Déjà vu? Polarization and Endangered Democracies in the 21st Century

Murat Somer[1] and Jennifer McCoy[2]

Abstract

As political and societal polarization deepens, democracies are under stress around the world. This article examines the complex relationship and causal direction between democracy and polarization and posits three theoretical possibilities: (1) polarization contributes to democratic backsliding and decay, (2) polarization results from democratic crisis, and (3) polarization contributes to democratic deepening. We argue "politics" is central to polarization and identify as a key feature of the process of polarization the manner in which it simplifies the normal complexity of politics and social relations. Polarization does so by aligning otherwise unrelated divisions, emasculating cross-cutting cleavages, and dividing society and politics into two separate, opposing, and unyielding blocks. As such, it often has pernicious consequences for democracy, emerging as an intended or unintended consequence of political interest–based and purposeful political mobilization. Polarization over the very concept of democracy may also be the product of democratic crisis. Finally, in certain circumstances, polarization may strengthen democratic institutions and citizen choice. The article then introduces the articles in this issue that address these three theoretical and empirical possibilities.

Keywords

polarization, democratic erosion, democratic backsliding, democracy, authoritarianism

Introduction

For some time now, scholars have been cautioning that democracies are in danger (Bermeo, 2016; Brownlee, 2007; Diamond, 2015; Schedler, 2002; Stepan, 2009).

[1]Koç University, Istanbul, Turkey
[2]Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Murat Somer, Koç University, Rumelifeneri Yolu Sarıyer, Istanbul 34450, Turkey.
Email: musomer@ku.edu.tr

From "developing" democracies such as the Philippines to "consolidated" democracies such as the United States, growing evidence suggests that their warnings and predictions are well-founded. In addition to a well-known repertoire of authoritarian interventions such as military coups, political actors around the world seem to utilize a common set of strategies and tools to undermine institutional constraints, manipulate participatory processes such as elections and divide or marginalize political opposition as they slowly dismantle democracy.

In tandem with democratic decline, social and political polarization seems to be deepening, creating similar stressors and problems in widely different polities across the world. How are these two phenomena—polarization and the troubles of democracy—interrelated? What are the root sources of the polarizations in the contemporary world, and how can we measure and compare the severity of polarization in different cases?

We have compelling historical reasons to worry about the pernicious consequences of polarization for democracy. The interwar period of the past century witnessed a wave of democratization that soon turned into one of democratic breakdowns and rising authoritarianism. The centrifugal dynamics of political party polarization are thought to have played major roles in the processes that brought about "authoritarian takeovers" through "legal revolutions" from below and "preemptive suspensions" of democracy through coups or interventions from above. Just as critically, "survivors" such as Czechoslovakia and Finland are argued to have avoided democratic breakdown thanks to their ability to achieve "polarization reversals" (Capoccia, 2005).

Yet, as various contributions in this issue discuss from different empirical and theoretical vantage points, what constitutes polarization is far from clear, and extant conceptualizations are unsatisfactory in important ways. Hence, this issue has grown out of a larger project motivated by this concern and investigating the causes and consequences of, and solutions to, the severe political and societal polarization around the world.[1]

In the first contribution to this issue, McCoy, Rahman, and Somer (2018) propose a simple definition of polarization as a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of "us" versus "them." We prefer this definition because it highlights the relational as well as politically instrumental nature of polarization. We observe that contemporary examples of polarization often follow a common pattern. They start when (objectively or subjectively) marginalized elites and societal groups coalesce into new formations and mobilize to achieve social, economic, and political-institutional changes in their own favor. During this process, they often use polarization in a conscious effort to unite their own and to weaken their opponents. Even when not a conscious strategy of polarization, the mobilization of one group may threaten other groups, who countermobilize and contribute to the polarization dynamic in a self-reinforcing cycle.

Hence, "politics" is central to polarization. Pernicious consequences of polarization may emerge as an intended or unintended consequence of political interest–based and purposeful political mobilization. Presumably, politics can also play a central role in depolarization.

The key feature of polarization is not necessarily ideological or social distance, which most conventional definitions emphasize. Rather, it is how the process of polarization simplifies the normal complexity of politics and social relations. Polarization does so by aligning otherwise unrelated divisions, emasculating cross-cutting cleavages, and dividing society and politics into two separate, opposing, and unyielding blocks.

