STUCK IN THE MIDDLE:

THE EXTREMES PULLING AMERICA APART

STUCK IN THE MIDDLE:
THE EXTREMES PULLING AMERICA APART

To many Americans, it feels these days like politics has become an arena for extremists and elites to show off how much they can hurt the other side. The average American is left stuck in the middle without a voice. What happened to "power to the people?"

Political polarization, or an increasing divide across the political aisle, has been studied in the U.S. for decades as a reason for why American politics seems so dominated by extremist and power-hungry voices. There are two types of polarization that have been studied.

"Ideological polarization" is the degree to which Democrats and Republicans are drifting farther apart over time in their policy opinions (attitudes toward welfare, immigration, abortion, taxes, for example). In terms of elites, it is clear that **Congress has indeed ideologically polarized significantly** over time. Republicans and Democrats in Congress are farther apart in their voting on issues like abortion, business regulation, immigration, gun rights, and the like than ever before. Yet when it comes to the public, the evidence is mixed, with some arguing **they are** and others arguing **they are not**. Either way, polarization among elites certainly seems to outpace polarization in the public—the average American is not ideologically extreme and, in fact, tends to despise politics all together.

"**Affective polarization**" is the term scholars use for the increasing animosity we are seeing in the U.S. across the political aisle. Now, **more than ever**, Americans express **intense animosity and intolerance** toward the "other side" politically. This means that the division in American politics is spreading beyond just disagreements about laws and policies. It is getting personal. **Over 40% of Americans** think a civil war is likely within the next decade.

Yet despite the narrative that the country is evenly split, most Americans **just hate politics** all together. There is such a thing as *false polarization*, or the tendency to overestimate how polarized the country is because of what we see on the news and through social media. The fact is that more and more Americans are having their voices muted as an extreme few have theirs amplified. Scholars tend to agree increased polarization is **a significant threat to American democracy**.

WHERE DO POLITICAL OPINIONS COME FROM?

How did America get this way? To start, we might think of where we think political attitudes come from in the first place. People often think of their political opinions as the result of some rational thought process—you weigh costs and benefits, try to do the "right thing," and use "common sense," right? This makes it easy to wonder how others could possibly reach different conclusions about politics. Maybe they are stupid or immoral? However, research has shown a lot of factors outside of our control shape and influence how we think about politics. The idea of "common sense" is somewhat of a myth when you think about all the different factors that make some things "make sense" to some people but not others.

Generally, political attitudes are thought of as the product of the Person and the Environment (or as researchers tend to call it, "P x E"). Some "P" factors include: **personality traits** like openness, conscientiousness, and agreeableness, **values** like individualism and egalitarianism, and **authoritarianism**, or a high valuation of authority, rules, and conformity. Even **genetic heritability** has been shown to play some role in political orientation.

On the other hand, some "E" factors include: demographic factors like race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, income/class, and age, as well as **socialization factors** like media (TV, newspaper, social media), church, school, and especially, our parents. Even seemingly unrelated events or conditions like the **weather**, **whether the home football team wins**, the **gender of one's siblings**, or one's **draft lottery number** (during the Vietnam War) have been shown to indirectly affect people's political opinions.
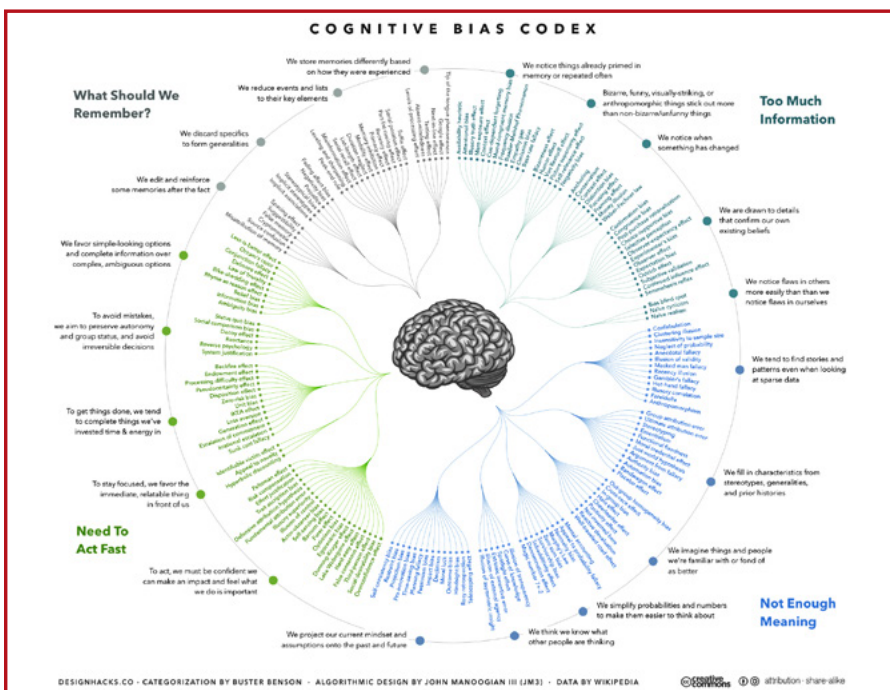
WHERE DOES POLARIZATION COME FROM?

