

How does polarization matter?

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1 Introduction

More than half of Americans think that political polarization is extremely threatening to the ‘American way of life’ (AP-NORC 2016). According to one writer, it ‘is poisoning America’ (Avlon 2020). It is, they claim, ‘killing [their] country’. Others say that polarization is a ‘serious problem for democracy’, that it is ‘contaminat[ing] government institutions’ (Tavernise and Cohn 2019; Carothers and O’Donohue 2020). These words express a straightforward view. The view is that polarization is bad for American democracy. It degrades democratic values. If it further increases, it will further degrade democratic values. Two different concerns can underly this view. One type of concern is with the instrumental import of polarization. This is a concern about its causal consequences. Some think, for example, that polarization causes governmental gridlock, or that it makes democratic backsliding more likely (Mann and Ornstein 2013; Svobik 2019). A second type of concern is with the non-instrumental import of polarization. This is a concern with how it might, in itself, constitute or preclude democratic values. Some think, for example, that polarization precludes proper representation, or that it threatens an ‘ideal of mutual respect and regard’ (Hill and Tausanovitch 2015, 1059; Brennan 2016, 231). My focus in this paper is this second type of concern. It is with the non-instrumental import of polarization.¹

Let us get clear on the distinction. Something matters instrumentally when it matters due to its causal consequences. Suppose, for example, that you skip your morning coffee. This might not be bad in itself. Perhaps you buy bad coffee. You don’t even like how it tastes. But skipping it causes you to be less alert, less awake, less ready to face the day. This makes it instrumentally bad. Compare this to your friend betraying you. This might not matter instrumentally. Perhaps you never learn of the betrayal. It never affects your life. But a friendship that contains a betrayal is a worse friendship. The betrayal, constitutively, degrades the friendship. This makes it non-instrumentally bad. This paper is about whether polarization matters in this non-instrumental sense. My foil is the view that polarization is non-instrumentally bad.

I do not think that this view is wrong, exactly. But I think that it is insufficiently nuanced. There are many different types of polarization. These different

¹My focus will also be on the United States. This is because, first, there is much popular discussion of polarization in the US and, second, the existing empirical literature focuses on the US.

types matter differently. Some are non-instrumentally bad, some neutral, some good. That is the main thesis of this paper: we should not treat polarization as some evaluatively monolithic entity. We should distinguish its varieties carefully. We should judge them differently. Accordingly, in the next section we'll do some distinguishing. I'll outline the five types of polarization on which the existing empirical literature focuses. In section 3, I'll lay out the democratic values that these might non-instrumentally impact: equality and self-rule. In sections 4 to 6 we'll see that some of these types detract from these values; some contribute to them; some do neither. Thus, we support my main thesis: our appraisal of polarization must be nuanced. Some types matter; some do not.

2 Types of polarization

The existing literature on polarization is an empirical literature, rooted in political science. It concentrates on the level and growth of five things. In this section, we'll lay out those things.² We start with three instances of mass policy polarization. These each involve the distribution of policy attitudes among ordinary American citizens; people without political office. The first of these is *mass ideological divergence*. The level of mass ideological divergence is how far apart, on average, ordinary citizens are on different policy issues. Take, for example, abortion policy. Some people think that abortion should never be legally permissible. Some think that it should be permitted in cases of rape, incest or risk of death. Some think that it should always be legally permitted.³ There's an intuitive sense in which there's most distance between the first and final of these options. The level of ideological divergence on abortion is the average distance between people's attitudes towards abortion policy in this sense. The notion generalizes. Ordinary citizens might differ more on their preferred tax rate, healthcare policies or amount of foreign intervention. The level of mass policy divergence amounts to the average distance between people's attitudes on such policy issues.

The second type of mass policy polarization is *party sorting*. This consists in the alignment between people's party identification and their ideologies, where ideology is understood primarily in terms of issue positions.⁴ When party sorting is high, people have the view their party backs. Republican identifiers are pro-life; Democratic identifiers are pro-choice. Republican identifiers want to cut taxes; Democratic identifiers want labor protections. To see a low level of party sorting, consider the situation of conservative southerners in the 1960s. They wanted to roll back the New Deal. They wanted segregation. They certainly did not want the Voting Rights Act. Yet they identified with, and often voted for, the Democratic party. They did not have the view their party backed. Their shift to the Republican party increased the level of party sorting. It made their policy issues better aligned with their party identity. The level of party sorting is the extent to which party identification and policy attitudes are in alignment.

The third type of mass policy polarization is *ideological consistency*. This

²See Lelkes (2016) for these distinctions. I ignore geographical polarization in this paper. See e.g. Bishop (2009).

³These options are options in the National Election Survey (NES) abortion attitude item.

⁴See Levendusky (2009, 4) for this definition.

concerns the correlation between citizens' different issue positions.⁵ High levels of ideological consistency mean citizens bunch up into ideological groups. The members of these groups take the same side on policy issues. In the United States, the most important such groups are Conservatives and Liberals. High levels of consistency mean few people are liberal on some issues and conservative on others. Few people are both pro-choice and for smaller government. Few are against gun control and for public healthcare. People are either liberal across the board or conservative across the board. In extremity, they either share the same side on everything, or disagree on everything. The level of ideological consistency is the extent to which having the position of a given ideology on one issue correlates with having the position of that ideology on other issues.