This simplifying (or rather reductionist) nature of polarization has far-reaching consequences for democracy. Nevertheless, the causal nature and direction of the polarization–democracy relationship are complex. As the articles in this issue and the larger project reveal, three different theoretical and empirical possibilities can be identified: (1) polarization contributing to democratic backsliding and decay, (2) polarization resulting from democratic crisis, and (3) polarization contributing to democratic deepening.

From Polarization to Democratic Decay: Torn Democracies

Some developing and polarized polities, such as Egypt, Thailand, and Venezuela, have already experienced the collapse or suspension of democracy through democratic backsliding, elected government authoritarianism, or military rule. Many advanced democracies are also troubled. Voter support for "far-right parties," such as France's National Front and the Alternative for Germany, is rising, imposing centrifugal pressures on the centrist and "moderate" politics in these countries.

Ominously, according to a recent study, "citizens in a number of supposedly consolidated democracies in North America and Western Europe have become more cynical about the value of democracy as a political system and more willing to express support for authoritarian alternatives." Furthermore, many people feel "less hopeful that anything they do might influence public policy" (Foa & Mounk, 2016, p. 7; see also Hale, 2016).

Why should citizens of even ostensibly advanced democracies feel powerless and obstructed in their political systems? Social and political polarization may be a major underlying source of these feelings of paralysis and diminishing trust in democratic governance.

When people become increasingly polarized, we expect that growing numbers will feel, often rightly, that their efforts to influence public policy and shape their country's future stumble on an obstinate "bloc" of other citizens, that is, "them." They will perceive this opposing bloc of others as preventing their efforts by using (or, as they may see it, "abusing") their democratic rights. At the same time, people associating themselves with each group may become less willing and less able (because of the declining links of social and political communication, collective actions, and trust and cooperation) to reach out to the others and seek their collaboration. Thus, the

perception that democracy is not working to solve the problems of the society and to steer the country in a better direction is likely to grow.

Worse, these perceptions may not be unwarranted in the context of a severely polarized polity. When societies are divided about what people want and care about *and* polarization divides people into oppositional blocs and suppresses and eviscerates cross-cutting interests and ties, democratic institutions have a hard time responding to and accommodating societal demands. They may become paralyzed or even torn between rival, exclusive, and unyielding expectations. As a result, at least some segments of elites and ordinary citizens may begin to feel less satisfied with democracy and more willing to accept violations of democratic norms and support political ideologies skeptical of democracy.

Alternatively, in an attempt to defend "democracy" against the "undemocratic others," people may begin to undertake actions or employ discourses that end up undermining democracy and advancing authoritarianism, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Perceiving an existential threat from an authoritarian government in a polarized atmosphere, for example, opposition groups may reflexively focus on the "urgent need" for removing the government rather than on developing a positive agenda. This may reinforce polarization as progovernment groups charge the opposition with "attacking" the government but offering no alternative program. In this respect, several contributions in this issue highlight that the behavior of political elites who try to defend democracy out of self-interest or sincere commitment may make things worse instead. Slater and Arugay (2018), for example, maintain that this happens when political elites try to remove polarizing political figures through unconstitutional means. Similarly, Stavrakakis (2018) criticizes the presumably antipopulist elites who "resist acknowledging" the reality, and importance for democracy, of differences and alternatives and often themselves employ dismissive, exclusionary, and dehumanizing rhetoric (against the populists).

From Democratic Crisis to Polarization: Democracy Cleavages

As the analyses of both Slater and Arugay, and Stavrakakis imply in this issue, the causal relationship between polarization and democratic troubles may be more complicated than the first path described above implies. The causality may also flow from democratic crisis or stagnation to polarization, whereby polarization is a consequence of crises rooted in democracy's internal tensions and contradictions.

As one interpretation of the common pattern we described above implies, polarization may be triggered by clashes between social-political groups that hold different understandings of and different expectations from democracy. That is, the actors polarize around different conceptions of democracy itself. Then, of course, the ensuing polarization can further deepen the democratic crisis.

