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I-POLHYS

INVESTIGATING POLARIZATION IN HYBRID MEDIA SYSTEMS

I-POLHYS Talks

Interview with James Druckman
Northwestern University

Transcription of the full interview

The video-interview is available at www.ipolhys.it ("Talks" section)
The interview was carried out on June 26, 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

James Druckman: A good place to start is just thinking about polarization in general as a general concept, and the idea originated, so there was some evolution of the idea. The original idea of polarization was when one group comes together and they interact with one another, then they might move in a more extreme direction. So if a group of people who were in favor of a particular public policy, let's say, increasing public benefits, came together and discuss, they would start to move towards more - if they were inclined to be supportive of public benefits, increasing public benefits - they would start to move more, more and more towards increasing public benefits.

But the concept has evolved over time to talk about intergroup differences, and I think the current way that it's construed, and particularly in the political domain, is when you have at least two groups and the two groups, either at one point in time, so you could talk about it at one point in time, seem very far apart, on average, and fairly homogeneous internally. Or we can talk about it over time, which I think is the more common way to think about it. Where two groups, such as two political parties along a different - I 'll get a little bit more specific by move apart on what in a moment - but two or more groups, two or more political parties over time move further and further apart from one another.

And when I talk about kind of the way in which they might move further apart, there's typically two ways that people have been talking about that: one is in terms of specific issues or ideology, and so it might be that two political parties become more and more further apart on support or opposition to increasing public benefits, or more and more further apart on being liberal or conservative along a particular dimension, or generally speaking. And then another manifestation is what's called affective polarization which could be related, but does not necessarily have to be related, to ideological or issue polarization. And that's where the two groups, if we think about this in an overtime perspective, come to dislike one another more and more over time. And so, and that, there's been a lot of concern, particularly about that type of polarization in recent years, just kind of talking about the extent to which two political parties might exhibit hatred or animus towards one another. There also could be an increase in the extent to which they like their own party, but most of the dynamics have been in kind of the extent to which they dislike the other party.

Question 2 & 3

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?

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?

00:02:56

James Druckman: So when we talk about elite polarization, we're usually talking about elected officials or candidates, perhaps, or maybe activists or party leaders and we're talking about specifically one of the types of polarization I talked about earlier and just the elites, as I just define them, in the parties when we're talking about partisan polarization as moving further apart, regardless of what voters do, generally speaking. And so that could be, for example, in the United States Congress there has been a dramatic trend of ideological polarization over time. So if you look at over time trends and ideology just in the US Congress, so only talking about members of Congress, you can see starting kind of in the in the early 1970s, you start to see the two parties becoming further and further apart, particularly the Republican party in the US, it's become more and more conservative over time. The Democratic party has become a bit more liberal, but a lot of that has been the Republican party has become more conservative. So you have that ideological polarization amongst just elites.

And then, when we talk about citizen or mass polarization, you're talking about, not the elites, but rather citizens or voters amongst the public. And you could get very, the types of polarization you could talk about in the same way, but you could get very different dynamics. And so, for example, coming back to the idea of ideological polarization in the US again, in the US it's very unclear - t's somewhere between unclear or it has not happened - such that citizens have become significantly more ideologically polarized. There's some signs that they've become more ideological, for, as you mean that Republican voters and Democratic voters have become more separated in terms of their conservativeness and liberal leanings, but that seems to be very concentrated amongst just a small set of the mass public, or those who are very engaged politically, but kind of amongst the average member of the mass public there hasn't been a huge increase in ideological polarization.

There has been some change on particular issues in the mass public. So, for example, on a lot of social issues in the US, such as gay marriage, there's been some polarization over time, but most of that is that both parties have moved towards being in a kind of a more progressive direction, and it's just the Democratic party has moved much more quickly, and that's happened at the mass level. So you can see examples of where, at the elite level, you have this clear ideological polarization, at the citizen level or the mass level you don't really have that ideological polarization, but you might on a particular issue.

Then, if we talk about affective polarization, that's been really the topic that people have really focused upon at the mass level, and there is, you know, there's in the US, for sure, but around the world not as much time series, but over time, you see in the US, and around the world, you've seen an increase of members of the mass public coming to hold more animus, or just like towards the other parties somewhat. And that has been a pretty steady increase in many countries around the world. In the US, it's happened particularly quickly, but it's not particularly higher in the US than it is in other countries.

When we think about elite affective polarization, that's much harder to measure because we usually don't have measures of where the elite, how much the elite just like the other party. But I think the presumption is that it's probably a little bit lower amongst the elite, simply because they interact a lot more with members of the other party which tends to decrease affective polarization a little, but there aren't good over time measures, because that would require doing - at least that I'm aware of - surveys of some sort with elites, which is a difficult task to do over time, particularly.

