centered on Us versus Them aligns group interests around one social cleavage, while suppressing and reducing the importance of other cross-cutting cleavages.
- Rhetorical focus on intergroup competition reinforces resentments and contributes to rising mass negative partisanship (dislike of out-party is greater than like of in-party) and affective polarization (sympathy toward in-group and antipathy toward the out-group).
- Deepening affective polarization, in turn, strengthens tribal tendencies of loyalty to in-group and conflict with out-party, enhances zero-sum perceptions, increases social distance, and decreases willingness to cooperate and compromise with the political out-group.
- Perceptions of the policies and political project of the “Other” as an existential threat to the nation lead both government and opposition groups to consider undemocratic actions.
 - Government supporters condone democratic norm violations and erosions, and tolerate illiberal practices by the incumbent in the interest of keeping power and reducing threats.
 - Opposition groups are motivated to contest power outside the electoral arena if necessary. If they win, it indicates a change of power has occurred outside democratic rules (thus, democratic breakdown). If they lose, it facilitates greater erosion by the incumbent.

A simplified graphic representation of the causal chain follows.

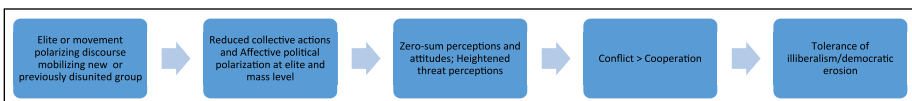


Figure 1. Causal Chain from Polarization to Democratic Erosion.

Illustrative Cases: Pernicious Polarization and Consequences for Democracy

Hungary

Hungary exemplifies a pattern of contemporary polarization where a traditional left–right divide has been replaced by a more cultural nationalist–cosmopolitan one, constructed by post-communist political parties to fill the ideological void and stabilize the electorate. In fact, the political party system is one of the least polarized in Europe on economic and social issues, but one of the most polarized on cultural and symbolic issues, as perceived by both experts and citizens (Vegetti, 2017; in press). Thus, while

the polarization is expressed on a Left–Right ideological scale in public opinion surveys, the content of that divide reflects cleavages over religious–secular and nationalist–cosmopolitan divides, rather than economic or social ones. Right wing parties in Hungary are staunch supporters of religious principles in politics, favor nationalist symbols, call for greater governmental control on citizens’ lives, and prioritize order and stability. In contrast, Left wing parties favor cosmopolitanism, advocate a secular state, promote individualism, and support civil liberties.

This level of polarization was not immediately visible following the transition from Communist era to the democratic one. The first three post-Communist elections (1994, 1998, and 2002) were marked by electoral volatility shifting between Right- and Left-wing coalitions to form a government. The 2002 elections marked a change in political tone when a Fidesz-led populist campaign reduced the margin of victory for the left/liberal coalition headed by MSZP, and Fidesz leader Victor Orban made accusations of electoral fraud. Although the 2006 election brought the same MSZP-led coalition to power, several events led to rising support for Victor Orban’s increasingly populist message and eventual victory in 2010: a scandal over a leaked tape in which the MSZP Prime Minister confirmed that he had lied to the nation during the election campaign, a clash between the ethnic minority Roma and mainstream Hungary, and the financial crisis of 2008. Fidesz won a landslide victory giving it a two-thirds majority in the parliament and the ability to modify the constitution. Orban consolidated his party’s influence over the Constitutional Court, the Election Commission, and even the Media Council.

Polarization in Hungary is largely elite driven. In postcommunist Hungary, economic reform enjoyed widespread consensus and did not differentiate the political parties. Orban’s populist language and shift to the right in the 2002 election identified the old Communists as the establishment elite to rail against, but a Cosmopolitan/National cleavage soon emerged as an electoral mobilization tool. The style of discourse became increasingly antagonistic as the parties adopted Manichean rhetoric to describe a cosmic struggle between good versus evil and denigrated their opponents. Institutional incentives underlie the political strategy: the Hungarian electoral system is a winner-take-all system where defeated political parties have no say in policy formulation (Enyedi, 2016). Therefore, their strategies are based on coalition politics and divisive rhetoric which shrinks the room for any moderate and alternative opinion (Tóka & Popa, 2013). Fidesz actually perfected the art by slowly building coalitions with conservative parties and civil society organizations like the Church. It even created its own “civic circle” that mobilized mass participation through seemingly non-political activities like blood donation. While such strategies might be beneficial in terms of stabilizing the electorate, and giving the party system more institutional form, it is also causing democratic erosion and poisoning social relationships.

