31

POLITICAL PARTIES, ELECTIONS, AND PERNICIOUS POLARIZATION IN THE RISE OF ILLIBERALISM

Jennifer L. McCoy and Murat Somer

Introduction

Illiberalism – i.e. the adoption and popularity of illiberal policies, values, and attitudes – can result from *pernicious polarization*, from the emotions it invokes and the behaviours it incentivizes rather than from ideology *per se*. Pernicious polarization operates through the division of society into "Us" vs. "Them" camps of mutual distrust and dislike, which reaches pernicious levels when it is sustained at high levels (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018; Somer and McCoy 2019a).

Two different mechanisms can link pernicious polarization and illiberalism. First, ideologically and intentionally illiberal political actors have an incentive to employ polarizing politics in order to create audiences receptive to their illiberal projects. If they succeed in this strategy – an outcome that is endogenous to their actions as well as the responses of their rivals and the built-in dynamics of polarization (McCoy and Somer 2019b) – the ensuing pernicious polarization expands the popular base of support for them and their illiberal policies. This process can further reinforce the illiberalism of political actors when they feel that sympathetic constituencies confirm their worldview.

In the second mechanism, political actors who are not opposed to democracy or even liberal democracy in principle may think that their transformative political agenda requires them to polarize the political field in order to simplify the choices for the electorate and overcome resistance to reforms (Somer and McCoy 2019a). However, these actors and their constituencies may take the illiberal turn during the process of pernicious polarization, as they become increasingly distrustful of others' intentions, cynical about the possibility of mutually gainful outcomes, and bent on marginalizing relatively more liberal members within their own ranks. In other words, the pernicious polarization that illiberals help generate can also transform them in the process.

In the following, we will first elaborate this thesis and then critically review the relevant extant research in relation to our argument. We will proceed with an exploratory discussion of which party and party system types and which electoral practices and systems facilitate or

encumber illiberalism arising from polarization and explain the how of this process. Our con-
cluding remarks will reflect on some possible reforms.

Illiberalism as a Product of Polarization – and of Pernicious Polarization

Liberalism is an ideology that emphasizes individual freedom, multilateral cooperation, and
rule-based competition rooted in the expectation of mutually beneficial (positive-sum)
gains and in the presence of a degree of trust, which liberal institutions aim to foster, in the
benign intentions of others. Accordingly, liberalism aims to institutionalize power-sharing and
de-concentration. These, of course, are all complementary if not essential to the functioning
and consolidation of healthy democracies.[1] By contrast, illiberalism highlights unilateral actions
and power-based competition rooted in the expectation of zero-sum gains and in the presence
of a degree of distrust, which illiberal institutions promote, in the malign intentions of others.
Thus, illiberal worldviews foster power-wielding and concentration in the name of order and
security against social and political threats.

Polarization, especially the pernicious kind (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018; McCoy
and Somer 2019a; 2019b), is a process that almost automatically facilitates the strengthening
of illiberal projects. This is because pernicious polarization fosters threat perceptions and a dis-
trust of "Them" that can justify support for illiberal projects. It is a process that divides societies
into distrustful camps of "Us" vs. "Them" who begin to view each other as existential threats
with mutually exclusive interests. Thus, it cultivates social and political climates sharing elective
affinities with illiberal worldviews.

More specifically, several mechanisms are at play. To start with, pernicious polarization
facilitates the growth of sympathy for illiberal ideas. In polarized polities incumbents are
inclined to adopt illiberal policies against oppositions. Their supporters tend to endorse or
overlook their actions even when these conflict with their democratic values. In other words,
people choose partisan loyalty over democratic commitments (Svolik 2019). In turn, oppos-
ition forces, where legal-institutional and electoral routes are perceived as tainted or closed
off, may be inclined to embrace illiberal strategies ranging from politically motivated criminal
accusations to violent uprisings and coups to unseat the incumbents. Their constituencies may
approve or discount the undemocratic implications of these strategies (McCoy, Rahman, and
Somer 2018).

Illiberalism and polarization are linked in yet another way. Liberalism aims to secure freedoms
and build institutions based on the belief that people can agree on some common truths and
find common goods by utilizing such tools as deliberation, public reason, expert knowledge,
and voting. In turn, illiberalism is skeptical of these freedoms, institutions, and people's ability
to agree on common truths and goods by utilizing these tools. Polarization enhances the cred-
ibility of illiberalism by weakening the common ground whereon people can compromise on
shared interests, and by fostering post-truth politics, or, "bullshit" (Hopkin and Rosamond
2018) where "partisan truths" replace common, "self-evident" ones.

