

# Polarization and the Democratic System: Kinds, Reasons, and Sites

Christian F. Rostbøll


It is widely agreed that the increased polarization many countries experience is bad for democracy. However, existing assessments of how polarization affects democracy operate with simplified understandings of both polarization and democracy. Bringing empirical studies and democratic theory into dialogue, I argue that polarization cannot be understood as a single phenomenon that can be evaluated in one way. Moreover, its different kinds affect different parts of the democratic system in distinct ways. First, we must distinguish between the degree of polarization in a given context and the different kinds of polarization at play. Second, we must consider whether people have good reasons for their polarizing behavior or whether it is entirely irrational. If people have good reasons for their polarizing behavior, the problem lies elsewhere than in polarization itself. Third, we must distinguish between the content of polarized opinions and the process of opinion formation. Both can be assessed with democratic criteria, but they raise different questions. Finally, for democratic evaluation it matters where polarization occurs and thus, we must differentiate between different sites of polarization: civil society, election campaigns, and legislatures. I recommend a systemic approach to assessing the democratic implication of polarization, which analyzes both the effects of polarization at different sites and on democracy as a composite whole.

It is a common perception that, over the last few decades, politics has become more polarized in many countries around the world and that this is damaging democracy. Much empirical work in political science confirms this perception. We find conceptualizations and measurements of political polarization mainly in the political science literature on legislatures and public opinion. Studies of polarization have traditionally focused on the United States but have recently been extended to cover other countries around the globe (Carothers and O'Donohue 2019a; Lieberman, Mettler, and Roberts 2022; McCarty 2019; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018). Moreover, normative work on polarization is increasingly being published (e.g., Talisse 2019). Still, we lack systematic bridge building between empirical work on polarization and normative democratic theory. While empirical work on polarization often includes normative judgments regarding its detrimental effects on democracy, it lacks clear and explicit normative standards and more nuanced

discussions of democracy. The democratic theory literature that mentions “polarization” often fails to differentiate between the different kinds of polarization that empirical researchers have identified. If empirical research and normative theorizing are to be helpful for each other, we need to take more seriously the details of each other’s work, rather than normative theorists picking out only a few stylized findings about polarization and empirical researchers treating democratic standards as implicit or self-evident assumptions. Thus, the contribution of this article is to provide a conceptual and normative framework for bringing empirical studies of polarization and democratic theory into dialogue.<sup>1</sup>

I argue that “polarization” cannot be understood as *one* phenomenon that should be evaluated in *one* way. Nor is the problem for democracy that polarization has become too severe and the solution to find its “right level.” Rather, political polarization raises a series of issues and challenges that must be assessed in an appropriately differentiated manner. First, we must distinguish between the question of the degree of polarization in a given context and the question of which kind(s) of polarization is (are) at play. What kind of polarization is at play is the more important question. Second, from the perspective of normative theory, we must consider the reasons (not only the causes) that people may have for polarizing (in different ways). Are they good or bad reasons? Third, we must distinguish between the content of polarized opinions and the process of forming polarized opinions. Both content and process can be assessed from the democratic point of view, but

---

Christian F. Rostbøll  is Professor of Political Theory at University of Copenhagen, and he holds a PhD from Columbia University (cr@ifs.ku.dk; Denmark). He is author of *Democratic Respect: Populism, Resentment, and the Struggle for Recognition* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), *Deliberative Freedom* (SUNY Press, 2008), and numerous articles on political and democratic theory in journals such as *Journal of Politics*, *Political Theory*, *European Journal of Political Theory*, and *Constellations*.

doi:10.1017/S1537592724000525

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of American Political Science Association.

they raise different types of concern. Finally, we must differentiate between different sites where (different kinds of) polarization can occur. It matters for the democratic assessment of polarization where polarization appears—in civil society or legislatures, during campaigns or in governing. Rather than applying the same standards to all political arenas, we should appreciate that different arenas have different purposes and should be judged in relation to their different functions within the democratic system.

I begin by distinguishing between four different kinds of polarization—ideological, intransigent, affective, and sorting—and I identify their opposites in a manner that is helpful for democratic assessment. The next section suggests some democratic criteria that can serve as standards for this article’s normative analysis of polarization. This is followed by a critical evaluation of the claim—often found in the literature on polarization and the crises of democracy—that the problem for democracy is severe polarization and the aim is to find the Goldilocks point of its right level (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 223; McCarty 2019, 20). If the issue is not the degree of polarization, it is tempting to conclude that the problem is its kind. Based on the existing literature, it is especially tempting to suppose that the problem is affective polarization, while ideological polarization can be good for democracy. However, I argue that this conclusion is premature, and that affective polarization is not always or only bad for democracy. The ensuing section discusses the issue of how polarized opinions are formed. The issue of whether people’s opinions are formed in a free and rational way is central in normative democratic theory but largely ignored in empirical studies of political polarization. The quality of democracy also depends on the character of the processes in which people arrive at their political opinions. The penultimate section argues that whether and how different kinds of polarization harm democracy depends on the site at which they occur. The political process has several stages, and in some stages, polarization can play a more positive role than in others. Thus, I propose that we take an approach to the democratic assessment of polarization, which regards democracy as a complex system in which political work is divided between different arenas that each must be evaluated in relation to their function.

## Four Kinds of Polarization and Their Opposites

To assess the democratic implications of polarization, we must make clear how we understand the phenomenon—or phenomena. It is part of my aim to clarify and compare the different ways in which “polarization” is used and to argue that different kinds of polarization should be evaluated differently. This section’s contribution is to provide a synthesis of different strands of research on polarization,

sharpen the conceptual distinctions between different kinds of polarization, add a fourth kind of polarization (“intransigent polarization”) and some subtypes to existing typologies, and offer an integrated and comprehensive framework that more clearly connects the different kinds of polarization to democratic theory. Thus, in what follows I distinguish and conceptualize four different kinds of polarization and identify their opposites in a manner that is instructive for democratic assessment.

The classical understanding of political polarization in political science regards it as a matter of “*ideological distance* (in contra-distinction to ideological proximity)” (Sartori 2005, 120). When people have much dispersed positions on ideology and policy, we are witnessing *ideological polarization*. The further apart people are on the political spectrum, the more ideological polarization there is among them. While scholars working with this understanding of polarization tend to speak of polarization as a “process where extreme views on some matter of public policy have become more common over time” (McCarty 2019, 9), they also tend to speak of polarization in terms of “bimodality.” Polarization as bimodality refers to the situation where the political opinions and votes of politicians or the public are clustered at different poles of the political spectrum and there is little or no overlap between them (McCarty 2019, 9; Fiorina and Abrams 2008, 566). However, dispersion is not the same as bimodality. The two poles of a bimodal distribution of political attitudes need not be far apart and there can be high dispersion of ideological positions without bimodality (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996, 696). Thus, there are two subspecies of ideological polarization, where one is about moving to the ideological extremes, and the other is about opinions clustering around opposing ideological poles (where the poles can be more or less ideologically extreme). Thus, we should distinguish between polarization as *ideological extremism* and polarization as binary *ideological clustering*.

Whereas the first kind of polarization is about *what* people believe, the second kind of polarization is about people’s attitudes to their opinions or *how strongly* they hold their beliefs. In other words, what I call *intransigent polarization* is not about the content of people’s opinions, as ideological polarization is, but concerns how people relate to their beliefs—how insistently they stand on them. Both ideological polarization and intransigent polarization might be understood as about going to extremes, but they refer to two different understandings of “extremism” (Talisso 2019, 106–110), and thus to different phenomena. To clarify the distinction, consider the difference between the following two cases. In the first, a person goes from believing in “lower taxes” to believing in “no taxes.” This is a case of changing the content of one’s opinion and becoming more ideologically extreme. In the second, a person goes from believing

that “low taxes” is a somewhat attractive position to holding that “low taxes” is an extremely attractive and nonnegotiable position. This is a case of changing one’s attitude to one’s belief and of extremism as intransigence. To be intransigent means to hold one’s opinion with such confidence and rigidity that one is unwilling to change it. Political polarization is about the relations between political opponents, and intransigent polarization is about being unwilling to learn from, accommodate, or agree to anything proposed by opponents.

Today, *affective polarization* has become an important competing understanding of the partisan divisions in politics and society. Affective polarization was first introduced as an alternative and “more diagnostic” indicator of mass polarization than ideology and policy preferences (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012, 406). Affective polarization is identity based and expressed in feelings of dislike of and anger at the other party and its adherents. According to its proponents, affective polarization is not a mere spillover from ideological polarization, and extremity in ideology is not a necessary condition for the existence of animosity toward opponents (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012, 424; Iyengar et al. 2019, 131). Thus, the claim is that the public can be deeply divided and hate their political opponents without this being related to strong political disagreement over policy (Mason 2015; 2018). The theory is that affective polarization is driven by “the power of partisanship as social identity,” rather than ideological differences (Iyengar et al. 2019, 130). When the public is in the grip of affective polarization, citizens will see their opponents as hypocritical, selfish, and close-minded, and they will avoid social interaction with them. In short, affective polarization is characterized by negative feelings of animosity, anger, and distrust of people associated with the other party and positive feelings for and trust of one’s own party.

