A Threat to Democracy: Political Polarization

With waves of democratic transition at the end of the twentieth century, many political observers predicted the coming years would be ones of democratic triumph. However, the past few decades have been characterized by democratic setbacks to the point where today, many political observers talk of a current crisis of democracy. Democracy is confronting considerable challenges such as loss of support for established parties, popularity of illiberal politicians and the growing influence of authoritarian power. One especially significant challenge faced by democratic societies today, one that many believe to be a threat to the functioning and health of democracy, is political polarization.

Political polarization is the extreme divergence of political attitudes into opposing ideological camps. When ideologies of citizens, parties, media, the government and interest groups move far away from each other on the left-right ideological continuum, they become politicized. However, research shows that, today, Americans are actually no more divided (and maybe even less divided on certain issues such as abortion) on policy issues than in the past but rather, we *believe* we are polarized and at extreme odds with each other.

Increasingly, we allow our identification with a political camp to be crucial in our political decisions. Research has shown how, increasingly, voters don't evaluate policies in isolation but rather on party lines using partisan cues (such as labeling policies as "Democrat" or "Republican"). Polarization manifests itself at every level of our society: within families, workplaces, neighborhoods, schools and religious organizations. Recently, many have shared experiences of how political polarization has impacted their friendships, families and romantic relationships. As antipathy for the ideological other grows, more people with similar political attitudes live closer, spend more time together and interact in the same social spaces, creating an "echo chamber" that ignores and automatically rejects any views coming from the other political camp.

We become polarized when we allow our political identities to impact every aspect of our lives and when we consider political affiliations to be group identities that allow us to view opposing political affiliations as the enemy in all respects. Although many consider this situation natural and even necessary in democracies (hearkening back to the saying "the personal is political") others strongly believe that extreme polarization actually can threaten the capacities we need to perform as democratic citizens-- leading to the weakening of democracy. Because the health of our democratic process may depend on it, those that hold this view claim that we must learn how to disagree with one another in a productive way.

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Information gathered from Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue's *Democracies Divided:The Global Challenge of Political Polarization* (Brookings Institution Press, 2019); Chapman Rackaway's "Polarization" in *American Governance* (Credo Reference, 2016); "Political Polarization in the American Public," The Pew Research Center (www.pewresearch.org); "What Are the Solutions to Political Polarization?," Greater Good Magazine (www.greatergood.berkeley.edu); "Political Polarization is About Feelings, Not Facts By Robert B. Talisse," Utica College Center of Public Affairs and Election Research (www.uspublicaffairs.com) and "Are Americans Overdoing Democracy?," National Review (www.nationalreview.com).