

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: ON VOTING AND POLARIZATION

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Polarization has become a pressing issue in today's American society. As much as we talk about it and have a general sense of what it is, it still seems like there is more work to do to clarify the concept. The purpose of this dissertation is to explain what polarization is, what makes it bad, and what we ought to do about it. Along the way, I will consider how voting is important in practically managing and reducing polarization. In the first chapter, I will analyze polarization as it's popularly construed and provide a way for us to evaluate it normatively through its effect on a property of society I call *Stability*. In the second chapter, I review a proposed solution to addressing political polarization: instant run-off voting, or IRV. I argue that while it will address the consequential worry raised in the first chapter, it misses the social and epistemic worries, and I take a look at how expressive voting provides a better model for us to understand how to address the remaining worries about polarization. In the third chapter, I describe polarization as a moral problem akin to prejudice. After looking at two kinds of polarization, I argue that if one thinks we should resist being prejudiced, then we have the same obligation to resist being polarized. I conclude this by suggesting a bottom-up approach to resisting polarization.

ON VOTING AND POLARIZATION

by

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Tiffany. You have been my biggest supporter and, often, a much better philosopher than me. Thank you for your listening ear and constant encouragement through this journey. And to my parents, Gloria and Zuwei, who have taught me the importance of pursuing an education and finishing what I started.

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## Chapter 1:

# Polarization and Stability

### Introduction

In 2016, I saw my church in California begin to show cracks owing to differences in political ideology, particularly when it came to the issue of abortion. By that year's election, the community was torn in two, and people who were good friends were no longer on speaking terms. Many left the church completely. As I looked around me, I saw the same division rapidly running course in society at large. The Internet seemed angrier, and social media convinced me that everything was political. For the first time, the question of who one voted for became a litmus test for that person's morality. Failure to disagree well became commonplace, and news sources rapidly degraded in quality. When George Floyd was murdered, something broke in American society. The process that was unfolding before me is what we now frequently refer to as "polarization."

Polarization has become a pressing issue in today's American society. As much as we talk about it and have a general sense of what it is, it still seems shrouded in opacity, like a ghost that we know exists but has become something of a tourist attraction. The research that has sprouted up around the topic is best represented in the social sciences, particularly in sociology, psychology, and political science. These areas have focused on the empirical side of polarization, trying to navigate its effects on us as individuals and on us in society. Studies have been done that consider the whether geographic, racial, and gender factors have any role to play in explaining the growing political divide.

As far as philosophy goes, polarization has also found its way into areas like social epistemology. Important work by C. Thi Nguyen (2020) has explored the concept of the “echo chamber,” which seems like an increasingly important mechanism of polarization on social media. Kevin Vallier (2020) has published a book about how much trust Americans have in each other and the government during a period of increased polarization. Much of this work falls in the intersection of social epistemology and political philosophy.

I hope to provide another point of discussion for philosophers to do what they do best when it comes to concepts: clarify and distinguish. Polarization still requires a conceptual analysis, and while we can sense that it’s bad, the normative dimensions of polarization need to be laid down. The purpose of this dissertation is to explain what polarization is, what makes it bad, and what we ought to do about it. Along the way, I will consider how voting is important in practically managing and reducing polarization.

In the first chapter, I will analyze polarization as it is popularly construed, considering the many facets of the complex concept that is thrown around. There haven’t been many attempts to clearly define polarization despite how often the term is used, and this will be an attempt to do just that. Polarization has three primary facets: issue-bundling polarization, affective polarization, and epistemic polarization. These three, taken together, properly outline the salient aspects of polarization in the current discussion. Defining polarization has the additional benefit of allowing us to normatively evaluate it; I argue that polarization is bad because of the negative effect it has on a property of society that I call *Stability*. Once polarization is defined in terms of its issue-bundling, affective, and epistemic aspects, it is clear that why it is harmful is a result of how each aspect undermines *Stability* in a society.

In the second chapter, I review a proposed solution to addressing political polarization: instant run-off voting, or IRV. IRV has been touted as an institutional solution to the problem of polarization because of the way that it structures the vote: voters rank the candidates based on their preferences. Candidates who don't make it past the first round of the vote have their votes re-allocated to the next highest choice. This process is reiterated until one candidate remains. The functioning idea behind IRV is if voters are able to rank their candidates, then there would be greater support for more moderate candidates, who would be winning either first-place or second-place votes. As the run-offs continue, these candidates would continue to amass votes until they ultimately secured the victory. However, IRV likely does not fix the problem behind why voters become more polarized. Not only does IRV fall prey to a problem called the "center squeeze," but also it misdiagnoses the root of polarization. I argue that expressive voting provides a better model for us to understand the rise in polarization. The act of voting is understood as an act of "being" whereby voters are engaging in identification and attachment to political parties. This is a more agent-oriented way to understand what is theoretically relevant for reducing polarization at the polls compared to the methods of IRV and other social choice-theoretic proposals. In the end, I argue that rather than viewing voting methods as the way we can stem the rise of polarization, we have to look to the area of individual identities and how they can be expressed differently when voting.

In the third chapter, I seek to defend a moderate proposal about our moral obligation to resist polarization. While it is impossible to require all citizens to resist polarization at all times, the claim is merely to resist polarization when possible. This shifts the conversation about polarization from being a political or social problem to a moral problem. Because of what polarization does to a moral agent, I draw an analogy between polarization and prejudice. Just as

prejudice affects how people view the “others” in more negative ways, so too does political polarization. The basic argument goes like this: prejudice is bad. If prejudice is bad, we have a moral obligation to resist it when we can. Polarization is like prejudice. Therefore, we have a moral obligation to resist polarization when we can. I examine the two kinds of polarization that we might catalogue: just polarization and pernicious polarization. Finally, I take a look at how a bottom-up approach to addressing polarization is likely the more effective way for society to fulfill its obligation to resist polarization.

Given the growing political divide in the United States, polarization has become a household topic of discussion. After all, the civility demonstrated between political parties (and in particular, their supporters) is at an all-time low. It’s no longer the case that we are merely struggling to find common ground with one another. There is an active, passionate dislike of the political other. However, it’s worth asking: is polarization a real concern? If it is, what exactly makes it a concern? On the flip side, some think that it should be obvious that polarization is a concern, and yet, some political scientists think that greater polarization is beneficial for the country’s politics. We say that polarization is bad but pinning down why it’s bad—which is crucial to the argument that polarization should be reduced—is not straightforward. In this paper, I will attempt to provide a philosophical analysis of why polarization is bad. I begin by outlining a few different aspects of polarization that have been common to the general discussion about the phenomenon. I then focus on three core aspects of polarization: issue-bundling, affective, and epistemic. These will comprise the definition of polarization that I put forward, which will allow for a normative evaluation of polarization. Finally, I argue that—far from being merely an object of media attention—what makes polarization bad is that it threatens a society’s stability.

## I. The Concept of Polarization

Despite how common the term ‘polarization’ has become, there are actually many ways to conceive of it (Bramson et al. 2017; Fiorina et al. 2005; Fiorina et al. 2008; Iyengar et al. 2012; Levendusky 2013; Mason 2015; Druckman et al. 2013). Of note, Bramson et al. (2017) produce nine different facets of polarization that can be modeled, highlighting the different phenomena which might be construed as polarization.<sup>1</sup> Others gesture roughly at the divide between “red” and “blue” states, suggesting polarization has to do with particular issues that political parties choose to platform (Fiorina et al. 2008). There’s also mention of partisan sorting, mentioning the discussion on polarization focusing on “the extent to which partisans’ policy preferences have moved” (Iyengar et al. 2012). Finally, others characterize polarization in terms of “elite polarization,” addressing the relationship between elites and how the way their being polarized affects the policy decisions of citizens (Druckman et al. 2013).

Given the number of different ways to characterize polarization, it’s clear that polarization needs to be defined precisely if we’re to make headway in doing something about it (assuming that we *want* to do something about it). While there are many helpful discussions about polarization, they are relatively quiet about pinning down the content of the term both as used in common parlance and in a normatively salient way. As Bramson et al. (2017) say, “[h]owever intuitive or intriguing those claims [regarding polarization] may be, it is often unclear what social phenomenon of belief configuration is at issue or in exactly what sense opinion has or has not become ‘polarized.’” It will be the project of this paper to elaborate on what we mean when we use the term ‘polarization’ so that we can normatively evaluate whether polarization is bad or not.

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<sup>1</sup> The different phenomena that they attribute to polarization include: spread, dispersion, coverage, regionalization, community fracturing, distinctness, group divergence, group consensus, and size parity.

Polarization is often used to refer to how political beliefs and opinions become increasingly concentrated in (usually) two opposing camps (sometimes referred to as “partisan sorting”) (Mason 2015, 2016; Törnberg 2022; Luttig 2018; Davis and Dunaway 2016; Fiorina 2017; Abramowitz and Saunders 1998). When political scientists pursue questions about polarization, they sometimes measure it in terms of intensity of disagreement between political parties and their supporters (Brewer 2001a; ANES data, YouGov data). As it turns out, no matter if we’re talking about it academically or colloquially, there is no clear definition for polarization. The “popular” understanding of polarization is a multifaceted concept and often incorporates a few distinct characterizations. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on three aspects of polarization that—taken together—describe the concept comprehensively: issue-bundling polarization, affective polarization, and epistemic polarization.

Issue-bundling polarization emerges as a result of the political platforms and policies that political parties are advancing, and it results from the electorate’s response to the bundling of those platforms and policies. The bundling of these platforms and policies leads to more and more political sorting. Gone are the days when Democrats could sell themselves as being pro-life or Republicans being pro-choice. Now, politicians are increasingly disincentivized from expressing views contrary to their own parties as the sorting becomes more and more thorough. As the bundling of issues has increased, the sorting of the political parties along particular issues has led to the sorting of the voting population’s attitudes as well. This leads to more voters voting for straight-party tickets rather than choosing to vote for candidates from both parties for Congress (Oberlander 2024). At the time of this paper’s writing, some examples of issues that have been bundled include issues such as gun control and abortion. Issue-bundling polarization explains the

political divide that gets deeper and deeper based on the political issues that we're most concerned about becoming bundled together.

However, the issues that matter to today's political parties are not necessarily the same issues that these parties have built their identities on in the past. After all, there was a time in the 1960s and 1970s when the ideologies of the Democratic and Republican parties looked quite a bit like one another (Levendusky 2009). When it comes to issue-bundling polarization, there are at least two theories about how issue-bundling polarization functions with respect to political parties. An earlier observation about how political issues factor into polarization is sometimes explained by way of 'conflict displacement' (Aldrich 1983a, b, 1995; Miller and Schofield 2003). Conflict displacement is the view that political parties become polarized on particular issues, which are later "displaced" by new issues. For example, the issue of abolition was relevant to the polarization of the Democratic and Republican parties in the 1860s; nowadays, those issues have been displaced by the topics of gun rights and abortion.

In contrast to conflict displacement, an alternative view of issue-bundling polarization is 'conflict extension'. This view notes that when parties become polarized on issues, instead of replacing polarizing issues one after another (which is what conflict displacement suggests), they "extend" the reach of the bundle of polarizing issues that their parties disagree on. Therefore, polarizing issues get bundled together as part of the extension of the conflict between political parties. When the bundle of polarizing political issues is formed, we end up with more deeply entrenched (and polarized) political parties (Layman et al. 2006). Conflict extension, therefore, seems to represent the kind of polarization that is concerning because there is no principled reason for why certain issues become bundled together. In other words, these bundled issues are bundled somewhat indiscriminately; I may be able to reliably tell how someone will vote on gun control

policies based on how they vote on abortion, but gun control and abortion have little in common that should allow me to reliably predict this outcome. We might settle on the following characterization:

*Issue-bundling polarization* Issue-bundling polarization occurs when political parties bundle distinct, unrelated political policies together, creating a larger and larger ideological divide between them.

Properly understood, the conflict extension model of issue-bundling polarization explains the worrying aspects of it; over time, these bundles of issues grow to unmanageable sizes, and they grow further apart ideologically. This process turns every potential issue into something to become further polarized about. As the process of issue-bundling polarization unfolds, the bundles become impermeable, meaning constituents of either party are expected to more rigidly conform to the entirety of their respective bundles or else be viewed as a traitor to their party. This prevents more nuanced political perspectives from ever taking shape. The issue-bundling thus forms a feedback loop, which leads to greater polarization between political parties.

