

“Vicious, Hateful, and Divisive” Partisans: Understanding and Countering Antidemocratic Political Polarization

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“... the most vicious, hateful, and divisive speech ever delivered by an American president, vilifying 75 million citizens... as threats to democracy and as enemies of the state. You’re all enemies of the state. He’s an enemy of the state, you want to know the truth. The enemy of the state is him and the group that control him, which is circling around him....”

– [*former President Donald J. Trump at Dr. Oz Rally on September 4, 2022 about President Joseph Biden’s September 1, 2022 address*](#)

Introduction

At a fall 2022 rally for the US senate candidate Dr. Mehmet Oz, former United States President Donald J. Trump excoriated President Joe Biden and the Democratic party, questioning his legitimacy as president, suggesting he was under the control of hostile powers, and asserting that Democrats and the press were “enemies of the state.” The speech, which was delivered partially in response to the Justice Department raid on Mar-A-Lago, could not be a more quintessential example of political polarization: the overt and hostile painting of one party as the enemy by the other, amplified by traditional and social media. The topic of American political partisanship and polarization has become a staple of both academic research and the political news cycle ([Iyengar & Westwood 2015](#); Mason 2018). A search for the word “polarization” in any major newspaper or news magazine turns up dozens of articles, op-eds, and think pieces either decrying the phenomenon or wholeheartedly endorsing it. We see it in family members at the dinner table, in our celebrities on Twitter, and in our politicians on the podium. Definitions may vary by field, by frame, and sometimes by convenience to an argument, but the consensus is this: Political polarization exists, and it’s increasing.

At its most basic level, “political polarization” is a catch-all term used to describe the

phenomenon of opposing political beliefs becoming more extreme over time. This can take many forms: political parties taking more extreme stances, increased distance between the ideologies of average partisans, hostility between partisans, and even deliberate campaigns of disenfranchisement by one party or group of partisans against another. Political polarization is embedded in our daily lives and can even be seen in the places people live. In the United States, neighborhoods have become more similar over time in political affiliation, as well as social conservatism, race, socioeconomic status, and religiosity. This phenomenon is known as social sorting [glossary term: a process in recent decades whereby Americans have fewer social ties that exist outside of politics, and their parties are increasingly homogenous, leading to reduced social exposure to and greater difficulty tolerating opposing party members] (Mason 2018).

Researchers approach political polarization through different lenses. Some scholars model the ways that the absence of cross-party social ties and interaction contribute to polarization or polarized dialogue ([Bodrunova et al. 2019](#); [Mason 2016](#)), suggesting that partisanship is less important than individual factors like anti-authoritarianism when it comes to polarized online dialogue. Others look at polarization as a function of trust between parties ([Carlin & Love 2018](#)). Much of this research operates under two problematic assumptions: that all forms of political polarization are (1) unequivocally bad for society and democracy and (2) equally problematic, no matter what party they arise from and what party they are against. These assumptions are embedded in the ways academics talk about their research and about the phenomenon itself. Researchers may describe polarization as having “grave ramifications” for democracy, effecting “fundamental changes” in American politics, and sparking a “culture war” ([Iyengar et al. 2019, 143](#); [Abramowitz & Saunders 2005, 19](#); [Greenberg 2005](#)). Assumptions like these ignore the central importance of democratic equality in political and democratic problems and solutions, potentially closing the door to a deeper understanding of the underlying dynamics of antidemocratic polarization at play ([Kreiss & McGregor 2023](#)).

The idea that polarization is *itself* the problem fails to take into account the current asymmetric state of polarization in the United States. The Republican Party is far more socio-demographically homogeneous and united in ideals and values than the Democratic Party, and thus Republicans are far more likely than Democrats to unite under a shared loathing of “the enemy.” There is further asymmetry in the media and information ecosystem and the extent to which cable news media prioritize sensationalism over fact-based journalism by leaning into Democratic and Republican extremes, and in the political right and left’s approaches to activism ([Benkler et al. 2018](#); [Freelon et al. 2022](#)). There is also an asymmetry in the internal socio-demographic and cultural makeup of the Republican as compared to the Democratic Party, and a disproportionate role of racial and gender-based intolerance both in Republican rhetoric and broader attitudes ([Schaffner et al. 2018](#);

Mason et al. 2021; [Kalmoe & Mason 2022](#)). Research has generally found that Democrats have much less uniformity in their political views than Republicans, and Republicans are far more likely to be polarized to extreme views that translate to extreme actions, like the January 6 Capitol insurrection. In its rawest form, Republican polarization might be exemplified by US Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene's assertions on Steve Bannon's *War Room* podcast in November of 2022: "We have to do everything we can to stop our enemy. And the enemy is the Democratic Party."