The literature on mass polarization—polarization among ordinary citizens—began life as a literature on mass policy polarization. Fiorina, Abrams and Pope (2005) claimed that America was a nation of centrists. They denied that there was much mass policy polarization. They denied that mass policy polarization had increased in recent decades. Abramowitz and Saunders (2008) denied the denials. Abramowitz (2010), in particular, argued that America was once a nation of centrists but is no longer. To some extent, this was a verbal dispute. Fiorina and his co-authors denied that mass ideological divergence had increased. In contrast, Abramowitz and Saunders claimed that party sorting and ideological consistency had increased. Both views seem credible. On the former, people's positions on survey questions don't seem to have gotten further apart (Levendusky 2009, 70–75; Hill and Tausanovitch 2015). But, on the latter, those positions have got better aligned with their party identification (Levendusky 2009, 44–50). And, so Abramowitz and Saunders (2008) argue, people now have increasingly ideologically consistent policy positions.⁶ Thus, mass ideological divergence may well not have recently increased. But both party sorting and ideological consistency likely have.

The fourth type of polarization is *elite ideological polarization*. The level of this amounts to the distance, on policy issues, between elected officials of different parties. Thus, it is a counterpart to mass ideological divergence on the elite level. Discussion of elite ideological polarization preceded that of mass policy polarization. It began with advances in measurement technology. In the early 1980s, Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal developed a summary measure of the voting behavior of legislators on a unidimensional ideological scale. They found that, since the late 1960s, senators from different parties had been getting further apart (Poole and Rosenthal 1984). Their view is now the consensus (Hetherington 2009, 415–19). More recent work focuses on the causes and consequences of increased elite ideological polarization (Theriault 2008; Levendusky 2009): its rise is virtually undisputed.

The fifth type of polarization is *mass affective polarization*. This is a divide in feeling rather than thought. It is the level of cross-partisan animus amongst ordinary citizens. The literature on this was driven by a dissatisfaction with the policy attitude focus in then-contemporary studies of mass polarization (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012, 405–407). Accordingly, researchers understand this type of polarization in terms of emotions rather than policy attitudes. It is a matter of cross-partisans disliking one another. Such dislike seems to have

⁵For this definition, see Baldassarri and Gelman (2008, 418–21).

⁶This second point is disputed. See Baldassarri and Gelman (2008).

been growing since the 1960s. There are several ways to identify this growing animus. One is with feeling thermometer ratings (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar et al. 2019). When you ask Americans how warmly they feel towards members of the other party, they report much more frigidity than they used to. The coldness in cross-partisan feeling is striking relative to feeling towards other groups. There is more coldness between cross-partisans than between different religions, races or classes. A second is with implicit attitude tests. These suggest that Americans have greater implicit biases against cross-partisans than against those of other races (Iyengar and Westwood 2015). A third is by eliciting loaded judgements. Americans today are much more likely to say that cross-partisans are stupid, selfish, mean and hypocritical than they are to say these things about co-partisans or independents (Iyengar and Westwood 2015). The overall picture is that Americans are divided by feeling as much as, or more than, policy. Loathing flows across party lines.

Our focus is the import of these five types of polarization. Political scientists have expressed much concern about each of them. Some think that mass polarization will lead to a more volatile, less stable society (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008, 409; Iyengar and Westwood 2015, 705). Some think that elite polarization worsens policy. It does this, they think, by making it difficult to enact new policy (Binder 2003; Mann and Ornstein 2013) or by ensuring policy is less carefully drafted (Sinclair 2008, 83–4; Fiorina and Abrams 2012, 157–59). Some think that all these types of polarization make democratic backsliding more likely: they make it more likely that voters will look past a candidate’s non-democratic behavior (Svolik 2019). These concerns are important. They must be part of any complete account of the import of polarization. But they are instrumental concerns. They are about the causal consequences of polarization. Insofar as democracy’s value is non-instrumental, we should also care about polarization’s non-instrumental import. It is to this that we now turn.

3 Democratic values

If polarization matters non-instrumentally, I’ll suppose it matters to non-instrumental democratic values. There are of course other ways it might matter. But it is plausible that it matters most directly to democratic values. Accordingly, in this section, I’ll spell out two democratic values: equality and self-rule. Discussion of each value has deep roots in democratic theory.⁷ I’ll offer a distinctive articulation of each, but focus on the values themselves is not novel.⁸ In articulating them, we’ll work with a more or less stipulative definition of democracy. We’ll say that a democracy is a political system in which all have equal political power and the exercise of that power determines what government does. Now, whether any such political system exists is doubtful. But this definition is just a convenience: it helps us talk fruitfully about the types of values our actual, real world, democracies could realize.⁹

We start with equality. Democratic equality is often construed as a type of relational equality (Kolodny 2014*b*; Viehoff 2019). The idea is that democracy improves the quality of our relationships. I will also construe democratic

⁷For recent examples, see (Kolodny 2014*b*; Viehoff 2019; Stilz 2009, 2019)

⁸I defend this account of democratic values at greater length in my dissertation.

⁹I take this approach from Kolodny (2014*a*, 197).

equality in such terms. In part, such equality consists in avoiding inegalitarian relationships. It consists in avoiding relationships of subordination. Paradigm examples of such relationships are those between a master and a slave or lord and peasant. A slave is subordinate to a master, a peasant to a lord. Such relationships are non-instrumentally bad. Yet part of what it is to be a subordinate in such relationships is to lack relative power. It is to be under the power of others. Democracy, as we've defined it, constitutively involves equalities of power. Thus, democracy helps preclude inegalitarian relationships. This makes it non-instrumentally valuable.

