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A review and provocation: On polarization and platforms

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Abstract

Scholars increasingly point to polarization as a central threat to democracy—and identify technology platforms as key contributors to polarization. In contrast, we argue that polarization can only be seen as a central threat to democracy if inequality is ignored. The central theoretical claim of this piece is that political identities map more or less onto social groups, and groups are, in turn, located in social structures. As such, scholars must analyze groups as they are embedded in relations of power to meaningfully evaluate the democratic consequences of polarization. Groups struggling for equality, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, often cause polarization because they threaten the extant power and status of dominant groups. To develop a shared theoretical lens around polarization and its relationship with inequality, we take up the case of research on the role of platforms in polarization, showing how scholarship routinely lacks analysis of inequality.

Keywords

Democracy, platforms, polarization, political communication, social movements

In the summer of 2013, activists Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi created #BlackLivesMatter in the wake of the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of teenager Trayvon Martin (Jackson et al., 2020). A year later, the hashtag exploded into public view as it became the rallying cry for the Black Lives Matter protests in Ferguson,

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Missouri in the wake of the murder of Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson, and Wilson's subsequent acquittal (Freelon et al., 2018). The period of activism that followed was organized substantially on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook and grew especially intense following the police murder of George Floyd in May 2020, which lit night skies and screens around the United States and the world in the months leading up to the 2020 US presidential election. The movement, in turn, has advanced many policy goals, including criminal justice and police reform and reparations for centuries of slavery and injustice and has spurred new analyses of America's racial history and present-day inequalities and efforts in many institutional corners to redress racial and ethnic disparities (Rojas, 2020).

Black Lives Matter also provoked intense White "backlash" in the United States and beyond (Shahin et al., 2021—a recurring pattern, see Abrajano and Hajnal, 2015). Alongside the rise of Black Lives Matter, since 2014, "thin blue line" flags—symbols of solidarity with White police forces—began to grace Facebook pages, show up at Trump and Republican rallies and the Charlottesville "Unite the Right" rally, and fly on porches across White America (Shanahan and Wall, 2021). On Twitter, former President Trump called Black Lives Matter a "symbol of hate," referred to protestors as "THUGS," and—following clashes between protestors and police in Minneapolis after Floyd's murder—stated that "when the looting starts, the shooting starts." In June 2020, Republican Senator Tom Cotton (2020) of Arkansas took to the pages of the *New York Times* to brand movement protests as "riots" and stated that sending "in the troops" "to restore order" during Black Lives Matter protests would be equivalent to the use of the military to integrate Southern universities in the 1960s.

Amid all this there is a growing scholarly concern with a nation being torn apart by polarization. To many researchers, it is of foremost concern that Americans seemingly no longer respect or even tolerate one another, and fear the other side poses an existential threat to their very way of lives and livelihoods. For example, an influential article in *Science*, "Political Sectarianism in America" (Finkel et al., 2020), captured the prevailing view of many empirical researchers who, since the mid-2000s, have paid increasing attention to polarization. These leading scholars note that concerns over ideological polarization (i.e. polarization at the level of policy views) have largely been supplanted by fears over a broader "sectarianism" fueled by "affective" and "social" polarization. In this account, hardened social identities, and their distinct sorting into the two main parties in the United States, have given rise to othering and the dislike and distrust of the opposition, in addition to claims of moral superiority for one's own side.

These scholars, and many others, argue that the causes of this sectarian polarization are both political—such as the sorting of racial and other identities into distinct parties and the embrace of sectarianism by elites—and tied to broader shifts in media, including the rise of social media and platforms (e.g. Törnberg, 2022). Fittingly, these scholars spend considerable time thinking through what is to be done to mitigate this sectarianism, including platform interventions to encourage more thoughtful deliberation, crowd-sourcing false and hyperpartisan content, and algorithmic interventions to deemphasize supposedly harmful content in people's feeds. This article—and many more—reveals how polarization and platforms consume the field's imaginary when diagnosing our contemporary democratic ills and provides a reliable go-to for both blame and intervention.

In this article, we argue that the analysis and normative conclusions of much polarization research, and especially work on platforms in this context, are wrong. We put the literature on polarization into conversation with theoretical and empirical work on democratic inequality, especially focused on race and ethnicity in the United States. We show how scholarship on polarization and platforms, including affective polarization, is often silent when it comes to analysis of power and inequality—specifically differences in economic, social, and political status, and especially between different racial and ethnic groups. By contrast, the work of political historians, sociologists, and racial and ethnic studies researchers shows how the efforts of marginalized groups to achieve political and social equality—undertaken on and off platforms—often provoke powerful backlash from dominant groups, especially Whites in the United States. As such, this work tells us that efforts to remedy inequality often undermine social solidarity and drive increasing polarization. And yet, Reconstruction-era politics, the Civil Rights Movement, and Black Lives Matter have been central to moving the United States toward becoming a multiracial democracy.

Normatively, we argue that we cannot sacrifice equality and justice on the altar of social cohesion. Any consideration of the harmful democratic effects of polarization must address the fact that political inequality, especially in the context of White racial supremacy in the United States, has historically had far greater and more lasting de-stabilizing and anti-democratic effects, especially for non-White and non-dominant groups in society (Mulrooney, 2018). As an emerging body of research has begun to do (see, for example, McCoy et al., 2020; Voelkel et al., 2021; Westwood and Peterson, 2020), scholars should place questions of racial (and racist) power, social stratification, and their histories at the center of analysis of polarization, instead of promoting social cohesion over social equality and justice. This matters because the normative conclusions of polarization researchers spawn narrow research and policy agendas, including about platforms' role in exacerbating sectarianism and searches for elusive technological shifts that might promote greater social cohesion. From this stem policies—and especially technology policy—solving for solidarity, not equality.