There are certain aspects of political polarization that ought to be of concern to us all. We find that polarization *does* cross into clearly undesirable outcomes, as it can engender deep hatred, ([Halperin 2008](#)), vilification, and perceptions of all in the opposing group as monolithic and less than human (dehumanization; [Buckels & Trapnell 2013](#); for an overview on dehumanization, see Haslam 2014). Unfortunately, such sentiments have become increasingly prevalent in the United States ([Harel et al. 2020](#); [Martherus et al. 2021](#)). As researchers and journalists covering political polarization, we must extend our understanding of partisan animosity beyond "both sides do it" and shine light on the difference between democratic and antidemocratic political attitudes and behavior. In doing so, we can both map out the true contours of the pernicious effects of polarization and leave room to take action against these effects. If we aren't able to understand and combat the harmful mechanisms and effects of polarization while leaving room for constructive advocacy to push back against political inequality, we risk the very foundations of American democracy.

When discussing polarization as an increasing problem, researchers often imply that at some point in the past, there was an "optimal," lower level of polarization to which we should aspire (Iyengar et al. 2019). The finger frequently points to the mid-twentieth century—a period of relatively low partisan animus. When polarization is discussed in media and popular contexts, it seems to follow very similar paths: At some point, America started becoming "more" polarized, and this increase in polarization is *itself* the issue; if we could only find a way to go back to a time when we were less polarized, this problem would no longer exist. However, this rosy view of American history elides the fact that this period was characterized by an undemocratic, racially oppressive environment that maintained those relatively low levels of political animosity by disenfranchising Americans of color (Kalmoe & Mason 2022). Research into political polarization points to the civil rights movement as a pivotal moment in crystallizing political identities: Democrats as a party of diversity and working people, and Republicans as wealthy and racially homogenous. Just as partisan and racial animosity go hand in hand, the development of American political polarization is inextricably linked to the racial dynamics of the United States.

Some scholars' blind spot surrounding white racial authoritarianism in the mid-twentieth

century also overlooks the extent to which the polarization we see today may be less about partisan hatred than it is about the intersection of political identity with other identities ([Weaver & Prowse 2020](#)). In other words, the tension between Democrats and Republicans may have less to do with a specific political orientation than with the cultural, racial, and ethnic identities that have come to rest under partisan umbrellas. Research has shown evidence of a bidirectional link between racial and partisan affect: An intervention designed to shift feelings on other races leads to a parallel shift in feelings toward opposing partisans, and vice versa, suggesting that some individuals see race and party as linked ([Westwood & Peterson 2022](#)). Racial animus and political polarization thus carry a symbiotic role in the future of US democracy.

At times, polarization can seem like an exclusively American problem—and American polarization is certainly unique. Political polarization of all kinds is most common in two-party systems, and much polarization research focuses on the United States, where the increasing sorting of two diametrically opposed political parties has been easy to clearly observe and categorize (it may also be a function of the general tendency of academics to focus on “Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic” nations as research subjects). But polarization exists beyond American borders. Aspects of it have been observed internationally, with members of opposing political groups becoming increasingly antagonistic toward one another in both bipartisan and multiparty systems. Although polarization can be more complex to describe in multiparty systems, where groups may loosely affiliate into multiparty coalitions, international polarization can also disturbingly echo US polarization, with a strong right-wing party driving a majority of the animosity and polarized rhetoric ([Baker et al. 2020](#); Orhan 2022; Carlin & Love 2018; Urman 2020; Voorheis et al. 2015; [Knudsen 2021](#); Wagner 2021). If we limit ourselves to viewing polarization as exclusively a problem of the United States, we overlook the reality of a global phenomenon that has different implications on different nations, as well as the disturbing global trend of rising emotion-based right-wing extremism, such as the recent case of Brazil ([Layton et al. 2021](#)).