But that does not exhaust the egalitarian value of democracy. This is because absence of subordination does not exhaust relational egalitarian values. There are also positively good egalitarian relationships. On the small scale, friendship is the paradigm example. This is a non-instrumentally good relationship. It is not just instrumentally useful to have friends; it's good in itself. Friendship is in part constituted by equalities of power: good friends don't wield power over one another. And, importantly, it is also in part constituted by bonds of affections. One can't truly be friends with someone who hates you. For democratic theory, the critical claim is that you can also have large scale such relationships. We can call these 'civic friendships'.¹⁰ They obtain when each member of society can look each other member in the eye.¹¹ Nobody is subservient to anyone else. And, additionally, members of the society do not view their fellow citizens with contempt. They put some store in the joys and sorrows of their fellow citizens. These egalitarian relationships are attractive. It is good for societal relationships to be civic friendships. Democracy consists, in part, in the equalities of power necessary to these relationships. The facilitation of such relationships then is another part of democracy's value.

Let me linger on an important point. I've claimed that civic friendships, are precluded by widespread mutual contempt. The evidence for this is twofold. First, it comes from the analogy with friendship. It seems clear that contempt precludes friendship. Civic friendship is friendship on the societal level. Thus, contempt should preclude civic friendship. Second, it comes from intuitions about societal relationships. The relationships between co-citizens seem much better when devoid of contempt. Something seems positively, and non-instrumentally, valuable about the relationships when they're instead marked by affection. Widespread contempt precludes that value. Thus, I take such contempt to preclude civic friendship. This will matter when we come to evaluating mass affective polarization. It means that just ensuring equality of power falls far short of exhausting the value of democratic equality. Such equality may prevent us being subordinated to our co-citizens. But it does not, on its own, get us into positively attractive civic friendships with them. For that, we need to avoid having certain attitudes towards one another.

Let's turn to a second democratic value: self-rule. This consist in the manifestation of the people's will in government policy. Discussion of this value has a long history. It is the value tapped by Rousseau when he insists that "[t]he people, subjected to law, ought to be its author" (Rousseau 1968, 2.6.10) and United Nations when it says that "everyone has a right to self-determination"

¹⁰The term comes from Schwarzenbach (1996). See Viehoff (2019) for the most extensive defense of this as a democratic value. Scheffler (2015) provides the underlying positive conception of egalitarian relationships.

¹¹The eyeballing metaphor comes from Pettit (2012, 47).

(UN 1966, Article I). Recent work construes it in terms of joint intentions (Stilz 2009, Stilz 2019, 89–154). A joint intention is an intention one shares with others. When we together intend to sing a duet, paint a house, raise a child we have a joint intention. The idea is that democracy helps make citizens’ joint intentions manifest in government policy. Let’s put this more precisely. We’ll say that when some citizens jointly intend to bring about some policy enactment, and their having this joint intention brings about that enactment, then they’re self-ruling with respect to that policy. A political system better achieves self-rule the more citizens are more self-ruling with respect to more policies. So, in a system which perfectly realized self-rule, all policies would be the product of intentions everyone shared. This is an impossibly high bar. But there are a lot of intermediate stages between this and the total absence of self-rule. These are intermediate insofar as either fewer things manifest joint intentions, or fewer citizens share in the relevant intentions. So, this gives us a general, scalar, notion of self-rule. Democracy helps realize this because it involves causal influence between people’s will and government policy. Self-rule requires such influence. Thus, democracy ensures that a necessary condition for self-rule is satisfied.

Why is self-rule valuable? In my view, the value this helps realize is that of self-authorship. Being the author of your life is attractive. It’s good to be responsible for what has a big impact on your life. We can see this in personal cases. Compare two people. One has a conception of the good life and pursues it. They deliberately live their lives in accord with their values. The other makes few real choices. They might have a conception of the good life. But they don’t pursue it. They drift through life, making few choices. Intuitively, there’s something preferable about the first life. We want mastery; not drift. We want people to be the author of their own lives.¹² In the personal case, what it is to be the author of things in your life is for your intending them to bring them about. You become a pilot because you chose to be; you marry your partner because it was who you wanted to marry. In the collective case, what it is to be the author of things in your life is for your jointly intending them to bring them about. Suppose you, together with others, jointly intend to change government policy. If this intention leads to policy change, you are joint authors of that change. This is valuable in much the same way single authorship is valuable. Such policies have a huge impact on you. It is valuable to be part responsible for things with such an impact on you. Self-rule is valuable because, and to the extent that, it helps make citizens joint authors of their political affairs.

We should say more about shared, or joint, intentions. The account of joint intentions I endorse comes from Bratman (1992). He thinks that some people have a joint intention to ϕ only if they each intend that they together ϕ in accordance with meshing subplans. This requires two things. First, they each have what are called *we-intentions*. I intend not that *I* paint a house, but that *we together* paint the house. Second, they intend to do this via *meshing subplans*. These are ways of contributing to the house painting which are jointly compatible. Suppose I plan we paint our house by painting it blue all over and you plan we paint it by painting it red all over. Then the ways we each aim to individually contribute to the end of the intentions are not compatible. Our subplans don’t mesh. This, according to Bratman, means that we can’t have a

¹²Raz (1986) contains what is probably the most important contemporary discussion of this value. As he puts it, ‘[t]he autonomous person is part author of their life’ (1986, 370).

joint intention to paint our house. In political contexts, this makes concrete the idea that self-rule involves working together with others to mold our political environment. When we are not working together with them, when our plans are incompatible with theirs, we cannot both enjoy self-rule. At most one of us can enjoy this value.

