

## **Political Polarization** **A Conceptual Survey**

*Laurence Whitehead*

### **Abstract**

This essay probes the logic and boundaries of the concept of polarization and tests its utility as compared to available overlapping and adjacent analytical frameworks. Until recently, political polarization was a marginal theme in the study of comparative politics, but under the pressure of unexpected events it lately has achieved a new centrality. Case studies have multiplied, and a growing inventory of indicators has become available. Some of the terminology used (for example, “pernicious”) is notably denunciatory. It rests on underspecified theoretical foundations and its conceptual contours have received scant attention. Polarization’s current appeal is largely due to its evident relevance to some recurrent and pressing aspects of political behavior that previously were overlooked. But it risks over-extension and conceptual stretching. This essay thus seeks to evade such pitfalls by specifying the morphology of the concept, identifying its scope conditions, and situating it in relation to proximate terms of comparative political analysis.

**Keywords:** Autocratization, conceptual morphology, consociationalism, democratic backsliding, pacting, pluralism, political polarization, totalitarianism.

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Comparative democratization studies make much use of evocative language designed to capture the dynamics of political contestation and regime change in a turbulent and unpredictable world. Leading examples include “transitions” from authoritarian rule; “consolidation” of new democratic regimes; “populism”; “identity politics”; “backsliding”; and the newly fashionable term that concerns here—“political polarization.” Such encompassing categories serve a valuable purpose in theory construction, but they also have serious limitations. The aim here is to extract maximum utility from this framing device, while guarding against the most egregious of the associated pitfalls.

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**Laurence Whitehead** is Senior Research Fellow at Nuffield College, Oxford University, and Research Associate at CREDO (Stellenbosch University) and the German Institute of Global Affairs (GIGA), Hamburg. <laurence.whitehead@nuffield.ox.ac.uk>

## On Master Concepts, Paradigms, Temporal Models, and Conceptual Tools

A new paradigm (or “master concept”) typically comes to the fore because of its utility in tackling a fresh or neglected topic that has attracted widespread concern and that does not seem to be adequately addressed by the pre-existing repertoire of scholarly concepts. In particular, students of comparative democratization processes have been confronted with the unexpected challenge of accounting for multiple setbacks to liberal democratic consolidation, notably including the experience of the Trump administration after 2016.<sup>1</sup> This startling development demanded explanation in its own right, and it also highlighted parallel experiences in other major democracies, for example, in Brazil, India, South Africa, and Turkey. This unexpected course of global democratic evolution has stimulated the adoption of supplementary concepts that might fill the gap left where rational choice, institutional design, and socio-structural models have been found wanting. As we shall see below, there was already prior literature about political polarization,<sup>2</sup> but this was not a central concern of the discipline until such episodes abruptly triggered a cascade of new contributions assigning it an unfamiliar centrality.<sup>3</sup> The resulting expansion of coverage also involved a repositioning of the concept in relation to adjacent categories of analysis. It was now required to deliver a much greater explanatory punch than before, and this enhanced responsibility was accompanied by significant shifts in the balance of its argumentation. Subcategories, such as “affective” and “pernicious” polarization, were brought to the fore, modifying what previously

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Francis Fukuyama’s latest attempt to come to terms with the surprises and turbulence of post-Cold War global politics, including the Trump presidency. His strategy is to single out identity politics as the golden thread. “Demand for recognition of one’s identity is the master concept that unifies much of what is going on in world politics today.” It animates the right as well as the left, and illuminates political developments in Hungary, Poland, Thailand, Turkey, and many other democracies as well as in key undemocratic regimes. See Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition* (London: Profile, 2019), xv. There is also an evident dark side to this proposed Master Concept—namely intolerance of “outsiders.” Fukuyama stresses that Trump was careful “not to articulate openly racist views” (p.120), but *apartheid* was also an expression of identity politics—as is Hindu nationalism, Zionism, Russian imperial nostalgia, and so forth.

<sup>2</sup> Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches* (Boston: MIT Press, 2006), which contrasted the long-term reduction of both inequality and political polarization in the United States between 1913 and 1957 with their sustained and drastic rise in tandem ever since the 1970s.

<sup>3</sup> Nolan McCarty, *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). Although focused on the United States and its specific metrics of elite and mass polarization, this useful overview helpfully distinguishes among partisanship (a social identity), party sorting by ideology, and his narrowly defined notion of political polarization, which covers bimodal preferences on public policy, ideology, and partisan attachment. These specific elements are reasonably measurable, but McCarty does acknowledge the potential validity of broader and more long-term variants of political polarization.

had been mainly simple characterizations of party and electoral behavior, or of bimodal distributions of mass political preferences and elite roll-call votes.

In its new guise, political polarization can assume the mantle of a paradigm, or master concept, that is to say, a foundational and structuring force that is presumed to underlie and order a wide array of more conventional/epiphenomenal features of political behavior. Beyond specific studies of polarization in precise places and times (say Trump's U.S.A.), the term now tends to be deployed to account for much larger and more general explanatory challenges (such as the spread of "democratic regression" as a current worldwide tendency).<sup>4</sup> Instead of just examining precise manifestations of political polarization in specific institutional settings or policy domains, comparative scholars, Stephen Haggard and Robert Kaufman, diagnose persistent and cumulative tendencies toward ever-greater confrontation and negative sum deinstitutionalization across a variety of political arenas, spread by diffusion and intentional action, with disruptive consequences that, if not effectively countered, may prove irreversible and uncontainable.<sup>5</sup>

This essay sketches a reflective interpretation of the promise of the described emerging paradigm/master concept, drawing attention to its changing status in comparison to adjacent categories that also have bearing on the phenomena in question. The strengths and limitations of this conceptual innovation can already be detected in outline, especially when it is situated within the comparative dynamics and morphology of similar items in the social science repertoire. Political polarization conceived as a broad and encompassing category meets a pressing need and opens the door to fresh and constructive avenues of research. But, like other big labels in the democratization toolkit, it is also liable to conceptual over-stretch followed by reflux. The aim here is not to deconstruct the concept but rather to outline the best ways to capitalize on its insights, while guarding against the associated pitfalls. An essential first step is to trace its origin and diffusion.