Our foundational claim is that polarization might not be bad for democracy—it might in fact be a necessary outgrowth of efforts to achieve democracy. To support this argument, our article proceeds in three parts. First, we present an overview of platforms and polarization, laying a foundation for our critiques. This involves a review of various bodies of literature on polarization and their underlying normative concerns with solidarity. With this basis, we return to the literature on platforms and polarization, contextualized within the broader polarization work that illustrates much contemporary discourse about threats to American democracy. In the next major section, we turn to literatures on race and justice, showing that overriding concerns with solidarity often evacuate questions of power and equality—in essence, abandoning any consideration of the unequal terms upon which solidarity is so often premised. In this section, we consider extremism as a more apt concept than polarization in many instances. We also discuss the pro-social and pro-democratic antecedents of polarization, demonstrating that polarization is often the outcome of struggles for justice. Finally, we return to take up questions of platform policy, arguing that these powerful arbiters of the public sphere should be solving for democracy, not polarization. We offer a new normative and conceptual focus to guide future work.

Platforms: places for polarization or power struggles?

Movements for social equity and justice—and the virulent backlash to them—have centrally utilized platforms in their struggles over social, economic, and political power. Much contemporary political struggle plays out and is highly visible on social media platforms, which are vehicles for movements, candidates, elected officials, interest groups, advocacy organizations, and regular citizens alike to raise money and visibility, create symbols of political affiliation and group identity, foment social division, win adherents, advance ideas, contest frames, persuade the undecided, and advance favored interpretations of public issues. What many analysts point to as underlying problems of political discourse on social media are often the ways that groups pursue strategic forms of identity mobilization, collective action, social distinction, and even disinformation as tools in pursuit of power.

In this context, platforms have wrestled with their role as forums for political conflict and calls to mediate between movements for racial equality and backlash to them. In the end, many platforms prefer—like many of the scholars who study them—to dodge this complexity and instead apolitically focus on social cohesion through more civil discourse (e.g. Gillani et al., 2018). Research on the relationship between platforms and polarization provides a comparatively bounded literature to analyze the normative and analytical assumptions that animate the research on polarization, and public discourse, about threats to democracy in the United States. This literature has not only advanced a set of analytical and empirical claims about polarization—it plays a prominent role in policy debates around the role of platforms in political and social life and informs social debate about the democratic ills of the United States.

The polarization literature

Over the past decade, scholars have produced a voluminous body of literature on polarization and its harmful effects. Polarization is an expansive concept, understood broadly as the distance between groups across any number of politically relevant dimensions. It has varying dimensions depending on *whom* is polarized (elite vs mass) and *how* (ideology, social identities, affect, morals, and culture). Accordingly, scholars suggest that each of these dimensions likely have different potential democratic effects. We focus here primarily on the US literature on polarization, while at times drawing in perspectives from other countries.

One key premise in the global literature on democracy is that a base level of solidarity, or cohesion, is necessary for states to function (see Haggard and Kaufman, 2021). This means that at some fundamental level the groups that exist within a pluralistic society must accept one another as legitimate, even though they may have opposing values, interests, and ends. Groups must tolerate one another, accepting each other's right to exist and to advance their interests in private and public spheres. This tolerance is essential given that groups often define themselves *through* drawing boundaries with others (Smith, 2003). It is often socially and politically powerful to create and draw hard edges around a shared identity, conjure a clear opposition, and define competing interests, especially through media spheres that support building, maintaining, and contesting political power (Squires, 2002). As such, some level of polarization is an endemic feature of social and political life. Polarization becomes problematic, however, when it is so extreme as to erode the legitimacy of opposing groups, the tolerance that democratic co-existence is premised upon and faith among partisans that the other side will continue to engage in free and fair elections (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021), the epistemic underpinnings of democracy (MacKenzie et al., 2021), or democratic norms and rights (e.g. Kingzette et al., 2020).

Within the vast literature on polarization, there are a number of important distinctions, all of which are part of various subfields and debates. For a long time, the crux of the debate centered on elite versus mass polarization, mostly on ideological grounds, such as policies and issue preferences (for a review, see Mason, 2018). Social polarization refers broadly to the distinctions between social groups along various lines of division, which can take on political implications through the workings of partisanship (Goodman et al., 2022; West and Iyengar, 2020). Affective polarization captures feelings of like and dislike or trust and mistrust between various social or political groups (Wagner, 2021). Moral polarization has received considerably less attention but refers broadly to the ways that differences in values map onto social and political groupings (Tappin and McKay, 2019). Cultural polarization broadly can be taken to mean differences in worldviews as they are mapped onto underlying psychological dispositions (Hetherington and Weiler, 2009). All these things are interrelated in ways that are hard to separate out causally.

Polarization is fundamentally relational—it refers to how far apart people or groups are from one another across these various dimensions, such as their support for certain policies, feelings about elements of social life and groups within it, values, or preferences for what can broadly be described as ways of life. To be far apart on any of these dimensions, groups must be internally consistent or coherent in a way that sets them apart from other groups (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008). While often conflated with partisanship in public discourse, the two concepts are fundamentally different. Partisanship is an *identity* ultimately linked to institutional politics (i.e. parties); polarization is concerned with the relations between any salient groups in society that share an overarching interest, affiliation, or identity—including partisans. Rarely does this literature analyze how social groups emerge, form, and become politically salient, but related literatures argue these are dynamic processes embedded in social structural relations (e.g. Laamanen et al., 2020).