Let me linger on another important point. I've claimed that it's valuable to be self-ruling with respect to specific government policies. One might object to this point. Some think that self-rule only matters with respect to broad political affairs.¹³ On this view, it is valuable to be self-ruling with respect to the basic structure of society but not with respect to specific government policies. It is valuable to be self-ruling with respect to, for example, whether one's state is a liberal democracy, but not with respect to healthcare policy. I do not think this is plausible. I think it is good to be self-ruling with respect to society's basic structure, but simply because that structure has such an enormous impact on our lives. It's good to be author of what impacts us. Yet specific government policies often have an enormous impact on our lives. Healthcare policy, tax policy, criminal justice policy have a pervasive impact on how citizens live. Thus, it should also be good to be author of these policies too. It is not only valuable to be self-ruling with respect to the broadest political affairs, but also with respect to the narrower, more quotidian, stuff of politics.

Let me sum up. I think that these two values make up most of democracy's non-instrumental value. On the one hand, democracy promotes equality. It makes our relationships more egalitarian. On the other, it promotes self-rule. It makes our will manifest in policy. Thus, we're interested in how polarization non-instrumentally impacts these values.¹⁴ It can do this in two ways: constitution or preclusion. A constitutes B when A helps ground B. A precludes B when A obtaining is incompatible with B obtaining. Take equality as an example. Equalities of power help ground egalitarian relationships. They are thus a constituent of such relationships. Inequalities of power are incompatible with such relationships. They thus preclude such relationships. We can now see how different types of polarization constitute or preclude democratic values.

4 Mass policy polarization

Let's start with how mass policy polarization affects equality. There is little reason for mass policy polarization, of any sort, to preclude egalitarian relationships. The key point here is that mass policy polarization amounts to a pattern of agreement and disagreement. Ideological divergence means people disagree deeply on certain policy issues. Ideological consistency means that those with different views disagree on many issues. Party sorting means that members of different parties disagree on policies. But egalitarian relationships don't require agreement between their participants. Disagreeing with someone doesn't make you their subordinate, or them yours. It also doesn't stop you being in a positively valuable, egalitarian relationship with them. I can disagree deeply with a friend on many important issues yet still have an excellent friendship. We need

¹³See, for example, Stiliz (2019, 108).

¹⁴Some readers will notice I haven't talked about the value of democratic deliberation. My view, not defended here, is that insofar as deliberation is non-instrumentally valuable, that value is reducible to that of equality or self-rule. So we needn't discuss it independently.

not agree with our friends. As with friendships, so with civic friendship. We need not agree with our fellow citizens in order to share a civic friendship with them.

Now, that is not of course to say that disagreements never impair friendships. Of course they can; disagreements can often turn vitriolic. Sometimes, even, when one disagrees with someone deeply it can be hard to see them as acting in good faith. Both vitriol and aspersions of bad faith can impair relationships. But here the problem is not the disagreement as such. It is upstream consequences of the disagreement. Accordingly, the proper response to these problems needn't be to get rid of the disagreement. It can be to ensure that the disagreement doesn't have these bad consequences.¹⁵ This goes for both personal and civic friendship. Thus, mass policy polarization needn't imperil democratic equality.

The status of self-rule is more complicated. On the face of it, it is not obvious why mass policy polarization would impair self-rule. But I think that there is a way for it to do so. The key point is that, for some people to be self-ruling with respect to some policy, they have to jointly intend that policy be enacted. But this requires that they agree on enacting that policy. Mass policy polarization, as we've just noted, often involves disagreement. It means people disagree more deeply on certain issues, or that (some) people disagree on a greater number of issues. Those who disagree cannot together be self-ruling with respect to the subject of their disagreement. And this threatens to reduce the extent to which self-rule can be realized. Mass policy polarization, in other words, can reduce what we agree on. This can impair our ability to form the joint intentions we need to be self-ruling.

Let's see how this works with mass ideological divergence. Imagine two citizens disagree about the top tax rate. One aims to help bring about a top tax rate of 30% and another aims to help bring about a top tax rate of 40%. Their disagreement means that they can't share an intention about what the top tax rate should be exactly. But they might both, also, have a vaguer intention: that the tax rate be between 30% and 40%. They can share this intention. Now suppose that their intentions diverge. The tax cutter now wants the tax rate to be 20%. The tax raiser now wants it to be 50%. This means they can no longer share the intention that the tax rate fall between 30% and 40%. They can, at best, share the intention that it fall between 20% and 50%. Their growing divergence, in other words, reduces the specificity of the joint intentions they can share about the tax rate. So, it reduces the specificity of the policies they can be self-ruling with respect to. This goes for healthcare policy, foreign policy, criminal justice policy too: in general, the further apart are citizen's policy positions, the less specific are the intentions that they can share, and so the less specific are the policies that they can be self-ruling with respect to.

A similar point goes for both party sorting and ideological consistency. Party sorting means that cross-partisans, insofar as they adopt their (conflicting) party position, cannot share intentions with respect to those positions. This means two sorted cross-partisans cannot both be self-ruling on such issues. Equally, increased ideological consistency means that liberals now disagree with conservatives on more issues. Previously they might have found some common points

¹⁵But see Lelkes (2018) for evidence that mass policy polarization in the US has not driven these bad consequences.

of agreement. Now such commonalities have been extirpated. This means that there are fewer policy issues on which they can share intentions, and so fewer issues on which they can together be self-ruling with respect to. So, in general, the disagreement realized by mass policy polarization threatens certain kinds of self-rule.