## Conceptual History

Many key concepts in the social sciences are borrowed from other scholarly discourses. Scientific terms are particularly prone to such transfers because they carry with them an aura of rigor and intellectual authority. However, such terms as "contagion," "diffusion," "transition," and "consolidation" (to cite

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the V-Dem Democracy Report, 2022; the Bertelsmann Stiftung Publication BTI 2022: Democratic Resilience under Pressure; and Larry Diamond, "Democracy's Clear and Present Danger," *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 1 (January 2022): 163-179.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Haggard and Robert Kaufman, *Backsliding and Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021) reviews sixteen cases of democratic retreat and identifies a prior uptick in political polarization as a contributory factor in virtually all instances.

some of the evocative terminology littering the comparative democratization literature) acquire different resonances and altered connotations once they are translated from medicine, physics, engineering, and so on, into the field of political analysis.<sup>6</sup> This realm of inquiry is much more fuzzy and unstable, and many of its key concepts are both contested and value-laden (e.g., what counts as a “really existing” liberal democracy, not to mention how to characterize “backsliding” or, indeed, “political polarization”). For example, some Britons attribute political division and dysfunction to the Brexit Party, while others assign responsibility to “euro-fanatics” aligned with Brussels. Such disputes cloud scholarly efforts to identify a neutral and objective meaning of these concepts, and yet at the same time they are too relevant to be left out of consideration. The redeployment of such language from the natural sciences into political analysis can best be regarded as a metaphorical exercise (harsher critics might even say a sleight of hand) rather than directly applicable transfers of meaning. So, we need to briefly consider the significance of “polarization” in the physical sciences before moving on to the various ways in which it has been taken up first by the human sciences, in general, and then more specifically by comparative politics.

At the most abstract level, binary contrasts are fundamental to human thought, and polarization recurs across the whole spectrum of our physical as well as social classifications. Thus, for example, it is the two polar ice caps that lock up much of our planet’s liquid water and thereby uncover its continents and structure the ocean currents that govern the global ecosystem and regulate our entire natural world. Likewise, electricity consists of the flow of electrons through a conductor from positive to negative poles, after having escaped from the atomic bond that contained them. Digitalization is the redescription of the material world in terms composed entirely of the polar digits 0 and 1. Ethical and normative reasoning rests on the polarity between positive and negative appraisals. Narrative consists of the flow of a story from the beginning to its conclusion. Turning to the human sciences, gender polarity provides a fundamental category for thinking about family structures, and the distinction between “public” and “private” social domains; and lifecycle polarity structures progression from young to old, or from growing to declining organisms. Overall, therefore, binary classifications and polarized reasoning are fundamental to the basic human endeavor to impose order and establish intelligible meaning across the flux of sensations and experience that surround and compose us.

Thus, polarization is not just a convenient shorthand for use in restricted domains; it is, in fact, a presupposition of rational analysis in all disciplinary

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<sup>6</sup> Laurence Whitehead, “Enlivening the Concept of Democratisation: The Biological Metaphor,” *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 2 (2011): 291-299, and “On Biology, Politics and Democracy,” *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 2 (2010): 23-42.

fields. Having established that, we can now consider how it is used in the social sciences, in general, and in the comparative politics of democracy, in particular. Binary contrasts and conflicts are standard fare in many areas of social scientific theorization (although specific reference to these dynamics in terms of “polarization” is relatively rare). Thus, in international relations, “balance of power” reasoning occupies a central position. In development studies, the passage from “traditional” to “modern” conditions is a core concern. Likewise, traditional macro-sociology postulates class conflict between owners and their workforce; psychoanalysis pits conscious against subconscious mental processes; legal theorists wrestle with the conflicting imperatives of order and justice; and so on. Under all these headings, “polarization” would refer to the possibility that, instead of establishing some stable flow of energy or workable equilibrium between the rival poles, their antagonistic features might intensify and feed on each other to the point of an unfettered confrontation with uncontrollably destructive consequences.

## **Polarization and Political Disorder**

With these background conditions in mind, we now can examine more specifically the conceptual history of *political* polarization. For many centuries, the prime source of political authority in Europe was the divine right of kings, sanctified by the Catholic Church. These two bulwarks against destructive confrontation failed in the seventeenth century wars of religion and parliamentary resistance to royal absolutism, and from its inception modern political theory was required to address the resulting perils of escalating confrontation. In their different ways, both Thomas Hobbes and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz were spurred by the excesses of political and societal polarization that they had to live through to elaborate their doctrines. But neither of them found a reliable antidote to these perils.

It was England’s 1688 “Glorious Revolution” that offered the most durable solution to out-of-control polarization, and that underpinned the consequent elaboration of liberal political theory as a doctrine of balance and moderation. The compromise formula was initially based on parliamentary monarchy, although it eventually progressed to what we now regard as the standard model of liberal constitutional democracy. Always underlying the varied and successive elaborations of this general formula was a foundational preoccupation with the need to contain the unfettered energies and to curb the power abuses that could be unleashed by the excesses of polarized politics. Robespierre and Napoleon exemplified these dangers at the turn of the 1800s, as did Stalin and Hitler a little more than a century later. By the mid-twentieth century, the menace of unlimited power accumulation as the ultimate consequences of unbridled polarization had acquired a new and categorical designation under the pseudo-scientific rubric of “totalitarianism.”

So, polarization was a galvanizing concern from the earliest days of modern European political theory,<sup>7</sup> and it continued to cast its shadow almost to the end of the Cold War. But it was a specter haunting the debate, rather than an explicitly articulated master concept. Positive approaches to the channeling and containment of political conflict (such as constitutionalism, regular party alternation, bills of rights, accountability mechanisms, and the rule of law) were carefully developed and fully elaborated under the broad heading of liberal democratic legitimation. By contrast, the destabilizing potential of cumulative cycles of political confrontation were mostly anathematized rather than substantively theorized. As the Cold War faded and many nations embarked on trajectories of democratization, the imbalance intensified between scholarly precision and professionalized expertise directed at promoting political consensus and, on the other hand, imprecision and emotionalism (sometimes bordering on panic) when analysts are confronted by the possibility of adverse dynamics. The recent upsurge in “polarization” studies arises from the unmet need to address twenty-first century political developments that escape the confines of the pre-established democratization paradigms. It is only very recently, as comparative experience has begun to force political scientists to face such contingencies, that attention has shifted toward a fuller specification of the concept of political polarization.

