

Political and Media Polarization: Dynamics, Consequences, and Perspectives in Contemporary Society

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Abstract

This contribution examines the relationship between political and media polarization in contemporary society. Over the years, polarization has become a central phenomenon in multiple countries, characterized by the progressive separation of opinions and extreme attitudes among different political groups. The media, absolute protagonists in the dissemination of information and in the shaping of public opinion, stand as a stronghold of this process. This article first presents a conceptualization and examines its link with the media landscape, establishing its origin, consequences, and the different ramifications. The effects impact society's media consumption and the very functioning of democracy, strongly affecting political life. Possible trajectories and strategies are therefore addressed to promote a more constructive and less polarized public discourse.

Keywords: Political Polarization; Media Polarization; Public Opinion; Democracy; Political Communication

1. Introduction

The mechanisms underlying social platforms are structured to maximize user engagement and attention, channelling information flows according to individual preferences. Such a system of automated content selection and recommendation hardly allows individuals to find themselves in environments with differing opinions; rather, it leads to the consolidation of the perceptions they already hold. This continuous bombardment of content that responds to our interests does nothing but reinforce and compact users within homogeneous clusters, whose main outcome is the radicalization of those same perceptions into opinions and prejudices that are difficult to question. Their effects manifest themselves in strongly polarized ideological positions, which have been considered the main cause of several negative phenomena

that currently surround our society on digital platforms¹. It must be emphasized that this phenomenon should not be confused with a simple divergence of opinions on political programs, nor with a natural opposition between different ideas. Rather, what can be observed is a more subtle process in which social divisions align along a single dimension. Thus, it does not arise from debate, but from its deformation, that is, when opinions become identities, when disagreement translates into hostility, when complexity is compressed into irreconcilable moral blocs. From this dynamic emerge forms of identity tribalism, which push online communities to develop strong hostility toward the opposing side and an indissoluble bond toward their own political group².

In the visceral desire with which we defend our favourite digital group or our ideological position, we recognize the same logic of ancient tribal alliances: identity-based loyalty in exchange for protection and a sense of belonging. On the other hand, hostility toward the out-group, which once served to protect us from potential enemies, is now directed at abstract categories of people never met in person voters of the other party, supporters of a certain cause, members of a different online subculture. Each of these can become, in our eyes, a target onto which we project atavistic fears and resentments. And so digital tribes coalesce and oppose one another, engaging in fierce disputes over often symbolic issues. Social networks are filled with factions that feel mutually under attack, ready to strengthen internal camaraderie and portray the opponent as entirely evil or insane. It cannot be ruled out that behind the construction of convinced, cohesive, and exclusive niches lies precisely the awareness of a sort of disintegration affecting intermediary bodies and the collapse of ideologies, which in the past provided all-encompassing frameworks for interpreting the things of the world. Added to this is the tendency of traditional media and partisan communication to sensationalize public debates, stimulating resentment and transforming discussions into polarized clashes. A situation so complicated that the issue has come to be regarded as a widely observed trend in today's politics, with implications that are generally considered harmful. Faced with such a phenomenon, the idea has spread that politics would function better, more efficiently, and more fairly, if strong opinions could be more moderate, with an underlying ideal dictated by moderation among citizens and institutions³. Therefore, the factors involved are not limited to their effects on voting but constitute a discourse that invades a much broader space of reasoning. A deep understanding of this structural drift proves to be a fundamental priority, especially in an informational ecosystem characterized by a profound fragmentation of channels, the erosion of trust in institutions, and informational disorder in the digital environment⁴. It follows that public debate, the

¹ Levin et al., 2021.

² Battista, & Gallina, 2025.

³ Weber et al., 2021.

⁴ Gallo et al., 2022.

public sphere, public opinion, and political participation have, in recent years, become common concepts that fully fall within the broad domain derived from the field of communication and politics. In political communication, people relate to reality based on what the media say reality is, which suggests that political reality will be the result of what political actors communicate through the media. In other words, it is necessary to establish direct control over the media to shape this reality, and the Internet has proposed a new paradigm, in which the recipient is no longer only a passive actor, but an active one. After all, in the age of online media, information is 'unverified', meaning it has not been checked and lacks any checks and balances to guarantee its accuracy⁵. Furthermore, the quality of media content is assessed on the basis of the number of 'likes' or 'dislikes'⁶.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Background

The quadrilateral conceived between media, politics, public opinion, and communication makes it possible to address the complex situation, understood as a central element today.