While issue-bundling polarization causes policies and political platforms to move in certain opposing directions, affective polarization refers to the aspect of polarization that adversely affects our relationships with others. A succinct way to put it is “an increasing social distance between Democrats and Republicans” (Mason 2018). This “social distance” between parties can be empirically measured via surveys of opinions about opposing parties or certain political leaders; for instance, questions asked about warm feelings towards political opponents might be something like, “On a scale of one to five, with five being the most positive and one being the most negative, how do you perceive people who voted for Donald Trump?” This is empirically illustrated in Iyengar (2021). The following chart plots the “warm” feelings (on a scale of 0 to 100, with 100 being the warmest) that one has for those who are in the “in-group” (i.e., the political party they

support) while also plotting the “cold” feelings they have towards those in the out-group (i.e., the political party they oppose).

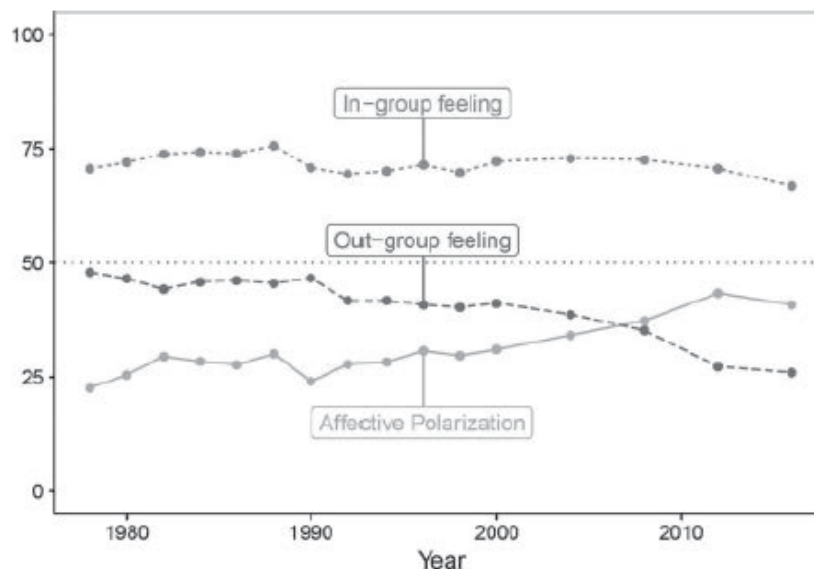


Figure 1. The level of warmth hovers around a score of 75, while affective polarization and feelings towards the out-group demonstrate a kind of inverse relationship—as affective polarization rises, the feelings that citizens have towards those in the outgroup get colder (ANES party feeling thermometers, 1976-2016).

When people generally talk about “polarization,” they are likely referring, in part, to affective polarization. This kind of polarization is expressed most often in the archetype of the uncle who rants and raves about how liberals are ruining the country or the niece who considers all Republicans to be brainwashed agents of institutionalized religion. Despite these caricatures, affective polarization boils down to three primary phenomena: “increased partisan bias, increased emotional reactivity, and increased activism” (Mason 2018; also see Iyengar et al. 2019; DiMaggio et al. 1996; Fiorina et al. 2010; and Abrams et al. 1990 for discussions of how social groupings play a role in social polarization).

Affective polarization is the kind of polarization that society is generally concerned with the most because it affects the relationships we form in society the most. Without affective

polarization, whether or not someone votes for the same policies may not make a large difference in how we treat them. However, if how I vote significantly affects the way that someone treats me or views me, it becomes problematic. When affective polarization happens, we see citizens becoming more biased in the ways that they engage and disagree with political opponents and their supporters. Political activism increases not necessarily because there is a sense of political injustice, but because polarized citizens are fueled by a deep disdain for their political opponents and everything for which they stand. Not only are citizens becoming more partisan in terms of their political identities, but they are also contributing to emotionally charged tensions that often lead to an inability to engage in a tempered way with perceived political “enemies.” Therefore, we might define affective polarization in the following way:

*Affective polarization* Affective polarization is increased partisan bias (either for one’s own party or against a political opponent), increased emotional reactivity to political issues, and increased political activism on account of intense political emotions.

More recently, some philosophers have focused their attention on the last kind of polarization: epistemic polarization. Epistemic polarization refers to how our society is increasingly packaged into neat communities with access to and confirmation of the same information known as “echo chambers” (Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Nguyen 2020; Baumgaertner and Justwan 2022; Begby 2022). In particular, C. Thi Nguyen (2020) distinguishes ‘epistemic bubbles’, which “can form with no ill intent, through ordinary processes of social selection and community formation,” from ‘echo chambers’, which “leave their members overly dependent on approved inside sources for information” (Nguyen 2020, 2-3). The upshot of the formation of echo chambers is that the collective knowledge a society has access to (or focuses on, given the limitations of the human mind) is increasingly less collective. Instead, we are increasingly herded into separate ingroups and outgroups the more that we settle into our preferred

media outlets (and their political allies). To illustrate this, consider the stark contrast between the evidence and arguments presented by FOX News and those presented by CNN. Since very few viewers take the time necessary to consume content from more than one side of the debate, epistemic polarization occurs; in other words, the beliefs that some citizens form are at odds with those that other citizens form not necessarily because of some faulty reasoning, but because the sources of their beliefs are already polarized, leading to the polarization of their own beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

Other philosophers have argued that polarization is a matter of falling trust in society, which goes hand in hand with political divergence (Westwood et al. 2018; Vallier 2020). Vallier (2020) argues that as a result of falling trust in society, polarization increases, and a host of societal issues arise. He defends a “*distrust-divergence* hypothesis: that social and political distrust and partisan divergence are mutually reinforcing” (Vallier 2020, 9). In other words, once polarization increases, trust in other citizens decreases, reinforcing a vicious downward spiral into further polarization.

This suggestion can be supplemented by considering how democratic politics has infiltrated more areas of our lives than it previously has, and groups that used to be ideologically cross-cutting (i.e., groups where people with different ideologies are able to come together because of a shared interest, such as a tennis club, etc.) have become politically charged (Talisie, 2019). Talisie (2019) notes that “when we talk only to likeminded others, we become polarized not in that we become increasingly distant from our opponents (though that also occurs), but rather in that we come to exchange our initial opinion for one that is more extreme. In short, belief

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<sup>2</sup> While this is not within the scope of this paper and the particular aim of outlining the meaning of epistemic polarization, some philosophers argue that becoming polarized in this way is rational (e.g., Singer et al. 2019; Dorst (forthcoming); Ross and Anderson 1982). In particular, Singer et al. (2019) argue that given limited agents, polarization is epistemically rational because it is simply the result of limited agents reasoning in a coherence-minded way.

polarization invokes a change in our beliefs; particularly, it involves a change that renders us more extreme versions of ourselves” (Talisso 2019, 97). Given that social sorting (i.e., individuals in society sorting themselves into certain social groups) along political lines has occurred, the occasions for our beliefs to becoming more extreme as we talk to likeminded group members also increase in frequency. This leads to greater epistemic polarization. In a similar vein, what some would consider the most fundamental social group—family—has been empirically demonstrated to contribute to the polarization of adolescents (Tyler and Iyengar 2023). This is the result of a rational process that starts at home as a form of socialization, and the study concludes that adolescents have become as polarized as adults, particularly in homes with polarized adults. Before social sorting even occurs, the social environment an agent finds herself in as a youth already begins to contribute to one’s epistemic attitudes towards those on the opposite side of the aisle.

From the current discussions about epistemic polarization, I will take the following definition of epistemic polarization on board:

*Epistemic polarization* Epistemic polarization occurs when citizens are isolated into distinct epistemic environments (e.g., echo chambers).

Now that the three aspects of polarization are before us, it will be important to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive but responsive to different aspects of how polarization is structured. For instance, because affective polarization involves the emotional and relational components of how individuals relate in a society, questions about the intensity of disagreement are more relevant than they might be when thinking about epistemic polarization (though, of course, they wouldn’t be completely unrelated). A better model for understanding how the three aspects are related is to view them as indicators that a society is approaching a dangerous level of polarization for a society (which will be covered in a later section). Any of these aspects, when instantiated alone, is not sufficient to be concerned about society’s well-being. When any two of

these aspects are instantiated, there is reason to be concerned about polarization's effects on society. When all three aspects are instantiated, society is threatened by polarization, and it needs to be addressed. The upshot of understanding these aspects in this way is that each of these aspects is sufficient for polarization to exist, but all three aspects are mutually necessary for polarization to be worrisome.

## II. Polarization and Stability

However, it may not be clear that polarization is on the rise in the United States—at least, not significantly more so than at any other point in the past. After all, memories of pacifists and “war hawks” during the Vietnam War era of United States history seem to suggest that society was just as polarized once. Perhaps this is true; however, Democrats and Republicans today are finding themselves further apart than at any time in the past fifty years (Pew Research Center 2022). With the aid of social media and the problem of echo chambers, polarization has the potential to be even worse than it was in the 1950s.

Even if polarization is on the rise, it isn't entirely clear that the rise in polarization is *prima facie* concerning. After all, there are some viable explanations for the rise in polarization (as well as the conclusions to be drawn from it). For instance, polarization may be on the rise because people want to be politically informed but are not willing to pay the costs in order to be politically informed in an unbiased way. Polarization lowers the cost of being informed through an intellectual division of labor of sorts; instead of a citizen needing to spend hours researching the positions of each party on particular issues, she can spend no more than half an hour to become informed about a political party's position by scrolling through their various media channels. Each political party relies on its own experts to communicate the virtues of its respective platform, and

citizens choose among a variety of media channels (manned by these experts) in order to form their own political opinions (Begby 2022; Bonotti 2017; Dorst (2023); Klar 2014). Begby (2022) writes: “as a limited epistemic agent, I need to rely on the input of others, both for supplying me with information I wouldn’t otherwise have access to, and for serving as a check on my own reasoning.” This is not an unreasonable claim to make; after all, becoming familiar enough with how the government and electoral processes function may already be too high a cost for most citizens to pay in order to vote well—at least polarized citizens are still trying to get informed (to some extent).

On the other hand, it may seem all too obvious that polarization is bad—is anyone really claiming that it’s a good thing to have more polarization? Dodd and Schraufnagel (2013) have argued that having more polarization (if the country isn’t polarized enough) allows for a more effective Congress. The argument goes something like this: if Congress is too polarized, then they will constantly be in a state of gridlock, but if Congress isn’t polarized enough, then they won’t efficiently produce solutions to the needs of the country because they won’t have variety with respect to their approaches. To go one step further, Levendusky (2010) has argued that when it comes to elite polarization (where “elites” refers to elected officials who have some control over policy), the more polarized the elites are, the clearer it is where parties stand on particular issues of the day. This allows voters to adopt more consistent attitudes when they vote, which likely increases representations of their competence.

Most (if not all) of the defenses of polarization are given with respect to the *rationality* of polarization; very few want to take on the task of defending polarization *simpliciter*. In other words, the defenses of polarization only go as far as the individual’s rationality is concerned—polarization is still (tacitly) understood as a problem for society. It may seem obvious that polarization is bad

at the societal level, but what makes it subtle, practically speaking, is the rational justification for it at the individual level. Polarization makes making political decisions easier for individuals. When they confine themselves to polarized epistemic bubbles, they gain easy guidance to more detailed knowledge about particular positions that their preferred political party holds. The individual can then claim to be more “rational” as a voter since she is more informed about the issues at hand. Polarization makes the process of becoming politically informed a more straightforward process for the everyday voter, which provides a veneer of rational decision-making at the polls. Setting these considerations aside, I want to outline a few concerns about polarization and demonstrate what makes polarization bad for society.

Recall the three categories of polarization mentioned earlier: issue-bundling polarization, affective polarization, and epistemic polarization. There are (at least) three accompanying worries about polarization that stem from each of those categories: the consequential worry, the social worry, and the epistemic worry. These separate worries all sprout from a common root that polarization attacks, which is a property I’ll call *Stability*.

*Stability* has conceptual roots in some earlier perspectives in political philosophy. According to Aristotle, the “stability of constitutions” was something worth securing, and it was to be done by educating the whole body of citizens (*Politics*, 5.1310a1). Aristotle’s theory of government, or “constitutions” conceived of stability as an important feature of three different possible constitutions: monarchy (the rule of one), aristocracy (the rule of some), and polity (the rule of many). When Aristotle conceives of stability as an important characteristic of each constitution, he is worried about the devolution of these three kinds of constitutions into their less noble versions. Monarchies are at risk of devolving into tyrannies when the monarch is only interested in advancing her own desires. Aristocracies are at risk of devolving into oligarchies

when the oligarchs are only interested in advancing the desires of the wealthy. Polities are at risk of devolving into democracies when the people are only interested in advancing the desires of the needy. As it turns out, all of these constitutions, in their best forms, are acceptable forms of government. The lesson behind Aristotle's political theory is that stability needs to be secured; in other words, the undesirable advance of structural change must be kept at bay.

