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Against the tide:
essays on political polarization

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THE VARIETIES OF POLITICAL POLARIZATION:
Challenges in operationalization, taxonomy, and metrics

Political polarization is a fuzzy concept. Operationalizing it involves defining the idea in a way that can be instrumental in allowing scholars to study this complex phenomenon within a specific knowledge domain (e.g., politics, psychology, ethics, communications) to offer a robust response to a specific research question (e.g., what, how, when, and why).

Ideally, an adequate operationalization allows scholars to complete the entire cycle of a scientific inquiry in a (sufficiently) coherent manner: observe it as a social fact in the real world in a specific time and context (i.e., past, present or future), choosing a unit of analysis (i.e., individual, group, city, country) to measure it according to the research tools (i.e., surveys, analysis of discourse, econometric models) and data available (i.e., quantitative, qualitative) available, and to proceed with a multi-factor analysis (i.e., variation, correlation, causation) using specific research designs and methods (i.e. empirical, phenomenological, experimental, process tracing) to confirm (or not) a previously formulated research hypothesis.

So, as a rule-of-thumb, an adequate operationalization does not need to bring the optimal definition (the "best single definition available") of any concept but, otherwise, propose a "best fit" that conciliate multiple alternative combinations of plausible meanings, types, and metrics under a specific research purpose. It is even better if the operative definition leads to findings and conclusions that can resist falsifiability tests, external validation, and extrapolation to other knowledge domains. However, the main idea here is that explanation power trumps the scope of validity, at least for academic purposes.

Conciliating all possible dimensions, types, and metrics under a single operative, intelligible, and robust definition takes work. Several key dimensions can be operationalized to capture the concept's essential elements.

One of these dimensions is the divergence of **ideological beliefs** between different political groups. This can be done through opinion surveys applied to the mass public or by discourse analysis applied to political speeches or media coverage of party politics to - for instance – measure the degree of disagreement on specific policy issues or values. Researchers might use scales, categories, or composite indicators to translate qualitative-type data into quantitative panel data and composite indicators, creating scales and categories to produce a political polarization taxonomy based on ideological differences.

Political polarization can also be understood as **partisan sorting** (Levendusky 2009). Partisan sorting is the degree of alignment of voters' political attitudes and preferences with party affiliation. This can be measured by analyzing voting patterns, party identification, or the degree of overlap between positions expressed by the voters and their party manifests or programs across a longitudinal series of political events, such as elections, plebiscites, or referendums. The weaknesses of the "sorting" dimension are many: (a) samples ignore those who do not vote, (b) it supposes the preferences revealed on voting align with voter's attitudes because voters cast their votes according to their "rational" interest – what is not the case very often (Caplan 2008).

Another way to operationalize political polarization is to investigate the pattern of the frequency of distribution (i.e., dispersion, concentration, mode, mean, average? skewed?) of individual attitudes regarding a specific political issue across a targeted population – without considering their revealed preferences on voting. This approach's weaknesses are evident and

familiar to every research inquiry based on opinion surveys: attitudes are always self-declaratory and contingent on peer pressure and the "spiral of the silence" effects.

Nowadays, identity is of great importance when explaining political polarization. In a world where identity politics claims relevance, emotions (or "affections") are among the most critical engines fueling our differences. **Affective polarization** (i.e., distrust, animosity, hostility) between opposing ethnical, religious, or gender groups is now more often expressed in the political domain partially because of their growing claims of special treatment for underprivileged minorities [Fukuyama, 2018]. The adequate operationalization of political polarization in its affective dimension is particularly tricky because it often deals with veiled negative emotions, unconfessed prejudices, and unperceived bias towards diversity and pluralism. Research in this realm cannot rely only on surveys or in-depth interviews but also use controlled human-centered experiments under strict protocols of social behavior human-subject ethics.

Mass media consumption and **social media engagement** patterns can reveal specific dimensions of political polarization at the individual level in a high-resolution approach. The extent to which individuals selectively expose themselves to ideologically aligned media sources, the frequency and intensity with which they manifest their disagreement toward opposing viewpoints on social networks, and the information flow among individuals or groups that are net producers or net consumers of information can be easily measured by mining metadata on social platforms. However, the puzzle of balancing behavior-based or attitude-based proxies remains when it comes to negative emotions: people may "hold their horses" in public due to the norms of expected social behavior while "releasing their dogs" in private due to our natural "ghoulishness" (Haidt 2013).

In sum, many ways exist to operationalize a definition of political polarization to "best fit" a specific research inquiry. Despite the strengths and weaknesses of each one, researchers may adopt

an approach based on their specific research questions and data availability. Furthermore, combining multiple operationalizations in an interdisciplinary research program provides a more comprehensive understanding of this complex political phenomenon.

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MESSAGES FROM THE FRONT
Cultural war, trickle-down polarization, and the silence of the innocents

There is a general sense among the American public that political debate and policymaking are becoming increasingly polarized, dogmatic, intolerant, and justified on moral assumptions rather than on empirical evidence. Red suburban moms vs. blue metropolitan hipsters, Evangelicals Christians vs. Asian Muslims, white supremacist vs. BLM protesters, *workerism* against the "Alt-Right gangsters," pro-choice laws vs. pro-life judges, protesters favoring same-sex marriage vs. those who do not… you name it. The idea of America as the shining city over the hill seems to be sinking in the middle of a multi-issue cultural war played by two cohesive tribes: conservatives who would like to preserve the very American traditions and liberals who would like all Americans to open their hearts and minds to embrace every novelty as progress toward a better future.