As noted above, definitions of the concept are varied and elastic. Narrow versions tend to apply only in very highly specified contexts and fail to do justice to the historical and geographical variability of such processes. Their main merit is their clear metrics, but that benefit comes at a high price in terms of explanatory relevance. Since demand for this new concept is driven by the need to fill a gap left by prior explanatory models, only a broad-gauge and encompassing version is likely to meet the case.

The following definition serves the purposes of this essay: *Political polarization is a dynamic and time-limited process (or succession of episodes) of rising open confrontation and noncooperation over core principles of tolerance and coexistence that regulate an open political system.* While empirical validation remains essential, this framing device needs to extend beyond short-term visible manifestations of political polarization to include recurrent and longer-run and more structural aspects, including “identity” issues and habituated cleavage politics. Clearly this definition generates a need for “subsets” of polarization that can be tracked and measured separately. It encompasses both elite-led and mass-driven polarizations; it covers electoral, personalist, ideational, and identitarian motivations; it embraces both short-term upsurges and longer-run slow-burning processes; it may be traced back to institutional design failures, or to socio-economic grievances, but also can

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<sup>7</sup> Beyond Europe, political theorists were similarly motivated (e.g., the legalists versus the ritualist in ancient China, or the purity of the desert versus the luxury and corruption of the city in Ibn Khaldun).

arise from associative polarization not attributable to such causes. All these subsets of the phenomenon can combine and interact in multiple configurations according to specific contextual settings.

One important way to refine the term is to specify how it relates to already existing adjacent conceptualizations. Another is to spell out the relevant scope conditions for its effective application. The third essential step is to test the resulting framework against the available evidence. After touching on each of these three procedures, this essay turns to the emergence of this formulation as a potential new concept and assesses the possible benefits and pitfalls of its rise to prominence.

### **Boundary Concepts: Totalitarianism and Pluralism**

Political polarization of the above kind is a concept with considerable expansive potential. It can be made more useful and precise by comparing it to adjacent categories that can help to limit its range of application. For example, it refers to a process that operates somewhere between two contrasting stylized models of a durable political regime—totalitarianism and pluralism.

The failure of the Weimar Republic to control the escalation of political polarization gave rise to the Nazi regime, which in due course helped to popularize the category of “totalitarianism” as a supposed term of art in political science. It was always an overwrought and polemical designation,<sup>8</sup> and in the present context it has not been revived as a suitable concept for either labeling or interpreting such candidate regimes as China, Iran, Russia, or Saudi Arabia. Whereas totalitarian regimes were said to be incapable of internal reform and destined to end in aggressive expansionism and military overreach, in the 1980s both the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China disproved these core predictions.

Consequently, the negative pole in regime classifications has shifted from totalitarianism to the vaguer and more heterogenous category of “authoritarianism,” and today’s examples of accentuated political polarization are mostly described under such labels as “autocratization” and “backsliding” (as undesirable processes), and “populism” and “electoral authoritarianism” (as negative outcomes). While the postulated processes are negative, they are not defined as necessarily beyond the scope of rectification; and while the outcomes are assumed to be undesirable, they are not existentially catastrophic. The extreme implications of the “totalitarian” option are thus not in the forefront of comparative political analysis, and that could be regarded as a positive development, allowing theories of political polarization to operate more calmly and objectively than before. There is no need to rule out the totalitarian hypothesis completely (North Korea remains a possible candidate),

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<sup>8</sup> As was already evident half a century ago, for example, Robert Burrowes, “Totalitarianism: The Revised Standard Version,” *World Politics* 21, no. 2 (January 1969): 272-294.

but serious comparative analysis requires a more open-minded and nuanced perspective, especially since many current examples of political polarization take place within what are still broadly democratic regimes.

If the totalitarian framework to political polarization is too drastic to fit most lived experience, at the other end of the scale the alternative pluralist model of safely contained political divergences is too complacent. Certainly, this is what recent developments in both the U.K. and the U.S. seem to demonstrate. As a concept in political theory, pluralism is more subtle and sophisticated than totalitarianism. As a category in comparative politics, pluralism has essentially positive connotations that arise from its promise to combine freedom and diversity with stability. This arises from the segmented and competitive character of the bargaining processes that it foregrounds. No single or permanent political interest predominates—rival groups with limited agenda engage in continuous lobbying and trade-offs, but although this renders the citizenry, in general, as largely passive bystanders, the interplay between plural interests remains open and flexible since the politically inactive remain informed and free to organize and intervene if they judge their interests to require it. Politics is therefore concerned with partial and incremental issues of distribution, not existential challenges; and political cleavages are pictured as cross-cutting and fluid, rather than zero-sum and cumulative. These postulates of the pluralist model of politics produce homeostatic outcomes which are assumed to be well-protected from the dangers of unbridled and destructive polarization. Hence, the tendency toward complacency built into the presuppositions of the pluralist schema.<sup>9</sup> There are differences between the applications of this general approach to major cases—for example, the U.K. variant highlights the supposedly stabilizing role of cabinet government and the sovereignty of parliament, whereas the U.S. privileges the checks and balances allegedly enshrined in the Madisonian version of constitutionalism.<sup>10</sup> In both cases, the recent evidence is clear that such pluralist equilibrium is by no means a permanently assured feature of these venerable democratic regimes, and that for serious comparative political analysis they, too, should be encompassed within a polarization dynamic.

The examples considered thus far concern the study of macro-political developments in such major nations as China, Germany, Russia, the U.K., and the U.S. But what are the general scope conditions enabling the polarization concept to gain traction in a specific and limited range of relevant cases?

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<sup>9</sup> “On the pluralist analysis, a highly articulated civil society with cross-cutting cleavages, overlapping memberships of groups, and social mobility is the presupposition for a stable democratic polity, a guarantee against permanent domination by any one group and against the emergence of fundamentalist mass movements and antidemocratic ideologies.” See Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Boston: MIT Press, 1992), 18.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Pierson and Eric Schickler, “Madison’s Constitution under Stress: A Developmental Analysis of Political Polarization,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 23 (May 2020): 37-58.



## Applicable Scope Conditions

Here we consider the questions of *when*, *where*, and *how* the concept of political polarization can serve as an effective resource for the comparative analysis of escalating confrontations and destabilizations.

