Pernicious Polarization, Autocratization and Opposition Strategies

Murat Somer, Jennifer McCoy and Russell Evan Luke, IV

Abstract: Pernicious polarization" - the division of society into mutually distrustful Us versus Them camps in which political identity becomes a social identity -- fosters autocratization by incentivizing citizens and political actors alike to endorse non-democratic action. An exploratory analysis of new V-Dem data on polarization indeed shows the negative relationship between the *level of* political polarization and liberal democracy ratings. How can pernicious polarization be avoided or reversed once present? By drawing on an endogenous explanation of polarization, where the decisions and actions of both opposition actors and incumbents contribute to its evolution, we focus on the question of what democratic oıpposition actors can do to stop or reverse pernicious polarization. Based on insights from examples across the world and deductive theory-building, along with illustrative cases, we offer a typology of potential opposition goals, strategies and tools, and then analyze how these may affect polarization and in turn democratic quality at early and late stages. We identify goals as either *generative* or *preservative*, and we argue that "active-depolarizing" and "transformative-repolarizing" strategies are more promising than "passive-depolarizing" and " reciprocal polarizing" strategies to improve a country's resilience to autocratizing pressures. The specific tools employed to pursue these goals and strategies are also crucial. though the effectiveness of available institutional accountability and mobilizational tools will change as the process of polarization advances. The emerging literatıres on opposition strategies to democratize electoral autocracies and to improve the resilience of democracies should incorporate their impact on polarization as a critical intervening variable.

Introduction

Severe polarization fosters "autocratization,"[1] by which we mean the gradual erosion of democratic quality in democracies and the democratic elements of electoral authoritarian regimes. While temporary upsurges of polarization limited to politics may be part and parcel of politics and may even help democratization, as argued by a large body of research, "pernicious polarization" -- the division of society into mutually distrustful Us versus Them camps in which political identity becomes a social identity -- has negative consequences for democracies and for democratization in autocracies. A society locked into pernicious polarization views politics to be in an exceptional state, in which each side views the other political camp and their supporters as a threat to the nation or their way of life and considers extraordinary and forceful policies as legitimate to defend its interests.[2] Under such conditions, citizens and political actors alike have incentives to endorse non-democratic actions to gain or keep power, and to prevent or remove their opponents from power.[3]

The editors of this special issue define democratic resilience as the capacity of a democracy to recover or preserve the "same or a similar level of democratic quality when facing challenges" of illiberalism and authoritarianism. Similarly, democratic capacity could be defined as the capacity of a democracy to improve its democratic quality and of an electoral autocracy to adopt more democratic features. We focus on the resilience of a democracy to withstand, and the capacity of an electoral autocracy to overcome, one particular challenge: sustained severe polarization. We argue that democratic resilience must include capacities to prevent or reverse pernicious polarization that erodes democracies and strengthens autocrats. We thus add a focus on this missing link to the emerging literature on

---

[1] For an insightful discussion of the concept, see Lührmann and Lindberg, "A Third Wave of Autocratization.".

[2] McCoy and Somer, "Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization"; McCoy, Rahman, Somer, "Polarization and Global Crisis."

[3] Svolik, "Polarization versus Democracy;" Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*; McCoy and Somer, "Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization."

opposition strategies during democratic erosion[4] and on ending electoral autocracies.[5] Our contribution is the first to delineate the strategies open to opposition actors to avoid reciprocating the harmful aspects of polarizing politics and instead to mobilize voters around democracy-enhancing depolarizing or repolarizing strategies. Oppositions are not unitary actors. Opposition actors include social movements as well as parties where intra-movement and intra-party politics can be fierce. Hence, opposition resilience comprises not only their ability to choose the right strategies but also to cooperate around *a* common strategy.

The article first provides a theoretical overview of the autocratizing consequences of polarization. We explain our conceptualization of polarization as a *process* and a *condition* or state of pernicious polarization. We argue that the process of deepening polarization is primarily driven by political actors deliberately employing polarizing politics to achieve their aims. We thus offer an endogenous and agentic explanation of polarization and autocratization, but we acknowledge that polarization can be facilitated by exogenous factors such as economic, institutional, and informational environments, preexisting social-political cleavages, and historical memory. A large-N exploratory analysis supports our argument that the severity, i.e. level of polarization, is mostly responsible for the negative consequences for democracy. This raises the question of what pro-democratic opposition actors can do to prevent their polities from reaching this level, or to reduce polarization to lesser levels once it does.

The bulk of the article then turns to an analytical framework of potential opposition strategies to address processes of polarization and respond to polarizing incumbents in ways

---

[4] See, for example, Yarwood, "The Power of Protest;" Gamboa, "Opposition at the Margins;" Ginsburg and Huq, "Democracy's Near Misses;" Kuisz and Wigura, "The Pushback against Populism;" Laebens and Lührmann, "What Stops Democratic Erosion?"

[5] For example, Bunce and Wolchik, "Defeating Dictators;";Chenoweth and Lewis. "Unpacking Nonviolent Campaigns" Geddes, Wright, and Frantz. "Autocratic Breakdown;";Teorell and Wahman. "Institutional Stepping Stones," ; Esen and Gumuscu, "Killing Competitive Authoritarianism;" Gorokhovskaia, "What It Takes to Win;" Ufen, "Opposition in Transition;" Wuthrich and Ingleby. "The Pushback against Populism."

that may enhance democratic resilience and potential for democratization. We discuss

heuristic examples from across the world selected with a view to illustrate these strategies

and our theoretical propositions, rather than offer a systematic comparative case analysis,

which is beyond the scope of this article.[6] .

The Endogenous Nature of Polarization and Negative Consequences for Democracy

As we have elaborated elsewhere, unlike many contemporary analyses that treat

polarization as a given in a society or caused by exogenous factors such as economic or

demographic structural change, our political and relational explanation argues that, given the

opportunities created by these exogenous and facilitating factors and preexisting cleavages in

a society, polarization episodes are initiated by political entrepreneurs who choose polarizing

strategies to further their political aims.[7] Many of these aims may *a priori* be authoritarian,

and polarizing politics may be employed as a deliberately chosen instrument to change power

balances and make room for autocratization; however, we do not assume that every political

actor who uses polarizing tactics is a would-be authoritarian. Rather we maintain that

increasing polarization incentivizes autocratization regardless of initial actor aims.

We conceptualize polarization as both a *process* of simplifying politics, and a

condition in which an equilibrium of severe political polarization is eventually reached where

neither side has the incentive to move to a depolarizing strategy, short of exogenous shocks

or the rise of new actors and innovative political realignments. The very game of polarization

transforms the actors through two main mechanisms. First, it increasingly induces both

citizens and political actors to see politics as a battlefield between rival blocs, each posing an

existential threat to the other, which renders them willing to endorse and undertake

extraordinary, usually democracy-eroding or autocracy-endorsing, political acts. Second,

---

[6] See Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market,* and Bates et al. *Analytic Narratives* for employing empirical cases this way.
[7] McCoy and Somer, "Special Issue on Polarized Polities."

4

polarization by its very nature advantages the most extreme or radical voices within each camp -- extreme in their willingness to antagonize rivals and ignore democratic decorum -- over potential bridge-builders or de-polarizing centrists. Hence, severe polarization changes actor incentives and even fosters internal transformations within both the incumbent and opposition groups in an authoritarian direction. Often unintentionally, "democratic" oppositions also contribute to pernicious polarization through their own actions and reactions.