When new groups become mobilized to achieve sweeping changes in public policy in a context of polarizing politics, what they expect from democracy tends to be based on the principles of representation and majority rule. In turn, their opponents frequently defend their position in the name of protecting the democratic rights and

freedoms, procedures, and accountability mechanisms that had resulted from prior political conflicts, agreements, and compromises. They may do so, for example, by invoking the need to uphold the constitution.

Neither group's claims can be dismissed as necessarily and entirely antidemocratic. Democracy is a system of governance for managing competing interests in a society in a peaceful way (where majoritarian mechanisms, e.g., elections, are one of the main instruments), following *agreed-on rules of contingent consent* (Przeworski & Sprague, 1986). But what if the competing interests regard the democratic rules themselves as the object of disagreement or if the conflict is between groups that prioritize one set of democratic rules and principles over the others? This may result in a weakening of the contingent consent, that is, in the emergence of a *democracy cleavage*. The society may become polarized along a simple axis reflecting this democracy cleavage (even when it is not necessarily named as such in practice). Indeed, current examples of polarization often seem to revolve around a political ideological cleavage over conceptions of democracy itself, as opposed to conventional cleavages such as economic ideological cleavages over the role of the state in the economy (McCoy & Rahman, 2016).

These observations may help explain why we witness so many examples of polarized democracies in the contemporary world. The reasons may be related to the democracies' unsuccessful attempts to reform and reinvent themselves, whereby they would need to find new equilibria rebalancing their different constitutive principles and premises.[2] Hence, polarization may result from these crises of democracy in two ways. First, people may be polarized along an axis of democracy loyalists versus cynics. Alternatively, people may be polarized over the particular bases—discourses, identities, normative principles, or institutional configurations—on which their democracies could be reformed and reestablished. As we summarize below, for example, the analysis of Slater and Arugay indicates that democracies may need to be reformed by finding new equilibria between "vertical and horizontal accountability mechanisms," whereas the argument of Stavrakakis suggests that polarized democracies must reestablish or renew their shared symbols and values. Either way, insofar as the cynics are gaining ground and reform attempts are failing, polarization may be seen as a consequence of a "reverse wave of democracy."

From Polarization to Democracy: Janus-Faced Polarization

Despite the pernicious consequences we identified above, we acknowledge that polarization does not inevitably harm democracy. The simplifying features of polarization can sometimes help democratization. Political scientists have long argued that some processes of opposition and exclusion and the notion of friends versus foes—which we count here among the features of polarization responsible for its pernicious consequences—are inherent in all types of politics, including democratic politics (Schattschneider, 1975). They serve to unify, invigorate, and mobilize political actors' potential allies and to divide, weaken, and pacify their competitors. Indeed, social movements are often defined, among other things, as a "group of people involved in a

conflict with clearly defined opponents . . . (having) a conflictual orientation toward an opponent (and) a common identity" (Kriesi, 2008, p. 395).

Polarization can (and historically does) facilitate party building and constituency mobilization and stabilization, simplify choices for voters, and help consolidate political party systems (LeBas, 2011, 2018; Przeworski & Sprague, 1986; Tilly, 2004). Hence, political actors (movements or parties) with a democratizing agenda, or that are advancing a heterodox understanding of democracy, can benefit from polarization. This may happen, for example, when polarization enables the winning majority to coalesce behind the cause of "democratic reforms." A polarizing politics can help them overcome their internal differences through framing their common identity based on their common opposition to those resisting reforms.

This theoretical and empirical role of polarization in democratization produces one of the four possible outcomes of polarization conceptualized by McCoy et al. (2018) as *reformed democracy.* It is illustrated in Lebas's analysis of comparative African cases (this issue), and, partly, the discussion of the early periods of Turkey under the Justice and Development Party in McCoy et al. (2018).

Furthermore, as we aim to elaborate in future work focusing on policy implications, we realize that some type of polarizing politics may be part of a political repertoire based on which the current threats to democracy may be successfully addressed. In other words, prodemocratic actors may also need to use polarizing politics to unite and mobilize based on their common opposition to authoritarianism.