*Stability* has also been defined in a few different ways. Some political philosophers and theorists might define it in terms of the absence of violence in a society, a government's longevity, the existence of a legitimate constitutional regime, the absence of structural change, or some multifaceted societal attribute (Hurwitz 1973; Gurr and Ruttenberg 1967; Ake 1967; Eckstein 1966; Lijphart 1968). It has also been characterized as the "regularity of the flow of political exchanges" (Ake 1975). Conceptually, it's a bit difficult to properly define stability apart from either the conditions that lead to it or the outcomes it produces. With that in mind, here's a first pass at characterizing *Stability*:

*Stability* A society can be said to be a stable society when the citizens have and uphold norms against violence in society and drastic structural change. *Stability* is exemplified when the institutions of government and society are respected.

*Stability* is a beneficial property of society to maintain because—at least with respect to democracies—it prevents structural changes from happening too quickly. Easton (2024) has noted the lack of analysis regarding 'structural change' in the political science literature (despite its increasing usage), so for the purposes of defining *Stability*, I'll understand 'structural change' as any kind of change to the laws, government, or how citizens are affected by political institutions. *Drastic* structural change, then, will occur when structural change does not result from the standard political procedures for that particular kind of change. It's important to note the distinction between structural changes *simpliciter* and drastic structural changes. Structural changes can be beneficial

to a society; in fact, they should be welcomed if certain institutional arrangements are not producing efficient outcomes. However, these changes ought to be established through the normal procedures of democratic decision-making. Drastic structural changes are changes that happen too quickly, bypassing an important feature of what makes democracies legitimate: fair procedures (Estlund 1997).

It may be easier to paint the full portrait of *Stability*'s role in society by considering what happens during periods of instability. A clear case of this is civil war; during the 1860s in America, society became so unstable that the norms against violence in response to structural change (i.e., the new laws against slavery) were violated, and civil war broke out. It's important here to distinguish between the just outcome of the period following the American civil war and the descent of a nation into war with itself. *Stability* is silent about the reasons for which social upheaval needs to happen, and for that reason, there will be times when it's important for *Stability* to play second fiddle to things like a nation's moral development with respect to human rights. However, these moments should be the exception, not the rule. In general, it is not beneficial for a society to constantly be in a state where citizens are rejecting norms against violence in society and structural change. When paired with good governance and just outcomes, *Stability* becomes an important property in establishing a well-functioning society.

### III. Normatively Evaluating Polarization

Given *Stability*, we are provided with a foil to normatively evaluate the three different aspects of polarization that I have thus far stated. If *Stability* is a property of a society worth protecting, then threats to *Stability* ought to be regarded as pernicious. The following worries about the different effects of polarization on *Stability* will demonstrate how *Stability* can be used to

normatively evaluate polarization, and it will allow us to decry polarization as being problematic for society.

### *The Consequential Worry*

The first worry about polarization and how it attacks *Stability* is the consequential worry, which is concerned with the outcomes that polarization produces. Because of issue-bundling polarization, we unwittingly produce a set of incentives in a democracy which results in inefficient government and a political process that is both irrational and aimed at the wrong goals.

While it should come as no surprise that, within a democracy, polarization leads to inefficient government, there is an important qualification to make: it's *too much* polarization that leads to inefficient government, and it's *too much* polarization (i.e., when all three aspects of polarization are instantiated) that I'm concerned about in this paper. Empirically, having a moderate level of polarization may be optimal for achieving a productive Congress (Dodd and Schraufnagel 2009). Theoretically, this tracks—when two parties aren't at *complete* odds with each other, they are more likely to compromise as well as propose solutions from their own distinct perspectives. However, as Dodd and Schraufnagel (2009) suggest, high levels of polarization—which is measured according to the ideological distance between parties and the loyalty of the members to their parties—decrease policy productivity. The mechanism behind this is fairly straightforward: political parties want to cater to their constituents. Catering to their constituents means that they will need to “score political points,” or act such that their constituents feel like their interests are promoted and the interests of their political opponents are diminished. When political parties are polarized, “scoring political points” is incentivized to mean “making sure that the other party doesn't get their policies passed.” After all, it would look like the other party was

actually doing some good if they passed policies in Congress. Therefore, highly polarized political parties often trickle to a standstill with respect to policy productivity.

The same incentives that lead to stalemates in a highly polarized government contribute to distracting political parties from aiming at the public good such that the public votes in a way that further distracts political parties from aiming at the public good. Instead of each political party aiming at progress of some kind for society, they become primarily concerned with advancing their own agendas. This isn't intrinsically a bad thing; after all, some agendas need to be advanced in service of the public good. However, there is a difference between advancing an agenda for instrumental reasons and advancing an agenda for the sake of advancing an agenda. When polarization occurs, citizens become less concerned with the public good and more concerned with their preferred political party winning, which incentivizes political parties to give the people what they want and not what they need. As a result, political winners are not chosen on the basis of their policies, which seems like the appropriate justification for winning; rather, political winners are chosen on the basis of how much they can tailor their platform to the desires of their constituents—an aim that is logically distinct from the best policies.

The consequential worry threatens *Stability* because it results from the surface-level justification given for why people are becoming polarized: it's about the policies. The concern is that issue-bundling polarization actually doesn't have good reasons for bundling certain political issues together, but when it does, it leads to a deeper entrenchment on either side of the political aisle than would have resulted when isolating particular policies. As a consequence, political parties are incentivized to push bundled platforms as if they're internally consistent, leading to less and less bipartisan cooperation and more and more ideologically homogenous parties and constituents. This kind of sorting threatens the respect that people have for the institutions of

government and society because the sorting leaves little room for compromise and the political successes of the opposing party are regarded as detrimental to their preferred party. A noteworthy example of this is the January 6<sup>th</sup> riot that followed the results of the 2020 election; because the sorting has become more and more extreme, the standard peaceful transfer of power that typifies *Stability* was disrupted.

### *The Social Worry*

Furthermore, polarization is bad for society because it is bad for social unity, which might be understood informally as “how well we get along with each other.” More formally, we might define social unity as a “jointly shared disposition of the citizenry to cooperate according to the principles of political justice” (Pourvand 2023: 1). This “jointly shared disposition” manifests in a few ways, but the specific instances of this disposition that I am interested in (and is relevant to *Stability*) can be found in our interactions with one another—particularly when we disagree ideologically.

Take the following case:

Kelly and Larry are having a conversation over coffee, and Larry, being a liberal, provides statistical evidence about incarcerations that he found while reading the New York Times. Kelly, a conservative, dismisses the evidence immediately as being “leftist propaganda.” Assuming that objective facts are possible, the statistics about the issue that Larry cited are objectively true. Kelly and Larry no longer find it possible to continue having coffee, and they cut their time short.

The salient aspect of the case that illustrates the social worry is the fact that Kelly and Larry were no longer able to continue having coffee. That Kelly did not have the same response to evidence is more along the lines of the epistemic worry, which I will get to later on in this paper. In this case, however, the focus is on how Kelly is not demonstrating an ability to cooperate with a political opponent. Even if it is possible to have the same evidence and still reach different

conclusions (Simpson 2012; Thune 2010; Christensen 2007), this should have no bearing on how we treat one another, especially those of us who don't have any real power when it comes to political outcomes. However, the fact that polarization causes us to treat one another worse if we disagree with someone we perceive to be a political opponent is the crux of the social worry.

It is also worth noting that the goal of reducing rising polarization does not entail having no polarization whatever. As mentioned earlier, moderate levels of polarization are ideal for productive government, and maintaining some levels of disagreement in a country is socially beneficial. It allows for people to have opportunities to exercise fair-mindedness while receiving the benefit of engaging with perspectives contrary to their own. Disagreement in a fair-minded society allows for people to change their minds on things (while leaving open the option to respectfully disagree). When high levels of polarization exist, the vehement tribalism takes what it means to change one's mind and paints it as a sign of weakness or betrayal of the ingroup.

The social worry can be summarized like this: polarization makes citizens treat each other more poorly than they should when they disagree. Because political identity can be entrenched in how we identify ourselves and others (Abrams et al. 1990; Brewer 2001; Iyengar et al. 2012; Levendusky 2018; Tyler and Iyengar 2023; Wojcieszak and Warner 2020), the formation of in-groups and out-groups leads to concerning trends that will likely threaten *Stability*. In other words, the kind of poor treatment that results from polarization's effect on fair-mindedness will upend *Stability* in a society.

### *The Epistemic Worry*

Last but not least, there's an epistemic worry about polarization. When high levels of polarization exist, the evidence and arguments that we are presented with become polarized as

well. This state of affairs is best represented by the literature on echo chambers and epistemic bubbles. What's worrisome about the epistemic environment created by polarization is the way that it affects how we approach evidence. Politics is a series of collective-action problems, which means collective knowledge is required to solve those problems. When the evidence is polarized, the resources to solve these collective-action problems become insulated from one another in a hostile way, distorting the way that knowledge is interpreted by opposing sides and preventing a collective solution from being produced.

There's a more sinister, big-picture worry about polarization's effect on *Stability*. While most extreme polarization seems to start out as obviously bad reasoning—consider how we evaluate the people who participated in the January 6<sup>th</sup> riot—there's a point at which those who participate in such bad reasoning eventually justify this bad reasoning as good reasoning. They begin to form epistemic communities that subscribe to these false beliefs, and then they form their own streams of media that reinforce the false beliefs, such as their own skewed sources of news. Call these people the *deviant knowers*. Once this happens, and if enough people begin to buy into these beliefs, we find ourselves in an epistemic position where two alternative pictures of reality are in conflict. This sounds like an overly dramatic concern, but there's a very thin difference between this potential state of affairs and one that already exists in the form of conspiracy theorists. While conspiracy theorists are currently dismissed because the views they have are on the “fringe,” or unlikely to be true given the world as we know it, these epistemic communities would not be dismissed in the same way because the world as they know it would be fundamentally different. When it becomes good to share the same beliefs as these deviant knowers (e.g., because it seems like the government really *did* knowingly allow vote count fraud to occur), conflicting accounts of

reality begin to spread and the deviant knowers form a separate epistemic community (e.g., QAnon) that only aims to justify its errant views.

Earlier, I stated that the three aspects of polarization taken together would lead to the kind of polarization that would attack *Stability* in a society. These worries demonstrate why that's the case and allow us to know how we can normatively evaluate polarization as bad for society. The adverse relationship between these worries and the foundations of society isn't arbitrary, though. Rawls (2001)'s notion of "justice as fairness" conceives of society as having a 'basic structure' that is the arrangement of certain political and social institutions, such as the political constitution, the economy, and the family. Given this characterization of society's basic structure, we can draw a causal connection between the three worries and society—each of the worries affects a different aspect of the basic structure of society. The three worries taken together can be understood to be threatening to the foundation of society. In Nozick (2013)'s consideration of the utopian model of society projected onto our world, he notes that there are social relationships in actual world communities, information costs, and alternative communities with different arrangements of institutions. These might be traced to the three worries as well. The social worry is concerned with the social relationships in society; the epistemic worry is concerned with the costs of being informed and the nature of that information; and the consequential worry is concerned with the outcomes for policy decisions—a component of how institutions are arranged—within a society. The Austrian school of economics also conceives of society as being affected by these three worries since it views law, politics, and social norms as critical to how economic forces play out in the real world (Schmidtz and Boettke 2025). While a comprehensive review of theories about what society is lies outside the scope of this chapter, the three worries stand out as causing fundamental trouble for society's wellbeing. When the three of them are active concerns at the

same time, that trouble becomes deeply worrying. My view therefore pinpoints the property of society that is under threat when the three aspects of polarization are instantiated: *Stability*.

#### IV. Why *Stability*?

At this point, it is worth asking: why *Stability*? After all, the given definition of *Stability* was merely stipulated, and there seem to be many viable options for the property that occupies the explanatory role that I'm interested in. While I'd be happy for another property to fill the role of allowing us to normatively evaluate polarization, I'll take some time here to consider two other reasonably strong candidates and explore why *Stability* measures favorably in comparison.

The first candidate that seems like a natural fit (especially in a conversation about polarization) is *Unity*. After all, *Unity* and polarization seem like natural opposites; polarization divides people, and *Unity* signals a state of affairs in which people are joined together. Plato gives a more detailed account of political unity: political unity is the sharing of pleasures and pains in common, and the unity of a *polis* resembles the unity of an individual (*Republic* 462a-e). Given this understanding of *Unity*, we can use *Unity* to normatively evaluate polarization. Polarization is bad because citizens no longer share pleasures and pains, and they no longer resemble the unity of an individual. In other words, when citizens view their pleasures and their pains as connected with other citizens, they are not polarized (or, perhaps, are less polarized). As an example of when *Unity* is exemplified, the tragedy of 9/11 brought the American people closer together, uniting us against a common enemy through the sharing of the pains of those who lost their lives. Having a society that exemplifies *Unity* would therefore seem to be a good thing.