Some researchers also speak of *partisan sorting* as a form of polarization. Generally speaking, partisan sorting entails that political parties become more internally homogenous. However, it is important to distinguish between two different processes of homogenization: ideological sorting and social sorting (Mason 2018). *Ideological partisan sorting* refers to the process where ideology and partisan identity become increasingly matched. An example is the process in the United States, beginning in the 1960s, where liberals moved to the Democratic party and conservatives to the Republican party (Hare and Poole 2014, 415-418; McCarty 2019, 14-16). Notice that partisan sorting is different from people having become more ideologically extreme (Fiorina and Adams 2008) but contributes to ideological clustering. *Social partisan sorting* goes beyond ideology and includes the alignment of different group identities or cleavages. Parties are socially sorted when partisan identities fall into alignment with several different social identities (Mason 2018, 61-63).

Thus, social sorting means that partisan identity becomes connected to particular social identities, defined in terms of, for example, ethnicity, race, religion, and place. Moreover, social sorting entails a process in which multiple cleavages are aligned under one single difference of “Us versus Them” (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018). Thus, the key expression of polarization as partisan sorting is that people perceive the parties as entirely distinct and with no overlap in terms of ideology or social identities.

It is instructive for the explication and subsequent evaluation of the four different kinds of polarization to identify their respective opposites. By identifying the opposites of polarization, we can ask whether those are what democracies should aim for.

To identify the respective opposites of ideological polarization and intransigent polarization, it is necessary to distinguish more clearly between consensus and compromise than political scientists often do.<sup>2</sup> As I suggest we use the terms, “consensus” refers to ideological convergence or absence of disagreement, and “compromise” refers to a kind of agreement that is motivated by or at least made necessary by ideological divergence or disagreement (Gutmann and Thompson 2012, 10-12; Rostbøll 2017, 621-622). Whereas consensus ends disagreement or ideological polarization, compromise doesn’t do away with disagreements between the involved parties but embodies them. Thus, the opposite of ideological polarization is ideological consensus, while the opposite of intransigent polarization is compromise-willingness. Importantly, the disposition to compromise is needed only in cases where there is some ideological polarization (or some other kind of disagreement).

It is difficult to identify *one* opposite of affective polarization, because the concept refers to two ideas: that politics has become more affective and that the affects characterizing polarization are negative ones. I propose that we regard the general opposite of affective polarization as the composite notion “absence of negative affects.” This opposite can be divided into a) a politics characterized by absence of affects (apathy), and b) a politics defined by positive feelings toward opponents. What we regard as the most important opposite of affective polarization depends on whether we focus on its affectivity or its negativity.

The overall opposite of partisan sorting is heterogeneous or internally diverse parties. The two kinds of partisan sorting have each their opposite. The opposite of parties that are internally ideologically homogenous is parties that are internally ideologically diverse, and the opposite of socially sorted parties are parties with cross-cutting cleavages or identities. Thus, when there is no or less ideological partisan sorting, there will be greater overlap between the ideological views of opposed partisans and the parties will have less clear ideological identities. And when there is no or less social partisan sorting,

**Table 1**  
**Four kinds of polarization and their opposites**

Kind of Polarization	Definition	Opposite(s)
Ideological polarization	Increased dispersion of positions on an ideological spectrum a) Ideological extremism b) Ideological clustering	Ideological consensus
Intransigent polarization	Refusal to listen to or accommodate political opponents	Compromise-willingness
Affective polarization	Negative feelings toward political opponents	Absence of negative affects a) Apathy (no affects) b) Positive affects
Partisan sorting	Internally homogenous parties a) Ideologically b) Socially (no cross-cutting cleavages or identities)	Internally diverse parties a) Ideologically b) Socially (cross-cutting cleavages or identities)

partisans will share some social identities or group memberships with their political opponents.

Table 1 summarizes the definitions of the four kinds of polarization and their opposites.

### Criteria for the Quality of Democracy

In order to evaluate whether the different kinds of polarization are good or bad for democracy, we need democratic criteria that can be used as standards to judge the quality of democracy. I shall not provide a full list of necessary and sufficient conditions for a democratic system but highlight the five criteria that are most relevant in relation to the normative assessment of polarization in existing democracies:

- C1 *Inclusive participation.* Those subject to collective decisions should be equally included as participants in the making of those decisions (Dahl 1989, 119-131; Habermas 1996, 104-111; Warren 2017, 44; Young 2000, 23). Since we are concerned with the quality of existing democracies, the question is not only whether those subjected have political rights of participation but also the actual level of political inclusion and participation.
- C2 *Contestation.* It must be possible to oppose the government, to offer alternative points of view, and there should be a clear range of alternatives for voters to choose between (Dahl 1971, 4; Mouffe 2018, 17). This is required both for government to be responsive to citizens' preferences and for holding government accountable. Again, the issue is not just formal opportunities for contestation but also the actual level and quality of contestation.
- C3 *Mutual respect.* Political opponents are respected as legitimate adversaries rather than as enemies to be destroyed (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 102-106; Mouffe 2009, 101-105). Mutual respect is

compatible with strong disagreements and even dislike of one's opponents, as long as one respects their equal standing as fellow citizens (Rostbøll 2023).

- C4 *Enlightened understanding.* The electorate should, in the light of sufficient information and good reasons, be able to develop an adequate understanding of political alternatives (Dahl 1989, 111-112; Habermas 1996, 315-316; Mansbridge et al. 2012, 11). Only if citizens know something about their own and others' interests as well as the expected consequences of different political programs and policies, can they through the political process get what they want and find right.
- C5 *Collective decision-making capacity.* Citizens must as a collective have the capacity to impose binding decisions on themselves (Warren 2017, 44). Only if citizens or their representatives have this ability of "getting things done" can the people be said to rule themselves. Democracy is not just a matter of inclusion, contestation, and learning, it is a form of governing.

To further appreciate the significance of these criteria, it is helpful to identify the main threats to each, which I have done in table 2.

### Degree versus Kind

While polarization is commonly seen as detrimental to the quality of democracy and sometimes as a threat to the very survival of democracy, more sophisticated accounts emphasize that polarization can have both good and bad effects on democracy. Writers who mention the potential beneficial effects of polarization often caution that they materialize only under a moderate level of polarization and argue that if the level of polarization becomes severe, the negative effects of polarization will predominate. To improve or save democracy, the task, these writers suggest, is *reducing* polarization (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018,



**Table 2**  
**Criteria for assessing democratic quality and threats to these**

Criteria for Democratic Quality	Threats
C1 Inclusive participation	Exclusion, lack of participation
C2 Contestation	Lack of opposition, conformity, no clear electoral alternatives
C3 Mutual respect	Viewing opponent as enemy to be eradicated, regarding disagreement as illegitimate
C4 Enlightened understanding	Lack of clarification of interests and opinions, ignorance about politics and policy, epistemic bias, disinformation
C5 Collective decision-making capacity	Gridlock, inefficiency

115, 223). Thus, on this view, the problem of polarization is a question of *degree* and for committed democrats the aim should be finding “the Goldilocks point” of the right level of polarization (McCarty 2019, 20). This section questions the suggestion that “the problem of polarization” is mainly a matter of degree.

One disadvantage of speaking of the problem of polarization as one of degree is that it is unclear exactly what it would *mean* to reduce it or find its right level. If we speak of “political polarization” in general terms, we risk obscuring the fact that the term can refer to different phenomena. Considering our four different understandings of polarization, the suggestion could be finding the right level of ideological polarization, intransigence, affective polarization, or partisan sorting. One complication is that the four need not go together. For example, there can be much affective polarization without strong ideological disagreement (Mason 2018), and there can be partisan sorting without anyone having become more ideologically extreme (Fiorina and Adams 2008). So, what counts as reducing or finding the right level of “polarization”?

While there can be a conceptual difficulty of specifying what it would mean to reduce the diverse phenomena called “polarization,” the main danger is communicative and normative. Indicating that there is a “right level” of polarization moves one into normative terrain and commits one to a conservative view of what (a good) democracy is and requires. If researchers and other commentators indiscriminately speak of severe polarization as bad for democracy, this seems to imply that polarization of all kinds should be reduced. However, from the perspective

of normative theory that is a questionable position. In general, there is a risk that political scientists become servants of the existing order when they warn against high degrees of polarization. If we are not clearer regarding the exact forms of polarization that threaten democracy or on what kind of relations democracy requires, there is the danger that any form of dissent is delegitimized, that the status quo ante is glorified as “good democracy,” and that any fundamental change is depicted as fatal for democracy (Mouffe 2018, 10, 17, 22; Stavrakakis 2018).