The outcomes for democracy exhibit a concentration of power and a growing illiberalism. Fidesz used its majority position after the 2010 elections to modify the constitution, further concentrating the party’s hold on key institutions, such as the election commission and media council, and increase its supermajority through changing electoral rules and gerrymandering districts to achieve an even more disproportionate share of representation in the parliament. As shown in Figures 2 and 3, the government’s willingness to compromise, indicated by its respect for counter-arguments of

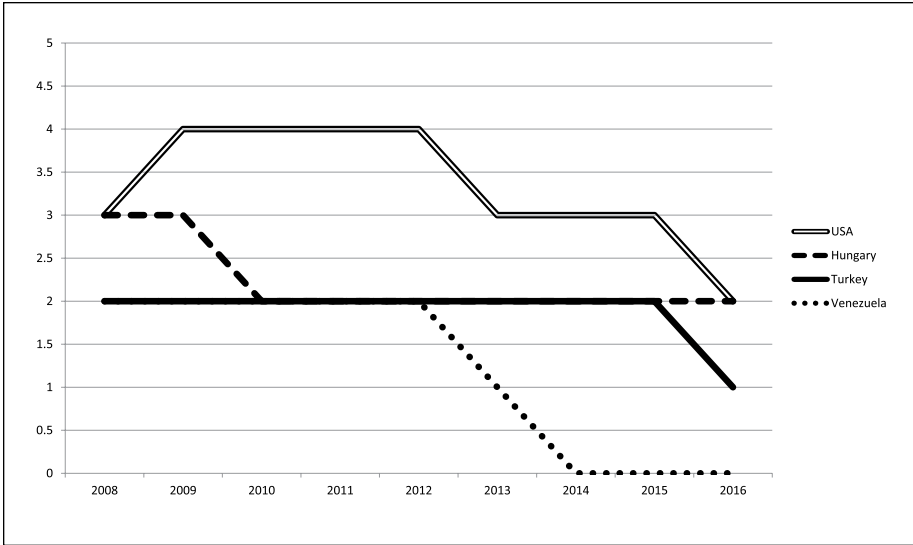


Figure 2. Respect for counterargument.

Source. Varieties of Democracy dataset (Version 7). On scale of 0 to 5 (0 being the lowest), scores represent diminishing level of tolerance for opposing views among political elites. 5 = Recognition of counterarguments and changing one’s one position accordingly; 0 = Counterarguments are not permitted in the country and people face punishments for voicing opposing opinions.

political opponents and its consultation of other parties and actors, has declined since Fidesz’ ascent to power in 2010.

Civil liberties have also come under threat as the Orban government cracked down on internationally funded NGOs, restricted freedom of the press, and took a hardline against refugees and immigrants, refusing to adhere to European Union guidelines on receiving Syrian refugees. As Figure 4 shows, Hungary declined on the Freedom House 7-point Freedom scale from a 1 (completely free) to a 2 between 2010 and 2015, and another dip to 2.5 in the 2017 Freedom in the World Report. Restrictions on press freedom were particularly singled out. Meanwhile Hungary’s Democracy score declined from 2.14 in 2008 to 3.54 in 2017 (on a 7-point scale with 7 the least democratic; Freedom House, 2017). While it would be premature to call it a case of democratic breakdown, Hungary thus illustrates a case of democratic backsliding under new political elites and dominant groups.

United States

The Southern Democrat political party realignment in the 1970s and 1980s led to marked political party polarization in the 1990s and 2000s as Americans sorted into more ideologically homogeneous political parties and Congressional voting exhibited greater polarization (Campbell, 2016; Pew Research, 2016). Affective polarization

