

Building Connective Democracy to Combat Polarization

NATALIE J. STROUD AND GINA M. MASULLO

The University of Texas at Austin



When thinking about the problems facing American democracy today, none strikes us as quite so potent, quite so insidious, or quite so devastating as affective polarization—the increasing animosity between social and political groups. It is characterized by the a priori distrust people feel when listening to someone with a different point of view. Affective polarization is not just a matter of seeing those with a different perspective as misguided.¹ It is also viewing their judgments as irrational, ascribing sinister motives to them, or even casting them as threats to democracy itself.

This group-based divisiveness permeates our lives. Other social groupings, such as religion and race, correlate with partisanship to form clusters of co-occurring social identities.² This means that discussions impinging on one aspect of identity can quickly implicate other elements of one's identity, triggering even sharper feelings of in-group favoritism and out-group hostility. Everyday acts that scarcely registered as political in years past—the car you drive, the neighborhood you live in, the grocery store you frequent, and the music you choose to listen to—now provide reliable clues about your social and political group membership.³

The real-world consequences of affective polarization are legion. Among individuals, there is an unwillingness to engage with different perspectives, which results in less reasoned and nuanced opinions. Affective polarization also seeps into everyday behaviors, influencing whom you date and whether you get a job interview.⁴ Some people favor limiting the rights of those opposed to their views and, even more worrisome, endorse political violence against those with different perspectives.⁵ Affective polarization also encourages extremist views, leading people to find other viewpoints so abhorrent as to leave no room for compromise.⁶ For government institutions, affective polarization becomes a losing game for the governed under any circumstances. If power is divided between two equally balanced governing institutions, such as the two houses of Congress, the refusal to compromise yields gridlock. If one party dominates government, such as holding the presidency and majorities in Congress, it further exacerbates polarization when the party enacts its will without compromise.

It is important to distinguish between affective polarization and other forms of polarization. Ideological or issue-based polarization, for instance, involves substantive differences of opinion on matters of policy. For example, people may hold opposing views on the best way to provide health care. This strikes us as normatively acceptable and, dare we say, even healthy in a democracy. Societies are better off when citizens have diverse views. When ideas productively clash and we are willing to listen to people marshaling evidence for their claims, we can reach more logical conclusions. When we recognize that groups prioritize shared values differently, we can be more empathetic. It's hard to see similar upsides to affective polarization, whereby ideas from the opposition are dismissed before they're even heard.

The increasing acrimony between groups has many sources, all of which build on our basic human tendencies to form groups that foster camaraderie, in part by identifying and demonizing

out-groups. Technology has not done us any favors in addressing affective polarization. Digital forums for online discussion reward loud and extreme voices. Comments on the *New York Times* website using partisan and uncivil language, for instance, receive more “recommends” from other site visitors than comments without this language.⁷ When sites reward comments and posts garnering more responses with higher visibility, they inevitably reward polarizing content. This can be seen in comment sections that prominently display comments receiving more recommendations, on social media platforms that algorithmically elevate content in news feeds based on user engagement, and among news organizations eager to post stories they believe will earn the most clicks and viewers. The current technological system feeds on—and privileges—polarization.

Foreign and domestic groups bent on causing disruption seize upon these divides. They strategically use disinformation, easily spread by both humans and bots on social media,⁸ to fan the flames of affective polarization. They engage in rhetoric designed to inspire emotional rather than cognitive responses because powerful emotions, such as anger, inspire action,⁹ whether clicking to share an article or spewing outrage at an adversary.¹⁰

At the time of this writing, we are living in extreme uncertainty. What will happen to the economy? Will Covid-19 have an even deadlier second wave before a vaccine has been discovered and widely administered? When we’re afraid for our lives and livelihoods, groups can be comforting. Identifying out-groups that can be blamed for the current situation can inspire confidence and further in-group loyalty. It gives us a sense of control to be able to point to someone, or something, as the source of our suffering. For conservatives, liberals are to blame for hyping the virus in order to oust President Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election, for infringing on individual liberties, and for creating economic hardship. For liberals, conservatives are to blame for de-emphasizing the dangers of the coronavirus, for prioritizing the economy above public health, and for causing cases to rise. Everyone has a known “other” to blame.