In media and political communication research, polarization is often separated into multiple types, to more clearly indicate who is being polarized and why. For instance, *affective polarization* deals with an increase in feelings of animosity toward members of an opposing party, while *ideological polarization* describes an actual change in political and policy opinions (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes 2012; Baldassari & Gelman 2008; Orhan 2022). *Elite polarization* deals only with policymakers and other people in positions of political power, and *mass polarization* refers to the phenomenon of the public as a whole becoming more politically extreme. While in some cases these different types of polarization are related, they are not the same ([Rogowski & Sutherland 2016](#); [Webster & Abramowitz 2017](#)). There is far less evidence confirming the presence of ideological polarization than there is in favor of

affective polarization—people do not as a whole become more ideologically extreme with time. In the cases where both types of polarization exist, people who loathe members of an opposing party can still have moderate policy opinions ([Dias & Lelkes 2021](#)), and people with radical political opinions can still be sympathetic and even warm toward members of the other party (Baldassari & Bearman 2007).

Although multiple types of polarization exist, the most commonly-cited of them by researchers and journalists alike is affective polarization: the emotionally-driven loathing of the political “other side.” Whether by lamenting the increased hatred by Democrats for Republicans or trying to understand the unwillingness of Congress to compromise, the negativity between parties is generally what comes to mind when we discuss polarization—and this is the polarization that is also the most inherently problematic when we look at partisan populations. As a global phenomenon, right-wing partisan polarization is increasing, and this creates a ripple effect of other polarization throughout the political sphere. This is the foundation we work from as we review and propose solutions throughout the rest of this piece.

The polarization dynamic

There is no single driving factor of political polarization, no smoking gun to which researchers can point to as the primary cause of the problem. Instead, a constellation of interconnected factors contributes to affective and ideological polarization. While many of those factors are individual personality traits, others are social.

Economic factors, in particular income inequality and economic uncertainty, are often associated with an increase in polarization (Baker et al. 2020; [Boxell et al. 2022](#); [Franco & Pound 2022](#); [Gaffney et al. 2014](#); [Grechyna 2016](#)). Economic and political uncertainty seem to have a symbiotic relationship with political polarization, with economic uncertainty increasing in periods of political transition and summarily increasing polarization, which can lead to additional political uncertainty that continues to drive economic worries.

Additionally, political polarization tends to be highest in nations with high levels of economic inequality—which may in part explain the particular intensity and marked increase of US political polarization when compared to other countries considered to have advanced democracies and well-developed economies (Grechyna 2016; Boxell et al. 2022).

The Tea Party [external link:

<https://www.thoughtco.com/a-history-of-the-tea-party-movement-3303278?>—a conservative interest group championed by Sarah Palin that drove American polarization in the late 2000s and early 2010s—arose in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash and soared to prominence primarily by weaponizing that uncertainty to drive Republican politics further to

the right and setting the agenda for the party's next decade. By painting insufficiently polarized Republican candidates as unsuited for office, Tea Party leaders laid the foundation for the Trump-style populism that defines the Republican Party today (Gaffney et al. 2014).

Economic status can also feed into broader contexts, like social sorting, which has been shown to particularly increase affective polarization ([Fiorina & Abrams 2008](#)). The more homogenous an area is in demographic categories like race, age, income, and political party, the more likely members of that community are to experience animosity toward people who do not share their political identity. Social and geographical sorting and feelings of political polarization are closely tied: For example, anger has been shown to increase polarization (Webster et al. 2022), a particularly fascinating finding given that socially sorted partisans express stronger negative sentiments about members of their outgroups (Mason 2018). This polarizing trend emerges in a number of dimensions and is particularly exacerbated in online spaces. In particular, social media and other algorithmically driven content platforms are associated with an increase in affective polarization (see Bodrunova et al. 2019; [Conover et al. 2021](#); [Gruzd & Roy 2014](#); among others). Algorithms allow people to self-select into increasingly extreme content ([Dylko et al. 2018](#)), while the ability to curate online spaces may produce a group culture that amplifies ideologically extreme beliefs and alienates outsiders (Bodrunova et al. 2019).

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A fragmented media landscape that allows people to curate the media they consume may also be a driver. Those who are more polarized also tend to consume more polarizing media, creating a self-reinforcing cycle ([Hutchens et al. 2019](#)). Exposure to partisan media leads to greater polarization not just for those who have been directly exposed, but also for the people in their social orbit ([Druckman et al. 2018](#)). News coverage itself can also influence polarization. The more people hear that they are living in a politically polarized environment, the more likely they are to believe that other people are polarized, which can paradoxically drive their own increased polarization ([Bernhardt et al. 2008](#)).