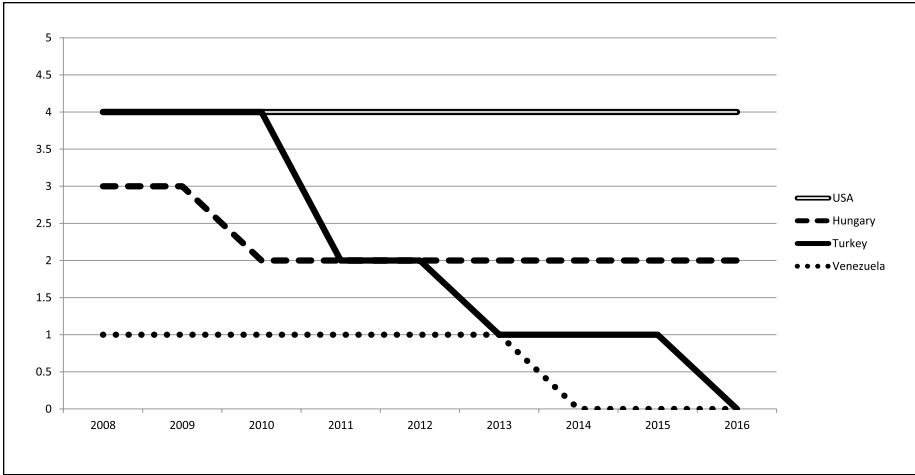


Figure 3. Consultation with other actors.

Source. Varieties of Democracy (Version 7). On a scale of 0 to 5 with 0 the lowest. 5 = consulting with a wide range of participants from the entire political spectrum; 0 = authoritative decisions taken without any consultation.

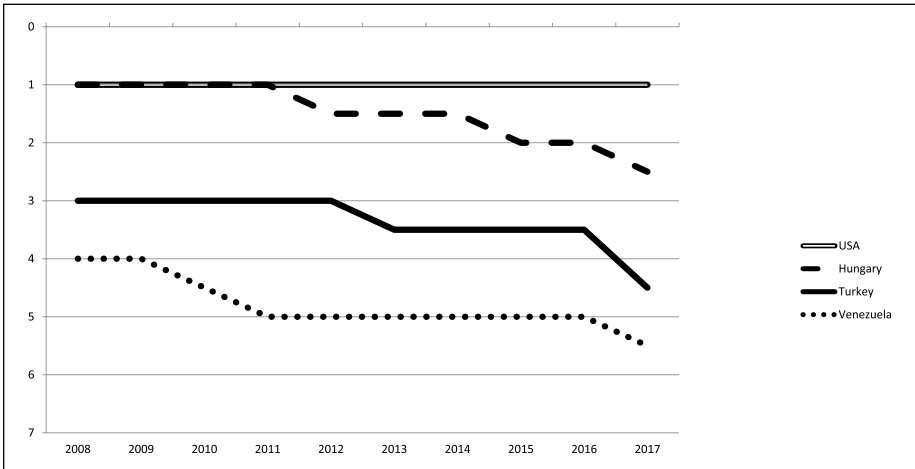


Figure 4. Democratic Erosion (Freedom scores).

Source. Freedom House, 1 = most free; 7 = least free.

accelerated after Barack Obama was elected in 2008 as the first African American biracial president, giving voice to an underrepresented minority with a long history of discrimination.

Obama’s presidency belied the hope that the United States had entered a post-racial political era. Instead, political scientists determined that racial resentment,

ethno-nationalism, and racial prejudice played a major role in predicting voting choice among Whites in the next two presidential elections, costing Obama votes in his second election and lending votes to Trump in 2016 (Abramowitz, 2016; Knuckey & Kim, 2015; Morgan & Lee, 2017; Tesler, 2016).

Obama's election spurred a counter-mobilization of White, conservative, and evangelical voters in the Tea Party. The early Tea Party movement expressed anger and resentment at the distributive injustice of welfare programs for "undeserving" immigrants, minorities, and youth, while favoring entitlement programs like Social Security and Medicare for "hard-working" Americans (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012).

Six years later, the reaction to the growing racial, ethnic, and gender diversity of the American electorate produced a surprising win for Donald Trump, whose campaign rhetoric was starkly polarizing and anti-establishment, dividing the country between "Us"—the "real" Americans who hungered for a return to an idealized past when industrial jobs provided for upward mobility and White males were in charge in the workplace and the family, and "Them"—the immigrants, minorities, and liberal elites who had wrought an "American carnage" (Inaugural speech, January 21, 2017). Trump's victory spawned another grass-roots counter-mobilization, this time on the Left and in particular women, who marched and ran for political office in massive numbers.

