

Polarization: Issues and Identity in American Politics

Samuel Frederick

Course Overview

When we read the news, we are inundated with stories about how America is the most polarized it has been in recent times. Republicans and Democrats appear to have vastly different views of what policies should be implemented, what values should guide governance, and even what basic facts are. A great number of people believe false information that supports their party. So extreme is the conflict between the parties that, on several occasions, it has spilled over into actual physical violence—as in the January 6th attack on the Capitol by supporters of Donald Trump. But what does political science research say about this topic? What do we mean when we talk about “polarization?” Are Americans really polarized? If so, why, and what can be done to de-escalate?

In this course, we will read widely from political science research, exploring different kinds of polarization and the causes and consequences of each type. We will start by discussing ideological and policy-based polarization (what we often think of when discussing political conflict in the American setting). Next, we will examine affective polarization, a type of polarization characterized by partisan hatred rather than simple policy disagreements.

Over the course of the semester, we will pay close attention to measurement, thinking carefully about how existing measures do (or do not) capture the underlying concept of polarization. Additionally, students will learn to critically evaluate research designs and to effectively communicate the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches for studying polarization. In class discussions, we will make connections to other research and examine current events through the lens of course readings.

Course Goals

At the end of the semester, students will be:

- Well-versed in current scholarly debates about political polarization
- Capable of carefully defining and effectively measuring theoretical constructs
- Skilled in the critical evaluation of research
- Prepared to communicate scholarly ideas clearly

Grading

Discussion

Students should come to each class prepared to discuss the assigned readings, including asking questions that came up in the course materials and presenting thoughts on the premises, design, structure, and conclusions of the texts. This course is a seminar built around a full and open scholarly dialogue. As instructor, my job is to structure and facilitate class supportive discussions in which all students feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and posing questions.

Class Research Project

Over the course of the semester, we will, as a class, field a survey, possibly including experimental methods. First, we will identify areas of research that we are particularly curious about and that we think warrant further exploration. We will carefully define our question and theoretical constructs. With an eye toward measurement, we will design experimental treatments or survey questions that capture our theoretical constructs of interest. Together, we will go through the process of applying for Institutional Review Board approval for our survey design and pre-register our hypotheses and design. Finally, we will field our survey and analyze the results.

Reflection Papers

At the beginning of the semester, students will choose four class sessions with topics that look particularly interesting to them. On the day of these classes, students will submit brief reflection papers (3-4 pages, double-spaced), which aim to connect the readings for the class. These papers may, for example, reflect on the theme of the readings, suggest other potential research directions or designs, identify potential shortcomings of the papers and ways to fill these gaps, or consider how these papers can help us understand current events (or ways they fail to do so).

Literature Review or Research Project

At the end of the semester, students will submit a 10-15 page literature review or an original research paper on a topic of their choosing. Students may choose topics from readings, class discussions, current events, or any other area that is interesting. While our course focuses on the American political context, students are also encouraged to explore comparative politics research. I will meet with students individually early in the semester to help choose topics and my door is open throughout the semester if anyone needs advice or input.

Course Readings

1 What is Polarization?

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

Chapter 1

- Shanto Iyengar, Guarav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes (2012). “Affect, Not Ideology: A Social-Identity Perspective on Polarization”. In: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76.3
- Daniel Kreiss and Shannon C McGregor (2023). “A review and provocation: On polarization and platforms”. In: *New Media & Society*. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231161880>

2 Ideological and Policy Polarization

Is the Public Polarized?