Signs of social breakdown caused by polarization are all around us. People “unfriend” acquaintances or even relatives on social media who disagree with them politically.¹¹ In some areas, people no longer operate under the same set of facts. People can easily find confirmation of their opinions online from sources proclaiming knowledge of the facts, whether or not these sources have any expertise in the subject. Institutions previously trusted to be arbiters of truth have buckled under the pressure of polarization. At one time, the national news media were a trusted source of information. No longer. Accusations of partisan bias emerging in the 1980s—though not always backed by evidence—have rendered the media less effective in cultivating shared knowledge.¹² Scientists, another group historically commanding respect, are often seen today as partisans on issues such as climate change. Institutions of higher learning, once regarded as the repositories of societal knowledge, are charged by some as liberalizing agents. Today there are conservative colleges that “provide an important counterbalance to the progressivism and liberalism that pervade so much of American higher education.”¹³ These charges of liberalism occur despite evidence that the college experience can, in some instances, further economically conservative views.¹⁴

There are several possible responses to this dire state of affairs. One is to throw up one's hands and conclude that these problems are too big to tackle. Although some certainly take this view happily, many others recognize that unless we make a serious investment in addressing affective polarization, all hope is certainly lost. Another response is to push against affective polarization by elevating rationality. But an over-emphasis on rationality can tamp down passionate debate that is valuable to democracy¹⁵ or silence marginalized voices.¹⁶

We advocate, instead, for the idea of connective democracy, or bolstering the ties that bind us. This means embarking on a coordinated effort to tackle a problem so massive that it cannot be addressed by any one person or organization. Coordination is challenging, given that different organizations have their own focus, their own means of determining priorities, and their own strategies for assessing effectiveness. Several recent efforts demonstrate that it can be done, however. For instance, several groups—the News Integrity Initiative, the Democracy Fund, the Lenfest Institute for Journalism, and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation—joined forces in forming the Community Listening and Engagement Fund to help local newsrooms connect to their audiences through digital engagement. Similarly, Arnold Ventures, the Children's Investment Fund Foundation, the Democracy Fund, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Knight Foundation, the Charles Koch Foundation, Omidyar Network's Tech and Society Solutions Lab, and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation joined together to fund Social Science One, an organization seeking to make social media data available to the academic community.

These examples demonstrate the wisdom of coordinated efforts in attacking a problem of such immensity. They also raise the question of whether organizations should come together around a single priority or whether they would be more effective by adopting a divide-and-conquer strategy in which different groups tackle different aspects of the issue. When it comes to philanthropy, the answer is probably the former. Dividing the problem into distinct subtopics can create problems for philanthropic organizations, which may then become dependent on fewer and less diverse funders, which, in turn, would make them more vulnerable to economic downturns or changes in funding priorities. It seems to us that coordination is essential. No single organization or philanthropist can hope to address this problem in isolation. Only by working together, identifying what is working and what isn't, and pivoting to more successful endeavors can we hope to make a difference.

More important than coordinating organizations and streams of funding for this work is to figure out what work should be undertaken to address the problem. We center our proposed solutions on the idea of connective democracy. Building connections among publics and between the public and government, the media, scientists, and other centers of expertise and representation are key to addressing affective polarization. These connections, in our modern era, are scalable thanks to media and technology. We believe that there are actions that individual citizens, organizations, and philanthropists, committed to the ideals and promise of democracy, can take. Three such actions are outlined below.

We must bolster and learn from institutions that maintain trust from diverse groups.

Despite high levels of affective polarization, there are institutions that earn high marks from the public. Local news media, for instance, are more trusted across divides than major national news organizations.¹⁷ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has also earned favorable opinions from those on the right and the left, at least as of polling from the Pew Research Center in March 2020.¹⁸

Philanthropists interested in combating polarization should be concerned with maintaining organizations that engender trust across divides. Local news, in particular, has been facing increasing economic challenges as public consumption habits change from print or broadcast to digital news consumption. This yields fewer advertising dollars and puts local newsrooms at a disadvantage compared to national news players. There are further signs of trouble for local newsrooms as companies like Sinclair Broadcast Group are accused of tilting local news toward conservative views (although some research puts this contention in question).¹⁹ Turning to the CDC, the trust afforded to the organization is fragile at best. Its failings during the coronavirus pandemic have been widely chronicled,²⁰ as has the fact that the agency's views and those of the president increasingly diverged in the summer of 2020.²¹ These moments may dismantle the CDC's position as a trusted source.