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 outmost 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?

00:07:14

James Druckman: Given my knowledge base, I'm going to focus that question on the US, because I am not aware of some of the data dynamics in other countries. But in in the US, one of the things that has occurred over time is that there's been what's called a social sorting amongst the parties, meaning that people with particular demographic inclinations or attributes have tended to kind of move all towards one party or another. So, to give you an example, in 2000, the percentage of members of the Democratic party who were white was about 45% and the percentage of members of the Republican party who were white was also roughly on a 45%. But if we move to 2020, so just 20 years later, we see this huge division, so that now it's something like 57% of the Republican party is white where it's you know I think 30-something percentage of the Democratic party is white. And so, and we can kind of see similar trends along on domains such as religiosity. And so people who are more religious, and particularly evangelical, have become increasingly republican, and the people who are not religious, atheist or agnostic have become increasingly democratic. We can see this a little bit along gender lines, although not quite as strongly as those other two attributes where women have gravitated more towards the Democratic party.

And so, the reason I'm going through all of that, to come back to your actual question, is that in some sense, what has happened in the US, is that these other lines of cleavage have started to line up with partisan divisions. And so in that sense it's hard to differentiate the two. And so, when we talk about the partisan cleavage, in a way, partisanship has become somewhat of a mega identity that envelops these other identities, and that's part of the concern, in so far as these other cleavages often historically have been cross cutting, meaning that you have other points of tension across the political parties who are seeking power. And so you might get some disagreement within the party along those cleavages, but that's becoming increasingly less the case. So part of the concern in the US is that these other cleavages have kind of calcified within the parties themselves. I should make a particular note: in the US, race has probably done that most strongly.

And so, you know, even in people's minds, people have done studies where they don't psychologically differentiate particularly black Americans from the Democratic party, and somewhat white Americans from the Republican party. And so they're almost overlapping. And so, you know, race is obviously an extremely salient cleavage in the US. It's a much stronger identity then partisan identity in the US. But it's become somewhat, I think, the title of a paper that looks at that is along the lines of that, you know, race and partisanship are inseparable and so, in that sense, I think these other cleavages have become increasingly salient, except it's just very hard to distinguish them from part of some cleavages.

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?

00:10:34

James Druckman: I mean, I think that's been a really substantial, played a substantial role kind of in the twenty-first century, you know. I think, historically, a lot of the concern about the media was that they were spoke a lot, kind of took the perspective of the government's view because they relied a lot on government sources, and you had a very limited set of legacy media outlets. And since the proliferation of media starting really in the 1990s with cable and then obviously evolving with the Internet and then social media into the twenty-first century, you see this massive fragmentation of the media market, and so that there's been a lot of concern that there are what are called echo chambers, which means that people from particular parties or particular ideological perspectives will only consume media from media outlets that confirmed their perspectives. It's been difficult to gather evidence definitively on that trend, in part because it's very hard to gather data on exactly what media people are exposed to, a lot of that. You could ask people what media they consume, but that those are often very unreliable measures. And getting data on actual consumption, either doesn't exist, or in many cases is proprietary data. So, in the case of social media companies, you know, researchers don't have direct access to who's going on what social media and doing what. But I think the best work that I've seen on this would suggest that the fragmentation of the media has contributed to polarization. And so, if we think about the explosion of the Internet, for example, I think there is some, some, you know, reasonably good evidence that is that profuse to cross, at least in the US, you saw an increase in affective polarization, for example.

And then, when it comes to social media, there have been a series of studies where, they're quite clever, what they do is they ask people to deactivate their social media account for a certain amount of time. And so, you know, they might pay somebody a certain amount of money to not get on social media for a month. And then they look at just to see if those people look less polarized after being off of it than they otherwise would be had they stayed on it. And the evidence suggests that does depolarize them, which, you know, the flip side of that means that social media itself can be quite polarizing, both in terms of ideological and somewhat in terms of affective polarization.

So I think it's a difficult topic because of the measurement issues that I spoke about before, but I think it seems fairly clear that people are choosing media outlets, to the extent that they consume political media, which is declined dramatically over time, but to the extent that people are consuming political media, it does seem that they are choosing both their cable network and less so, but somewhat, their kind of social media networks, at least when it comes to accessing political elites on social media. So, I think media definitely plays a role. I don't think, is necessarily the definitive factor, but I think it definitely plays a role right now, and it's a bit of a supply and a demand thing as well, right?