Even taking our four kinds separately, it is not evident what reducing polarization means and if it is necessarily democratically desirable. The meaning of reducing ideological polarization might seem clear enough: less ideological distance between parties or voters. However, there is a difference between reduction of the distance between the most extreme ideological positions and reduction of clustering around two opposing poles. Ideological extremism and ideological clustering create different kinds of democratic challenges and should be evaluated differently. Whether ideological extremism is a problem or not depends on the content of the dispersed ideological positions more than on the distance between them. In other words, it might be more important *what* the parties (and voters) disagree about than *how much* they disagree. Particularly, disagreements over fundamental democratic values and the rules of the game create greater challenges for democracy than disagreements about policy. Hence, it is not clear that all ideological disagreements are of the same kind and that they all should be reduced. Ideological clustering creates a different kind of problem for democracy. Clustering is less a problem of extremism than that the dispersion of ideological views becomes concentrated around two opposing poles with no overlap between them.

Perhaps part of the appeal of the idea that there is a Goldilocks point of the right level of polarization relies on an aversion to extremism and a belief in the value of moderation (Graham and Svobik 2020). However, it is important not to confuse the different meanings of “extremism” involved in ideological polarization and intransigent polarization, respectively. From a normative perspective, we should clarify whether “the problem of extremism” is that the ideological content of people’s views is extremely divergent (for example, far left versus far right), or that partisans hold their views with such confidence and inflexibility that they are unwilling to listen to or accommodate anything proposed by political opponents (Almagro 2023). In political negotiations as well as voting behavior, the degree of confidence in beliefs among the parties might be just as important as the content of their beliefs. For example, an extreme degree of confidence in the rightness of one’s beliefs might make one less likely to compromise and less tolerant of political opponents. Thus, what destroys “the compromising mindset” might not be extremity in ideological views (belief content) but

extreme confidence in one's views (Gutmann and Thompson 2012; Muirhead 2014, 105-110). Moreover, extreme confidence in (and commitment to) one's views can also beset ideological centrists.

As the opposite of extremism, "moderation" can also refer to two different phenomena: ideological centrism and compromise-willingness. It is possible to have radical ideological views and nevertheless be willing to compromise with political opponents. And one can be an ideological centrist who is unwilling to cooperate and compromise with "extremists" (Craiutu 2017, 6, 22-23, 32, 237-238, 242; Gutmann and Thompson 2010, 1134-1138; May 2018: 37; Rostbøll 2021; Theriault 2015). What is most important for meeting the criteria of both mutual respect (C3) and collective decision-making capacity (C5) is not that the parties become more moderate in the sense of moving to the ideological center, but that they become more moderate in the sense of being willing to compromise.

The last point is important to keep in mind when considering issues of institutional design and reform proposals for countering polarization. Political scientists have, for example, discussed the effects on polarization of electoral systems, campaign finance, and political party reform, but they have done so without clearly distinguishing between the aim of creating more centrist parties and providing incentives for compromise (Carothers and O'Donohue 2019b, 279-281; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 202-206; McCarty 2019, 119-132). It goes beyond the scope of this article to go into the question of which institutions provide incentives for compromise. The issue is complicated by the suggestion that sometimes majoritarian institutions may be better at generating compromise than so-called consensus institutions (Schwartzberg 2018). Moreover, we should note that similar patterns of polarization exist across societies with very different institutions (McCoy et al. 2018, 19).

Affective polarization tends to be deemed always bad for democracy and something that should be reduced or eradicated for the sake of democracy's quality or survival. However, speaking of reducing affective polarization might not be the most enlightening way of thinking about the challenges it poses to democracy. Here we should remember that affective polarization is a composite phenomenon including both a dimension of negativity and of affectivity. It might make sense to say that there is a golden mean for the level of affectivity in politics, where too much affectivity crowds out any form of deliberation and too little entails apathy or indifference. However, I want to argue that the main issue for the quality of democracy is the *kind* of feelings partisans have for their political opponents. Here we should speak in more qualitative terms. Democracy depends on mutual respect (C3), which is a kind of feeling. However, it is important to note that respect is neither the opposite of hatred, nor some golden mean between hatred and love. Respect is something

qualitatively different than these other feelings. Mutual respect is based on a regulative (moral) principle that tells us how to treat others, *irrespective* of whether we hate or love them (Kant 1996, 54-56). Thus, the negativity of affective polarization becomes a problem for democracy only in the absence of a feeling of respect that *overrides* the impulses connected with hatred of political opponents.

When it comes to partisan sorting, most political scientists think that democracy works best when parties provide voters with clear ideological alternatives or distinct policy programs (APSA 1950; McCarty 2019, 19-20; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018, 17-18; Muirhead 2010, 132). Political contestation (C2) requires that voters can distinguish between the parties. However, this benefit of partisan sorting seems only to be connected to *ideological* partisan sorting and not to *social* partisan sorting. What is detrimental to democracy is when partisan sorting goes beyond what the vote should be about—ideological and policy disagreements—to being only a matter of identity. When parties become socially sorted, the danger is that what determines the vote is less which program and policies voters find good or bad, but mainly a question of which group they identify with (Mason 2018; Vachudova 2019). Social partisan sorting also harms the development of enlightened understanding (C4), because party politics becomes a question of who you are and with whom you belong rather than which policies are best. Thus, the issue is not having the right level of sorting but having the right *kind* of sorting.

It might be objected that it is unrealistic that people should vote according to their policy preferences or ideology rather than their identity (Achen and Bartels 2016, 18). However, while it is true that normative theory must be consistent with human abilities ("ought implies can"), we should not tailor our democratic norms to how citizens behave *under present circumstances* ("ought cannot be derived from is," especially not "is now"). Perhaps people would act differently with different institutional incentives or under other socio-economic conditions (Landmore 2020, 44-47). Normative theory should speak to potential human competencies rather than only the realized ones. Moreover, realism requires that we examine variation across time and space and note that group behavior and polarization do not always take the same form (Chambers 2018). It is likely that identity or group attachment will always play a role in political behavior, but as I shall argue later, this need not be seen *in contrast to* acting for reasons, as Achen and Bartels (2016, 215, 228) do.

The democratic assessment of the different kinds of polarization is complicated by possible interaction effects among them. Affective polarization, for example, is often seen as causally connected to social partisan sorting (Mason 2015), and intransigence can be seen as closely connected to affective polarization. While it is important to understand these connections, I have emphasized that

the different kinds of polarization do not always go together and that it is equally important to understand the distinct democratic implications of the different kinds of polarization taken separately. It provides for a clearer analysis to keep apart the question of whether a kind of political polarization has bad democratic effects on its own and the question of whether it spills over into other kinds of polarization. But, of course, in the end we should bring all the issues together in an all things considered assessment.

### Ideological versus Affective Polarization

The conclusion of the previous section is that the problem of polarization is more a question of its kind than of its degree. This section continues the analysis by providing some reasons why from a normative democratic perspective it is important to distinguish between the implications of ideological and affective polarization. While there are several reasons to regard ideological polarization as less of a democratic problem than affective polarization, this section and the next argue that it is premature to conclude that the threats of polarization all lie with affective polarization and that affective polarization is only detrimental to democracy, as one might think from reading the literature based on social psychology.

I begin with the reasons for regarding the distinction between ideological and affective polarization as normatively significant, and for regarding the latter as especially problematic for democracy. First, most democratic theorists agree that ideological disagreement is a natural and legitimate aspect of a free society. Insofar as we can speak of ideological disagreement as a fundamental “circumstance of politics” and respect for disagreement as a fundamental democratic norm (Waldron 1999), ideological polarization as a form of dispersion of political views cannot be regarded as a democratic wrong or something that should be eliminated. Nothing similar can be said of affective polarization if we understand the latter as a matter of animosity toward political opponents. It *would* be better if no one hated their opponents. Only by distinguishing between ideological polarization and affective polarization can we appreciate the democratically important distinction between legitimate disagreement and destructive hatred, between opponents with whom one disagrees and enemies who one wants to eliminate, as required by the criterion of mutual respect (C3).

