

How does polarization matter?

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.

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 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 must 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 largely by political scientists. It focuses on the level and growth of five things. In this section, we'll lay out these things.¹ 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.² 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.

¹See Lelkes (2016) for these distinctions. I ignore geographical polarization in this paper. See e.g. Bishop (2009).

²These options are the options in the National Election Survey (NES) abortion attitude item.

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.³ 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 concerns the correlation between citizens' different issue positions.⁴ 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

³See Levendusky (2009, 4) for this definition.

⁴For this definition, see Baldassarri and Gelman (2008, 418–21).

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). 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.⁵ Thus, mass ideological divergence probably hasn’t increased recently. But both party sorting and ideological consistency likely have.⁶

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. This literature 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 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,

⁵This second point is disputed. See Baldassarri and Gelman (2008).

⁶For somewhat more up-to-date evidence, see Hill and Tausanovitch (2015).

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 must 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. 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. In articulating them, we’ll work with a more or less stipulative definition of democracy. We’ll say a democracy as 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 helps us better explore the nature of these values. It helps us understand the types of values our actual, real world, democracies could realize.⁸

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 equality in such terms. In part, such equality consists in avoiding inegalitarian relationships. It consists in avoiding relationships of subordination.

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

⁸I take this approach from Kolodny (2014*a*, 197).

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. 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. Enter democracy. Democracy, as we've defined it, constitutively involves equalities of power. Thus, democracy helps preclude inegalitarian relationships. Such relationships are non-instrumentally bad. Thus, this makes democracy 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 such 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'.⁹ They obtain when each member of society can look each other member in the eye.¹⁰ 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 presence of such relationships then is another part of democratic equality.

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

⁹The 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.

¹⁰The eyeballing metaphor comes from Pettit (2012, 47).

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 they say that "everyone has a right to self-determination" (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 citizen's 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, and their having this joint intention brings about the policy, 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 just go with the flow. 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.¹¹ 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 intended to be; you marry

¹¹Raz (1986) does much more to spell out the attractiveness of this thought.

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 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.¹² On this view, it is valuable to be self-ruling with respect the basic structure of our institutions or the general direction of our society but not with respect to specific government policies. I do not think this is plausible. It is good to be self-ruling with respect to the basic structure of our institutions because that structure has such an enormous impact on our lives. It's good to be author of what impacts us. But specific government policies often have an enormous impact on our lives. Tax policy, healthcare policy, policing policy have a pervasive impact on how citizens live. Thus, it should also be valuable 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.

¹²See, for example, Stiliz (2019, 108).

Now we shouldn't overstate the import of this point. It does mean that those who get little of what they want manifest in specific government policy enjoy less of the value of self-rule. Communists, for example, are self-ruling with respect to fewer policies than conservatives. They get fewer of their intentions manifest in policy. But this seems to me plausible. It explains why persistent minorities a problem for democracy are: such minorities enjoy relatively little self-rule. Yet, equally, there are many issues on which, in most polities, the vast majority get roughly what they want. In the United States, the vast majority agree that we should live in a liberal democracy, that the state should provide some support for its worst-off citizens. The vast majority agree on broad contours of certain policies: that the state should some sort of social safety net. Insofar as people jointly intend to bring about, or sustain, these things, and those intentions do bring or sustain them, people can be self-ruling with respect to such them. So, on my view, it's valuable whenever we enjoy self-rule with respect to government policies. This means some people likely enjoy less self-rule than others. But most can still enjoy self-rule with respect to many political affairs.

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.¹³ It can do this in two ways: constitution or preclusion. A constitutes B when A helps ground B.¹⁴ 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 peo-

¹³Some readers will notice I haven't talked about deliberation as a democratic value. 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. Thus, we needn't discuss it independently.

¹⁴For more on grounding, see Fine (2012).

ple 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 the participants. Disagreeing with someone doesn't put you in an inegalitarian relationship with them. It 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 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. Thus, we can disagree deeply with our fellow citizens and still enjoy the full run of democratic equality. Democratic equality is not imperiled by mass policy polarization.

The status of self-rule is more complicated. There is a way that mass ideological divergence can threaten self-rule. A simple two-person case shows this. Imagine one person intends to help bring about a top tax rate of 30% and another intends 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 can share an intention that it fall inside a range: that it be between 30% and 40%. Now suppose their preferences get further apart. 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. Thus, their growing divergence reduces the specificity of the issues they can be self-ruling with respect to. Initially, they might have been self-ruling with respect to the tax rate falling between 30% and 40%. But, after diverging more, they can only be self-ruling with respect to the tax rate falling between 20% and 50%. The point generalizes. The further apart are citizens policy positions, the less specific are the intentions they can share. And so the less specific are the policies that they can be self-ruling with respect to. That goes for abortion policy, healthcare policy foreign policy—not just tax policy. Growing ideological divergence, then, precludes some kinds of self-rule.