- Philip Converse (1964). “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics”. In: *Ideology and Its Discontents*. Ed. by David Aprter. New York: The Free Press
- Matthew Levendusky (2009). *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrats and How Conservatives Became Republicans*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, **Chapter 3**
- Alan Abramowitz and Kyle Saunders (2008). “Is Polarization a Myth?” In: *The Journal of Politics* 70.2
- Morris Fiorina, Samuel Abrams, and Jeremy Pope (2008). “Polarization in the American Public: Misconceptions and Misreadings”. In: *The Journal of Politics* 70.2

Measuring Policy and Ideological Polarization

- Joseph Bafumi and Robert Y. Shapiro (2009). “A New Partisan Voter”. In: *The Journal of Politics* 71.1
- Geoffrey C. Layman and Thomas M. Carsey (2002). “Party Polarization and ”Conflict Extension” in the American Electorate”. In: *American Journal of Political Science* 46.4. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3088434>
- David Broockman (2016). “Approaches to Studying Policy Representation”. In: *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 41.1
- Donald Kinder and Nathan Kalmoe (2017). *Neither Liberal nor Conservative: Ideological Innocence in the American Public*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, **Chapters 2, 3, and 5**

Suggested Readings:

- Delia Baldassari and Andrew Gelman (2008). “Partisans without Constraint: Political Polarization and Trends in American Public Opinion”. In: *American Journal of Sociology* 114.2

Causes of Policy Polarization and Sorting

- Geoffrey C. Layman, Thomas M. Carsey, John C. Green, Richard Herrera, and Rosalyn Cooperman (2010). “Activists and Conflict Extension in American Party Politics”. In: *The American Political Science Review* 104.2
- Matthew Levendusky (2009). *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrats and How Conservatives Became Republicans*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, **Chapters 2 and 5**

Suggested Readings:

- Edward Carmines and James Stimson (1989). *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Eric Schickler (2016). *Racial Realignment: The Transformation of American Liberalism, 1932-1965*. Princeton: Princeton University Press

Consequences of Policy Polarization and Sorting

- Donald Kinder and Nathan Kalmoe (2017). *Neither Liberal nor Conservative: Ideological Innocence in the American Public*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, **Chapter 6**
- Matthew Levendusky (2009). *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrats and How Conservatives Became Republicans*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, **Chapter 7**
- Joshua Zingher (2022). *Political Choice in a Polarized America: How Elite Polarization Shapes Mass Behavior*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, **Chapter 6**

Who Is Polarized?

- Joseph Bafumi and Michael Herron (2010). “Leapfrog Representation and Extremism: A Study of American Voters and Their Members in Congress”. In: *American Political Science Review* 104.3
- John Zaller (1992). *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. New York: Cambridge University Press, **Chapters 2, 3, 7, and 8**
- Matthew Levendusky (2009). *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrats and How Conservatives Became Republicans*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, **Chapter 4**

3 Partisanship and Affective Polarization

Partisanship as a Social Identity

- Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1986). “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior”. In: *The Psychology of Intergroup Relations*. Ed. by Stephen Worchel and William Austin. Chicago: Hall Publishers
- Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes (1960). *The American Voter*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, **Chapter 6**
- Steven Greene (1999). “Understanding Party Identification: A Social Identity Approach”. In: *Political Psychology* 20.2
- Donald Green, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler (2002). *Partisan Hearts and Minds: Political Parties and the Social Identities of Voters*. New Haven: Yale University Press, **Chapters 1 and 2**

Affective Polarization

- Shanto Iyengar, Yphtach Lelkes, Matthew Levendusky, Neil Malhotra, and Sean Westwood (2019). “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States”. In: *Annual Review of Political Science* 22
- James Druckman and Jeremy Levy (n.d.). “Affective Polarization in the American Public”. In: *Working Paper* (). URL: <https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/documents/working-papers/2021/wp-21-27.pdf>
- Liliana Mason (2018). *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Measuring Affective Polarization

- Shanto Iyengar and Sean Westwood (2015). “Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization”. In: *American Journal of Political Science* 59.3
- James N Druckman and Matthew S Levendusky (2019). “What Do We Measure When We Measure Affective Polarization?” In: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 83.1. URL: <https://academic.oup.com/poq/article/83/1/114/5486527>
- James N. Druckman, Samara Klar, Yanna Krupnikov, Matthew Levendusky, and John Barry Ryan (2022). “(Mis)estimating Affective Polarization”. In: *Journal of Politics* 84.2
- John Kingzette, James Druckman, Samara Klar, Yanna Krupnikov, Matthew Levendusky, and John Barry Ryan (2021). “How Affective Polarization Undermines Support for Democratic Norms”. In: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 85.2. URL: <https://academic.oup.com/poq/article-abstract/85/2/663/6373858>