However, *Unity* fails to capture the precise nature of the harm that polarization causes to society—it's a bit too general, conceptually. In order to be useful, *Unity* needs to be modified by

something: *Unity* in terms of something else. If it isn't, it leaves itself open to the possibility of society exemplifying *Unity* by being polarized. Even if *Unity* is defined in a more specific way, it still misses the mark on how society is threatened by polarization. Polarization isn't just about people disagreeing or existing together; it's about the institutions of society being threatened as a result of the process of polarization. *Unity* is certainly threatened by the social worry (and perhaps even the epistemic worry), but it's hard to see how the consequential worry is threatening to *Unity*. *Unity* would either be too sensitive to the consequential worry to accommodate even a moderate amount of polarization, or it would be insensitive to the consequential worry and view *Unity* as existing no matter how the incentives of political parties work against one another. However, if these three aspects of polarization are taken to all be relevant to why we think polarization is bad, failure to account for any one of them would mean that the threat of polarization wouldn't be fully characterized. As outlined earlier, *Stability* is a property of society that can be threatened by all three aspects of polarization.

Another candidate for the property that best explains the harms of polarization is *Toleration*, which seems to be a key feature of liberal democratic societies (Jones 2007). In particular, John Locke's work is often referenced in the broader literature on toleration. In "A Letter concerning Toleration," he argues for the protection of the rights of individuals of different religions, saying, "No private Person has any Right, in any manner to prejudice another Person in his Civil Enjoyments, because he is of another Church or Religion. All Rights and Franchises that belong to him as a Man, or as Denison, are inviolably to be preserved to him. These are not the business of Religion." This has generated discussion about the fundamental importance of *Toleration* for a liberal society (Schwartzman 2005, Waldron 1991, 2002; McCabe 1997; Mitchell 1990; Bou-Habib 2003), and it is relevant because *Toleration* seems like a good contender for being the

property that helps us to normatively evaluate polarization. Not only does it have existing literature defending its importance as a feature of liberal society, but also, especially in the case of the social worry, it captures the kind of antagonism that we're concerned about. People are becoming less and less tolerant of those who are opposed to their political views, and this is arguably what is damaging to society.

However, *Toleration* and *Stability* are importantly different, as the following case will demonstrate. Consider a country that is divided by Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims who vote in blocs. Is polarization happening here? It's very likely that in such a country, similar symptoms of polarization might be shared, such as being incentivized to vote for laws according to one's in-group; only having positive social relationships with those who voted the same way on issues and candidates; and having isolated epistemic environments according to the particular religious traditions. (In the real world, Catholics and Protestants might have some overlap, especially when it comes to sharing epistemic environments, but for the sake of the case, let's assume they don't.) These are the same three worries that arise when it comes to *Stability*.

A simple difference between *Toleration* and *Stability* with respect to the divided country case is that polarization primarily happens when there are 'poles' due to the binary way that the incentives will be structured. Therefore, in the case above, we can grant that *Toleration* is the relevant concept rather than *Stability*, but polarization isn't what is happening in the divided country. After all, when there isn't a party that can lay claim to having a simple majority of the votes (rather than just a plurality), there is a greater need for discussion and political cooperation in order to achieve political success. Interestingly, *Toleration* seems sufficient but not necessary for *Stability*, especially in cases with more than three relevant parties. When there is *Toleration*, there is likely to be *Stability*. However, one cannot have *Toleration* without *Stability* of some sort.

However, *Toleration* does seem significantly different from polarization in a few different ways that should lead us to prefer *Stability* in cases of polarization where only two primary parties exist. When there is polarization that arises from policies being incentivized for the purpose of catering to a political party's constituents, *Toleration* seems to be more concerned about the content of the policies and maintaining that these policies don't harm others. *Stability* is more concerned with the institutional arrangements that result from these kinds of incentives, as they could lead to a more pernicious kind of polarization in the future. With respect to the social worry about polarization, *Toleration* and *Stability* are more or less in line with one another. Finally, *Toleration* doesn't really have much to say about being in separate epistemic communities, so long as the rights of others aren't infringed on for being in a different community. *Stability* recognizes the way that epistemic polarization can contribute to greater division, and it allows us to evaluate epistemic polarization as normatively bad. In all, *Toleration* is a fine candidate for the theoretical role that *Stability* plays, but it is not quite specific enough in terms of why the polarization is bad. *Stability* is a concept that captures both the aspect of how polarization affects the institutions of society as well as the relationships that citizens have with one another, and this is what makes it the ideal concept to play the role of allowing us to normatively evaluate polarization.

## V. Closing Thoughts

It's hard to know why things are normatively evaluated the way that they are without clear targets in place. At least at the popular level, people seem convinced that polarization is bad for society, but it has thus far remained unclear why that is the case. I hope to have introduced the target of why it is that we think polarization is normatively bad for society by first taking aim at what the salient dimensions of polarization are. Polarization is not just simple disagreement; it has

particular aspects that, taken together, threaten the stability of a society. In general, this characteristic of it is what makes it normatively bad.


In particular, polarization has wide-reaching effects because it isn't contained to one dimension of society. Polarization affects the policies that are bundled together, creating ideological rifts that grow wider and wider with every issue. It affects the social interactions that we engage in, making disagreement deeper than it used to be. It affects how we interact with information, leading us to give variable credences to facts based on the political communities we are affiliated with and distrust anything that would suggest the opposite of our preferred position.

Whether or not *Stability* turns out to be the most salient property of society that polarization attacks remains to be seen. However, the goal has always been to provide a standard to normatively evaluate why polarization is so often characterized as "bad." When *Stability* is undermined, as in the cases of the Civil Rights movement, it is justified as a cost of moral progress in a nation. However, when *Stability* is undermined as the result of something like growing differences in political preferences, there's much less to justify the division that polarization produces.

## Chapter 2:

### A Holistic View of Polarization and Voting

In Chapter 1, I noted that there were three worries that arose from how polarization threatened *Stability*: the consequential worry, the social worry, and the epistemic worry. In recent times, there have been some institutional changes designed to address polarization, such as Instant Runoff Voting. Instant Runoff Voting (or IRV) has slowly begun to be adopted in the United States as a new way to vote, and it has the additional purported benefit of combatting polarization. In simple terms, voters are given a ballot and asked to rank candidates in order of preference. The candidates with the fewest first-place votes are eliminated, and their votes are dispersed to the remaining candidates. This process repeats itself until a winner stands alone. Some of its proponents claim that IRV is able to help reduce polarization because of how it influences voters' approach to casting their ballots. Since IRV ballots implement rankings of preferences rather than forcing voters to only choose one candidate, voters more honestly represent their preferences when voting in an IRV system; in other words, voters are less likely to vote strategically when given an IRV ballot. Because voters do not feel forced to vote for the "lesser evil" candidate, they can freely vote for the more moderate candidate without worries about the polarized candidates dominating the election.

This approach addresses the consequential worry with respect to polarization, but it's not clear that it will address the social or the epistemic worries.  When voters become more polarized, it can sometimes be less a matter of voting for certain outcomes and more a matter of expressing a political identity. As parties become more polarized, a clearer representation of the identity of

the voter emerges. So, even if they *can* better represent their preferences on an IRV ballot, it does not address the root of why polarization happens in the first place. In this paper, I argue that the expressive voting model is necessary for us to understand how to address the social and epistemic worries about polarization. I will first survey some of the arguments in favor of IRV as a voting method that deals with the consequential worry while examining some claims that it ameliorates polarization. I then compare the ways that IRV and expressive voting might play a role in addressing the polarization problem. Finally, I propose that the expressive voting model allows us to have a better sense of how polarization is motivated, particularly with respect to the social and epistemic worries.

## I. The IRV Proposal

First-past-the-post (FPTP) is generally how elections are done in the United States. The system is relatively simple: voters cast votes for a single candidate, and the candidate with the most votes wins the election. In the U.S., a candidate needs to win the vote of at least 270 electors (i.e., more than half of all electors) in the Electoral College to win the election. However, there has been some dissatisfaction with the performance of FPTP in recent elections. As it turns out, FPTP seems to reinforce polarization. In light of the increased attention placed on how polarized society has become in the United States, some have cleverly turned to proposing new voting mechanisms as a way to guard against the rise in polarization. A popular (and increasingly implemented) option is instant runoff voting (IRV), which has begun to see adoption in state and city elections (Alaska and Maine use IRV for state elections while San Francisco, CA and Burlington, VT use it for city elections) as well as party primaries (in New York City and Virginia). IRV works like this:

- (1) Voters are given a ballot with the candidates on it.

- (2) Voters will rank the candidates in order of their preference.
- (3) The candidate with the fewest number of first-place votes is eliminated. (This is where it gets its “instant runoff” name.) The eliminated candidate’s votes are then re-allocated to the next highest choice.
- (4) This process of eliminating the candidate with the fewest first-place votes and re-allocating her votes continues until only one candidate remains.

While the way that IRV is implemented (such as at what stage in the voting process it comes into play, how many candidates should be on offer, etc.) differs from election to election, IRV has been touted as the best way to address the U.S.’s polarization crisis (Richie et al. 2023; Atkinson et al. 2023).<sup>3</sup> The argument goes something like this: if people can submit rankings of their preferences between all the candidates on offer as opposed to simply choosing one candidate, then it is possible that we’ll see increased support for the more moderate candidates, including third-party candidates (Tomlinson et al., 2023). As Richie et al. (2023) write, “With IRV, third-party candidates need not worry about becoming spoilers and can instead share their ideas in a more receptive forum and contribute meaningfully to the discourse of a campaign.” One reason that voters choose the more polarized candidate in the current first-past-the-post elections is because the alternative—which is polarized to the other extreme—is so disagreeable to them that they feel compelled to vote for the “lesser evil.” IRV is structured in a way to avoid being forced to choose between two unfavorable options. Furthermore, according to the State of Nevada (2022), IRV is supported because it picks the “candidate who receives the broadest support from all voters.” Voters who don’t like either of the radical candidates will be able to cast more of their first-place votes for the more moderate candidate.

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<sup>3</sup> The sense of polarization that is targeted by proponents of IRV seems to be that of strong partisan sorting, resulting in a distribution of voters with twin peaks at opposite ends of the spectrum.

However, IRV may unintentionally yield the opposite effect with regards to reducing polarization in a society. For starters, it is still consistent with the IRV model that the voters distribute themselves such that twin peaks form with respect to their political preferences. Given the way that IRV works and the criterion it depends on to eliminate candidates through successive runoff, polarization may actually become more entrenched (and rewarded) by implementing IRV (Clelland 2023; Foley 2023; Atkinson et al. 2023). Despite claims about IRV's ability to produce a candidate that the majority supports and reduce polarization in elections, there is empirical and theoretical reason to think that this, in fact, is not the case.

The empirical evidence regarding how IRV fares in the face of polarization is demonstrated in the paradigm case of Alaska's 2022 special election for the United States House. Since Alaska's representative Don Young died before his term was up, Alaska held a special election (using IRV) for the United States House. Democrat Mary Peltola ended up running against Republicans Sarah Palin and Nick Begich III. Palin was the polarized Republican candidate, and Begich III was the moderate Republican candidate. Peltola ended up winning the election, which was deemed an upset given Alaska's Republican-leaning history. Since IRV is one of the few changes to the voting system actually being adopted, it's possible to evaluate its track record empirically.<sup>4</sup> This upset might be used to demonstrate the success of IRV in reducing polarization; after all, if a Democrat could win in a Republican state as a result of an IRV election, wouldn't that suggest that the polarization was addressed?

There are actually two failures here. The first failure is a failure to deliver; IRV is touted as being able to reduce polarization, and yet the moderate candidate in the context of the election—Nick Begich III—failed to win the election. The Democrat candidate Mary Peltola and the

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<sup>4</sup> Foley (2023) provides an alternative ranked choice voting method to IRV that avoids the problem of the “center squeeze” and would have elected the moderate candidate, Nick Begich III.

Republican candidate Sarah Palin were at entirely opposite ends of the political spectrum, with Peltola as the liberal candidate and Palin as the Trump-adjacent right-wing candidate. Therefore, polarization was not reduced by having an IRV election, and the Democrat candidate winning the election actually leads to the second failure of IRV: the failure to represent.