The crucial question is how worrying this threat should be. My view is: not very. For a start, let's be clear that it is only worrying against certain background assumptions. These assumptions are that, sometimes, relatively specific policy preferences drive political participation. For suppose neither tax cutter nor tax raiser were ever motivated by their preference about tax policy. They are never led to vote, donate, campaign in order to enact this preference. Then it doesn't really matter whether they agree on tax policy. They'd never be self-ruling with respect to such policy anyway. The accuracy of this background assumption is contentious. Some defend it; others deny it.¹⁶ But, for the sake of argument, let's grant it. Even so, I think the threat is not worrying. That is because mass policy polarization, if it has increased at all, has increased along partisan lines (Abramowitz 2010, 43–47; Lelkes 2016, 398). Republicans and Democrats have been getting further apart. Republicans have been aligning more with the Republican party and Democrats with the Democratic party. Republicans have got more consistently conservative beliefs and Democrats more consistently liberal beliefs. But it is already very difficult for joint intentions to span party lines. So, this doesn't preclude any joint intentions that weren't already precluded. What mass policy polarization threatens to do, party division already does.

Why is that? Because, plausibly, cross-partisans usually lack meshing subplans when it comes to enacting policy. Reconsider the tax cutter and tax raiser. Suppose the cutter is a Republican and the raiser is a Democrat. It is a plausible conjecture that the Republican would usually plan to get their tax policy enacted by helping elect a Republican and the Democrat would plan to get their policy enacted by helping elect a Democrat. But these subplans don't mesh: they're jointly incompatible. So, they can't share an intention that the tax rate be between 30% and 40% anyway. It's as if they intended to together paint a house, but they each planned to paint it a different color. Such jointly incompatible subplans prevent joint intentions. The point generalizes. Most people, I conjecture, plan to contribute to policy by helping elect the candidate they support. But cross-partisans support different candidates. Thus, their subplans are jointly incompatible. This alone stops joint intentions spanning party lines. So mass policy polarization probably makes little difference to self-rule. It stops cross-partisans sharing certain policy intentions. But their having these intentions was likely prevented already by the very fact of party division.

Now, one might resist this claim. For it means that, most likely, election losers won't be self-ruling with respect to the policies the winning party enacts. They won't share intentions with the partisans of that party. So, it will be only the winners will which get made manifest in policy. Yet this seems to me a virtue, rather than a vice, of my position. It is plausible that, when you're on the losing side of an election, the policies the winner enacts rarely manifest your intentions. They, instead, manifest the winner's intentions. What would be

¹⁶For the former, see Ansolabehere, Rodden and Snyder (2008). For the latter, see Achen and Bartels (2016).

implausible is if this were to imply that election losers don't enjoy any level of self-rule. But, for two reasons, it does not imply this. First, competitive political systems involve an alternation of power. So, those who lose today's election have won elections in the past. And policy is cumulative. When a party wins power it just changes, often incrementally, the existing body of policy. Insofar as those who lost the last election influenced policy in the past, they are still author of much of government policy. They're author of the policies they influenced in the past.

Second, I've relied on the conjecture that cross-partisans have clashing subplans with respect to specific government policies. But such a conjecture needn't be true about all political affairs. It seems plausible that many have meshing subplans when it comes to some broad features of America's political system. Consider, for instance, the fact that Americans live in a liberal democracy. Cross-partisans might aim to help uphold this simply by politically participation: by voting, protesting, campaigning. Such subplans mesh perfectly well. There's nothing incompatible about two cross-partisans both doing such things. So, cross-partisans can be self-ruling with respect to this very important feature of their political system. The point generalizes: there are many general features of our political systems. Cross-partisans may have meshing subplans with respect to such features. So, election losers can enjoy substantial self-rule. This, it seems to me, does justice to our intuitions about electoral politics. So, our conclusion looks secure: the intentions mass policy polarization disrupts are already disrupted by party division.

We now turn to one final, important point. Some types of mass policy polarization—party sorting and ideological consistency—contribute to self-rule. This is because they facilitate not just disagreement between cross-partisans, but also agreement between co-partisans. Party sorting means that people agree with their own party on more policies. This likely contributes to self-rule, because one's party's policies cannot manifest your will unless you agree with them. If you vote Republican, but favor strong labor protections, then Republican labor policies aren't going to manifest your will. Your intending to help enact such protections won't causally contribute to those protections. So, when your party wins office, that party's policies are more likely to manifest your will. Equally, ideological consistency means that people agree with other party members on more policies. This allows for more intra-party joint intentions. It means Democrats agree with Democrats on more policies, and so they can share intentions with respect to more policies. So, when Democrats win elections, more of their joint intentions can manifest in policy. Now many other conditions must be in place for sorted, consistent voters to enjoy self-rule. But sorting and consistent voters form more cohesive parties. This puts them in a better position to be self-ruling.

Let's sum up. If I'm right, then mass policy polarization does not damage democratic equality. Democratic equality doesn't demand agreement. But it does, potentially, impair self-rule. It precludes certain intentions from spanning party lines. Yet party divisions already precludes such intentions. And some forms of mass policy polarization have benign effects. Thus, overall, it is unlikely that mass policy polarization non-instrumentally detracts from the value of American democracy. It may of course be instrumentally troublesome. But it is more likely non-instrumentally good than bad.

5 Elite ideological polarization

We now turn to elite ideological polarization. The key thing this does is impact the options citizens are presented with when they vote or otherwise decide which party to support. When there is little such polarization, citizens face relatively similar options. Whichever party gets into power, government policy will be roughly the same. When there is a lot of elite polarization, citizens face more distinctive options. Which party gets into power will make a big difference to government policy. The important question, then, is how the nature of citizens' options affects democratic values. Are citizens in a better or worse position to enjoy these values when they face more distinctive options? When it comes to equality, it seems the answer is: neither. Having more or less distinctive options doesn't affect the equality of our relationships to our fellow citizens. But, as we'll see, the nature of our options does matter to how much we can enjoy self-rule.