Because one of the reasons why social media, for example, may have sparked a little bit of an increase in affective polarization is because the leaders of each party consistently are negative towards the other party, denigrate the other party, and those types of negativity, that type of negativity tends to get a lot more circulation on social media. So it's a bit of a vicious circle, in so far as to get attention elites are going to denigrate the other party, and that seems to kind of spread in social media networks, and that tends to then increase animosity towards the other party, and then it just kind of continues along those lines, so in that sense it can be a kind of a difficult cycle to break in that way.

Question 5 a

Can you say anything specific about the role played by journalists?
00:14:51
James Druckman: Journalists find themselves in a difficult situation, particularly, given the kind of the democratic erosion that's occurred across the globe. So, you know, I think journalists historically have, you know, it's been a critical norm of journalists to keep a balanced perspective and try to report each side of the story. I think they've, [it has] become increasingly difficult for them for two reasons. One is the competitive landscape of media. Information has so dramatically changed such that they're competing now with a lot of other types of, they're competing with social media. They're competing with different cable networks. And so they have to take different steps in order to gain an audience which is ultimately the goal of most media organizations. And so that's led them to, you know, be a little bit more conflict-oriented, and also pushed some networks to have a little bit more of a partisan, at least implicitly, leaning. And then I think it's become particularly difficult, as I said before, as there's been this democratic erosion across the globe somewhat. I think journalists often find themselves in a position where they want to be defenders of democracy, as that's kind of fundamental to their profession, right, kind of having the, serving a role being somebody who keeps accountability over the government by sharing information. And as democracy is eroded, it becomes difficult. They're in a challenging position to maintain some neutrality or lack of bias, because if one of the side that is kind of eroding the government, they're kind of, it might be very challenging to not be in favor of a side that's more pro-democratic. So I think journalists, journalism is, definitely face a lot of different challenges.
And then a third, you know. So one is kind of the competitive environment. The other is the democratic erosion. And then a third, at least in the US, is that there's been a massive decline of local media outlets and local media outlets have always played a really important role in just informing people about kind of activities in their communities, but also their political representatives. And as those organizations have closed down or nationalized, people have a lot less access to information about politicians. And so, you see that in areas, for example, where there are no, there is no local access to media, a lot of the representatives from those areas become more and more extreme in their actions because they're less and less accountable to their constituents, who don't have as much information about what they're doing. So I do, I think media's played, journalists have played an important role in their kind of dealing with all these different challenges that have emerged in the last 20 years in particular.

Question 6

What are in your opinion the best methodological approaches to study and understand polarization?
00:17:55
James Druckman: I think it's very difficult, coming back to one of the first things about which I spoke, which was we can think about polarization, any type of polarization, as a point in time. So, for example, we could compare the level of polarization in the US versus Italy, and that's certainly a reasonable thing to do. And one interesting thing along those lines is that, in the US at least, there's this perception that people are very polarized on issues. And I mentioned before, there actually hasn't been so much of an increase amongst the mass citizenry on that. But if you look at the US in comparative context, they're actually much less polarized on issues than many other countries.
But most people are more interested in kind of over time comparisons in polarization, and looking at this trends over time to see if we're becoming more and more polarized. And that makes it a challenging methodological issue, because you need over time data to do that, and we can talk about over time data in a long-term sense, so going back decades, and then you're kind of, you can only use what has

been collected over time. And that's one of the reasons I think that affective polarization has gained a lot of attention is because that had been data that had been collected over a fair amount of time. And so we were able to see a very long time trending what that looked like.
But even if we're looking at a shorter period of time over the course of like 2 or 3 years, you still might want to use data that you collect over a certain amount of time. You might want to re interview people. Of course, when you're collecting data like that, and then you're trying to see how polarization is affecting different types of outcomes, so, for example, are the levels of affective polarization affect people's support for democratic norms? You could collect data over time and see the correlation between those 2 indicators. But that is difficult to make a causal claim, then, that affective polarization necessarily causes lower support for democratic norms. And so to make those kinds of causal claims, social scientists often want to use experiments, where they might kind of random, to come back to my example, they might try to randomly reduce or increase somebody's level of affective polarization, and see how that affects their attitudes about democratic norms. And that's one way to make a causal claim.
The difficulty with that, of course, is given that these are over time trends called kind of realistic or ecologically valid, is manipulating levels of affective polarization. And then also it doesn't allow you to directly speak to kind of over time trends, so I might be able to even run an experiment and point out here's the causal relationship between, say, affective polarization and voting for an undemocratic candidate. But I can't say anything about whether that's increased over time or not. So, I think in the end you really need to triangulate these different methods. So you can use over time data of what you have, or you can start to collect this type of over time data kind of looking towards the future. And that's important to understand different trends. But then, if you want to isolate specific causal relationships, you need to complement that with experimental data. So, I think there are some debates among social scientists about which of those is best, and I think it seems fairly clear to me, at least, that you really need to have both in order to get a full picture of the impact in the evolution of affective or ideological or issue polarization over time.