These mechanisms that link pernicious polarization to illiberalism are not mutually exclusive
and can be at play simultaneously in particular cases. In Turkey, for example, the ruling Justice
and Development Party (AKP) had Islamist origins and strong illiberal-authoritarian propen-
sities from the very beginning of its rule in 2002 (Tepe 2005; Somer 2007, 1272–1273; Yenigun
2021). However, its polarizing-cum-transformative political agenda and the pernicious polar-
ization it triggered also transformed the party itself. The changes empowered illiberal actors
and tendencies within the party while disempowering relatively liberal ones, which had some
influence in early years (Somer 2019). Overall, the changes "de-institutionalized" the party in

favour of the party leader and elites (Yardımcı-Geyikçi and Yavuzyilmaz 2020). Polarization also reinforced illiberal inclinations among the supporters of the pro-secular opposition parties, who grew suspicious of liberal democracy as a regime that allows Islamists to come to power and "achieve their aims." Hence, in the pro-secular press, opposition to illiberal and authoritarian (judicial or military) interventions in democratic politics, such as party shutdowns, decreased over time and whenever the situation called for action "to protect secularism" (Somer 2011).

Political Parties as Promoters or Inhibitors of Illiberalism-cum-Polarization

Parties stand out as both potential initiators of and solutions to the recent upsurge of "democratic erosions/autocratizations" (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Diamond 2020), which are often associated with polarization and illiberalism in many parts of the world. In addition to their crucial roles in recruitment and governing, political parties are the main actors that mediate between societal interests, i.e. cleavages, on one hand, and the political field and public policy on the other. In cooperation with civil society and social movements they aggregate, articulate, and translate into policy alternatives these cleavages and public interests (Panebianco 1988; Boix 2007; Wren and McElwain 2007). Typically, various cleavages present in society, especially the "formative rifts" we define (Somer and McCoy 2019a), produce a potential for polarization. Formative rifts are unresolved debates defining citizenship, identities, or national myths at a country's founding or refounding, for example, following a war of independence, civil war, or dictatorship. When these formative rifts reemerge to polarize a society, we predict that pernicious polarization is more likely to become entrenched. These rifts may be products of history as well as more recent socioeconomic and technological developments. However, the impact of these divisive cleavages is normally offset by other, cross-cutting ones before causing polarization.

Political parties can change this dynamic by selectively politicizing divisive cleavages and trivializing cross-cutting ones. A process of polarization with pernicious potential typically starts when some major political actor – a political party, leader, or social movement – decides to employ polarizing politics strategically, as an instrument to achieve its aims. Hence, a political party may begin to aggregate and articulate societal interests by re-bundling divisive and cross-cutting cleavages in a simple meta-division of "Us" vs. "Them." If this strategy succeeds in expanding and mobilizing the party's supporters, and if other social and political actors respond in ways that reinforce this division, pernicious polarization may ensue with all the consequences we discuss above. Why do political parties sometimes embark on this path?

There does not appear to be a clear relationship between party type or party-system typology and a propensity for polarizing politics. Rather, different ideological goals; rules organizing recruitment, finances, and intra-party competition; and the resources available to parties to mobilize voters and compete with other parties – such as programmatic and patronage-based resources – in the context of their electoral-institutional environment provide opportunities and present incentives and disincentives for polarizing politics.

Political parties are stand-alone collective actors with agency and claims to ideological and material self-interests in governing while also being deeply embedded in their social, political, and institutional environments. They influence and are influenced by their voters, the media, civil society, social movements, and other parties. Variations among parties occur in several ways. Individual parties can be organized in various forms – such as mass, elite, and catch-all party organizations – with relatively programmatic or clientelistic linkages with voters, various ways and means of party financing, and different types and degrees of intra-party democracy. "Authoritarian successor parties" constitute yet another important party type for developing

democracies (Loxton and Mainwaring 2018). Likewise, the characteristics of the party system can range among multiparty, two-party, predominant, and competitive/electoral authoritarian party systems. Party systems can also be relatively institutionalized, stable, and predictable or relatively un-institutionalized, fractured, and unstable.