Second, ideological polarization among ideologically sorted political parties is a necessary condition for providing citizens clear and meaningful alternatives to choose between, as required by C2 (Levendusky 2010; Lupu 2015). Nothing like that can be said about affective polarization. Indeed, affective polarization means that partisans do not just regard the other party as mistaken but as an illegitimate choice or an enemy (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012, 428; Iyengar et al. 2019, 143). Since

affective polarization means that partisans “lose perspective on the difference between opponents and enemies” (Mason 2018, 6), it is a threat not only to mutual respect (C3) but also to contestation and enlightened understanding (C2 and C4). In an environment of affective polarization, a governing party will not seek to promote clear ideological choices that citizens can freely choose between and have equal opportunities to attain an understanding of. Rather than improving the democratic process of free and enlightened choice, affective polarization undermines it. Thus, unless we distinguish clearly between ideological and affective polarization, we have the paradoxical conclusion that “polarization” is both the promotion and the limitation of dissent, contestation, and electoral competition.

Third, it is a common idea that diversity of opinions has positive effects on learning and thus some kind of polarization is epistemically beneficial (C4). At the same time, the literature on affective polarization shows that the latter has bad epistemic effects such as bias in belief formation, simplification of the issues, and prejudices against the opposition (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar et al. 2019; Mason 2015; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018). Here it is crucial not to confuse the effects of the two kinds of polarization. Indeed, the epistemic value of ideological polarization may depend on the absence of affective polarization. Thus, John Dewey (1993, 243) argues that the epistemic value of disagreement depends on “the habit of amicable cooperation—which may include . . . rivalry and competition,” but also requires that we “treat those who disagree—even profoundly—with us as those from whom we may learn, and in so far, as friends.” Amicable cooperation is exactly what affective polarization erodes. However, it is essential to distinguish this issue from the existence of ideological disagreement. Failing to differentiate between ideological polarization and affective polarization combined with the typical negative evaluation of “polarization” has the danger of delegitimizing expressions of dissent and strong disagreement.

While there are strong reasons to highlight the divergent democratic implications of ideological and affective polarization, as well as to note that some of the positive effects of ideological polarization require absence of affective polarization, we should be careful not to assume that ideological polarization is always good and affective polarization always bad. Most important, there is the obvious point that not all ideological positions accept democratic norms. While democracy allows for and even profits from much ideological dispersion or disagreement, it also depends on consensus on some basic democratic norms and institutions. Without an ideological commitment to basic norms of freedom, equality, and respect for opponents (C1–3), as well as the institutional rules of the game, we have a kind of disagreement or ideological polarization that may undermine democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). In a

democracy, there cannot be disagreement about everything. If you disagree with the notion that disagreement should be respected, you are not respecting disagreement but denying its legitimacy. Even democratic theorists who have done most to emphasize its “agonistic” or conflictual character agree that democracy requires “certain forms of consensus” regarding basic norms and institutions (Mouffe 2018, 93). In short, if ideological polarization includes undemocratic positions, this kind of polarization can also be detrimental to democracy.

### Reasonable Affective Polarization

The claim that affective polarization is not always or only bad for democracy is controversial and will require more argument. Notice that my contention is not that affective polarization should be part of our ideal conception of democracy. My argument belongs to non-ideal theory in its technical definition, as a theory that applies to conditions in which not everyone follows ideal principles (Rawls 1999, 8, 216). If everyone were in full compliance with the norms of democracy (the definition of ideal theory), there clearly would be no reasons for hating opponents, or regarding them as corrupt and self-serving. My claim is that under non-ideal conditions—which are the conditions that characterize actual democracies—there are sometimes good reasons for these affects.<sup>3</sup>

As said, affective polarization is defined by partisans hating and being angry at people from other parties, seeing them as “hypocritical, selfish, and close-minded” (Iyengar 2019 et al., 130). Under non-ideal conditions, we cannot exclude the possibility that some people deserve to be viewed in that way. A non-ideal theory of democracy assumes that some people do not comply with democratic principles, which could include forms of corruption and lack of concern for the common good. My contention is that the types of feelings that constitute affective polarization in principle could be reasonable. In other words, sometimes there might be *good reasons* for being angry at and distrusting political opponents, or regarding them as hypocritical and selfish. When it comes to normatively evaluating affective polarization, it makes a difference whether the involved parties have good reasons to feel the way they do. Indeed, there might be such a thing as *reasonable affective polarization*, which consists in emotionally reacting to and distancing oneself from others’ wrongdoing.<sup>4</sup>

The question of whether people have good reasons for their negative feelings toward political opponents is not raised in the existing literature on affective polarization. The latter literature is typically inspired by Social Identity Theory, which suggests that positive feelings for the in-group and negative feelings for the out-group are consequences of categorization and identification (Tajfel 1970; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Social Identity Theory regards affects as unconsciously formed and discriminatory

behavior toward out-groups occurring for “no ‘reasons’” (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 47). On this basis, the literature does not regard affective polarization as based on choice and reflection but as something that is caused by *unconscious and automatic* psychological mechanisms (Iyengar et al. 2019, 130; Mason 2015, 130). This theory of affective polarization excludes *the very possibility* that people could have good reasons for distrusting and hating political opponents, as well as for regarding them as self-serving, hypocritical, and narrow-minded. Thus, any discussion of the potential reasonableness of affective polarization is blocked from the start.

We should be clearer than the existing literature is on whether “affect” in affective polarization is posited as the cause or the matter of polarization—or both. It is one thing to say that political polarization has an affective cause—and thereby imply that people’s emotions rather than their cognitive faculties or reason drive it. It is another thing to say that political polarization is about the affects that people who identify with different parties have toward one another. Hence, we should distinguish between the notions that people’s relation to their party is caused by affect and that people exhibit certain affects. We should not assume that just because affective polarization involves strong emotions, it is necessarily caused exclusively by emotions. Emotions need not be blind, and they can have reasons as well as causes.<sup>5</sup> If we regard the affective aspect of polarization only in terms of or as necessarily caused by unconscious and automatic psychological mechanisms, we cannot distinguish between cases in which people have good reasons for their negative feelings toward their opponents and those where they do not. Making this distinction is crucial for the democratic assessment of affective polarization.

My proposal is that we examine whether or to what extent the negative feelings toward political opponents described in the literature on affective polarization could be understood as what we might call *principle-dependent feelings*, rather than assuming that they always are automatic or noncognitive reactions to external stimuli. John Rawls (2000, 45-48, 148-152) describes a principle-dependent feeling as a feeling we can only explain with reference to the violation of a principle. They are indirect or reflective feelings, which only persons who have principles and are endowed with reason can have. For example, the feelings of resentment, indignation, and anger at the corrupt or selfish behavior of others can only be explained with reference to the violation of principles of honesty and the common good. A person can simply not have those kinds of feelings without understanding and applying principles.

If we analyze the affects involved in polarization as principle-dependent, we can ask whether these affects could be explained by the violation of a principle and thus whether there are good reasons for them. Of course, the



fact that a feeling can be associated with a principle is not sufficient for it to be reasonable, since the principle might be invalid; anti-democrats, for example, may feel principled resentment at political equality. Moreover, a person might be mistaken in their belief that a principle has been violated. Still, the very possibility that negative affects toward political opponents can be motivated by principles and reasons opens a way for a discussion that has been blocked by seeing them as *necessarily* irrational, as is the case in the social psychology-inspired literature on affective polarization.<sup>6</sup> Noting the cognitive dimension of, for example, anger enable us to consider whether this emotion is “more or less correctly directed, or *fitting*” (Lepoutre 2018, 401).

The feelings associated with affective polarization are sometimes feelings of resentment and indignation of the fact that the other party does not treat you with proper regard or respect. If you feel that members of the other party are close-minded, corrupt, untrustworthy, or selfish, these could all be feelings that they do not treat you as an equal or respect your dignity (violating C1 and C3). Populist parties are often described as the most polarizing parties and as the most in the grip of affective polarization (Cohen 2019; Müller 2016b, 4; Pappas 2019, 212; Roberts 2022; Urbinati 2019, 50-51, 70, 74). Moreover, there is a large literature that explains populism with reference to feelings of lack of respect and recognition (Cramer 2016; Gidron and Hall 2020; Zurn 2022). Some people might see these developments as detrimental to democracy because they distract from what politics should really be about, namely policy discussion and choices (Mason 2015, 142; Müller 2016a). However, I would argue that sometimes the kind of resentment expressed in affective polarization is a democratic sentiment. Democracy is a form of government in which citizens owe one another inclusion and mutual respect (C1 and C3). If resentment and hatred of political opponents can be explained by people being ignored, marginalized, or oppressed, there is nothing democratically wrong about these feelings. They might be cries for being seen and heard, included and respected as equals in the political process (Cohen 2019, 26; Cramer 2016, 52, 66, 105; Mouffe 2018, 22-23). Since democracy requires that everyone be seen, heard, and treated as equals, this is a reasonable demand (C1 and C3). If certain groups are not included as equals in the political process, *this* is the primary democratic problem, rather than the fact that they feel resentment, anger, or distrust of those who exclude them.<sup>7</sup>

To be sure, very few actual cases of affective polarization may be products of violations of democratic principles. Some cases of affective polarization are based on non-democratic principles, and some people see violations where there are none. Sometimes, elites for strategic purposes speak to potential supporters as if the latter were not heard

or in other ways are disadvantaged, even though this rhetoric has no factual basis. And sometimes, people feel resentment at losing privileges that cannot be defended with reference to egalitarian democratic principles (Fukuyama 2018, 22; Mutz 2018). My point is simply that to evaluate actual cases of affective polarization, we must also look at *the reasons* people (could) have for feeling as they do.