The U.S. story reflects the dynamics of severe polarization laid out in this article. The empowerment of new minority groups in the form of Barack Obama's election reinforced a relative sense of loss and disempowerment by White working-class voters whose economic base was shifting in a globalized economy. Their sense of injury and injustice was easily exploited by candidate Trump as he employed a populist Manichean message casting blame on the nefarious Washington elites working against the virtuous people, giving permission to his supporters to express their resentment and anger even in violent forms.

Partisan antipathy rose dramatically compared with 1994, when only 21% of Republicans and 17% of Democrats had highly unfavorable views of the other. By 2016, those figures had risen to 58% and 55%, respectively. Roughly half of voters of each party say the other party makes them feel afraid, while those who say that the policies of the other party are so misguided they are a threat to the nation have risen rapidly. In 2016, 45% of Republicans viewed Democratic policies as a threat, up 8 points in just 2 years; 41% of Democrats viewed Republican policies as a threat, up 10 points in 2 years (Pew Research Center, 2016).

The growth in negative partisanship may also reflect the sense of threat and zero-sum perceptions: large numbers of voters are voting *against* an opposing candidate rather than *for* their candidate, and more voters dislike the other party more than they like the party they belong to or lean toward (Abramowitz & Webster, 2015; Pew Research, 2016).

Polarization's impact on U.S. democracy has been primarily one of gridlock and careening as Republicans carried out an explicitly obstructionist strategy against the Obama administration, and Obama made use of unilateral executive orders to implement policy change. Subsequently, the Trump administration in its first year exhibited

an evident bent to undo anything accomplished by Obama. The Republican-led Senate ended a practice of supermajority voting (filibuster and cloture) for Supreme Court appointments and attempted to enact major legislation without bipartisan consultation or support in 2017. Diminished tolerance of opposing views among political elites is also reflected in the degradation of respect for counter-arguments as indicated in Figure 2, where the United States fell to a 3 (acknowledge but not value counterarguments) in 2013 and then to a 2 (elites acknowledge the counterarguments only to degrade them and debase the individuals and groups who make such arguments) in 2016.

Warning signs of another of our possible outcomes—democratic backsliding, emerged in the public’s apparent tolerance of illiberal behavior by the new administration and some of its supporters in 2017. Violation of democratic norms in recent years and especially since the election of Donald Trump include the erosion of partisan restraint, presidential restraint, and the idea of a legitimate opposition (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2016). Trump’s questioning the legitimacy of Obama’s presidency from his birther movement of 2010, and his behavior in the 2016 campaign and first year in office—unfounded accusations of voter fraud in his own election, refusal to unambiguously condemn violence, distortion of facts, attacks on mainstream media, and denigration of scientific evidence and expertise—are all warning signs of antidemocratic behavior. Even strong institutions and constitutional protections are vulnerable to regression (Huq & Ginsburg, forthcoming) and scholars tracking assessments of political scientists indicate an increased risk of democratic backsliding (Authoritarian Warning Survey, 2017).

Turkey

Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) was an offshoot of earlier Islamist parties. As a newly founded party, it came to power in 2002 following a financial crisis that widely discredited mainstream political elites and institutions in the eyes of the electorate and by promising to be a catch-all party and to revamp Turkey’s mainstream political–institutional and economic structures in favor of the country’s underprivileged groups. From the beginning, but increasingly after initial confrontations with pro-secular institutions and opposition, the party used polarizing rhetoric and identity formation by building on preexisting and at least partially cross-cutting cleavages. These included divisions and identities such as “religious–secular,” “center–periphery,” “globalist–nationalist” and “rich–poor,” which were historical–institutional legacies of Turkey’s pro-secular and state-led modernization and nation-state building.

Polarization helped the party align the perceived interests of diverse groups with each other and alongside a newly constructed division. While on the surface the new division seemed to coincide with the amorphous markers of “conservative” versus “secular,” it evolved into a partisan fault line. Regrouping along this new cleavage, pro-AKP groups would consolidate into a governing bloc based on an oppositional identity against those ostensibly defending “the elitist and corrupt old Turkey.” This

was a relational process. Opposition groups threatened by the AKP's rise also used polarizing rhetoric and strategies of mass mobilization based on causes and principles such as secularism and constitutionalism but were less effective in overcoming their internal differences.