The power of this phenomenon can be seen through in-group and out-group dynamics. Social identity theory ([Tajfel & Turner 1979](#)) accounts for the fact that human behavior is often rooted in our salient group identities that exist and operate in opposition to constructed "out groups." Even when randomly assigned and seemingly trivial, group distinctions can produce bigotry and bias (Tajfel & Turner 1979; see also Kalmoe & Mason

2022). The mere awareness of a distinct group has been shown to lead to disparaging discourse ([Sherif et al. 1961](#); see also Brewer 1979). In more destructive circumstances, this can be the othering of racial minorities by white supremacists or attacks on LGBTQ+ rights by religious politicians. In the United States, as the parties have become internally homogeneous along the lines of race, religion, geography, and culture (Mason 2018), political partisanship serves as a sort of “mega-identity”—a catch-all proxy for different ways of looking, worshipping, thinking, living, and playing as a primary social identity ([Robison & Moscowitz 2019](#))—a fact that may lend itself directly to the United States’ particularly intense animosity between partisans ([McLaughlin 2018](#)).

A growing amount of research shows that one of the primary ways in which polarization carries serious emergent consequences is when it is sustained and severe enough that it alters the systemic incentives to enable leaders to subvert democracy ([Svolik 2019](#)). Some researchers go further to argue that politically opportunistic politicians facilitate periods of rapid polarization that “incentivizes autocratization” ([Somer et al. 2021, 931](#)). In other words, a highly polarized electorate requires sustained high levels of polarization to satisfy, reducing the possibility of partisan compromise—a phenomenon that might not look too out-of-place to anyone familiar with the current workings of the US Senate. To make matters worse, there is a politically motivated double standard in the willingness to punish undemocratic behaviors among both Democrats and Republicans, while only a small minority are willing to prioritize democratic principles over partisan loyalty ([Graham & Svolik 2020](#); [Simonovits et al. 2022](#)).

Normative questions

Viewed in a broader context and allowing for the messy reality of politics, the idea of “political polarization” as a single, discrete entity that can be pushed back on all fronts begins to fracture. In a contemporary political scene marked by the rise of white supremacist radicals and active attempts to undermine the legitimacy of the government and democratic values, it can be tempting to ask if all polarization is equally bad. The answer is complex. Most polarization research begins with the assumption that polarization is unilaterally bad and focuses on its negative consequences ([Skytte 2021](#)). For example, recent work has shown that affective polarization emerges from misperceptions about how ideologically extreme and politically engaged the other side is, but the implication remains that if only the illusion were dispelled, polarization could be solved, and we would all be the better for it (Druckman et al. 2019). The reality is more complicated. Affective polarization is frequently linked to radical and hostile, even violent, ideologies. Populist radical right parties play an outsized role in driving affective polarization, in that “they both radiate and receive high levels of dislike” ([Harteveld et al. 2021, 703](#)). In the US context, hostility

toward minority groups among white conservatives uniquely predicted future support for the right-wing populism of Trump (Mason 2021). As such, this carries a different weight and significance in the larger picture of the negative consequences of polarization. If one side of the pole, even if a minority, advocates vociferously and sometimes violently for antidemocratic values, is it truly so problematic to have an overestimation of the prevalence of dangerous ideas and thus also help to mobilize opposition? We view this as a valid and underappreciated argument. An understanding of the nuances of polarization, and how it may further democratic aims in the long run, motivates researchers to identify the precise kind of affective polarization that proves harmful to democratic resilience (Somer et al. 2021).

Answers and potential solutions

If the problems of polarization are not about polarization itself, but about the potential antidemocratic and illiberal effects that political polarization can engender, how do we solve it? Intergroup conflict research in social psychology has much to add to the conversation, while other polarization literature in political science and political communications has begun to touch on conflict and related areas traditionally in the realm of social psychology. Research has found group-based identity motivations can result in the moralization of issues, where agreeing or disagreeing with a stance becomes divided along a good/bad axis ([Brady et al. 2020](#); [Grubbs et al. 2019](#)). This moralization is in turn associated with increased conflict, which can further drive affective polarization ([Grubbs et al. 2020](#)). In political spaces, the polarization of an issue is a common mobilization tactic ([Petersen et al. 2021](#)). The resulting moral outrage can also serve to justify and motivate online networked harassment, which in political spaces disproportionately targets young candidates, women, and candidates of color ([Marwick 2021](#); [Collignon & Rüdiger 2020](#); [Thakur 2022](#)).

