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DELINEATING THE SOURCE AND IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIAL POLARIZATION

by
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A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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ABSTRACT

LOGAN MATTHEW KOHAN: Delineating the Source and Implications of Social Polarization
(Under the direction of Conor Dowling)

The purpose of this research was to examine the causes and consequences that meta-perceptions of polarization in the United States entails. The survey used in this study assessed respondents demographic and political information prior to questions regarding polarization. This study found that the polarization in the United States results from a multitude of variables, including: the intrusion of partisan cues into everyday life, social sorting, polarization's implicit effect, and differences in moral concern. Moreover, polarization encompasses and variety of ramifications that include disease, amplified interparty animosity, biased policy evaluation, reduced governmental efficiency, intraparty polarization, tribalism, and the quest to achieve political victory rather than achieving the "greater good." In further discussion, it was determined that polarization poses two main outcomes for the United States: a perpetual cycle in which polarization continues to increase over time, or a future in which polarization has already reached its apex and, thus, will deescalate over time. In light of these findings, it is prudent for Americans to refrain from impulsivity to preclude the onset of polarization and its accompanying repercussions.

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“Hatred, anger, and violence can destroy us: the politics of polarization is dangerous” (Rahul Gandhi, 2017). Given the current condition of the sociopolitical climate, the tension that exists between groups is not only more apparent than it has been in recent decades, but it has also become tangible. For example, topics such as Black Lives Matter, vaccination status, and - of course - the 2020 U.S. presidential election all seem to elicit diametrically opposing factions of people. To understand the essence of this discord, it is imperative to question its source; what causes this social incongruity? Moreover, what has exacerbated this stark rift in American society? When pinpointing the origin of this social phenomenon, one cannot help but recognize the role *polarization* has in channeling this social tension. Political polarization refers to when subsections of a population endorse, “increasingly dissimilar attitudes toward parties and party members (i.e., affective polarization), as well as ideologies and policies (ideological polarization)” (Heltzel and Laurin, 2020, p. 179). The polarization that can be observed today in the United States is precipitated by a myriad of factors, which include the following: the intrusion of partisan cues into everyday life (Iyengar and Westwood, 2014, p. 691), social sorting (Mason, 2018, p. 54), the nuance of polarization’s implicit nature (Iyengar and Westwood, 2014, p. 696), and differences in moral concerns (Graham et al., 2009, p. 1029). Moreover, the issue of polarization is one which should garner substantial concern considering the momentous consequences it poses, such as disease (Nayak et al., 2021, p. 1), increases in interparty disdain (Iyengar and Westwood, 2014, p. 691), biased policy evaluations (Ehret et al., 2018, p. 308), reduced governmental efficiency (Mason, 2018, p. 47), intraparty polarization (Groenendyk et al., 2020, p. 1616), tribalism (Mason and

Wronski, 2018, p. 274), and the quest to achieve political victory over achieving the greater good (Tajfel et al., 1973, p. 172).

Existence of Polarization in the United States

To begin, it is imperative to first establish the existence of polarization – as well as specify its societal manifestation – before its more abstract elements can be defined. A study titled “Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization” examined the increase of affective polarization, particularly in the United States. Affective polarization can be defined as the “extent to which citizens feel more negatively toward other political parties than their own” (Boxell et al., 2020, p. 2). The study utilized a feeling metric of average partisan rated in-party members against out-party members. On a scale ranging from 0-100, the difference between these two groups was 27.4 in 1978. This disparity grew to 56.3 in 2020, demonstrating a substantial increase in affective polarization. When compared to 11 other countries, including Switzerland, France, Denmark, Canada, New Zealand, Japan, Australia, Britain, Norway, Sweden, and (West) Germany, researchers found that the United States demonstrated the largest increase in affective polarization throughout the duration of this study (2). Therefore, the issue of polarization is most evident in the United States and, thus, warrants closer inspection.

To further examine the distinctive polarization present in the United States, I conducted a survey. This survey was administered through Lucid in March 2022 to more than 2,000 respondents. The responses were collected from March 9-12, 2022. Human subjects approval was obtained from the IRB at the University of Mississippi (Protocol #22x-215). For this study, I obtained informed consent, basic demographic (e.g. gender, race, education, income), and political (e.g. partisanship, ideology, voting behavior) information prior to my questions related to polarization. My sample consisted of a fairly

representative racial composition including about 74% White, 11% Black, 6% Hispanic, 5% Asian, and 4% other. The partisan make-up of my sample is roughly 52% Democrats, 38% Republicans, and 10% Independents.

Table 1: Respondent Demographic Characteristics

	Sample characteristics (N = 2,168)
Average Age (in years)	47
% Female	55
Race	74
% white	11
% black	
Average Income (10-point scale)	3.9
3 = \$35,000-\$49,999	
4 = \$50,000-\$74,999	
Average Partisanship (7-point scale)	4.4
1 = Strong Republican	
4 = Independent	
7 = Strong Democrat	
Average Ideology (7-point scale)	3.9
1 = Extremely Conservative	
4 = Moderate	
7 = Extremely Liberal	
Average Education (6-point scale)	3.7
1 = Some high school	
6 = Postgraduate degree	

I asked several questions of interest to this project. One question asked respondents whether political polarization increased during the COVID-19 pandemic; 62.23% of respondents agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic escalated polarization, with 35.95% of all respondents being in strong agreement. Interestingly, the respondents who

identified with a party the strongest tended to agree the most: 35.66% of *Strong Republicans* strongly agreed and 30.75% of *Strong Republicans* somewhat agreed; 42.44% of *Strong Democrats* were in strong agreement with the survey question and 30.26% of *Strong Democrats* somewhat agree. Similarly, less fervent partisans exhibited the same trend, though not quite to the same magnitude: 23.33% of *Not very strong Republicans* strongly agreed and 29.17% somewhat agreed; 25.38% of *Not very strong Democrats* strongly agreed and 32.95% somewhat agreed. A vast majority of those who *Lean Republican* were in agreement with the survey question – 40.30% strongly agreeing and 22.89% somewhat agreeing – as well as those who *Lean Democrat* – 38.12% strongly agreeing and 24.86% somewhat agreeing. Though 43.07% of *Independent* respondents indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement that the COVID-19 pandemic increased polarization, still, 22.85% strongly agreed and 23.97% somewhat agreed. In essence, these results encapsulate not only the prevailing attitude that the COVID-19 pandemic increased polarization, but it also highlights the correlation between party identification and perceptions regarding polarization: the more fervent partisans tended to be in stronger agreement that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated polarization

Table 2: Partisan Demographic x Attitudes Regarding Polarization

Pid7	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree/Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Strong Republican	32 29.09	37 26.24	109 16.62	163 22.61	189 21.77	530 21.23
Not very strong Republican	10 9.09	17 12.06	87 13.26	70 9.71	56 6.45	240 9.62
Lean Republican	9 8.18	9 6.38	56 8.54	46 6.38	81 9.33	201 8.05
Independent	18 16.36	9 6.38	115 17.53	64 8.88	61 7.03	267 10.70
Lean Democrat	3 2.73	14 9.93	50 7.62	45 6.24	69 7.95	181 7.25
Not very strong Democrat	6 5.45	14 9.93	90 13.72	87 12.07	67 7.72	264 10.58
Strong Democrat	32 29.09	41 29.08	149 22.71	246 34.12	345 39.75	813 32.57
Total	110 100.00	141 100.00	656 100.00	721 100.00	868 100.00	2,496 100.00