Considering this, and due to the fact that polarizing politics is a major item in the toolkit of intentionally autocratizing actors, democratic oppositions necessarily *must* develop strategies in response to polarization, and their other anti-authoritarian polices need to be rethought with respect to their impact on polarization. Precisely because we provide an endogenous explanation of polarization, agency comes into play and the strategies chosen by political and social actors to initiate or respond to polarizing politics will determine its outcomes.

Empirical Relationship between Polarization and Democratic Quality

A lack of cross-national quantitative measures of polarization has made it difficult to empirically test the different theoretical positions regarding how polarization affects democratic quality. New data from the Varieties of Democracy project is a major improvement as it allows for a robust examination across polities.[8] Similar to our conceptualization of pernicious polarization, this new measure, termed 'political polarization', asks "Is society polarized into antagonistic, political camps?"[9] Crucially, it captures "the extent to which political differences affect social relationships beyond political discussions," thereby encapsulating affective polarization that can turn pernicious.[10] While theoretical contributions focusing on the political aspects of issue or party polarization are

---

[8] Coppedge et al. "*Varieties of Democracy Project*.

[9] Ibid, 211.

[10] Iyengar and Westwood. "Fear and Loathing"; Iyengar et al. "Consequences of Affective Polarization."

divided over the constructive -- e.g. by inducing party system institutionalization -- and destructive -- e.g. by undermining compromise -- roles of polarization in democracies, studies of affective polarization emphasize the latter.[11] Accordingly, we argue that polarization is more likely to turn pernicious when it permeates society, creating mutually distrustful societal camps who increasingly view one another through a Manichaean lens.[12]

In this paper, we perform a series of relatively straightforward analyses of three interrelated hypotheses:

H1: Increased polarization decreases the quality of liberal democracy in a state.

H2: An increased *rate* of polarization disproportionately decreases the quality of liberal democracy in a state.

H3: The *level* of polarization disproportionately decreases the quality of liberal democracy in a state.

While the goal of H1 is straightforward, H2 and H3 aim to unpack how and when polarization undermines democracy -- whether the rate of change or the level of polarization matters more. A spike of polarization, tested by H2 can often happen around election years, and is more likely to include cases of temporary polarization with neutral or potentially positive effects on democracy. Even if the rate of change is quite large, this type of polarization may be short lived or otherwise not spill into social relations. Yet, as the *level* of polarization rises, however gradually, it is more likely to affect social relations. Hence, we can expect it to damage democratic quality to a greater degree.

To test these hypotheses, we perform a series of linear regression analyses, with fixed effects on both the year and the country, on the period from 1900 to 2019. [13] We also lag the

---

[11] While imperfect and suffering from some weaknesses like any other measures constructed using expert opinion surveys, this measure is the most appropriate available capturing polarization both longitudinally and cross-sectionally, including states from the Global South, and can be commended for featuring large numbers of cross-checking and complementary questions. It correlates in a statistically significant manner – at the $\alpha=0.05$ level – with previously used measures of 'range of consultation' and 'respect counterarguments' from V-Dem – ρ = -0.339 and -0.267 respectively.

[12] McCoy, Rahman, and Somer. "Global Crisis of Democracy;" McCoy and Somer, "Pernicious Polarization."

[13] Future research will examine the impact of polarization during different periods, specifically post 1975 and 1994, to illuminate any differential effects.

polarization measure at 1, 2, and 5 year intervals to examine the delayed effect of polarization on democratic quality – the effects of polarization may be delayed or otherwise manifest primarily around election years. At the expense of efficiency, the fixed effects approach is theoretically most appropriate as we are primarily concerned with the 'within' estimator for each country – the effect of polarization on democratic quality. Moreover, in pursuit of the most parsimonious model, it allows us to eschew an unwieldy number of country-specific factors such as level of development, education, and other pertinent factors that cause systematic heteroskedasticity by relegating their influence to the country-specific error term.[14] Also including fixed effects terms for each year, we can more easily account for global trends to and away from democracy, i.e. democratic waves, without including imprecise, time-specific measures such as the global mean value of liberal democracy.[15]

We assume that the effect of polarization is consistent across groups and across time. To make this assumption, we exclude those country-year observations that are categorized as 'closed autocracies' in the Regimes of the World typology, as politics under a closed dictatorship operate under a different set of rules and incentives.[16] Also excluded from analysis are those states with less than 30 observation years.[17] Democratic quality is measured with the V-Dem measure for liberal democracy, where 1 denotes the most liberal democracy and 0 the least. Polarization is normalized to a 0 to 1 scale from its original 0 to 4 scale, such that higher values on this scale denote higher levels of polarization.

---

[14] Kmenta, "Elements of Econometrics.".

[15] Samuel P. Huntington. *The Third Wave*.

[16] Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival*; Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*.

[17] States with fewer than 30 observation years are excluded to ensure proper functioning of country-specific error calculations. States excluded are Bahrain, Barbados, Bosnia & Herzegovina, France, Honduras, Iceland, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Mozambique, Nepal, New Zealand, Oman, Serbia, Singapore, Slovakia, Somaliland, Switzerland, Syria, Timor-Leste, and Turkmenistan.

Table 1 presents the results of the tests for H[1]. The observed effect of polarization on liberal democracy is negative and statistically significant for each of the periods examined.[18] The effect appears to diminish in influence the further from the analysis year, but it remains substantial nonetheless.

[Table 1 about here]

To test H[2], we subset the data to identify periods of what we term rapid polarization, based on rate of change: periods where polarization increased by at least 10% (0.1 units on the polarization scale) in 5 or less years, where there were two or more years of increased polarization, and where there were no declines in polarization greater than 0.01 units.[19] We then compared the effect of polarization on democratic quality during periods of rapid polarization and all other cases. The effect on democratic quality remained negative and statistically significant for both groups, but the difference between the two was not statistically significant. Thus, we cannot conclude that periods of rapid polarization are any more damaging to democratic quality than other periods of increased polarization. [20]

Lastly, we examined the effect of polarization on democratic quality at different levels of polarization in H[3]. We argue that periods of sustained severe polarization exert a distinct and more negative effect on democratic quality over other periods of polarization. We subset the data using different thresholds of polarization. These are labelled Elevated, Heightened, and Severe. Elevated uses the mean value of 0.456, Heightened uses the top quartile of 0.566, and Severe uses the top 5% of all cases -- 0.722. This threshold for Severe polarization allows us to examine the most extreme cases of polarization, and roughly

---

[18] Critical value for these analyses is $\alpha=0.05$.

[19] This is analogous to Croissant's (2019) characterization of periods of democratic backsliding. We also used an alternative coding scheme dropping the requirement of 2 or more years of increased polarization. The results were not substantively different. However, a single year increase of polarization of at least 0.1 may be due to extraordinary events and otherwise is not within the scope of our conceptualization of rapid polarization. The results of this analysis are available upon request.