Regardless of the various factors complicating polarization in the United States, we find a substantial body of research demonstrating that polarization becomes toxic when it involves or encourages dehumanization of an outgroup ([Moore-Berg et al. 2022](#)). This is the moment when it crosses into more dangerous territory, transforming into a prominent feature of intergroup dynamics that leads to violent conflict. Both reciprocal dehumanization (two sides viewing their opponent as less than human) and “metadehumanization” (believing that your opponent views *you* as less than human) predict intergroup conflict (Kteily et al. 2016). Affective polarization—i.e., animosity toward the political outgroup—strengthens the association between political ideology and dehumanization ([Crawford et al. 2013](#)). If you already dislike the members of a given political party, it is much easier to turn that dislike into anger against all partisans, which in turn facilitates a view of the other side as “monsters” or “enemies of the state.”

Affective polarization provides yet another way for us to create “ingroup” and “outgroup” dynamics within our politics. This matters because the components of hate (anger, contempt, and disgust) also lead to angry or hostile assumptions about the “other” ([Matsumoto et al. 2017](#)). An increase in expressions of these components marks a time leading up to violence ([Matsumoto et al. 2013](#)). Hate is theorized to follow certain communicative techniques or narrative themes, like the portrayal of hatred as a moral necessity ([Sternberg 2003](#)). For example, the Trump quote about Biden at the beginning of this piece incorporates themes of the enemy as barbarian (“Vicious, hateful”), victimization of the ingroup (“You’re all enemies of the state”), and illegitimacy of the other side (“group that control him, circling around him”) ([Bar-Tal et al. 2017](#); Sternberg 2003). Group-based hatred impedes the likelihood of future resolution (Halperin 2008). Even where polarization is normatively or morally justified, the closing of the possibility for future resolution, even if remote, is sobering.

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The rhetoric quoted above also calls up conspiracy theories, the contents of which often serve social identity-related needs like blamelessness, group superiority, and belongingness ([Golec de Zavala et al. 2012](#); Sternisko et al. 2020; van Prooijen et al. 2020). As generators of prejudice and correlates of the psychological motivations of intergroup conflict, conspiracy theories should be taken seriously in the polarization literature (Jolley et al. 2020; [van Prooijen & Douglas 2018](#)). Research has largely focused on pathologizing the conspiratorial mindset by looking at psychological needs at the individual level for factors such as trust, need for cognitive closure, and need for belonging, rather than investigating the potential relationships between political partisanship, polarization, and conspiratorial thinking (Douglas & Sutton 2018; Miller et al. 2016; Sapountzis et al. 2023). In part, this is because believing in conspiracies is not in itself a partisan activity: Conspiratorial thinking occurs in all people regardless of their ideological affiliation—left-leaning individuals are no more or less likely to be prone to it than right-leaning individuals ([Imhoff et al. 2022](#)).

However, in the current US political climate, the *types* of conspiracy that gain the most traction and are shared the most widely are not symmetrical, and many previously nonpartisan conspiracy theories, such as vaccine skepticism, have become highly polarized. The most widely discussed conspiracies are right wing in nature ([Bergmann 2018](#)), and recent research suggests that Republicans are more prone to conspiratorial thinking than

Democrats ([Enders et al. 2022](#); [van der Linden 2021](#)). Belief in specific, politically motivated conspiracies can also be influenced by strength of political identity and ideology, with both of these factors contributing to higher belief in politically driven conspiracy, just as they contribute to increased polarization (Enders et al. 2022).

Misinformation goes hand in hand with this dynamic. Polarization has been found to drive the willingness to spread misinformation online (Osmundsen et al. 2021). Increased affective polarization decreases an individual's motivation to arrive at an accurate conclusion, while simultaneously increasing the desire to arrive at conclusions supported by one's party, whether accurate or not (Schaffner & Roche 2017). Even in situations where there is little to no prompting, in the case of political information and decision-making, partisans are more likely to make the conclusions they think their party representatives would draw ([Bolsen et al. 2014](#)). Polarization can also influence media choice, and the perpetuation of misinformation on some partisan media sources can make that partisanship particularly dangerous. Additionally, the presence of misinformation in a media environment can increase perceived distance between ingroup and outgroup, leading to further affective polarization ([Dan & Dixon 2021](#)).