The important point here is that self-rule, as we're conceiving it, is meant to realize the value of self-authorship. It is meant to make citizens joint author of government affairs. But how much you are the author of a choice generally depends on the options you faced when making the choice. Imagine, for example, that you faced very similar, very bad options. Perhaps you're a medieval thief due to be punished. The judge is lenient: they let you choose between losing your right hand and losing your left hand. There's not much difference between the two (you're ambidextrous). They're both terrible options. Here your chance to choose doesn't seem to make you any more author of your own life. The nature of your options forestalls that. Thus your options matter to how much self-authorship you enjoy. Now our notion of self-rule is intended to capture just this value. So citizens' options matter to how much self-rule they can achieve. The kinds of options they need to achieve substantial authorship are, by stipulation, exactly those that help them achieve substantial self-rule.

So, what features of your options matter to self-authorship? For a start, the more diverse your options the better are you able to be a self-author. Your options are diverse when they are very different. What matters here is not the number of options available to you. Being able to choose between five hundred identical cereals doesn't give you diverse options. Rather it's how distinctive your options are. To see this, imagine that you have two job offers: banker for Goldman Sachs or banker for Morgan Stanley. These are very similar jobs. They're both good jobs, at least for a certain kind of person. But, if these are your only options, you're in a worse position to be a self-author than had you more distinctive options. Suppose, for example, you were instead choosing between Goldman and academia. Then your ultimate choice contributes more to your self-authorship. It makes your career more fully your own. Thus, more diverse options let you be more author of your own life.¹⁷

This has straightforward implications for elite polarization. Growing elite polarization just consists in parties getting more distinctive. So, this growth has made citizens' options more diverse. This puts them in a better position to be self-ruling. We can make the point concrete. Imagine citizens were faced by two nigh-indistinguishable, centrist, parties. These parties agree on all central issues of policy. Their disagreements are trivial. They disagree only on whether

¹⁷Raz (1986, 375) makes a similar point.

the minimum wage should be \$7.25 or \$7.35 per hour. Huge public battles are fought over a ten cents difference on minimum wage policy. The issues which make any such policy desirable are given no airing. In this case, the lack of diversity between citizens' options detracts from their self-rule. We should lament their bland centrism. Were the parties to polarize, were they to disagree more deeply about more important issues, citizens would be in a better position to be self-ruling. There is a clear-cut way, then, that growing elite polarization has been good for self-rule: it makes citizens options more diverse.

But diversity is not the only feature of one's options which matters to self-authorship. Their quality also matters. Quality matters in two ways. First, it seems that having very bad options doesn't much help make you a self-author. Consider again the medieval thief. That each of their options is so bad is reason to think that they're not in much of a position to be a self-author. And this would hold even were their options much more diverse. Suppose they were deciding between losing their right hand and spending five years as a galley slave. These options are quite different. But again it seems they're not in much of a position to be self-authoring. The natural explanation of this is that, if one of your options is not minimally decent, then your having that options doesn't help you be a self-author. Indecent options don't count for the purposes of self-authorship. Thus, you must have multiple minimally decent options to be a self-author.¹⁸

How do we determine what a minimally decent option is? One way to do this is objectively. If, objectively, an option is sufficiently morally bad, or sufficiently bad for the chooser's well-being, one might adjudge it not minimally decent. The chooser's opinion about their options needn't matter.¹⁹ Yet this seems counterintuitive in some cases. All my options could, objectively, be morally terrible. But I might not see things that way. Perhaps I am a war leader, who revels in the slaughter of my enemies. My bellicosity has left me with only violent options; but that that seems like no bad thing to me. Such a person, in my view, could be author of their own lives: they would typically author a morally reprehensible life. So, I prefer a subjective account of minimal decency. On this view, an option is minimally decent as long as the chooser does not think it is too noxious, too unpalatable. It is their attitudes which are critical. Your self-authorship, then, is in part dependent on you seeing your options as decent.

The import of this for elite polarization is ambiguous. On the one hand, the polarization of initially centrist parties means that those on the political extremes likely have more minimally decent options. Previously, they may have found both centrist parties sufficiently noxious, sufficiently unpalatable, for them to count as having no such options. As one of these parties has shifted towards them, they have acquired at least one decent option. On the other hand, those on the center-left and center-right might have lost a minimally decent option. Consider people on the center-left. As the Republican party has veered rightwards, it may from their perspective no longer count as a minimally decent option. Voting Republican is, for them, sufficiently noxious that they now have but one decent option: voting Democrat.²⁰ Which of these effects is more im-

¹⁸Raz (1986, 373–77) also endorses this thought.

¹⁹This is how I interpret Raz (1986, 378).

²⁰Many believe that Republicans have moved more to the right than the Democrats have to the left (Mann and Ornstein 2013; Barber and McCarty 2013). If so, then in reality this

portant is hard to say. Assuming there are more people in the center than the extremes, the latter will have affected more people. Yet, plausibly, moving from zero decent options to one decent option is more good than moving from two decent options to one such option is bad. So, how elite ideological polarization impacts this aspect of quality is ambiguous.²¹

Yet the minimal decency of one's option is not the only way that quality matters to self-authorship. It seems plausible that, second, simply having *better* options puts one in a better position to be a self-author. You're in a better position to be a self-author when you're choosing between a set of individually very good options than a set of merely minimally decent options. In the former case, your choice will more manifest your values. How the value of one's set of options is determined here is not by their average value or their median value or even their sum value. It's closer to the value of one's best option. To see this, suppose you have the option of being a galley slave or being in the Rolling Stones. The fact that you have the rowing option doesn't drag down the quality of your choice set in the relevant sense. Subtracting this option—forcing you to be in the Stones—would not put you in a better position to be a self-author. Thus, you are in a better position to be a self-author when your options are better, where this is understood as especially sensitive to the value of your best option.

