POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Maxton Andrew Cline
Paul H. White
Department of Psychology

In the contemporary United States, the role of party identification has a unique significance for individuals. Although political parties have existed in the United States since its inception, recent trends highlight their ability to influence individuals. One such trend is the increased polarization of parties, defined by Layman and Horotwitz (2006) as the ideological divide between the two major political parties in the United States, the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. As they note polarization is symptomatic of an extreme tendency to have one's own decisions and behaviors be influenced by their membership to their respective political party.

By reviewing the literature on polarization, its recent rise seems to be undisputed. Abramowitz and Webster (2016) found using American National Election Studies that negative feelings towards the opposing party has seen a sharp increase since the 1980s. By taking a comparative approach, Lupu (2015) supports this finding and suggests this to be a phenomenon unique to the United States. The increase in political polarization is relevant as it reflects a prominent implicit preference with consequences in policy, elections, and every day political discourse between individuals. Although it is accepted to have risen since the 1980s, a further examination of the literature finds a more drastic rise in the past 20 years. The Pew Research Center conducted a study finding that in the mid 1990s, approximately 20 percent of each party's members had strong negative view of the other party, compared to 70 percent in August of 2017. ("Partisan Divide Grows Wider", 2017) A more recent rise since the mid 1990s suggests that more recent developments in society may serve as attributable factors to the overall increase of polarization. Thus, research focusing on recent developments must be explored.

Research suggests that some explanations of polarization rooted in recent developments are better than others. A study testing recent trends in city urbanization and suburbanization failed to find any evidence suggesting a link between the phenomena and polarization. (Walks, 2005) Another study examined the increased role of social cleavages within political party activism, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. This study found that despite the perceived connection between partisanship and social cleavages, some salient identities become more politically engaged than others, making the connection somewhat ambiguous. (Posner, 2017) However, an empirical examination of Twitter and polarization done by Conover et al. (2011) suggests a correlation between social media and polarization, which would fit the established narrative of political polarization's rise being attributable to recent developments, specifically developments in technology. Overall, the lack of findings regarding urbanization social cleavages compared to the discovered association for social media implies that polarization is a phenomenon uniquely tied to recent technological developments, and therefore more research must be done to account for this.

Another study examining the relationship between social media and polarization reveals this connection. Hong and Kim (2016) tested two main hypotheses regarding social media and polarization: one of social media decreasing polarization through "crosscutting interactions" and

another of social media increasing polarization through "echo chambers". Essentially, one hypothesis would argue that social media would allow users to interact with more members of the other party and come to understand them better (the "crosscutting interactions" hypothesis), whereas the other argues that it reinforces users' preexisting attitudes through facilitating news and feeds that align with their preference (the "echo chambers" hypothesis). It finds that the "echo chambers" hypothesis is the empirically supported, which implies that social media could be a cause for political polarization specifically due to its connection with implicit preference.

When discussing political polarization, it is best understood to be the result of implicit preferences. Implicit preferences are essentially nonconscious associations that one holds about a particular social group. (Staats, 2016) Although politically-charged rhetoric aimed at the opposite party can be explicit, the actual tendency for members of the two parties to have their behavior be tied to their political identity occurs on a nonconscious cognitive level, as confirmed by Lodge and Hamil (1986) who found that political polarization is best understood as a partisan schema for processing political information. The article specifically notes how this holds true for politicians and non-politicians alike. Thus, political polarization can be much better understood as a nonconscious preference rather than a behavior caused by certain behavioral, developmental, or clinical attributes. Therefore, political polarization is best understood as a cognitive phenomenon resulting from implicit preference

In order to explain the rise in political polarization, methods aimed at addressing implicit bias must be used. One such method is the Implicit Association Test (IAT). Developed by Psychologists Greenwald and Bananji, the IAT evaluates an individual's implicit preference between two groups by measuring their speed in a task that involves pairing each group with either positively or negatively connoted phrases. (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) The IAT takes the speed of four different combinations of social groups and positively or negatively connoted phrases and uses it to determine an individual's particular implicit bias as well as the degree (moderate, strong, slight) of bias that individual seems to possess. for example, the IAT measures how quickly an individual pairs the word Democrat with good words versus bad words". In fact, the IAT was used in a study by Lynegar and Westwood (2014) which used national survey data regarding feelings towards the opposite party as well as an IAT.

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