The increasing visibility of the political system has led to the configuration of the political sphere as a media sphere⁷, and the relationships between representatives and the represented are shaped by forms of communication, so much so that the media frame politics and political actors and are forced to play by the rules imposed by the media game⁸. Based on this fact, we conclude that an analysis of contemporary democratic systems reveals that political polarisation is a structural feature, usually defined as the extreme divergence between the political opinions or beliefs of individuals or groups within a society. It is a representation distinguished by the frequent elaboration of extreme positions, the lack of consensus, and the growing hostility among different political factions⁹. It also implies the fragmentation of public opinion on political and social issues, in which citizens cluster into opposing positions along the ideological spectrum. It is an expression linked to the formation of extreme political identities and adherence to inflexible partisan values and beliefs. From an institutional point of view, this split negatively affects the legislative level, slowing down the search for political compromises and hindering cooperation among governing bodies. The manifestations of this fragmentation move along different trajectories, ranging from the radicalization of party positions to the progressive disengagement of citizens from public debate¹⁰. This distance is no longer measured solely based on different ideological preferences

⁵ Kasarda, 2018.

⁶ Sámelová, 2021.

⁷ Štětka, & Mihelj, 2024.

⁸ Roslyng, & Dindler, 2023.

⁹ Esteban, & Ray, 1994.

¹⁰ Brüggemann, & Meyer, 2023.

but directly affects social relationships: the divisions separating political leaders and the positions assumed by the population tend, in fact, to translate into marked mutual hostility. Thus develops a rejection of compromise in which those who support the opposing opinion are perceived as a threat to the stability of one's own group¹¹. This identity clash acts both as a cause and as an effect of conflicts within a democracy, finding fertile ground both in the structural factors of politics and in the way modern media intercept and amplify the emotional reactions of audiences. In summary, political polarization is a recent phenomenon in academic studies, and without a universally accepted definition, which has developed in democracies over the last decades, favoured both by structural changes and by media activity¹². It is therefore established that the relationship between political polarization and media is a slippery subject. Following this, there is an intertwining of approaches, some of which defend the limited influence of the role of media in political polarization, arguing that people choose what they consume according to their pre-existing preferences, or those that emphasize that sociodemographic and economic circumstances are what provoke polarization¹³. In the opposite direction, other studies highlight the contribution of media to the expansion of the phenomenon, showing how transformations in the political landscape directly depend on the exponential spread of social networks and the exacerbation of antagonism driven by partisan information structures¹⁴. Algorithmic curation increases segregation and reveals complex dynamics that depend on the specific characteristics of each platform and political culture¹⁵. In the context of polarization, there are elements that can be considered effects and at the same time drivers of the phenomenon, as in the case of audience segmentation. This process is based on the disintegration of the public into multiple niches, distinguished by ideological peculiarities, interests, or age groups, within which messages are conveyed on a large scale and in reduced timeframes¹⁶. This practice has become prominent with the emergence of social networks and content personalization. In its emergence there are factors such as "filter bubbles"¹⁷, which show users information aligned with their existing beliefs and values, a situation that leads to "echo chambers"¹⁸, where similar opinions are reinforced and divergent ones excluded; the presence of strongly ideological media that specifically address ideological groups; or the personalization of content directed at individuals with messages that reinforce their convictions.

¹¹ Skytte, 2021.

¹² Boccia Artieri, 2025.

¹³ Wilson et al., 2020.

¹⁴ Somer, & McCoy, 2019.

¹⁵ Santos et al., 2021.

¹⁶ Bliuc et al., 2024.

¹⁷ Pariser, 2011.

¹⁸ Sunstein, 2017.