*When:* Anyone who observed politics in the U.S. in 1968, or in Chile in 1973, or in either Iran or El Salvador in 1980, not to mention many subsequent examples from all continents, will know that political polarization is a widespread and recurrent phenomenon, by no means just a recent aberration. In fact, the U.S. election of 1800 was a dangerously confrontational affair, as was that of 1860 and many other western hemisphere electoral processes throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Such historical precedents should not be forgotten, but since the focus here is on the recent emergence of polarization as a potential master concept, it is twenty-first century democracies that provide the most relevant universe of cases.

*Where:* Given the emphasis on contemporary representative politics, further contextual conditions emerge. Major nations with effective administrations and secure borders still can experience intense cycles of political polarization, but if so, the drivers are likely to be essentially domestic. It helps the clarity of the analysis if external polarizing pressures can be largely set aside. In addition, polarization under conditions of relative political freedom is of primary interest here. (Uprisings against repressive government also involve substantial elements of political polarization, of course, but these constitute a subset that reflects a distinct and separately dynamic logic.) For political polarization to constitute a clear and useable master concept, it needs to focus on the generation of zero-sum conflict in genuinely open and representative systems. It therefore makes sense to highlight processes of polarization triggered by electoral contests.

*How:* A focus on the dynamics of political polarization in closely fought elections can provide a privileged arena of observation for testing this particular concept. Such directly observable trials of strength crystallize the partisan forces in contention and expose the political dynamics of the underlying conflicts to visible inspection. The comparative study of such episodes can therefore provide a window into the broader processes at work and thereby sharpen the precision of the polarization thesis, in general.

## Polarization and Depolarization in Closely Fought Elections

The standard template of democratic procedure rests on the assumption that opposing parties or interests periodically test the extent of their popular support

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<sup>11</sup> See the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Revolutionary Elections in the Americas*, ed. Eduardo Posada-Carbo and Andrew Robertson, Oxford University Press.

in successive elections. The conventional incentive for the losing side to accept the verdict of the polls is the promise that within a limited time period the same test will be run again. By accepting defeat now, the losers should be in good standing with the voters the next time. That is the core provision of “loser’s consent”<sup>12</sup> that was thrown into question by Trump’s support for an assault on the Congress on January 6, 2021.

But although such response to defeat is often taken for granted, it is somewhat counter-intuitive. At best, it rests on unstated secondary assumptions that are not necessarily robust. What guarantees that voters mobilized in favor of a losing option will quietly and comprehensively demobilize and trust their leaders to do better next time? How confident can defeated candidates or parties be that the victors will not take advantage of their success to marginalize their opponents ahead of the next contest? Procedural democracy requires all to accept a radical disconnection between the normal rough and tumble of political competition and the exceptional restraints required for electoral integrity to prevail at the crucial moment of national choice. Neither political theory nor comparative experience lends much conviction to this required article of democratic faith.

In 2006, this journal published a special issue containing seven comparative case studies (including one on the U.S. presidential election of 2000). My introductory survey included the following:

In the course of a closely fought election campaign, the level of political partisanship in a society can be expected to reach a peak, with the potential for increased partisanship among militants and intensified politicization and polarization among the electorate at large. Most closely fought campaigns excite both hopes and fears concerning the consequences of victory or defeat. Various practices and mechanisms can be established both to arouse interest in the outcome and to channel these energies into structured (typically nonviolent) directions. Mass rallies, television debates, door-to-door canvassing, workplace *sindicato*, or church-based advice and direction all tend, on the one hand, to intensify public interest in the contest, and, on the other, to direct attention to the specific actions required of the concerned voter (as well as to the forms of partisan behavior that are either prohibited or to be discouraged). So, although political conflict may reach a crescendo during a democratic election campaign, it is also carefully orchestrated. There is a clearly specified time and place for approved activism [after the count]... . In general,

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Wong, ed., *Political Transitions in Dominant Party Systems: Learning to Lose* (London: Routledge, 2009).

a wide array of social and political actors will be required to put aside the differences that were highlighted during the campaign and to unite around a consensual message concerning the legitimacy and probity of the results. This reversal of stance can be hard to achieve even in the most stable and irreproachable of old democracies. It demands an exceptional degree of discipline, unity, and public spiritedness...<sup>13</sup>

## **Five Facets of Polarization**

The subset of cases in the following sections can be used to elaborate on the concept of polarization, in general. Consider the following facets: (1) temporal dynamics; (2) structural features (asymmetry, strategic interactions, connectivity between the rival poles); (3) emotional drivers; (4) majoritarianism v. consociationalism; and (5) polarization as a spur to democratic reform, backsliding, and populism.

### ***Temporal Dynamics***

As just illustrated with reference to contemporary closely fought elections, processes of political polarization are temporally structured and unfold sequentially. However drastically a polarization process may intensify, it must eventually peak and be followed by some degree of subsidence. These are cyclical affairs not equilibrium outcomes. They can, however, proceed along a variety of trajectories: intermittent; long dormant and then eruptive; slowly cumulative until a point of catharsis, followed by quiescence; or—as in some stable democracies—predictably cyclical. Containment or reinforcement patterns will vary depending on which of these alternatives prevails. For example, slow-burn processes are less likely to catch the authorities unaware, as eruptive episodes (such as the Bogotazo of Colombia) can do. On the other hand, long-term latent discontent may prove harder to overcome once it has crossed a critical threshold (e.g., Brexit).

What conditions precipitate an intensification of underlying tensions so that they acquire a cumulatively polarizing dynamic? In all societies, there are latent conflicts and divergences of outlook, but additional precipitants are required to trigger such effects. Competitive elections offer a convenient entry point, but a general analysis of polarization must consider other possible triggers, flaws of institutional design, clashing leadership ambitions, and rifts

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<sup>13</sup> Laurence Whitehead, “Closely Fought Elections and the Institutionalization of Democracy,” *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 2, no. 1 (July 2006): 10-11. See also my follow-up article, “The Challenge of Closely Fought Elections,” *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 2 (April 2007): 17-22, which provides further evidence of a widespread “polarization syndrome” where post-electoral reconciliation is not achieved.

in public opinion (as in the section “Adjacent Concepts: Backsliding and Populism” below). As polarization advances, all these contributory factors can become more strongly implicated and entangled with each other. Rather than prioritizing one element and downplaying the others, a better approach to these comparative dynamics is to begin with some history.