Nevertheless, the potential pernicious dynamics and consequences of severe political and societal polarization on democracy should be taken very seriously. Once it is set in motion, polarization has built-in dynamics to become self-propagating and spiral out of control (Somer, 2001). As we discuss below, and various contributions in this issue elaborate from different angles, it activates many discursive, organizational, and psychological dynamics and causal mechanisms that endanger coexistence and the proper functioning of democratic systems. Within organizations ranging from political parties to the media and academia, polarization disadvantages social and political actors who shun polarizing and exclusionary discourse and uphold cross-cutting attachments, power sharing, and consensus seeking. Instead, it advantages actors willing and able to employ unyielding, exclusionary, and demagogic politics and rhetoric. It facilitates the development of rigid and antagonistic political identities. Hence, even when contributing to democratization in the short run, polarization can undermine the long-term structural, institutional, and psychological factors that build and sustain democracy.

Therefore, a better understanding of the causes, dynamics, and consequences of polarization can contribute to answering a variety of questions crucial for extant research on democratic backsliding and authoritarianism. For example, what makes it possible that many "electoral-authoritarian regimes" manage to maintain their support base even when they "routinely [fail] to provide desired goods and services" (Rhodes-Purdy, 2017, p. 3)?[3] Polarization may be part of the answer, whereby partisan blocs of supporters mobilized by authoritarian regimes become impervious to internal criticism and penetration from opposition parties. This accords with Svolik's (2012) argument that polarization fosters illiberal governments backed by voters. Similarly, how do

"dominant party regimes" emerge, and why do many autocrats choose to govern through a party (Brownlee, 2007; Reuter, 2017)? Polarization may help dominant parties arise based on mass support and the politics of fear. Furthermore, the usefulness of party organizations in polarizing voters before elections may help explain why many autocrats find loyal parties instrumental. Finally, ethnic and similar polarizations are argued to be among the factors helping electoral-authoritarian parties, such as Malaysia's UMNO, to divide the opposition and maintain the support of centrist voters (Wong, Chin, & Othman, 2010).

This Special Issue

In light of the discussion above, we believe that it is vital to analyze, understand, and explain the causes, dynamics, and consequences of polarization. This special issue is an effort to contribute to this goal. It is the first product of a project on societal and political polarization from a comparative perspective in democracies around the world. An international and interdisciplinary group of scholars have met in two workshops over the past 2 years to discuss these questions. This special issue covers the first set of articles to come out of the project.[4]

In their contribution to this issue, Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer elaborate the definition, common pattern, and possible outcomes for democracy of polarization. Drawing on the literature in psychology and political science, they then posit a set of causal mechanisms linking polarization to harm to democracy, and they illustrate these with reference to four cases: Hungary, Turkey, Venezuela, and the United States.

Even though the authors acknowledge the potentially beneficial consequences of polarization, this contribution highlights the pernicious dynamics and consequences of severe political and societal polarization. It sees polarization as a double-edged sword, even when used by well-intended, prodemocratic actors. Once a society begins to polarize for various reasons and is politicized from above or below, a rhetorical focus on intergroup competition reinforces resentments and contributes to rising mass negative partisanship and affective polarization. The latter strengthens loyalty to the in-group and conflict with the out-party, enhances zero-sum perceptions, increases social distance, and decreases joint collective actions and willingness to cooperate and compromise with the political out-group. Perceptions of existential threat lead both government and opposition groups to consider undemocratic actions.

Thus, three out of the four outcomes of polarization conceptualized in the first contribution to this issue are based on examples from the world that reflect its pernicious consequences for democracy, while the fourth is the more positive democratic reform:

1. Gridlock and "careening"[5]
2. Democratic erosion or collapse under "new" elites and dominant groups
3. Democratic erosion or collapse under the "old" elites and dominant groups

The next set of contributions theorize and offer empirical demonstrations of the Janus-faced nature of polarization vis-à-vis democracy. Based on a theory-developing

and comparative analysis of four African cases, Lebas argues that Burkina Faso and Ghana exemplify how polarization can foster what she calls "generative conflict." This happens when polarization facilitates "mobilizing new constituencies, sustaining the commitment of activists, [and] producing a new and potentially more inclusive political order." By contrast, she maintains that pernicious polarization has occurred in Kenya and Côte d'Ivoire. Her thesis highlights two crucial variables making the difference. The first is the nature of the cleavage that polarization activates. If polarization draws on a historical legacy of "formal group exclusion or differential citizenship rights," it is "more likely to result in large-scale violence and democratic breakdown." The second is relational and pertains to balances of power. A sustained balance of power between the polarized blocs more likely enables the competitors to build durable organizations and encourages them to share power and build more accountable institutions.