Another factor that can be considered both an inductive factor and, conversely, as a derivation or consequence of the phenomenon of polarization is sensationalism. Sensationalism in the media is the tendency to emphasize, exaggerate, and even distort information in order to arouse emotions or interest¹⁹. This tendency to focus on conflicts and controversies can exacerbate existing political and cultural divisions. Likewise, the simplification and reduction of the complexity of political issues within sensationalism can lead to a superficial and polarized understanding of the topics addressed. Furthermore, emotional and exaggerated narratives may foster extreme attitudes and reduce tolerance for opposing points of view. A further component linked to polarization is media bias, understood as the systematic tendency to favour one political perspective over another²⁰. The presence of media aligned with specific ideologies can intensify polarization by providing distorted information. Media bias, sensationalism, and audience segmentation are factors that influence polarization and may damage the quality of public debate and the democratic decision-making process. In this situation, the ethical responsibility of the media, media literacy, and regulation could be potential solutions to mitigate these effects, although it has not been widely demonstrated how they effectively contribute to depolarization²¹. We have a better understanding of the causes of polarization and its effects on political attitudes and the problems of democracy than of the possible tactics for defusing these dynamics. Another point to note is that not all political forces polarize ideologically in the same way or with the same intensity. This situation of uneven polarization raises questions about the reasons behind it, and common arguments have highlighted the particular role of media and political elites in pushing a party or a set of political forces to adopt more extremist positions²². For example, if social networks are understood as causes of polarization, insofar as they consolidate echo chambers and information bubbles and reinforce cognitive biases, how can different levels of polarization be explained? Another issue is that, considering the unequal levels of polarization in different democracies, the question arises as to what the role and responsibility of digital social networks are in this phenomenon²³. It is not evident that their impact is homogeneous across different political systems and countries, even when they are widely consumed. In fact, recent works show that digital platforms have no effect on the polarization of attitudes or ideological preferences. Starting from these findings, it becomes necessary to redefine analytical models, shifting attention toward the interaction between the strategic communication of political leaders and the emotional reactivity of users, from which the media propagation that generates polarizing dynamics derives²⁴.

¹⁹ Brown et al., 2018.

²⁰ Elejalde et al., 2018.

²¹ Gaultney et al., 2022.

²² Barberá, 2020.

²³ Yarchi et al., 2024.

²⁴ Bail et al., 2018.

3. AI and Polarization: Reconfiguring Politics in the Digital Era

The continuous integration of artificial intelligence into contemporary information flows constitutes a factor of potential destabilization, whose effects spill over in a non-negligible way onto democratic dynamics. In this sense, the technological progress implied by AI seems destined to have visible effects in each of the fields in which it intervenes. In this regard, however, we must not forget that artificial intelligence (or machines as such) is not governed by ethical or moral principles and may be subject to abuse, for example to exert ideological influence on society. Although a set of basic ethical principles has been drawn up to guide the use of AI to ensure, for example, transparency, data security and respect for fundamental rights, the actions of AI remain unpredictable²⁵. For these reasons, an attempt has been made to trace the coordinates of this constantly evolving scenario, highlighting how its impact on democracies may generate different interpretations. From this perspective, clear examples have been observed in discussions on the algorithmic shaping of digital communication environments and the consequent deterioration of political discourse; on the use of algorithms to influence political conflicts; and on the saturation of the public sphere with false or misleading information through generative AI²⁶. Moreover, their impact also influences the competitive balance between autocratic and democratic systems, especially in developing countries. Such technological pervasiveness raises profound questions about the resilience capacity of democratic systems, fuelling a critical perspective according to which digital automation is progressively conditioning social relations and the ways in which political power is managed. This dynamic is reflected in concerns that automation processes are altering the foundations of democratic participation, penetrating digital communication processes and modifying the very nature of public debate. This situation is attributed to its penetration into political processes, both through its presence on platforms such as social media or online comments, and through its use by bots and trolls to influence the political sphere²⁷. It follows that political systems, electoral processes, decision-making, and citizen participation are increasingly influenced by aspects derived from algorithmic systems and automation at different systemic levels. Such a scenario requires a shift in analysis toward the dynamics of reception within multimedia ecosystems. It is highlighted how the impact of artificial intelligence now affects the transition from purely textual formats to visual and synthetic ones, through the dissemination of deepfakes and audiovisual clones. This technological metamorphosis alters the emotional and psychological response of audiences, exacerbating identity boundaries and accelerating phenomena of affective polarization²⁸. Consequently, the dynamics of creating and

²⁵ Hajdúková, & Bindas, 2023.

²⁶ Cho et al., 2020.

²⁷ Waller, & Anderson, 2021.