In Europe, until the 1960s or so, multiparty systems featuring mass parties were key to avoiding pernicious polarization and consolidating democracy. These parties had relatively cohesive organizations and socialist, social and Christian democratic ideologies, disciplined memberships, and intimate bonds of trust with social movements and actors such as labor unions and church associations (Duverger 1967; Przeworski and Sprague 1986; Kalyvas 1996). Among other factors, and thanks to their permanent, massive, and disciplined membership and clear ideologies and party identities, they successfully represented social cleavages based on social class and centre-periphery distinctions and mobilized people without necessarily antag-onizing them against each other.

However, this may be a historically contingent feature of mass parties. Mass party organizations produce both advantages and disadvantages for averting pernicious polarization. On one hand, a party leadership dedicated to avoiding polarizing politics based on principle or ideology can more easily rein in radical and polarizing rank-and-file members and social movements. This is because of the ideological and organizational coherence of their membership and bonds of trust within the social movement. On the other hand, and for the same reasons, once polariza-tion advances as a result of technological or socioeconomic change or political ambition, and is entrenched in mass parties and their party identities, it becomes more difficult to reverse polar-ization (McCoy and Somer 2019b). Attempts to depolarize would face resistance from these parties' cohesive memberships, loyal voters, and civil society linkages.

Polarization can serve various external and internal goals for parties. Externally, polar-izing politics can help parties mobilize voters, present themselves as indispensable, consolidate constituencies, and differentiate themselves from other parties. Internally, polarization can be instrumental for prevailing during intra-party power struggles and strengthening the overall cohesion of the party. For example, successful "authoritarian successor" and "dominant" parties highlight "the role of polarization and conflict in bringing about strong parties." They gen-erate loyal constituencies, contain "centrifugal intra-party conflicts," and increase the cost of defections (Ayan Musil 2014; Loxton and Mainwaring 2018).

In Turkey, for example, parties were key contributors to building Turkish democracy by shaping citizens' political identities, mobilizing them for votes, and proving "surprisingly resilient" despite autocratic interventions (Laebens 2020). However, their lack of intra-party democracy in decision-making, dependence on patronage, and domination by powerful leaders have undermined democratic development (Ayan Musil 2011; Massicard and Watts 2013). Given their weaknesses on programmatic differences and reliance on clientelism, party leaders time and again chose polarizing rhetoric to distinguish themselves from each other in the eyes of voters. In turn, this contributed to their failures to reach elite settlements on power-sharing, which undermined the consolidation of democracy – liberal and pluralistic democracy in par-ticular (Somer 2020). Voter dissatisfaction with these failures and their economic consequences was key to the AKP's coming to power in 2002 with a mixture of liberal and illiberal trans-formative promises.

Other features of Turkish political parties facilitated these outcomes (also Yenigun 2021). A leader-dominated party organization helped AKP leader Erdoğan suppress internal party opposition during his suspension of democracy through an incumbent takeover, while the same feature undermined opposition parties' ability to block Erdoğan's ascendance by renewing their leadership and platforms and thus improving their electoral performance (Laebens 2020).

Simultaneously, Turkish parties' relatively high levels of membership, rootedness in society, and mobilization capacity (Baykan 2018; Laebens 2020) help to explain how the AKP maintained partisan voter loyalty despite its democratic transgressions and how opposition parties sustained their constituencies despite an increasingly uneven playing field. Expectedly, these dynamics gave rise to acute pernicious polarization that split society in two, with disastrous consequences for Turkey's democracy. The country suffered a 33 percent drop in its freedom score between 2005 and 2019 as well as a democratic breakdown in the 2010s (Esen and Gumuscu 2016; Somer 2016).

Thus, some parties can employ polarizing strategies because of the incentives presented by polarizing politics and because various features of electoral institutions, political party systems, and internal party organizations allow or encourage the use of such strategies. They then turn illiberal as a result of the endogenous consequences of polarization. Institutional characteristics provide opportunities for and constraints upon these actors, while their decisions determine whether polarization becomes pernicious, engendering illiberalism, or is contained as a normal process of liberal democratic politics. Other parties, of course, may pursue polarizing politics intentionally in order to implement their a priori illiberal ideologies and political agenda.