Polarizing discourse that defined the supporters and "foes" of the AKP in terms of a highly simplified frame ("the challengers and defenders of old Turkey," respectively) while defaming the latter helped the party build a highly effective party organization and secure a loyal support base. In addition, it proved instrumental as a leverage to dismantle the long-established tutelage of the secularist military over civilian politics. Hence, polarization can be argued to have contributed to democratization as long as there remained some balance and sharing of power between the AKP on the one hand and the opposition parties and pro-secular elites, middle classes, civil society, and bureaucracy on the other. The AKP became increasingly unwilling to share power, intolerant of criticism, and bent on authoritarianism; however, as the party used polarizing tactics and creeping authoritarianism to undermine the latter groups and institutional checks and balances, opposition parties failed to reform themselves, and the power balance changed in favor of the ruling party (Somers, 2014).

Arguably, polarization spiraled out of control increasingly undermining social relations, emboldening the AKP's Islamist and nationalist activists and political opportunists, who sidelined more democratic-minded and corruption-resistant actors within the party, and disabling interparty cooperation. As the Figures 2 and 3 above indicate, "consultation with other actors" and "respect for counterarguments" have been diminishing since 2010 and 2015, in respective order. Polarization nurtured rigidly loyal AKP constituencies and new elite supporters who were, in accordance with Svoboda's (2012) more general argument, ready to tolerate—or, in the case of the elites, implement—the party's illiberal policies and overlook its involvements in state capture and corruption. Other pernicious consequences of polarization also became increasingly clear. Both politics and the society became highly polarized based on pro-government versus antigovernment partisanship with undertones of secular-religious and urban-rural cleavages, and, more recently a more personalist division between the supporters and opponents of President Erdogan (Aydın-Düzgün & Balta, 2017; Corporate Social Responsibility Association of Turkey, 2016; KONDA, 2017). Public debates even about seemingly neutral issues such as environment almost automatically turned into partisan quarrels. As of March, 2017, 34.2% of the AKP voters and 60.4% of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) voters declared respectively that they would "never vote" for the other party (KONDA, 2017).⁶

A failed coup attempt in 2016 allegedly staged by previous AKP allies led to the declaration of an ongoing state of exception, de facto suspension of rule of law and checks and balances, massive purges and widespread rights abuses, and oppression of the opposition. Constitutional amendments that narrowly passed in a disputed referendum in 2017 mean that the parliamentary system would be replaced with an executive presidency by 2019. This change may institutionalize the "executive degradation" of political and civic pluralism based on an authoritarian presidential system (Diamond, 2015).

Hence, as of this writing, Turkey was in a period of flux suffering from democratic erosion and increasingly authoritarian rule with new elites and dominant groups, which may or may not become consolidated. As Figure 4 shows, Freedom House considers it “partially free” with a downward trend since 2012 and a sharp decline since 2016. While some scholars already classify it as “competitive–authoritarian,” others point out that it may stabilize into different variations of authoritarianism, return to democracy and reforms, or fluctuate between these outcomes (among others, Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017; Öktem & Akkoyunlu, 2017; Somer, 2016b). Authoritarianism or illiberal democracy with return of old elites and dominant groups seem unlikely but are also possible.

Similar to the Venezuelan case analyzed below, Erdogan’s AKP emerged from the periphery of political power and challenged the status quo with the promise of replacing the old elites *and* bringing full democracy, more accountable government, and justice for the masses. After 15 years in power and surviving backlashes from the old elites and their middle-class base, the AKP clearly became the new status quo. However, rather than the creation of more democratic and inclusive rules of politics, Turkey has been witnessing in recent years a democratic breakdown coupled with the development of a less rule-based regime (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016; Öktem & Akkoyunlu, 2017; Somer, 2016a). Thereby, the AKP not only has been reproducing the “old” authoritarian and semi-democratic practices in the name of a new and more Islamic mainstream identity; it also began to generate new, more mass-based and often less tolerant methods of authoritarianism (Somer, 2016a). It became more reluctant to give up power democratically than any previous government of Turkey, and faced massive and unaccounted for charges of corruption.

Venezuela

In the wake of a turbulent decade in the 1990s, characterized by a twin crisis of representation and of the state (McCoy & Myers, 2004; Handlin, 2018), Venezuelans elected their president, a charismatic former coup-leader turned radical politician promising to re-found the 40-year old democracy. Hugo Chavez’s populist message blaming the corruption and mismanagement of the political elite for stealing the oil birthright of common Venezuelans mobilized the previously marginalized urban and rural poor and an increasingly resentful middle class. Chavez’s new political movement, the Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement, initially lacked a legislative majority, but after pushing through a new constitution and holding new elections in 2000, Chavez’s party gained a majority.

