INFOCORE Definitions

"Polarization"

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Definition: "Polarization"

Polarization is a process that results in a distinctive pattern of interpretations and political preferences held within a population. Polarization can occur *within* a society or public sphere (*internal polarization*) or *between* distinct societies or public spheres (*external polarization*). Polarization occurs if increasingly disconnected views of some conflictual issue are held by different groups within a society (e.g., religious/ethnic groups, political factions, majority and minority), or between different societies. Polarization is normally a prerequisite for the escalation of conflict (Sunstein, 2003; Shmueli et al., 2006). There are two main forms of polarization, which often, but not necessarily coincide:

- *Positional polarization* occurs if different subgroups in a population take in starkly different preferences with respect to specific agendas for action or evaluations of a common object. As polarization proceeds, positions considered commonly acceptable in one group increasingly lose acceptance among other groups, and vice versa. In extreme polarization, opposing groups advance directly opposite demands, which are logically irreconcilable and offer no way for finding compromises that satisfy all groups.
- *Interpretative polarization* occurs if different subgroups in a population contextualize a common object in starkly different ways. As polarization proceeds, interpretations advanced by one group increasingly lose resonance in other groups' discourses. In extreme polarization, a meaningful conversation between polarized groups about the same object fails because both groups are talking about the object in entirely different terms.

Polarization as a process concerns the distribution of beliefs and stances within a public debate, or across public debates: One position or interpretation alone cannot be polarized, this is only possible for a set of positions or interpretations. Polarization requires an object that polarizes the debate, i.e., toward which distinct groups advance distinct interpretations and demands. Debates are polarized to the degree that they can be organized into sets of demands or interpretations commonly accepted within specific groups but rejected by other groups (Chong, 1996). Polarization is not necessarily binary, although plural polarization is more common for interpretations than for positions. Polarized debates are characterized by the absence or marginality of mediating contributions, which might connect or even integrate disconnected interpretations, or reconcile distinct demands (Hyde & Bineham, 2000). Polarization, consequently, is the process by which mediating contributions to the debate decrease and contrasting positions and interpretations identified with distinct groups increasingly dominate the debate.

It is possible that subgroups discuss an object in very different terms yet still agree on its evaluation and treatment; likewise, groups can share a common interpretation yet disagree strongly about its appraisal and solution.

To the degree that polarization is present, groups typically display strong group identification and perceive conflict as a zero sum power struggle between these groups (Shmueli et al., 2006). They refer to in- and outgroup views in a de-individuated manner, generalizing positions and interpretations toward the group level and neglecting internal heterogeneity within the group debates. Groups may refer to ideas or demands from outgroups, but then typically disqualify the opposing groups' views as incomprehensible, irrelevant or illegitimate (Lemke, 1988): Other groups' views are not recognized as

valid demands or informative counterarguments, and fail to resonate within group discourse. Internal polarization is complete when the debate is dominated by groups rejecting one another's views. However, any change from accepting outgroup (members') contributions as comprehensible, relevant, and legitimate toward doubting or denying these properties is considered an increase in polarization, which can take place on various levels.

The main drivers of polarization are social group dynamics (identification with prototypical or elite group members), the "echo chamber" quality of group communication (Yardis, 2013), and the antagonistic structuring of conflicts in politics and the media (Fisher et al., 2013). The way political debates are organized and reflected in the news suggests the distinctness and homogeneity of conflicting groups; People leaning toward one side are invited to identify with "their" group, and enter into increased interaction with ingroup members and discourse. As members of one group are primarily exposed to like-minded arguments, their recognition of group-specific views as commonly shared solidifies, and deviant views appear increasingly invalid (Sunstein, 2003). This process often goes hand in hand with radicalization; however, also moderate groups sometimes commonly reject more radical groups' interpretations and demands, such that both groups' views fail to resonate and gain acceptance in the other group.

The opposite of polarization is de-polarization, wherein interpretations and positions of formerly polarized groups begin resonate with one another. As the dominance of exclusive constructions decreases, the share of mediating positions connecting the different views increases, until a majority of views considers a variety of positions and interpretations as valid and legitimate. Its endpoint is a population wherein no clear structuring into distinct dominant group discourses is possible, either because such groups are marginalized by mainstream society, or because high fragmentation denies either view of dominant influence.

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