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Causes of Polarisation in the United States

Summary: The article explores the causes of polarisation in the USA. The author delves into various factors, such as elite-level policy disagreements, national economic conditions, electoral institutions, media fragmentation, party realignment, social sorting, and racial diversity, in order to comprehensively understand how those factors contribute to the existing high, though not alarming, if to be compared with other developed countries, level of polarisation in the United States. To limit the scope of the research, only the causes of polarisation are examined, omitting the negative consequences that are apparent during high level of polarisation. The article particularly explores the role of social media and the rise of populism, especially of right-wing populism, apparent with Donald Trump being elected as 47th president of the USA. The article provides an opinion on where to draw a line between moderate polarisation with its benefits and polarisation that produces pejorative effects. By understanding the root causes of polarisation, we can begin to explore strategies and solutions to foster greater cooperation, compromise, and civility among Americans. The subsequent experience would be of significant importance to countries around the globe, especially to those, experiencing increased polarisation, including Poland. The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to polarisation. The research is exploratory in nature, as it tries to gain familiarity with the phenomenon of polarisation, particularly in the United States, as well as gain new insights into it. The research question posed and explored by the author is what are the primary causes of political polarisation in the United State. By exploring the topic as well as the research questions posed, the research, in addition to the above-mentioned purpose, seeks to contribute to the discourse on preserving and strengthening democratic institutions, as well as the strengthening of deliberate democracy in the face of increasing division.

Key words: polarisation, United States, causes, democracy, populism, ideological difference, social media

Introduction

Polarisation is a social process whereby a social or political group is divided into two opposing sub-groups having conflicting and con-

trasting positions, goals, and viewpoints, with time, adopting more extreme positions reproduced by social interactions of an in-group (Smith, Thomas, Bliuc, et al., 2024, pp. 1–3). Polarisation, or, in other words, the degree of division or conflict within a society, has emerged as a defining characteristic of contemporary American politics and society. In recent decades, the United States has experienced a rapid increase in polarisation, both among its citizens and its political elites (Dinkelberg, et al., 2021, p. 285). This trend raises concerns about the health and stability of American democracy, as well as its role and influence in the world.

The hypothesis has been made that the following factors exacerbate the polarisation in the United States: 1) the rise of populism; 2) worsened economic situation of the individuals, as well the uncertainty of their well-being in the future; 3) focus of the mainstream political parties more on cultural and identity differences rather than administration particular policies on various sectors of the state; 4) first-past-the-post voting system; 5) government officials disengagement from concerns of the citizens; 6) social media echo-chambers and algorithms.

Conducting exploratory research based on the already existing literature on the topic has helped me gain better familiarity with the concept as well as new insights. The importance of the topic is relevant, as understanding polarisation can promote greater civic engagement and informed participation, which contribute to the functioning of deliberate democracy and improve the functionality of democratic institutions and democratic processes. Identifying causes of polarisation will lead to finding the ways to reduce increased polarisation, if that is at all possible and moral to do so, in order to diminish the negative effects of it, thus, helping to preserve the core principles of democracy, such as pluralism, compromise, and respect for diverse viewpoints.

A thorough review of existing literature on political polarisation, consisting mainly of scientific articles, focusing on theoretical frameworks, historical context, and previous research findings, has been conducted. The researcher doesn't conduct any new quantitative research but theories on already existing ones.

The research question explored in the article is, "what are the primary causes of political polarisation in the United States". The research question seeks to identify the various social, economic, political, and cultural factors that have contributed to the growing divide between different political ideologies and societal groups within the country. Complementary to it, the article explores the dynamics and recent trends that have exac-

erbated polarisation, including the role of media, political leadership, and policy decisions among others.

In a state, the process of polarisation could happen on different levels of society. For instance, elite polarisation, polarisation of the political elites, such as party leaders, elected officials, and activists. It is measured by the degree of ideological difference and conflict between the parties and their representatives. While mass polarisation is the polarisation of the general public or electorate, it is measured by the degree of ideological difference and alignment between the citizens and their parties, as well as the degree of affective or emotional attachment and hostility towards the political in-groups and out-groups (Gidron, Adams, Horne, 2023, pp. 997–1012).