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?

00:21:36

James Druckman: I think you know, starting kind of with kind of real life, I mean, I think it's fairly well documented that there's a lot of social ramifications, insofar as people have developed more of a kind of animosity towards those of the other party, they're less likely to want to interact with them, to befriending, to collaborate with them, to work with them. They don't even want to pay them the same wages that they might pay somebody from their own party. And so there's a fair number of social ramifications of this, people are much less likely to want to marry somebody if they're from a different party, as another example.
Politically, you know, I think that is still something that people are discussing and debating. I think that, you know, basically it seems fairly clear that politically it makes democratic functioning much more difficult, insofar as affective polarization increases citizens, and presumably elites as well, are much less likely to want to compromise with those from the other party. They're probably going to take more extreme policy positions just to kind of affirm their partisan identity. And so that makes functioning in a democracy more difficult, because people are going to dig in a little bit more stronger. I think it's much

less clear that any type of polarization - and that difficulty in democratic functioning could definitely undermine the functioning of democracy and lead to backsliding or erosion - I think it's much less clear that there's a direct proximate impact of polarization on democratic erosion insofar, as I don't think it's a one to one relationship between, say, the increase in affective polarization and the support for undermining democracy or support for political violence. I think it's a little bit more roundabout, but I think it's still quite significant, nonetheless.
Oh, and coming back to kind of an academic debate, yeah, I mean, it's really, you know, received an enormous amount of attention amongst academics. It seems that people are studying this as one of the central phenomena of kind of contemporary politics. And, you know, it's been very progressive in that sense that we have a lot of insights from a lot of different scholars around the world from a lot of different disciplines. It's also a little bit hard to keep track, because so many people are doing so many things. And you conceptually, there are these kind of distinguished differentiation between these different concepts that you've brought up somewhat. And so, you know, I think it can become challenging sometimes when people are kind of talking about different contexts at different time, and possibly slightly different concepts, and trying to make general statements. And so I think it's gotten a lot of attention, but people probably could, scholars could probably be a little bit more careful in kind of laying out the scope or the contextualization of the findings that they are coming across.

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?
00:24:40
James Druckman: I think it is reversible to a point. I mean, I think it might be hard to kind of imagine kind of a time when it was as low as like in the US they started measuring this in 1978. But it very might well be that was a unique time rather than later higher levels of affective polarization. So it's hard to make that time comparison, because you don't know what was the exceptional, that might be an exceptionally cohesive time. But I do think there's ways to decrease it. I think there's been a lot of scholars and practitioners who have done interventions to try to decrease polarization, and I think some of those are quite effective. And so, you know, having partisans from each side spend time with one another, speak to one another.
Another dynamic that seems to be behind a lot of the increasing affective polarization is perceptions that the other side is much more extreme than they actually are, or much more anti-democratic than they actually are. So to the extent that you can correct those misperceptions, you can also decrease polarization. Of course, the challenge is how do you do that? And, you know, doing that on a grand scale is difficult, because it might require some changes in institutions which seem unlikely. It might require some different media practices along the lines of the changes that I spoke about before, which are probably not good for polarization, and that might be difficult to implement as well.
And then you can kind of also go back to kind of, well, what about socialization patterns? Because it does seem that people who are coming to political age at this point in time are becoming, are more polarized than prior cohorts, which is not surprising giving that they're being socialized during a time of intense polarization. And so that makes it hard to know what one can do. I think we're at a point now where we have a fairly good understanding of what one would ideally do along the lines of the things that I mentioned before. How to implement them is harder, but I don't think it's impossible, and I think one of the, there can be programs and kind of interventions where you try to get people together or

correct misperceptions.
I think one of the things, though, that will have to happen – which, right now, in the US and in many other countries is not happening - is that members from different political parties or different political inclinations need to kind of exhibit a little bit more common views of kind of sustaining democracy, or common values of a given society. Right now, that's kind of very divided, and that comes back to this ideological polarization, perhaps amongst the elites that I spoke about at the beginning. And so that might be one of the biggest hurdles. But if we can kind of get elites to have a shared understanding and kind of a shared expectation of at least some basic democratic values, I think we would see a decline in in polarization.
So that might be, even though at this point in time that's difficult to imagine in a lot of countries, including the US, of course, but you know that might be one to hold out some hope for, that there'll be some reconciliation and elites will, even though they're incentivized to denigrate the other party, they might see some reason to kind of want to protect democracy. I mean, it might be getting to a point where it becomes quite vital to do that. And so I think, you know, I think it is possible. I think it's difficult, but I don't think it's time to kind of say this is an irreversible issue per se.