[20] Full results of this analysis are presented in Appendix B, Tables 4, 5, and 6, and Figure 3.

corresponds to a response of 4, "Supporters of opposing political camps generally interact in a hostile manner," in the original V-Dem scale. Each category is coded such that polarization is sustained over a period of at least five years with no declines greater than 0.01. [21]

The results of each model indicate a negative, statistically significant, relationship of polarization on democratic quality; the full regression tables for each model are located in Appendix B. Table 2 presents the difference coefficients between the models for each elevated, heightened, and severe polarization.[22] For periods of both elevated and heightened polarization, there is no observable difference between the effect of polarization within these periods, and all other cases. In line with our expectations, the effect of polarization on democratic quality is shown to be more damaging under periods of severe polarization, for the analysis year and single year lag, than all other periods. In none of these periods is there a statistically significant difference between polarizing periods lagged 2 or 5 years on democratic quality, so these results are excluded for ease of presentation. These results provide suggestive evidence that the periods of sustained severe polarization, our primary focus, pose a distinct threat to democratic quality in democracies and electoral autocracies above the baseline threat of polarization.

[Table 2 about here]

Opposition Dilemmas and Challenge

Our endogenous explanation of polarization posits that agency is critical to the development of polarization, and the long-term ideological-programmatic goals as well as the strategies chosen by political and social actors to initiate or respond to polarizing politics will

---

[21] Mean value here refers to the mean political polarization value for all observations excluding closed autocracies. Descriptive statistics for all variables are located in the appendix. For reference, the Severe category includes periods such as Chile from 1975-1984, Hungary from 2015-2019, and Turkey from 2013-2019, among others (561 country-year observations).

[22] This denotes the inclusion of an interaction term between political polarization and the period indicator. Significant results indicate a statistically significant difference in the impact of polarization on democratic quality between periods.

determine its outcomes. In this paper, we do not offer an explanation of how and why oppositions choose one strategy over another. Instead, we offer a framework with two broad opposition goals and four different strategies that oppositions may adopt to respond to polarizing incumbents[23] with democracy-eroding behaviors. We theorize about the potential consequences of each for polarization and, in turn, democratic quality. We argue that some anti-authoritarian policies, even though ethically acceptable and feasible in early stages, will not be recommendable at later stages precisely because we expect them to reinforce polarization and thus backfire, or because they have already been disarmed by severe polarization. Polarization is thus always an intervening variable and strategies to reciprocate, avoid, reduce or transform it are choices for actors with consequences not only for the polarizing dynamics but for democracy itself.

We also argue that the timing of each strategy and the practical instruments with which it is implemented affect the outcomes. Democratic oppositions aiming to prevent or reverse autocratization have two basic sets of instruments to hold accountable a democracy-eroding incumbent: legal-institutional forms of vertical, horizontal and diagonal accountability, and extra- or unconstitutional mechanisms.[24] The severity of the polarization and the length of time it has been sustained at high levels will shape the opportunity structures of opposition groups and the effectiveness of their choice of instruments and strategies. At early stages, before polarization has progressed significantly, oppositions often retain significant institutional leverage in the form of horizontal accountability mechanisms -- judiciaries, legislatures, bureaucracies, as well as vertical and societal mobilizational capacity

---

[23] We use "Incumbent" to refer to either the individual holding office or the party or administration in office throughout the text.

[24] Laebens and Luhrmann, "What Stops Democratic Erosion?"; Gamboa, "Opposition at the Margins;" Slater, "Democratic Careening."

from organized political and civil societies.[25] They are likely to have a large toolkit to choose from to prevent polarization from deepening with pernicious consequences for democracy.

At later stages of polarization, however, the toolkit is smaller as the institutions themselves become politicized and organizational capacity reduced. In contexts of severe, sustained polarization, incumbents are motivated to ignore horizontal-institutional accountability mechanisms seen as disloyal to them, discrediting them as politically biased, elitist or antagonistic in the eyes of their constituencies. Alternatively, if incumbents have managed to gain influence over accountability mechanisms by populating them with loyalists, oppositions will not accept them as legitimate. Simultaneously, the vertical and "diagonal"[26] accountability mechanisms become divided and weakened based on partisanship. For example, pro-incumbent media and popular contentious movements are mobilized against critical media and anti-incumbent popular protests with an Us vs. Them logic.[27] Anti-incumbent electoral coalitions can divide over whether to participate in unfair elections controlled by pro-incumbent election authorities.[28] In other words, no matter whether the opposition is motivated by principle or self-interest, polarization undermines its ability to constrain the incumbent's actions by appealing to the normal democratic accountability mechanisms.

Choices of Polarization Strategies and Tools

We argue that the crucial decision pro-democratic oppositions need to make is not merely to choose between engaging in or avoiding polarizing politics -- the former risks deepening the downward spiral and the latter risks demotivating or fragmenting opposition

---

[25] McCoy and Somer, "Pernicious Polarization"; Gamboa , "Opposition at the Margins."

[26] Diagonal accountability refers to media and civil society, Laebens and Lührmann, "What Stops Democratic Erosion?"

[27] See Mietzner, "Sources of Resistance," for a discussion of Indonesian civil society divided and weakened by polarization and an illiberal incumbent.

[28] See Pantoulas and McCoy, "An Unstable Equilibrium," for a discussion of the Venezuela opposition divisions in the face of the Maduro-controlled electoral institutions in Venezuela.

supporters and legitimizing incumbent actions.[29] Instead, oppositions should consider various long-term ideological and programmatic goals, repolarizing and depolarizing strategies, and the instruments with which to implement them.

Table 3 presents the basic choices of programmatic goals and strategies for political oppositions along with the predicted outcomes for polarization and democracy. We discuss each and give illustrative case examples below.

[Table 3 about here]

We start by assuming that oppositions to polarizing and autocratizing incumbents seek to gain power, but that they do so with different goals about using that power. The first are those groups who wish to restore the status quo ante, to return to the prior set of political arrangements and rules and to reincorporate political (and social) actors who were excluded by the polarizing incumbent. We call this a *preservative* goal. The second goal characterizes those groups who wish to create a new social contract, or bring some fundamental change to the polity, economy or social relationships. We call this a *generative* goal. The actors pursuing a preservative goal can be expected to choose reactive counter-polarization strategies, while those pursuing a generative goal can be expected to choose proactive counter-polarization strategies. The difference in outcomes for democracy has to do with how each goal and strategy addresses the polarization dynamic, working as an intervening variable, as explained below.

Reactive Counter-polarization strategies

Following the preservative goal, reactive counter-polarization strategies are aimed at restoring the status quo ante -- either returning displaced elites to power in a backlash to a new group achieving electoral gains, or mobilizing the society against an unscrupulous

---

[29] McCoy and Somer, "Pernicious Polarization."

incumbent. Comparative case examples indicate two versions: reciprocal polarization that engages in the same divisive discourse and tactics as the incumbent, and passive avoidance depolarization that seeks to defuse the conflict and mitigate abusive behavior from within the system.