With all the different places political attitudes come from, it is no surprise there is a lot of disagreement. But people can disagree without hating each other, right? So where does political polarization, particularly *affective* polarization, come from?

The Human Mind and Cognitive Biases

Basic neuroscience: The human brain is like other muscles in that areas of the brain activated frequently are strongest and most o be activated again in similar circumstances. The brain seeks to conserve energy, and so takes the path of least resistance whenever possible. If a certain way of thinking is repeatedly activated, it becomes stronger.

COGNITIVE BIAS CODEX

DESIGNHACKS.CO · CATEGORIZATION BY BUSTER BENSON · ALGORITHMIC DESIGN BY JOHN MANOOGIAN III (JM3) · DATA BY WIKIPEDIA

We humans believe we make rational decisions, but those decisions are subject to as many as 130 cognitive biases, as depicted on the Cognitive Bias Codex.

o Social Categorization and Social Identity

- Humans are **innately wired** to simplify the social world into "ingroups" (groups we belong to) and "outgroups" (groups we do not belong to) to reduce uncertainty and anxiety. Being part of a group helps us make sense of the world and feel like we belong.

- Humans even tend to want the ingroup to be dominant over the outgroup **even if equality between the groups would be better for everyone overall**.

- We see associations between negative traits and outgroups **even when no actual association exists**. These associations are **automatic** (exist subconsciously) and **resilient** (resistant to change).

o *Biased assimilation* and *confirmation bias* are tendencies related to people interpreting information in a manner that fits their own desired conclusions or favors the ingroup. *Selective exposure* is the tendency to only engage with sources of information that are seen as fulfilling these same goals.

o *Moral disengagement* involves seeing the outgroup as having fundamentally different morals, and it is a common consequence of severe ingroup-outgroup categorization. It has been shown to be **central to affective polarization and dehumanization** of the political outgroup as individuals switch to seeing the other side as "bad actors."

These psychological tendencies are not new, so why has polarization increased in recent years?

Societal Trends

o *Social sorting* is when identities like race, religion, and ideology all become aligned with a political party. Today, more than in the past, Republicans are most likely to be white, non-Hispanic, Christian conservatives and Democrats are most likely to be non-white, Hispanic, non-Christian liberals.

o "**Negative partisanship**" has become the norm in the United States, whereby who people vote for is more about how much they dislike the other side than how much they like their own side. In other words, intense animosity toward the other side beats love toward your own side.

The Media

o In media, **negative stories** (e.g., crime, corruption, disaster) drive engagement much more than positive stories, and this **amplifies polarization**.

o Social media has allowed people to form "**bubbles**," in which they surround themselves with people and news outlets that are likeminded and easily avoid diverse viewpoints. These bubbles are amplified by **social media algorithms**.

o The **anonymity of social media** allows people to express incivility and intense animosity in ways they would not express in-person, **creating a norm** that it is okay to be uncivil.

- Social media is an environment ripe for circulation of **fake news** and **misinformation**. The prevalence of fake news can be overstated. For example, fake news accounts for about **6% of all news consumption** on X/Twitter, and most fake news consumed and shared is due to just a small percentage of users, largely **those over age 65**. However, **there is profit to be made by propagating fake news** since viral posts generate advertising revenue, and so **a small handful of fake news generators can have significant effects** on public discourse and people's beliefs.