During the last two decades, several scholars have dwelled on the problem to find responses to three fundamental questions: (a) is there a (real) cultural war going on in the US, (b) if so, is it indeed a "war"? Is it cultural in its very nature ? and (c) if it does not, what is happening in contemporary American politics? Is this any different from the recent past?

Despite the evidence that shows that Americans reveal a great deal of time inconsistency (i.e., transitive choices in and across time) when translating value preferences into political attitudes [Jacoby, 2006], some scholars argue that cultural divides are of particular relevance in contemporary American politics – especially when it lay down its foundations on the confrontation between a wide variety of religious traditionalisms against several forms of

Gnosticism [Layman and Carmines, 1997]. On the other hand, some scholars are skeptical about a broad open conflict, at least in extension and dimension that justifies naming it as "war" [Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, 2011]. For them, as for many others, the messages arriving from the front are exaggerated – maybe on purpose.

Arguments favoring the existence of a "cultural war" and its relevance for the current state of American politics seem far more convincing than those denying it. However, both visions could be reconciled if we provide a critical and needed semantic correlate to the "cultural war" debate frenzy.

First, if a war is now in place – as it seems proper to some degree after all… – that is not a civil war. According to 2020 Gallup surveys, 80% of Americans do not care about or follow. Just 60% of the US VAP voted in the 2020 presidential elections, one of the most polarized electoral campaigns in many years. Looking for affective and ideological differences across different levels/units of analysis (i.e., states, parties, and individuals in general), cleavages (i.e., party affiliation, electoral vote, church attendance) and issues/identity markers (i.e., homosexuality, drug consumption), FAL (2011) surprisingly found an "American citizenry that looks moderate, centrist, nuanced, ambivalent rather than extreme, polarized, unconditional or dogmatic" in general. In that sense, party politics and debates in Capitol Hill (gridlocks, filibustering, tabloid scandals) seem much more contentious than conversations between Republicans and Democrats over a pint of beer at the bar next door.

Second, the societal cleavages that professional politicians could use to strike the sensitive chords of polarization are becoming less relevant to define access to different walks of life. For instance, church membership is declining in modern America, and party affiliation within families is becoming more diverse and less relevant as a part of individual identity. Interracial

marriages are now perceived as belonging to the realm of private affairs and are gradually creating a melting-pot society; more States are becoming swing States, and in these States, voters are becoming more tolerant of the legal introduction of drugs for medical and recreational purposes. Ivy League universities are under pressure to end heritage privileges and adopt color-blind admissions, while academic credentials are becoming less relevant than (inter)personal skills to access job opportunities in a digitalized economy. These trends indicate that attitudes and value preferences are not consistent in a glimpse of time [Jacoby, 2006], but the first can change rapidly despite the stickiness of the latter. These new attitudes toward oneself and others can emulate behavior changes with the potential to reduce the propensity to political animosity fueled by affective and ideological differences.

Third, in the absence of an indifferent mass public to brother in arms and fight for their flags across the battlefield, the so-called "war" must be played chiefly by generals (politicians, party leaders, political pundits), their officers (i.e., syndicated shows, digital influencers) and mercenaries (i.e., anonymous and not-so-anonymous social media-based groups and campaigns monetized with bitcoins) and guerrilla fighters (i.e., identity groups and professional demonstrators taking the streets). This dynamic implies that what is a political conflict between political elites and insiders "trickles down" toward spin doctors and political pundits and "spreads out" to other societal places that are not primarily political in their very functional but cultural. Suddenly, everything is "politicized." Every individual singularity (the way you speak, eat, drink, walk, and sleep) is necessarily associated with a cultural tradition. Every cultural aspect that reminds us of that tradition is there to express a political meaning with a political purpose in mind. From university campuses to stand-up comedy audiences, private matters are no longer private; all privacies are morally unjustified, tagged as corrupt, and must be scrutinized by the public over

the altar of proper attitudes and behavior according to the group's minimal affiliation standards.

Finally, even if the "war" is disputed around cultural divisions across identity traits (race, ethnicity, faith, nationality, gender, sexuality), archetypes, narratives, archetypes, symbols, and so on, the ultimate purpose of all this noise, revolt and resentment is still 100% political.

If the messages coming from the front are deeply exaggerated, if the ongoing war is between a polarized few, not among an unpolarized mass, if the politicization of everything is charging a tool over individual freedom, the silent majority must assume the responsibility to rebuild the political center, win elections, vote the extremes out, and reduce the politics of resentment, noising, finger-pointing, name-and-shaming and cancellation driven by the far-left and the far-right.

Putting the trickle-down effect of the current "cultural" "war" to an end is a task for the "moderate, centrist, nuanced, ambivalent" silent innocents. It does not matter much if "the revolution will not be televised (or streamed, perhaps)" now or never. If cultural war feeds polarization by dividing us against one another, and the only way to stay is to join the war with one side or the other according to the group expectations, then culture war compromises. Diversity on all sides: on the left, on the right, and outside. In the end, what is freedom for? - if not to think, speak, pray, love, and live differently?

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UNTIL POLITICS DO US APART?
The "noble savage," (neo)tribalism, identity politics, and the perils of affective polarization

There is a great deal of debate among scholars and the public if the original distrust toward those we see as "the others" is a by-product of nature or nurture. We do not have to go back to the 17th century and dive deep into the philosophical reasoning of the Enlightenment to criticize Jean Jacques Rosseau's idea of the "noble savage" as the best archetype of human nature. Plenty of accumulated evidence points out that "nature" has wired differently from the toddlers can recognize parents by pheromones, and little kids can act cruelly, hurting and molesting other kids to call parents' attention. Nurture seems insufficient to overcome our original sin: teens enjoy stereotyping, ridiculing, and canceling those that do not fit into the model (losers or weirdos), and grown adults can easily find justification to physically, legally, and morally kill each other in traffic fights, tribunals, and social media.