Central to our discussion is the concept of affective polarisation, a term used to describe the growing hostility and resentment between members of different political parties. It has become a mainstream topic of debate in the United States in particular. Unlike ideological disagreements, affective polarisation is rooted in social identity and emotional responses rather than differing policy stances. This "us versus them" division mentality amongst the citizens could be heard more frequently in American society. Further below, the article will find a link between the affective polarisation and populism.

The debate over whether polarisation is inherently good or bad is a complex and nuanced one. In pluralistic societies, diversity of values and beliefs is a hallmark of vibrant democracy, often leading to robust discussions and the exploration of diverse perspectives. When managed effectively, these differences can be leveraged to generate innovative solutions and foster cooperation among individuals with varying viewpoints, which is the core foundation of deliberate democracy. However, polarisation becomes concerning when it escalates to the point of deep division and hostility, undermining constructive dialogue and impeding the pursuit of common goals. In the instances of "extreme" polarisation, it may undermine the very foundations of democracy, eroding trust in government and democratic institution, exacerbating social tensions (Vallier, 2020, pp. 2–12).

Main content

Affective polarisation contributes to a growing perception among citizens that the opposing party and their policies pose a threat to the nation or an

individual's way of life (Mason, 2016, pp. 352–365). A survey, conducted in 2018, found that 31 percent of Americans agreed with the proposition that the United States will descend into civil war within five years (Rasmussen, 2018). Though those five years have already passed and nothing like that has happened, apprehensions that are likely fueled by the spectacle of cross-party distrust and hostility remain to this day.

The data from these two research studies provide compelling evidence for the increasing polarisation in the United States.

Firstly, the survey conducted by Lilliana Mason and Nathan Kalmoe between 2017 and 2018 revealed that a significant portion of Americans harbour strong negative sentiments towards individuals belonging to the opposing political party (Mason, Kalmoe, 2021, pp. 172–192). Specifically, 40 percent of self-identified Democrats or Republicans agreed with the notion that individuals from the opposite party are not just political adversaries but are actually "downright evil" (Mason, Kalmoe, 2021, p. 182). This stark characterization indicates a deep-seated animosity and demonization of political opponents, suggesting a significant polarisation of attitudes and perceptions between party lines.

Moreover, the study done by Yphtach Lelkes in 2016 highlighted the growing reluctance of Americans to form close relationships with individuals from the opposite side of the political spectrum while in 1960 only about 5 percent of partisans expressed discomfort at the prospect of interparty marriage, by 2010, this figure had skyrocketed to approximately 50 percent (Lelkes, 2016, pp. 342–402). The data revealed a striking trend: while in 1960 only about 5 percent of partisans expressed discomfort at the prospect of interparty marriage, by 2010, this figure had skyrocketed to approximately 50 percent (Lelkes, 2016, p. 402). This significant increase in hesitancy towards forming personal connections across party lines underscores the widening divide and erosion of social cohesion within American society (Druckman, Levy, 2021, pp. 2–16).

Electoral institutions and polarisation

Democracy, no matter how it is construed, relies on active citizen participation; and in order for citizens to have the desire to actively participate in the political life, they ought to be invested enough in politics to care. Without an electorate that is invested in the government's behavior, the

government is held less accountable, and we end up in a vicious cycle where poor representation and lack of engagement follow on each other's heels (Pew Research Center, 2022).

Polarisation like what is currently experienced has the power to engage those who might not otherwise pay attention. When everyone around us is dividing into two camps, we feel compelled to choose a camp as well.

The U.S. at least for the better part of a century has been an anomaly among democratic states in that its elections have placed more emphasis on the specific candidate running for office than on their party affiliation, due to the structure of the electoral system (Tausanovitch, 2023).

Due to the system of primaries, the two major parties hold elections among their own members to decide which of their candidates will run in the general election. In these candidate-centered elections, the "character" of a candidate has to be discussed more than ideology in order to distinguish between candidates in the primaries. This has the unfortunate side effect of making it difficult to discern the difference in policy that would result from one candidate's victory over another, making it all too easy to conclude that the outcome of an election would be inconsequential (Tausanovitch, 2023).