Perhaps one of the primary factors explaining these attitudes regarding polarization stems from social media usage. To explain, the survey also assessed the frequency of political content on social media viewed by the respondents. The study found that a higher prevalence of political content viewed on these platforms correlated with stronger attitudes concerning the increase in polarization during the COVID-19 pandemic: 51.18% of respondents who viewed political content on these platforms *often* strongly agreed that polarization increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and 26.46% somewhat agreed; 26.93% of those who reported viewing political content on these sites only *sometimes* strongly agreed and 32.27% somewhat agreed; 22.47% of those who

hardly ever view this kind of content on social media strongly agreed, 29.07% somewhat agreed, and 37.44% neither agreed nor disagreed; 30.80% of those who *never* view political content on social media strongly agreed, 18.00% somewhat agreed, and 43.20% neither agreed nor disagreed. These results demonstrate the relationship between political content consumed via social media and beliefs regarding polarization during the pandemic: those who engaged with this type of content more frequently tended to have stronger attitudes about polarization increasing.

Table 3: Frequency of Observed Political Content on Social Media x Attitudes Regarding Polarization

COVID Polarization	Social Media Political Content				Total
	Never	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Often	
Strongly disagree	12 4.80	19 4.19	40 4.11	25 3.94	96 4.15
Somewhat disagree	8 3.20	31 6.83	79 8.12	20 3.15	138 5.97
Neither	108 43.20	170 37.44	278 28.57	97 15.28	653 28.24
Somewhat agree	45 18.00	132 29.07	314 32.27	168 26.46	659 28.50
Strongly agree	77 30.80	102 22.47	262 26.93	325 51.18	766 33.13
Total	250 100.00	454 100.00	973 100.00	635 100.00	2,312 100.00

The study also examined social indications of polarization. Namely, the survey asked whether respondents had stopped being friends with someone because of something that person had said about government or politics. Discerning the extent of discontinued friendships is insightful because it further represents the encroachment of polarization into everyday life, particularly relationships. If a significant amount of

people report cutting ties with a former friend due to a mere difference in political opinion, then this might be indicative of the sociological magnitude of polarization and its repercussions. In keeping with the common theme here, more fervent partisans were more likely to report that they had stopped being friends with someone: 26.79% of *Strong Republicans* and 41.08% of *Strong Democrats* answered “yes”; 17.42% of *Not very strong Democrats* and only 9.58% of *Not very strong Republicans* answered “yes”; 28.18% of *Lean Democrats* and 19.9% of *Lean Republicans* answered “yes”; 11.99% of *Independents* answered “yes.”

Table 4: Partisan Demographic x Discontinued Friendship

	Stop Being Friends		Total
	No	Yes	
Strong Republican	388 21.23	142 21.26	530 21.23
Not very strong Republican	217 11.87	23 3.44	240 9.62
Lean Republican	161 8.81	40 5.99	201 8.05
Independent	235 12.86	32 4.79	267 10.70
Lean Democrat	130 7.11	51 7.63	181 7.25
Not very strong Democrat	218 11.93	46 6.89	264 10.58
Strong Democrat	479 26.20	334 50.00	813 32.57
Total	1,828 100.00	668 100.00	2,496 100.00

Ostensibly, those who reported that they had, in fact, ceased being friends with someone due to a political disagreement were also more likely to agree that polarization escalated during the pandemic. 45.43% of people who answered “yes” strongly agreed,

28.30% somewhat agreed, and 12.63% neither agreed nor disagreed. On the other hand, only 29.94% of those who answered “no” strongly agreed, 28.28% somewhat agreed, and 33.59% neither agreed nor disagreed. Comparing these sets of results reveals the association between polarization and its social impact. Those who lost friendships due to differences in political thought are more likely to support the notion regarding polarization’s increase during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 5: Discontinued Friendship x Attitudes Regarding Polarization

	Stop Being Friends		Total
	No	Yes	
Strongly disagree	73 3.69	40 5.81	113 4.24
Somewhat disagree	89 4.50	54 7.84	143 5.36
Neither agree/disagree	664 33.59	87 12.63	751 28.17
Somewhat agree	559 28.28	195 28.30	754 28.28
Strongly agree	592 29.94	313 45.43	905 33.95
Total	1,977 100.00	689 100.00	2,666 100.00

As polarization continues to increase, so have Americans’ anxieties: 90% consider the country to be politically divided and 60% are not entirely optimistic about its current trajectory and whether or not these divisions will be resolved (Heltzel and Laurin, 2020, p. 179). Moreover, animus between parties has grown substantially: 80% of Americans today disfavor opposing partisans, and the magnitude of people that fervently hold this demeanor have tripled since 1994 (179). In fact, these revelations have prompted many scholars to hypothesize that this interpartisan antipathy supersedes

intrapartisan affinity and, furthermore, is the prevailing factor dominating the current political landscape (179).

Factors Influencing Polarization

To fully understand the essence of polarization, it is imperative to delineate the factors that help create it. In particular, there are six main factors that galvanize polarization.

Intrusion of Partisan Cues

The scope of polarization is further evidenced by the intrusion of partisan cues into everyday life. For instance, “a standard measure of social distance – parents’ displeasure over the prospects of their offspring marrying into a family with a different party affiliation – shows startling increases in the United States, but not in Britain” (Iyengar and Westwood, 2014, p. 691). Though it bears some relevance, the rarity that is individuals marrying across party lines – only 9% of married couples – cannot be entirely explained by parental dissatisfaction. In one study, marital selection on the basis of partisanship eclipsed other relevant factors such as personality and physical attributes (692). Ostensibly, “even though single men and women seeking companionship online behave strategically and exclude political interests from their personal profiles, partisan agreement nevertheless predicts reciprocal communication between men and women seeking potential dates” (692). Partisanship is an integral component evinced in even the most nonpolitical, mundane circumstances. Even the subtle nuances of courtship cannot escape the expansive grasp of partisan discord.

Partisan Identification

The concept of partisan identification is especially relevant when delineating the origins of polarization. In fact, most scholars attribute partisan affiliation as being the

most prominent indicator of an individual's voting and political behavior in the United States (Carmines et al., 2012, p. 1633). However, many researchers disagree about the constancy of partisan identification: is it subject to change in response to evolving circumstances, or is it resistant to these sociological pressures? One popular view on this matter explains that partisan loyalty is a quality that is attained early in an individual's life, usually as a result of parental socialization. Partisan loyalty then endures throughout one's adult life, becoming an instrumental element in shaping the individual's beliefs on political matters and other issues (1634). Other scholars contend that partisan identification is a mutable quality that reflectively changes and adjusts in response to various political and social events (1634).

Recent survey data seem to corroborate this latter view. Using a 7-point ANES partisan identification scale, these surveys found the average difference between liberals and conservatives to be approximately 2.5 times more in 2008 than they were in 1972, thus demonstrating the malleable nature of partisan identification at a collective level (Carmines et al., 2012, p. 1637). Changes in partisanship at the individual level can be observed in voters who adjust their political orientation in response to elite partisan polarization.