Despite the advancement of civilization, secularization, and modernization, we still live in tribes to some degree. Inadvertently, we cultivate wrong affections toward others not because we were born as evils, not because we are sinners, nor because parenting and socialization failed us somehow. Those "made-up" antagonisms are instrumental to building, reinforcing, and sustaining our contingent belonging to a social group that protects us from the threats of a natural disaster or human action. Prejudice and stereotyping result from our protection instincts, not our malevolence.

During the last decades, affective polarization (aka, disaffection, animosity, rivalry based on group belongingness, and perceptions of identity traits) became a central phenomenon in contemporary America's political landscape. Research to determine if this phenomenon is "really new" or remounts to the early days of Independence and the Civil War is somehow pointless once those negative affections are the amalgam of the groups' formation, cohesion, growth, crisis, and decline across centuries [Diamond, 200ti]. What seems to be (kind of) "new" are (i) the crisis of the welfare state and (ii) the surge of identity politics.

During centuries, late medieval and early modern politics aimed to protect individual negative freedom by suppressing tyranny and preserving equal consideration to all individuals

under the Law, granting legal rights to make temporary minorities legally equivalent to and free from the potential abuses of power potentially perpetrated by temporary political majorities – regardless of individual's identity attributes. Moreover, freedom was instrumental to order, and order was a condition for prosperity. Contemporary politics seems more ambitious and naïve: it aims to promote a group's positive liberty by granting unequal consideration to specific groups under the Law, granting economic "privileges" to make permanent (self-declared) minorities economically equal to and free from the potential exploitation by economic elites – according to the minority group's shared- attributes of identity. In this new world, the central role of the State transits from *preserving freedom _for_ prosperity* to *promoting (re)distribution _of_ wealth.* This transformation is at the core of the counterintuitive rise of affective polarization in a more secular, modern, liberal, democratic era: "Who gets what, when, and how" strongly depends on our differences (race, ethnicity, gender, citizenship status) – not on our similarities.

We learn that more than 80% of Americans declared themselves uninterested in politics [Fiorina at., 2018], even when the US experiences higher electoral turnouts compared to some European and Latin American countries where voting is non-mandatory. Despite declining church membership in the US, a life lived among religious faith/confession peers seems to revive interest in politics. Shared moral values among members of more orthodox religious denominations and sects strongly predict individual attitudes – predominantly negative – toward policy issues in the current political agenda. [Castle et al., 2012]. The same seems to occur within partisanship and party sorting domains. Those that share the experience of politics more often and more intensely (i.e., politicians, party leaders and officers, political pundits, and political junkies) and build their own social identities primarily on that attribute (i.e., "I am a Republican lawyer, or "I am a Christian physician") seem to be more likely to express negative dispositional attribution toward peers across the aisle along time [Lees and Cikara, 2020].

Two conclusions follow: (a) political polarization firstly grows due to the "radicalization of the tails" when those already interested in politics (aka, political insiders) move towards the extremes and become more vocal about their positions, and (b) then, it grows by "the inclusion of the averages" when formerly uninterested masses (aka, political outsiders) joins the conversation because their contingent, sometimes loose, sympathetic-only affiliation to stakeholder group potentially affected by the political decision of the day.

If that is true, then what contemporary (?) politics does is play the most sensitive chords of (dis)affection (i.e., anger, fear, pride) to turn-key negative attitudes confrontational, defensive, or partisan-based disaffection well outside the political sphere with a consequence of social interactions (marriage, residence relocation) and economic choices (career choices, job opportunities, perceptions about the current state of the Union) [Iyengar at all., 2018].

However, how does it play out? Luttig (2018) shows that party sorting ideological and affective polarization go together in America during the 00s. However, it is still tricky to figure out how these three dimensions interact: the trigger, the engine, the fuel that makes polarization stand and run and how they are correlated in the long run [Ivengar et al., 2018]

Without much scientific rigor, we can try to speculate an "integrated approach on how political polarization unfolds out of affection is cherry-picking elements and insights from ideological [Abramovitch, 2008], psychological [Heidt, 2012] and group-centrist hypotheses [Luttig, 2018] and combining them along a lifetime cycle. A very brief exercise to conciliate these "approaches" goes as follows:

I understand political polarization as a continuous process where, once the agenda-setters make an issue public, individuals join the conversation and then gradually move their positions to the tails of a particular distribution of preferences. That involves two communication challenges: (a) call mass public attention to turn outsiders into insiders and (b) frame the issue as a moral one to trigger polarization, building upon the previous worldviews or group affiliations. Most outsiders stay home and take the free-rider option – because the cognitive and opportunity costs are high, pay-offs are low, or simply because they do not care at all [Fiorina, 2018]. Those who attend the call made by the political elites through mass and social media are moved first by emotions that were rationalized and organized coherently [Heidt, 2012]: a way that parents, as kids protectors, can justify kids group affiliation (i.e., school choice, sports, religious faith) as "coherent" with family traditions in public to enhance their social desirability [Connors, 2023] and in a way that the grownup can make a coherent sense of its own identity later on. Adult individuals do not manifest all their identity attributes simultaneously, and group affiliation to the group comes in different sizes (i.e., sponsorship, membership, affiliation, sympathy only…). So, political engagement responses primarily based on affection depend on (a) the nature of the issue, (b) the context that gave that specific opportunity and priority for that issue (noticeability?) among the other concurrent public

issues, (d) the specific identity attribute that is being called in and the degree in which individual ingroup social desirability depends on the "pureness" of that attribute [Connors, 2033]; and, finally (e) the salience of this attribute as an ingroup marker in deep contrast with outgroup attribute of rivalry or competition.