Reducing polarization is different from misrepresenting an electorate. Given Alaska's history as a Republican state, the results of the IRV election might actually serve to deepen dissatisfaction with how the voters are represented and *further* polarize the voters. After all, it would be hard to imagine the majority of the state voting for the Republican candidate being pleased to find out that the Democrat candidate won. What's worse, IRV failed to elect the Condorcet winner (the candidate who wins a majority of the votes in head-to-head comparisons with each of the other candidates), who was, in fact, Nick Begich III (Clelland 2023).

Theoretically, IRV also runs into a bit of a problem: it may only work in non-polarized societies. Consider a society that is already polarized. (In this way, the 2022 Alaska special election is ideal because it shows how an IRV election would operate in a polarized election.) Given the way that IRV works to eliminate the candidate with the fewest first-place votes, the moderate candidate (whom IRV supposedly works to get elected) will always lose first. This is because polarized voters vote for polarized candidates. The moderate candidate may very well win all of the second-place votes, but given the way that the system is formatted, this will be of little use to her. The majority of the first-place votes will be given to the two polarized candidates whom the electorate supports thereby eliminating the moderate candidate in the process.

The aforementioned phenomenon is known as the "center squeeze" (Clelland 2023), and it is a serious bug that IRV needs to address. The "center" that is referred to is the moderate candidate in an election. Given IRV's claims that it can reduce polarization in elections, the moderate

candidate ought to be the target candidate over and above the other two polarized candidates. However, the opposite occurs in polarized societies. The moderate candidate actually gets “squeezed” out of the running because she is likely to not earn enough first-place votes. This is because in a polarized election, not only are the candidates on polar opposite ends of the political spectrum, but voters are motivated to vote for the polarized candidates since the voters themselves are polarized. This is bad because when she is squeezed out, her votes get redistributed among the remaining candidates—both of whom are polarized. Therefore, the problem of the center squeeze exposes an inherent flaw with the claim that IRV can reduce polarization. It may very well maintain the status quo when non-polarized elections take place (and it may even work in polarized elections with a non-polarized electorate) but given a polarized society, IRV can do little to stem the problem of rising polarization.

As it turns out, IRV may primarily be suited to addressing the “spoiler problem,” which arises when a (polarized) candidate could potentially “spoil” an election’s results by taking votes away from one of either of the two major candidates. It may seem like this addresses polarization by making it so that extreme candidates don’t stand a chance, but as stated earlier, this is only satisfied in societies that are not yet polarized. If the two major candidates running in an election *are* polarized candidates, the “spoiler problem” becomes less of an issue while the “center squeeze” becomes more prominent. If the “center squeeze” becomes the primary problem, then polarization will end up becoming reinforced by IRV since the moderate candidate will fail to make it past the first round of run-offs.

## II. The Root of Polarization at the Polls

While some have focused on changing the way that we vote in order to reduce polarization, there's something about this that seems misguided (not to mention paternalistic). After all, what if the changes to how we vote actually *don't* end up making a difference to how voters are distributed along ideological lines? Will we try shifting to another voting method in pursuit of the results that we are expecting to see? It seems like we'd begin treading the line of social engineering if we kept changing the voting method more until we get our desired outcome. We should seek further explanation elsewhere.

There is another aspect of why voters vote that IRV (and any voting system operates on the assumption that voters vote with the intention of determining the outcome of an election) fails to capture. After all, Downs (1957) and others (Hardin 1982; Hirschman 1971; Olson 1965) all argue in various ways that there is a paradox when it comes to participating in elections. Given the cost of how to vote correctly (including things such as getting informed about the policies, understanding economic ramifications of those policies, etc.), it is irrational for most citizens to get informed for the sake of voting; in fact, it is irrational for most citizens to even vote in elections because the likelihood that their vote will be decisive is infinitesimal. If this argument holds and voters are (at least somewhat) aware that their votes matter in deciding an election are small, then it seems more unlikely that voters are participating politically for the instrumental consequences of voting. And yet, people vote.

This discussion on the rationality of voting is analogous to the voting method approach to mitigating polarization in how they both are addressing consequential worries without considering more qualitative components of the problem. The argument that voters are irrational when they get informed for the sake of voting is only concerned with the fact that casting a decisive vote is basically impossible for any single voter. However, there are likely other reasons for people to

vote beyond casting a decisive vote. Adopting IRV or other voting methods as a way to fix polarization might work, but since IRV won't work in an already-polarized society, there must be some other approach to addressing polarization that works beyond tinkering with the voting system. Interestingly enough, expressive voting happens to fill in the gaps for both the problem of the rationality of voting and the problem of polarization that remains if voting methods are insufficient.

Expressive voting is a theory that suggests that voters do not only care about the outcomes of elections, but also about expressing their opinions or beliefs (Brennan and Lomasky 1993; Brennan 2008; Hamlin and Jennings 2011). Schuessler (2000) presents a model of expressive voting that describes voters as being motivated by “being” rather than “doing.” His view is able to make sense of the supposed paradox of political participation, and it also explains why a purely instrumental understanding of voter activity may not be sufficient for dealing with polarization. “Being” a Democrat means that one *identifies* oneself as a Democrat by expressing a preference for the Democratic candidate, and one *attaches* oneself to the collective of Democrats through one's action of voting for a Democrat. Rather than understanding a voter's decision to vote Democrat as an act of “doing,” in which the voter is concerned with the instrumental value of her vote, expressive voting understands the actions of a voter as an act of “being”—to vote Democrat is just part of what is it to *be* a Democrat. Apart from some of the responses to the paradox of political participation that cite various private returns that citizens get from voting (Hardin 1982; Brennan and Buchanan 1984; Riker and Ordeshook 1968; Wilson 1974), Schuessler's view explains what motivates voters to still turn up at the polls regardless of the efficacy of their vote: “expressively motivated action, first and foremost, is a form of identification and attachment” (Schuessler 2000).

This distinction between “being” and “doing” is useful for understanding polarization that happens at the polls because it changes what we take to be the root of polarization. IRV (and other similar voting methods) are primarily concerned with the outcomes of choosing between preferred outcomes at the polls. Expressive voting can model polarization as the development of deeply different political identities within society, leading to a much more nuanced understanding of how to address rising levels of political polarization. When the parties become more polarized (whether it is the result of more polarizing candidates, more polarizing policies, etc.), expressive voting predicts that voters will be more polarized at the polls because that is the natural result of voting as a way of “being” a Republican or a Democrat. The distinction between outcomes-based voting and identity-based voting is important because the predictions about voter behavior are different in the two cases. If voting (and the ensuing polarization) was just about outcomes, then one could reasonably expect a voter to change parties based on how they feel about the policies on the table. However, as Robbett and Matthews (2022) observe, individuals do not vote according to what they believe but to affirm their political affiliations. In other words, they vote to express. Given how polarization is characterized in my first chapter, the policy consequences of voting are not the only salient dimension of polarization. Because polarization is not as simple as mere political sorting by bundles of issues, it requires us to consider how social relationships and epistemic communities are relevant to one’s political identity; therefore, expressive voting provides a more fitting explanation for why polarization is getting worse.

Polarized parties lead to stronger feelings of political identification and attachment. When political parties are more moderate, the notion of being a Republican or a Democrat is less burdened with affective and social tensions. This is because the differences between what it is to be a Republican or a Democrat are less pronounced, and bipartisanship seems more possible. When

political parties are more polarized, what it is to be a Republican or a Democrat is more divisive. Republicans put their foot firmly down on particular issues that Democrats could never be asked to compromise on, and a rift begins to form. As political parties begin to coopt other identities that voters may have (e.g., being the “religious right”), what it is to be a Republican or a Democrat becomes even more relevant to voters who vote expressively.

If voting is no longer merely about policy and outcomes, it’s unclear that any voting method concerned solely on representing outcomes would properly target the root of the polarization so long as voters have expressive reasons for voting. Voters are often described as ignorant or irrational, yet most voters still have reasons to vote even if their votes are going to be drowned in a sea of the opposing color. These expressive reasons help to resolve the tension of the aforementioned paradox of political participation. As voters build their identities on their preferred political party, the results of voting matter less than “being” part of their political party. Instead of resigning to the outcomes, they dig their heels in deeper on those issues until they see their identity represented (Besley and Coate 2000). This generates a vicious feedback loop whereby voters become more and more polarized the less they feel that they are represented by the outcomes of the most recent election, and parties solidify their identities even more. But the key thing to note is that it’s not the outcomes that matter—it’s how their identities are represented. Even if the outcomes turn out in their favor when the opposing political party is in charge, it was never about the outcomes in the first place. It’s about “being” and expressing a political identity.

Schuessler (2000) begins with the strong form of the expressive model in which voters are purely expressive before he considers models where expressive voting is among the many reasons why voters vote. Regardless of which model better matches reality, as long as expressive voting is salient in understanding voter behavior, it allows us to get a better look at what undergirds the

motivations for people to vote. If Schuessler (2000) is right about expressive voting, then the explanation for why polarization is on the rise is simple: the rising polarization in society is a function of the parties becoming more polarized. This is how the expressive voting model of voters helps us to understand why voters are becoming more and more polarized.

### III. IRV and Expressive Voting

IRV and other similar ranked choice voting approaches (which I'll refer to more broadly as "IRV-style approaches") to polarization and expressive voting both have much to offer. It can be difficult to know how to weigh them on a balance and know which one to consider as more salient for addressing the problem of rising polarization. Here, I'll address some theoretical strengths of IRV-style approaches and anticipate some reasons against expressive voting that might be raised.

One thing that IRV-style approaches do extremely well is provide an empirically verifiable approach to the problem of polarization. Even if the arguments against IRV mentioned above hold true, this doesn't take away the ability for further revisions of IRV-style approaches as more data is gathered. Because it is reasonably clear what factors are being controlled with each proposed voting method, deploying, revising, and iterating different forms of ranked choice voting methods allows for a more systematic understanding of how to best represent the preferences of voters. Since IRV-style approaches are outcomes-oriented (rather than agent-oriented, as expressive voting is), it seems like they would be more likely to find a practical solution to the problem of rising polarization. They focus on institutional design and incorporating the theories of social choice theory to develop the voting method that best meets certain standards, such as Pareto efficiency or electing the Condorcet winner.

Furthermore, IRV-style approaches have the practical advantage of being simple to implement. While it may be slightly more difficult to understand how to fill out an IRV ballot, it is not such a great institutional change that it would fundamentally change the how voting is done. Indeed, the fact that IRV is already finding implementation in various states is a sign that citizens are willing to participate in IRV elections and find it to be a legitimate way of aggregating individual preferences. The practical simplicity gives way to theoretical utility, as seeing how voters behave when presented with the option to rank all the candidates on offer may yield surprising results, particularly for minority political parties. I may not like the opposing party candidate at all, but my first impressions about a minority party's candidate could lead me to be happy to rank them in second or third place, giving them a better chance of being represented in Congress (or even the White House). This scenario is a reason why IRV would have a useful side effect related to addressing polarization: it seems to provide a good chance to break the two-party stranglehold that seems to be driving polarization in the United States, moving us closer towards a form of representative government whereby political parties may need to form coalitions in order to get their agendas on the table.<sup>5</sup> However, even if this turns out to be the case, there's still no guarantee that polarization couldn't happen even with coalitions in play.

Given the simplicity of IRV, expressive voting is, by comparison, shrouded in mystery when it comes to its practical capability. It may be true that voters are expressing an identity when they vote, but so what? One of the concerns raised against IRV-style approaches earlier was that it would lead to a kind of social engineering whereby the voting system would be changed until the "appropriate" results were achieved. However, if expressive voting is true, wouldn't it be even

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<sup>5</sup> However, Lewyn, Michael E. "Two cheers for instant runoff voting." *Phoenix L. Rev.* 6 (2012): 117 does demonstrate that if the minority parties are weak enough, IRV's effect on the two-party system would not be significant enough to be useful.

more reprehensible to attempt to change people's identities until polarization was reduced? After all, if expressive voting is true, then voters are just expressing their identities—it just so happens that this coincides with rising polarization. To get them to “be” otherwise would be tantamount to saying that people need to “be” differently. If all expressive voting gives us is an explanation rooted in the voter's identity, can it really be useful in bringing about real change?

Another potential argument against thinking expressive voting is fundamental to the model of voters that we have in mind is whether it will yield significantly different results from the voting methods produced by social choice theory. Perhaps it is true that expressive voting shows how voters are primarily considering their votes as actions of “being” rather than “doing.” It theoretically wouldn't take all that much to devise a voting method that accounts for preferences of the voters being primarily based on identity and adjusting against it so that polarization is reduced. The voting method would be slightly more complicated and might include multiple stages to account for this, but voters would be free to “be” as they want while seeing a reduction in polarization. If this is the case, shouldn't we prefer the method that is empirically viable over one that seems primarily theoretical?