Chavez’s polarizing populist rhetoric emphasizing a nefarious elite tied to the “imperialist” United States exploiting “el pueblo”—the virtuous people, set up an Us versus Them scenario with moralist overtones. His confrontational policies to remake democratic institutions in a new “participatory–protagonist” democracy and his economic policies soon produced a backlash from the prior business, political, and civil society elites. The resulting polarization led to massive marches, the deaths of 43 persons, and a short-lived coup against Chavez in 2002. After defeating a

recall referendum to cut short his term in 2004 and an opposition boycott of legislative elections the next year, Chavez took advantage of the absence of a second political “pole” to pack the courts, promote loyalists in the military and electoral council, and weaken independent media. For the next decade, while affective polarization at the societal level grew between “chavistas” and anti-chavistas,” at the political level, the opposition fragmented while Chavez and his political movement took control of most political institutions and dominated in the electoral arena. Over time, Chavez constructed a new polarizing boundary, moving from class-based cleavages and competing views of democracy, to a simple divide of being for or against his so-called Bolivarian Revolution.

A new political polarization emerged in 2013 when Chavez died and his successor, Vice President Nicolas Maduro, only narrowly defeated his opponent in special elections. Oil prices fell in 2014 and finally by 2015, a unified opposition political alliance gained a two-thirds majority in the legislature, setting up a serious institutional challenge to the governing party. Maduro’s institutional allies in the Supreme Court and National Electoral Council turned increasingly authoritarian, stripping the legislature of its powers, establishing a new all-powerful constituent assembly through a dubious electoral process and repressing political protest. Democratic erosion in terms of loss of separation of powers and curtailment of civil and political rights increased throughout the period, as shown in Figure 4, to the point that Freedom House rated Venezuela Not Free for the first time in its 2017 report (5.5 of 7, where 7 is Least Free).

Maduro’s hardcore supporters seem willing to tolerate the growing illiberalism and clear transition toward authoritarianism, maintaining his approval among that group at 88% while opposition supporters disapproved at 98% and independents at 94% in November 2017. Some opposition factions, frustrated with their inability to influence government actions through street protests or electoral routes, called on the military to intervene to defend the constitutional order and international actors to apply sanctions on the government. The public was starkly polarized, but also unsatisfied with both of the political options offered to it, with Maduro’s net national approval at -37% and the opposition alliance MUD at -34% (Venebarometro, 2017).

The Venezuelan case, like the Turkish case, illustrates the outcomes of polarization when a marginalized sector of the population is mobilized to support an elite displacement, producing a backlash from old elites and increasing authoritarian behavior by the new elites as they become the new status quo. After 18 years in power, the movement claiming to be revolutionary and democratizing increasingly resorted to corruption and undemocratic behavior to retain power.

Conclusions

We have argued that a common pattern of polarization—one that is inherently *relational* and with an instrumental *political* use—is threatening democratic norms and governance in widely varying democracies around the world. In our conceptualization, polarization is a process in which the normal multiplicity of differences in a

society increasingly align along a single dimension and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of “Us” versus “Them.” As such polarization deepens, it has pernicious consequences for democracy.

Our brief review of four country cases illustrates the chain of causal mechanisms we identified linking severe polarization to gridlock, democratic backsliding, or collapse. In cases as diverse as Hungary, Turkey, the United States, and Venezuela, we found that elites play a critical role in constructing and/or intensifying existing cleavages or resentments with a divisive rhetoric of “Us” versus “Them” intended to mobilize a (perceived) marginalized or disunited sector of the population. More often than not, this mobilization is also activated by some crisis, frequently a state or economic crisis.

In the case of Hungary, Turkey, and Venezuela, the new groups in power enacted constitutional change to consolidate their power. They increased their electoral advantage through increasingly majoritarian electoral systems and disproportionate representation, and they eroded constraints on executive power by promoting loyalists in the courts, electoral authorities, and security forces. In the United States, the constitution was not modified, but long-standing norms of party restraint and bipartisan consensus for major decisions were dismantled and replaced by single-party legislation and appointment of Supreme Court justices.