Before any cycle of polarization gets going, there is already a background record of prior experiences that can be drawn on and reworked for the new episode. From a comparative history standpoint, the key issues become: what precedents are available; how are they activated; and by whom? For example, the Trump-related polarization can draw on collective memories of such precursor experiences as Reconstruction after the Civil War; Kennedy’s questionable election victory in 1960; and the Supreme Court’s polemical ruling on the “hanging chads” of Florida in 2000.

As democratic inclusion expands, there always will be a big spread of demands and aspirations, some of them highly urgent and specific, but mixed in with others that are distant and perhaps unreal aspirations. Both the content and the feasibility of inclusionary agendas have varied massively over time and space. Thus, for example, for over two centuries Republican France has oscillated between ambitiously expansionist and vigorously contractionist experiments.

The European 1848 Revolutions were mostly followed by severe backlashes, and something similar could be said of Reconstruction after the U.S. Civil War. As Crozier noted, in Western Europe in the 1970s there was another (albeit far less drastic) tug of war over the expansion or rollback of the welfare state and its promise of inclusionary social rights. Since the turn of the century, the so-called “Pink Tide” in Latin America has produced substantial democratic expansions and contractions, and the “Arab Spring” has demonstrated that modest advances toward democracy can still trigger ferocious clampdowns.

Let us take the case of Brazil since the 1980s as a characteristic illustration. The upswing began with the *diretas ja* mass protests against military rule in 1983. The 1988 Constitution expanded the franchise to include illiterates and extended a series of ambitious citizen and social rights. Over the ensuing three decades, these paper advances were converted into a succession of practical provisions that indeed greatly extended both the scope and the coverage of citizen entitlements, culminating a decade of *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT, or Workers’ Party)-led social advances that finally ran into mounting resistance and backlash after Lula left the presidency. The cycle peaked, and then sharply reversed, with the Odebrecht scandal, the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, the disqualification of Lula as a candidate in the 2018 presidential election, and the reactionary and anti-institutional policies of the Bolsonaro administration.

The point of the Brazilian example is not to take sides on the details of its divisive history, but simply to note the underlying pattern of democratizing expansion met by growing resistance. Generalizing from the assortment of the

above historical cases, it seems clear that cycles of political polarization are frequently observed in many diverse settings; they may be *longue duree* or single-generation experiences; they can be deeply structural in origin but also there are more contingent upsurges associated with specific elections; and old democracies can be prone to polarization as well as more recently established electoral regimes. This was foreseen in the “democratic overload” literature of the 1970s, with its concern about alleged excesses of radical democratic inclusivity in many established democracies.

Closely fought elections provide one window onto a much more extensive and diverse set of possibilities. In all cases, temporal sequences of rising conflict at some point peak and then subside. Three further general features also can be delineated.

### ***Structural Features: Asymmetry, Strategic Interactions, and Connectivity between Poles***

#### Asymmetrical Polarization

It is plausible to hypothesize that routine electoral contestation becomes more likely to escalate into zero-sum conflict when the extension of political rights and benefits to a previously excluded sector of the population creates alarm among those whose previous expectations of coverage and protection seem potentially at risk. The Obama administration’s “yes we can” slogan may have seemed rather insubstantial to those in need of Obamacare, and so on, but it was a potent source of concern to many who feared that any extension of benefits to the excluded might come at the expense of their own precarious rights. Similarly, as Brazil’s PT broadened its social base through various public welfare offerings, it also stirred up fear and resentment among another large sector of the public, whose fragile citizenship advantages seemed in peril. The general argument here would be that a common and powerful trigger for political polarization may be the extension of political and social rights to newcomers, with the unintended side effect of unsettling their only slightly better placed compatriots. (Brexit also can be understood as a backlash by those fearful of EU programs that might reward others better than oneself.) In such a scenario, the active backlash against “progressive” reforms may not come from a majority of the electorate, but rather from an insecure minority that has been intensively alerted to its diminishing leverage.

Institutionally oriented studies of polarization also recognize its frequently asymmetrical features.<sup>14</sup> Such analysts tend to present this as a strategic choice made by incumbent leaders who calculate that intensified conflict may cover up their failings and reinforce their grip on power. It also can be chosen by opposition leaders (perhaps “populist” in outlook) who judge that increased

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<sup>14</sup> For example, McCarty, *Polarization*, 42-43.

intransigence is their best—or only—route to office. So, although there may be some examples of fully symmetric polarizations, across the full range of cases this would seem to be rather atypical. Usually one side takes the lead, presses the accelerator to the limit, and thereby drives a reaction from the opposite pole, probably squeezing out intervening restraints and nonparticipants in the process. There could be more than two poles at the outset, and a three- or four-way polarization cannot be excluded, but, in general, as the dynamic advances the options tend to narrow toward a binary opposition.

Such zero-sum escalations cannot continue indefinitely. At some point, either the main opposed factions pull back from the ultimate confrontation, or one side crushes the other. But a pullback should not be confused with a return to the status quo ante. It would be a mistake to picture the restoration of an inherently stable underlying equilibrium, or natural balance in society. As a general rule, serious political polarizations change the landscape, recast the expectations of the main players, and leave legacies that alter the subsequent balance of forces and the available range of options. (Chile after the failure of the Popular Unity experiment illustrates how radical and far-reaching a backlash can become.)

### Strategic Interactions

Although social structure and mass opinion are often the largest determinants of the outbreak and outcome of polarization processes, some degree of strategic calculation always will be involved as well, particularly in shaping their trajectories. The contentious politics approach provides a generally reasonable balance between the energies required for collective political mobilization and the strategic rationality that usually guides political elite choices.<sup>15</sup> It cannot be excluded that leadership choices may drive polarizations to extremes that would never arise from purely societal conditions. But equally, there is also a significant potential for leadership choices to intervene and damp down processes of confrontation that would otherwise escape all management.

### Connectivity between Rival Poles

Reflecting on the many diverse examples of electoral systems pushed to the edge of collapse by intensified processes of political polarization, typically one party or faction takes the lead, escalates the conflict, and is most prepared to run the risk that the established procedures may be undermined. But it would be a mistake to attribute an entire trajectory of polarization to a single pole. Instead, one should always model the interactive dynamics between two connected but antagonistic poles. It may be that the leading side falsely attributes aggressive intent to the other pole, but even in that case there is connectivity and feedback. From a comparative perspective, it is necessary to consider what could have

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<sup>15</sup> Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

provoked the lead party into its radicalism, and whether the other side might have damped down the conflict, perhaps by offering an olive branch at an early stage, or perhaps by more clearly defining and defending a red line. It is also important to review successive stages in the polarization process. One party may be guilty of reckless behavior at the outset, but the other side may then come together in such a determined pushback that intermediate options are squeezed out.