Recall that one of the issues with IRV was the fact that it wouldn't work in an already polarized electorate. This insufficiency can be explained by considering how approaches to polarization via voting methods are primarily focused on addressing the consequential worry. This is, of course, an important worry to address, but it doesn't cover the social and epistemic worries about polarization. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to consider expressive voting's role in dealing with the social and epistemic worries for a more holistic approach to combating polarization.

#### IV. How to Address Polarization, Expressively

I argue that polarization's social and epistemic worries can be addressed by adopting the expressive voting model, so how does expressive voting address polarization? If polarization is happening against the backdrop of voters who are voting to express their identities, I agree that it would be difficult to see what kinds of changes would be relevant (or adequate) for addressing it. In fact, the virtue of IRV-style approaches is how straightforward they are in producing quantifiable results. We could just pick a voting method, adopt it, and see how it goes. However, if the arguments against IRV and the multifaceted understanding of polarization introduced in the first chapter are to be taken seriously, then merely changing the voting method would not be sufficient for addressing polarization as a whole. Expressive voting can take the conversation about the remaining worries about polarization further to understand how to overcome it.

If expressive voting is true, one way to address polarization would be to target the way voters understand their identity. It seems unlikely that voters would ever vote in ways that ignore expressive voting considerations, but it is worthwhile to consider how the content of what they're expressing might change. Because the United States isn't run as a direct democracy, the "popular votes" cast during the general election are somewhat inconsequential—at best, they might be considered a moral victory. Despite this, many voters consider the election of the President to be the most important outcome of their vote; again, this is easily explained by expressive voting. Seeing the President that they voted for in the White House is tantamount to seeing who they are (i.e., their identity) represented. However, this betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of how the government works (though it does provide insight into how the electoral process relates to a voter's identity). To the degree that voters are concerned with the policies that are supported and passed in Congress as a reflection of the identity of their preferred political party, it would be far more

important for them to engage in the primary elections, yet around 80% of eligible voters do not participate (Ferrer and Thorning 2023). If a Republican candidate became President with a predominantly Democratic Congress, it is likely that whatever agenda the President had for the nation would struggle to be represented in legislative reality. However, having a stronger presence in Congress would only served to strengthen the identity of the party and what it achieves. The content of what is expressed would still be the same, to a certain degree—I am voting to identify with and attach myself to my preferred political party. Seeing Democrats or Republicans successfully pushing policy through affirms this identity, and it gives citizens expressive reasons to vote in the primaries.

Furthermore, if what grounds polarization is, in part, the fact that voters view voting as an act of “being,” then it’s important to clarify what it is to “be.” Since voters are voting to express their identities, the first thing to analyze would be the connection between the vote and the voter’s identity. With their votes, voters can express their identities positively and negatively. When voters positively express their identities, they are doing what they think is necessary to “be” a Republican or a Democrat. When voters negatively express their identities, they are doing what they think is mutually exclusive of being a Republican or a Democrat. In other words, they are doing what they think is necessary to “not be” a Republican or a Democrat. Alongside the relatively recent rise of polarization, the way that voters have chosen to express their identities has shifted closer to the negative way of expression.

Anecdotally, in the past couple of U.S. presidential elections from 2016 onwards, a key phrase that described the approach to selecting a candidate was: “lesser of two evils” (Mantell 2024; Hogan 2024; Karty 2023; Simpson 2020; Singer 2016). By describing the options on offer as two evils, this approach to voting signals two things: a dissatisfaction with the quality of

candidates on offer and the negative way of expressing identity through voting. With the “lesser of two evils” motivation becoming more widely accepted to justify one’s vote, the negative way of expressing identity through voting came along for the ride. Empirically, this has also found some support (Rivas and Rockey 2021; Robbett and Matthews 2022; Martin and Swisher 2024; Ganuthula and Balaraman 2025; Zeedan 2024; Rathje et al. 2021; Iyengar and Westwood 2014; Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Huddy et al. 2015). As Rivas and Rockey (2021) describe it, expressive voting is two-sided: voters ‘cheer’ for their preferred party and ‘boo’ their disliked parties. Their analysis of data from British elections following the “Brexit” referendum concludes that ‘booing’ now matters more than ‘cheering’ to voters. Robbett and Matthews (2022) designed an experiment that suggested that despite potential costs of voters acting in expressive ways and voting along identity lines rather than for their political opponents, voters were willing to pay those costs and produce outcomes that were regrettable. Rathje et al. (2021) report on evidence of out-group animosity leading to higher engagement on social media—another dimension along which the negative way of expressing identity rears its head.

Not only does encouraging expressive voters to express positively reduce the number of voters who are negatively expressing their identity, but also, it can provide a strategic signal to political parties about the quality of their candidates. When the political party no longer seems to fit the identity that a voter desires to express, she ought to abstain from voting. When political parties recognize that they are losing support from their constituents, the identity of the political party should realign with the primary voter identity. What grounds this reaction is the voter having a stronger individual identity than the identity of the political party, which can be achieved through non-political pursuits, desires, or affiliations. Talisse (2019) echoes this assessment, saying, “Politics must be put in its place, and we can do this by participating together in cooperative social

endeavors that are fundamentally non-political in nature” (Talisso 2019, 131). Creating opportunities for voters to have stronger non-political identities is pivotal for addressing polarization. An example of such an opportunity that Talisso (2019) provides is volunteering to clean litter from the public park, which expresses an identity that is unrelated to the identity of any political party (at least thus far—it seems unlikely that running on a platform on cleaning up local parks will be on the agenda anytime soon).

The difference in positively expressing and negatively expressing identities is how productive each approach is, particularly when the voter has a stronger overall identity than her political identity. Positive expression allows for the corrective realignment of political parties with the identities of their constituents as well as providing directions for which ways political parties ought to go to achieve the common good. Negative expression rejects alternatives to one’s own identity, but it’s worth considering what the cost of this is. After all, this kind of attitude is akin to the friend who wants to go out to eat, rejects every idea that is raised, and never contributes an idea of his own. Returning briefly to the argument that expressive voting makes sense of the why it’s rational for voters to vote, positive expression picks out the right reasons for voting. When I vote Democrat as an act of “being,” I am voting for progressive policies, such as environmental conservation and women’s rights to abortion because they are fundamental to my beliefs about the kind of person I am. These are reasons that can serve as motivations for action. When I vote Democrat because “I won’t vote for a Republican,” this is a negative reason. Between the two, if we want to justify viewing voters as rational when they vote, then we should prefer positive expression over negative expression because positive expression has more explanatory value than negative expression does. Obviously, it is not (and may never be) the case that voters will be purely

positive expressers or purely negative expressers, but having both ends of the spectrum in view allows us to discern what the possibilities in expressive voting could be.

Addressing the content of voters' identities, encouraging positive expressive voting, and strengthening voters' non-political identities, as abstract as they might seem, better target the mechanisms that increase the amount of polarization in society. The theory of expressive voting allows for us to see what the fundamental mechanisms of polarization are, including a further theory of positive and negative expressions of identity when voting. How we go about achieving these goals is a matter of encouraging more non-political activity in a society that increasingly buys into the belief that "everything is political." what is really at the root of polarization.

## V. Closing Thoughts

In order for us to begin to do the work of addressing polarization, I have argued that it's important to understand what voters are up to when they go to the ballot boxes. IRV and similar approaches to reforming the voting system certainly have the higher ground when it comes to their empirical value, but they also will fall prey to theoretical and empirical shortcomings as well. In arguing in favor of the expressive voting model, I suppose I am following in the spirit of Vernon Smith's "humanomics" in preferring a comprehensive understanding of human action. I have argued that if we can realize the reordering of identity expression from voters adopting the identities of their preferred political parties to voters voting in line with their own personal identities, we will most likely see a reduction in polarization. After all, polarization is, in part, a simplification of preferences, and humans turn out to be complex in their sets of desires and beliefs. The hardest part is just learning what it looks like for us to abandon our seemingly all-or-nothing

political identities and participate in non-political activities that work towards building what Talisse (2019) calls “civic friendship.”

Some people don’t find the rise in polarization to be disconcerting. In fact, some may be rubbing their proverbial hands together in excitement, waiting to see which political agenda comes out on top. However, many theorists have been taking it seriously, as the threats of polarization will have too large of an effect on society to ignore. I personally find the prospect of society being destabilized a terrifying one. In order for us to begin to do the work of addressing polarization, I have argued that it’s important to understand what voters are up to when they go to the ballot boxes. It may be an empirical question, but I think it’s a matter of reminding each individual in society that there is more of their identity to express beyond their political identities. Too much politics, as it turns out, seems to be bad for the health of our society.

## Chapter 3:

### The Moral Obligation to Resist Polarization

Every day, we are faced with the pressures of polarization—and very few are exempt. As long as one reads a newspaper, watches television, or scrolls through social media, polarization crouches at the door. Though the same streams of pressure (e.g., mainstream media outlets, talk shows, etc.) have existed for decades, the effects of polarization are amplified in an age when those streams have become oceans thanks to the prevalence of digital content. Unless one makes a conscious effort to engage with a variety of different perspectives, it is easy—and getting easier and easier—to drown in polarized information.

It doesn't help that the incentives for polarization are structured in a way such that polarization is encouraged. In other words, it's profitable to allow polarization to run its course. Regardless of which "side" is involved, the more polarized consumers are, the easier it is to capitalize on their preferences. Since preferences are becoming less and less heterogeneous, the process of tailoring content to each consumer is simplified. For instance, if I know that a consumer prefers to see pro-choice content, I can also tailor my advertisements to include stronger gun control and LGBTQ+-affirming agenda. What eventually results from this is sorting on a large-scale across a variety of issues. I argue that this is a moral problem akin to certain kinds of prejudice. In this paper, I will argue that we have an obligation to resist a certain kind of polarization as much as we can because it is morally problematic. I begin by addressing the question of whether polarization is bad *ceteris paribus* or if it is intrinsically bad. This leads to examining two kinds of polarization: one that is grounded in justice and is morally permissible and one that is pernicious

and resembles certain kinds of prejudice. I will then argue that when we face the pernicious kind of polarization, we have an obligation to resist polarization as often as we are aware of it happening. Drawing the connection between prejudice and polarization makes it clear that polarization is a moral issue that we must address to live well in a civil society.

## I. Two Kinds of Polarization

In my first chapter, I outlined the dimensions that make polarization worrisome in light of *Stability*: the consequential worry, the social worry, and the epistemic worry. When all of these worries are present, polarization can be said to be normatively bad because of how it threatens *Stability*. However, it's worth considering whether polarization is a bad thing *ceteris paribus* or if polarization is intrinsically bad. If polarization is only a bad thing (all other things being equal), then it would reduce the importance of addressing it as harmful for society.

At present, the “liberals” and the “conservatives” are the two prevailing political ideologies driving a significant divide between the Democrats from the Republicans, respectively. This has created a climate in which one's political affiliation affects how others see her. However, polarization may not always be a bad thing—after all, when the issue of slavery was a divisive factor between the North and the South during the Civil War period of U.S. history, the polarization that happened was a result of reactions to the deep injustices against the civil rights of people who were enslaved and led to the legislation of equal rights for all people. This kind of polarization turned out to be beneficial for society as a whole, and thus, is largely unlike the kind of polarization we're concerned with today. Therefore, it's an open question whether polarization is intrinsically bad or not.

Another way to define polarization is the radical sorting of citizens into two ideologically opposed camps. In the United States, how polarization looks can be described as something like the growing schism between Democrats and Republicans over a bundle of seemingly unrelated political issues. Just knowing that a Democrat supports a certain policy is reason enough for a Republican to reject it—even if they might support the same policy when it is presented without any background information about whose policy it is. Polarization’s adverse effects have become a widely acknowledged problem in American society; it leads to decreased trust among citizens, a more toxic media environment, and bad policymaking (Vallier 2020; Lee 2022; DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007; Gerber, Karlan, and Bergan 2009; Hopkins and Ladd 2014; Dodd and Schraufnagel 2017). There’s also empirical reason to think that polarization is rising at a rapid rate in the United States (Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2021). However, it seems like the general approach to polarization has been a bit like staring into a solar eclipse; we acknowledge its dire consequences but have no intention of stopping.

So, what is the difference between the kind of polarization that split the nation over whether slavery should be abolished and the kind of polarization that leads to a society-wide schism? I’ll call the former “just polarization” and the latter “pernicious polarization.” One difference between them is the grounds of polarization. When the North and South of the U.S. Civil War era became polarized on the issue of slavery, there was a fact-of-the-matter in view: slavery was morally reprehensible; therefore, it ought to be abolished. The polarization was grounded in the issue of whether or not it was just for Southern plantation owners to continue owning slaves. Of course, the Southerners protested, but their responses were not considerate of the moral dimensions of the problem and were predominantly concerned with issues of economic gain and private property.