As was earlier pointed out, to the writing of the article it is important to examine populism as a variable influencing polarisation. In fact, polarisation might be the most enduring consequence of populism (Roberts, 2022, p. 680). Populism deepens societal divides through "us versus them" rhetoric, and exploits identity politics, as populism relies on identity politics to exacerbate cultural and ideological divisions. The growth in populism is a main contributor to the increasing polarisation that we see occurring in the United States (Roberts, 2022, pp. 681–698). Takis Pappas proclaims "extreme polarisation" to be "the absolutely most important element of populist rule" (Pappas, 2019, p. 212).

Populism is an approach that appeals to the common people, often through rhetoric and strong emotional sentiments. Populism enables those on the far end of the spectrum to gain attention and influence, allowing them to rise to the ranks quickly. With their growing influence, it can become easy for them to become the voice and determinant of their political party.

The author takes the definition of populist polarisation presented by Kenneth Roberts in his work titled, "Populism and Polarization in Comparative Perspective: Constitutive, Spatial and Institutional Dimensions. Government and Opposition", which distinguishes between primary and

secondary aspects of populist polarization (Roberts, 2022, p. 681). The primary aspect is fundamental, involving the creation of a populist identity and the division of the political landscape into opposing factions. Secondary aspects are more practical and involve spatial and institutional elements, such as the widening gap between ideological positions and increased contention over democratic norms (Roberts, 2022). While the foundational dimension of polarisation is inherent to populism, the spatial and institutional dimensions are common outcomes but not inherent to the ideology (Roberts, 2022, p. 682). When these dimensions are combined, polarisation emerges as the division of society into adversarial political groups, moving farther apart over time.

With all of this in mind, we can argue that populism is supported by the increasing polarisation displayed through the two-party system. To gain the support of the voters, a candidate running for president in the United States is left in a position to appeal to half of the country's citizens, who have the same party affiliation as the candidate, and not the other (Drutman, 2019). It means, for example, that a Republican candidate would try to appeal to Republican voters even more, which could lead to a candidate who is more extreme on the ideological spectrum of conservatism being more popular among his or her voters. While doing that, a candidate doesn't try to mild his or her policies to accommodate voters from the other party but only bridges the gap between the two camps. The parties stopped competing for each other's voters and instead swivelled to their most loyal supporters (Drutman, 2019).

Trump, like other populist leaders, derived his authority from the widespread perception among his supporters that the system was unfairly stacked against them: "For too long, a small group in our nation's Capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished – but the people did not share in its wealth. Politicians prospered – but the jobs left, and the factories closed. The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country" (The Inaugural Address, 2017, January 20).

Although populism is intrinsically polarising, it does not necessarily emerge in polarised environments. The rise of Donald Trump as a right-wing populist figure in an increasingly polarised US political system is something of an anomaly, and could be attributed in part to the institutional particularities of American politics: presidentialism combined with a two-party system, plurality elections and an open primary system (Roberts, 2022, p. 684).

Although Trump was a consummate political outsider who stridently opposed both major US party establishments, he was able to capture one of the traditional parties and transform it into an instrument of his insurgent populist project (Roberts, 2022, p. 692). Trump is indeed a member of the Republican Party, but some Republicans don't see him as the true embodiment of the party. That can potentially explain why warm feelings towards the in-party show low on the scale (Pew Research Center, 2019). In contrast to populist counterparts in Europe and Latin America, Trump did not have to found a new political party or run an independent campaign to access executive office due to the two-party system, in which a number of successful candidates have focused on building an "ideology brand, the personal ideology of a candidate, which could be broadly understood as the development and promotion of a distinct set of beliefs and values that are closely associated with a particular political leader rather than the broader principles of the party they represent. So, instead of representing the ideas of the party from which their candidature is proposed, In America's recent events, populism has created unwavering party affiliation, to the extent where a party is mainly focused around a leader" (Drutman, 2019).

Populism is not confined to any particular ideological spectrum; it manifests across the political spectrum, including both left- and right-wing ideologies, as evidenced by global examples, particularly in regions like Latin America (Ivaldi, Lanzone, Woods, 2017, pp. 355–371). Left-wing populism often defines "the people" in terms of economic disadvantage and political marginalization, including in its rhetoric ethnic minorities and marginalized groups as "the people" (Huber, Schimpf, 2017, p. 149). In the US, Bernie Sanders exemplifies left-wing populism, advocating for progressive policies like universal healthcare and free education while critiquing the establishment and corporate elites as out of touch with ordinary citizens.