Reciprocal Polarization. A reciprocal polarization strategy engages in an action-reaction cycle that ends up reinforcing the cleavages already politicized by the incumbent and deepening the affective partisan polarization characterized by mutual dislike and distrust among the partisan camps. At earlier stages of polarization-cum-autocratization, when legal-constitutional mechanisms of accountability still retain their independence and before societies polarize in their very perceptions of such institutions, courts or oversight agencies including the media may serve to contain abuses by a polarizing executive and prevent pernicious polarization. For example, the constitutional impeachment of Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid in 2001 for corruption prevented more contentious politics erupting in the wake of his unilateral decision-making and failure to respect power-sharing agreements.[30]

In contrast, at later stages with sustained, severe levels of polarization, public perceptions of those same legal-constitutional accountability institutions become polarized -- opposition groups view them as necessary mechanisms of oversight and accountability, while pro-incumbent supporters view them as sinister political attacks on the incumbent. For example, the Turkish opposition tried to block the governing AKP party's rise, among other strategies, through social mobilization in the form of massive anti-Islamist protests in 2007, and legal-constitutional tools such as media and judicial investigations into allegations of illegal party finances involving religious charities and a Constitutional Court case to de-

---

[30] Slater and Arugay, "Polarizing Figures" 2018.

register the party for its anti-secularism in 2008.[31] Since the main axis of these opposition

mobilizations was the defense of secularism against the party's religious retrogression

(*irtica*), they ended up "projecting their disdain for [the party] onto [its] supporters as well".[32]

Hence, pro-incumbent pious Turks who felt disdained closed ranks behind the AKP. Further,

as could be expected from the high level of political polarization -- which rose from 3,09 in

2002 when the party came to power to 3.17 in 2005 and 3.68 (out of 4) in 2008, the court

cases were seen as legal-institutional accountability at work by opposition supporters and as

malicious political attacks by incumbent supporters.

In a polarized context, parties are often tempted to engage in an ultimately self-

defeating tit-for-tat strategy out of indignation or pressured by their angered bases. The battle

over the procedures for life-time judicial appointments in the U.S. Senate between 2013-17 is

an example of both sides engaging in a tit-for-tat strategy that ultimately terminated the

filibuster and cloture norm providing for bipartisanship in the appointment process. The

result was the majority party could now make Supreme Court and federal judgeship

appointments by a simple majority vote, excluding the minority party and raising the

perception of an increasingly politicized and ideological judiciary. Thus, not only was the

perceived impartiality of an important accountability institution reduced, but elections

became an even higher-stakes affair to elect the party that would control future judicial

nominations.

A second set of practical instruments includes the use of extra-constitutional

mechanisms to oust or obstruct an autocratizing polarizer, including illegitimate

impeachment procedures, violent mass protests, general strikes, military coups, and appeals

to foreign interventions such as sanctions or military invasions. The Venezuelan opposition

---

[31] Somer, "Moderate Islam and Secularist Opposition;" Somer, "Turkey: The Slippery Slope."
[32] Wuthrich and Ingleby, "Pushback against Populism": 32-33.

repeatedly resorted to such tools attempting to remove a polarizing incumbent without success. A coup attempt, a general strike, a military sit-in, massive protests, and a legislative election boycott, along with the legal instrument of a recall referendum, all failed to unseat President Hugo Chavez early in his tenure.[33] Instead, these elite failures fragmented the opposition and demoralized its supporters, while strengthening the incumbent's hold on power.

More advanced stages of democratic erosion or autocratization present special dilemmas for oppositions. In this context, an autocratizing incumbent may have been able to politicize accountability institutions by placing their own loyalists in key institutions, from electoral to judicial to security agencies. The polarized perceptions of these institutions are thus the reverse of the context of still-independent institutions; now, autocratizing incumbents use loyal institutions to burnish their pseudo-democratic credentials in the eyes of their supporters and the world, while oppositions distrust such institutions and must be creative in devising their anti-authoritarian strategies.

Passive Depolarization. A passive depolarizing strategy refrains from participation in polarization either as a normative choice or out of weakness, without questioning or trying to shift the axis of existing polarization. It may be a normative choice to oppose polarization as many people realize the dangers of severe polarization for democracy and coexistence. Alternatively, it may be a strategy to improve political prospects of an opposition group. This strategy appeals to the center based on existing axes of politics, or seeks a *modus vivendi* with rivals without trying to transform politics in ways addressing long-term polarizing issues. In the inter-war era of the 1920s-30s, for example, many European democracies fell to authoritarianism among other reasons because indecisive centrist parties failed to counter fascist rivals who exploited left-right polarization and fear of communism.

---

[33] McCoy and Diez, *International Mediation in Venezuela*.

Two variants of elite depolarization through cooperative agreements carry their own risks. First, elite depolarization can be achieved when opposition forces join in power-sharing agreements with autocratic incumbents, whether for personal gain or with the aim of changing the system "from within". Such strategies are unlikely to depolarize either society or politics in the long run, however, if the junior partner feels marginalized, democratizing agreements are not implemented or their supporters feel sold out. Instead, such a successful cooptation strategy may simply strengthen the hegemonic leader, as happened for example multiple times in Kenya and Zimbabwe.[34]

A second variant of passive avoidance depolarization is a pacted transition to democracy that produces an apparent elite consensus without addressing the underlying grievances fueling the polarization. Such elite consensus-seeking efforts accompanying democratic transition may actually mask persistent underlying societal polarization that will later reemerge to threaten democratic resilience, For example, the 1989 transition in Chile brought the center-left coalition Concertacion to power for two decades with an agreement to continue the Pinochet-era market approach to economic policy and to postpone transitional justice for human rights abuses committed by General Pinochet's regime. Polarization dropped immediately and continued low until 2006, when student protests began against the privatization of education and continued over the next decade. Polarization spiked in 2018-19 and widespread protests erupted over the persistent inequality, privatization of health and education, and Pinochet-era constitution still in place.[35]

A more recent example of elite consensus papering over underlying divisions is Tunisia since the popular upheaval -- "the revolution" -- for democracy and social justice ended a decades-long dictatorship in 2011. There, political parties with fiery rhetoric and

---

[34] Khadiagala, "Ethnic Polarization in Kenya"; Lebas and Munemo, "Elite Conflict, Compromise and Enduring Authoritarianism,.

[35] https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/03/world/americas/chile-protests.html

deeply polarized over the Islamism-secularism fault line and questions of transitional justice have remarkably managed to avoid backsliding by compromising on a series of national unity coalition governments of Islamist and secularist parties.[36] This enabled the country to transition to parliamentary democracy with a new democratic constitution, which has so far proved itself stable. However, these passively depolarizing compromises postponed resolving the polarizing socioeconomic troubles and ideological divisions, instead of achieving broad-based and elite consensus on inclusive solutions. This has led to public disillusionment with democracy and the absence of any "effective opposition" and real programmatic differences across parties,[37] raising concerns over the long-term stability of Tunisian democracy.

Impact on Polarization and Democratic Outcomes. Reactive polarizing politics, even to prevent democratic erosion, risks deepening polarization and moving to a pernicious equilibrium. Reciprocal counter-polarization responses in particular can backfire: they may mobilize the opposition's supporters but also cause the incumbent's supporters to close ranks to defend "Ours against Theirs." Denigration and demonization of the incumbent and their supporters also inhibits the ability of a democratic opposition to attract allies from among disaffected incumbent supporters if needed to protest growing violations of democratic norms. This Manichean discourse strengthens tribalism and affective polarization and the simplification of politics makes the two camps more rigid, with less communication and even less fluid movement between them. The resulting perceptions of a zero-sum game lock both sides into a downward spiral of pernicious polarization.

At a minimum, pernicious polarization generates government paralysis and dysfunction. Further, to the extent that oppositions employ extra-institutional mechanisms to attempt the immediate removal of the incumbent before the end of the term, the opposition

---

[36] Brumberg and Sale,"Tunisia's Endless Transition."
[37] Grewal and Hamid, "The Dark Side of Consensus."

risks delegitimating itself and providing the incumbent a rationale to use repressive measures against it.[38] Alternatively, successful extra-constitutional ousters of polarizing elected leaders may lead to outright democratic collapse, as happened when the military intervened to remove polarizing incumbents in Thailand in 2014 or Egypt in 2013, which may serve to depolarize society in the short-term, but at the cost of killing democracy.