Interestingly, just as mass programmatic parties can have both advantages and disadvantages in averting polarization, diffusely organized, weakly institutionalized, and patronage-based elite parties with few programmatic differences have a degree of immunity to pernicious polarization. In fractured party systems comprising weakly organized and personalist elite parties, polarization can be contained through factionalization and party splits, with fence-sitter voters switching their votes between parties, as in Brazil and Indonesia (Mignozzetti and Spektor 2019; Warburton 2019). Hence, temporary polarizations before and during elections usually subside afterwards (Warburton 2019). However, party collusion in endemic corruption in these weakly institutionalized systems can also engender popular dissatisfaction with the political establishment and open the door for polarizing populist leaders to arise (Carothers and O'Donohue 2019).

In the long run, elites in many professional parties stand to lose from pernicious polarization and the collapse of the liberal-democratic procedures to which they owe their careers. Hence, in Indonesia provincial elites from various parties were found to hold relatively more liberal views of democracy compared to the general public. Indeed, these elites highlighted the importance of the paradigm of checks and balances "in which their careers were embedded" (Aspinall et al. 2019). This cast a shadow of doubt onto elite-based explanations of the country's recent democratic backsliding (Ibid). Yet, at other times, the elites of patronage-based parties with weak programmatic differences can choose to focus on polarizing identity politics and formative rifts in order to mobilize their constituencies, as secular and Islamist party elites did in Bangladesh and, partially, as Islamist parties have been recently doing in Indonesia (Aspinall et al. 2019; Rahman 2019).

At first sight, catch-all parties – their ideal type competing for centrist voters in a two-party system – appear to be natural guardrails against pernicious polarization. Since the 1960s, socio-economic and technological changes compelled mass parties to transform themselves into elite-cartel and catch-all parties (Kirschheimer [1933] 1966; Katz and Mair 1995; Ignazi 1996; Mair 2013). These parties have an interest in avoiding any pernicious polarization that divides society into immobile partisan blocs, given their socially and ideologically diverse and flexible electoral bases and memberships. Nevertheless, some catch-all parties, lacking clear party identities and loyal voters, may be inclined to employ polarizing politics on personalized subjects in order to differentiate themselves and gain loyal voters. Further, the ostensibly "moderate" preferences of

centrist voters, on which catch-all parties depend for their immunity from polarizing politics, is a poor guardrail against pernicious polarization.

Insofar as catch-all parties have few organizational resources to influence the preferences and actions of their constituencies (as compared to mass parties for example), they may have less potential to depolarize politics once pernicious polarization is activated and has permeated society. As the number of centrists who are potential voters for their party dwindle in advanced stages of polarization, catch-all parties face diminishing incentives to avoid polarizing politics. Notably,

> stronger partisans value democracy just as much or even more than moderates do …
> [But] centrists can afford to place a greater weight on democratic principles because of
> their weaker allegiance to candidates on partisan or policy grounds. [Hence] centrists
> provide precisely the kind of democratic electoral check that polarized societies lack.
> *Svolik 2019, 27*

This can change, however, when, as polarization advances, centrist voters also begin to trade off democratic principles for partisanship. That is, in a highly polarized polity centrist voters can cease to be "moderate" in the sense of their commitment to democracy. Of course, the meaning of moderation varies across regime types and the other contextual characteristics of a polity, in particular depending on how democratic the country's "centre" is in the first place (Somer 2014).

How Election Processes and Systems Shape and are Shaped by Polarization and Illiberalism

Illiberal leaders often deride liberal provisions on the separation of powers and freedom of expression and association required for competitive elections. Yet, they are not necessarily anti-democratic in the sense of opposing elections. In fact, illiberal leaders often rely on electoral legitimacy, privileging the vertical accountability of voting over the horizontal accountability of constitutional checks and balances and the diagonal accountability of civil society and media watchdogs (Laebens and Lührmann 2019).

Pernicious political polarization changes the incentives of political – and thus electoral – competition. Polarizing actors thus seek to win and retain electoral office not through broadening their reach and seeking the mythical centrist voter, but rather by tethering the loyalty of their own supporters to their personal political success while dissuading opposition voters from participating at all. The efficient "sorting" of voters into increasingly homogenous camps along lines of race, ethnicity, religion, geography, or ideology thus inhibits cross-cutting ties and reduces electoral competition. The high levels of antipathy toward the "out-party" allows polarizing leaders to lock in their "base" and retain power as long as they have a majority. If not, they will need to resort to electoral engineering, discussed below.