Does this mean if the polarisation caused by the two-party system is eliminated, leaders would not have to use populist sentiments? The answer is more complicated than we might be led to believe. While not a cure-all solution, the elimination of the two-party system might be enough to encourage leaders who are actually representatives of the people to come to power. Perhaps it can decrease populist tactics, as elections can become less of a power struggle between only two sides.

Indeed, there has been discussion amongst scholars in the US regarding reforming the current First-Past-The-Post electoral system to propor-

tional representation. Though it could be argued that the political situation and the type of party system are not the result of the electoral system, Gidron, Adams, and Horne came to the conclusion that partisans residing in countries with majoritarian, single-winner voting systems tend to dislike opposition parties more intensely and like their own party less than do partisans in countries with proportional voting systems (Gidron, Adams, Horne, 2023 pp. 999–1012). It seems like with the implementation of multi-party system, there indeed would be more political representation, as well as the quality of good governance, at least for the fact that, as Horne, Adams, and Gidron note, no consensus has emerged regarding measurement of mass-level affective polarisation in multiparty systems and that it tends to be less prominent in multiparty systems (Gidron, Adams, Horne, 2023, p. 1012). However, if public itself remains polarised on two camps and the parties get an overwhelming amount of support, it would cause such multi-party system to revert back to a two-party system, especially in the case of the United States, where one predominantly feels that voting for a third party candidate is a waste of a vote.

Government officials disengagement

Revisiting the discourse of populism, it becomes apparent that the surge in populism is linked to the growing disenchantment among citizens with mainstream political establishments, trust to whom is additionally undermined by populists, who "scapegoat and vilify the elites and the establishment" (Berman, 2021, p.74). These establishments, often viewed as unresponsive or ineffective in addressing the concerns of the populace, have provided fertile ground for the rise of populist movements (Berman, 2021, p. 79). Within the context of the United States, a noteworthy concern emerges: the widening gap between senior congressional staff members and the sentiments of the American public. Studies highlight a troubling trend wherein these influential staffers, instrumental in shaping legislative priorities, exhibit a significant detachment from the aspirations and anxieties of ordinary citizens (Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger, Stokes, 2019, pp. 1–17). As their attention gravitates towards corporate interests at the expense of engaging with grassroots movements, this disconnect amplifies discontent with the prevailing status quo, fueling the ascendancy of populism. Consequently, this upsurge in populist sentiments exacerbates societal divisions, thus contributing to the escalating polarisation witnessed in contemporary political landscapes.

Economic and cultural conditions

Coming back to the topic of examining which factors correlate with polarisation, another variable to consider would be economic conditions. Economic hardships have the insidious effect of fostering attribution and responsibility displacement as individuals seek explanations for their misfortunes. Marginalised groups such as immigrants, minorities, or the affluent often become convenient targets for this resentment, leading to the proliferation of hostile and prejudiced attitudes towards these groups.

In the United States, heightened immigration rates have sparked discussions about broader demographic shifts, projecting the country to become predominantly nonwhite by the middle of the century (Vespa, Medina, Armstrong, 2020). It has been revealed that informing white Americans about their impending minority status heightens their inclination to prioritise their own group and view outsiders with suspicion (Craig, Richeson, 2014, pp. 1190–1195). The research highlights the influence of identity-based threats on voter behaviour, illustrating how individuals may gravitate towards politicians and parties pledging to safeguard their group's identity and status. This not only exacerbates existing societal divisions but also deepens the ideological and emotional chasm between different segments of society.

Basic formulation of the message by conservative politicians when addressing their electoral base, especially to white males, sounds something approximating this, "Migrants come and sleep with our woman. We cannot let that happen". Such message undoubtedly triggers many of the addressed voters (Ibssa, Kim, 2024).