²⁸ Jost et al., 2022.

disseminating politically oriented content on social networks do not generate uniform effects, and the debate remains open regarding the real conditioning of generative technologies on issue polarization, political knowledge, and citizens' attitudes. These divergences demonstrate that algorithmic curation accentuates isolation, but also reveal articulated dynamics that depend on the characteristics of each country. Despite these divergences, there are uniform operational modalities across different national contexts. Both AI and bots stand out for their ability to generate and propagate content rapidly and efficiently in large volumes; these actors have the ability to manipulate articles, photos, videos, and audio files, to target a specific audience, and to conceal their identity with ease; however, this influence and activity in quantitative and qualitative terms mark a fundamental change in the political sphere. Not because of its novelty, but because of its diffusion, which moreover demonstrates how the strong growth in the use of social networks is generating enormous amounts of personal and collective data that are used in attempts to influence citizens. However, in the face of purely distortive uses, the reflection highlights the need for integrated research paths, capable of exploiting the same automated tools to intercept and mitigate conflictual drifts, although the speed of propagation of artificial visual content tends to nullify the timeliness of traditional institutional debunking interventions²⁹.

4. Impact of Media Polarization

The recent evolution of information architectures has placed media polarization at the centre of scientific debate, highlighting its capacity to profoundly redefine contemporary cognitive and social structures. It is a process in which the media adopt extreme and often distorted positions in the presentation of news and opinions, generating significant consequences on the perception, behaviour, and decision-making process of the public. The repercussions of this polarization are felt by the public and have an impact on the democratic health of society; one of the most discussed effects is audience fragmentation³⁰. Polarized media tend to attract an audience that shares similar ideological opinions, which in turn leads to more distorted news consumption and the creation of "echo chambers" in which individuals are exposed only to opinions that reinforce their beliefs. Within digital ecosystems, this tendency sometimes manifests itself as selective filtering, in which people exploit channels and algorithms to determine in advance the nature of the content they will consume; in other cases, users intentionally choose to turn to specialized or alternative information sources, with the aim of finding an ideal faction that reflects their own values and points of view. This limited exposure to certain media and formats influences the recipient, who does not receive pluralistic information and therefore hinders the possibility of changing opinion. Another issue revealed by media polarization is the

²⁹ Burton, 2023.

³⁰ Pildes, 2021.

decline in trust in the media. The perception of partisan orientation in a specific news outlet may push citizens to extend this distrust to the entire information system. Distrust in the media is a problem that threatens the integrity of the informational function of the media in a democracy. In fact, it sometimes even results in a rejection of information, in a decision not to be informed. This is the so-called avoidant attitude toward the media. This attitude represents a defensive response by recipients, who seek to protect themselves from the negative impact of media content perceived as partial or extreme³¹. The impression that the media are influenced by political or economic agendas may lead individuals to doubt their objectivity and truthfulness, particularly when these media defend certain ideological positions without allowing other lines of thought. This situation produces in some individuals a desire for disconnection from information, with recipients choosing to disengage completely from the media. Avoidant attitudes represent an adaptive response by recipients to a media environment perceived as hostile and constitute a significant challenge for social cohesion and the functioning of democracy; indeed, one consequence of exposure to polarized information is that disillusionment and apathy may occur among citizens, reducing the likelihood that they will participate in the democratic process³². This continuous media focus on permanent conflict fuels the idea that public institutions are structurally compromised or inefficient; polarization generates fatigue in public opinion and may lead to a general disengagement from political issues. If, moreover, the media do not reflect a diverse range of opinions, the perception of poor representativeness among the different components of the population risks undermining the stimulus for active participation³³. The most important consequence is that if large segments of the population choose to abstain because of media polarization, electoral results may fail to reflect the real opinions and desires of society, and even the abstention of moderate voters may lead to electoral outcomes favouring extreme candidates, further exacerbating polarization in the political arena³⁴. The relationship between voter abstention and media polarization represents a challenge for modern democracies. We can say that we have moved beyond even the concept of the 'monitoring citizen' - an alternative to the traditional model of the 'informed citizen' - that is, a citizen committed to monitoring the public sphere with minimal cognitive effort, as they are immersed in a culture of participation that oscillates between an active and a passive attitude depending on a strong interest or stimulus³⁵. There has been a marked shift towards a citizen who appears to have very little interest in political life. The relationship between voter apathy and media polarisation therefore represents one of the main challenges facing contemporary democracies.

³¹ Barnhardt et al., 2008.

³² Arbatli, & Rosenberg, 2021.

³³ Casal Bértoa, & Rama, 2021.

³⁴ Autor et al., 2020.

