

I-P<>LHYS

INVESTIGATING POLARIZATION IN HYBRID MEDIA SYSTEMS

I-POLHYS Talks

Interview with Delia Baldassarri New York University

Transcription of the full interview

The video-interview is available at www.ipolhys.it (“Talks” section)

The interview was carried out on June 30, 2023

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Transcription

Question 1

How would you define political polarization? Could you please make one or more concrete examples of how it manifests?

00:00:10

Delia Baldassarri: Political polarization can be defined in various ways, and it has been used to identify different political processes. The most common understanding of political polarization implies a movement of a population of individuals to more extreme positions. Generally, this is a symmetric moment. So, imagine you have two parties, they move further away from an ideal center. And to give you an example of this, this is exactly what happened in the United States in the US Congress, and in general, with respect to the political system. Starting from the 80s, political representatives became increasingly less likely to work together on legislation, and they became more divided on all sorts of issues, and that since then, especially starting in the mid 90s, it has been very clear the extent to which Republicans and Democrats were well divided in Congress, which is a very uncommon in the history of the United States. In fact, in the previous 50 years, most representatives were centrist, and would actually vote along with the interest of their State, or districts, while in more recent period, there was this phenomenon of polarization. And this is the most evident form of polarization nowadays in Western democracies.

Not a lot has happened with respect to public opinion. Again, thinking about the United States, what has happened with respect to public opinion, the everyday citizens, is that we have observed something called the partisan sorting. So, since parties have become much more clearly divided, what has happened is that people found much easier, probably much easier, to identify their own party, so to sort between the Republican and the Democratic party. This didn't mean that people have changed that position on issues. In fact, if you go and look at the position on tons of issues from welfare state, civil rights to moral issues, the country has not become much more divided. You don't see a more extreme distribution of preferences. However, Republicans and Democrats have become more distinctive. So, if you divide the preferences by partisanship, then you do see an increased divide, especially with respect to economic issues and civil rights issues. This is less evident with respect to moral issues, which is counterintuitive, but it has an explanation itself.

The last way in which you can think about political polarization, and probably the most meaningful way, is a situation in which people become aligned along unique dimensions. So usually in Western democracies, what you have is that there are multiple cleavages along which the population divides. It could be economic, it could be religious, it could be ethnicity, it could be some other dimension, and they don't fully overlap. So that means that you have some rich people who are of a certain religion, and some poor people who are of the same religion. And therefore, these cleavages are cross-cutting. When this doesn't happen, when everybody who is rich, let's say, is of the same religion, and everybody who is not is of the opposite religion or not religious, then this is a process of alignment. And this actually might lead to a greater social division, because people are starting to sort not only along a single ideologic dimension, but along multiple dimensions, and this becomes much more threatening to the stability of this

democratic society. Honestly, however we have not seen much of this happening even in the United States, where many people have been claiming that there was huge division, growing division. But it's greater animosity, greater hate between the partisan groups. But there is still plenty of people who are seeing that in the middle, not really happy with the current situation. And essentially, in this sense, people who are cross-pressured, who might be sympathetic to some of the Republican party views with respect to moral issues, let's say, but are actually more aligned with the Democratic party when it comes to the welfare state, they are sort of holding the country together.

Question 2

Studies about political polarization often distinguish between mass and elite polarization. How would you define them and in what relationship do you think they stand? Can you please help us understand by giving us some practical examples?

00:05:10

Delia Baldassarri: This is a fundamental distinction, because, as I mentioned before, the process of increased partisan division that has been observed in the party system and among activists and politicians has not been strongly visible within the population. So, the elite polarization, the polarization of the parties, of the political representatives, of - in this case - interest groups in the media does not really fully map into what people want and what people stand for. So, in that sense, [there is a] very strong distinction between elite and mass polarization.

In other cases, you might have, we might observe like different frames. So, many people like to talk about political polarization when it comes to Europe. But, however, there is not strong evidence of increase polarization among the European parties, for instance. And instead, you might be more in the position of observing the emergence of some bottom-up process of division that might have to do with new political dimensions. But, for instance, just to refer to a very established finding, in the same period in which the parties split in the US, in the UK parties have collapsed and really become very similar, so... And in the rest of the European democracies, it's very hard to identify processes in which the Social-democratic establishment and the Christian-democratic, if you think about Italy and Germany, or other sort of center-right institutions, the parties have moved apart.

What you observe in Europe is the emergence of the populist parties, both on the left and right, or the center, if you take the Five Star movement. But that's a different process, in the sense that is not necessarily polarization, it's just the emergence of populist parties, and leadership. There's a consequence of the departitization of the population. In these terms, keeping the distinction, the analytical distinction between elite and mass is important, because it's very relevant to describe the processes for what they are and where they are initiated.