Using two ANES surveys where respondents were re-interviewed 4 years apart, we show that liberals and conservatives were more likely to become stronger partisans, whereas libertarians and communitarians were more likely to adopt a weaker partisan identification. Specifically, we consider two important periods: 1992-1996 and 2000-2004. The former period is important because the Republican Party assumed control of both chambers of Congress simultaneously

for the first time in over 40 years. Furthermore, the new members of the Republican Party in Congress were considerably more conservative than the moderate Democrats they replaced, thus considerably increasing the ideological divide between the two parties in Congress (Carmines et al., 2012, p. 1639).

Elite party polarization serves to augment these attitudes, creating mass partisanship and a “disappearing center” in the electorate (Abramowitz 2011). As parties diverge, the difference in partisan favorability and the perceptions of difference between parties simultaneously grows. Thus, the resurgence of partisanship is the result of ideological polarization among party elites (Carmines et al., 2012, p. 1639).

The surveys also found that the stability and strength of partisanship is determined by the consistency with which one’s attitudes coincides with the prevailing view of his or her identifying party. The probability of libertarians and communitarians to change their partisan identification were 38% and 44% respectively. Moderates are 32% likely to alter their partisan identification. Compare this to the probabilities of liberals and conservatives – which are 23% and 28%, respectively – and it becomes clear who is the most severely impacted by partisan polarization. “Specifically, the closer the fit between one’s own views on the major issues of the day and the menu of issue positions offered by partisan elites, the more stable one’s partisanship and the more likely one becomes a stronger partisan identifier over time” (Carmines et al., 2012, p. 1639).

Social Sorting

In addition, social sorting effectively reinforces these aforementioned party passions by bolstering the identification individuals have with their respective party. “Uncivil Agreement demonstrates that social sorting is capable of dividing partisans from their political opponents by increasing intolerance of opposition” (Mason, 2018, p. 54).

Various theories in the field of social psychology suggest that this intolerance can be predicted on the basis of asymmetry in the “social makeup” between opposing groups. Though people typically hold a multifaceted set of personalities, “the most salient identity tends to be the one whose status is threatened, or the one that is engaged in conflict with an out-group” (55). Social psychologists consider people who share overlapping identities to be *aligned*; the more closely *aligned* any two groups are results in an enhanced level of disdain towards out-group members. When analyzing the relationship between group alignment and tolerance, those who exhibited a high degree of alignment within their respective social cohort tended to be less tolerant and more prejudicial of outgroup individuals (55). Additionally, a study by Miller, Brewer, and Arbuckle (2009) discovered that “perceived alignment between social groups predicted both implicit and explicit racial prejudice, beyond the effects of ideology and personality” (Mason, 2018, p. 55). In other words, if partisans perceive their social group as homogenous, they will react with intolerance and prejudice towards partisan outgroups. Likewise, if partisans consider their party to be diverse and inclusive of both ingroup and outgroup members, those individuals will typically be more tolerant of outsiders.

The Implicit Nature of Polarization

Furthermore, examining polarization at an intrinsic level may further clarify how it precipitates. To elaborate, affective polarization on the basis of party is analogous to that of racial polarization. Similar to racial discrimination, the impetus for inter-party animus occurs at an implicit level. In fact, “The detection of implicit partisan affect shows that the sense of partisan identity is deeply embedded in citizens’ minds,” and, moreover, “[these] negative associations of opposing partisans are faster (more

automatic) than negative associations of African Americans” (Iyengar and Westwood, 2014, p. 696). This subconscious element of partisan animosity therefore signifies that these attitudes are ingrained into individuals, and automatically manifest into the minds of voters. Moreover, the degree of discrimination between opposing partisans is, in fact, of a greater current magnitude than that of racial discrimination. “The willingness of partisans to display open animus for opposing partisans can be attributed to the absence of norms governing the expression of negative sentiment and that increased partisan affect provides an incentive for elites to engage in confrontation rather than cooperation” (690). Social norms serve to constrain and mold behaviors; however, unlike gender, race, and other various social divides, “there are no corresponding pressures to temper disapproval of political opponents” (690). If anything, the actions and rhetoric that politicians display encourage inter-partisan hostility. Thus, partisans feel vindicated in openly expressing animus and discrimination towards outgroup members. “In the absence of a social norm or sanction that discourages partisan discrimination, partisans frequently choose to discriminate against opposing partisans” (691).

Differences in Moral Imperatives

In explaining the effectuation of polarization, it is imperative to understand that liberals and conservatives are different at even the most fundamental level: moral concern. There is some evidence that the issue of morality has been an area of non-self-interested concerns that has garnered much attention in recent years. Political campaigns spend considerable amounts of time and other resources towards appealing to voters’ self-interests, yet the relationship between rational self-interest and voting behavior appears to be weak (Graham et al., 2009, p. 1029). Those who vote against their material self-interest are considered to be voting on the basis of their values, which collectively

entail what they envision to be a “good society” (1029). However, the notion of what constitutes a good society is not one that is universally shared. Effectively, these conflicting visions have created a “culture war” within American politics. The “culture war” refers to “a clash of visions about such fundamental moral issues as the authority of parents, the sanctity of life and marriage, and the proper response to social inequalities” (1029).

Traditionally, liberals have held a more optimistic perception on human proclivity as well as the perfectibility of man, which Sowell (2002) deems as an “unconstrained vision” in which people are left to their own accord in deciding appropriate courses of action in aim of bringing about their own personal development. Conversely, the crux of conservatism confers to a form of positional ideology, which is essentially a reaction to the authority and institutions typically dominated by liberals. Historically, conservatives are more pessimistic in their assessment of human nature, arguing that human endeavors are inherently hedonistic and, moreover, that the human condition is imperfectable. These opposing moral ideologies amount to what Sowell describes as a “constrained vision” in which people require these constraints in order to live civilly with one another.

In addition to these conflicting visions, personalities also vastly diverge across the political spectrum, where liberals tend to be more experimentative and pursuant of change and conservatives gravitate towards familiarity, predictability, and stability (Graham et al., 2009, p. 1030). On the other hand, conservatives tend to be more emotionally susceptible to perceived threats to the social order, which is the predominant motivation for their limiting of certain liberties for the purpose of preserving that order (1030).

In order to foment specific predictions regarding these moral differences, it is imperative to examine the concept of the moral domain. Turiel (1985) defines the moral domain as, “prescriptive judgements of justice, rights, and welfare pertaining to how people ought to relate to each other” (3). When the issue of morality is likened to the protection of individuals, the prevailing concerns are exterior to the moral domain.

Western elites are unusual in limiting the moral domain to [what they call] the ‘ethic of autonomy’ and, moreover, morality in most cultures also involves an ‘ethic of community’ (including moral goods such as obedience, duty, interdependence, and the cohesiveness of groups and institutions) and an ‘ethic of divinity’ (including moral goods such as purity, sanctity, and the suppression of humanity’s baser, more carnal instincts) (Graham et al., 2009, p. 1030).

Recently, Haidt (2008) proposed an alternate definition to morality that includes conservatives and non-Western concerns by analyzing the *functions* of a moral system rather than just the *content*. “Moral systems are interlocking sets of values, practices, institutions, and evolved psychological mechanisms that work together to suppress or regulate selfishness and make social life possible” (70). Moral systems attempt to restrain these selfish inclinations by protecting individuals directly – via the legal system – and by emphasizing the prudence of respect in relation to individuals’ rights. This individualized approach shifts the central focus of moral values from the group – which is often championed by *binding* approaches, which serve to emphasize the utility of social groups in perturbing human nature and combating selfishness – to the individual. Though political ideology is not confined to a narrow, one-dimensional spectrum, the

individualizing-binding distinction is useful in illuminating liberals and conservatives' moral concerns, which underlie most *culture war* issues.