- The more fake news is repeated, **the more believable it becomes**.

- Why do people keep sharing fake news? Research has shown two important reasons: a) **lack of critical thinking** and b) **desires to harm political outgroups**. When people despise the other side, they are more inclined to share negative news about them even if it is not trustworthy.

- **Foreign nations** have utilized social media to spread misinformation to amplify polarization and destabilize the American political system.

- Finally, news coverage has become **increasingly nationalized over time**, meaning there is less coverage of local political issues. **This has been tied to polarization** as politicians have only national party cues to go off of when deciding how to vote on bills. These national cues tend to be geared toward ideological extremes rather than the practical, on-the-ground solutions affecting people's everyday lives.

The American Political System

- The U.S. has **"winner-take-all" elections**, which means there is only one winner of an election, and they represent the entire constituency. This is different than **proportional representation**, whereby elected officials are granted a proportion of representation based on their vote share. America's winner-take-all system is argued to help prevent small extremist groups from winning elections, but it also **ensures a two-party system and is argued to increase polarization**, as well as a **"two-party doom loop"** where radical minority groups control government rather than the majority of the public.

- Party "machines" are the organizations that run political parties (e.g., Democrats and Republicans). Although not as powerful in controlling elections as in the past, these "machines" still control nominations and endorsements in state legislatures **in a way that favors extreme candidates**. In other words, "the party decides" which of its elected members will be making decisions and which will be relegated to menial tasks.

- **Legislative process** consists of the rules and guidelines that determine how Congress operates, such as how leaders of each party are chosen and who chooses who gets to sit on which committees. Some have argued that today's legislative process, dominated largely by the Speaker of the House and Senate Majority Leader, **contributes to polarization in Congress**.

Economic Conditions

- Interestingly, **wealth inequality** has been shown consistently to lead to greater polarization at the state and local level as party differences are more likely to reflect conflicts over resources between the wealthy and the poor.

CONSEQUENCES OF POLARIZATION

> From The Smithsonian:
>
> In September 1796 after two terms as president, George Washington presented his Farewell Address to the country he had served for more than 20 years.
>
> Published in the Philadelphia newspaper, *The American Daily Advertiser*, the Farewell Address was Washington's final advice to his countrymen. He urged all Americans to support their newly formed nation and to put aside regional or party divisions, saying: "Your Union ought to be considered as a main prop of your liberty, the love of the one ought to endear to you the preservation of the other."

Affective polarization means having negative feelings toward those with differing political views, but it is also associated with some more severe consequences, such as:

o Desire to distance oneself from members of the other party **socially** (e.g., being uncomfortable with the idea of a child marrying a member of the other party) and **physically** (e.g., wanting not to live in neighborhoods with many members of the other party).

o Biased evaluations of individuals even when politics is not relevant, **such as when evaluating the resumes of candidates for a job**.

o **Dehumanization** of the other side, whereby people literally see political outgroup members as less than human.

o **Taking delight in harm** (including but not limited to physical harm) being done to members of the other party.

o **Support for political violence** is also correlated with affective polarization.

  • That said, support for actual political violence is **quite rare**, *but* most violent conflicts and even civil wars consist of sporadic acts of violence by small radicalized groups, and so small effects are likely meaningful here and **can lead to prolonged conflicts**.

o **Partisan motivated reasoning** (i.e., justifying facts and reality in ways consistent with protecting one's political worldview) and behavior (**including responses to the COVID-19 pandemic**).

o Some evidence even suggests political polarization has **negative health effects**, such as anxiety, depression, and sleep disorders.

Aside from direct effects from those on the extremes, indirect effects of polarization on those in the middle have been noted as well.

> Curious about how polarization affects attitudes about American democracy?
>
> This short video offers some sobering answers.
> **https://youtu.be/GmLwgdtF930**
> (Runtime 4:16)

o Among moderates and Independents, the effects of polarization are more mixed. Some argue it has **encouraged them to become engaged in politics**, whereas others the divide between parties has **alienated an increasingly large middle**.

o People are innately motivated to "**justify the system**" and see whatever currently exists as ideal. Yet historically, the "middle" shifts, and so believing "the truth is somewhere in the middle" often leads to continuation of the status quo, which can be problematic (think of what "the middle" was during the times of slavery or when women were not able to vote).