Now, this preclusion should be worrying only against certain background assumptions. The background 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 that they can't share a specific joint

intention 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.¹⁵ But we'll put that aside for the moment. Even granting this assumption, I think this threat should not concern us much. That is because ideological divergence, if it has increased at all, has most likely increased between the members of different parties (Lelkes 2016, 398). Republicans and Democrats have been getting further apart. But it is already very difficult for joint intentions to span party lines. So, this divergence doesn't preclude any joint intentions that weren't already precluded. What ideological divergence threatens to do, party division already does.

Why is that? Because cross-partisans likely lack meshing subplans when it comes to enacting policy. Suppose the cutter is a Republican and the raiser is a Democrat. The Republican would usually plan to get their tax policy enacted by helping elect a Republican. 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 assume, 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 growing ideological divergence between the parties probably makes little difference to self-rule. It stops cross-partisans having certain specific joint intentions. But their having these intentions was already prevented by the very fact of party division.

Let's turn to party sorting. Party sorting, likely, means that those on different party sides side disagree more often about policy. They take their parties' (opposing) positions. This precludes them sharing intentions on such policies. But this doesn't mean they share any fewer intentions. Such intentions were already precluded by party division. At the same time, party sorting means people more often agree with their party on policy. This helps them enjoy self-rule. That is because, for a policy to manifest your will, your intending that policy must have contributed to its enactment. If you vote for a party which does not share your positions, then this is less likely. Suppose some voters favor strong labor protections but vote Republican. Then, unless Republicans do a *volte-face* on labor law, their intention won't bring about strong labor protections. Their vote may be causally related to

¹⁵For the former, see Ansolabehere, Rodden and Snyder (2008). For the latter, see Achen and Bartels (2016).

some Republican labor policies. But it won't bring about the policy they intended: strong labor protections. Thus, labor policy won't manifest their intentions. Party sorting makes such cases less common. It makes it more likely that people's policy preference and their party identification match, and so more likely that, if their party wins office, its policies will manifest their preferences. It doesn't of course ensure this. Many other conditions must be in place before a sorted voter will count as self-ruling. But such a voter is in a better position to be self-ruling with respect to policy than one who supports a party that spurns their policy positions.

Now we turn to ideological consistency. The key point here is that, insofar as ideological consistency has increased, it has increased along partisan lines. Republicans have acquired more consistently conservative beliefs and Democrats have acquired more consistently liberal beliefs (Abramowitz 2010, 43–47). This means that Democrats and Republicans disagree on more issues. But it also means that each agree with their fellow partisans more often, on those very same issues. The former makes no difference: joint intentions rarely span party lines anyway. But the latter allows for more joint intentions. Whereas two Democrats might previously have agreed on just economic policy, they now agree on both social policy and economic policy. Thus, these Democrats can share intentions with respect to both policy areas rather than just one. So, when Democrats win elections, more of their joint intentions can manifest in policy. The point generalizes: increasing ideological consistency means that each side is in more agreement. So they can share intentions on more issues and so can see more of those intentions made manifest in policy. Thus increasing ideological consistency helps self-rule. Again, it doesn't ensure it. But more ideologically consistent voters are in a better position to be self-ruling.

Let's sum up. If I'm right, then mass policy polarization does not preclude democratic equality. This is because democratic equality doesn't demand agreement. But it does, potentially, impair self-rule. It precludes specific intentions from spanning party lines. Yet party divisions already disrupt such intentions. And two forms of mass policy polarization—party sorting and ideological consistency—have countervailing 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. Elected officials of different parties are now far apart on policy issues. The key thing growth in this does is impact voters' choice set. That means it impacts the options people are presented with when they vote. When there is little such polarization, voters face relatively similar options. They face parties that will enact similar policies. But, when there is a lot of elite polarization, voters face more distinctive options. The parties will enact quite different policies. The crucial question, then, is how the properties of a choice set matter to democratic values. I don't know of any way in which they matter to equality. Elite polarization seems to leave this value untouched. But, as we'll see, the nature of one's options does matter to self-rule.

Here's how we'll proceed. We'll start with how the properties of choice sets affect one's position to be a self-author. These are the properties which determine how much your choices makes you individual author of your own life. From this, we'll reason by analogy to the properties of choice sets which help make you joint author of government policies. Our notion of self-rule is intended to capture this value of joint-authorship. Thus, we'll say that one is in a better position to be self-ruling when one's choice sets have these properties. Now I'm not going to give an exhaustive account of these properties. But the two that seem most important are diversity and quality. The more diverse your options are, and the higher quality they are, the more your final choice contributes to your self-authorship. Let's take these points in turn.