In further discussion, moral foundations theory refers to both the origination as well as the variation in moral reasoning on the basis of inherent, standard foundations. This concept is comprised of five basic elements, two of which are: The Fairness/ reciprocity foundation, which pertains to humans' fixation on fairness, reciprocity, and justice; and the Harm/ care foundation, which encompasses the human concern for ensuring care, nurturing, and protection from harm for vulnerable individuals. These two foundations can be conceptualized as the "ethic of justice" and the "ethic of care" respectively and, furthermore, are the pillars of individualizing foundations because, "they are the source of the intuitions that make the liberal philosophical tradition, with its emphasis on the rights and welfare of individuals, so learnable and so compelling to so many people" (Graham et al., 2009, p. 1031).

However, it should be noted that the virtues of most cultures are not limited to those that advocate for the protection of the individual. There exists a cluster of virtues – three to be exact – that exist beyond the ethics of autonomy. The *ethic of community* is comprised of "virtues of loyalty, patriotism, and self-sacrifice for the group, combined with an extreme vigilance for traitors," in addition to, "virtues of subordinates (e.g., obedience and respect for authority) paired with virtues of authorities (such as leadership and protection)" (Graham et al., 2009, p. 1031). And lastly, the *ethic of divinity* encompasses, "virtues of purity and sanctity that serve social functions, including marking off the group's cultural boundaries and suppressing the selfishness often associated with humanity's carnal nature (e.g., lust, hunger, material greed) by cultivating

a more spiritual mindset” (1031). These three foundations (Ingroup/ loyalty, Authority/ respect, and Purity/ sanctity) can be conceptualized as binding institutions because, “they are the source of the intuitions that make conservative and religious moralities, with their emphasis on group-binding loyalty, duty, and self-control, so learnable and so compelling to so many people” (1031).

The study by Graham et al. (2009) found that, when compared to liberals, conservatives typically perceived issues regarding the Harm and Fairness criteria as less relevant to their moral judgements. Instead, conservatives regarded the aspects of Ingroup, Authority, and Purity as more germane to their moral judgment than did liberals.

It may be inappropriate to perceive these opposing patterns of moral concern to be a matter of more versus less rather than just different opinions about what considerations are relevant to moral judgements. Furthermore, these differences were neither significant nor consistently impacted by other metrics or variables (e.g., gender, age, income, education level) thus indicating that these discrepancies were primarily a function of or contributor to political identity (Graham et al., 2009, p. 1033).

Another integral concept in the discussion of moral judgment is the idea of moral trade-offs. Moral trade-offs can be defined as, “any value that a moral community explicitly or implicitly treats as possessing infinite or transcendental significance that precludes comparisons, trade-offs, or indeed any other mingling with bounded or secular values” (Tetlock et al., 2000, p. 853). It was found that liberals required slightly more incentive to violate individualizing foundations – in particular, the Harm foundation – whereas conservatives required significantly more incentive to violate the three binding

foundations (Graham et al., 2009, p. 1037). Moreover, liberals were more reluctant to violate their individualized moral foundations. “Liberal participants showed a greater difference between the individualizing and binding moral foundations for their overall degree of unwillingness to violate the foundations” (1037).

Furthermore, liberals generally assessed the consequences of moral rules at an individual level, whereas conservatives were more likely to respect and abide by rules given by a divine entity or figure – namely God, for religious conservatives – or from preceding generations (Graham et al., 2009, p. 1037).

Moreover, the linguistic framing of messages is instrumental in painting certain policies as either morally good or bad. Predictably, the results of Graham et al.’s study found that liberals’ phraseology gave deference to notions regarding Harm and Fairness whereas the rhetoric of conservatives appealed more so to the foundations of Ingroup, Authority, and Purity.

The primary finding of the Graham et al. study is as follows:

Across all four studies, liberal morality was primarily concerned with Harm and Fairness, whereas conservative moral concerns were distributed more evenly across all five foundations. These findings help explain why liberals and conservatives disagree on so many moral issues and often find it hard to understand how an ethical person could hold the beliefs of the other side: Liberals and conservatives base their moral values, judgements, and arguments on different configurations of the five foundations (1040).

In sum, understanding that liberals and conservative are at odds with one another at a fundamental, moral level is crucial to understanding the stark polarization separating the two groups.

Mediums Channeling Polarization

Now that its underlying elements have been divulged, it is crucial to analyze potential mediums that channel affective polarization. Numerous studies have attributed the growth in polarization evident in the United States to the simultaneous rise of digital media and partisan cable news networks.

Within the domain of media influence, social media may even have a role in contributing to the polarization seen today. Social media shapes polarization via the mechanisms of partisan selection, message content, platform design and algorithms (Van Bavel et al., 2021, p. 913). Though it is not necessarily the main driver to polarization, social media is a key facilitator. However, there does seem to be much disagreement amongst researchers about whether or not social media contributes to polarization. Some believe social media enhances polarization by augmenting divisive partisan content, which effectively confines people into echo chambers, encouraging intergroup conflict (Brady et al., 2019, pp. 978-1010). Others disagree, stating that social media does not have this impact (Boxell et al., 2017, pp. 10612-10617).

One point that is often overemphasized is that social media amplifies polarization through its creation of political echo chambers. The amount of people who consume markedly polarized content on these social media platforms is vastly outnumbered by the amount of people who consume more centrist or even apolitical content (Van Bavel et al., 2021, p. 913).

Though papers such as Boxell’s (2017) conclude that social media is not likely to be the primary factor in creating polarization – on the basis that older Americans are the most polarized segment and they are not as likely to either use or be active on social media – studies such as this one are overly reliant on observational data and fail to account for the correlation of social media with user’s political beliefs (Van Bavel et al., 2021, p. 914). In support, a recent study instructed participants to deactivate their Facebook accounts 4 weeks prior to the 2018 U.S. election. The study found, “Deactivating Facebook reduced issue (i.e., policy preferences) polarization and marginally reduced affective (i.e., feelings about the other party) polarization, largely by decreasing people’s exposure to news that facilitated a better understanding of their own party relative to the other party” (913). Another field experiment had Republicans and Democrats follow people with opposing political beliefs for 1 month on Twitter, finding that exposure to members of an opposing party actually increased political polarization (913). This backfire effect may be best explained by social media’s tendency to selectively amplify extreme attitudes, and being exposed to these out-group *hyper-partisans* may cause individuals to become further entrenched in their beliefs.

Though the internet and social media posit a seemingly infinite amount of information, this does not override people’s innate tendency to seek out information that coincides with their presupposed political beliefs. “Research suggests that greater selective exposure to congruent political news is correlated with (possibly being both caused by and causing) polarization” (Van Bavel et al., 2021, p. 914). Additionally, people will update their views more when that information corroborates their beliefs – a concept referred to as asymmetric updating (914). People are also more willing to share

content that aligns with them politically. Though these effects are primarily driven by the user, it is worth noting the interaction between these cognitive biases with certain features of the platform, which may amplify these effects. “Seeking out and engaging with congruent information results in the platform’s algorithm exposing the individual to more similar content” (914).