Politics can poke some fundamental identity attributes easily [Fukuyama, 2018]. Race, ethnicity, and gender are inescapable identity markers prone to dichotomy (black vs. white, Caucasian vs. Asian, cisgender vs. transgender, tall vs. short). Other requires more sophisticated political framings to be activated as polarization cleavages (rich vs. poor, Republican vs. Democrat, Boston Celtics vs. LA Lakers fans) because you can evade them to some degree by chance or choice. The first ones are perfect to be instrumentalized as internal attributions regarding others' behavioral (moral!) failures, feeding stereotyping and prejudice.

In sum, the group comes first; affections come second (shaped by ingroup/outgroup interactions); psychological traits and worldviews come next, and ideology (as a simplified, previously packaged, one-flavor worldview "bento box") leads to party sorting comes at the end.

Does the dynamics of this interaction represent a general framework across different geographical and cultural contexts? Across time? Or is it so contingent that insights gained in the most robust randomized control are useless to inform policy interventions in other latitudes? It is hard to say.

It is hard to say what we can do to mitigate affective polarization and its effects on contemporary politics in an effective manner. Nevertheless, there are plenty of alternatives to be explored. First, we can reduce the scope of what is often tagged and problematized as "political" or stetted as an "issue of public interest." That does not mean censorship or authoritarianism. It means reducing not necessarily the size of the State but its scope: maximizing freedom by bringing some issues back to the private sphere and taking (carefully) a leap of faith in common sense and individual autonomy. Second, we could transfer part of the State's distributional power to intermediate organizations (churches, clubs, associations, unions, civic leagues), expecting to reduce pressure for rent-seeking, clientelism, and patronage – old forms of gain allegiances for current political settlements by granting privileges to interest groups, now driven by identity. Third, the political debate could be made in more rational and perhaps dull terms. Affections will be there to tap on anyway, as an old bad habit. However, politics must find a way to divorce private money

and public performances. If the so-called "spetacularization" is an unavoidable consequence of contemporary overcommunicated society, we need some regulation that prevents abuses of disinformation and triggers a scape valve when debate overheats. That is tricky: too much of that and the right of free speech will be gone.

Finally, we can try to deconstruct the ultimate attribution errors that see our failures and others success as mere results of circumstances (aka, situational attribution) and our success and other failures as unavoidable evidence of our reasoning, skills, beliefs, or moral superiority. One way would be de-bias ingroup members from overestimating the negative appreciation (they suppose…) they receive from the outgroup by exposing ingroup radicals to the typical outsider affiliated with the "other tribe" [Druckman et al. I, 2022]

Far from perfect, here is a decent roadmap to mitigate affective polarization and reduce its chances of being captured and magnified by the current logic of political debate: less politics and more freedom; less State and more society; less performance and more reason; less tribe and more encounters.

Politics will not do us apart. However, too much of politics will tear us apart.

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SURVIVING IN A TINY POND OF MANY FISHES
Mobile technology, news market fragmentation, broken hypodermic needles, and the role of digital influencers contribute to the new political polarization dynamics.

There is much debate among scholars and the public about the real impact of mass media on the political debate around the globe – particularly in contemporary America. This debate is not new either scholarly: our parents and maybe a few of us were raised under the threat of being brainwashed by the radio in the 60s, the broadcast television in the 70s, the videogames consoles in the 80s, and the personal computer in the 90s. Voices of America, ABC News, Atari, and Commodores 64 were all tools of the same elite-led "divide them and reign" conspiracy to gain "control of the masses" by making vulnerable groups fight each other. Names may have changed (CNN, Apple, PlayStation, Twitter, WhatsApp), but the idea of a "hypodermic needle" remains the same. Despite all the autonomy granted by the mobile communication and digital technology revolution, we are the same passive robots of the past, consuming informational packages packed with accurate, scientific, trustable news in a way that can be swallowed fast and easy – without too much time for attention to contents and considerations about sources, frames, and intentions.

However, a more attentive spectator will perceive that the hypodermic needle is broken – or, at least, clogged. That is not because the mass media has stopped pursuing its interest by setting the public agenda, channeling the public debate, or persuading decision-makers by flip-flopping public opinion from one side to another. The problem here is that technology has enabled significant changes in the mass communication market's structure, strategies, and performance, resulting in a brand-new dynamic of "public opinion" in the contemporary era that, I will argue, is conducive to a radical polarization of affections, ideologies, and morals. I will explore these changes and their results in the following paragraphs.

First, the technology. Global connectedness, mobile devices, browsing tools, and social media made "the news" global, abundant, omnipresent, and easy to search, filter, share, and, therefore, to be consumed in groups. Moreover, the technological triad that made the second globalization possible (information, communication, transportation) impaired the limits imposed by

geography and time – making "what is global and foreign" accessible, relevant, or (un)desirable for "what is local and national."

Second is the structure. Technology allows every one of us to engage in content production and make a living out of that. That means news production is no longer a locational mono/oligopoly game where only big fish can invest massive amounts of money in finding, packaging, and reporting the news globally. Luckily, even the small fishes can call attention to their tiny public. In sum, the news market is no longer one of the big fishes in a small local pond but of small fishes in a – at least, in potential – big global pond. Big media outlets are still there handling giant hypodermic needles, with massive capacity for reaching the facts, analyzing them, and selling framed opinions and biased interpretations to the public. However, they are no longer alone: they serve as Gordian knots in an extensive, overpopulated, and entry-barrier-free network of net producers. On the demand side, advancements in literacy, education attainment, and access to information make consumers exposed and capable of considering more options – which does not necessarily mean they will be more aware, attentive, knowledgeable, or critical.