The risk of passive depolarizing politics that aims to avoid polarization is that it may fail to mobilize the opposition's own base enough to defeat the incumbent in elections, and it may be seen as too soft and legitimizing the incumbent's divisive and antidemocratic behavior. Elite depolarizations through power-sharing agreements or concessions that fail to deliver political gains, risk fragmenting the opposition through internal rivalries, demoralization, or apathy. Withdrawal from engagement, including election boycotts, is also likely to strengthen an autocratizing incumbent.

Proactive Counter-Polarization Strategies

In line with their generative goals, proactive counter-polarization strategies seek to change the axis of polarization and thus also affect democratic outcomes. Like the reactive strategies, proactive strategies can either be polarizing or depolarizing. The polarizing variety seeks to change the axis of polarization away from the Manichean line emphasized by the polarizing incumbent and toward one that is more flexible and programmatic, such as those based on democratic or social justice principles. In this sense, it repolarizes with the goal of generating fundamental change, re-simplifying politics based on a stark choice between the proponents and opponents of such change, for example a renewed social contract that addresses underlying grievances that gave rise to severe polarization in the first place. The depolarization variety seeks to dismantle the reinforcing cleavages resulting from the simplified politics of Us vs. Them polarization, and actively seeks through social and

---

[38] Gamboa, "Opposition at the Margins," 2017.

political action to construct cross-cutting ties more amenable to pluralist democracy. We call these two strategies *transformative repolarization* and *active depolarization*.

Once again, a proactive strategy can only succeed if supported by appropriate practices. Choice of practical instruments for proactive counter-polarization strategies include the previously discussed legal-constitutional and extra-constitutional institutional and mobilization mechanisms. Their effectiveness and impact also vary by the severity of polarization and democratic erosion. What differentiates successful proactive counter-polarization strategies, however, is their degree of innovation. Innovation in communication tools, campaign strategies and alliances with social movements and civic organization, recruitment methods, use of emotion and symbols, and narratives are key to proactive counter-polarization strategies.

A major challenge for innovation, for example, is to learn how to utilize the power of protest movements to improve electoral prospects rather than antagonize incumbent supporters and deepen polarization. Between 2012 and 2017, for instance, the Russian opposition is argued to have learned how to transform "reactive electoral mobilizations" (protesting the corruption of elections) to "proactive" ones, as a source of candidate recruitment and synergy to win elections.[39]   Less successful counter-polarization strategies rely on older mechanisms such as patronage politics to regain power, continuity in leadership rather than generational change, separation of political society and mobilization from civil society and social mobilization, and an inability to create a narrative and a vision for a hopeful future.[40]

---

[39] Gorokhovskaia, "What It Takes to Win"; McAdam and Tarrow,"Ballots and Barricades".

[40] See William Galston's discussion of the weaknesses of liberalism that include an overemphasis on individualism at the expense of belonging and tribal communities, the burdens of personal responsibility that can give rise to desire for savior-leaders, and incrementalism and stability over visionary change in "The Enduring Vulnerability of Liberal Democracy".

Transformative Repolarization. For the more advanced stages of polarization and autocratization, the political challenge that democratic oppositions face may be to find the organizational and discursive ways to rebundle and redefine cleavages and politics along a new axis of polarization based on a pro-democratic program. That is, democratic oppositions may sometimes have to respond through polarizing politics of their own, but they need to find a different axis of polarization based on a programme that can have democratizing consequences. In this way, oppositions can "de-fang" the power of the Us vs Them wedge magnified by the incumbent, reestablish the balance of power with would-be autocrats on a new axis, and mobilize a winning majority of the electorate on a democratizing agenda.They create a binary choice about democracy or justice by denouncing on principle, but not necessarily vilifying and excluding the "Other".

South Korea provides one example of, at least initially, successful transformative polarizing politics. The period between 2014 and 2016 was a major period of political polarization and civic mobilization, when South Korea's political polarization score jumped by 19 percent, and 14 percent in 2016 alone. Yet, the same period was one of "near miss" for the country's consolidated liberal democracy, when democratic backsliding was stopped and gave way to democratic recovery through peaceful change of government.[41]

The opposition's initial response to a period of democratic backsliding under the conservative government from 2008-2016 was a reactive counter-polarization strategy, including a boycott of the parliament's opening and anti-government rallies in 2008, and labor strikes in 2010-11. Over time, however, the opposition moved to proactive counter-polarization strategies, which broadened the backlash against creeping authoritarianism. President Park's impeachment in 2016 in the wake of the Choi-gate corruption scandal was the product of an alliance between opposition parties and softliners within her own party. It

---

[41] Ginsburg and Huq, "Near Misses;" Laebens and Luhrmann, "What Stops Democratic Erosion."

was also a result of pressure from daily "candlelight" peaceful social protests remarkable for the diversity of their participants and "the ingenuity expressed in protest methods," supported by civil society and media.[42] The innovative methods and messaging about the need for executive accountability reflected a proactive strategy of transformative repolarization around a pro-democratic policy. Soon thereafter, Democratic Party leader Moo Jae-in won the presidency with a reformist-democratizing agenda, which led to changes that recovered the country's liberal democracy score to 0.80. Hence, transformative repolarization helped democratic resilience when combined with strong horizontal and diagonal accountability mechanisms.

Active depolarizing strategies. Active depolarizing strategies attempt to mobilize a winning majority by redefining politics alongside new plural axes of polarization that devitalize the cleavages politicized by the incumbent and, in this way, depolarize politics. It consciously defuses the divisions, emphasizes cross-cutting ties, and seeks to unify the electorate with new political frames, campaign methods, actors and organizations. Successful examples include the 2019 opposition victories of crucial Istanbul and Budapest mayorships in Turkey and Hungary.

As we discussed above, until recently, the Turkish opposition forces tried to curb the incumbent Justice and Development Party (AKP)'s "populist-authoritarian" rise and creeping authoritarianism with reciprocal polarizing responses on the same religious-secular axis that brought the AKP and Erdoğan to power in the first place. [43] The opposition CHP's campaigns in 2019 local elections represented a shift to active-depolarizing politics, and the first electoral victory for the opposition in more than a decade, with the partial exception of

---

[42] Croissant, "Beating Backsliding?"
[43] Somer, "Slippery Slope"; Sözen, "Competition in a Populist Authoritarian Regimee.