It is also vital to examine the content of messages on various platforms. More divisive content is typically correlated with more engagement. For example,

An analysis of nearly 3 million social media posts found that posts about the political outgroup (often reflecting outgroup animosity) were more likely to be shared than those about the political ingroup. Each additional outgroup word (e.g., ‘liberal’ or ‘Democrat’ for a Republican post) increased the odds of that post being shared by 67% and increased the volume of ‘angry’ reactions on Facebook (Van Bavel et al., 2021, p. 914).

Content dealing with moral outrage was also more likely to be disseminated and the rhetoric of these messages generally portrayed outgroup members in a negative manner.

Perhaps the simplest explanation for the prominence of divisive content is that it captures our attention. Social media functions as an *attention economy*, in which users try to go viral (Van Bavel et al., 2021, p. 914). Therefore, socially divisive content may be conducive for message diffusion.

That said, polarization likely does not exist equally across all social media platforms. In fact, a recent study in Israel found the rates of polarization on Twitter to be significantly higher compared to Facebook and WhatsApp (Van Bavel et al., 2021, p.

914). Additionally, these different social media platforms may contribute to different forms of polarization. To explain, “Facebook algorithms may increase affective polarization while Twitter has been linked to both affective and attitudinal polarization” (914). These algorithms may even amplify content that support the user’s own social identity and pre-existing beliefs. For instance, “Facebook’s newsfeed seems to increasingly align content with cues about users’ political ideology (e.g., following partisan news sources increases exposure to similar content)” (914). In sum, though social media may not be the sole perpetrator, one cannot discount or overlook its profound impact on facilitating political polarization for the mere purpose of content consumption.

Collectively, the intrusion of partisan cues, partisan identification, social sorting, the implicitness of polarization, differences in moral concern, and the mediums facilitating dissemination all help facilitate polarization. Understanding how polarization arises may also forecast its subsequent implications.

Current Implications

Do individual’s issue positions coincide with their level of affective polarization? In a study titled “Affective polarization, local contexts and public opinion in America”, researchers found that partisans exhibiting high degrees of animus toward an opposing party are more inclined to distinguish themselves from their political foes (Druckman et al., 2020, p. 28). They achieve this by forming stances on new issues that juxtapose that of the opposing party, aligning with that of their own party. It is apparent that animus is the distinguishing factor given that, “as partisan animus increases, the partisan gap emerges: when animus is low, partisans are indistinguishable from one another, but when animus is high, partisans significantly diverge” (33).

But if those who exhibit the most animus towards opposing partisans also tend to have more extreme beliefs, then is it the animus that is driving those beliefs, the policy beliefs driving animus, or can it be attributed to elite issue polarization that is simultaneously driving these two elements? The COVID-19 pandemic may provide the necessary conditions for this question to be answered. Data measuring affective polarization among respondents was collected by researchers in the “Affective polarization, local contexts and public opinion in America” study in 2019 – before the onset of the pandemic – and, thus, provides a measure of affective polarization that is exogenous to the COVID-19 pandemic. “We can examine how pre-existing levels of partisan animus correlate with subsequent responses to COVID-19 without concern that the responses to the pandemic are, in fact, shaping affective polarization (and, more directly, out-party animus)” (Druckman et al., 2020, p. 28). In other words, the study’s design eliminates the aforementioned variables that elites’ or individuals’ policy beliefs drive affective polarization and, moreover, any relationship between beliefs and polarization.

It is also important to consider the parties’ drastically different responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The difference in how partisan elites responded to the pandemic indicates how affective polarization, particularly out-party animus, plays a vital role in facilitating issue positions. Compared to their Republican counterparts, Democratic politicians generally expressed greater concern about the pandemic and championed more restrictive policies. It is especially notable when considering that the behavior of the two parties in response to the pandemic were mirror opposites. This duality is relevant because it implies that citizens have received specific information entailing how members

of each partisan group ought to act, effectively elucidating elite cues (Druckman et al., 2020, p. 30).

The results of the “Affective polarization, local contexts and public opinion in America” study found that even in counties that had high numbers of COVID-19 cases, Republicans and Democrats with high levels of animus differ in whether they engaged in costly behaviors. This is due to the fact that Democrats exhibiting high rates of out-party animus are already participating in various mitigating behaviors while Republicans with high rates of out-party animus remain impervious to costly actions as case levels continue to increase (Druckman et al., 2020, p. 35). These findings seem to broadly suggest that policy differences between opposing parties are not merely derived from different information, or different values, but also partisan animus.

Broader Implications

Paradoxically, though polarization tends to entail a more negative connotation, polarization can actually be a benign tool conducive to cultivating a stable democracy. The potential benefits of polarization are most evident in its effect on galvanizing civic engagement. “Polarized citizens more often vote, protest, and join political movements, all of which are necessary for functioning democracy and help disrupt undesirable status quos” (Heltzel and Laurin, 2020, p. 179). Polarization can also be useful in that it encompasses pluralistic policy alternatives. These alternatives are essential for democracies, which require its citizens to engage in constructive discourse in order to consider and evaluate multiple policies. Ideally, it is this type of engagement that ultimately cultivates a government that is effective and stable: it allows societies to identify pragmatic solutions that best resolve the most pressing issues while

simultaneously ensuring that these policies will not be overturned by subsequent administrations since they are mutually agreed-upon (179).

On the other hand, polarization can be a nefarious entity that obstructs democratic processes. As Heltzel and Laurin write, “Highly polarized citizens often refuse to engage with each other, reactively dismissing out of hand both potential flaws in their own views and potential merits of their other opponents” (180). Effectively, under this particular manifestation, constructive debates are unattainable and interpartisan mutuality becomes elusive.

Moreover, contemporary polarization has a profound effect on social interactions. “Americans accept smaller paychecks to avoid listening to opposing partisans, move to new places to surround themselves with ideologically similar residents, and swipe left on people with whom they disagree politically” (Heltzel and Laurin, 2020, p. 180). Similarly, this effect of constrained social interaction deters Americans from critically assessing the merits and defects of policies in an objective manner (180). Confirmation bias and the utter disregard for information that may challenge presupposed beliefs are emblematic of the pernicious risks that accompany polarization.

Aside from its metaphysical impact, polarization also seems to be physically imposing. To explain, a study titled “Is divisive politics making Americans sick? Associations of perceived partisan polarization with physical and mental outcomes among adults in the U.S.” examined the potential health consequences inflicted by extreme sociopolitical division. In particular, the study surveyed U.S. adults from December of 2019 to January 2020 to gauge the correlation between perceived polarization and the prevalence of hypertension, high cholesterol, diabetes, obesity,

anxiety, depression and sleep disorders during or after the 2016 presidential election. The study also calculated perceptions of mass and elite polarization at both the state and national levels. To elaborate, perceived mass polarization refers to the perceptions of the partisan gap between Republican and Democratic voters; on the other hand, perceived elite polarization encompasses Democratic and Republican elected officials' perception of the partisan gap (Nayak et al., 2021, p. 1). The results showed that those participants who reported an increase in polarization since the 2016 presidential election were anywhere from 52%-57% more likely to report anxiety disorders and depression than those who reported no change in polarization. It is evident from this finding that perceptions regarding partisan polarization are associated with the manifestation of various mental and physical disorders.