Third is the strategy. Big fishes are no longer swimming at ease. When oligopoly breaks, firms fight against each other, margins go down, and players turn into a "partisan" survival strategy: functional specialization (i.e., 24-news, food, sports channels), channel diversification (i.e., broadcast/cable TV, radio, streaming, website, social media profiles and mobile apps), content differentiation (i.e., graphic, eschatology, politically incorrect) to capture the pockets of a self-interested clientele (i.e., PACs, interest groups, business clubs, and associations) and to patron a tiny but fiercely loyal group of spectators (political junkies, political pundits) and multipliers (i.e., spin doctors, syndicated journalists, digital influencers). Similar fragmentation occurs on the demand side among net consumers: abundance means diverse sources and different content options; too many options mean cognitive overload; and cognitive overload requires more frequent swallowing of small pieces that are easy to digest – those that we are familiar with, (re)confirming our opinions of the past in the present. Overexposure to diversity, uncertainty, ambiguity, and volatility produces dizziness rather than excitement and nudges ordinary people into a back-to-the-safety strategy: the comfort zone of selective attention, confirmation bias, and "groupishness."

Third, the performance. On the supply side, mass media now heavily depends on delivering news according to the editorial line sponsored by "partners" and "donors," hangs at least in part on

ad revenues coming from big firms keener to explore other targeted and more effective C2C-types of engagements (Instagram, Tick-Tock, WhatsApp, Metaverse). On the demand side, the public increasingly sees impartial, moderate, and verified coverage of "the news" as an undifferentiated public good for which they are unwilling to pay a penny. Without further ado, a business-model crisis becomes a challenge to sustain editorial independence and the opportunity to be rescued by serving special interest groups as an army in a cultural war.

When oligopolies collapse and downsize, a vast set of intermediaries emerge. When it comes to any market, intermediaries have a crucial role: they buy wholesale inputs from massive producers (i.e., mass media groups), mix and package in smaller packages, frame a narrative of opportunity and convenience, and, finally, retail them to a targeted tiny public. Syndicated shows and websites, digital influencers, news, showbiz, and sports celebrities are the intermediaries in contemporary news media markets. They are not mere agenda-setters as politicians or traditional mass media because they face different market conditions. Once middlemen compete selling opinions in a highly fragmented market of consumers of ideas facing several similar net producers, they must implement three simultaneous strategies ("the people"): expansion, mobilization, and retention of the client base. So, they must go for segmentation, differentiation, and loyalty. Purposefully, they micro-target the content and "spetacularize" the form to get their tiny (but loyal) public mesmerized and willing to chip in. They translate news into opinions, frame them in a way that their public can consume, and – more importantly – play the role of coaches of their tiny little public hope and struggles, as therapists of their anxieties and frustrations, as vindicators of their causes, resentments, and rages. They recognize people's right to their own facts by revealing the lies behind other truths. They are playing for their petty interest (chips-in, likes, followers), which translates into money. However, they are also recruiting, some indivertibly, for the political war (sold downstairs as "cultural" to look more comprehensive) played upstairs by politicians. Powerful ingroup peer pressures, social desirability, attribution, and confirmation bias do the rest of the trick to polarize people who have not even seen other faces.

The fundamental polarization rests right there: in the vicious cycle of mutually reinforced interaction between innocents made victims ("the people") by vindicators ("the digital influencers") playing each affective chord with the help of social media algorithms, echo chambers, and bots.

In a nutshell, the dynamic of opinion formation is migrating from the hypodermic needle toward combining ingroup observational/interactive learning, outgroup negative dispositional attribution, and – in some extreme cases – mimetic violence. That is not because we suddenly became more evil or less tolerant but because the phenomenology of news production and consumption radically changed in the last four decades. That is not digitalization making elders transition from radio to WhatsApp or teens from Atari to TikTok. It is an unwelcome by-product of the widespread mobile technology, the news markets' extreme fragmentation, and middlemen incentives to radicalize in form and content in an overcommunicated, overloaded, overloaded inattentive "burnout society."

Back to our needle analogy, mass mediatize needles are clogged, and the magnitude of vaccination campaigns may decline. Patients are sick of traditional diagnoses and unsuccessful treatments, suspicious of experienced doctors' expertise and intentions, and less prone to be vaccinated by those they do not trust. New family doctors have just entered the business with alternative, less invasive, common-sense therapies that promise cures and blame others for spreading disease. The fluids in the hypodermic needle are more dangerous than before because of the feel-good effect: patients desperately want to believe in anything that confirms their original beliefs and are prone to self-medicate with several doses of any little lie that remove the anguish of living in a world of uncertainty and ambiguity. More troubling is that patients do not know for sure what amount of the medicine is poisonous. Moreover, that (polarization) poison is attacking more frequently, installing deeper, spreading quicker, and being more resistant to depolarization remedies than before.