Illiberalism's Privileging of Vertical Accountability

In contemporary politics, the competition between horizontal and vertical accountability can be a primary institutional driver of polarizing politics, as political actors intent on including excluded sectors of the *demos* clash with political actors intent on protecting minorities through constraints on executive power. Debates over the risks to minority elites of rule by the *demos*

have persisted from the time of the Greek philosophers through the US Founding Fathers' debates on the American republic (Dahl 1989; Library of Congress n.d.). Liberalism seeks to protect against the potential tyranny of the majority by protecting citizens from abuse by both the government and their fellow citizens. The built-in tensions of constitutional democracy between majority rule and minority protections erupt into pernicious polarization when illiberal leaders/movements override horizontal accountability mechanisms of checks and balances in the name of majority rule, or when elites attempt to constrain rival elites by abusing horizontal accountability mechanisms (O'Donnell 1994; Slater 2013; Slater and Arugay 2018).

Hence, the debate over populism's democratizing versus autocratizing consequences often centres on this tension between vertical and horizontal accountability, or the perils of the tyranny of the majority and oligarchy. Like O'Donnell's (1994) "delegative democracy," in which elected chief executives claim a mandate from the people to override constraints from legislatures or courts, a large literature on populist parties and leaders documents the democracy-eroding consequences of leaders who claim a popular electoral mandate in order to concentrate power into their own hands and limit dissent (de la Torre and Lemos 2016; Müller 2016; Hanely and Vachudova 2018; Grzymala-Busse 2019; Pappas 2019). Alternatively, illiberal populist leaders may run their parties from the shadows without holding any official position at all, such as Jaroslaw Kaczyński's control of Poland's PiS party.

Populism's anti-pluralist and anti-elitist features emerge from the populist's claim of *exclusive* representation of "the pure people" against a "corrupt elite," and thus a refusal to recognize the opposition as legitimate or even to recognize the possibility of losing an election since the populist by definition represents the majority (Müller 2016). Yet, without freedoms such as freedom of expression and association the emergence of "majority rule" and vertical accountability based on the free will of the people would be impossible. In a democracy, horizontal accountability mechanisms should not only apply to government branches but should also apply to interactions among ordinary citizens so that they can freely form their preferences. Hence, majorities can emerge without oppression from either the government or other citizens who view themselves as representing the majority, nation, etc. Crucially, the "majority" in populists' minds is often a constructed majority: populists view their association with the majority as the default truth. Populist leaders blame corrupt elites engineering electoral fraud or "false consciousness" among the people for any empirical deviation from this belief; lost elections for instance.

Populism is also posited as a corrective to elitist and unresponsive governments, as it can give voice and benefits to unrepresented, marginalized people and break up the monopoly of traditional parties (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Populist citizens may not necessarily be authoritarian, but rather dissatisfied democrats (Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2020). Nevertheless, the type of democracy that populist citizens support may indeed be illiberal as well as a response to undemocratic liberalism (Berman 2017; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Further, and ironically, not all populist leaders seek to expand popular participation in self-government (for example through direct democracy via referenda). Instead, populist leaders often rely on the symbolic mobilization of supporters through mass rallies and the appropriation of national symbols such as the flag or historic figures and battles.

The challenge for democracy, then, is balancing majority rule with minority rights and individual freedoms, for which liberalism is a major historical and intellectual source. The aim of illiberalism is to concentrate power either in the name of the majority, without regard to minority rights, or to use a majority to further the aims of a more authoritarian actor. Illiberals often do this by falsely identifying such essential aspects of democracy as freedom of association and division of powers with elitist liberalism. Polarizing strategies lends credibility to these

illiberal claims by sowing distrust and zero-sum perceptions over a divide – whether it's the people vs the elite, rich vs poor, religion vs secularism, or nationalism vs cosmopolitanism. As discussed above, the "Us" vs. "Them" rhetoric heightens a sense of mutual threat and support for democracy-eroding tactics to keep one's team in power or prevent the other side from gaining power.

Majoritarian Electoral Systems Enable Political Polarization and, in turn, Illiberalism

The relationship between electoral systems, polarization, and illiberalism is not straightforward. The conventional approach to identifying party system polarization measures ideological or issue-based difference along a Left-Right dimension. This approach assumes that majoritarian systems encourage centripetal tendencies, while proportional representation systems encourage centrifugal tendencies (Downs 1957; Sartori 1976; Cox 1990). Thus, majoritarian systems should be more stabilizing, as they encourage two-party systems (or moderate pluralism multiparty systems with bipolar dynamics) who seek the Downsian median voter, while proportional representation systems encourage multi-party systems that may end up in Sartori's unstable polarized pluralism condition, with high ideological polarization, anti-system parties, irresponsible oppositions, and/or voters moving from the centre to the extremes (Sartori 1976). A recent study of established democracies by Dalton (2021) reconfirms these expectations, though it also finds rising levels of party-system polarization since the mid-1990s.