As economic insecurities intensify, the willingness to engage in constructive dialogue and compromise diminishes, further entrenching polarisation. In such an environment, the prospect of finding common ground and working towards collective solutions becomes increasingly elusive as individuals become more entrenched in their own perspectives and less receptive to alternative viewpoints (Sairam, Heddesheimer, Bryson, 2022, p. 30).

Economic hardships and insecurity wield a profound influence in shaping societal attitudes and exacerbating polarisation within the United States. When individuals grapple with financial struggles or face uncertainty about their economic prospects, it triggers a cascade of emotions, including dissatisfaction, frustration, and resentment. Such discontentment, in the author's reasoning, often stems from feelings of being overlooked or marginalised by established political and economic systems, leading to a pervasive sense of alienation and disenchantment with the

status quo. In search of solutions to their economic woes, individuals may gravitate towards extremist ideologies or populist movements that promise radical change and a departure from the perceived injustices of the existing order (Gidron, Hall, 2020, pp. 1047–1050).

An important observation has been made that concerns about future economic prospects among citizens may outweigh immediate financial conditions in driving support for populism. Instead of solely considering individuals' present economic status, the fear of worsening financial situations over time, possibly due to industry threats like automation or foreign competition, could render them vulnerable to populist appeals (Gidron, Hall, 2020, pp. 1027–1051). This perspective underscores the importance of perceptions regarding the broader societal and economic landscape in shaping the prominence of populism in society.

An analysis of trends in affective polarisation within countries over time reveals that as party elites become more polarised on cultural issues such as immigration, race, and national identity, affective polarisation tends to escalate, even when economic conditions and electoral institutions remain constant (Gidron, Adams, Horne, 2023, pp. 997–1012). Notably, the United States, which has experienced the most pronounced increase in elite cultural polarisation, has also witnessed a rise in affective polarisation at the mass level (Gidron, Adams, Horne, 2023, pp. 999–1001).

The problem with United States politics is that the society is divided into two irreconcilable teams: one that sees itself as representing the multicultural values of cosmopolitan cities and the other that sees itself as representing the Christian values of the traditionalist countryside. Both believe they are the true America. The many individuals and groups that don't fit neatly into one of these two teams have no other place to go but to choose sides. Thus, it erodes common in-group identity, fueled by a trend known as partisan sorting, which sees the two major parties reinforcing divisions along urban-rural, religious-secular, and racial-ethnic lines. What is more, the weakened sense of common in-group identity can be attributed, partially, to social media (Haidt, 2022).

Role of social media

Social media is another variable that affects polarisation and, hence, the decline in governance effectiveness in the US. It is hard to pin point particular occurrences or even the platforms, but a number of research pa-

pers cited in the article showcase it well (Bail, Argyle, Brown, Bumpus, Chen, Hunzaker, Lee, Mann, Merhout, Volfovsky, 2018; Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2016). The article, on the other hand, only summarizes the data to examine whether the role of social media, to which media in general can be attributed, is a factor influencing polarisation.

Brzezinski has made an important observation, "The paradox of our time is that humanity is becoming simultaneously more unified and more fragmented. Humanity is becoming more integral and intimate even as the differences in the conditions of separate societies are widening. Under these circumstances, proximity, instead of promoting unity, gives rise to tensions prompted by a new sense of global congestion" (Brzezinski, 1970, p. 2).

At first glance, social media provides a basis for direct, without any third party, people-to-people communication to which the whole world is connected. Logically, a platform for dialogue should encourage familiarisation between distinct groups and, hence, peacebuilding. However, they also contribute significantly to the deepening divide within society. Social media algorithms, particularly those employed by platforms like Facebook and Twitter, tend to prioritise content that aligns with users' existing beliefs, effectively creating echo chambers that reinforce convictions and breed animosity towards opposing viewpoints (Pariser, 2011, p.46). This phenomenon, known as selective exposure, not only perpetuates existing biases but also fosters polarisation by pushing individuals towards more extreme positions (Sunstein, 2016).

Studies have shown that exposure to algorithm-selected tweets on Twitter triggers heightened emotional responses, particularly anger, and promotes partisanship and hostility towards outgroups (Bail, Argyle, Brown, Bumpus, Chen, Hunzaker, Lee, Mann, Merhout, Volfovsky, 2018, pp. 9216–9220). Consequently, this selective exposure within echo chambers not only reinforces existing beliefs but also distances individuals from opposing views, ultimately contributing to increased polarisation (Kelly, 2021).