Elite polarization will, often, improve the value of people's best option. We can see this in a simple case. Assume that there are two parties, the ideological space is unidimensional, and citizens are uniformly distributed across this space. Assume, also, that the value of an option for each voter is entirely determined by its distance from that voter in this ideological space. In this setting, putting both parties in the center won't maximize the value of citizens' best options. We need to spread the parties more evenly in ideological space. Precisely, we want to place one party halfway between the left pole and the middle, and the other party halfway between the right pole and the middle. This will minimize how far, on average, voters are from their closest party and thus maximize the value of their best option. Insofar as the quality of their options in general is especially sensitive to this value, this will also maximize the quality of their options. The point generalizes to other settings. To maximize the quality of citizen's option, as conceived of as dependent on the value of their best option, we'll often want a substantial dose of elite polarization.

We can now sum up how elite polarization matters to self-rule. The diversity and quality of citizens' options matters to how self-ruling they can be. Elite ideological polarization plainly improves diversity. It gives citizens genuinely distinctive choices. Its impact on quality is more complicated. In some ways, and in some cases, elite polarization can help quality; in others it can hinder it. Thus elite polarization is clearly good in one respect and ambiguous in the other. So, it is more likely to be non-instrumentally good than bad.²² The last sixty years of elite polarization, in this respect, looks worthy of more celebration than lamentation. Political elites divided by ideology most likely make citizens

burden falls most heavily on the center-left.

²¹Notably, on the objective view of minimal decency, elite polarization will often not matter at all. Two centrist parties can, presumably, both be morally reprehensible.

²²Note that, if what I've said is right, introducing a third party would be excellent for self-rule. I don't belabor this possibility, because third parties face so formidable a task in winning American elections.

better able to rule themselves.

Let us look at one way to resist this conclusion. One might claim that my account of democratic values, in section 3 is incomplete. In particular, some think that democracy is non-instrumentally valuable, in part, because it involves preference satisfaction. It involves people getting the policies that they want. If this is right, then increased elite polarization will pose a problem. It means more people will likely be getting policies further from what they want.²³ But I doubt that satisfying people's preferences is non-instrumentally valuable. Consider Rawls' grass counter: the talented mathematician who wants to spend their days counting the blades of grass on park squares (Rawls 1971, 434). I doubt that counting blades of grass is good for the grass counter. It would be good for them to develop their talents, form deep personal relationships, have worthwhile projects. But the mere satisfaction of their preferences is not valuable. Thus, I doubt that a connection to preference satisfaction makes democracy non-instrumentally valuable.

Now perhaps that is wrong. Perhaps preference satisfaction is valuable in itself. If so, in our assessment of elite polarization, its value must be weighed against the value of self-authorship. Yet it's also doubtful that the former is generally weightier than the latter. For consider benevolent dictatorships. Benevolent dictators might do what the people want. But there's still a serious objection to benevolent dictators: they don't let the peoples' will get made manifest in government policy. This objection is not simply trumped by the value of preference satisfaction. Thus, I doubt that mere preference satisfaction is, as a general matter, more important than self-rule. But I won't pursue the issue further: this ground is reasonably well-trodden.²⁴ Suffice to say, the conclusion that elite ideological polarization is harmless relies on not giving preference satisfaction outsized weight. I myself am inclined to give it no weight at all.

6 Mass affective polarization

I have just argued that many types of polarization are innocuous. This is why simply calling polarization non-instrumentally bad is insufficiently nuanced. Many types of polarization aren't bad in this sense. But 'insufficiently nuanced' does not mean 'entirely wrong'. There is, I think, a non-instrumentally bad type of polarization: mass affective polarization. It is bad that cross-partisans have come to feel contempt for each other. In this section we'll lay out the two ways this is bad. The first is straightforward. It concerns the aspect of democratic equality that goes beyond avoiding subordination: the aspect achieved by realizing civic friendships. These relationships, I said in section 3, are precluded by contempt. When cross-partisans have contempt for one another, civic friendships cannot span party lines. But mass affective polarization consists in cross-partisans feeling contempt for one another. It thus precludes civic friendships. That doesn't put us in a relationship of subordination to cross-partisans. It doesn't condemn us to the objectionably inegalitarian relationships. But it

²³Both Singer (2016) and Bornschieer (2019) think that, in Latin America, polarization has done this in the past.

²⁴For a succinct critique of the preference satisfaction conception of democracy's value, see Kolodny (2014a, 206–8).

stops us achieving the positively valuable ones. Thus, it is non-instrumentally bad: it precludes the full achievement of democratic equality.