Though systematic comparative research is lacking there is some evidence in the literature to support the notion that majoritarian electoral systems (with plurality voting in single-member districts, also known as first-past-the-post, or proportional representation systems with seat bonuses) are more likely to produce pernicious polarization as they are more likely to create the perception of a winner-take-all system. With the electoral stakes high, polarizing rhetoric engenders perceptions of insecurity and out-party threats. Polarizing actors' reliance on divisive and moralizing strategies demonizing the "Other" means that the Downsian theory of the median voter does not apply. Rather than reach toward the centre to enlarge their voter pool, polarizing leaders instead double-down on their base to display their loyalty in the ballot box regardless of the growing illiberal or autocratic behaviour of the leadership. Voters reward such leaders by forgiving democratic norm violations by their own party (Svolik 2019; Graham and Svolik 2020), particularly when their own party is in power (McCoy, Simonovits, and Littvay 2021). When governing, majoritarian systems incentivize unilateral decision-making rather than consensus-promoting mechanisms and behaviour (Mueller 2019).

One comparative study found that single-member district systems concentrating power in a single party tend to generate more affective polarization (i.e. dislike and hostility across partisan lines) than more consensual mechanisms, such as proportional representation systems (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2019). Another study comparing Brazilian single-member Senate districts with multi-member proportional representation House districts found that majoritarian rules created more legislative polarization than proportional rules (Bernabel 2015). Finally, two earlier studies of established democracies failed to find evidence that proportional electoral systems predicted increases in extreme party policy or party-system polarization, as the conventional wisdom assumed (Ezrow 2008; Curini and Hino 2012).

Two recent compilations of comparative case studies from around the globe found that majoritarian electoral systems contributed to severe or pernicious polarization. Carothers and O'Donahue (2019) find that in the US, Bangladesh, Kenya, and India, first-past-the-post systems contributed to severe polarization. McCoy and Somer (2019a) similarly found that of

eleven polarized cases, nine of the 11 have disproportionate representation: seven with majoritarian electoral systems (single-member districts or mixed electoral systems), and two with proportional representation electoral systems with majoritarian–enhancing seat bonuses for the largest party.[2]

Electoral Engineering by Illiberal Polarizers

The twenty–first century international democratic norm emphasizing electoral legitimacy leads both illiberal democrats and illiberal authoritarians to hold elections. Yet, returning to Robert Dahl's concept of polyarchy, we see that elections themselves require certain preconditions rooted in individual liberties, such as freedom of speech and assembly and alternative sources of information, as well as rule of law (Dahl 1972). In contrast, elections in illiberal regimes generally have deficits in fairness; that is, they have "unlevel playing fields." The degree of deficit will range from light-to-moderate in electoral democracies, which heavily rely on electoral legitimacy, to moderate-to-serious in electoral or competitive authoritarian regimes, which use the facade of elections to stave off international criticism but which heavily tilt the playing field in the regime's favour (Levitsky and Way 2011; Schedler 2013). Typical electoral authoritarian practices include, for example, the manipulation of information by limiting opposition access to media, unfair use of state financial resources for campaigns, disenfranchisement of voters, disqualification of specific rival leaders, and intimidation of voters or "vote-buying" by promising needed resources such as food baskets to proven partisans.

Our prior comparative work documents the common devices employed by polarizing leaders seeking to entrench their electoral advantage through constitutional change, reform of electoral laws and systems, and control of electoral institutions (McCoy and Somer 2019b). The winner-take-all logic produced by institutional rules in disproportionate majoritarian electoral systems, when combined with the psychological elements of the "Us" vs. "Them" discourse employed in severely polarized polities, provides perverse incentives for de-democratization. The zero-sum perceptions of such systems lead governing parties to further work to cement their electoral advantages with revised electoral formulas giving disproportionate representation to the largest party, gerrymandered electoral redistricting, restrictive voter registration, and other such constitutional and legal reforms or voter suppression tactics (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018). The resulting electoral immobilism contributes to the extension of political polarization at the societal level, making polarization even more difficult to overcome (Vegetti 2019).