June 2015 elections. It formed new electoral alliances to overcome organizational and ideological fragmentation and focused on redefining politics based on positive, service-oriented and non-ideological messages, low-profile campaign techniques such as door-to-door voter visits, and a simplification of voter choices with binaries such as hope-fear, love-hate, and democracy-authoritarianism.[44]

Perhaps the most notable innovation was the CHP campaign manual called "The Book of Radical Love". The strategy was focused on defusing polarization through new and cross-cutting axes of politics, and responding to the politics of hate and resentment with "love".[45] Furthernore, the book's author argued: "The real divide in Turkey is not between secularism and Islam or between Turks and Kurds, but between rich and poor. If you want people to break out of their echo chambers, focus on poverty."[46] Hence, this emerging opposition strategy adopted by the CHP leadership also displayed precursors of an emerging "transformative" strategy aiming to redefine politics based on an axis of social class and economic development. A critical ingredient of opposition innovation also pertained to party organization; arguably, the strategy may not have worked in Istanbul elections without the support of a strong grassroots organization built up in recent years that successfully mobilized and communicated with voters and defended ballot boxes, despite Erdoğan's attempts to reverse the election results.[47] Finally, the Turkish opposition parties have struggled to achieve some unity around a "democracy-authoritarianism cleavage" and by coordinating their candidate selections. [48]

---

[44] Esen and Sebnem, "Killing Competitive Authoritarianism Softly."
[45] Wuthrich and Ingleby, "Pushback Against Populism": 25
[46] Partisi, "Book of Radical Love," p. 35.
[47] Ashdown, "A Motorcycle-Riding Leftist."
[48] Orçun Selçuk and Dilara Hekimci. "The Rise of the Democracy – Authoritarianism Cleavage and Opposition Coordination in Turkey (2014–2019)." *Democratization* (2020): 1-19.

In Hungary, a similar movement toward active depolarization strategies in the 2019 mayoral elections in Hungary may suggest a pattern of local level success and a learning process at work. A highly fractious opposition ranging from the far right Jobbik to the progressive youth movement of Liberal Momentum and the traditional Socialist Party finally agreed to present unified mayoral slates based on primary elections for the 2019 mayoral elections. The Budapest candidate ran and won on a platform of representing the people against the seat of power, a pro-Europe and green agenda, and a willingness to work in a partnership with the national government.[49]

Impact on Polarization Dynamics and Democratic Outcomes

The transformative repolarizing strategy is perhaps the most difficult to carry out. Yet we expect that this strategy holds particular promise for reversing severe polarization that has facilitated serious autocratization, as long as it creates a binary choice over democracy or justice, without demonizing the "Other". Otherwise the logic of polarization will kick in again, including perceptions of the "Other" as an existential threat and enemy to be eliminated, tempting both sides to violate democratic norms to gain or retain power.

Here, mobilization around programmatic ideas rather than identities is key. Mobilizing against the incumbent by vilifying the incumbent and their supporters based on their values, attitudes and identities may make people feel excluded based on socioeconomic or cultural background; in contrast, providing a binary choice based on principles and policies, such as democracy vs authoritarianism, hope vs fear, justice vs impunity can open the tent to disaffected incumbent supporters while energizing opposition supporters around a positive vision of the future.

---

[49]https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/13/opposition-parties-candidate-wins-budapest-mayoral-race; https://www.euronews.com/2019/11/04/the-new-mayor-of-budapest-gergerly-karacsony-talks-about-the-changes-in-hungary-s-politica

The risks of such a strategy include voters' fear that repolarization around a transformative agenda will be too radical to be a winning electoral strategy and instead allow an autocratizing incumbent to remain in place. For example, in the 2020 Democratic primary in the United States, a frequently repeated rationale for voters to eventually coalesce around the "safe", centrist and depolarizing campaign of Joe Biden over the more transformative Warren and Sanders campaigns was that the Biden approach presented the best prospect to defeat Donald Trump, even if it did not promise to address the underlying racial and income inequalities, or political and economic structural features that helped to give rise the polarizing presidency of Trump in the first place. A related risk is that if a transformative repolarizing strategy proves successful, the winning coalition could be tempted to resort to the "revanchist" and Manichean divisive discourse of pernicious polarization, or that supporters of the losing incumbent feel excluded and become alienated or engage in obstructionist politics.[50]

We posit, however, that innovative tools and practices can overcome these risks. Rather than conceding a nationalist message to populist polarizers, for example, transformative repolarizers could elaborate a civic nationalism to counter ethnonationalist narratives.[51] Refusing to vilify supporters of the polarizing incumbent, and countering the narrative rather than responding to personal insults or amplifying specific lies and disinformation can also help to defuse the Us vs. Them binary fueled by deliberate provocation and disinformation.[52] Creating new alliances between social movement and civic resistance, and political parties and campaigns can reinforce a transformative campaign by providing a visionary platform of real change. The 2019 presidential victory of a little-

---

[50] This might have contributed to the recent policies of South Korean government after successfully impeaching the previous president and winning elections. Shin, Gi-Wook. "South Korea's Democratic Decay." *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (2020): 100-14.

[51] Fish and Abrams, "The Polarization Paradox;" Galston, "Enduring Vulnerability."

[52] Bandeira et al, "Disinformation in Democracies."

known female politician over right-wing populist rivals in Slovakia exemplifies the successful use of such strategies: Caputova built on a powerful civic resistance movement enraged at a corruption-inspired murder of a journalist to marry her anti-corruption message with messages of inclusion and a refusal to engage in the reciprocating discourse of denigration and disinformation from her populist rivals.[53]

The risk of active depolarizing politics is similar to the risks of passive depolarization: it may fail to energize and excite the opposition's own base sufficiently to defeat the incumbent, and it may be seen as too soft and legitimizing the incumbent's divisive and antidemocratic behavior. Such a failure will strengthen the polarizing incumbent's hand and demoralize the opposition, leaving the polarization dynamic with one "pole" and likely resulting in further autocratization.

If active depolarization is successful in the early stages of polarization, it may contain polarization at tolerable levels and even return a country to the cross-cutting ties of a pluralism, but if leaders do not address underlying grievances and cleavages, divisions are likely to resurge at some point in the future.

When active depolarization is successful at later stages of polarization and autocratization, it is likely to be first at the local or legislative level. Democratic outcomes then depend on the subsequent steps by both opposition and incumbent. An opposition can overreach, such as happened with the Venezuelan successful unity campaign in the 2015 National Assembly elections in which they won a super-majority. The Assembly leadership immediately reverted to the Manichean discourse of reciprocal polarization, taking down the portraits of Hugo Chavez and thus symbolically excluding his supporters, and promising to remove President Nicolas Maduro from office through a recall referendum or other means within six months. Maduro reacted by suppressing the Assembly's authority through

---

[53] Xiao, "How to Defeat a Populist".

Supreme Court rulings, eventually usurping its authority almost completely as well as suppressing the legal-institutional mechanism of a recall referendum, moving the country to authoritarianism. Alternatively, the incumbent may recognize the victory of the opposition as happened in the 2019 Istanbul and Budapest mayoral opposition upsets, but then prevent them from carrying out their innovative strategies, blocking the democratizing moment.[54]

Conclusions

Our prior work theorized how deepening Us vs. Them polarization produces incentives for democratic erosion among both incumbent and opposition political groups as they react to growing perceptions of a zero-sum game, existential threat from the opposing camp, and politics as a state of exception requiring extraordinary, democracy-eroding actions. In this article, we present exploratory empirical analysis using new V-Dem data that supports our general proposition that polarization is associated with deterioration in democratic quality, including democratic elements of electoral authoritarian regimes, and that sustained severe levels of polarization have the most deleterious effects. Because we view polarization as an endogenous factor, we argue that agency and learning matter, and the willful strategic decisions and actions by both incumbents and oppositions will together shape the unfolding of the polarization process and its effect on a democracy. Particularly because polarizing politics is a common strategy of intentionally autocratizing actors, we argue that democratic resilience must include capacities, which may include those to learn from other cases in the world, to prevent or reverse pernicious polarization that erodes democracies and sustains autocracies. We therefore analyze polarization as an intervening variable or condition between opposition anti-authoritarian strategies and democratic outcomes.