Question 3

Is the distinction that studies make between ideological and affective polarization still valid? If so, how do these two forms of polarization differ and how do they intertwine? Can you please help us understand by giving us some practical examples?

00:08:00

Delia Baldassarri: So, essentially, this idea of affective polarization became very popular in the US, starting a good 10 years ago. And the reason is the following, so people have, scholars have tried as mad to find evidence of polarization in public opinion, and they couldn't find any, as I mentioned before, but there is really evidence of partisan sorting, but not of increased division. And they finally found,

indeed, that if you look at questions like feeling thermometers, in which people are asked to say how warm or cold they feel about their own party and the opposite party, scholars have found evidence that there is greater hostility toward the out-party. So, Democrats are more unhappy with Republicans, and the other way around.

And there are a few other questions that are quite strikingly convincing in this sense. So, if you ask Republicans if they were, be happy for their kids to marry someone from the out-party, you'll also find a lot of animosity and unhappiness there. However, this is really an emotional type of reaction that is totally understandable in a context in which the stereotypical out-party member is perceived as being very extremist. So, if you tell a Democrats: "Oh, you're gonna meet a Republican." They immediately imagine someone who is like anti-abortion, pro-guns, and is super rich, and "these are redneck". Instead, like the majority of Republicans are not these and the same thing the other way around. So essentially, when you ask this type of questions, you elicit a lot of animosity. And this is not animosity, but it is sometimes evident in the street, among the most involved citizens. But it's a bit artificial in the sense that this is created mostly by a media system that constantly depicts the representatives and the supporters of both parties as very extreme. So, people are constantly bombarded by images of Democrats as being like extreme woken individuals, who only eat vegetables and take away their guns and the other way around when it comes to Republicans. And these descriptions of the out-party have gotten under people's skin. So, it's quite funny to see that as soon as you specify or clarify that the member of the other party is a normal person, someone who likes some of the things that people like in the US, then things go back to normal, like the animosity towards this ideal typical person goes away and people manage to interact quite decently. So, the bottom line is that affective polarization is real – you can easily elicit it – but is alimented by this very artificial description of the situation on the ground. And obviously, when you also have organized groups like the one that's caused the January the 6th attack, achieving the visibility they have achieved, things might actually become real. So, I'm skeptical about this affective polarization being a real thing right now. I cannot say whether it would stay the same in 10 years, like the more you create these stereotypical images of red and blues as extremists, the more people start wearing these shirts, start like splitting these camps, even if they're not fully real, and we know that when people start wearing shirts one color or another, that becomes a problem. I would say at the same time that for instance, the idea of affective polarization being a valid concept for the European context makes me laugh a bit, having somehow grown up when I was in a country like Italy, where Communists were eating babies, and the democratic Christians were supposedly all governed by the Pope. So, the extreme versions of partisanship that many countries in Europe have experience in the period after World War 2 seems much more real in terms of animosity than what you can find nowadays on the streets. So, in that sense, I think that people would like, scholars write about an affective polarization, because it's easy to measure. But I don't see its value from analytical point when applied to context where the party competition is not particularly, there is not a lot of antagonism. Parties don't distinguish each other very well in terms of, in terms of agendas, or plans like on the economic agenda. Almost every single party in government to left to right in Europe has been more or less the same for thirty years. Policies on immigration in practice are not very different, doesn't matter who is in government. There are more like national interests taken into account than anything else. So bottom line, I think it's not super valid for the European context.

Question 4

Based on your research work and your knowledge of this field of research, what would you say are the dimensions along which polarization occurs more neatly? For example, do you see ideological cleavages such as that between right and left being of the utmost importance or do you think other

elements, like gender, class, ethnicity, religion, issues, levels of engagement in politics also play a part? Can you please help us understand how any of these dimensions that you think are relevant play a part by giving us some practical examples?

00:13:54

Delia Baldassarri: Yeah, so, it's quite important when you think about dimensions of polarization to distinguish between things that pertain to the domain of politics, like ideology being left and right, being support or against the welfare state, raising or not raising taxes, moral issues of various types and things that don't necessarily belong to the domain of politics, like gender or ethnicity or religion, that might actually become relevant in some historical moments, because issues are linked to these identities. And this is important to mention, because some sociodemographic traits cannot be changed. So, in some ways, you get them the way they are, the way they present themselves, like you cannot change age, you cannot easily change someone's economic status, and oftentimes even religion is something quite ingrained. While other things like opinions and ideological positions can change and do change much more. How this is relevant for polarization? It's much easier to see polarization in aspects where people can change their mind because the fact of media and ad party ideology can be more direct. There is a thing that is actually quite important when thinking about the combination of identities and ideologies: is to ask yourself which thing can align, and which thing can't. So, for instance, gender is usually quite evenly distributed. So, you have half people who are female in the rich population and in the poor population, in order to create some cross-pressure within that category, gender. So, it's very hard to see situations in which all women would vote one way and all men move the other way. It's slightly different when it comes to religion, especially in countries where religion becomes relevant for the public debate, which is, for instance, the case of the United States.