Other possible trajectories include both internal and external reactions. On the domestic side, those interests threatened by uncontrollable polarization may attempt to dampen it down, or may instead opt to back one side against the other, for example, via the reinforcement or manipulation of key bridging institutions that can control the excesses of polarization (courts, electoral integrity agencies, independent media, and so on); or through acting on public opinion, perhaps to penalize the radicals on both sides, or perhaps to reject the whole “political class” as dysfunctional.

On the external front, reactions could be channeled through financial market responses (credit downgrades, capital flight, enhanced economic monitoring, and conditionality), or via the intensification of external political pressures and interventions, either to bolster neutral institutions or to punish one side and support the other (targeted sanctions, mediators, selective aid and credit releases, arms boycotts, conditional military advice, or other means).

In general, as political polarization intensifies, a wider range of interested parties becomes more actively engaged. Whether this response reduces or aggravates the polarization is in principle indeterminate, but it certainly redoubles the pressure on all concerned.

### ***Emotional Drivers of Polarization***

Polarizing confrontations are driven not just by clashing ambitions or zero-sum material conflicts, but equally by ideological (or at least ideational) disagreements, and by the emotional energies that can be unleashed when existential issues of identity and collective purpose are believed to be at stake. In physical and biological processes of polarization, there must always be an underlying source of energy driving the flow from one pole to the other. In comparative politics, the functional equivalent of that transmission of heat or electricity is normative engagement. The rival camps must persuade their followers to care about the outcome of the contest—they must each convince large sections of the society that their side is in the right, and that the alternative is objectionable, if not intolerable.

Closely fought elections provide one privileged window for observing such normative contention. Partisan passions may be aroused by elements of polarization in the social structure (racial inequities, low welfare coverage, and so on); or they can latch on to design flaws such as the unrepresentative nature of the electoral college and the multiple veto points in an ancient and rigid constitution. Charges of corruption and elite conspiracy can be potent

ingredients in such processes; poorly instructed and easily misled segments of public opinion can be programmed to respond adversely to such considerations.

The Spanish election of 2004 provided a vivid illustration. Just three days before the vote, a terrorist attack redoubled the emotional intensity of the conflict. The incumbent administration clung to the false but advantageous narrative that members of the Basque separatist *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (Basque Homeland and Liberty, or ETA) were the authors, although, in fact, Islamists were responsible. Turning to Bolsonaro's 2018 election in Brazil, again the polarization was charged with intense emotionality, in part driven by disputed claims about governmental corruption. Bolsonaro's victory also drew on an inventory of structural imbalances (regional, religious, and ethnic) as well as the economic downturn; political precedents (like the 1964 military coup, or the impeachment record); and backlash against the PT's agenda of extensive inclusiveness.

The hopes and fears on display in such moments of collective choice expose the passions that can be unleashed by politics, normative considerations that feed polarization well beyond the rhythms of the electoral calendar. Such emotional components of political polarization tend to overflow the limits of partisan identifications, and to energize militants in both camps, undermining societal trust and disrespecting established institutional conventions, even politicizing the judiciary and legitimizing fake news and hate speech. Although the main impulse may initially come from one camp only, political polarization is contagious, and the driving energy transmits from one side to the other.

According to standard models of democratization, the extensions of political rights and social benefits is a one-way process of cumulative democratization. However, comparative analysis of many such sequences confirms the destabilizing force of these emotional drivers of political change. Democratization processes are often punctuated, even partially reversible, rather than unilinear advances. In a recent study of the long-term political dynamics in Chile, I note the advance/retreat sequence of suffrage extensions and electoral restrictions that prevailed over multiple generations.<sup>16</sup> It cannot be taken for granted that, in general, democratic political advances are on an automatically assured upward curve. Indeed, the recent literature of “pernicious” polarization highlights the opposite possibility.<sup>17</sup> The recent rise of polarization episodes indicates, on the contrary, that “oscillatory” patterns are to be expected, instead.

Although internal political confrontations are always important, they are not invariably the predominant drivers of processes of political polarization. In quite a few of the most intense political polarization processes in democratic

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<sup>16</sup> See Ursula van Beek, ed., *Democracy under Threat: A Crisis of Legitimacy?* (New York: Palgrave, 2019), chap. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, “Polarization and Democracy: A Janus-Faced Relationship with Pernicious Consequences,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 1 (January 2018).



South America, major players have enlisted outside backers to reinforce their internal capabilities, and in Central America and the Caribbean the role of foreign sponsors can extend from secondary support to full-scale and even controlling engagement.

### ***Majoritarianism versus Consociationalism***

Stable two-party electoral systems simplify theories of polarization, but empirically they are rare and where there are multiple cleavages, parties, or factions, the simplicity of the model will be diluted. In such cases, polarization may be blunted by the nonalignment of major social sectors (e.g., the nonsectarian parties in Ulster; the business elite in Brazil; the Anglican Church in South Africa). For polarization to intensify, such lateral or third-party actors will have to be cross-pressured, divided, and marginalized. Moreover, in addition to simple binary left-right divisions, political polarization also can be structured along other dimensions. For example, territorial differences can generate growing confrontations on questions of regional autonomy, and even secession (Catalonia, Quebec, Scotland, and so on).

Polarization can be elite-driven, but it also can arise from deeply held popular sentiments that acquire an independently compulsive force—“affective” polarization. It can energize political debate, but it also can feed intolerance and escalating conflict—the “pernicious” variant.<sup>18</sup> In short, not all political polarizations arise from bimodal partisanship within simple two-party electoral systems. To the contrary, multiparty systems also can become highly polarized, and nonparty or “outsider” political movements can play a leading role in destroying public trust and delegitimizing neutral institutions. Both *majoritarian* and *consociational* variants<sup>19</sup> of representation can become intensely polarized.