We need to ask some questions about those organizations that maintain the public trust. First, what is it about local media that inspires trust across divides? When a rancher from Montana thinks about whether a journalist from a national news organization based in New York really understands her problems, or even knows anything about her, there's good reason to question it. But when the Helena *Independent Record* writes about an issue, a Montanan has more confidence that she has been seen and understood. Second, can this trust-inspiring tactic be replicated? One of the many lessons of this pandemic is that some professions don't require in-office time to get the job done. Journalism, we suspect, is one of these professions. Can national news organizations radically reconfigure to be truly *national* news organizations, with journalists embedded in cities and towns across the country and truly engaged with local communities, much as local journalists are? This may require that stringers and correspondents for national media make more effort to let the public know they are there and mimic some of the community-building focus of local journalists. Similar objectives may be possible via less radical means. Report for America, for example, places journalists in different communities around the country. The experience could prove to be eye-opening for the journalists involved, changing their perspective for the future.

For example, news organizations could be better at determining the needs of their audiences and making sure that those needs are being satisfied. In a Center for Media Engagement analysis, we found that coronavirus coverage by local media on Facebook was, in some cases, aligned with what their readers needed to know.²² In other instances, however, their audience expressed

desires for information that was not being widely provided.

There also are lessons to be learned from the CDC. The Vaccine Information Statements given to parents when their infants are born contain information from the CDC about vaccine safety. Physicians provide these statements again each time a patient gets a vaccine. At critical moments, the CDC is there when needed, providing information and expertise. Perhaps this, too, could be replicated.

Studying these success stories can help us figure out what brings diverse groups together and can provide hints for how to move forward.

We must combat the manipulation of emotions in our public life.

It goes without saying that affective polarization feeds on affect. When people respond to social and political stimuli with feelings of affinity for those sharing their views and hatred for the opposition, rational arguments can go out the window. Identifying ways of encouraging the public to check their emotional responses is, therefore, of the utmost importance.

Institutions and frameworks can be set up to help with this. Social media, for example, could deprioritize content that inflames these passions, rather than elevating it in our social feeds. Platforms should promptly and consistently remove content that violates their terms of service before it goes viral. News outlets could avoid clickbait content designed to outrage people; research from the Center for Media Engagement shows that this type of content can prompt perceptions of fake news and dampen audience engagement with the news.²³

At the same time, it is essential to acknowledge the powerful emotional responses people, particularly those in marginalized groups, may have to discourse they view as trying to harm them. It is easy to discount their pain as an outgrowth of affective polarization, but a better response is empathy and compassion for how one's lived experiences influence how one sees the world. No one should be expected to be dispassionate in the face of viewpoints that challenge their very existence.

We must find opportunities to break across lines of difference.

Scholars have repeatedly found that positive experiences with those who don't share our views can break down barriers.²⁴ We must find ways to encourage these interactions, whether in person or through the media. One component of movements such as Black Lives Matter and Me Too is the mass sharing of experiences that illuminate the dark depths of a societal problem. Police brutality isn't an isolated incident; it is pervasive in Black communities. Sexual harassment and assault aren't isolated incidents; they are a common problem for women. Hearing from those with diverse

experiences will deepen our empathy for people whose lives are different from ours and help us learn from them. These interactions ultimately can build bridges.

Bringing groups with differing views together can run the risk of turning into shouting matches that accomplish little. But it's a risk we must be willing to take. We must also guard against the tendency of those with more societal power to dictate the terms of such interactions. We must learn to listen to one another with the intention of hearing what others have to say. And we must be compassionate with ourselves, so we can have greater compassion for others.²⁵

These are but three of many possible strategies for combating affective polarization. As we look to the thorniest problems facing the United States, we propose that affective polarization is among the most challenging. If we do not tackle this issue head-on, it has the potential to unravel the delicate fabric of democracy. Research and practice focusing on ameliorating affective polarization should be a priority for funders, and strategies like those suggested above could be starting points for understanding how to best curb this societal epidemic.

Natalie (Talia) Jomini Stroud is a professor in the Department of Communication Studies and the School of Journalism, as well as the founding and current director of the Center for Media Engagement (mediaengagement.org) at the University of Texas at Austin. The Center for Media Engagement examines commercially viable and democratically beneficial ways of improving media. Stroud's research has received national and international awards, including the International Communication Association's prestigious Outstanding Book Award in 2012 for her book *Niche News: The Politics of News Choice* and the inaugural Public Engagement Award from the Journalism Studies Division of the International Communication Association in 2019.

Gina M. Masullo (PhD, Syracuse University) is associate director of the Center for Media Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin and an assistant professor in the university's School of Journalism. Her research focuses on the ways in which digital space both connects and divides people and how that influences society, individuals, and journalism. She is the author of *Online Incivility and Public Debate: Nasty Talk* and *The New Town Hall: Why We Engage Personally with Politicians* and coeditor of *Scandal in a Digital Age*. She spent twenty years as a newspaper journalist before becoming a professor.

Notes

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