LeBas's framework applies to three of the cases analyzed by McCoy, Rahman, and Somer as well. Polarizing politics helped Erdogan's AKP in Turkey, Chavez's PSUV in Venezuela, and Orban's Fidesz in Hungary build effective party organizations and secure a loyal support base. In each case, an initial rough balance of power with the opposition constrained executive abuse of power, only to erode as the ruling parties consolidated their institutional power through constitutional change and majoritarian politics, while the opposition became weakened and divided. Once again, political elite choices, and self-restraint and organizational capabilities, play crucial roles; for example, in the Turkish case, the failure of the opposition parties to reform themselves and the government's resort to unconstitutional means of oppression and state capture jointly deepened the imbalance of power with the opposition, resulting in government authoritarianism and democratic erosion (Somer, 2007, 2017).

Two other contributions in the issue discuss and theorize how current polarizations may reflect democratic crises, rather than the other way around, while also highlighting the importance of political elite choices. Based on a theoretical discussion and reflections on the current Greek political-economic crisis ostensibly displaying populist/antipopulist polarization, Yannis Stavrakakis highlights that democracies need to produce real alternatives and maintain an agonistic common ground where these alternatives can compete without existentially threatening their proponents. However, "an agonistic outcome is always the result of a delicate balancing act between oligarchic and populist tendencies (and in modern times) a paradoxical blend of the democratic and the liberal tradition." Hence, he argues that current polarizations result from a crisis of liberal democracy and the inability of "moderate centers" to reestablish the balance under changing historical conditions. For example, "elite-driven anti-populist discourse has consistently employed dehumanizing repertoires enhancing pernicious polarization" as much as the "populists."

In their contribution, Dan Slater and Aries Arugay make a parallel point, maintaining in their comparative analysis of Southeast Asian countries that "the leading elite opponents of polarizing figures" are equally to blame for pernicious polarization. Slater and Arugay emphasize that, at least on a rhetorical level, current polarizations position proponents of "vertical accountability (i.e. inclusivity) and

horizontal accountability (i.e. constraints)" against each other. Tensions between these two democratic mechanisms are inevitable, but it is crucial to prevent their turning into Machiavellian conflicts. They argue that Taiwan and Indonesia owed their success in preventing polarization from transforming into Machiavellian clashes to the fact that their elite guardians of horizontal accountability tried to remove populist figures playing by the Madisonian constitutional rules. The opposite happened in the Philippines and Thailand, which suffered protracted careening and, in the latter case, breakdown with the return of the old elites.

Because every democracy must be sustained based on a socially and politically acceptable balance between the democratic mechanisms of "vertical and horizontal accountability," Slater and Arugay's argument implies that contemporary polarizations result from changes ushering in disequilibria between these two fundamental accountability mechanisms. In turn, for Stavrakakis, the constitutive battle underlying contemporary examples of polarized democracies is about the (loss of) legitimate rules, principles, and discourses constituting the agonistic common ground in democracies. Hence, both analyses imply that the challenge of depolarization involves problems of rebalancing and restructuring, whether of different institutional mechanisms or of shared symbols and values.

While LeBas highlights balances of power and the nature of the activated identity cleavages and Slater and Arugay point to elite choices, Sam Handlin's (2018) contribution turns our attention to path-dependent historical-institutional factors, political party systems, and the organizational resources available to political parties. Handlin maintains that severely polarizing leftist populists (rather than more pragmatic figures) emerged in Latin America in the 2000s, where there existed an infrastructure for left-wing mobilization and a state crisis in the prior period. He observes that state crisis often lies at the origin of antisystemic sentiments, but he argues that the factor explaining the different outcomes in Latin America is the availability of leftist party organizational resources, which rendered coalition building with centrist actors unnecessary for the polarizing parties. Handlin then tests these propositions through a broad analysis of eight South American countries and a more detailed case study of Venezuela, noting that polarizing populism combined with democratic erosion to varying degrees in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. Handlin concludes with the warning that "state crises seem likely to remain common in the 21st century" and we may therefore witness more instances of polarizing populism in the world.