While there may have also been other political and economic reasons involved, the moral issue was part of societal progress, and slavery was eventually abolished in the United States.

Another time polarization happened for the benefit of society was during the Civil Rights era. As a direct result of the efforts of those opposed to segregation, the institutions and opportunities that were previously unavailable to people of color became more and more accessible to them. Again, this instance of polarization worked toward the benefit of society as it provided for a more equitable view of one's fellow citizen, regardless of race. Separate from the erroneous beliefs that people had about people who were different from them, there was a moral fact of the matter regarding the basic civil rights that should be accessible to all people.

These are but a couple of instances of just polarization among many, but it gets us closer to understanding the nature of just polarization: just polarization is grounded in justice or just outcomes. In other words, any time two deeply opposed parties are formed along some kind of political dimension, the polarization can be described as just if and only if it is grounded in concerns about justice. This definition of just polarization reflects the kind of polarization that happened because of slavery and the Civil Rights movement.

However, this definition might not be satisfactory to people who are concerned with the pernicious kind of polarization. After all, they might say, abortion is certainly about justice! However, the polarization that arose from slavery was primarily a single-issue topic; as it turns out, pernicious polarization merely has the appearance of being about justice, but it is really about expressing a political preference. After all, consider the issues that are polarizing today, such as abortion, gun control, and same-sex marriage laws. The parties engaging in pernicious polarization line up against one another consistently and these issues (and a host of other unrelated issue). If there was something that these issues fundamentally had in common, then perhaps this alignment

would make sense. However, it's more likely than not that these issues have nothing to do with one another, and the fact that voters are polarized along these lines so predictably signals a different ground than justice.<sup>6</sup>

When pernicious polarization happens, it is possible that it begins with considerations of justice. People may think that it is a matter of justice for guns to be controlled to a greater degree in light of the many lives lost as a result of gun ownership falling into the wrong hands. Over time, however, these considerations of justice give way to supporting a political identity as the primary motivation. This can be how we define pernicious polarization: when polarization stops being about justice and begins to be about one's political identity, it is the pernicious kind of polarization that many are concerned about when they hear the word "polarization." The kind of pernicious polarization that we come across in modern political discussion and environments may be an occasion for just polarization to take place. We may need to become justly polarized about polarization itself because pernicious polarization resembles an issue that other historical instances of just polarization dealt with: prejudice. Polarization and prejudice are rarely mentioned together as bedfellows, but they both lead to a social nightmare of sorts. Just as instances of prejudice picked out particular demographics to treat poorly, so too does pernicious polarization. Affective polarization is the greatest display of this, as members of the opposing political party are treated with greater animosity than is warranted between people who merely disagree (Törnberg 2022; Mason 2016; Luttig 2018). It seems more and more common to view members of the opposing political party as "lesser than" in much the same way that minority groups were prejudiced against.

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<sup>6</sup> Though it's not the view that he ends up endorsing, Michael Huemer, in a blog post (?), has presented the "Miscalculation Theory," which suggests that political disputes are due to people making mistakes about difficult issues and disagreeing with others who haven't made mistakes or have made mistakes of a different sort. This may also contribute to characterizing pernicious polarization, as polarized voters may consider the issues they're polarized about to be about justice but be mistaken.

The central argument can be formalized thus: prejudice is bad. Pernicious polarization is a kind of prejudice. Therefore, pernicious polarization is bad. What makes pernicious polarization the bad kind of polarization (as opposed to just polarization, which is the good kind of polarization) is the way that it is a form of prejudice against one's political opponents. It would be odd to say that people who were opposed to slavery were prejudiced against people who were in favor of keeping slavery because their sights were set on realizing a just state of affairs. People who are prejudiced are only concerned with the character of the people whom they oppose. The way that pernicious polarization can be addressed is through an observation of what grounds the polarization. If part of what grounds a particular instance of polarization is dislike for one's opponent, then pernicious polarization has likely taken hold—even if matters of justice are part of the fundamental reasons for polarizing. It's important to take a moment to be precise about the role of grounding here. Saying that the dislike of others grounds the polarization doesn't just mean that the dislike is one among many reasons for it. It means the dislike for others is a *fundamental* reason for polarizing, which would suggest that without the dislike for political opponents, there would be no polarization happening. This is a large claim, but this characteristic of pernicious polarization closely resembles what is found in the grounds of people's prejudice—dislike for the other.

If polarization is as bad as people think it is, and we are constantly experiencing its effects, why does it seem like nothing is being done about it?<sup>7</sup> One reason why we drag our feet when it comes to resisting polarization is that it may not be as bad as we suppose. Some philosophers have even argued that being or becoming polarized is rational (e.g., Singer et al. 2019; Dorst 2023; Nguyen 2020; Almagro 2022). In particular, Singer et al. (2019) argue that given limited agents

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<sup>7</sup> I'm grateful to Dr. Andrew J. Cohen here for bringing to my attention that there are organizations like Braver Angels that are made for the purpose of seeking depolarization. However, I think society at large has not taken notice of these efforts nor these organizations given how rarely they are mentioned in the discussion about polarization.

(i.e., agents who have limited mental resources), polarization is epistemically rational. According to them, “[l]imited agents cannot remember more than their memory limit permits, except for a brief moment while they process the new incoming information that pushed them over their limit” (Singer et al. 2019, 2247). Agents who have a limited capacity to store information have to turn to strategies for managing their limited memories. Singer et al. (2019) suggest a strategy they call “coherence-minded,” which states that “agents prioritize reasons for the view that is best supported by all their reasons. When such an agent gets an 8th reason that goes over their memory limit, they prefer to forget a reason that runs contrary to the view that is supported by all 8 of their reasons” (Singer et al. 2019, 2248). In other words, polarization can be construed as rational because it is simply the result of limited agents reasoning in a coherence-minded way.

Polarization is also a result of rational engagement with the available evidence in our epistemic communities, making it a side effect what Nguyen (2020) calls “epistemic bubbles.” An epistemic bubble is “a social epistemic structure which has inadequate coverage through a process of exclusion by omission” (Nguyen 2020). This means epistemic bubbles are rationally innocent; that is, there is nothing pernicious about the kind of reasoning that occurs in an epistemic bubble. They form merely as a matter of happenstance, unintentionally omitting some perspectives in the process. Epistemic bubbles can be useful; after all, they are how we build social relations. The problem is when the process used to build social relations then becomes repurposed as a process for gathering information.

Other philosophers have noted that polarization is inevitable (or, at the very least, it can’t be held against us if we become polarized) in certain socio-epistemic contexts (Nguyen 2021; Begby 2022; Almagro 2022). Begby (2022) considers how the formation of echo chambers is “a natural and inevitable by-product of any socio-epistemic process, at least in contexts where factual

judgments and value judgements intersect, as they generally do in politics and other matters of public interest.” In other words, the kind of polarization that eventually leads to the formation of echo chambers is just the consequence of the natural way we reason about the kinds of problems that polarize us. When we learn that others agree with us on some particular topic, we increase our confidence that we have the right answer. This increase in confidence means we become more entrenched in our views about that particular topic, which means that it would take more and stronger evidence for us to change our minds. By simply engaging with others who share our views and reinforce them, we undergo the process of polarization.<sup>8</sup>

This is just the beginning. When we find those who agree with us on some particular topic of sufficient complexity (like some political view), we develop a sense of who our “peers” are. When we find those who disagree with us on a bundle of topics of sufficient complexity, we develop a sense of who our “peers” aren’t. In the literature on the epistemology of disagreement, Elga (2007) notes that when people systematically disagree with us on complex issues, it becomes harder to view them as our peers. As the numbers of issues on which we disagree increases, it becomes more likely that we will disagree on further topics. This leads us to become even more confident that these people we disagree with cannot be our epistemic peers. If we all have access to the same evidence, the thought is, “These people are so wrong about *so many things* that we can’t possibly be peers.” Before long, we’ve fully realized the kind of partisan sorting that we are seeing in American society.

Despite the worries raised by this kind of extreme partisan sorting, polarization is certainly useful. Since polarized groups undergo thorough sorting, it is clear what each group stands for. I don’t need to wade through the history of the Republican party’s beliefs in order to understand

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<sup>8</sup> Begby (2022) calls this stage of the process “intra-group belief polarization” while Nguyen (2020) might categorize it as an “epistemic bubble.”

what policies they are proposing in the current election—polarization makes it easy to know immediately what policies they plan to enact and what ideals they stand for. Some say that voting is costly (Santana and Aguilar 2019; Woller et al. 2023; Downs 1957; Goodman and Stokes 2018; Blais et al. 2019). Polarization of political parties makes it the case that the epistemic cost of voting—understood as something like how much effort it takes to know what one is voting for—is reduced.

If it's the case that there are these two kinds of polarization, then polarization is a bad thing *ceteris paribus* and not an intrinsically bad thing. It does seem to be the case that there are other factors that contribute to determining whether or not the polarization in question is bad. Despite this, pernicious polarization remains a clear threat for us, as I will argue later on. When we encounter pernicious polarization, we are encountering a kind of moral issue akin to prejudice. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how polarization can be a moral problem and not just a political or social problem.

## II. Some Initial Concerns

At this point, it is worth addressing some initial concerns about the status of polarization and its relationship with prejudice before moving on to our obligation to resist polarization. I've stated that pernicious polarization is a kind of prejudice, but this may not be so clear. After all, not every case of polarization is going to resemble the kind of prejudice that marked the Civil Rights movement. Is it really the case that Democrats and Republicans are (necessarily) prejudiced against one another when they're polarized?

While it may seem like an overstatement to say that Democrats and Republicans are necessarily prejudiced against one another when they're polarized, it's a milder claim than one

might think. After all, being prejudiced isn't an all-or-nothing property; it is more fitting to describe it as a spectrum, with some people demonstrating more prejudice and some demonstrating less prejudice—all in accordance with how polarized they are. If one is only mildly polarized (however one wants to capture this empirically), she will likely not display much prejudice against her political opponent. Accordingly, if one is strongly polarized, she will be very prejudiced against her political opponent. This isn't a unique characterization of prejudice, either—people are prejudiced in varying degrees along various dimensions when it comes to other things, like race or socioeconomic class. So, the claim that Democrats and Republicans are necessarily prejudiced against one another when they're polarized should actually seem fairly tame when we consider the variable nature of prejudice. What makes it significant that they are prejudiced against one another when they are polarized is the relationship between how polarized they are and their prejudice towards their political opponents.

Another concern to address is the idea that polarization could be beneficial. The paradigm case that supported this claim was the American Civil War case, but this alone may not be enough to make the case that polarization can (sometimes) be beneficial. After all, one might wonder: is there really a time when it's good to bundle issues together, or feel negatively towards fellow citizens, or be epistemically isolated? There are a couple of ways to respond to this worry. The first response would be to bite the bullet and answer affirmatively to the questions about issue-bundling, negative feelings towards other citizens, and epistemic isolation. The way that this response might be justified is if there really were a moral issue at the societal level that had a clear correct answer (as in the case of slavery). Therefore, the cases in which this response would be viable would be few and far between, as obvious answers to moral problems are rare indeed.

Another way to respond to this concern about how beneficial polarization is suggest that though polarization comes with some drawbacks, it also has its benefits. It thus becomes a matter of utility calculation (if one is so inclined). This would be tantamount to saying: polarization isn't *only* negative—it has some positives, too! Given the characterization of polarization I've provided in the first chapter, the Civil War case (and other analogous cases) can be properly categorized as instances of polarization. However, to explain why we don't think that this kind of polarization was a bad thing, it will be helpful to distinguish between these beneficial states of affairs and the states of affairs wherein polarization seems harmful. While it is bad to have issue-bundling, negative feelings towards other citizens, and epistemic isolation *in general*, having this kind of polarization is sometimes the only way to represent when something morally significant has gone wrong. The polarization in this instance functions as a signal to people that perhaps something needs to change (for the better). When there isn't a justified explanation for these generally harmful things, we end up with something like pernicious polarization.

### III. Our Obligation to Resist

Earlier, I mentioned that some defenses of polarization pointed to it being rational. However, the fact that polarization may be rational (and even useful) is a separate matter from polarization being good, and it is much harder to find arguments in favor of the *good* of polarization. Testa (2012) and Melki and Pickering (2020) do argue that polarization helps to curb government corruption by raising the electoral stakes, but this is a narrow upside when compared to the problems raised by polarization for society. It is also empirically dubious given the ways that polarized parties can be (and have been) incentivized by lobbying groups to support their particular agendas, which can be construed as a kind of government corruption (Karol 2015; Garlick 2021; Statsch and Berkhout 2020; Brock 2021).