One must recognize that the crux of this study dealt with *perceptions* regarding polarization because, “perceived polarization is often larger than actual polarization and is frequently more strongly correlated with voting behaviors, attitudes toward government, and feelings of partisan discord” (Nayak et al., 2021, p. 1). When participants were inquired about the extent of the current political divide and whether or not its impact has been amplified in response to the 2016 presidential election, the results revealed that the perceptions of polarization were more rigid at the state level than they were at the national level. This finding may be explained by the close “proximity of seeing divisiveness in everyday interactions” (5). Thus, perceiving greater polarization at the state level may be more detrimental to health than a perception that holds national polarization to be more cumbersome.

Equally important, political polarization in policy making is largely driven by the partisan support it garners, rather than just the content of the policy itself (Ehret et al., 2018, p. 308). To explain, the overwhelming influence of partisan cues on how people evaluate certain policies can be so potent that it prompts individuals to prioritize party over policy. This influence was demonstrated in an experiment where college students evaluated welfare policies that were supported by either Democratic or Republican officials (G.L. Cohen, 2003). The study found that though the participants were reading the exact same policy, they reported differing stances, contingent on whether their own party or the opposing party supported it (819).

Many critics of the *party-over-policy* effect contend that these results are only significant within the confines of a laboratory setting, and, thus, not applicable to everyday life. However, partisan cues are pragmatic in that they provide insight to policies themselves. Since Democratic and Republican politicians generally support and propose different policies, the use of partisan cues in assessing policies is commensurate with the discernment of those different policies (Ehret et al., 2018, p. 308).

Additionally, these critics cite the relevance of other important factors in formulating personal evaluations, such as policy knowledge or personal beliefs. They argue that, essentially, the more knowledge someone has on a given topic, the less impressionable and reliant they are on certain heuristic cues, like partisan framing (Ehret et al., 2018, p. 309). In other words, proponents of this information-deficit theory suggest that the more educated and informed individuals are, the better-equipped they are to evaluate the policy's content.

In juxtaposition to this aforementioned concept, ideological-consistency theories suggest that knowledge actually reinforces one's reliance on partisan cues. In fact, as it pertains to the divisive topic regarding climate change policy, "greater levels of educational attainment did not lead individuals to adopt the scientific consensus regarding climate change, but rather, more highly educated partisans aligned their climate change beliefs with their political party, resulting in the greatest levels of polarization among the most highly educated" (Ehret et al., 2018, p. 309).

Social norms that govern partisan behavior also serve to mediate the effects of partisan identity and partisan cues on policy evaluation. An individual's own support of a given policy mirrors how strongly they perceive other fellow partisans to support or reject that policy (Ehret et al., 2018, p. 309). Therefore, perceptions regarding how much other ordinary members of their party support a policy (i.e., descriptive norms) determines the individual's own policy support. These descriptive norms are psychologically compelling because they imply how individuals ought to evaluate a policy in order to be considered *good* group members and not dissent from this status quo. "In-group norms help partisans cohere around a uniform set of beliefs; out-group norms provide a contrast to establish clear group boundaries" (309). In sum, in-group norms (through the mechanisms of assimilation and conformity) as well as out-group norms (through the facets of differentiation and opposition) further elucidate the impact that partisan cues have on policy evaluation.

At the same time, perhaps policy evaluation is ancillary to the predominant motivation underlying these dissenting opinions. An experiment that analyzed the allocation of money between in-group and out-group members found that, "when people

were given the chance to choose in-group victory over the greater good, even in the presence of such weak and imaginary group labels, ‘it is the winning that seems more important to them’” (Tajfel et al., 1973, p. 172). This study demonstrated the concept of in-group bias, which is the implicit psychological tendency to perceive their in-groups more favorably in order to maintain status. In-group bias stems from an innate propensity to prefer *us* to *them*. People naturally resort to hostility toward outgroup members in the presence of conflict. Such reactions exemplify the implicit nature of group membership, and, moreover, serve to be representative of intergroup dynamics. The degree of hostility Democrats and Republicans exude is contingent on the level of competition felt between these two groups (Mason, 2018, p. 55). Thus, the greater the level of perceived competition is, the more pronounced feelings of hostility become.

The desire to win rather than achieving the greater good is a consequence of a strong social identity. “Where partisans once held cross-cutting identities that weakened overall partisanship and allowed them to see their opponents as relatable, they now find that their social identities lead them away from understanding those on the other side” (Mason, 2018, p. 56). This lack of understanding is best typified by the willingness – or lack thereof – of partisans to compromise with opposing partisans. Generally, partisans uphold their stances and vehemently refuse to “give an inch to the other side” (Wolf et al., 2012, p. 1689). Therefore, the emphasis on political victory encumbers amicability, further fueling this polarized tension.

In sum, affective polarization is derived from the social construct of group identity politics rather than genuine policy disagreements. As opposing parties evolve to be more socially isolated from one another, the perception of politics as simply a matter

of zero-sum competition – a view in which a political win for one party means a loss for the other – proliferates the political landscape (Mason, 2018, p. 60). This type of thinking dissuades political opponents from investing in the *greater good*, further deepening the rift between Democrats and Republicans. As social divisions become more robust, Democrats and Republicans begin to view each other more so as enemies rather than just opponents. And the more entrenched these feelings of animosity become, the more that personal identity is subjugated to partisan influence and discretion. Ultimately, the essence of government will be neglected as American partisans fixate more on purely winning.

The adversarial nature of modern-day politics poses many obstacles for government to work efficiently. The source of this contentious environment emanates from a lack of common ground between conflicting partisan groups. A lack of social exposure between opposing partisan groups conjures feelings of intolerance, which, in essence, causes individuals to dehumanize antagonistic partisan members (Mason, 2018, p. 47). Though this sociopolitical discord may seem trivial and innocuous on its face, “the basic understanding of partisan opponents as human beings with good intentions is not a requirement of a democracy, but it is a requirement of a well-functioning one” (49). In fact, in his 1796 Farewell Address, George Washington warned of partisan intolerance, stating, “Partisanship agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one part against another, forments occasionally riot and insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption, which finds a facilitated access to the government itself through the channels of party passions.”

Ironically, public response to elite polarization has cultivated intraparty polarization, which refers to, “increased dispersion in partisans’ feelings towards their own party” (Groenendyk et al., 2020, p. 1616). To unpack this concept, it is imperative to first examine how the public tends to respond to elite polarization.

First, many people respond by mirroring Congress’s lead. Though policy issues may not be an area particularly impacted by polarization, the electorate has sorted, nonetheless. This sorting has aligned the components of ideology and party identification more strongly than they were before, instilling a prominent sense of social identity among partisans. Furthermore, this alignment causes sorted partisans to become more involved and resentful towards opposing partisans (Groenendyk et al., 2020, p. 1616).

Conversely, many people have grown tired of polarization. Distrust and disengagement are common sentiments expressed by these people, blaming the boorish nature of current political discourse for deterring them from politics altogether. Many people are embarrassed to admit their political affiliation and even prevaricate, framing their issue positions more moderately in order to “distance themselves from the partisan fray” (Groenendyk et al., 2020, p. 1617).