I should emphasize that my contention is not that it is in any way ideal when people have the negative feelings characteristic of affective polarization. As mentioned, I am making this argument as part of a non-ideal theory of democracy. It is only when some people do not comply with democratic principles that there can be good reasons for resentment, anger, and distrust. Moreover, I do not deny that affective polarization often has detrimental consequences for the democratic system and that it often expresses itself in violation of democratic principles.<sup>8</sup> One of the problems with affective polarization is that it can create a vicious circle of mutual hostility. When the dynamic of affective polarization has taken hold, *everyone* might be said to have good reasons to feel hostility toward their opponents. Thus, all things considered, even reasonable affective polarization can have negative effects on democracy.

Still, we must be careful not to place the blame in the wrong place. To secure this, we should not only look at the psychological causes and external effects of affective polarization, but we should also examine to what extent people have good reasons for their negative feelings toward political opponents.

I have argued both that it often is analytically and normatively important to distinguish between ideological and affective polarization, and that we should avoid assuming that all the problems lie with affective polarization. The more fundamental question concerns the norms and principles to which the partisans are committed. From a democratic perspective, we cannot blame people for taking up diverse ideological positions as long as these do not violate basic democratic norms and accept democratic institutions. Regarding affective polarization, we should not blame people for their negative feelings toward political opponents if—and this is an important qualification—these can be explained by actual violations of democratic principles. However, the question of affective polarization is complex. For while we should be careful not to blame people for feelings that they have democratic reasons to have—feelings of resentment and anger at being ignored or oppressed, for example—we might still blame people for acting on these feelings in ways that are destructive of democracy.

I don't suggest that all or even most actual cases of affective polarization have any principled democratic basis. What I call for is a more nuanced evaluation that at least considers the possibility that some cases of affective

polarization are reasonable reactions to deeper problems. A more nuanced analysis and discussion of affective polarization involves three stages. First, assuming that people's feelings toward their own party and political opponents depend on their experiences and principles, we—scholars and fellow citizens—should try to identify what these experiences and principles are. That is, we should ask which *reasons* people (could) have for feeling as they do. Second, recognizing that having reasons is not the same as having *good* reasons, we should discuss the validity of different interpretations of people's experiences and the principles involved in evaluating them. Do people have good empirical and normative reasons to feel about different parties as they do? Are their emotions fitting? Third, we should assess the political effects of affective polarization at the mass level. The existing literature tends only to consider the third stage and thus risks dealing only with a symptom and ignoring people's potential reasons for having polarizing affects. By including the first two stages in the analysis, we recognize that there is something in relation to affective polarization not only to condemn but also to discuss and reason about as fellow citizens, namely the validity of our interpretations of reality and our principles.

Invoking the idea of “good reasons” for affective polarization is admittedly not without challenges. The idea is easily twisted and everyone in emotionally charged political struggles might think they have good reasons for their anger and hostility. And in so far as there is disagreement on what the proper democratic principles are and whether they have been violated in particular cases, it seems that we need some way or someone to adjudicate on these issues. However, I do not think this is a unique challenge to the approach I suggest in this article. Political scientists in all subfields routinely judge whether certain attitudes and actions are positive or pernicious for democracy. It might be more straightforward to judge all cases of affective polarization detrimental to democracy than differentiating between the validity of the reasons for different instances of it, but that does not make the former less problematic. If I am right that people can have better and worse reasons for their affects toward political opponents, and if we want to assess their democratic pedigree, there is no way around making judgments about what are valid democratic principles and whether they have been violated in particular cases. Of course, no such judgments are infallible, and they should be seen as part of a continuing dialogue rather than final verdicts. The role of normative democratic theory is to provoke self-reflection and common deliberation among citizens, not to substitute for the latter.

### Group Polarization and Opinion Formation

I now turn to the process of belief formation, which is the focus of the literature on “group polarization.” The latter is

not yet another kind of polarization, but an explanation for how and why polarization occurs. Rather than measuring distance between different groups or their feelings toward each other, group polarization concerns the group internal process that makes its members “go to extremes” (Sunstein 2009; Talisse 2019, 96-98). More specifically, group polarization refers to the phenomenon where people after within group interaction move toward more extreme positions than they were originally inclined (Sunstein 2017, 68). In short, the dynamic of group polarization makes people more extreme versions of themselves.

Group polarization can contribute to all four kinds of polarization: It makes people more ideologically extreme, it creates intransigence, it fosters negative feelings toward the outgroup, and it increases within group homogeneity (Sunstein 2009, 3; 2017, 68-69; Talisse 2019, 96-106). Group polarization is a consequence of “enclave deliberation” among insulated, likeminded groups, who are “mostly hearing more and louder echoes of their own voices” (Sunstein 2017, 66). There are different explanations of group polarization, including that the groups are exposed to limited information and argument pool, that the members are concerned with their within-group reputation, and that they become more confident of their views from the corroboration by their group (Sunstein 2017, 71-75; Talisse 2019, 110-115).

This section discusses which democratic concerns are relevant in relation to group polarization. I argue that the appropriate democratic assessment is a procedural one, that is, it should focus on the quality of the *process of opinion formation* rather than the substantive content of people's beliefs and opinions.

The notion and reality of group polarization require us to evaluate not only the state of affairs of polarized ideological positions, intransigence, hatred of opponents, or partisan sorting but also *the process* that creates these kinds of polarization. From the perspective of normative democratic theory, the phenomenon of group polarization raises the issue of the quality of processes of opinion formation in society. Especially deliberative democrats have emphasized the level of autonomous and rational opinion formation as an essential indicator of the quality of democracy (Habermas 1996, 360-366). The idea is that the quality of democracy depends not only on how people's preferences are aggregated in the democratic process, but also that background conditions enable people to form their political opinions in free and rational ways. However, one does not need to accept the high standards of deliberative democracy to agree that processes of opinion formation that are unfree or grossly irrational pose a problem for the quality of democracy (cf. C4).

The problem of group polarization is often regarded as an epistemic one. The warning is, and empirical findings show, that when people engage in “enclave deliberation”—discussion among like-minded people in

insulated groups—the process will not be one of learning or approaching true beliefs (Sunstein 2017, 86-87). Another concern has less to do with the substantive merit of polarized beliefs than with the fact that group polarization is a process that changes people's beliefs regardless of the evidence (Talisso 2019, 106). Why should we regard these epistemic shortcomings as *democratic* shortcomings? My suggestion is that we should do so because they threaten a fundamental democratic concern with freedom and autonomy. If people form their political opinions in irrational ways, their freedom and autonomy are diminished (Rostbøll 2008, 135-141; Sunstein 2017, 11). This is the case because people who lack understanding of their own interests and political affairs cannot rule themselves in the sense of giving laws that correspond with their interests and solve their problems.

According to the procedural view, the task of democratic theory is neither to tell people which ideological opinions are right nor what their true interests are. No one has privileged insight into these questions, and democracy requires that citizens treat each other as authorities regarding their own interests and that everyone is free to form their own opinions (C3). However, this does not mean that democratic theory should not be concerned with the quality of the background conditions and the processes in which people form their beliefs and political opinions. It would be a strange democratic theory that had *no* concern for the social and institutional conditions that shape how citizens interact and form their opinions. Democratic processes are not merely processes where each has an opportunity to have an equal impact on political outcomes but just as importantly are processes in which people interact and influence the opinion formation of one another (Dworkin 2000, 191). Some forms of political interaction, some institutions and social conditions, are more conducive to the free and rational development of political opinions than are others (C4). Democratic theory should say something about the rationality and autonomy of citizen interactions in different political processes. There is no point outside social conditions and political processes where true interests or rational opinions can be found. People's political opinions and conceptions of themselves are shaped by the social conditions and political institutions under which they live (Rawls 1999, 229). The task of democratic theory, then, is to analyze what free and rational democratic processes look like and to discuss which social conditions, political institutions, as well as individual behaviors undermine such processes.