---

[54] For example, Erdogan prohibited the new Istanbul mayor from raising funds to fight the Covid-19 pandemic in Spring of 2020.

Our focus on opposition strategies sets out a theoretical framework linking the choice of preservative vs. generative ideological-programmatic goals and reactive vs. proactive counter-polarization strategies with their expected impact on polarization dynamics and democratic outcomes. Drawing on our deductive framework and heuristic-empirical examples, we posit that reactive counter-polarization strategies, often associated with preservative ideological-programmatic goals to restore the *status quo ante*, are most likely to deepen and entrench pernicious polarization, and in turn, to damage democratic quality. If it is successful at removing the incumbent but using extra-constitutional means, it could actually kill democracy. Likewise, passively avoiding polarization through withdrawal or through elite cooperative mechanisms could depolarize the country at the elite level, but if that cooperation is done on an unequal basis or fails to address underlying grievances, the outcome could actually strengthen the autocratizing incumbent or simply suspend polarization until it resurges in the future.

In contrast, the proactive counter-polarization strategies tackle the dominant axis of pernicious polarization head-on, seeking to create a new pro-democratic axis in a transformative repolarizing strategy, or to defuse that dominant axis by (re)creating cross-cutting ties in a plural polarization. We expect these strategies to more effectively reduce pernicious polarization and reverse autocratization trends, particularly if the opposition actors use innovation in their strategies and practices. Creating new electoral coalitions and crafting messages that may either unify and actively depolarize, or repolarize around a transformative pro-democracy agenda, can succeed in challenging the incumbent party as long as elections retain some element of uncertain outcomes. Examples such as the 2019 municipal elections in Istanbul and Budapest suggest that even seemingly unassailable incumbents concede when faced with well-organized oppositions and decisive defeat. We thus view transformative

repolarization and active depolarization, contingent on contextual factors, as the most

promising and democratizing strategies for opposition forces.

References

Ashdown, Nick. "A Motorcycle-Riding Leftist Feminist Is Coming for Erdogan." *Foreign Policy*, May 1.

Bandeira, Luiza, Donara Barojan, Roberta Braga, Jose Luis Peñarredonda, Maria Fernanda Pérez Argüello. 2019. *Disinformation in Democracies: Strengthening Digital Resilience in Latin America*. Washington, DC: The Atlantic Council.

Bates, Robert H., Avner Greif, Margaret Levi, Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, and Barry R. Weingast. 1998. *Analytic Narratives.* Princeton": Princeton University Press.

Brumberg, Daniel, and Maryam Ben Salem. 2020. "Tunisia's Endless Transition?". *Journal of Democracy* 31(2): 110-24.

Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson, and James D. Morrow. 2003. *The Logic of Political Survival*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Bunce, Valerie J., and Sharon L. Wolchik. 2009. "Defeating Dictators: Electoral Change and Stability in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes." *World Politics,* 62(1): 43-86. DOI:10.1017/S0043887109990207.

Carothers, Thomas, and Andrew Donahue. 2019. *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

Chenoweth, Erica, and Orion A. Lewis. 2013. "Unpacking Nonviolent Campaigns: Introducing the NAVCO 2.0 Dataset." *Journal of Peace Research,* 50(3): 415-423. DOI:10.1177/0022343312471551.

Coppedge, Michael, et al. 2020. "V-Dem [Country–Year/Country–Date] Dataset v10". *Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project.* https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/28/14/28140582-43d6-4940-948f-a2df84a31893/v-dem_codebook_v10.pdf.

Croissant, Aurel. 2019. "Beating Backsliding? Episodes and Outcomes of Democratic Backsliding in Asia-Pacific in the Period 1950 to 2018." Paper presented for the Workshop on "Democratic Backsliding in Asia: Resilience, Responses, Revival," Heidelberg University. https://www.uni-heidelberg.de/md/politik/personal/croissant/s/croissant__2020__beating_backsliding.pdf.

Eaton, Kent. 2007. "Backlash in Bolivia: Regional Autonomy as a Reaction against Indigenous Mobilization." *Politics & Society,* 35(1): 71–102. DOI:10.1177/0032329206297145.

Esen, Berk, and Sebnem Gumuscu. 2019. "Killing Competitive Authoritarianism Softly: The 2019 Local Elections in Turkey." *South European Society and Politics,* 24(3): 317-342. DOI:10.1080/13608746.2019.1691318.

Farthing, Linda. 2020. "In Bolivia, the Right Returns with a Vengeance: The Right-Wing Power Grab in Bolivia has Unleashed an Authoritarian Crackdown, Racist Violence, and a Swift Rollback of Evo Morales's Policies. What is the Path Forward for Reclaiming Democracy?" *NACLA Report on the Americas,* 52(1): 5-12. DOI:10.1080/10714839.2020.1733217.

Fish, M. Steven, & Abrams, Neil. 2020. The Polarization Paradox. *Journal of Democracy,* (2), 182-185.

Galston, William. 2020. The Enduring Vulnerability of Liberal Democracy. *Journal of Democracy,* (3), 8-24.

Gamboa, Laura. 2017. "Opposition at the Margins: Strategies Against the Erosion of Democracy in Colombia and Venezuela." *Comparative Politics,* 49(4): 457–477. DOI:10.5129/001041517821273044.

Geddes, Barbara, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz. 2014. "Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set." *Perspectives on Politics,* 12(2): 313-331. DOI:10.1017/S1537592714000851.

Ginsburg, Tom, and Aziz Huq. 2018. "Democracy's Near Misses." *Journal of Democracy,* 29(4): 16–30.

Gorokhovskaia, Yana. 2019. "What It Takes to Win When the Game Is Rigged: The Evolution of Opposition Electoral Strategies in Moscow, 2012–2017." *Democratization* 26(6): 975-92.

Handlin, Samuel. 2017. *State Crisis in Fragile Democracies: Polarization and Political Regimes in South America*. Cambridge University Press.

Huntington, Samuel P. 1991. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Later 20th Century.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Iyengar, Shanto, and Sean J. Westwood. 2015. "Fear and Loathing Across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization." *American Journal of Political Science*, 59(3): 690-707. DOI:10.1111/ajps.12152.

Iyengar, Shanto, Yphtach Lelkes, and Matthew Levendusky. 2019. "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States." *Annual Review of Political Science,* 22(1): 129-146. DOI:10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034.

Khadiagala, Gilbert M. 2019. "Persistent Ethnic Polarization in Kenya." In *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization*, eds.Tom Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue, 38-64. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

Kmenta, Jan. 1971. *Elements of Econometrics,* 2nd Edition. New York: Macmillan.

Kuisz, Jarosław, and Karolina Wigura. 2020. "The Pushback against Populism: Reclaiming the Politics of Emotion." *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 2: 41-53.

Laebens, Melis G. and Anna Lührmann. 2019. "What Stops Democratic Erosion? The Role of Institutions of Accountability." Paper presented at "Berlin Democracy Conference," Berlin. https://gupea.ub.gu.se/bitstream/2077/64508/1/gupea_2077_64508_1.pdf.