So, the United States is a country with many religious affiliations and many Christian, religious affiliations, and till probably forty years ago were quite, very much in the background, and the only religious denomination that was really vocal, but not a lot, was the Catholics who tended to be slightly anti-abortion, but they are also very Democrat because they were working-class, Irish, Italians, and so on. Later on, you had, there is a conservative Evangelicals group become dominant of the public debate, and they are strongly conservative, and they have become like an important voice within the Republican party. So, you do see a strong alignment over the last twenty years between being an Evangelical, a Conservative Evangelican, and voting Republican, but, at the same time, we have seen, finally, in the US, a huge amount of people declaring themselves as non-religious or agnostics. The US has been one of these places where, strangely enough, like many people still used to declare themselves as religious, one way or another, and this has stopped. And the US is still behind compared to Western Europe with respect to the proportion of people declaring themselves to be not religious or not belonging to an organized religion, but is actually catching up, and partly because of this very visible role that religion has started to play in public life. And things that we now think are common, like the "God bless America" that every President is saying or reading on as a model on the flag is something quite recent. The country was not born that way. So, the use of religion in politics has in one way, in one sense made the religious cleavage more prominent, but, at the same time, might actually have, sort of, pushed the younger generations to think about the role of religion and pushed them to move away from it.

Another good example of the interesting intersection between such a demographic profile and voting is ethnicity. For instance, both Blacks, and especially Latinos, tend to be quite conservative when it comes to moral issues. So, you do have always this kind of controversial situation, where especially when there are Latinos involved, you might have them supporting welfare state interventions, but, at the same time, they are extremely conservative when it comes to civil rights in terms of LGBT+ and other things. So, you have an intersection of, it cannot support for economic reforms, but at the same time like more

conservatism in a population like Latinos, which is fastly growing in the US, and really decides the outcome of what actions in a few States like Texas and Florida. So, what you observe is that this population might be more easily conquered by a party that is not what the current Republican party is, or what the Democratic party is. So, essentially the intersection of these identities, even if they have become relevant in politics, is not inevitably in overlap. And therefore, the more identities become relevant like religion and ethnicity, the more problems may arise for a two-party system that offers some, such a strong like organization of preferences along like different issue demands.

Question 5

What is the role of the media with respect to polarization processes? Do you see any similarities and/or differences between the role played by traditional and digital media? Can you say anything specific about the role played by journalists?

00:20:17

Delia Baldassarri: I mean, there is always some attempted blaming the new thing for social maluses, for things that go wrong in society. So obviously people observe political polarization, and all of sudden it's all because of the Internet, because of blogs, because of social media, because of echo-chambers and political bubbles. In reality, again, if you focus on the case of the United States, we did observe increased polarization before the advent of social media. And indeed, what happened first was the emergence of cable TV. And what cable TV did was actually to allow people to watch something else but politics. So, the first step in the 80s and early 90s was that many people did not have to watch the news at 8 pm in the evening, but they could watch anything else they wanted, because there were like larger offering in terms of programs. Only later we have observed something different, which was that media news – in this case, I'm talking about traditional media like television – in this context, they started to cater to more specific subgroup of the population. So, essentially, for the majority of historical period in which media and TV was influential in terms of providing information, what we observed was that they were catering with some idea like centrist border, and they were providing more of the same type of information. Then there was this actually moment in which people could walk away from watching media, which actually led many people to distance themselves from politics. And after this we have observed another process, which is that media, especially with the advent of Fox News in the mid-90s, had started to split their attention. So, Fox News started to cater to a certain type of right-wing voter, and the CNN and the other cable TV started to adjust to this and target their content to a different type of voter to create their own their own like platforms, and increase some sort of loyalty in their audience. Only subsequently we have the impact of the social media, which is a phenomenon itself, but also have made it more possible to spread the content of a traditional media. So social media have a double role of allowing everybody to become a content provider – because anybody, anyone can sit down and write a blog or some content – but also it makes it easier to spread information. And one of the phenomena that are, which is quite telling in recent years is the extent to which social media have helped Fox News to spread their content well beyond the actual number of people who watch the TV channel itself. So, the interaction between these two types of media is quite interesting, and it's been less studied than like the effect of traditional media versus social media on their own.