Partisanship encompasses many different types of groups, especially in a two-party system like the United States—and therefore plays a key role in scholarly analyses of polarization. As Mason (2018) has powerfully shown, in the US partisanship maps closely onto other important social differences, such as religion, geography, race and ethnicity, and class. Partisanship is a mega-identity that encompasses these other deeply held identities, making it more consequential. Being a Democrat or Republican stands for many significant forms of social affiliation from religious beliefs and racial and ethnic identity to cultural preferences, and therefore politics is perceived by many as literally a matter of fundamental ways of life which come under threat during electoral politics and must be defended. Partisan elites then are significantly incentivized to frame politics in these ways as well for electoral gain (Rosenfeld, 2017). Indeed, much of political communication consists of elites and organized groups in various domains of social life—from politics and religion to organized lifestyle pursuits—not only defining their social identities, but mapping them onto politics in various ways, from articulating their policy preferences to advocating for their interests (Kreiss et al., 2019; McCoy and Somer, 2019).

In the United States, concerns over affective forms of polarization especially are rising among scholars. As noted above, affective polarization relates to the ways that partisans *feel* about one another—also known as "negative partisanship" (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016; Ridge, 2020). For instance, (Iyengar et al., 2012) chronicle the rise of affective polarization in the United States—including how it looks different in the country versus others (where ideological polarization is a more common phenomenon). Affective polarization encompasses negative emotions felt toward out-groups, but also attributions of traits to members of out-groups (such as things like patriotism and greed) and perceived social distance (how partisans perceive out-group members as not being a part of their social worlds). The concern here is chiefly around the ways that there are real or perceived differences between people and social groups, which, in turn, leads partisans to have negative feelings about out-parties or, more broadly, groups with which their identities do not align.

In the United States, researchers have also examined social polarization. Scholars analyze how social groupings map onto political ones—the social sorting that Mason (2018) details. The concern here is that group differentiation undermines larger social cohesion. In classic work, Tajfel and Turner (1979) broadly detail how groups compete over status based on fundamental human needs for identity, inclusion, and differentiation. People have multiple group memberships but also a self-concept that relates to their social identity. As a result, people have stronger, more emotional attachments to the groups with which they primarily identify (i.e. "social identity complexity"—see Roccas and Brewer, 2002). The more identities align within larger groupings—in the political space, for instance, when being a Democrat also means being secular, living in an urban environment, and so on—the stronger the differentiation with out-groups and the less tolerance people have toward them and their members (Levendusky, 2009). When partisanship maps onto other large, salient, and meaningful social divisions—such as race and ethnicity, religion, and geography—it likely means that people have fewer identities that overlap with those of members of the opposing party and this potentially leads them to experience more negative feelings toward out-groups and more intense emotional conflicts (i.e. affective polarization), decreased tolerance, and heightened group conflicts. As Mason (2018) clearly shows, these conflicts are often divorced from policy disagreements; instead, they are conflicts over group status—ultimately a question of power, which we return to in greater detail below. Pulling these threads together, recent work has argued that a new "sectarianism" has emerged, wherein political identities coalesce and drive aversion to, othering of, and moral superiority over the other side—and scholars posit that platforms are fueling these dynamics (Finkel et al., 2020).

Platforms and polarization

Despite the outsized attention and criticisms platforms receive, the empirical link between platforms and polarization is complicated and, ultimately, inconclusive. While a recent systematic review of empirical studies about social media and polarization finds that media and social media use generally increase ideological and affective polarization (Kubin and Von Sikorski, 2021), these authors also note that there are significant methodological issues in the literature: poorly conceptualized definitions of "ideological" and "affective" polarization, inconsistent results, and an over-reliance on studies of Twitter. Panel studies, meanwhile, have found that individuals' prior degree of polarization affected their social media use (Nordbrandt, 2021). At the same time, other literatures suggest that platforms are responsible for algorithmically amplifying content that antagonistically divides members of political parties and these algorithms interact with human psychology to create misperceptions about the beliefs and composition of partisan and social outgroups (Bail, 2021).

There are other literatures that add further complication to these findings. Despite significant attention from researchers and journalists, very few people use social media or other platforms to discuss explicitly political topics, such as policies or issues. Politics is ultimately a very limited part of life for most people (Krupnikov and Ryan, 2022; see also Barber and McCarty, 2015). And, studies have noted that increases in polarization are generally among people who have the least amount of Internet use (Boxell et al., 2020). Research has also debated the link between "filter bubbles," "echo chambers," and polarization. While these concerns have significant cultural currency, including in policy debates at the highest level, the empirical evidence for a clear link between them is scarce (for a review, see Bruns, 2019). A bevy of empirical studies has shown that social media is actually more closely associated with exposure to a diverse array of information (e.g. Fletcher and Nielsen, 2017; Guess et al., 2018; Möller et al., 2018), including from ideologically cross-cutting individuals in extended networks brought together through context collapse online and social sharing (e.g. Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016).