HOW TO REDUCE POLARIZATION AND BRING BACK POWER TO THE PEOPLE

In conclusion, it is clear that polarization is real, comes from a variety of sources, and has numerous severe negative outcomes. So, how might we reduce it?

First, it is important to look at some potential solutions that seemed promising at first but have yet to bear much fruit. Some institutional changes often thought to be remedies for polarization have actually been shown to have little or no effect, or even create greater polarization.

- Many have called for redistricting reforms to reduce partisan bias in how districts are drawn (i.e., gerrymandering), which is argued to encourage extreme candidates. However, such reforms such as using independent commissions to redraw districts rather than a party-controlled state legislature have actually shown **little to no effect on polarization**. In some cases, independent commissions have even been associated with greater polarization.

- Open primaries have often been seen as preferable to closed primaries (in which only registered party members can vote in the primary) because moderates then have much less of a say in who the final two candidates are. However, research shows **little to no relationship between open primaries and polarization**, likely because **moderates tend not to vote in primaries even when permitted to**.

Now, to solutions that have shown promise:

Bringing People Together

- **Common Ingroup Identities**: highlighting broader, "superordinate" groups that we all belong to (e.g., Americans) over "subordinate" groups that are fighting (e.g., Republicans and Democrats) can help reduce conflict between subordinate groups.

- **Correcting Misperceptions**: Informing people that the other side is not as extreme or hateful as they may have thought reduces affective polarization.

- Accuracy prompts on social media: Brief reminders to remember the importance of accuracy and the truth can **reduce the power of misinformation**.

- Intergroup Contact: Negative feelings toward the outgroup can be reduced via **contact between the groups (as long as certain conditions are met**: 1) the two groups share power equally, 2) they work toward common goals, and 3) their cooperation is institutionally supported).

- Perspective-Taking and Storytelling: Encouraging **perspective-taking** and **stories emphasizing the humanness of members** of the outgroup may reduce affective polarization. In fact, *believing* **that empathy is beneficial for reducing polarization** can, itself, reduce polarization.

- **Emphasizing the Fragility of Democracy**: Showing instances of violence and repression that tend to co-occur with collapsing democracies (e.g., Venezuela, Turkey) can bolster support for the foundations of democracy such as elections.

- It is important to be explicit about the outcomes you want to influence. Some research suggests that the interventions that tend to decrease animosity toward the other side do not necessarily affect support for violence or democratic processes. In other words, **different interventions work for different outcomes**.

Changing the Rules/Laws

- As an alternative to "winner-take-all" elections, some have called for **ranked choice voting**, in which voters rank the candidates in order or preference and then runoff elections are held until one wins a clear majority, as a way to **reduce the likelihood of extreme candidates** winning and increase representation of people whose views are not represented by the extremes.

- **Money in politics** is argued to play a significant role in driving candidates to extremes. Although **PACs tend to be somewhat less ideological** in goals, **individual contributors are generally more ideologically extreme** and can incentivize extremism.

- Relatedly, **the relationship between wealth inequality and polarization is clear**. As American politics becomes more about the "haves" versus the "have nots," we should expect polarization to increase, and so we should also expect reduced inequality to reduce polarization.

- Some have traced **increased congressional polarization to the increased power of congressional leaders** such as the Speaker of the House and Senate Majority Leader, and so reforms aimed at decentralizing power in Congress may allow for more diversity in views at the elite level.

- **Local newspapers** have been associated with lower levels of polarization, and so a shift toward local rather than just national news may reduce how much rhetoric is focused on broad, ideological principles rather than local issues.

> **Does the divide between the rich and the poor really matter that much?**
>
> **Expert on the topic, Nolan McCarty explains in this brief clip:**
> **https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4686834/economic-inequality-political-polarization**
> **(Runtime 1:38)**

> **Wondering about actions you can take as an individual?**
>
> **The Bridging Differences Playbook, published by the Greater Good Science Center, offers a user-friendly instruction manual with research-based strategies to promote positive dialogue and understanding. See https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/Bridging_Differences_Playbook-Final.pdf.**
>
> **Or peruse the many articles, podcasts, and short videos on the Greater Good Science Center site. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/bridging_differences/definition#how-bridge-differences**