All of these contributions suggest that polarization involves more than growing social and ideological distance (even though this may be one of the dynamics and consequences of polarization). Some version of negative partisan polarization—when antipathy toward rival blocs accompanies and even overshadows sympathy for one's own—is crucial to understand its pernicious consequences for democracy, just as it is necessary to develop empirical indicators enabling meaningful cross-country comparisons of polarization.

The final two articles in the issue make empirical contributions to a better understanding of partisan polarization. We do not have adequate empirical indicators to measure partisan polarization across polities. In response, Lauka, McCoy, and Firat

have developed a cross-country index of mass partisan polarization based on a critical review of theory and empirics. Rather than measuring in-group predilection or out-group bias per se, their indicator is based on the cumulative outcome of the *relative values* of in-party support versus out-party rejection. They then illustrate how their index captures something different from the existing indices of affective polarization and ideological party system polarization measures.

In a complementary contribution, Steve Webster (2018) draws our attention to the individual-level traits that may underlie negative partisanship in the United States. He argues and demonstrates that affective polarization may vary across individuals based on personality. His statistical analyses show that, more than common socio-demographic predictors, differences in individuals' Big Five personality traits predict how much they dislike the party they oppose and how much they express this affective polarization. He finds that Americans increasingly dislike the opposing political party and its supporters, but Extraverted individuals are less likely to have negative affective evaluations of the opposing party and Agreeableness lowers the degree of dislike. These findings suggest that creating spaces and incentives to facilitate fruitful cross-party contact and more agreeableness in those interactions may mitigate the rise of negative partisanship and its consequences for this important democracy.

Never Again?

As in the past a century, extant democratic crises have been arriving in the aftermath of a wave of democratization. Furthermore, polarization again seems to be playing a central role during the current troubles of democracy. From this perspective, related phenomena, such as populism and "posttruth" politics,[6] can be considered as manifestations of the more general problem of polarization.

Hence, once again, democracies' survival may depend on their ability to reverse polarization. As various contributions to this issue emphasize, among other factors, the prudence, skills, and discourses of political elites and the strategic choices and organizational capacities of political parties will play crucial roles (Handlin; LeBas; Slater & Arugay; Stavrakakis). Research can help by developing better and comparative measurements and causal explanations of polarization across polities (Lauka, McCoy, and Firat; Webster). From a conceptual-theoretical point of view, it will be just as crucial to recognize the inherently political roots and common pattern of polarization, as well as the psychological and other mechanisms that may be unleashed and become self-propagating with pernicious consequences during the process (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer).

earlier drafts of these papers were presented and debated: the first in March 2016 at Georgia State University in Atlanta, with conference grants from the International Studies Association and Georgia State University, and the second at Central European University in Budapest, Hungary, with conference grants from the National Science Foundation and Central European University.

Notes

2. We do not explore here the question of which factors induce major groups in extant democracies to question previous political-institutional arrangements and to search for new equilibria between different democratic principles. Global transformations of economic governance and changing balances of power between democracies and authoritarian or semi-authoritarian rising powers may have much to do with some of these democracy crises and cleavages. For an insightful analysis, see Öniş (2017).
3. For alternative arguments on "competitive authoritarianism," see Greene (2007) and Levitsky and Way (2010), respectively.
4. A second set, based on country case studies, will appear in a forthcoming special issue—Polarized Polities: A Global Threat to Democracy, guest editors Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*.
5. See Slater (2013).
6. See Mudde (2007), Moffitt (2016), and Müller (2016).

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Author Biographies

Murat Somer is an Associate Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Koç University. His writings 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*.

Jennifer McCoy is Distinguished University Professor of Political Science at Georgia State University and coordinates an international research group on political polarization. She writes on polarization, democratization, mediation, elections and election monitoring, and Latin American politics. Her most recent book is *International Mediation in Venezuela*.