In the end, as Dahlgren (2021) has compellingly argued, much of the literature on filter bubbles is actually not primarily concerned with platforms but with human psychology, and specifically motivated reasoning and selective exposure (e.g. Allcott et al., 2020; Asker and Dinas, 2019; Rathje et al., 2021). Highly partisan and politically knowledgeable people exposed to a diversity of cross-cutting views are often the most polarized because they have the psychological resources to steel themselves against other groups and information (Beam et al., 2018; Kearney, 2019; Zhu et al., 2021). Even when echo chambers *do* exist, they do so often deliberately as activists create "safe spaces" (Kanai and McGrane, 2020) or "counter-publics" (Jackson et al., 2020) to pursue their political goals, making their normative democratic implications less clear.

Most of the literature on platforms focuses on ideological polarization and has an informational bias. This has a long history in communication and political science research, but a spate of recent work argues for understanding democracy primarily through identity-based frameworks (Achen and Bartels, 2016; Egan, 2020; Jardina, 2019; Kreiss et al., 2020; Kuo and Marwick, 2021; Lane et al., 2021; Mason, 2018; Reddi et al., 2021; Sides et al., 2018). Much of political identity performance takes place on social media, where politicians and publics alike utilize platform affordances and the norms and genres of communication on them to co-construct partisan and social identities (Kreiss et al., 2018, 2020). And while there are social identities that are not politicized, recent evidence shows people bring their social identities in line with their partisan identities (Egan, 2020).

In affording the symbolic and social action of groups, media and platforms constitute the very arena of political struggle. Platforms amplify particular forms of political communication through their technical architectures, such as promoting extreme and emotional content that can be easily monetized (Bail, 2021; Noble, 2018), even as their policies also shape the form and content of political discourse (see Gillespie, 2018; Kreiss and McGregor, 2018). Over time, through their architectures and monetization strategies, platforms provide incentives for particular forms of political symbolic action over others (i.e. memes, extremist content, performative politics, etc.) (Van Dijck et al., 2018), reward the political groups predisposed to them or that utilize them effectively (Schradie, 2019), and otherwise have power to structure attention and relations in the public sphere (Nielsen and Ganter, 2022). They also might reward groups that were at a structural disadvantage in offline settings (i.e. White nationalists that can now find each other and organize more easily in the face of geographic dispersion) (Miller-Idriss, 2022; Swain, 2002).

Accordingly, work on the identitarian aspects of polarization provides evidence about the incentives that platform structures create and their possible effects—although how this plays out varies significantly across platforms (Yarchi et al., 2021). For example, Settle (2018) argues that the affordances of social media platforms might heighten polarization through the algorithmic creation of incentives for engaging content (i.e. that which is emotionally resonant and inflammatory), the display of visible political identity cues, structured expectations of immediate responsiveness to content, and the blending of various political, social, and cultural worlds and content. As a result, Settle argues that social media play a role in creating a greater awareness of and the entwining and hardening of political and social identities, leading to greater distinctions between political in- and out-groups and the creation of more negativity about outgroups. Relatedly, Levendusky (2009, 2013a, 2013b, 2023), who has written extensively about media and polarization, argues that social media contribute to the extremism and political engagement of their users, which, in turn, gets amplified by media reporting (see also McGregor, 2019). In fact, politically engaged users who comment online are unusually engaged and polarized—and when they post toxic comments, those garner increased likes (and thus exposure) which spurs more toxicity in future comments (Kim et al., 2021; see also Hutchens et al., 2019).

All of this leads to distorted perceptions of the other side, including the sense that outgroups are more partisan and extreme than they really are (Bail, 2021). On social media, users interact through affordances of platforms in different ways from as face-to face interaction. Bail (2021) argues that this disjuncture between social media and “real life” helps drive much political polarization through the ways that it makes those who hold more extreme political views more visible. In this account (Bail, 2021), people themselves matter, specifically how they use social media to perform their identities, differentiate themselves from others, seek status, and engage in their passions—including politics—that might turn other people off from them *and* create skewed perceptions of the political opposition (including distorting people’s perceptions about the robust number of Americans who seek compromise, see Wolak, 2020).

Despite these empirical findings, there are significant normative and conceptual issues with this literature—which also exist in the context of polarization research itself. Work on polarization—whether online or off—overwhelmingly treats polarization as *ends neutral*. These veins of scholarship lack detailed attention to democratic problems, such as social and political inequality. As such, they often fail to place concerns about platforms and polarization within a meaningful political and social context that must necessarily shape the democratic conclusions we should draw. For example, even when polarization might be exacerbated or amplified by platforms, not all extremism, incivility, and/or toxicity is created equal. As Rossini (2020) has demonstrated through an analysis sensitive to context, intolerance is especially a concern, and more prevalent, when it threatens "minorities, activists, and civic organizations . . . precisely when and where it threatens democratic values the most." In contrast, much of the literature frames pro- and anti-democratic performances of political identities, deployment of moral language, and unwillingness to seek compromise as equally bad, as if we should equate Black Lives Matter and Stop the Steal.

Polarization and struggles for equality and justice

Scholarly conceptions of polarization, on platforms and beyond, have overwhelmingly focused on its harmful democratic effects. Scholars have argued for polarization's role in policy gridlock (McCarty, 2019), growing forms of ideological and policy extremism (Shor, 2015), and conflict and "war" oriented framing of politics and policy by political elites (Kalmoe et al., 2018). Some argue that polarization is a key factor behind the rise of authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, and internecine and deadly ethnic and racial conflict (Campbell, 2018; Klein, 2020). Polarization may fuel performative forms of politics focused on claiming symbolic victories or digging into positions to rally partisans to a cause, which elites often have electoral and media incentives to pursue and to which audiences have psychological dispositions to respond (Scacco et al., 2018).