Earlier I warned against the danger that the predominantly negative evaluation of political polarization among political scientists and other commentators risks delegitimizing dissent and ideologically radical views. In this connection, the advantage of the procedural approach suggested here is that it focuses on the processes of opinion formation rather than the content of people's beliefs. In

other words, it does not evaluate people's opinions *per se* or as a state of affairs (how divergent or ideologically extreme they are) but concentrates on the interactions and institutions that contribute to people forming their opinions as they do. If we can find fault with these interactions for being coercive, manipulative, or otherwise violating democratic criteria of freedom and enlightened understanding (C1-4), we can provide a democratic critique of them. This would not be a critique of people for holding certain views but of processes that fail to allow people to form their opinions freely and rationally. Such a critique, focusing on the process of opinion formation, might be just as critical of centrist as of extreme views, since what matters from this perspective is not the content of people's views but the quality of the process of opinion formation (Rostbøll 2008, 20-24, 135-141).

## Sites of Polarization

Until now, I have argued that democratic assessment should discriminate more clearly between different kinds of polarization as well as include considerations of whether people have good reasons for their polarized opinions, affects, and behavior. This section suggests another way in which we should be more discriminating in our democratic evaluation of polarization. I argue that whether (different kinds of) polarization benefits or harms democracy also depends on the site at which it occurs. Politics takes place at different sites (in civil society, in election campaigns, in legislative assemblies, and so on), and the democratic process can be divided into different stages (opinion formation, campaigning, voting, and governing). There is a division of political work among different actors and sites that complement one another only by serving different purposes (Goodin 2005; Habermas 1996; Mansbridge et al. 2012). Because different political arenas have different purposes their democratic quality should not be judged by the same standards. To assess the democratic implications of polarization, therefore, we should avoid assuming that all parts of the democratic system must live up to the exact same ideal. Some forms of polarization might be beneficial in some parts of the democratic system, while they are detrimental in others.

The main harm caused by polarization is often said to be that it inhibits compromise and the solving of societal problems, while the main benefit is said to be that it provides clear electoral alternatives (Lieberman, Mettler, and Roberts 2022, 3; McCarty 2019, 19-20; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018, 17-18). From the perspective of the more differentiated and systemic approach suggested here, it is important to emphasize that lack of compromise-willingness is mainly a problem in legislative assemblies, while the benefit of clear alternatives for voters to choose between pertains to elections. Moreover, the main harm of polarization refers to collective decision-making capacity (C5), while the main benefit refers to

contestation (C2). Some forms of ideological polarization, partisan sorting, and even affective polarization can be valuable during elections because they motivate participation and include otherwise marginalized people (C1) (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018, 17-18; Roberts 2022). However, the kinds of polarization that benefit participation and inclusion during the campaign stage are detrimental to the deliberation and compromise required in legislative assemblies (C5) (Gutmann and Thompson 2012). This is just one example of how our democratic assessment of polarization should be sensitive to the question of in which part of the democratic system it occurs, and that sometimes different democratic criteria should be applied to different sites.

The empirical literature on polarization tends to have a narrow focus on the formal part of the democratic system, as does the division between governing and campaigning in the previous paragraph. While my approach agrees that it is important to distinguish between the democratic implications of (different kinds of) polarization in legislative assemblies and in electoral campaigns, it holds a more expansive view of the democratic system by including the informal arena of civil-society politics. Thus, we can divide the democratic system into an informal part consisting of civil society with its associations, movements, and media, and a formal part consisting of elections and the legislative assembly (Cohen and Arato 1992; Habermas 1996, 304-387). Civil society has a different political purpose than elections and formal decision-making bodies. Rather than making binding decisions or providing electoral alternatives, civil society with its public sphere is the place where new problems are discovered, experiences are articulated, and opinions are formed. Table 3 lists the main functions of the three principal arenas of the democratic system. Of course, what we regard as the purposes of the different parts of the democratic system depend on our normative model of democracy and the following fits a more deliberative conception of democracy.

The most important difference between the public sphere of civil society and a legislative assembly is that the former is not able or required to make binding political decisions and, thus, do not need to live up to the criterion of collective decision-making capacity (C5). The most important difference between civil-society politics and elections is that the former does not have the same representative functions and requirements of equal power as the latter. As part of the democratic system, the purpose of civil society is to detect new problems, give voice to marginalized groups, protest existing decisions, learn about one’s own and others’ interests and their connection to politics, and form a public opinion that can influence elections and legislative assemblies. According to Habermas (1996, 186, 307), these purposes require that civil society remains a “wild” complex with an “anarchic structure.”

**Table 3**  
Democratic arenas and their functions

Arena	Functions
Civil society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discover and articulate problems and preferences</li> <li>• Politicization and problematization</li> <li>• Protest and contest of political decisions</li> <li>• Motivate participation</li> <li>• Learning and opinion formation</li> </ul>
Election campaign	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide alternative programs</li> <li>• Competition and contestation</li> <li>• Motivate participation</li> <li>• Secure representation through responsiveness and accountability</li> </ul>
Legislative assembly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deliberation and negotiation</li> <li>• Cooperation</li> <li>• Decision-making</li> <li>• Legislating</li> </ul>

While it is crucial for the ability of civil society to serve its democratic purposes that it does not become structured along the same lines as the formal part of the democratic system and that it need not fulfill the exact same criteria, this does not mean that there are no democratic criteria for civil-society action. Indeed, the quality of civil society should be judged with the first four criteria (C1–4). However, the *type* of inclusion, contestation, respect, and enlightened understanding that we should expect and hope for in civil society differ from what is required in the formal political system, especially legislatures. Here I limit myself to indicating what this means in relation to the criteria of mutual respect (C3) and enlightened understanding (C4).

Consider first mutual respect (C3). In a legislative assembly, this norm is connected to a willingness to listen to others, cooperate with them, and to make the concessions needed for compromise (Rostbøll 2017; 2018).<sup>9</sup> Civil-society groups do not need to show these virtues, because the functions they have within the democratic system often can be realized only through more confrontational forms of action. Social movements are not always respectful of political opponents in the strong sense required for cooperation in legislative assemblies, but they further other democratic desiderata by bringing new issues to the agenda, including otherwise marginalized voices, and motivating participation (C1 and C2) (Mansbridge et al. 2012, 7, 19; Young 2001). The actions of social movements are often polarizing, both ideologically and affectively, and movements are often



engaged in enclave deliberation that entails group polarization. In evaluating the polarizing and disrespectful actions of social movements, it is crucial to remember in which arena they act and not subject them to the same criteria as, for example, political parties engaged in governing.<sup>10</sup> Thus, insofar as affective polarization motivates political participation and insofar as group polarization helps to generate new ideas, these might have a place in civil-society action, even if they are detrimental in legislative assemblies.

However, we should avoid a risk in the systemic approach, as this is programmatically laid out in Mansbridge et al. (2012), which is to justify all kinds of actions within the parts if they contribute positively to the democratic system as a whole. If civil-society action has the effect of including new voices or motivating participation by violating fundamental democratic norms such as mutual respect (for example, through racist speech or violence), it is normatively dubious to deem it “democratic” (Owen and Smith 2015). To judge actions only in terms of their *effects* on the democratic system, rather than on their intrinsic qualities, would be to treat some persons as means for the realization of some aggregate goal or state of affairs, which violates fundamental democratic norms of equality and mutual respect (C3). For this reason, I propose that while the different parts of the democratic system do not need to fulfill the democratic criteria in the *same way*, all the parts must satisfy democratic criteria such as mutual respect in some minimal sense. For example, insofar as affective polarization entails regarding political opponents as enemies to be eradicated, this cannot be regarded as “democratic” no matter its consequences in terms of mobilization or contestation. This is also because even if such forms of affective polarization might mobilize and include some groups, it is not itself based on a commitment to respect for norms of inclusion and contestation (C1 and C2) (Rostbøll 2023, 205-210).

Consider next enlightened understanding (C4). From the literature, we know that both affective polarization and group polarization can have negative epistemic effects (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar et al. 2019; Sunstein 2017). However, it has also been argued that there can be epistemic advantages to people clustering in groups of likeminded others (Mansbridge et al. 2012, 24; Sunstein 2017, 85-97). When people meet in likeminded groups, they are more likely to share their experiences and opinions and to get a hearing than in large diverse settings. By promoting otherwise invisible or silenced forms of knowledge, unearthing new information, and generating new types of arguments, enclave deliberation can counter “epistemic injustice” (Fricker 2007). Thus, when people deliberate among likeminded people in diverse groups, this can create a form of second-order epistemic diversity within the wider society (Sunstein 2017, 85-97).