Thus, in addition to the *practice* of unfair elections, illiberal regimes commonly manipulate the electoral formulas of representation to give the governing party a comparative advantage. Even those who enjoyed a majority or super-majority in their initial electoral victory attempt to deepen the disproportionality and entrench their advantage, incentivized by the zero-sum perceptions and existential fears of pernicious polarization. Polarizing leaders who may not have come to power with authoritarian ambitions or ideologies are nevertheless incentivized to concentrate power further in their own hands by the logic of polarization. For example, in Bangladesh, Hungary, Poland, the Philippines, South Africa, and Turkey, a polarizing period began with one party winning an absolute legislative majority, giving it the opportunity to then remake the rules to further its own advantage. Of these, the Awami League in Bangladesh, Fidesz in Hungary, ANC in South Africa, and AKP in Turkey all went on to reform the constitution, further enhancing the majority party's electoral advantage and augmenting executive power. The PiS party in Poland attempted and failed to change the constitution in 2015, but went on to implement the proposed changes anyway with their legislative majority after

changing the composition of the Constitutional Tribunal to make it more compliant. Hugo Chavez won the Venezuelan presidency in 1998 without a legislative majority, but engineered a constitutional reform the following year which strengthened presidential powers and changed electoral rules to a more majoritarian system, giving his party a strong majority until 2015 (also Landau 2021).

In addition to changing laws to gain unfair advantages, illiberals weaponize the very laws that are meant to protect democracy if enforced with forbearance (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018), such as sanctions against anti-constitutional parties or anti-libel laws. Turkish President Erdoğan, for example, took advantage of libel lawsuits and anti-terror laws to silence government critics (Varol 2015). Strategies of voter suppression, gerrymandering, abuse of democracy-protecting laws, disinformation, restrictions on candidates, and closing alternative media sources are all more likely in contexts of polarization *because* winning by persuading opposition voters to come to your side is closed off by the high levels of affective polarization, negative partisanship, and mutual distrust and threat. The remaining route to victory lies in dissuading opposition voter participation or engineering disproportionate representation favouring the incumbent (Klein 2020; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). We illustrate these points with two brief country illustrations: Hungary and the US.

The Illiberal Democracy of Hungary

Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán promotes an illiberal democracy in the name of the interests of the national community. In this view, "the collective interests of the national community trump the interests of individuals and of minorities" (Enyedi 2016). Orbán's Fidesz party unilaterally rewrote the constitution after winning a two-thirds parliamentary majority in 2010. Orbán's coalition was able to parlay a 53 percent vote into 68 percent of the seats in parliament by winning all but one of the single-member districts (which comprised 45 percent of the total seats in the parliament) plus a "seat bonus" from proportional representation seats. Orbán then used that supermajority to write a new constitution — retaining the parliamentary form of government and giving the president and prime minister extraordinary powers to appoint loyalists to newly empowered and extended-term regulatory bodies including the media board, national judicial office, public prosecutor, state audit office, electoral commission, and Constitutional Court. The new Fundamental Law extended the requirement of a supermajority to new policy areas, including taxes, family subsidies, and electoral districts, thus making it difficult for future governments to change those policies and insulating Fidesz cronies if they were ever to lose power. Orbán then used his supermajority to further entrench his party's advantage through a comprehensive electoral reform, augmenting the disproportionate representation such that in 2014 and 2018, despite winning less than 50 percent of the vote, Fidesz retained a two-thirds majority (Enyedi 2016; Magyar 2016; Krekó and Enyedi 2018). This is an example of enhancing a party's electoral competitiveness by a legal change in the rules, such as redistricting and enfranchising ethnic Hungarians living in the near abroad (Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, and Ukraine), while still administering the elections professionally.

Orbán, according to Krekó and Enyedi, is not an authoritarian leader like Putin or Lukashenko. At home with democratic competition, his goal is to "polarize and divide the electorate while retaining the support of the biggest and best organized group within it. His means are often nondemocratic, but the logic of his behavior is quintessentially competitive" (Krekó and Enyedi 2018, 11). Brought to power in part by electoral rules that sought to create a stable majority in parliament, he was able to wield his advantage to further strengthen the majoritarian system and polarize the electorate. Meanwhile, the opposition had trouble