On solutions

Clearly, reducing polarization is not as simple as reminding people that they share many of the same traits and interests as their political opponents, and reducing political polarization does not necessarily reduce antidemocratic behavior ([Voelkel et al. 2023](#)). Unfortunately, the question of what *does* work is still under investigation. Research into hostile political partisanship, as well as into religious and sectarian violence, has found that intergroup hostility can be reduced by providing narratives that emphasize both internal and external suffering, reducing the importance of one's group affiliation, and offering shared identities as alternatives to highly-polarized ingroup/outgroup dynamics ([Adelman et al. 2016](#); Brewer 2010; Zavala et al. 2012; [Levendusky 2018](#)). All of these approaches suggest avenues by which we can reduce partisan hostility and may serve as useful starting points for future researchers. Ultimately, political science and political communications research on connections between political polarization, illiberalism, and democratic erosion is a relatively new field, and many proposed solutions are likewise under-researched. A reduction in polarization means very little if it is not targeting the antidemocratic ideals that accompany that polarization. Solutions may rely on emotion, education, interaction, or some combination of any or all of the above, or they may even vary from person to person depending on their circumstances and how polarized they are.

Recently, researchers of revolutionary groups and political radicals have proposed several

potential strategies for reducing antidemocratic polarization ([McCoy & Somer 2019](#)). These include refocusing polarization around ideological beliefs rather than political identity, democratizing existing political structures, and establishing antiauthoritarian measures (Somer et al. 2021). Other research suggests other techniques for reducing interparty hostility, such as de-emphasizing political polarization, reducing misperceptions of the other party's hostility, and greater gender representation in political leadership positions ([Lee 2022](#); Iyengar et al. 2019; Adams et al. 2023). No single one of these strategies is a silver bullet. But in part or together, each strategy may work to defuse the political environment, making it easier to focus on the populist animosity, autocratic polarization, and violent hostility that characterize the most dangerous forms of political polarization.

Outside of polarization research, correcting inaccurate metaperceptions [glossary: beliefs about the attitudes or thoughts of others] has also been shown to reduce support for violence and dehumanization (Landry et al. 2022; Mernyk et al. 2022). Empathy is also often considered a potential solution to partisan divisiveness and intergroup conflict ([Batson & Ahmad 2009](#)). However, conflicting research suggests that empathy may also potentially exacerbate affective polarization ([Simas et al. 2020](#)). Empathy can mobilize, but it is also tied to our biases and thus can be applied in destructive and disadvantageous ways, leading us to unfairly favor our "own" groups or even obscuring our ability to make well-considered rational decisions ([Bloom 2017](#)). Future research should resolve this uncertainty surrounding the role of empathy and how it might be leveraged constructively in an affectively polarized society.

Emotion and perception are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to reducing antidemocratic polarization. A logical assumption might be that education would be a fitting solution to the issue. Unfortunately, increased political education often has a paradoxical effect on polarization: The more knowledgeable about politics people are, the more polarized they tend to be ([Herne et al. 2019](#)). However, increased awareness and information processing can reduce the degree to which any one person uncritically accepts partisan talking points, which can certainly reduce individual levels of polarization ([Stanley et al. 2020](#)). While there are multiple potential ways to increase a person's tendency to critically evaluate the information they are consuming, epistemic humility—a person's belief that their knowledge and beliefs may be incomplete or flawed, and that it is a logical and acceptable course of action to change their belief based on new information—has shown some promise as a potential solution ([Leary et al. 2017](#)). Something as simple as the reminder that an individual may not have all the information about a situation can help them to rethink or revisit their thoughts and assumptions, possibly allowing them to break away from a more polarized thought pattern ([Koetke et al. 2022](#)).

Given the history of democracy and political violence in the United States, it is crucial that

researchers and journalists covering political polarization go beyond the simple narrative of polarization-as-dangerous. Ultimately, political polarization is a complex topic with varied causes, consequences, and normative significance. When researchers and journalists join the polarization conversation, we recommend clarity and emphasis in seeking to address the so-called “problem of polarization.” What we are looking to solve isn’t the phenomenon of awkward conversations at Thanksgiving dinner, but rather the identity-driven, sometimes violent drive of particularly invested political individuals to paint their opponents as evil, as “enemies of the state.” We must consider the process of *depolarizing* voters as a way of reducing the potential consequences of polarization, which include the erosion of democracy at the hands of antidemocratic populists and a risk of violent conflict. To get to an era of reduced polarization and healthy democracy, we cannot look to an idealized past. Instead, we need to consider the here and now, and look to the future.

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