The second way takes more spelling out. In section 3, I mentioned one type of bad relationship: inegalitarian relationships. But there are others. The key example is enmity. Your enemy might be a despised neighbor, a hated co-worker, an abhorred competitor. These relationships seem non-instrumentally bad. A life full of enmities is a worse life. It is good for you not to have enemies, in a sense parallel to it being good for you to have friends. Friendship is intrinsically good, enmity intrinsically bad. Now, two things seem to suffice to make you someone's enemy. First, you work against them. This means you do things which tend to make their life worse, or just prevent them achieving their goals. Your actions frustrate their desires. Yet that alone does not make someone an enemy. Consider top athletes. Often, they do things that frustrate each other's desires. They defeat each other in tournaments. But they needn't be enemies. Second, then, you have a negative attitude towards them. You despise, hate or loathe them. You feel contempt for them. Mere rivals don't have such attitudes. When they do, they become enemies. Plausibly, it is bad to have enemies: it is bad for one's relationships with others to be marked by conflict and contempt.

Let us apply this to politics. Electoral competition alone makes cross-partisans rivals. Insofar as they aim to get their party into office, they are working against one another. Democrats work against Republicans' desired candidate. Republicans work against Democrats' desired candidate. Both are trying to frustrate the others' goals. But such rivalry alone is not problematic. There is nothing problematic about the rivalry between Nadal and Federer. Yet affective polarization adds to such rivalries. It consists in cross-partisans having animus, contempt, loathing for one another. This turns such rivalries into enmities. By so doing, it makes cross-partisan relationships non-instrumentally bad. There are very many such relationships, for very many co-citizens identify with a party. Thus, mass affective polarization creates many bad relationships. It transforms many anodyne rivalries into objectionable enmities.²⁵

One might resist the thought that these cross-partisan enmities are bad. The most promising source of resistance, it seems to me, relies on the idea that sometimes enmity can be justified. Sometimes, it is fitting to feel contempt for people and permissible to work against them. Suppose, for example, that you find out your neighbor is a white supremacist. It may well be fitting to, on this basis, feel contempt for them. It will be permissible to work against their political goals. Enmity towards them may in this sense be justified. More generally, when someone has reprehensible values, it may be justifiable to be their enemy. And one might also think that, when one's enmity is justified, then it isn't bad. It makes your life no worse to have well-chosen enemies. Now we apply this to politics. One might claim that the members of one party have reprehensible values. So, it will be justifiable to be enemies of the members of that party. Thus, cross-partisan enmities aren't bad after all.

²⁵Brennan (2016) also worries about enmity between citizens. My view differs from his in two ways. First, Brennan thinks that democratic co-citizens are inevitably enemies (Brennan 2016, 235–45). I think some are inevitably rivals, but that rivalry alone is harmless. Second, Brennan thinks partisan contempt is unfitting because the disputes between parties “are tiny” (Brennan 2016, 232). I think this is false. But I have a different explanation of why cross-partisan contempt is unfitting. So our views are similar in tenor but differ importantly in detail.

I think this objection fails. For a start, I doubt that relationships of enmity are anodyne even when justified. To see why, reconsider the case of the white supremacist. It would be better never to have to be this person's enemy. This gives you reason, antecedently, not to interact with them very much. It perhaps gives you reason not to be their neighbor in the first place. By avoiding such interactions, such proximity, you can avoid having to be their enemy. This is well-explained if even justified enmity is bad. It is hard to explain if it is anodyne. Now, unjustified relationships of enmity may still be especially bad. When you have unfitting contempt for someone, this is worse than when you have fitting contempt for them. When you impermissibly work against someone, this is worse than when you permissibly do so. Yet I suspect that this is because it makes your life worse to have unfitting attitudes and do impermissible actions. That doesn't mean that justified enmity is wholly anodyne. It can still be, as intuition suggests, bad in itself.

Yet we needn't rely on this point. For, in any case, I doubt that cross-partisan contempt is usually fitting. That is because contempt on the basis of someone's values is only fitting when it *is*, fundamentally, based on their values. If you hate a white supremacist because they didn't go to college, then you're in the wrong. You may fittingly hate them on the basis of their views. But it's unfitting to hate them on the basis of their ill-education. Yet the leading theorists of mass affective polarization do not think it is driven by value conflict. They see it as a manifestation of out-group bias (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012, 407–8; Lelkes 2018, 68–9; Mason 2018, 1–17). They think that we identify with some partisan groups and in opposition others. When we identify with a group of any kind, we feel favorably towards that group. When we see a group as opposed to those we identify with, we often view its members negatively. These feelings are driven by group psychology. Thus, even if members of a party do have reprehensible values, it's unlikely that our actual attitudes of contempt for them are fitting. Those attitudes are based in facts about group membership. But those facts do not justify contempt. It is not appropriate to feel contempt for someone just because they're not in your in-group.

The upshot of this is that mass affective polarization puts citizens into relationships of unjustified enmity. Thus, in sum, it is bad for two reasons. First, it severs attractively egalitarian relationships. Second, it replaces them with objectionably adversarial relationships. This is the truth behind our general sense that polarization is non-instrumentally bad. It makes citizens' relationships worse.

7 Conclusion

Let me conclude. We began by noting the view that polarization is non-instrumentally bad. As I've said, I do not think this view is wrong, exactly. But it lacks subtlety. One type of polarization is non-instrumentally bad: mass affective polarization. But, for other types of polarization, the situation is more complicated. Mass policy polarization poses some threat to self-rule. But, in reality, this threat is likely pre-empted by party division. Meanwhile, elite ideological divergence likely helps self-rule. It improves the diversity of voter's options. Perhaps these types of polarization are instrumentally bad; perhaps not. But they are non-instrumentally innocuous. Broadly speaking, then, polar-

ization in policy attitudes does not in itself detract from the value of American democracy. Only polarization in feeling does. We must not, then, paint with too broad a brush in our evaluation of polarization. Our appraisal of polarization needs nuance.

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