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AWAKENING THE SILENT MAJORITY
Institutions, incentives, persuasion, and coexistence to depolarize America

There is much debate about the future of American liberal democracy regarding the growing political polarization among the public. Some scholars tend to diminish the phenomenon's size, scope, and degree, arguing that political polarization is significant for a small group of political insiders while the masses remain moderate, uninterested, and self-alienated from the political debate [Fiorina, 2008; 2011]. Others see a deliberate trickle-down effect in place, with media middlemen (spin doctors, political punditries, digital influencers) pushing polarization downstairs and, gradually, making a "polarization of few" becomes a "polarization of many." Others argue that empirical evidence from behavioral experiments shows polarization is somehow hardwired in human beings even before socialization. We tend to fall back on the protection offered by the primary identity group (i.e., tribe, family, sect) when threatened by outsiders perceived as essentially evil due to ingroup negative dispositional attribution: a "polarization of (dis)affections" [Castle and Stepp 2021]. Surprisingly, some scholars find instrumental good use for polarization: it engages ordinary people in an otherwise elite-based political debate, makes deliberation more democratic, and makes decision-making around policy choices, design, and implementation less vulnerable to be captured by special interest groups [Levendusky, 2009]. On the contrary, others see polarization as adverse to policy compromise, preventing the public from considering flaws and the merits of alternative policy choices from a pragmatic point of view and fostering them to moralize every single choice made by anyone in public, even those strictly related to private life, lifestyles or personal taste; such as the way look, what you wear, what vehicle you drive, and the food you eat. [Gurri, 2018]

If it is hard to have scholars agree on how to conceptualize and operationalize polarization as a political phenomenon, what is the very nature of the problem, and even if the polarization is a problem that demands careful consideration; let alone ask them to come up with a one-size-fits-all silver-bullet solution. If political polarization comes in different types, sizes, colors and scopes, the depolarizing solutions to mitigate it do as well.

Prior to briefly discussing depolarization interventions, let us consider a short (but non-exhaustive) list of disclaimers: one must not require depolarization to be 100% effective when it comes to results at the end. However, they do must be coherent with the previous operationalization of the concept to start. For instance, an intervention designed to address ideological polarization among political insiders – such as electoral college reforms and gerrymandering – may not affect affective polarization among the masses. Second, this same intervention may produce ingroup and outgroup harmful (and, with some luck, favorable) unintended consequences and externalities. Third, every solution comes to a cost – moral or pecuniary – and some may suffer from early-death syndrome due to fiscal or political fatigue. Fourth, interventions targeting behavior change do not necessarily translate into changes in attitude – a paradox particularly relevant for depolarizing affections. Fifth, solutions must be designed to address "the polarization of others" once scholars are not representative samples of the American public population. Finally, we must consider one of the critical problems of any endogenous top-down type of intervention: they often lose momentum in the long run due to a lack of ownership. In sum, as an addiction, it is hard to depolarize the polarized without having them recognize their polarized attitudes ("extreme are the other folks, not me"…) as a problem of their own that cannot be solved without their willingness to help be helped.

Let us see what can be done considering these caveats and limitations.

Persily (2015) offers ample **institutional reforms** covering the electoral system, political parties, voters, and policymaking as potential solutions to political polarization. These reforms might change the basic structure of the US political system and electoral rules that might affect agency – the strategies taken by the agents within the system (i.e., politicians, political parties, PACs, donors, pre-candidates, regulators, and voters) to reach their political goals (i.e., votes, partisans, donations, contracts, political mandates, compliance with rules, and entitlements, respectively). Some proposed solutions address the rules of the game themselves, promoting changes in the structure of incentives, expecting self-interest and agent-based experimentation to gradually produce the right changes in agents' conduct in a way conducive to intended results (for instance, "pay-for-turnout" experiments). Some reforms directly address the actors' payoffs by creating bans and mandates and trusting that soft coercion and enforcement of contracts will do the trick to compel socially undesirable (for who ??) behavior – once the attitudinal chord is too sticky to strike.

Social oversight of media-compelled speech mandates and safe space regulations are contemporary examples of the last. Social media content control is an excellent example of how alleged good intentions can miss the target [Kubin & Von Sikorski, 2021] or result in being innocuous when polarization is built by online interpersonal interactions over WhatsApp, Snapchat or Telegram [Boxell & Shapiro, 2017]

As I have argued before, the so-called (neo)institutional design of economic incentives, political organizations, legal rules and social norms has become the mainstream tradition in political economy science since the ti0s ("get incentives right," "it is about institutions, stupid"...), but the collective action flaws that led to 2008 financial and covid-19 crisis have demonstrated that promote change in attitude and behavior toward others at induvial level is a different ball game, and maybe are better addressed by more subtle influence, persuasion and nudging-type interventions.

Let us consider non-administrative behavior-based **interventions**. Huddy and Hair (2020) remind us that "the herd effect" is particularly relevant in politics. Followers tend to emulate the behavior of those they recognize as their political leaders or role models. Other followers tend to follow the vanguard ones, creating a crowd [Sivers, 2010]. If followers emulate how their leaders behave in situations of tension, drama, confrontation, or conflict (warm, calm, angry, tolerant), a change in **leadership style** toward a more generous, more forgiving, more patient way of doing politics might be a promising solution to tackle affective polarization between groups. However, it needs to be clarified why leaders would be willing to change styles that seem to have given them higher returns on donations and votes. In an overcommunicated and fragmented society, politics is about contrast.

Moreover, the contrast is better perceived if you stand firmly and shout out your positions from one extreme pole of the political spectrum. Furthermore, it is unclear how the emulation mechanism will reach the masses outside the group's frontiers. The "follow-the-leader" approach seems to leave the "polarization of masses" unsolved.