So, has the division in the American populous resulted in more uniform groups, or did they simply just divide? Despite feelings between partisans and their respective party remaining relatively stable on average, simple spatial logic suggests increasing homogeneity underscoring this average. Therefore, if ideological self-identification is a necessary condition determining voters’ responses to elite polarization, then ideologically extreme partisans should support their party’s growing extremity whereas moderate partisans should oppose (Groenendyk et al., 2020, p. 1617).

The study found, “While the average distance between Republicans and Democrats' feelings toward one another has been growing (mean difference), there is little evidence to suggest that partisans' feelings are consolidating into more distinctive groups (bimodality)” (Groenendyk et al., 2020, p. 1619). Rather, the more extreme partisans are those impacted the most by affective polarization and this skews the mean value for affective polarization. Fixating on the mean partisan may obscure conglomeration in partisans' response to elite polarization over the years. In fact, it appears that the average partisan has grown to like their party less and less over time (1620).

These aforementioned findings pose crucial implications for discerning the current political landscape. Extant literature may suggest that the partisan divide will continue to grow more rigid, however these results support the notion that this ideological cleavage will actually grow to be more fluid. Parties are increasingly becoming more divided from within regardless of ideological and partisan sorting (Groenendyk et al., 2020, p. 1620). More fervent partisans will continue to gravitate and express support toward their party, but more ideologically moderate identifiers increasingly favor their party less, thus having nowhere to sort. A potential consequence of partisans becoming devoid of political attachment is that it renders them more susceptible to third party and antiestablishment influence, “increasing the likelihood of electoral realignment” (1620).

Identifying an Underlying Element in Polarization: Tribalism

Perhaps the best ontological explanation for polarization can be found when examining it through a tribalistic lens. To begin, if an individual is technically affiliated with a group that they do not necessarily feel particularly close to, then that identity will have little effect on their behavior and beliefs. Conversely, strong connections to a social

group enhances the salience of that particular identity (Mason and Wronski, 2018, p. 270). Therefore, those who are more closely attached to party-aligned groups (e.g., Whites, Christians, and Conservatives for Republicans, and Blacks, Hispanics, Atheists, and Liberals for Democrats) will also exhibit stronger partisan identity, and vice versa. Conversely, those who are strongly connected to groups that are not aligned with parties (e.g., Blacks, Hispanics, Atheists, Liberal Republicans, or White, Christian, Conservative Democrats) encounter cross-cutting pressures which should diminish party identity strength. Party identity strength and partisan-aligned group attachment are strongly correlated, albeit asymmetrically across the two parties. For Democrats, as connection to aligned religious, racial, and ideological groups increases, partisan identification is enhanced. This association is more pronounced among Republicans, “with increases in group attachment relating to an increase in party strength by nearly two-thirds” (270). Intuitively, this incongruity makes sense. “The Democratic Party encompasses a greater variety of groups, making cross-cutting identities less detrimental to Democrats’ party identity, relative to Republicans who have fewer associated groups and more identity-based ‘deal-breakers’” (270).

As it pertains to social sorting, individuals that demonstrate stronger objective sorting should also exhibit an increased affinity for their party. This study found that, once again, Republicans exhibited a more pronounced association between objective sorting and in-party feelings (Mason and Wronski, 2018, p. 271). Regardless of the analogous relationships between in-party ratings and objective sorting across the two parties, Democrats tended to feel more positively about their party despite their degree of objective sorting (271). This disparity between partisan groups is most prevalent among

the least objectively sorted, “where Democrats holding the most cross-cutting identities in both samples remain relatively affectionate toward their co-partisans” (272). On the contrary, Republicans who are strongly attached to the religious, racial, and ideological groups who are not aligned with the party tended to respond more negatively towards the Republican Party. “Yet, Republicans who feel close to the ‘correct’ party-aligned groups are just as warm towards their co-partisans as Democrats” (272). Thus, Republicans, generally speaking, tend to be more conscious of who does and does not “belong” in the group. Republicans who perceive themselves as “outsiders” – whether that is due to a difference in racial, religious, or ideological values – feel less attached to their party than Democrats who do not feel like they fit in (273).

When it comes to social-group membership and party identification, social identities function as integral components that determine the strength of partisan attachment. Objective and subjective forms of social sorting, collectively and individually, enhance ingroup partisan identification (Mason and Wronski, 2018, p. 273). One of the most significant implications of these findings is that partisanship is unequivocally associated with individual-level understanding of party-group alliances (subjective sorting), and cognitive proximity to the aligned groups (objective sorting). “The cumulative effects of party-group alignment reveal a psychologically durable partisan social identity that can be singular in nature – in essence, a tribe that binds all other identities together” (274).

It is interesting to consider that within the typical coverage of “identity politics,” it is the Democratic Party that is typically associated with using social identities as a means for political gain. However, Mason and Wronski’s work suggests that Republicans

are the most sensitive to the alignment of their party-associated groups (Mason and Wronski, 2018, p. 274). In fact, the most cross-cutting identities are more deleterious to in-party loyalty for Republicans than they are for Democrats (274). Grossman and Hopkins (2016) characterize Democrats as the party of group interests, whereas the Republicans are the party of “ideological purity.” This Republican “purity” refers to in-party social uniformity. Republicans that do not fit the White, Christian stereotype are far less associated with the Republican Party than those who do fit this mold. This effect is more pronounced among Republicans than it is among Democrats, who encompass a substantially larger variety of racial and religious backgrounds that do not coincide with the mold of the average Democrat. Considering that Republicans are typically linked with fewer associated social groups, “deal-breaker” identities is a concept that is more applicable to Republicans than Democrats. Given this, Republicans are more dependent than Democrats on their social identities for establishing fervent partisan attachment and having a more cohesive ideological framework (Mason and Wronski, 2018, p. 274).

One crucial implication from these results is the notion that political elites may wield varying incentives to remind voters about the different groups that constitute each partisan team, thereby cajoling them into the preferred, “correct” behavior. Specifically, the Republican Party, being the less diverse and socially sophisticated of the two parties, could easily reemphasize voters’ White and Christian identities to bolster partisan identity strength. In contrast, it would be pragmatic for Democratic leaders to remind voters of their accomplishments on behalf of various, diverse groups.

All partisans, however, are incentivized to portray the other party as social strangers, making the in-party ever more attractive...as social identities are

increasingly associated with one party or the other, and as partisans increasingly identify with these party-associated groups, the American divide grows more intractable...the convergence of social identities along partisan lines makes in-party preference more powerful and out-party preference more powerful and out-party tolerance ever more difficult (Mason and Wronski, 2018, p. 274).

In further discussion on the element of tribalism, coalitional conflict is a foundational element of the human mind. Competition is ubiquitous and is a driving factor between human tribes for thousands of years. Cooperation and cohesion to these coalitions were conducive not just for survival, but also for acquiring land and other resources. Defectors were punished or publically vilified and loyal members were rewarded handsomely with resources or status, elucidating the value tribes assign to coordination and commitment in achieving group success. Therefore, individual-level fitness could be improved by demonstrations of commitment and loyalty to the tribe and its members. Effectively, this practice “selects for traits that signal and enhance coalitional commitment” (Clark et al., 2019, p. 587). Therefore, tribalism is natural.