We start with diversity. Your choice set is diverse when it contains very different options. What matters here is not the number of options available to you. Being able to choose between five hundred identical cereals doesn't make your choice set diverse. 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 choice sets let you be more author of your own life.

Why does diversity matter? It's natural to explain this in terms of difference-making. When your options are very similar, which one you choose doesn't make much of a difference. If you'd chosen differently, or not at all, your life would have ended up much the same. But when your options are very dissimilar, which one you choose makes a huge difference. If you had chosen

differently, your life would have been very different. You would have ended up as an investment banker rather than a professor. And, crucially, how much a choice contributes to self-authorship is a matter of how much that choice makes a difference. When your life would have ended up pretty much the same whatever you chose, the choice isn't much of a manifestation of self-creation. So, the more diverse your options, the more your choice makes you a self-author.

Now turn to quality. Suppose you have very bad, but very diverse, options. You can choose between spending fifteen hours a day working in one of Andrew Carnegie's steel factories or fifteen hours a day fighting Mike Tyson. These aren't very similar; making steel is very different from getting beaten to a pulp. But they share the distinction of being terrible options. Intuitively, this reduces the extent to which the option you pick contributes to your self-authorship. The worse your options are, the less the choice you make manifests your intentions. Plausibly, the quality of a choice set has two determinants. First, the value of an option depends in part on how much you like (or hate) the option. If an option is objectively good, but you yourself hate it (think working for Goldman), then it doesn't much improve the quality of your choice set. It's your own judgement of the value of your options which matters to this quality. Second, what matters most for the quality of your choice set is the quality of your best option. Suppose you have the option of either fighting the heavyweight champion of the world or being in the Rolling Stones. The fact that you have the fighting 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 what matters is not just the mean or median or sum value of your options. Their maximum value has special weight.

We now analogize from the personal case to the collective case. The collective case is just one where others have a say in what gets decided. The properties of our choice sets also seem to matter in these cases: they also determine how well we're in a position to achieve joint-authorship. And, in particular, both diversity and quality matter. The more diverse our choices, the better. Equally, the higher quality our choices, the better. This draws support from its credibility in the personal cases. But it's also independently plausible. Consider anti-war protestors choosing between Nixon and Humphrey. They had very low-quality options. Even their best option was one they detested. This reduced the extent their vote choice could contribute to their joint authorship of government policy. Similarly, their options weren't very diverse. Nixon and Humphrey were both, in the final analysis, domestic policy liberals. This also detracted from the extent to which their

choice could contribute to their joint-authorship of government policy. Now the notion of self-rule we want is exactly one which tracks the value of joint authorship. Thus, when voters face diverse, high quality options, they're in a better position to be self-ruling.

Let's apply this to the import of elite ideological polarization. We'll just consider how things work out in extremely simple conditions. We'll assume that there are two parties, the ideological space is unidimensional, and citizens are uniformly distributed across this space. How we maximize diversity in this setting is straightforward. Suppose increasing elite ideological polarization makes voters' options more distinctive. Then we place both parties at the poles of the ideological space. We want them to be as extreme as can be. But maximizing quality is a little more complex. Here we'll make two further assumptions: (1) the value of an option for each voter is entirely determined by its distance from that voter in this ideological space, and (2) the quality of a voter's choice set is the value of its best option. These entail that the quality of each voter's choice set is determined entirely by their distance from their closest party. By minimizing the average of these distances, we maximize quality. Thus, we clearly shouldn't place both parties at the median citizen. This leaves the extremes very far away from their closest choice. Instead, we should want to spread the parties more evenly across the 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. Thus, to maximize the quality of voters' choice sets, under these assumptions, we need substantial elite polarization.

Now, of course, that holds only under our various assumptions. The most important of these is assumption (2): all that matters to the quality of a choice set is the value of its best option. One could deny this. But what *is* extremely plausible is that the value of the best option is more important, in determining the quality, than the value of the other options. I don't think this can be plausibly denied. For, if one denies this, then putting bad parties on the ballot would seem to seriously drag down the quality of people's electoral choices. But it does not. The mere fact that George Wallace was on the ballot paper did not, in 1968, impair people's self-rule. Yet this alone suffices for qualitatively similar results to those we just arrived at. To maximize the quality of voters' choice sets, we'll want some distance between the two parties.¹⁶ And, since diversity also improves choice sets, we'll likely want

¹⁶Alternatively, we might introduce a third party at some distance from both. I don't belabor this possibility, because third parties face so formidable a task in winning American elections. They would be good for American democracy. But their feasibility is questionable.

even more distance than this. I won't try to put exact figures on the matter. The central point is just that a substantial dose of elite polarization will be best for self-rule. Such a dose puts voters in the best position to enjoy joint-authorship of government policies.