Conclusion

The study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to polarisation. Understanding the factors contributing to the increase of polarisation is essential for assessing the implications of

polarisation and the consequences that arise from it in order to determine whether the issue should be addressed or not.

The author concludes that several factors contribute to the increase in polarisation in the United States: 1) the rise of populism; 2) worsened economic situation of the individuals, as well the uncertainty of their well-being in the future; 3) prioritisation of identity-based and cultural issues to a greater extent by government elites when adressing the voters; 4) the two-party system which forces a binary choice between the camps; 5) government officials that are disengaged from citizens' problems; 6) social media algorithms and echo chambers that exacerbate polarisation by reinforcing existing beliefs. Thus, the hypothesis posed at the starting of the article proven to be correct. Both, the evidence from the sources cited, as well as the authors' reasoning, based on the literature review, support that statement. Thus, the purpose of the research has been fulfilled and the posed research question has been answered.

As explored in the article, the escalating division and animosity among political factions, both within elite circles and among the general populace, pose significant challenges to the health and stability of democratic processes. Affective polarisation, characterised by an entrenched "us versus them" mentality, undermines constructive dialogue and cooperation, potentially eroding trust in institutions and exacerbating social tensions. While diversity of beliefs and values are essential for a healthy democracy, the escalation of polarisation to extreme levels threatens to erode trust in institutions and exacerbate social tensions.

When polarised groups perceive a lack of protection for their interests and identities within democratic institutions, this perception can fuel democratic institutional backsliding, undermining the foundational principles of democratic governance. It's often not about the existence of differences but how they are perceived by the groups, and mechanisms such as social media or political mobilisation seem to play an effective role in shaping them.

Deeper analysis by scholars and practitioners ought to be done in two sectors: 1) examining the negative impacts of increased polarisation on democratic institutions and governance in the United States; 2) determining the role social media plays in influencing polarization, with an emphasis on quantitative data.

While, thanks to technological advancement, we grow increasingly interconnected, we also witness a deepening fragmentation. Despite our greater interconnectedness, disparities among the society widen.

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Przyczyny polaryzacji w Stanach Zjednoczonych

Streszczenie

W artykule podjęto próbę zbadania przyczyn polaryzacji w USA. Autor zagłębia się w różne czynniki, takie jak nieporozumienia polityczne na szczeblu elit, warunki gospodarcze w kraju, instytucje wyborcze, fragmentacja mediów, reorganizacja partii, podział społeczny i różnorodność rasowa, aby kompleksowo zrozumieć, w jaki

sposób czynniki te przyczyniają się do istniejącego wysokiego, choć nie alarmującego, jeśli porównać z innymi krajami rozwiniętymi, poziomu polaryzacji w Stanach Zjednoczonych. Aby zawęzić zakres badań, zbadano jedynie przyczyny polaryzacji, pomijając negatywne skutki, które ujawniają się przy wysokim poziomie polaryzacji. W artykule w sposób szczególny zbadano rolę mediów społecznościowych i wzrost populizmu, zwłaszcza prawicowego, widocznego po wyborze Donalda Trumpa na 47 prezydenta USA. Celem badania jest zapewnienie wszechstronnego zrozumienia czynników przyczyniających się do polaryzacji. Badanie ma charakter eksploracyjny, gdyż stara się poznać zjawisko polaryzacji, szczególnie w Stanach Zjednoczonych, a także zyskać na nie nowe spojrzenie. Pytaniem badawczym postawionym i eksplorowanym przez autora jest to, jakie są główne przyczyny polaryzacji politycznej w Stanach Zjednoczonych. Zgłębiając temat i postawione pytanie badawcze, badanie, poza powyższym celem, stara się wnieść wkład w dyskurs na temat zachowania i wzmacniania instytucji demokratycznych, a także wzmacniania świadomej demokracji w obliczu wzrastających podziałów.

Słowa kluczowe: polaryzacja, Stany Zjednoczone, przyczyny, demokracja, populizm, różnica ideologiczna, media społecznościowe

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