Most elections are *majoritarian*. This term embraces many variants of representative government: presidential and parliamentary; federal and unitary; two-party and multiparty; and more. In practice, there are also intermediary forms, such as semi-presidentialism; regionally inflected unitary systems; party systems that may tend to involve two and a half parties in serious contention; and so on. Political polarization can arise in all these settings. Pluralist theorists have argued that, provided the social foundations of these party systems rest on *cross-cutting* cleavages, the resulting clashes of interest and outlook can be contained within neutral institutions that provide checks

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<sup>18</sup> Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, “Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, December 2018, and Jennifer McCoy and Benjamin Press, “What Happens When Democracies Become Perniciously Polarized?” Carnegie Endowment, Washington, D.C., January 18, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> The May 2013 special issue of the *Taiwan Journal of Democracy*, edited by T. J. Cheng and Teh-fu Huang, provides a stocktaking of this canonical debate inspired by Arend Lijphart.

and balances to allow the representation of all groups, without the permanent domination of any. This always has been an improbably optimistic portrayal of how majoritarian political systems really function, airbrushing structural inequalities and legitimizing dominant hierarchies. But so long as there were multiple divisions, and the cleavages really were cross-cutting, a considerable degree of competitive inclusivity and flexibility was achieved. However, once political polarization gains traction, the range of counterbalanced interests is reduced and there is a shift from a *cross-cutting* to a *stacking* pattern of cleavage alignments.

In the case of *consociationalism*, the starting point is an explicit recognition of the entrenched nature of societal polarization, at least in those settings where discrete linguistic, religious, or other partisan communities are well-established in distinct territorial locations within the overall *democracies*. Catholics versus Protestants within the twelve varied provinces of the European Netherlands; the contrasting Flemish and Walloon provinces of Belgium; or the sectarian divide in Northern Ireland provide vivid examples of this phenomenon in some long-established democracies. These separate communities often are segregated by deep social divides—outgroup friendship and kinship ties are heavily sanctioned, so these cleavages display severe “associative” polarization whether or not they are also politically escalatory. What the consociationalist perspective adds is the need for agreed rules on power sharing between these “pillarised” communities. Mere majoritarianism would threaten the security and identity of the minority pillars and would force their latent identarian conflicts to the surface of political decision-making. To preserve coexistence and contain the potential for such social divisions to erupt into unmanageable levels of political polarization, some key areas of decision-making must be removed from the arena of electoral alternation and rendered less explosive by the provision of mutual guarantees. Although the consociational approach has the merit of explicitly addressing the dangers of political polarization inherent in majoritarianism, it has two severe limitations. First, it sets aside the historical and geopolitical conditions that gave rise to these unusual and specific rules of political engagement, and therefore postulates their permanence, regardless of the ways in which they may vary over time. Second, it fails to deal with the considerable range of pillarised polities where in due course power-sharing prescriptions not only have failed but also have even exacerbated problems of ungovernability (Cyprus and the Lebanon being among the strongest examples).

### ***Polarization as a Spur to Democratic Reform?***

The destructive potential of unbridled political polarization is strongly emphasized in the current scholarly literature. And, indeed, the still ongoing confrontations in the United States, Brazil, and elsewhere, confirm the gravity of the issues it addresses. Moreover, as just noted, it can also wreak havoc in parliamentary and proportional representation electoral systems, and

more widely. It even has become fashionable to add such negative adjectives as “toxic” and “pernicious” when referring to strong upsurges in political polarization. However, from a more dispassionate and conceptual standpoint, it may suggest that such designations could prove one-sided—even panicky. After all, when strong currents of public opinion acquire such traction, the scholarly observer needs to examine the sources of that mass engagement, without too many preconceptions about its justification. Moreover, those of a prodemocratic disposition ought to see at least something positive about the active concern over public affairs that polarization displays. Furthermore, although such challenges are disturbing and potentially destructive, they also constitute an invitation to re-examine what features of the established order are in need of repair, and they may well serve to galvanize fresh efforts to relegitimize failing democratic institutions, and to revive coalitions of reform and democratic innovation. Systemic shocks can teach necessary lessons.

### ***Adjacent Concepts: Backsliding and Populism***

Some theoretical innovators proceed by championing their preferred concept at the expense of available alternatives, but the “repertoire” approach to evaluating new proposals is more constructive. “Political polarization” is a fashionable concept that, as we have shown above, can be situated between such venerable political science paradigms as pluralism and totalitarianism. But it also can be elaborated and refined by comparison to more contemporary adjacent tools and concepts. Two currently influential alternatives are *backsliding* and *populism*.

*Democratic backsliding* is a temporal process intended to track and compare sequences of institutional erosion and elite defection that can cumulatively undermine existing liberal democratic regimes.<sup>20</sup> So it can be fitted within the broader framework of “polarization,” but it is unilinear, partial, and highly judgemental. (In fact, “backsliding” originated as part of John Knox’s diatribes against rival Protestant divines who were insufficiently principled in opposing Catholic doctrinal heresies.) Current usage of “backsliding” focuses attention on purportedly democratic elite actors who compromise their stated convictions by incrementally adjusting their behavior and doctrine to accommodate illiberal and eventually fully antidemocratic outcomes. Beyond verbal retreats, they also erode, and finally abandon, institutional guardrails against the abuse of power. This is, indeed, a notable feature of many contemporary democracies, and it deserves to be examined both in terms of its drivers and its major manifestations. So, it can supplement broader work on polarization, while the larger concept can correct its distortions and omissions. Such oversights include the likelihood that a regime vulnerable to

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<sup>20</sup> “The notion of democratic backsliding has coalesced into a clear concept: slow, formally legal descent into a hybrid regime, orchestrated by power-concentrating elected leaders in a relatively predictable sequence.” See Licia Cianetti and Sean Hanley, “The End of the Backsliding Paradigm,” *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 1 (January 2021): 77.

sustained backsliding, in fact, did contain flaws and illusions that were in need of correction and reform; the possibility (highlighted under *Populism* below) that popular opinion rather than elite opportunism might be the greater driver of the process; and the need to consider second-round or interactive effects of backsliding (e.g., how it might galvanize democratic renewal on a sounder basis). An “oscillatory” perspective on polarization allows consideration of such highly relevant potentialities.<sup>21</sup>

Backsliding, oscillation, and polarization are all time-limited temporal models. Backsliding is a term of disapproval indicating change in a negative direction, whereas oscillation is less evaluative and involves cycles of upward and downward alternation. Polarization is also more neutral regarding the desirability of such a process, but it, too, is cyclical—involving intensification of confrontation up to a point of resolution, which usually is followed by some form of reflux, or depolarization. In this third temporal model, it is an open question whether the resolution involves a new equilibrium (possibly a better balance of forces, for example, a political pact or rewritten constitution), or an outright victory for one side and defeat for the other (perhaps an oppressive victory, although an emancipatory result is another possibility to consider). In well-established democratic systems, the outcome of a burst of polarization may well prove reinvigorating, although this cannot be taken for granted; but in weak democracies and hybrid regimes, the impediments to achieving a beneficial new equilibrium are greater. None of these three temporal models contains guarantees about the eventual outcome, or, indeed, the length of the timeframe in question. They each map scenarios and possibilities, without making strong predictions. That reflects the nature of the political dynamics in question.