³⁵ Schudson, 1998

Disengagement from the electoral process (and, more generally, from politics) and the fragmentation of public debate are two sides of the same coin, symbolising a chasm that is difficult to bridge in the crisis of representation and trust in democratic institutions. This trend is, however, fuelled by specific dynamics that drive citizens away from the ballot box. This is not merely a question of numbers but constitutes a starker political signal. It is the manifestation of a crisis in the system of representation that is eroding the relationship between citizens and institutions. And when that relationship is undermined, democracy itself is weakened. It is essential to understand and address the dynamics that lead citizens to disengage from the democratic process because of polarized media representations and to warn the population that a less informed society is more susceptible to disinformation³⁶. This scenario becomes even more critical in the current technological context, where disinformation is no longer only textual but also relies on multimedia and audiovisual formats generated by artificial intelligence. The ease with which these visual contents affect the emotional and psychological sphere of users, combined with a speed of propagation that makes attempts at rectification belated, renders disengaged or polarized audiences extremely vulnerable targets to intentional manipulation³⁷. The spread of digital technologies and artificial intelligence has transformed access to information, exacerbating the risks of misinformation, deepfakes, and algorithmic manipulation. Digital platforms, with their ability to influence public opinion, raise issues of transparency and accountability. To counter these phenomena, an integrated approach is essential, combining regulation, advanced technological tools, international cooperation, and digital literacy, to ensure a safe, pluralistic, and democratic information ecosystem.

5. Conclusions

The growing awareness of the risks associated with political and media polarization has prompted institutions and researchers to develop diversified intervention strategies. However, countermeasures focused on the most evident symptoms, such as the spread of false news or hate speech, show only partial effectiveness. Therefore, more direct actions against the problem have been hypothesized, including the encouragement of critical thinking and diversification in the consultation of information sources. At the same time, a more responsible and ethical journalism is being called for. Its most tangible concretization is media literacy, since it has been demonstrated that polarization has an impact on the values of a community, influencing internal prejudices and making the population more vulnerable to conspiracy theories. From this perspective, media literacy assumes a central role in fostering the critical understanding of information flows by the public, translating into the set of knowledge and skills necessary to move

³⁶ Svolik, 2019.

³⁷ Carothers, & O'Donohue, 2019.

consciously within the media landscape³⁸. In general, this involves understanding the complexities behind journalistic decisions and the news production process in order to improve media literacy, while at the same time reducing the perception of media bias and mitigating the polarization generated by online content consumed by citizens, since it often does not come from reliable news sources or is based on a partial reading of the news content (usually the news headline), which also generates the illusion of being “well informed”³⁹. Consequently, a wide range of media literacy development practices has emerged, often incorporating the development of critical thinking, the promotion of diversity in information consumption, fact-checking, and the responsible use of social networks, or the promotion of active citizenship, as has already been widely noted⁴⁰. However, the way to achieve these objectives is not definitive, since there has been a shift from classical literacy styles to others incorporating strategies such as gamification or game-based learning. This educational framework now collides with the complexity of new generative technologies, capable of producing highly realistic audiovisual content and deepfakes⁴¹. Faced with visual flows that affect the emotional sphere immediately, traditional literacy must evolve to teach how to recognize not only distorted texts, but also the synthetic manipulation of images and voice⁴². The ability to address a multidimensional and complex problem such as political polarization through media literacy has often generated excessive optimism regarding its potential outcomes⁴³. At the same time, other studies warn that the effectiveness of these strategies has not been adequately tested empirically. Furthermore, some findings suggest that they may generate the opposite effect: excessive confidence in one’s ability to evaluate information. Consequently, simple debunking or traditional verification interventions often prove belated in relation to the speed with which visual disinformation spreads and becomes rooted in partisan biases⁴⁴. This scenario is configured as a field of strong experimentation, in which future research will have to define models of action capable of confronting the psychological impact and the speed of artificial intelligence. The challenge today is not to chase after technology, but to make it understandable and usable for those who will become part of today’s society. Perhaps this is precisely the most important skill to develop in the age of artificial intelligence: cultivating the cultural tools needed to find one’s way in a world already deeply permeated by these technologies. For the real battle will not be about replacing humans with machines, but about preventing them from relinquishing their ability to understand, judge and shape the world around them.

³⁸ Valtonen et al., 2019.

³⁹ Rekker, 2021.

⁴⁰ Baptista et al., 2026

⁴¹ Battista, 2024.

⁴² Simas et al., 2020.

⁴³ Schedler, 2023.

⁴⁴ Hameleers, & Van der Meer, 2020.

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