Others argue that polarization fuels the separation of groups into different information environments, driving them further apart, undermining the opportunity for political conversation to be based on a shared set of facts, and ultimately eroding political accountability (Orhan, 2021). Polarization can make parties less likely to cooperate or negotiate. In highly polarized societies political actors and institutions also might be more willing to, and have greater ability to, take steps to limit the political opposition through extrajudicial means, the breaking of democratic norms, or even resorting to dismantling laws or engaging in violence (see Graham and Svolik, 2020; LeBas, 2018; McCoy and Somer, 2021; Svolik, 2019). Broadly, having fewer persuadable voters switching sides given strong partisanship and polarization raises the stakes of electoral politics, and political actors have strong incentives to double down on existing coalitions and may find increased support for anti-democratic behavior (Graham and Svolik, 2020; Kingzette et al., 2020), or, at the very least, the lack of sanctions for that behavior (McCoy and Somer, 2021; see also McCoy and Somer, 2019). And polarization can beget more polarization—income inequality, which often overlays onto racial inequalities, drives political polarization, which, in turn, drives extreme policies that exacerbate inequalities (McCarty et al., 2016). Over the last 40 years, for instance, Americans have become increasingly polarized along partisan lines as to whether socioeconomic inequality is driven by individual behavior or systemic societal inequities (Suhay et al., 2022).

Despite this body of work, other scholarship has begun to debate how much polarization is bad for democracy, what kinds, and among whom. Some studies have questioned the link between affective polarization and support for anti-democratic norms (Broockman et al., 2022). Other work finds that reducing polarization *does not* change anti-democratic attitudes (Voelkel et al., 2021), even when a polarized partisan's own party is in power (McCoy et al., 2020). Even as there are clear dangers to polarization, blanket condemnation of polarization can miss its *beneficial* democratic effects (McCoy and Somer, 2021). Polarization provides citizens with a clear and coherent set of electoral choices (Drutman, 2020; Wickham-Jones, 2020). Meanwhile, McCoy and Somer (2021) conceptualize polarization as a "political strategy for achieving particular ends"—dividing the public into groups, pitting them against one another, and constructing enemies through narratives and stories that create political identities while making them salient is an endemic, important, and often normatively benign feature of routine politics. Polarization, in this sense, can fuel participation and policy-making.

Extremism in place of equidistant "poles"

At the same time, a number of scholars argue that what is really of concern is not polarization, but extremism. If scholars and other institutions readily embrace liberal democracy as a normative democratic value (see Scacco and Coe, 2021)—in the sense of the rule of law, protection of rights, and elections—polarization and extremism must be kept clearly distinct. And yet, in much of the research literature on polarization, and on polarization and platforms, there is scant analysis of the *poles* (in "polarization") themselves. The dominant methodological approaches in polarization research, such as "feeling thermometers" and broad, general party labels to measure feelings toward in- and out-groups (for a review, see Iyengar et al., 2019), evacuate the actual *politics* of the poles. As a concept, extremism generally means distance from a political "center," but it should also be evaluated in relation to liberal democracy (see Marwick et al., 2022). It would be wrong to equate anti-democratic extremism, for instance, with movements for gender, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, queer/questioning, intersex, and allied/asexual/aromantic/agender (LGBTQIA)+ and racial equality that are fundamentally about creating political equality for social groups, even if these movements are at 'extreme' poles. As a concept, however, polarization does not provide a normative or even conceptual way of distinguishing between White supremacists and racial justice activists, despite their asymmetrical relationship to liberal democracy.

Research on the asymmetrical rise of anti-democratic extremism, tactics, and media on the political right substantiates this point (see, for example, Benkler et al., 2018; Freelon et al., 2020). In the United States, it is ironic that fears over polarization have arisen at the same time as the increasing anti-democratic extremism of the Republican Party (see Jackson, 2020; White, 2018). Polarization researchers often do note this in passing, although they too often fail to tease out the implications of this fact. There are many aspects of this extremism: a widespread embrace of "anti-democratic White Christian nationalism" (Perry et al., 2022), White nativism (Du Mez, 2020), an increasing willingness to tolerate violence and reject election outcomes (Kalmoe and Mason, 2022), an embrace of disinformation as a political tactic (Kuo and Marwick, 2021), and the rejection of pluralism and multi-ethnic democracy (Frey et al., 2022). This extremism culminated in the stunning embrace by many Republican elites of anti-democratic questioning of the 2020 US presidential election, both in its run up and aftermath (Benkler et al., 2020), and the attempted coup by Trump and his supporters on January 6, 2021 (Cline Center, 2022).

On the flip side of anti-democratic extremism, we have pro-democratic movements for political equality and social justice. In this context, scholars see polarization as the potential (indeed, likely) *outcome* of pro-democratic movements. McCarty (2019) argues we should not worry about polarization in and of itself, but too much polarization, and suggests that polarization might be the result of the ways that pro-democratic movements—such as the Civil Rights Movement in the United States (McAdam and Kloos, 2014) and LGBTQIA + movement (Bishin et al., 2020)—advanced their claims through the Democratic Party. Indeed, much of the broader polarization literature is framed against a supposedly normatively desirable time of less polarization—one that coincided with the existence of White racial authoritarian states in the US South that both political parties generally upheld (Weaver and Prowse, 2020).