*Populism*, at least until recently, has been a more influential and encompassing analytical tool than backsliding for tracking trends in global democracy. Populists exalt the “will of the people” and disvalue the checks and balances that are so dear to the theorists of backsliding. They favor defenestrating traditional elites, rather than holding them to the highest standards of democratic probity. Theories of populism (of which there are several) tend to view it negatively but allow more scope for mixed judgements.<sup>22</sup> They may view it as a dynamic process, but also contemplate the possibility of semi-permanent

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Cianetti and Hanley’s critique is that “the lens of ‘backsliding’ obscures crucial dynamics of trade-offs, fluctuation, and sideways movement.” But compare Stephen Haggard and Robert Kaufman, “The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 4 (October 2021): 27-41.

<sup>22</sup> For a negative view, see Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2022). For an earlier and more mixed assessment, see Francisco Panizza, ed., *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2005). Compare Cass Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), and (regarding the United States) *A Political Science Manifesto for the Age of Populism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

populist outcomes—perhaps undesirable, but potentially workable and even in some accounts “legitimate.” Like polarization, populism is another concept that can embrace too much and contain too many internal inconsistencies, but used with care, it can serve as another necessary instrument in the toolkit of contemporary comparative politics. It highlights somewhat different aspects of political reality, but it overlaps with, rather than contradicts, the insights of the adjacent concept. Each can benefit from being used in competition with the other.

### **Useful Technique versus Unbridled Master Concept**

Political polarization has moved from a marginal role to the center of current debates about the state and future of global liberal democracy. It is an alluring concept that fills an evident analytical gap, and that meets a pressing need for theoretical renewal. It has considerable advantages by comparison with alternative approaches. But it is also very exposed to the risks of conceptual stretching and explanatory over-extension. This survey is intended to promote its utility as an instrument in the toolkit of comparative politics, while guarding against its promotion to the untenable status of a master concept.

Various strongpoints of this contribution deserve attention. It proposes a dynamic temporal perspective, dealing with sequential processes rather than postulated end-states or equilibrium outcomes. In contrast to backsliding, polarization is not unidirectional, nor is it in all respects a negative phenomenon. It encompasses both rational action (such as strategic interactionism) and the passions of political engagement. It is normatively ambivalent, but not value free or value neutral. It can be decomposed into distinct structural components and subsets of cases (thus inviting comparative study and empirical testing). One particular variant of political polarization (that displayed in closely fought electoral contests) provides a good window of observation on the wider features of the process. Empirical inspection of such variants confirms that polarization processes are typically asymmetrical and interactive in character. Their drivers or animating energies are fluctuating, and therefore they tend to peak and decline (to “oscillate”) rather than to permanently accelerate. But they are often system-changing. Whether their trajectories are explosive or more slow burning, they test pre-existing guardrails and restraints to the limit, either overwhelming them or forcing their reconstruction on stronger foundations.

Such are the virtues of polarization as a conceptual tool. The accompanying risks and pitfalls arise from the identified strengths. They create the temptation to rely on it too heavily, and to extend its application into domains where alternative perspectives deserve more attention. If political polarization is promoted to the status of a paradigm or master concept, it runs the risk of crowding out the insights to be derived from other items in the comparative politics repertoire (such as pluralism, populism, consociationalism, backsliding, elite pacting, and even identity politics).

## Conclusion: Stabilizing the Concept and Limiting Its Pitfalls

The utility of polarization, or any other concept in comparative politics, should be test checked against the available empirical evidence, which includes the twelfth wave of the V-Dem dataset<sup>23</sup> as well as relevant paired and small-set comparative studies, analytical histories, and predictive modeling. Influential paradigms are often brought down to earth by such means, but just as concepts should be checked against data, so also the collection of data depends upon the elaboration of appropriate concepts. Given the inadequacy of many existing tools of analysis to account for the current turbulence in global democratic processes, it is important to specify and refine the scope of political polarization as a concept rather than to dismantle it altogether. Various methods of checking can guide such refinements.

This conceptual overview has drawn attention to the background conditions and underlying presuppositions underpinning the polarization analysis. In early twenty-first century conditions, we are dealing with a world of nation states, so the internal drivers of polarization within recognized national boundaries can be highlighted, but also the intensity of global communications and the impact of instant social media connections must be given due consideration. An exemplary subset of cases, such as closely fought elections, may provide a fuller test of the concept than is possible on a universal scale. It is also important to challenge the implications of the polarization perspective by running them in tandem with alternative available schemas. Does the “backsliding” perspective deliver more insight than polarization under specified conditions? Does the elite pacting or institutional design standpoint provide a helpful corrective to the potentially fatalistic implications of an “oscillatory” analysis? By giving due attention to such cautionary considerations and procedures, it should be possible to stabilize the utility of the polarization approach, and to guard against the pitfalls that would arise if it were to become a dominant paradigm, or an unbridled master concept.

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<sup>23</sup> It presents three indicators for 2001–2021: polarization of society; political polarization; and use of hate speech. The 2022 Report, *Autocratization's Changing Nature* (V-Dem Institute, Gothenburg University), lists forty countries in which these measures suggest that polarization escalated toward toxic levels, with only six showing improvement. Compare Levi Boxell, Matthew Gentzkow, and Jesse M Shapiro, *Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization*, NBER, November 2021, which tracks twelve OECD countries over four decades and finds increases in six and decreases in the other six. The United States stands out among the six risers.