Kalla and Brockman (2021) suggest that **exposure to other perspectives** nudges us to be less sure about our own – tainting our black-or-white prejudice toward unpartisan with the fifty shadows of grey of competing worldviews when "the others" are humanized and individualized in face-to-face contact. Unfortunately, the extensive literature (and cinematography, why not?) on conflict management indicates that some conditions may apply. First, like political depolarization,

conflict management goes quickly if built up from individual to group level, free of peer/group pressure in the early stages. **When it comes to reconciliation, coexistence trumps compromise**. Second, exposure to other perspectives tends to increase disaffection and animosity if both groups perceive the other as equal in power: a rival that is credible and eminent to our political survival. Polarization tends to grow stronger between two equals and less among a mosaic of unequal [Bueno de Mesquita, 2003].

Considering the **self-reinforcing cycle of incentives to polarization** in several domains of contemporary life (i.e., political spetacularization to capture selective attention of voters, positive rivalry required by competition between firms, increasing unfair inequality feeding negative dispositional attribution from the rich to the poor despite lack of opportunities for all, and the other way around despite of merit - the list goes on and on..), it is clear that we must "sludge" the cycle by **creating opportunities for civic engagement** – ideally without having persuasive purposes or demands to be claimed over the table. That will require improving the attractiveness and safety of public spaces and repurposing urban equipment (parks, public libraries, theatres, squares, courts, public pools, buses, and metro) to nudge the rise of the "Occupy City Parks" movement.

Reigniting civic life in America – "bowling together again," as Robert Putnam once put it – is the most compelling solution to mitigate growing political polarization among ordinary Americans – especially among those who feel left behind among their fellow citizens and those who feel like foreigners in their land amid secularization, globalization, and postmodernism [Layman and Carmines, 1997].

There is no way to depolarize the "polarized few" without mobilizing the "unpolarized many." [Cavari and Freedman, 2018]. It is urgent to **nudge the latent majorities to break the silence and participate in political deliberation**. It is fair to expect that they can contribute to **rebuilding the political center** in America. The challenge is to figure out how to (re)motivate them. As Baudrillard (1978) put it, "(…) the silent majority, "the masses," are resistant to any form of total and planned social organization: they do not hesitate to exchange an important political demonstration for a football game on television; We kill ourselves like flies in wars whose objectives simply do not interest them while they emotionally accompany the displacements of a royal family. The majority is inserted. It is raised to remain silent (media, fashion, services), enjoying their own apathy".

Citizens assemblies, ranked-choice voting, and policy co-production are innovations in **bootstrapping deliberative democracy** in some European communities. They may be instrumental in channeling the political excitement of street demonstrations toward more fruitful modalities of political participation on the other side of the Atlantic. That kind of civic engagement may appeal more to those uninterested in what is going beyond their backyard or in Washington, DC [Young and Godfrey, 2022].

There is no silver bullet solution, and intelligent experimentation based on the best evidence available can give us an idea of why, how, when, and where all these possible solutions will play out together. No bowling together during the weekends will be enough if a community member finds no decent job shift during the weekend. No migrant will feel welcome if his/her value to the community derives from the fact he/she is doing hardship jobs that Americans are no longer willing to perform. No American created under a religious creed will see a fellow Muslim as an equal subject of duties and rights if law enforcement profiles them differently at airport security points. A more vigorous and frequent civic life will only do good in the long run without champions working to heal the growing animosity within communities, aiming to weave a more robust social fabric in the long run.

If polarization growth is stooling, and the political pendulum is moving back to more tolerant days, **there is no better time to start depolarization than now** [Hetzel and Laurin, 2020].

Zigmund Bauman once said in an interview with BBC Hard Talk that the central puzzle behind every public challenge we face in the contemporary world has nothing to do with "what" we will do but with "who" will do it. **There will be no depolarization without depolarizers**. If professional politicians are unwilling to take the lead, why not us? Why not you?

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BEYOND REASONABLE DOUBT?
Political polarization, state of denial, and what we can do about it…

Dear members of the Jury (…):

Political polarization is a growing threat to contemporary American politics. As we will see in a minute, plenty of scientific evidence supports this statement. However, let us rely on your common sense. You already know it because you can feel it. Beyond the graphic images of frequent episodes of political violence (i.e., the storming of the Capitol, the Charlottesville attack, targets from property to people), every one of us has experienced some degree of subtle tension in the air: politicians deliver speeches that sound inflammatory, mass media are more explicit on their partisans sympathies, indent groups are fighting for their rights of group ownership, strong-arming silent social majorities with political correctness. Suddenly, everything is "politicized.": the way you speak, eat, drink, walk, and sleep is subject to be scrutinized by your relatives, neighbors, workmates, and so on. Public life is in decline because you no longer know how to deal with others properly on their terms. Privacy is now a contestable right you must struggle for and just why – no longer a fundamental aspect of everyman's freedom. Home sweet home became the only "safe haven" from public scrutiny, judgment, and cancellation – if you do not go viral…

Despite this common sense, there is a great deal of debate among scholars if political polarization is something real or just another type of "fake news." Reductionists [Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, 2011] have been trying to diminish the relevance and the scope of the polarization phenomena using different levels/units of analysis (i.e., states, parties, and individuals in general), cleavages (i.e., party affiliation, electoral vote, church attendance) and issues/identity markers

(i.e., homosexuality, drug consumption) to "surprisingly found an American citizenry that looks moderate, centrist, nuanced, ambivalent rather than extreme, polarized, unconditional or dogma." However, all that glitter may not be gold: comprehensive does not necessarily equal robustness. More of the same old trick: as Mark Twain once said, "There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics."

FAP (2011) misses the point that an adequate measure of political polarization (aka, operationalization) must be investigated among those who do care about politics – while correcting for eventual selection [Cavari and Freedman, 2018] and non-respondent bias [Melon and Proser, 2021]. So, please do not listen to them.