Race, inequality, and polarization

To take an example, the polarization literature within communication and political science is generally, and often completely, silent about inequality. And yet, political identities map more or less onto social groups (Mason, 2018). Social groups, in turn, map onto social structures (Grusky, 2019). Social structures necessarily mean social differentiation, or fundamental differences in power. Therefore, any assessment of the implications of polarization for democracy must first account for social differentiation, especially in terms of inequality and power. Scholars who abstract polarization away from social structures and social differentiation see the primary democratic concern in terms of the lack of social cohesion and social solidarity. Scholars who proceed from an analysis of social, political, economic, or cultural inequality, in contrast, see polarization as the outcome of struggles for justice because it arises from challenges to dominant groups.

Research has consistently found that technology platforms also *further* pro-democratic movements for political equality, which are often premised on moral claims, the performance and maintenance of collective identities, and amplification of engaging content that builds in-group solidarity (Jackson et al., 2020; Richardson, 2020)—all of which scholars decry in the context of polarization. The struggles of pro-democratic social movements—often at least in part organized and highly visible on social media—often lead to greater polarization because they threaten the status and power of dominant groups (Hooker, 2017). The failures of the polarization literature to consider the political and structural dimensions of contentions over power and efforts to achieve equality is such that in Kubin and Von Sikorski (2021)'s extensive review of the literature, "inequality" is simply used as a policy measure of ideological polarization—not as a measure of the comparative status, power, or ends of opposing groups. At the same time, political communication—the home of much polarization scholarship—often highlights the role social media play in pro-democratic movements in hybrid and authoritarian regimes (e.g. Howard and Parks, 2012; Tufekci and Wilson, 2012; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013). Yet this literature often fails to explicate the roles social media play in backsliding or failed democratic regimes. And, the field has largely turned a blind eye to polarization in non-democratic regimes.

We believe that in the United States, and in many countries around the world with high social stratification especially along racial and ethnic lines (see Mamdani, 2020), polarization is occurring as formerly marginalized groups assert their right to political and economic equality. The United States is fundamentally a young democracy (Berman, 2017), only becoming truly multi-racial and multi-ethnic since the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, yet still marked by long-standing racial inequalities in political participation, wealth, and health and educational outcomes. In this light, emphasizing solidarity over and above equality means necessarily embracing *status quo* inequality. As Hooker (2009) argues:

> For nonwhites, the lack of commitment . . . to remedy historical injustices and present inequalities belies claims of shared citizenship; meanwhile, whites tend not to recognize such inequalities as problems of justice and therefore to perceive the demands of nonwhites for redress as the main threats to solidarity.

Hooker (2009) argues that this is a “racialized politics of solidarity” (p. 12). Arguments for solidarity—whether fellow feeling, tolerance, commitment to the common good, or even a commitment to a shared set of rules governing the exercise of power—over justice means the embrace of unequal racial social orders, especially in the US context.

While an underlying driver behind threats to solidarity, and by extension the increasing polarization in democracies such as the United States, is the push by non-dominant groups to achieve political and social equality, in our era social media has shaped and facilitated these movements (Brown, 2021; Freelon et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2020; Richardson, 2019). And, the United States is not the only country to witness fundamental challenges to its dominant racial order, especially through the organizational power of social media, which, in turn, has provoked affective, social, and political polarization (e.g. Lentin and Titley, 2011), including backlash organized on social media. To take a recent example that played out across social media, “Brexit” revealed how White Britons acted politically upon their “ethnocentric anxieties” in the face of the demographic shifts that threatened their dominant racial status (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020).

From a normative democratic theoretical perspective then, it is a mistake to elevate polarization as *the* primary concern as opposed to underlying social and political inequality. Inequality must be a foremost democratic concern (Glasser et al., 2009; Hanchard, 2018; Mills, 2017). Such a commitment would require centering analysis of social groups and their embrace of democracy and willingness to tolerate political and social inequality. This analysis poses a difficult set of questions for the polarization literature. For example, should citizens extend tolerance toward anti-democratic actors, ideas, and actions in the name of reducing polarization? Is it truly bad, from a democratic perspective, if some citizens feel socially distant from, or have negative feelings toward, members of an opposing party that act illiberally or that deny the existence of an unequal racial order? Must the legitimacy of the opposition always be honored, even if the opposition holds views or engages in actions that are anti-democratic or are premised upon upholding a *status quo* that violates political and social equality? While the answers to these questions are complicated, analyses of polarization abstract them away entirely by focusing rather narrowly on perceptions of outgroups rather than *justified* perceptions of outgroups against the baseline of normative democratic commitments.

Indeed, if polarization is perhaps a necessary byproduct of the struggle to realize democracy in unequal societies, left quite unresolved in much of the polarization literature, and especially its empirical variants, is the question of power and which political actors are deserving of tolerance and legitimacy in a democracy in the first place. And even when scholars do note underlying conflicts over things such as status, they often fail to account for the social stratification that forms the empirical baseline upon which all group conflicts arise. Questions of justice and civic solidarity are centrally and fundamentally about race in many countries, particularly the United States (Mills, 2017). In emphasizing concerns over polarization at all costs, scholars put their thumb on the scale for social cohesion instead of for social justice.

Platforms and polarization in new normative and conceptual focus

Platforms cannot solve for the underlying political problems at the root of polarization, and especially the racial and ethnic divisions that are fundamentally concerned with social power. Platforms ultimately cannot remove the incentives that political and other leaders have to create and harden social divisions in pursuit of political power. Platforms cannot solve for the deep cultural well of social and political history that structures groups and their identities, values, and political conflicts. And, even if platforms work to solve for things such as emotional content, this can also work to the detriment of pro-democratic social movements that utilize forms of moral commmunication in their efforts to realize democracy.