A backlash to the new groups occurred in most of the cases, as the political opposition also engaged in polarizing rhetoric, mobilized in mass protests and in Venezuela attempted military coups.⁷ In the United States, the victory of Barack Obama reflecting the growing demographic diversity of the country led to a backlash first in the Tea Party counter-mobilization and Republican obstructionist strategy in Congress, followed by Donald Trump’s successful populist mobilization of the White working class to win the presidency.

Initial counter-mobilizations, however, were unable to sustain themselves in Hungary, Turkey, and Venezuela as the incumbents consolidated institutional power and deepened a single boundary dividing the polity and society into pro- and anti-incumbent camps. Affective polarization decreased social contact and intensified zero-sum perceptions. The growing perceptions of the policies of the “Other” as a threat to the nation in combination with the high stakes of winner-take-all electoral systems and increasingly unlevel playing fields led to a growing tolerance of democratic norm violations.

In Turkey and Venezuela, the anti-establishment movements led by Hugo Chavez and Recep Tayyip Erdogan experienced the corrosive influence of power as they became the new elites and, over time, relied on increasingly corrupt and authoritarian behavior to maintain power. Arguably, new replacements took place within the “new elites” as polarization disadvantaged more democratic-minded actors and empowered those willing to resort to corruption and oppression for retaining power and self-enrichment. In Hungary and the United States, warning signs of democratic backsliding emerged with political attacks on press freedoms and scientific expertise, the practice of majoritarian politics and loosening of institutional constraints, and the vilification of political opponents with polarizing rhetoric.

Time will tell whether and to what extent these four cases will further converge with each other in terms of polarizations and democratic erosions they suffer. As we maintained in this article, their democratic futures may depend on their ability to either reverse polarization or manage it in such ways that it will produce reformed democracy rather than the negative outcomes we focused on in this article.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Poole and Rosenthal (1997), Hetherington (2001), Campbell (2016), Abramowitz (2010), Fiorina and Abrams (2008), Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2008), Motyl (2016), Levendusky (2009) on the United States; LeBas (2006, 2011) on Africa; Handlin (2017), Carlin et al. (2015) on Latin America; Enyedi (2016) on Europe; Sartori (1976) and Dalton (2008) on political party systems; Montalvo and Reynal-Quorel (2005) on ethnic/linguistic fragmentation; and Esteban and Ray (1994), Duclos, Esteban, and Ray (2004); Quah (1997), Wang and Tsui (2000), Zhang and Kanbur (2001), Chakravarty and Majumder (2001) on social polarization and income stratification.
2. Special issue on Polarized Politics: A Global Threat to Democracy, guest editors Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, forthcoming.
3. We note that Dalton (2008) and Inglehart (1990) assert that Left–Right ideological scales capture the primary political and cultural differences in a society, while others assert that voters may have difficulty correctly locating parties on issue scales or be unwilling or unable to place themselves on ideological scales (Iyengar et al., 2012; Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993); Zechmeister, 2015). Following Vegetti (2014) and Lauka, McCoy, and Firat (2018), we argue that Left-Right ideological scales are insufficient to measure the types of polarization we are interested in as so divisive for democracies today.
4. We distinguish between societal and social polarizations, reserving the latter concept to refer to socioeconomic status differences and measures of income differences (see citations in Note 1).
5. Joshua Greene (2013) describes group markers including language and race; however, social categories leading to social preferences (favoring in-groups over out-groups) can also be based on arbitrary group characteristics.
6. Most recent figures obtained from KONDA through email.
7. Allegedly, some secularist officers planned a coup in Turkey also, but they were later

acquitted and the trials against them (and secularist civilian actors) have been discredited as based on fabricated evidence. After a more recent coup attempt in 2016, the government blamed a religious movement that used to be its close ally.

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Author Biographies

Jennifer McCoy is Distinguished University Professor of Political Science at Georgia State University and coordinates an international research group on political polarization. Her most recent book is *International Mediation in Venezuela*.

Tahmina Rahman is a PhD candidate in political science at Georgia State University and an assistant professor of International Relations at the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Murat Somer is an associate professor of political science and international relations at Koç University. His research on democratization, polarization, religious and secular politics, and ethnic conflict appeared in books, book volumes, and journals such as *Comparative Political Studies* and *Democratization*.