LeBas, Adrienne, and Ngonidzashe Munemo. 2019. "Elite Conflict, Compromise, and Enduring Authoritarianism: Polarization in Zimbabwe, 1980–2008." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science,* 681(1): 209-226. DOI:10.1177/0002716218813897.

Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown.

Lührmann et al., Anna. "Democracy Facing Global Challenges: V-Dem Annual Democracy Report 2019." V-Dem Institute, May 2019. https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/99/de/99dedd73-f8bc-484c-8b91-44ba601b6e6b/v-dem_democracy_report_2019.pdf.

Lührmann, Anna, and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2019. "A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here: What Is New About It?". *Democratization* 26(7): 1095-113.

McAdam, Doug, and Sidney Tarrow. 2010. "Ballots and Barricades: On the Reciprocal Relationship between Elections and Social Movements." *Perspectives on Politics* 8(2): 529-42.

McCoy, Jennifer, and Francisco Diez. 2011. *International Mediation in Venezuela*. Washington, D.C: United States Institute of Peace.

McCoy, Jennifer, and Murat Somer. 2019. "Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681(1): 234–71.

McCoy, Jennifer, and Murat Somer. eds. 2019. "Special Issue on Polarized Polities: A Global Threat to Democracy." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681(1)..

McCoy, Jennifer, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer. 2018. "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities." *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1): 16-42.

Mietzner, Marcus. "Sources of Resistance to Democratic Decline: Indonesian Civil Society and Its Trials." Democratization 0, no. 0 (July 24, 2020): 1–18.

Pantoulas, Dimitris and Jennifer McCoy, "Venezuela: an Unstable Equilibrium", Revista de Ciencias Políticas: Vol 32, No 2. (2019), pp. 391-408.

Partisi, Cumhuriyet Halk. 2019. *Book of Radical Love (within-Party Educational Material)*. http://dijitalmecmua.chp.org.tr/CHPRadikal%20SevgiKitabiEng.pdf.

Pelke, Lars, and Aurel Croissant. 2020. "Conceptualizing and Measuring Autocratization Episodes." Working Paper. DOI:10.17605/OSF.IO/F9N23.

Przeworski, Adam. 1991. *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Selçuk, Orçun, and Dilara Hekimci. "The Rise of the Democracy – Authoritarianism Cleavage and Opposition Coordination in Turkey (2014–2019)." *Democratization* (2020): 1-19.

Shin, Gi-Wook. "South Korea's Democratic Decay." *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (2020): 100-14.

Slater, Dan, and Aries A. Arugay. 2018. "Polarizing Figures: Executive Power and Institutional Conflict in Asian Democracies." *American Behavioral Scientist,* 62(1): 92–106. DOI:10.1177/0002764218759577.

Somer, Murat. 2007. "Moderate Islam and Secularist Opposition in Turkey: Implications for the World, Muslims and Secular Democracy." *Third World Quarterly* 28(7): 1271–89.

Somer, Murat. 2019. "Turkey: The Slippery Slope from Reformist to Revolutionary Polarization and Democratic Breakdown." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science,* 681(1): 42-61.

Sözen, Yunus. 2019. "Competition in a Populist Authoritarian Regime: The June 2018 Dual Elections in Turkey." *South European Society and Politics* 24(3): 287-315.

Svolik, Milan W. 2019. "Polarization versus Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 30(3): 20–32. DOI:10.1353/jod.2019.0039.

Svolik, Milan W. 2012. *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Teorell, Jan, and Michael Wahman. 2018. "Institutional Stepping Stones for Democracy: How and Why Multipartyism Enhances Democratic Change." *Democratization* 25(1): 78-97. DOI:10.1080/13510347.2017.1318279.

Ufen, Andreas. 2019. "Opposition in Transition: Pre-Electoral Coalitions and the 2018 Electoral Breakthrough in Malaysia." *Democratization* 27(2): 167-84.

Wuthrich, F. Michael, and Melvyn Ingleby. 2020. "The Pushback against Populism: Running on "Radical Love" in Turkey." *Journal of Democracy* 31(2): 24-40.

Xiao, Jenny. 2019. "How to Defeat Populism: Three Lessons from Slovakia." *, Social Science Research Council* (blog), September 3. https://items.ssrc.org/democracy-papers/how-to-defeat-populism-three-lessons-from-slovakia/.

Yarwood, Janette. 2016. "The Struggle over Term Limits in Africa: The Power of Protest." *Journal of Democracy* 27(3): 51-60. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/623606/pdf.

Table 1: Effect of Political Polarization on Liberal Democracy: 1900-2019.

	Analysis Year	One Year Lag	Two Year Lag	Five Year Lag
Political Polarization	-0.420**			
	(0.061)			
Political Polarization		-0.415**		
		(0.062)		
Political Polarization			-0.391**	
			(0.062)	
Political Polarization				-0.305**
				(0.057)
Constant	0.333**	0.334**	0.347**	0.291**
	(0.044)	(0.044)	(0.047)	(0.047
N	6,192	6,161	6,120	5,973
Number of States	119	119	119	119
Number of Years	119	118	117	114
Adjusted R²	0.573	0.572	0.565	0.539

Note: Coefficient estimates are linear regression estimates with state and year fixed effects. Outcome variable is V-Dem liberal democracy score. 'Lag' refers to temporal lags of political polarization measure. Robust standard errors in parentheses. ** $p<0.01$, * $p<0.05$.

Table 2: Difference Coefficients between Periods of Elevated, Heightened, and Severe Polarization, and All Other Cases: 1900-2019.

	Elevated Polarization		Heightened Polarization		Severe Polarization	
	Analysis Year	One Year Lag	Analysis Year	One Year Lag	Analysis Year	One Year Lag
Difference Coefficient	-0.167 (0.122)		-0.032 (0.153)		-0.640* (0.284)	
Difference Coefficient		-0.165 (0.119)		0.009 (0.154)		-0.654* (0.326)
Constant	0.307** (0.048)	0.303** (0.048)	0.314** (0.046)	0.314** (0.046)	0.324** (0.047)	0.326** (0.046)
N	6,192	6,161	6,192	6,161	6,192	6,161
Number of States	119	119	119	119	119	119
Number of Years	119	118	119	118	119	118
Adjusted R^2	0.576	0.576	0.577	0.577	0.575	0.573

Note: Coefficient estimates are the result of interaction term between political polarization and period indicators. Outcome variable is V-Dem liberal democracy score. Robust standard errors in parentheses. ** $p<0.01$, * $p<0.05$.

Table 3: Opposition Goals, Strategies, and Outcomes

Goals	Counter-Polarization Strategies	Expected Polarization Outcomes	Expected Democratic Outcomes
Preservative: restore status quo ex ante	*Reactive* *Reciprocal Polarization* : using same axis of polarization	Deepening Pernicious polarization	Government dysfunction or paralysis *or* Creeping authoritarianism under Incumbent *or* Democratic collapse, return of old elites
	Reactive *Passive Depolarization* : fails to confront or change axis of polarization	Suspended elite polarization	Creeping authoritarianism under Incumbent *or* Weakened democratization
Generative: a new social contract	*Proactive* *Transformative Repolarization :* changes axis of polarization	Pro-democratic axis of polarization *and* Reduced polarization if and when successful inclusive reforms are in place	Slow or reverse autocratization
	Proactive *Active Depolarization :* establish cross-cutting ties	Polarization contained	Slow or reverse autocratization especially at local levels