Listen to me because, in the following minutes, I will make a brief but compelling case that (a) political polarization is for real, (b) political polarization is not new but is growing, and it is growing fast due to trickle-down effects, (c) political polarization comes in many sizes and types. However, some types of markers go beyond politics, (d) higher degrees/levels of political polarization threaten liberal democracy, and America's foundational values, and, finally (e) political polarizing is not destiny – and there is something we can do about now.

First, let us be honest; the first step to dealing with our problems is recognizing them: **political polarization is "for real"**. Despite most Americans declaring that they do not care about politics, turnout as % of VAP has grown steadily over the last two decades [Gallup 2020]. Engagement rise can be a force for good, but it is not when it is a by-product of antagonistic, hostile rivalry. Subjects who care about politics (elected officials, political pundits, influencers, and insiders) now express negative views of the opposing party far more often and consistently than three decades ago [Pew Research, 2014]. Politics is getting personal because party affiliation is becoming a crucial mark of individual identity (sometimes more important than other factors, such as race, ethnicity, or gender) as ideological self-placement and consistency is rising [Pew Research, 2014] and degree of alignment of voters political attitudes and preferences with party affiliation (aka, party song) is becoming more consistent [Levendusky 2009] What makes true Republicans is against true Democrats, no matter what - and vice-versa.

Second, **political polarization is growing**. Its primary source is among politicians and those directly engaged in day-by-day political wars – mostly around economic issues. While candidate-centered politics is on the rise worldwide [WaPenberg, 1991], a party's internal cohesion, ideological coherence, and candidate's rock-solid positioning across sensitive issues trump internal deliberation, open divergence, interest in diversity, complexity, and ambiguity when it comes to calling attention from the unregistered or independent voters, making an emotionally compelling case by establishing clear and deep contrast among political options for those that are too busy to listen carefully, and, therefore, winning elections by defeating the enemy. Those breaking news from the frontline of economic battles trickles down toward the mass public and is framed by digital and media influencers as framed as a Star Wars episode: a moral quest between the good and the bad, where you must take a side. Within political parties or across the mass public, the middle shrinks [Pew Research, 2014]. Stand in the center is no longer a form of moderation and tolerance. It is a reproachable act of defection, subject to the moral court of cancellation. A polarization of few became a polarization of many.

Third, **polarization matters**. Despite coming in different sizes, scopes, and dimensions (i.e., party sorting, ideological), polarization is particularly adverse for social cooperation when it means growing distrust, animosity, and hostility between opposing ethnical, religious or gender groups (aka, the *affective* type). Some societal cleavages that professional politicians could use to strike the sensitive chords of polarization during modern times – such as class, race, or status – are becoming less relevant as the postmaterialist ethos advances. However, unescapable cleavages related to more profound elements of identity (such as race, religion, ethnicity, religion, nationality, and, more recently, gender) are remarkably resilient in the postmodernist era. They can be observed as predictors of positioning across various sensitive cultural issues, such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and intelligent design teaching. [Castle and Stepp, 2021]. For instance, values associated with religious traditions are still a strong predictor of political attitudes toward cultural issues, even with secularization [Layman and Carmines, 1997] and regardless of the evidence of time inconsistency (i.e., transitive choices in and across time) when Americans translate value preferences into political attitudes [Jacoby, 2006].

Fourth, **higher degrees/levels of political polarization threaten liberal democracy and American foundation values**. Political polarization is the anathema of the core principles that organize public life in a liberal democracy: pluralism, tolerance, and moderation. Moreover, it is against America's foundational values – regardless of being as old as Hamilton or Madison. High polarization pushes citizens to emphasize their differences into high-resolution singularities that demand all types of special treatments – from historic reparations to gender-neutral public toilets. Notwithstanding their legitimacy, when rights are assigned based on self-assigned identities having self-declared belongingness to a group as a required condition, these rights are perceived as insider privileges granted at the expense of the outsider's limited resources [Fukuyama, 2018]. Identity politics is the key that opens the gate for broad conflicts between "factions" – precisely what American founding fathers tried to avoid with careful engineering of the US Constitution and the singularity of the US political system in the early days of the colonies.

(….) Dear members of the Jury,

Political polarization is a fuzzy concept but a concrete fact of everyday life. It is hard to define and measure even by experts – some negationist or reductionist, operating in good faith. However, you can feel it, see it around the corner, or perhaps you have been there once. Polarization is spilling from political insiders over the mass public, boosted by the omnipresence of screens in contemporary life, and becoming a moral and cultural war around identity rights rather than a pragmatic, down-to-earth dispute around economic interests. That is no good for anyone: it makes liberal democracy a zero-sum game and jeopardizes American values.

But polarization is not desirable. Much can be done to mitigate its adverse affective and ideological dimensions, which drive voters to subscribe to more extreme positions on cultural issues, without compromising the increasing mobilization, participation, and engagement produced by partisan sorting.

One course of action is to get political incentives right. All US political system idiosyncrasies conspire to a political dynamic that fuels polarization: de facto bi-partisan,

candidate-center politics, electoral votes, gerrymandering of districts, PACs and private funding, first-past-the-post, and the list goes on and on. Reforms must be considered and trailed gradually.

Another more promised but less immediate course of action is related to breeding a new political culture. No polarization survives in a culture of encounters, in a society that refuses to spend most of its free time behind screens, or in a community that decides to go bowling together again [Putnam, 2000]. Cultural changes require leadership, courage to row against the tide, diligence to stay on the course, and – especially – time. As President Regan once said: "It is time. All we need to do is act. Moreover, the time for action is now."

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