The extensive literature on platforms and polarization is marked by conceptual issues. Scholars have found it difficult—although they have certainly tried—to distinguish things such as polarization *from* social media use in contrast to polarization as played out *on* social media. Are people polarized because they use social media? Are they already polarized from numerous other factors in their lives—such as elite appeals, social sorting, talk radio, or what they hear in the pews and other social spaces? And, as detailed above, is polarization itself democratically problematic, or largely the outcome of struggles over inequality?

Polarization on social media is very visible online to researchers, journalists, and citizens themselves (see Peters, 2021; Settle, 2018). But other contexts that might have greater effects on polarization—such as church services, television and radio, social outings, geographic residential patterns, and the like—are largely hidden from outside gaze. Even more, the search for short, time-delimited effects in a causal sense is simply not compatible with what we know about polarization *over time*. Polarization likely builds through countless encounters with and across media, in offline contexts, as well as interpersonally (see Broockman et al., 2022), because across its many forms it is fundamentally identity-based. Identities, like political attitudes, are not crafted from discrete individual bits of content, they are forged over lifetimes of encounters that spill forth from navigating daily life—not to mention the endurance of social groups over generations in history, laws, and culture (e.g. Richardson, 2020). Social media is merely one aspect of that milieu, albeit an increasingly important one.

The *Science* article cited in the introduction (Finkel et al., 2020) reveals the state of the field's thinking with respect to polarization. These leading scholars identify how sectarian "othering," "aversion," and "moralization" drives polarization and argue that sectarianism itself is caused by the social sorting of the electorate into large partisan camps and shifts in the media ecosystem, especially the rise of platforms, as well as elite political dynamics.

This work, among the strongest in its tradition, begs conceptual and normative reevaluation. First, it is notable that there is an implicit equivalence between sectarians in this work—othering, aversion, and moralization is not only something that afflicts both sides of the partisan aisle, but it is seemingly also equally harmful to democracy regardless of the social locations of those advancing these claims. Second, there is no consideration of the political or social goals of the two sides, or any attempt at an evaluation of what ends might be democratically desirable to pursue. And third, the article reveals how platforms are central to the field's imaginary.

All three premises are considerably lacking as analytical and empirical claims. Putting sectarians on the same democratic or moral plane through false equivalence necessarily equates struggles to defend an existing racial and unequal social order with struggles to democratize this order. The piece entirely overlooks the massive body of work on the contemporary Republican Party in the United States as a coalition of Whites, and White Christian nationalists, fueled in no small part by backlash to perceived (and actual) threats to their status in the racialized American polity (e.g. Perry et al., 2022). In the process, the article posits that othering, aversion, and moralization is equally harmful across sectarian lines, and does not recognize them as potential communicative tools for groups struggling for equality and justice. Even more, for an article with so many ties to the field of political science, the absence of a diagnosis of power is surprising. Indeed, it would appear from this article that sectarians are fighting over nothing, mere misperceptions of the opposing side—or, at worst, that the public is the plaything of crass polarizing political elites. And yet, reams of other work show that the parties not only stand for distinct things, but there is also very real power at stake (e.g. McAdam and Tarrow, 2018; Panebianco et al., 1988): the power to define who is a citizen, who is entitled to government benefits, whose history of America we tell, and who is entitled to equal protection under the law. Just so we are clear about the stakes—it is hard to say it is a mere matter of perception to the young adult seeking citizenship under the DREAM Act, the Black people who benefit disproportionately from college loan forgiveness programs, the trans child who does not have a right to use a bathroom that accords with their gender identity in their public school, or non-White people who seek to have their histories in America validated and the country's history of slavery and colonization not only acknowledged, but redressed.

In the end, in preeminent veins of polarization scholarship, it is as if researchers looked across the landscape of American history, saw a racial group with 200+years of social, cultural, political, legal, and economic dominance premised on both violence and law, assessed challenges to this by Black people and other people of color, and walked away with the diagnosis that the problem is both sides. Even more, in scholarship on polarization and platforms, researchers often entirely overlook the substantial literature that shows that social media are also tools for pursing justice and accountability. After all, another phrase for "sectarianism" is "social justice movement"—and those pursuing justice are often institutionalized within the Democratic Party. And, platforms are central to these movements' efforts at mobilizing, witnessing, and accountability, often through moral and emotional claims that, yes, clearly identify those who would defend the positions of Whites and other dominant groups at the top of the political order as deserving of moral condemnation and distrust. We think that American history more than validates this view.

Finally, let us take the Black Lives Matter movement as a case of a movement for racial justice and but one example of the significant role platforms—and indeed polarization—play in the fight for equality and rights. Social media—especially the use of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter—allowed the movement to scale rapidly (Mundt et al., 2018), as well as to gain significant mass media attention (Freelon et al., 2018) and disrupt counter-narratives (Gallagher et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2020). The movement bridged collective action and connective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011) as on-the-ground protests were fueled by and organized on social media. Coverage of these protests against police brutality also influenced people's attitudes about the movement, which, in turn, further drove social media engagement with the movement (Mourão and Brown, 2022). And, use of the hashtag led to increased press coverage of police brutality, which, in turn, drove attention to the issue from political elites (Freelon et al., 2018). Meanwhile, members of Congress were polarized in their communications about the movement on social media. Democratic members were vocal with concerns about police brutality while their Republican counterparts, though less vocal on the topic on the whole, tweeted criticisms (often unfounded) of violent protests (Panda et al., 2020).