Consequences of Partisanship and Affective Polarization

- John Kingzette, James Druckman, Samara Klar, Yanna Krupnikov, Matthew Levendusky, and John Barry Ryan (2021). “How Affective Polarization Undermines Support for Democratic Norms”. In: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 85.2. URL: <https://academic.oup.com/poq/article-abstract/85/2/663/6373858>
- David Broockman, Joshua Kalla, and Sean Westwood (2022). “Does Affective Polarization Undermine Democratic Norms or Accountability? Maybe Not.” In: *American Journal of Political Science* 67.3
- James N. Druckman, Samara Klar, Yanna Krupnikov, Matthew Levendusky, and John Barry Ryan (2021). “Affective polarization, local contexts and public opinion in America”. In: *Nature Human Behaviour* 5.1. URL: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-020-01012-5>
- Matthew Levendusky (2023). *Our Common Bonds: Using What Americans Share to Bridge the Partisan Divide*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, **Chapter 6**
- Libby Jenke (2023). “Affective Polarization and Misinformation Belief”. In: *Political Behavior*. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-022-09851-w>

Suggested Readings:

- Mathias Osmundsen, Alexander Bor, Peter Vahlstrup, Anja Bechmann, and Michael Petersen (2021). “Partisan Polarization Is the Primary Psychological Motivation Behind Political Fake News Sharing on Twitter”. In: *American Political Science Review* 115.3
- Jan G. Voelkel, James Chu, Michael N. Stagnaro, Joseph S. Mernyk, Chrystal Redekopp, Sophia L. Pink, James N. Druckman, David G. Rand, and Robb Willer (2023). “Interventions reducing affective polarization do not necessarily improve anti-democratic attitudes”. In: *Nature Human Behaviour* 7.1. URL: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-022-01466-9>

Causes of Affective Polarization: Identities and Social Sorting

- Lilliana Mason (2016). “A Cross-Cutting Calm: How Social Sorting Drives Affective Polarization”. In: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80.S1. URL: <https://academic.oup.com/poq/article-lookup/doi/10.1093/poq/nfw001>
- Sean Westwood and Erik Peterson (2020). “The Inseparability of Race and Partisanship in the United States”. In: *Political Behavior*
- Matthew Levendusky (2023). *Our Common Bonds: Using What Americans Share to Bridge the Partisan Divide*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, **Chapters 2 and 3**

- Emily A. West and Shanto Iyengar (2022). “Partisanship as a Social Identity: Implications for Polarization”. In: *Political Behavior* 44.2. URL: <https://link.springer.com/10.1007/s11109-020-09637-y>
- Benjamin A. Lyons, Christina E. Farhart, Michael P. Hall, John Kotcher, Matthew Levendusky, Joanne M. Miller, Brendan Nyhan, Kaitlin T. Raimi, Jason Reifler, Kyle L. Saunders, Rasmus Skytte, and Xiaoquan Zhao (2022). “Self-Affirmation and Identity-Driven Political Behavior”. In: *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 9.2. URL: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-experimental-political-science/article/selfaffirmation-and-identitydriven-political-behavior/259498FE3F921E731CA8644F607030A2>

Suggested Readings:

- Patrick J. Egan (2020). “Identity as Dependent Variable: How Americans Shift Their Identities to Align with Their Politics”. In: *American Journal of Political Science* 64.3. URL: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/ajps.12496>

Causes of Affective Polarization: Cognitive Biases

- Douglas J. Ahler and Gaurav Sood (2018). “The Parties in Our Heads: Misperceptions about Party Composition and Their Consequences”. In: *Journal of Politics* 80.3
- Daniel Stone (2023). *Undue Hate: A Behavioral Economic Analysis of Hostile Polarization in US Politics and Beyond*. Cambridge: MIT Press

Suggested Readings:

- Daniel F. Stone (2020). “Just a Big Misunderstanding? Bias and Bayesian Affective Polarization”. In: *International Economic Review* 61.1. URL: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/iere.12421>
- Jan G. Voelkel, Michael Stagnaro, et al. (n.d.). “Megastudy Identifying Effective Interventions to Strengthen Americans’ Democratic Attitudes”. In: *Working Paper* (). URL: <https://www.strengtheningdemocracychallenge.org/paper>

Causes of Affective Polarization: Interpersonal Contact

- Matthew Levendusky (2023). *Our Common Bonds: Using What Americans Share to Bridge the Partisan Divide*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, **Chapters 4 and 5**
- Erik Santoro and David E. Broockman (2022). “The promise and pitfalls of cross-partisan conversations for reducing affective polarization: Evidence from randomized experiments”. In: *Science Advances* 8.25. URL: <https://www.science.org/doi/full/10.1126/sciadv.abn5515>

- James Fishkin, Alice Siu, Larry Diamond, and Norman Bradburn (2021). “Is Deliberation an Antidote to Extreme Partisan Polarization? Reflections on ‘America in One Room’”. In: *American Political Science Review* 115.4
- Joshua Kalla and David Broockman (2022). “Voter Outreach Campaigns Can Reduce Affective Polarization among Implementing Political Activists: Evidence from Inside Three Campaigns”. In: *American Political Science Review* First View

Suggested Readings:

- Gordon Allport (1954). *The Nature of Prejudice*. Cambridge: Perseus Books

Causes of Affective Polarization: Media and Social Media

- David Broockman and Joshua Kalla (n.d.). “Consuming Cross-Cutting Media Causes Learning and Moderates Attitudes: A Field Experiment with Fox News Viewers”. In: *Working Paper* (). URL: <https://osf.io/jrw26/>
- Yphtach Lelkes, Gaurav Sood, and Shanto Iyengar (2017). “The Hostile Audience: The Effect of Access to Broadband Internet on Partisan Affect”. In: *American Journal of Political Science* 61.1. URL: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/ajps.12237>
- Andrew M. Guess et al. (2023). “How do social media feed algorithms affect attitudes and behavior in an election campaign?” In: *Science* 381.6656. URL: <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abp9364>

Suggested Readings:

- Matthew Levendusky (2013). “Partisan Media Exposure and Attitudes Toward the Opposition”. In: *Political Communication* 30.4
- Levi Boxell, Matthew Gentzkow, and Jesse Shapiro (2017). “Greater Internet use is not associated with faster growth in political polarization among US demographic groups”. In: *PNAS* 114.20. URL: <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1706588114>

4 Ideology vs. Identity

- Jon C. Rogowski and Joseph L. Sutherland (2016). “How Ideology Fuels Affective Polarization”. In: *Political Behavior* 38.2. URL: <http://link.springer.com/10.1007/s11109-015-9323-7>
- Yphtach Lelkes (2018). “Affective Polarization and Ideological Sorting: A Reciprocal, Albeit Weak, Relationship”. In: *The Forum* 16.1. URL: <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/for-2018-0005/html>

- Lilla V. Orr and Gregory A. Huber (2020). “The Policy Basis of Measured Partisan Animosity in the United States”. In: *American Journal of Political Science* 64.3
- Nicholas Dias and Yphtach Lelkes (2022). “The Nature of Affective Polarization: Disentangling Policy Disagreement from Partisan Identity”. In: *American Journal of Political Science* 66.3. URL: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ajps.12628?casa_token=OVSoQR1zulwAAAAA:DuZK2Wj9s82748QrpPtHJJq_Cd435fno87YZ41E2xIs94W1E4dUzF1G_oexTt8HJ_dnBnDaApJICSaQZ
- Lilla V. Orr, Anthony Fowler, and Gregory A. Huber (2023). “Is Affective Polarization Driven by Identity, Loyalty, or Substance?” In: *American Journal of Political Science* First View. URL: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/ajps.12796>

Suggested Readings:

- Anthony Fowler (2020). “Partisan Intoxication or Policy Voting?” In: *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 15.2. URL: <https://www.nowpublishers.com/article/Details/QJPS-18027a>