To understand the value of second-order diversity requires us to take a systemic approach to democracy. It is the political role of civil society to form groups in which people can exchange experiences, become aware of their problems, and develop their political opinions. This form of learning is an essential part of developing enlightened understanding (C4). However, the challenge is that a society cannot benefit from second-order diversity if the different groups are isolated from one another and do not listen to one another. For the viewpoints of different civil-society groups to have a beneficial effect on societal learning, there needs to be an audience that is not polarized in the same way as the civil-society groups are (Mansbridge et al. 2012, 24). When enclave deliberation also leads to hatred and distrust of other groups (affective polarization) there will be no persuasion across group or party lines (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012, 428). The upshot of this brief analysis is that the kind of process that takes place in individual groups and the ones taking place in the mass public or among legislators need not be the same and need not be held to the same criteria. Different kinds of learning can take place at different sites of the democratic system, which means that polarization does not create the same problems everywhere.

I have argued that democracy should be seen as a complex system with different parts that partly divide democratic functions between them. This means that we cannot use the exact same standards to assess the democratic implications of (different kinds of) polarization in all political arenas. Commentators who speak of negative and positive effects of polarization in general terms fail to see how political work is and should be divided within the democratic system. I would finally like to argue that the way in which and the reason why polarization plagues many contemporary societies is connected to the fact that it does not respect the division of labor between different sites of the democratic system. Logics of conflict that belong to civil society are allowed to intrude on the formal part of the political system, and logics that are necessary and beneficial in electoral campaigns intrude on processes of legislation and governing. This problem cannot be understood by applying one universal standard to democratic politics as such, nor by indiscriminately speaking of too much polarization or the right kind of polarization. What level and kind of polarization is good or bad for democracy also depends on where it takes place. The problem for democracy is less the level of polarization or specific kinds of polarization, but that the same kinds of polarization are allowed to colonize all arenas. For democracy to work well, it is imperative that different arenas follow different logics and operate in different ways, which means (among other things) that they can tolerate and even benefit from different kinds and levels of polarization.

The breakdown of the proper division of political work between the different sites of the democratic system is

undoubtedly connected to the dysfunction or decline of political parties (Caramani 2017; Mair 2013; Pildes 2015). The traditional understanding of the function of political parties is to see them as linking civil society and the state, citizens, and government. However, it is important that this linking function does not involve a collapse of the separation of the informal and formal parts of the democratic system. For political parties to work well, they must be intermediary bodies that uphold the differentiation between civil-society (or movements) logics and political society (or party) logics (Arato and Cohen 2022, 53-106). A well-functioning party system institutionalizes pluralism, recruits and educates candidates, and ensures a form of regulated rivalry (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2020). Today, political parties in many places clearly fail to live up to these ideals. Political theorists have long neglected the democratic value of political parties but over the last two decades they have picked up the task of theorizing the proper place and form of political parties and partisanship in democratic systems (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2020). It takes us too far afield to consider the many interesting proposals in the normative literature on parties and partisanship, but I want to emphasize that we should not merely lament the decline of parties and party democracy nor try to find ways to return to some illusory golden age. Rather, we should think of reform proposals that respond to and fit present circumstances and challenges. My hope is that the conceptual and normative framework developed in this article—connecting different kinds of polarization, democratic criteria, and the diverse sites of political work—can guide further inquiry into the proper role and form of political parties in a well-functioning and differentiated democratic system.

## Conclusion

Current assessments of how political polarization affects democracy typically operate with unitary understandings of both polarization and democracy. However, polarization cannot be understood as a single phenomenon, and its different kinds affect different parts of the democratic system in distinct ways. This article has provided conceptualizations, criteria, and arguments that can contribute to a normatively informed and more differentiated analysis and discussion of the democratic implications of polarization. I have proceeded by indicating some blind spots in existing accounts and have sought to elucidate and remedy them. However, I am aware that my own analysis fails to cover the full complexity of the issue at hand. For example, I have not done enough to discuss the different implications of polarization at the elite level and among the mass electorate—even though it connects to the discussion of the different sites at which politics takes place. I have also not analyzed the potentially divergent effects of polarization on different kinds of democratic systems, for example, two-party versus multiparty systems, presidential versus

parliamentary systems, or systems with different degrees of constitutional checks and balances. To cover all aspects of the issue even more complexity must be part of the analysis and discussion.

Hence, whether different kinds of polarization at different sites of the democratic system have good or bad effects is not something on which I can definitively conclude here. To consider the short- and long-term effects of polarized opinions and polarizing action in different arenas requires a detailed and contextual analysis that goes beyond the scope of this article. My aim has been to demonstrate the importance of making such analysis for the democratic assessment of polarization, to suggest that it must be a combination of empirical, conceptual, and normative work, and to contribute some novel conceptual and normative orientation to this kind of work.

## Acknowledgements

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 2021; the Annual Meeting of the Nordic Network for Political Theory, 2021; the Annual Meeting of the Danish Political Science Association, 2022; and at seminars at Hamburg University, 2023; and the University of Arizona, 2023. The author would like to thank the organizers and participants. He is grateful for comments from Jonathan Benson, Peter Thisted Dinesen, Benjamin Carl Krag Egerod, Alice el-Wakil, Frederik Hjorth, Johanna Jauernig, Henrik Larsen, Wynne Walker Moskop, Peter Niesen, Tore Vincents Olsen, Ian O'Flynn, Viki Møller Lyngby Pedersen, Will Smith, and Christopher Zurn. Finally, he is grateful for feedback from the editors of *Perspectives on Politics* and four very constructive reviewers.

## Notes

- 1 For the importance of such a dialogue and how it can be conducted in different areas of research, see Biezen and Saward 2008; Sabl 2015; Thompson 2008.
- 2 For example, much of what Lijphart (1984) says about “consensus democracies” concerns what I would call compromise.
- 3 It might be thought that the very question of polarization belongs to non-ideal theory. However, if we include ideological disagreement as a form of polarization, there is room for this even within ideal theory (Rawls 1999, 171-2).
- 4 If affective polarization comes about through one's party distancing itself from the other party's wrongdoing, you might say that it is one party that is reasonable, rather than the polarization itself that is so. However, if polarization is created by one party distancing itself from the other, I still think it makes sense to speak of reasonable affective polarization—we

- just should remember that it does not mean that both parties are equally reasonable.
- 5 “Reasons” refer to the arguments or justifications people give or could give for feeling the way they do.
  - 6 Scholars of affective polarization may respond that the affective polarization that their studies have revealed is irrational. Moreover, we should note that researchers inspired by social psychology are motivated to push back against the prevailing assumption of rationality in studies of political behavior, rather than arguing that instrumental concerns do not play any role in political action (Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015). My point is that we should avoid a conceptualization of *affective* polarization that makes irrationality true by definition and should leave it a conceptually open question whether people’s negative affects towards opponents are irrational or not.
  - 7 In the text I have focused on the violations of democratic or procedural principles as good reasons for resentment and have not discussed violations of more substantive principles. My main aim is to make it plausible that there can be good reasons for resentment, not to delimit what would count as good reasons. The hope is that readers at a minimum would accept violations of democratic principles as a good reason for resentment and anger. The issue of substantive outcome principles raises more difficult questions. Moreover, the question of this article is whether polarization is good for democracy, not whether it is good for the promotion of a more substantive conception of justice.
  - 8 This does not mean that negative affects are always bad for democracy. Lepoutre (2018), for example, provides a compelling argument for the epistemic value of displays of anger in public discourse. However, more work needs to be done to connect an argument such as Lepoutre’s to the broader phenomenon of affective polarization.
  - 9 This description fits best multiparty systems and the U.S. Congress and less well Westminster systems. More work needs to be done to cover these differences.
  - 10 A full analysis would also consider the issue of power asymmetries among actors both within and between different political arenas. Which criteria are appropriate and which responsibilities a person has also depend on their power and authority.