In the case of the United States this means that the recent increase in elite ideological polarization have been non-instrumentally good in at least one respect. It's increased the diversity of voter's choice sets. And its impact on quality is not clear. It could have also improved the quality of voters' choice sets. It could have reduced the average distance between voters' and their ideologically closest option. Now it could instead have degraded that quality. It could have gone too far. But, on the simplest way of reckoning things, that might well be very far indeed. And that would still be *overall* bad for self-rule only if the consequent diminishment of quality outweighed the increase in diversity. These are high bars to surmount. Thus, increased elite ideological polarization seems unlikely to have been non-instrumentally bad. More likely, it has been non-instrumentally good.

There is a way to resist this conclusion. One might insist 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.¹⁷ 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

¹⁷Both Singer (2016) and Bornschieer (2019) think that, in Latin America, polarization has done this in the past.

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.¹⁸ 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 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

¹⁸For a succinct critique of the preference satisfaction conception of democracy's value, see Kolodny (2014a, 206–8).

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 augmented by 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 Republican's 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 a multitude of cross-partisan rivalries into objectionable enmities.¹⁹

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. Sometimes, it is 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. But one might also think that, when one's enmity is justified, then it isn't bad. It doesn't make your life any worse, the thought goes, to have well-chosen enemies. And, one might conclude, enmity between cross-partisans is justified. One might think that because one thinks that one party's platform reflects reprehensible values.

¹⁹Brennan (2016) also worries about enmity between citizens. Yet there are two differences between my view and his. First, Brennan thinks that democratic co-citizens are inevitably enemies (Brennan 2016, 235–45). He thinks this because he thinks that, when a competition gives us reasons to undermine someone's interests, we're enemies with that person. I think this at most makes us rivals. But rivalry is harmless; enmity is the bad relationship. Second, Brennan thinks partisan contempt is unfitting because the disputes between parties "are tiny" (Brennan 2016, 232). I agree that these disputes look tiny compared to, say, the dispute between the Bolsheviks and the Tsar. But they have a lot of moral import: people live or die on the basis of which party wins these disputes. This import could easily make partisan contempt fitting. Thus, I have a different explanation of why this contempt is unfitting. So our views are similar in tenor but differ importantly in detail.

It is thus, justifiable to be enemies of the members of that party. One may feel contempt for, and work against, them. So cross-partisan relationships of enmity, on this view, may not be problematic after all.

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 to convince them to change their mind than to simply defeat them politically. It would be better to enlighten them than to beat them. This is well-explained if one's relationship of enmity is, in itself, a problem. By enlightening them, one removes one's reason to be their enemy. That is evidence that even justified relationships of enmity are bad: it would be better not be someone's enemy, even when enmity is justified. 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 provides no support for the view that justified enmity is wholly anodyne. Such relationships may still be, as I believe they are, bad in themselves.

Yet we needn't rely on this point. For, in any case, I doubt that cross-partisan contempt is usually fitting. I doubt this for two reasons. The first is that many citizens' values are only loosely connected to their parties' policy platform. So, suppose a party's platform does reflect reprehensible values. Many of its supporters will nonetheless lack those values. This thought flows from Philip Converse's famous claim that many citizens are 'innocent of ideology' (Converse 1964). The claim is that many people lack the type of ideologies which inform party platforms. I won't summarize the evidence for this here: but I'll note two pieces of it.²⁰ On the one hand, few people (about 20%) cite ideology or policy when asked to explain their judgements of political actors. They cite the group affiliation of those actors. Or they cite how they think those actors will impact their material environment. On the other, few people (about 18%) are able to describe the ideological difference between Democrats and Republicans. Most don't know what these distinctions are. Both make it hard to judge partisans as guilty of ideology. Thus, many ordinary partisans likely lack the values manifested by their parties' platforms. So, it doesn't matter if those values are contemptible.

²⁰For a much fuller contemporary summary, see Kinder and Kalmoe (2017). The figures in the text are from this book. It's worth noting that if this view is true for the vast majority of citizens, as Converse thought, then the contribution elite or mass policy polarization makes to self-rule—positive or negative—is likely pre-empted. Plausible, citizens need to judge parties by their policies in order to enjoy self-rule.

Even if they are, that won't make contempt for these party members fitting.

Second, 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 view 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 aren't driven by value conflict. They're driven by group psychology. Thus, suppose members of a party do have reprehensible values. Even so, 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 voter's choice sets. Perhaps these types of polarization are instrumentally bad; perhaps not. But they are non-instrumentally innocuous. Broadly speaking, then, polarization 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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