On the other hand, there are plenty of arguments decrying the maladies of polarization. Polarization, as noted earlier, generates environments of distrust (Vallier 2020; Lee 2022; Schedler 2023), leading to a breakdown in the stability of democratic society. This, in turn, can lead to a refusal to cooperate on matters of civil importance, such as engaging in preventative behaviors during a pandemic (Cornelson and Miloucheva 2022). Polarization also compromises the epistemic abilities of the voter, leading them to be more likely to make electoral mistakes (Bernhardt, Krasa, and Polborn 2008).

Between generating environments of distrust and compromising our ability to vote well, it's clear that polarization is harmful for society. This leads to a fundamental question: what kind of harm is polarization? In the first chapter, I argued that polarization was bad because it attacked *Stability*. I don't think the way that polarization is normatively bad stops there, though. Here, I will argue for a different reason polarization is bad: it leads to moral harm in the same way that prejudice does.

Some harms are amoral; an apple falling from the neat pyramid at the local grocery store does seem to have undergone some harm, but there doesn't seem to be any kind of moral valence attached to it. However, other harms are moral in nature; there's something unjust about someone or something becoming worse off than it once was before. Polarization seems to fall into the category of moral harms. It shouldn't be hard to see why—the fact that polarization causes people to distrust those who differ in political preferences and impairs their epistemic abilities is bad in itself, but it also leads to bad outcomes that negatively affect the lives of others.

Given the negative outcomes of pernicious polarization, I argue that we, as citizens in a common society, have an obligation to resist it when we can. The argument is fairly straightforward:

- 1) Pernicious polarization leads to negative outcomes for society.
- 2) The existence of negative outcomes for society means that some members of society are harmed.
- 3) Polarization harms members of society (from 1 & 2).
- 4) We have a moral obligation to resist anything that harms members of society when possible.

∴ We have a moral obligation to resist polarization when possible.

This is a moderate proposal since the strategy is aimed less at the complete eradication of polarization and more at moderation. The stronger proposal—having an obligation to always resist polarization—doesn't seem feasible given the arguments presented by Begby (2022) and Nguyen (2020). Furthermore, there's a sense in which this would be wrongheaded. Polarization is most harmful when it's excessive and pernicious; however, as the arguments for the rationality of polarization have demonstrated, polarization does have some benefits. The more modest proposal grants that those benefits are legitimate benefits while recognizing that pernicious polarization must be avoided as a matter of obligation.

So, where does this obligation come from? Given the above argument, I think that no matter which major ethical view one takes, a *moral* obligation exists to resist polarization. Under some versions of consequentialism, minimizing the harm that results from polarization is a good reason to resist pernicious polarization. Under deontology, polarization ought to be resisted on grounds that allowing oneself to be polarized means allowing oneself to view other voters as mere means to a political end and not as ends in themselves. Under virtue ethics, polarization does not lead to human flourishing; indeed, the virtuous person would be a person who avoids polarization since it is the opposite of pursuing the Aristotelian mean.

Polarization is often construed as an epistemic or political problem, but it is, in fact, also a moral problem. How we respond to polarization (when we can recognize it) is a moral action supported by moral reasons. However, it can be difficult to know how exactly to respond to polarization as a moral issue; after all, one may agree that there is certainly something morally bad about polarization, but doubt there is a way to address it. I will turn now to casting polarization in terms of a well-established moral problem: prejudice. When we see pernicious polarization as a kind of prejudice, it becomes clearer how we ought to act in response to it.

#### IV. Polarization as Prejudice

Conceiving of polarization as a moral problem requires a moral solution—this begins with examining the contents of our beliefs and how the way we believe can sometimes be immoral. An analogy to correcting prejudiced beliefs that one may have is fitting: when we discover that the prejudiced beliefs we were taught turn out to be immoral beliefs to hold, we—as good moral agents—often update (or remove) those beliefs. This response is useful when considering pernicious polarization as a kind of prejudice.

Just as racial prejudice historically has stemmed from a variety of different roots, so too does pernicious polarization. It's helpful to outline the dimensions of racial prejudice before mapping them onto pernicious polarization as prejudice. Some racial prejudice begins in ignorance, which seems less blameworthy than intentional racial prejudice. Despite being more or less blameworthy given different roots, racial prejudice is always immoral. The more blameworthy racial prejudice in which one reinforces immoral (and incorrect) beliefs that one has about a particular racial group is clearly immoral and also comes with an obligation to resist the prejudiced thoughts, beliefs, or actions.

Pernicious polarization also moves along a sliding scale of permissibility. Some people who become polarized are completely ignorant about the fact that they are becoming polarized, as it happens in such a subtle way. This is immoral insofar as it leads to them forming erroneous beliefs about their political opponents, disparaging their ability to engage with the same facts that are on the table, and considering them enemies of democracy. However, this is permissible and hardly comes with an obligation to resist. Other people who are polarized are aware that they are becoming further and further entrenched in how polarized they are, but they do not see it as a problem; in fact, they embrace the demonization of the political other and reinforce the beliefs that they have about their political opponents. These individuals knowingly participate in sorting the kind of information and beliefs that surround them in their environment, and this kind of knowing polarization is especially immoral and comes with an obligation to resist.

#### V. Fulfilling Our Obligation

There have been a few proposals for how we can reduce polarization. Some think that making political parties stronger is a way to reduce polarization, claiming that stronger parties have greater autonomy from special interest groups while weak parties are those that build platforms around singular political issues (McCarty 2015; Persily 2015). Others have demonstrated the success of cross-cutting political discussions—political discussions between those who support different political parties but share an apolitical common interest—as a way for people to come to know each other and respect one another, leading to a reduction in polarization (Baliatti et al. 2021; Warner et al. 2020; Wojcieszak and Warner 2020; Axelrod et al. 2021). Some have considered priming a national identity to reduce affective polarization, claiming that a heightened sense of national identity leads citizens to come to see members of the opposing party

as fellow nationals rather than rival partisans (Levendusky 2018). These are all interesting (and promising) ways to address polarization, but they do not specifically address the moral problem of polarization.

Insofar as polarization is a kind of moral education, it is sometimes described by the social sciences as a top-down process. In other words, polarization happens at the elite level (whether social or political) and finds its way down to forming the voting citizen (Banda and Cluverius 2018; Levendusky 2009; Zingher and Flynn 2015; Enders 2021; Druckman et al. 2013). Citizens see people they respect becoming polarized, and in time, they become polarized themselves. This polarization gets reinforced when those same people become connected with polarized media or public figures (e.g., when NFL quarterback Tom Brady was reported to endorse Donald Trump during the 2020 election). Given this, it seems natural to think that polarization ought to be addressed from the top down. However, if this was the approach taken towards civil rights, it's not clear that disenfranchised people would have received their rights in a timely manner. After all, consider the narrative about how American corporations have exerted influence on government officials voting on tax policies that best benefit themselves and their interests. It seems highly unlikely that they would be clamoring for tax reform that would lead to higher taxes for the highest earners. Therefore, there needs to be a bottom-up approach to address the problem; the citizens need to play a more active role in realizing the reduction on polarization.

One of the oft-cited strengths of democracy may play a significant role in reducing polarization: the wisdom of the crowds. Though the citizenry is often taken to be misinformed and epistemically incompetent, the masses have usually been the driving population behind just polarization. The Civil Rights movement had some "leaders," but they were rarely, if ever, a part of the social, economic, or political elite. It began with local communities deciding to take action

that birthed a movement. Though the local communities were the primary driving force behind the Civil Rights movement, it's safe to say that the resulting success of the movement was due, in part, to many different people believing that the morally correct choice was to give people equal civil rights, regardless of race. As this conviction grew among the citizenry, the political elites were compelled to translate it into legislature.

It's also important to note that the literature on the wisdom of the crowds observes that the better informed the crowds are, the more likely they are to arrive at the right results (Hong and Page 2004; Goldstein et al. 2014; Mannes et al. 2014; Mercier and Claidière 2022). Therefore, it is up to the citizens to become better informed about the political facts on offer. Instead of ingesting political fast food and indulging in hot takes, it is important for members of society to do their due diligence and approach news and social media with an eye towards finding out what is true. If polarization arises in light of this, it has a better chance of being just polarization rather than pernicious polarization because the costs of becoming better informed are repaid with a better filter for what political issues are relevant for a society. This is likely to be more effective at the local level than the national; local communities will no longer feel the pressure of whatever political elites are presenting as the most important issues of the day, and they will be more attuned to discovering what the actual needs of their individual communities are.

Asking voters to change their minds at the interpersonal level is likely easier than asking political elites to change their views and policies. However, this is not to say that it would be more effective than changing the policies in place. After all, continuing the analogy from prejudice, people who were interested in civil rights in the 1950s to 1960s created the momentum needed for the policies to be changed. Once those policies changed, life became at least somewhat more equitable for people who were previously denied their civil rights. The same result is possible

when resisting polarization becomes the norm. If voters can find themselves resisting polarization more and voting in ways that reflect a desire to simply vote for issues that they care about rather than polarized candidates—even if they cut across the political aisle—then the policies and political platforms in place should reflect that change as well.

Thus far, I have detailed the bottom-up approach to resisting polarization. However, some may resist this as the proper direction of causation for polarization to be reduced. After all, there is research that suggests that voters take their cues from political elites (Banda and Cluverius 2018; Levendusky 2009; Zingher and Flynn 2015; Druckman et al. 2013; Hetherington 2009), so it would seem more likely that polarization ought to be addressed from the top down. If political elites are less polarized, then the electorate will follow. Furthermore, it seems like the power to make the kind of changes relevant for a reduction in polarization lies in the hands of the elite. After all, no one will notice if you or I work on reducing how polarized we are, but the symbolic significance of more bipartisan efforts in Congress would surely draw attention to efforts to reduce polarization.

Setting aside the fact that there doesn't need to be a mutual exclusion of the directions in which we could work to reduce polarization, it's also not a settled issue that elites do have such a direct relationship with mass polarization (Mullinix 2015; Enders 2021). While elites have been described as providing a clearer roadmap for voter attitudes given their own positions, there is still some resistance between the rise in elite polarization and the rise in the polarization of the masses.

It is an empirical issue whether or not elites can have the kind of polarizing (and depolarizing) effect on voters. However, there is also reason to resist claims about where the “power” lies to make effectual changes are unsubstantiated as well. Elinor Ostrom's work on polycentricity provides insight regarding the effectiveness of local governance and what can be

done at the level of local community.<sup>9</sup> Concepts like the effectiveness of localized knowledge about resources (Agrawal and Ostrom 2001; Basurto, Gelrich, and Ostrom 2013; Ostrom 2010; Ostrom 2009) and learning (Blomquist and Ostrom 1999; Ostrom 1968; Ostrom 2010; Ostrom 1995) demonstrate the potential of the bottom-up approach to making a significant difference in society, which can also be applied to reducing polarization. I don't disagree that top-down approaches would have the wider reach (and perhaps even be more immediately effective), but given the institutional arrangements and the incentives involved for those at the top, I am more confident that the bottom-up approach will yield sustainable results in keeping polarization at bay.

## VI. Closing Thoughts

Polarization is more nuanced than the general population gives it credit for, but the pernicious kind of polarization ought to be resisted. I have argued that pernicious polarization resembles another social malady that societies still struggle to deal with: prejudice. The Trojan Horse of pernicious polarization is the belief that it is in service of justice and how things ought to be in society, but upon closer inspection, many of the issues that have become bundled together are irrelevant issues with no clear connections. This bundling of issues only serves to deepen the perceived divide between political ideologies, which explains the prejudiced behavior of political opponents towards one another.

As citizens of a common society, we have a duty to resist pernicious polarization whenever we can. This involves increasing the amount of local interaction and reducing a dependence on

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<sup>9</sup> An interesting question about vagueness may arise here: what counts as the "bottom" or the "top" in these approaches. My intuition is that any space where an individual can have direct involvement with a perceivable connection between that involvement and the results is closer to being the "bottom," and the "top" refers to the realm of activity where individuals have been placed in elected positions and are subject to more procedures before they can accomplish their agenda.

elites, whether they be famous athletes, political leaders, or news conglomerates. We can allow space for just polarization to happen without letting it devolve into pernicious polarization by addressing issues on a solitary basis and determining what the grounds of those issues are. As local interaction increases, broad-scale political divides get watered down as citizens realize that the common good at the local level is something that is shared by the majority of their community. When elite polarization has a hold on the way that our values are formed, it radically disfigures the values that we actually have by replacing them with values that seem fundamental to our identity but really aren't. We are reminded of what the common good looks like for our own particular communities the more that we resist pernicious polarization and become more sensitive to when it is happening.

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