In this context, the role of the journalists has a bit changed in the sense that they have not, some of them have specialized in becoming opinion leaders, in a way in which probably most journalists weren't in the past and has made it much harder for traditional journalists to maintain their style of like being objective reporters of what happens, because the expectation at this point on both sides is that newspapers and media would actually cater to a certain type of audience. I have taught a class on political polarization this semester at the NYU, and my students were really mad at the New York Times

because they allowed someone to write on an opinion piece titled “In defense of J. K. Rowling”. And they were really pissed that essentially New York Times had allowed someone to write his opinion about why J. K. Rowling should be allowed to say what she thinks. So, this is the level at which people are expecting, especially younger generations, are expecting media to walk the line of their preferred ideology, which is something that probably my generation wouldn't have expected. Like, you know, a newspaper is a place for conversation and discussion you allow for the occasional opposite opinions. But yes, things are changing.

Question 6

What are in your opinion the best methodological approaches to study and understand polarization?

00:25:50

Delia Baldassarri: There is what people keep doing, which is to do surveys, and study the behavior of politicians in Congress, use language-modeling to process a large set of political contact, party agendas, speeches, and so on. But I believe that what we are missing, partly because methodologically is much more complicated, is to understand the intermediate actors, the social networks, the local level organizations that are organizing spreading political views on the ground. This type of research would be heavily needed, but it's very hard to carry out because it needs a mix of organizational studies and local level studies, that is very much removed both from, when doing surveys, so just randomly sampling people, asking them to answer questions, as well as large social media studies that give us lots in terms of behavior, but little in terms of who are the people behaving in a certain way.

Question 7

Over time, polarization has become a relevant political concept and, even more, a paramount feature of political processes. What consequences does polarization have both “in real life” and within the academic debate?

00:27:20

Delia Baldassarri: For real life it is hard for me to tell whether it has reached the point of having real, long-lasting consequences, or it is still an epiphenomenon of the political division that we observe at the elite level. So, the test for these would be if we could stop, miraculously stop, the parties from acting totally crazy the way they'd been doing it and literally moving to extremes. And if we could miraculously select candidates and politicians that are more moderate, would people change their level of animosity towards members of the out group? My belief is that right now these might still be the case. So, I believe it's still like a top-down phenomenon. And as soon as you, you take away the source of the animosity that comes from, as I said, like the message that comes from the politicians and media, we could sort of have American behave more openly to each other. But this might not last forever.

When it comes to scholars, I think that in some ways having this big topic has made many people lazy, in this sense that it makes it easy to say: “Well, I study this topic”. And you see a lot of research done in recent years, in which scholars, very smart people, spends lots of time and money, trying to see what are the best interventions to change people's levels of animosity toward members of the out-party. And we know that this not really have to do with people, in the sense that, as I mentioned before, maybe the intervention we need to look for is not at the level of the citizens. The integration we need to really be pushing for as scholars, as well as citizens, is to create a system of incentives for the parties to move away from this they all made. So, my take is essentially that while every new phenomenon makes it for an interesting period of research in academia, when this new phenomenon justifies easy studies that really don't go to the core of what's happening, then it might actually not be particularly positive.

Question 8

Is polarization reversible? In other words, is it possible to move towards a political practice that is more agonistic than antagonistic? How can one think about bridging polarized politics – or, perhaps, there is no coming back from polarized politics?

00:30:12

Delia Baldassarri: Oh, yeah, there is a coming back. There was in the past, both in Europe, if you think about it, and definitely in the US. There were other periods in the American history in which the country was even more divided than now. So, if there is a big political desire, if interest groups start spending their money differently, this is a big part of the story. If companies start to see that they are losing money by having customers who are divided, and ask themselves to take sides. If these things do change, I do believe there is a coming back. It's not necessarily the case that the country is destined to be, to remain a divided place, especially because there are no clear like cleavages that are sort of taking over and yes, with richer getting richer, that has always been the case, but they also are pretty aware that they cannot run a country on this, on these bases. And the economic cleavage overlaps almost orthogonally with other cleavages. For instance, rich people living in in big cities don't care about religion, they don't care about morality. So, you have natural situation in which you have like primarily conservative individuals who are morally liberal and the other way around. There are many working-class individuals who are still, like Obama said, clinging to religion, so they are more conservative on certain dimensions. So, there are the preconditions for a country that becomes more ruled from the center because people are still there. There is no strong alignment in terms of interests.