Despite the fact that tribal loyalties can motivate many benevolent actions, they can also deter individuals from sound reasoning and accuracy in favor of group belonging. That is, tribal loyalty precipitates tribal biases. To elaborate, people select information that adheres to their tribe’s guiding principles, while actively dismissing information that conflicts with it. This approach to information generates a biased assessment, where information in support of the tribe’s agenda is blindly accepted and any information that counters it is received skeptically (Clark et al., 2019, p. 587).

So, why does tribalism distort beliefs? To begin, beliefs are emblematic of loyalty to group goals. At some level, stated beliefs are representative of behavioral intentions and, further, of coalitional membership. If beliefs are held ardently, elicit a strong emotional response, or are costly to bear, they may signal as genuine loyalty indicators. Unfortunately, dogmatism and the rejection of dissenting evidence accentuates the signal's appeal because they demonstrate one's devout commitment to the group's ideology despite potential ramifications (Clark et al., 2019, p. 588).

Additionally, beliefs function as precursors, forecasting the potential arguments that align with the group's interests, "which coalitions are often formed to pursue and protect" (Clark et al., 2019, p. 588). Since modern society does not typically condone violence, tribes prevail by persuading other people, through the mechanism of argumentation, rather than physically conquering another tribe. Thus, the primary motivation for people favoring information that champions their group's interests and rejecting information contrary to these interests is to brand themselves more persuasively on behalf of their group's cause.

These two reasons explaining why tribalism alters beliefs may also help to explain why the political landscape is an area that is especially entrenched in bias. Political contests pose monumental implications because they entail the ways in which coveted resources (power, wealth, status) are to be allocated and distributed amongst society. Control of governmental mechanisms and cultural narratives are awarded to the political victors, advancing their coalition at the expense of the losers. Given these lofty implications, catalysts to ignite group loyalty and uphold the group's stances are especially powerful within the political domain (Clark et al., 2019, p. 588).

As it pertains to the political realm, bias is most prominent in issues that resonate the most with their group, often involving moral commitments. As mentioned earlier, moral commitments signify one's willingness to conform to the coalition's rules. Consequently, those who adhere and express support for those prescribed moral norms are often given status by the group. Conversely, those who rebel or oppose these norms have their status reduced by the group (Clark et al., 2019, p. 588). Therefore, one can anticipate these biases to be particularly salient for important moral commitments.

The quest for truth and accuracy is also a primary concern for humans, so biases are most likely to be present in issues where the truth appears to be ambiguous. In fact, most political and moral contention are derived from ambiguous affairs. Even if there were an expert consensus on the facts of the matter, "political positions often reflect opinions about what ought to be the case (often subjective beliefs) based on beliefs about what is the case (ideally objective facts)" (Clark et al., 2019, p. 588). In these instances where the truth is ambiguous, tribal biases are salient because argumentation prevails when the truth is not apparent or easily discernible. One may expect ambiguity to incite humility and admissions of ambivalence, but when ambiguity arises in instances of coalitional conflict, it actually enhances bias. This makes sense considering that humans are coalitional creatures, rather than dispassionate agents of reasons. "They were not 'designed' to be humble; rather, they were 'designed' to conform and to protect the status of their tribe" (588).

Thus, in sum, the guiding principle here is that tribal bias is an integral component of human nature and this very element is ineradicable in its essence, effectuating predictable cognitive biases (Clark et al., 2019, p. 591). But more importantly, if

polarization is a symptom of something which occurs naturally – tribalism – then, by extension, is polarization also natural?

The Consequential Trajectories for America

So, what does this mean for America’s future? I argue that there are two main possibilities. The first possibility is that polarization is a perpetual cycle that will only continue to increase over time. This self-reinforcing cycle can be attributed to Americans’ overperceptions regarding polarization that causes them to reactively disassociate from opposing partisans, thereby fueling actual polarization. As Heltzel and Laurin find, “Americans overestimate the extremity of both their opponents and co-partisans’ views, to the point where they perceive partisan opinion gaps to be twice their true size” (180).

These overestimates may be directly influenced by three sources. The bias in polling may incite polarization through the divisive language of the polls themselves. For instance, the term *opposing parties* generally garnered more polarized attitudes amongst Republicans as opposed to the term *the Democratic Party* (Heltzel and Laurin, 2020, p. 180). Secondly, the pervasive coverage of “extremists” is another contributing factor – though these people amount to fewer than 10% of all Americans. “News stories cover their views more often, they are twice as likely to post about politics on social media, and because they use negative, angry language to morally condemn opponents, their messages are more likely to spread through social networks” (180). This type of selectivity may skew people’s views regarding the modal perceptions of each party. Lastly, the pessimism of mainstream political content is psychologically imposing. “Negative political content (e.g., stories of disrespect and closed-mindedness, distressing

poll results, extremists' messages) grabs attention, dwells in memory, and colors our impressions of politics more than equally positive content" (180).

Another possible future is one in which polarization is analogous to a pendulum that has reached its apex. This deescalation may emanate from society's own vexation for polarization and its ramifications. Their contempt has increased for two primary reasons. First, polarization engenders extremist policy alternatives, which most people regard unfavorably even when the source is that of their own party (Heltzel and Laurin, 2020, p. 181). Secondly, Americans rebuke polarization's consequences.

They feel that the quality of political discussion has deteriorated, featuring too many insults and not enough factual debate, and they are embarrassed about their current politicians' antagonistic behavior...rather than applauding party representatives who berate opponents, they prefer civil, respectful political relations. Likewise, they believe political closed-mindedness is unintelligent and morally wrong, and reject co-partisans who refuse to consider opposing views, even socially excluding these dogmatic co-partisans (Heltzel and Laurin, 2020, p. 181).

The disrespectful and closed-minded attitudes that polarization conjures causes a rebound effect, in which people detach from their respective parties, thus weakening polarization. "For example, upon seeing co-partisans disrespect opponents and ignore their views, Americans disidentify with their parties, instead moving toward more moderate positions" (Heltzel and Laurin, 2020, p. 181).

In examining our current polarized state, one is reminded of America's first president, George Washington. When faced with pressing issues at the time, Washington would welcome discourse from Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, representing opposing viewpoints. Washington would then form his assessment of the matter at hand through a synthesis of these ideas. In the same vein, Americans should also strive to emulate this stoicism when facing divisive issues. The truth is often forged from the crucible derived from a culmination of viewpoints. As the renowned American author Kurt Vonnegut said, "If you are an American, you must allow all ideas to circulate freely in your community, not merely your own."

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

The language of the questions for my survey were as follows:

- Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or something else?
 - Response choices: Democrat, Republican, Independent, Other

{If Independent}
- Do you think of yourself as closer to the Democratic Party, closer to the Republican Party, or equally close to both parties?
 - Response choices: Closer to the Democratic Party, Closer to the Republican Party, Equally close to both parties

{If Democrat}
- Would you call yourself a strong Democrat or a not very strong Democrat?
 - Response choices: Strong Democrat, Not very strong Democrat

{If Republican}
- Would you call yourself a strong Republican or a not very strong Republican?
 - Response choices: Strong Republican, Not very strong Republican
- Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: During the COVID-19 Pandemic political polarization has increased.

- Response choices: Strongly disagree, Somewhat disagree, Neither, Somewhat agree, Strongly agree
- How frequently is the content you view on these platforms about politics?
 - Response choices: Never, Hardly ever, Sometimes, Often
- Have you ever stopped being friends with someone because of something they said about government or politics?
 - Response choices: No, Yes