The Black Lives Matter movement has shaped White Democrats' views about racial justice. Social media enabled and invited widespread participation in the story of the movement, evidenced by the myriad stories Black people shared about their experiences with police violence and systemic racism (Carney, 2016). On social media, White people engaged with the movement including seeking out and sharing information on Twitter—such as amplifying marginalized voices—as key aspects of their path toward anti-racist work and allyship with the movement (Clark, 2019). Similarly, research finds that public displays of support for Black Lives Matter from non-Black people led others who share a racial identity to view the movement and its goals more positively (Arora and Stout, 2019).

While the movement's significant presence on social media platforms enabled its progress, so too did platforms clearly extend its reach into the mass public. In the years since the movement started in 2013, public opinion polls show a significant and growing partisan gap between White Americans on an oft-used measure of racism—a racial resentment scale (Jardina and Ollerenshaw, 2022). This gap is largely driven by increasingly pro-Black attitudes among White Democrats. In the same analysis, Jardina and Ollerenshaw show that White Democrats support the government providing socioeconomic assistance to Black Americans at the same levels as do Black Americans. And yet, the authors note, "It is clear that white partisans have perhaps never been as polarized in their racial attitudes and policy preferences as they are today" (Jardina and Ollerenshaw, 2022: 585). We see this polarization—driven largely by White Democrats' increasingly liberal attitudes about race—as a normative good in a democracy premised on equal rights.

As the Jardina and Ollerenshaw study suggests, polarization among Whites may be helpful for the Black Lives Matter movement, such that the polarization manifests from increased support for policies that align with the goals of the movement. The movement—like the election of America's first Black president—laid bare how White racist backlash is institutionalized within the Republican Party. The resistance to anti-racist progress, in part an electoral strategy of Republican elites, appeared across many aspects of society and was especially prevalent and persistent across social media. Popular alternative slogans propagated by Republican elites and partisans on social media, such as All Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter, function to deny the systemic discrimination that Black people face and are thus in service of maintaining the racist *status quo* (Gallagher et al., 2018; Goodman et al., 2022). Research also challenges the claims of counter-narratives such as All Lives Matter. For White Americans, those with a higher orientation toward social dominance (i.e. the belief that an unequal *status quo* is justified and must be maintained) have, unsurprisingly, negative views about Black people even as they rhetorically espouse support for all lives:

> Despite the claims of Blue Lives Matter and All Lives Matter activists, we find that opposition to Black Lives Matter is *not* driven by the idea that all lives matter equally; instead, it is driven by the belief that non-Black lives should matter more than the lives of African Americans (Holt and Sweitzer, 2020: 14).

In sum, the platformed nature of the Black Lives Matter movement drove press attention, political attention, and public attention and action to the cause of racial justice—clearly resulting in social and political polarization. And yet, the polarizing impacts of the movement have brought greater support for the movement's goals, while at the same time clarifying the racist positions of those who would oppose it.

Conclusion

If, and how, social media and digital platforms polarize the public is the subject of intense academic debate, especially given that political elites play an outsized role in these processes (e.g. through the moralization of political discourse) and the ways that social identities and human psychologies interact with platform architectures. As this article has argued, whether polarization is *necessarily* a democratic concern, however, is often not addressed. Too much of the literature on polarization evacuates questions of racial power and other forms of social stratification—such as class, religion, sexuality, and gender—and their histories from analysis. And yet, platforms are fundamentally a part of political societies that have deep and conflictual histories over pluralism and justice—conflicts not easily reduced to social media.

These are also conflicts that scholars *must* evaluate with respect to power and democracy. For example, a ubiquitous meme on Facebook, flags, and bumper stickers over the past decade proclaims, "TRUMP Fuck Your Feelings" (Sharlet, 2020). It is clearly an expression of antipathy and even hostility toward the partisan outgroup and deploys uncivil language. It also potentially reveals, yes, polarization—at least in the sense of Republicans having negative feelings toward Democrats.

But that should not be our greatest concern. This Trump meme also captures the fact that at stake in politics are very real distributions of resources and political, social, economic, and cultural power. Rather than read "Fuck Your Feelings" as an apolitical expression of political negative affect—which is exactly what polarization scholars would focus on—we should understand it as a very real statement of political interest; namely, keeping Whites on top of the racial hierarchy. In the same way, we should understand the rejection of Black "respectability politics" (Richardson, 2020) and Black "sacrifice" (Hooker, 2016)—no doubt equally polarizing—as urgent demands for political, social, economic, and cultural equality, required by democracy itself.

So why do struggles *against* and *for* justice—especially on platforms—get equated through the lens of polarization? It is because our field's conceptualizations of democracy are so thin, solidarity is so treasured, racial analysis is so rare, and historical memory is so short. It is not polarization, but racial repression that has been far more challenging and destabilizing to democracy over the past centuries if looked at from a non-White perspective. In the United States alone, this spans slavery to a White subverted Reconstruction, the colonial history of the United States including the genocide of indigenous people, realized White coups and Black lynchings, ongoing police violence, mass incarceration, and the systematic disenfranchisement of Black and Brown people. When a meme of a White political leader representing a White political party proclaims "Fuck Your Feelings" that is not a mere expression of feeling—it is an expression of political interest.

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