## References

- Achen, Christopher H., and Larry M. Bartels. 2016. *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Almagro, Manuel. 2023. “Political Polarization: Radicalism and Immune Beliefs.” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 49(3): 309–31.
- APSA. 1950. “Part 1: The Need for Greater Party Responsibility.” *American Political Science Review* 44(3): 15–36.
- Arato, Andrew, and Jean L. Cohen. 2022. *Populism and Civil Society: The Challenge to Constitutional Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Biezen, Ingrid Van, and Michael Saward. 2008. “Democratic Theorists and Party Scholars: Why They Don’t Talk to Each Other, and Why They Should.” *Perspectives on Politics* 6(1): 21–35.
- Caramani, Daniele. 2017. “Will vs. Reason: The Populist and Technocratic Forms of Political Representation and Their Critique to Party Government.” *American Political Science Review* 111(1): 54–67.
- Carothers, Thomas, and Andrew O’Donohue, eds. 2019a. *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- . 2019b. “Comparative Experiences and Insights.” In *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization*, eds. Thomas Carothers and Andrew O’Donohue, 257–286. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Chambers, Simone. 2018. “Human Life is Group Life: Deliberative Democracy for Realists.” *Critical Review* 30(1-2): 36–48.
- Cohen, Jean L. 2019. “Populism and the Politics of Resentment.” *Jus Cogens* 1(1): 5–39.
- Cohen, Jean, and Andrew Arato. 1992. *Civil Society and Political Theory*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Craiutu, Aurelian. 2017. *Faces of Moderation: The Art of Balance in an Age of Extremes*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Cramer, Katherine J. 2016. *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dahl, Robert A. 1971. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- . 1989. *Democracy and its Critics*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Dewey, John. 1993 [1939]. “Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us.” In *The Political Writings*, ed. Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro, 240–245. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- DiMaggio, Paul, John Evans, and Bethany Bryson. 1996. “Have American’s Social Attitudes Become More Polarized?” *American Journal of Sociology* 102(3): 690–755.
- Dworkin, Ronald. 2000. *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Fiorina, Morris P., and Samuel J. Abrams. 2008. “Political Polarization in the American Public.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 11:563–88.
- Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Fukuyama, Francis. 2018. *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Gidron, Noam, and Peter A. Hall. 2020. "Populism as a Problem of Social Integration." *Comparative Political Studies* 53(7): 1027–59.
- Goodin, Robert E. 2005. "Sequencing Deliberative Moments." *Acta Politica* 40(2): 182–96.
- Graham, Matthew H., and Milan W. Svoblik. 2020. "Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States." *American Political Science Review* 114(2): 392–409.
- Gutmann, Amy, and Dennis Thompson. 2010. "The Mindsets of Political Compromise." *Perspectives on Politics* 8(4): 1125–43.
- . 2012. *The Spirit of Compromise: Why Governing Demands It and Campaigning Undermines It*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1996. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Trans William Rehg. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hare, Christopher, and Keith T. Poole. 2014. "The Polarization of Contemporary American Politics." *Polity* 46(3): 411–29.
- Huddy, Leonie, Lilliana Mason, and Lene Aarøe. 2015. "Expressive Partisanship: Campaign Involvement, Political Emotion, and Partisan Identity." *American Political Science Review* 109(1): 1–17.
- Iyengar, Shanto, Gaurav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes. 2012. "Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76(3): 405–31.
- Iyengar, Shanto, Yphtach Lelkes, Matthew Levendusky, Neil Malhotra, and Sean J. Westwood. 2019. "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States." *Annual Review of Political Science* 22:129–46.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1996. "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals." In *Practical Philosophy*. Trans. and ed. Mary Gregor, 37–108. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Landemore, Hélène. 2020. *Open Democracy: Reinventing Popular Rule for the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Lepoutre, Maxime. 2018. "Rage Inside the Machine: Defending the Place of Anger in Democratic Speech." *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 17(4): 398–426.
- Levendusky, Matthew S. 2010. "Clearer Cues, More Consistent Voters: A Benefit of Elite Polarization." *Political Behavior* 32(1): 111–31.
- Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die: What History Reveals about our Future*. New York: Viking.
- Lieberman, Robert C., Suzanne Mettler, and Kenneth M. Roberts. 2022. "How Democracies Endure: The Challenges of Polarization and Sources of Resilience." In *Democratic Resilience: Can United States Withstand Rising Polarization?* ed. Robert C. Lieberman, Suzanne Mettler, and Kenneth M. Roberts, 3–34. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lijphart, Arend. 1984. *Democracies: Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Lupu, Noam. 2015. "Party Polarization and Mass Partisanship: A Comparative Perspective." *Political Behavior* 37(2): 331–56.
- Mair, Peter. 2013. *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*. London: Verso Books.
- Mansbridge, Jane, James Bohman, Simone Chambers, Thomas Christiano, Archon Fung, John Parkinson, Dennis F. Thompson, and Mark E. Warren. 2012. "A Systemic Approach to Deliberative Democracy." In *Deliberative Systems*, ed. John Parkinson and Jane Mansbridge, 1–26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mason, Lilliana. 2015. "‘I Disrespectfully Agree’: The Differential Effects of Partisan Sorting on Social and Issue Polarization." *American Journal of Political Science* 59(1): 128–45.
- . 2018. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- May, Simon Cabulae. 2018. "No Compromise on Racial Equality." In *Compromise and Disagreement in Contemporary Political Theory*, ed. Christian F. Rostbøll and Theresa Scavenius, 34–49. New York: Routledge.
- McCarty, Nolan. 2019. *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know*<sup>®</sup>. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McCoy, Jennifer, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer. 2018. "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy." *American Behavioral Scientist* 62(2): 16–42.
- Mouffe, Chantal. 2009. *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso.
- . 2018. *For a Left Populism*. London: Verso.
- Muirhead, Russel. 2010. "Can Deliberative Democracy be Partisan?" *Critical Review* 22(2-3): 129–57.
- . 2014. *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Muirhead, Russell, and Nancy L. Rosenblum. 2020. "The Political Theory of Parties and Partisanship: Catching Up." *Annual Review of Political Science* 23:95–110.
- Müller, Jan-Werner. 2016a. "Capitalism in One Family." *London Review of Books* 38(23): 10–14.
- . 2016b. *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Mutz, Diana C. 2018. "Status Threat, Not Economic Hardship, Explains the 2016 Presidential



- Vote." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115(19): E4330–39.
- Owen, David, and Graham Smith. 2015. "Survey Article: Deliberation, Democracy, and the Systemic Turn." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 23(2): 213–34.
- Pappas, Takis S. 2019. *Populism and Liberal Democracy: A Comparative and Theoretical Analysis*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pildes, Richard. 2015. "How to Fix Our Polarized Politics? Strengthen Political Parties." In *Political Polarization in American Politics*, ed. Daniel J. Hopkins and John Sides, 155–160. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Rawls, John. 1999. *A Theory of Justice*. Rev. ed. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- . 2000. *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Roberts, Kenneth M. 2022. "Populism and Polarization in Comparative Perspective: Constitutive, Spatial and Institutional Dimensions." *Government and Opposition* 57(4): 680–702.
- Rostbøll, Christian F. 2008. *Deliberative Freedom: Deliberative Democracy as Critical Theory*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . 2017. "Democratic Respect and Compromise." *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 20(5): 619–35.
- . 2018. "Compromise and Toleration: Responding to Disagreement." In *Compromise and Disagreement in Contemporary Political Theory*, ed. Christian F. Rostbøll and Theresa Scavenius, 17–33. New York: Routledge.
- . 2021. "Second-Order Political Thinking: Compromise versus Populism." *Political Studies* 69(3): 559–76.
- . 2023. *Democratic Respect: Populism, Resentment, and the Struggle for Recognition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sabl, Andrew. 2015. "The Two Cultures of Democratic Theory: Responsiveness, Democratic Quality, and the Empirical-Normative Divide." *Perspectives on Politics* 13(2): 345–65.
- Sartori, Giovanni. 2005. *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis*. Colchester: ECPR Press.
- Schwartzberg, Melissa. 2018. "Uncompromising Democracy." In *Compromise*, ed. Jack Knight, 167–185. Nomos LIX. New York: New York University Press.
- Stavrakakis, Yannis. 2018. "Paradoxes of Polarization: Democracy's Inherent Division and the (Anti-) Populist Challenge." *American Behavioral Scientist* 62(1): 43–58.
- Sunstein, Cass R. 2009. *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2017. *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Tajfel, Henri. 1970. "Experiments in Intergroup Discrimination." *Scientific American* 223(5): 96–102.
- Tajfel, Henri, and John C. Turner. 1979. "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict." In *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel, 33–47. Monterey: Brooks/Cole.
- Talisse, Robert B. 2019. *Overdoing Democracy: Why We Must Put Politics in Its Place*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Theriault, Sean. 2015. "Partisan Warfare Is the Problem." In *Political Polarization in American Politics*, ed. Daniel J. Hopkins and John Sides, 11–15. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Thompson, Dennis F. 2008. "Deliberative Democratic Theory and Empirical Political Science." *Annual Review of Political Science* 11:497–520.
- Urbinati, Nadia. 2019. *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vachudova, Milada Anna. 2019. "From Competition to Polarization in Central Europe: How Populists Change Party Systems and the European Union." *Polity* 51(4): 689–706.
- Waldron, Jeremy. 1999. *Law and Disagreement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Warren, Mark E. 2017. "A Problem-Based Approach to Democratic Theory." *American Political Science Review* 111(1): 39–53.
- Young, Iris M. 2000. *Inclusion and Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2001. "Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy." *Political Theory* 29(5): 670–90.
- Zurn, Christopher F. 2022. "Populism, Polarization, and Misrecognition." In *Recognition: Its Theory and Practice*, ed. Onni Hirvonen and Heikki J. Koskinen, 131–149. London: Routledge.