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Political Polarization: US Lessons for Latin America

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Executive Summary

The last two decades in Latin America have seen a rise in ideological and affective polarization and associated democratic backsliding. Among other factors, immigrants and the shares of people who use the internet are strong correlates of this trend in political polarization. This trend is concerning for policymakers because it can hurt democracy and governance through increased distrust among citizens and between citizens and political leaders and the media.

Building on existing work on political polarization that has focused primarily on the US, we identify three main drivers of polarization likely present in Latin America. First, echo chambers contribute to creating and reinforcing erroneous beliefs about out-group members, and thus to polarization. Second, despite their potential to counter polarization by exposing people to more ideologically diverse information sources, the supply of biased information has contributed to greater political polarization. Lastly, the surge of divisive political elites who use aggressive political narratives and general incivility toward political rivals fuels polarization by steering underlying differences.

We conclude that policy work needs to promote contact, conversations, and information flow between out-partisans to overcome echo chambers. Highlighting commonalities and reducing misperceptions should contribute to reducing polarization. Policymakers should also support initiatives that expose and promote the open-mindedness of individuals to more ideologically diverse information sources, especially counter-attitudinal ones. Moreover, efforts should be made toward debiasing individuals before presenting them with ideologically opposed information to prevent backfiring. Lastly, policymakers should engage with the political elites who use polarizing messages for political profit.

Definitions of Terms Used

- **In(Out)-partisans**: individuals who hold political views that align with (oppose) those of an individual.

- **Affective polarization**: the relative dislike or distrust of individuals, information sources, or political groups holding political views that oppose those of an individual.

- **Ideological polarization**: growing ideological distance between individuals in a society, often characterized by extreme political positions away from the center.

- **Counter-attitudinal information**: information inconsistent with or opposing an individual's ideology, beliefs, or attitudes.

- **Echo chambers**: groups of like-minded people who reinforce their preexisting beliefs by similar information exposure and repeated communication.

- **Causal research**: research that estimates the extent to which one phenomenon causally (not correlationally) affects another. This research uses experimental and quasi-experimental techniques to estimate causal effects. Experimental techniques require the random assignment of treatment and control conditions within a survey, in the lab, or in the field (in person or online), and compare how outcomes vary on average across conditions. Quasi-experimental techniques make similar comparisons but account for the fact that the assignment is not random.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, Latin America has witnessed an increase in both ideological and affective polarization, accompanied by the weakening of democratic institutions. Despite the importance of these phenomena, we have a limited understanding of the mechanisms through which this rising political polarization affects governance and democracy in the region. Shedding some light on these issues is a crucial stepping stone to identifying areas of opportunity and potential lessons for scholars and policymakers in Latin America.

We tackle this task by reviewing the existing evidence on political polarization, mainly from the US, to identify the primary drivers of the growth in polarization in Latin America in the last two decades, as well as interventions to counter such growth. We begin by providing an overview of the key definitions of polarization, identifying its negative impacts on democracy and governance, and describing its comparative evolution in the US and Latin America over the past few decades. We then explore the evidence of the primary drivers that underlie political polarization, including the formation of *echo chambers*, the *supply and biased processing of slanted information, and the rise of divisive political elites*. Namely, we describe the role that individuals, media, and political elites play in polarization. In doing so, we place particular emphasis on **causal research**. We also review interventions designed to address each of these drivers, focusing on the work and interventions conducted in the US, and to a lesser extent, Latin America, while highlighting the implications for the region. Finally, we outline potential avenues for policy research that could help address political polarization in Latin America.

Definitions, Relevance, and Trends

Takeaway: Political polarization is associated with negative consequences for governance and democracy. The trends in polarization in Latin America are similar to those documented in the US and paralleled by democratic backsliding. We identify key correlates of polarization in Latin America: internet use, online media fractionalization, and immigrant population.
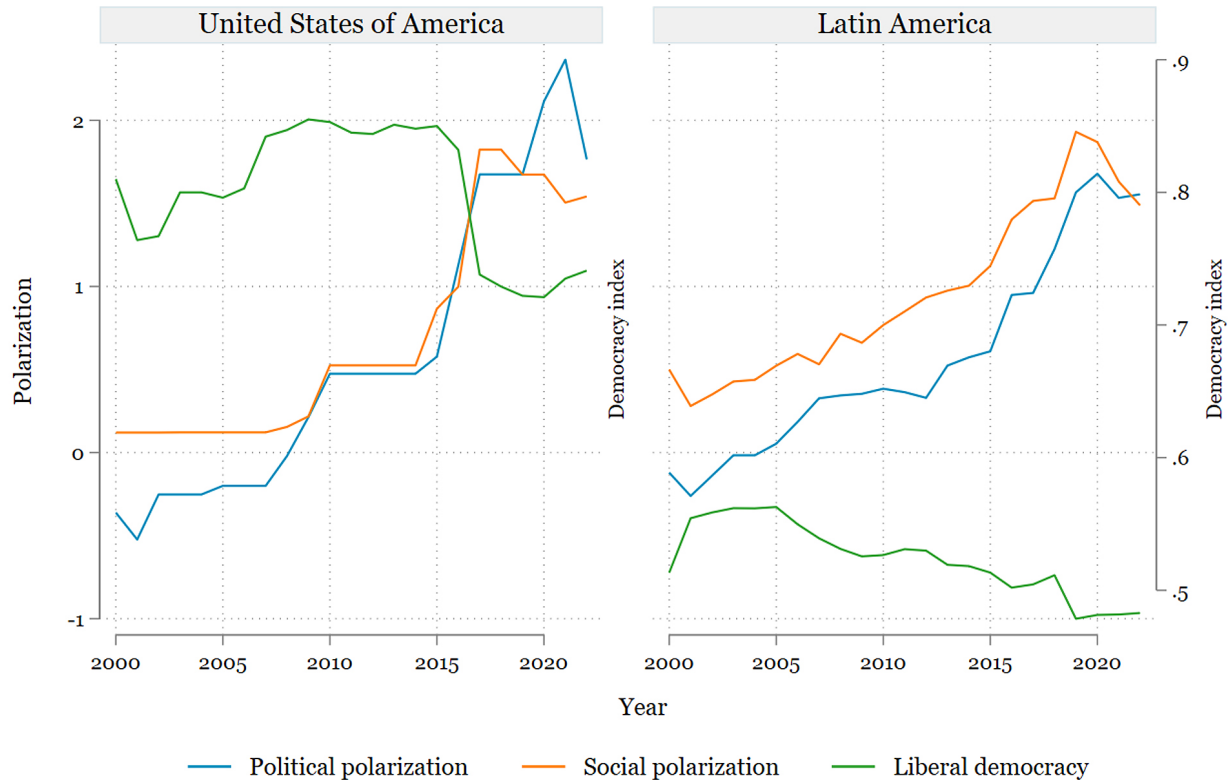
What is political polarization? Political polarization has two central notions: ideological and affective. On the one hand, polarization is characterized by a growing ideological distance between individuals in a society. Ideological polarization rises when societies' values and preferences diverge from the center. On the other hand, affective polarization is conceived as distrust or animosity toward people/information sources that belong to or identify themselves as part of a competing group. Affective polarization thus captures dislike toward members of a group, particularly a political group, mainly by assigning them negative characteristics and intentions. Ideological and affective polarization are correlated but do not necessarily move together. Regardless of the definition, polarization can vary along the lines of the relevant subjects driving it (political leaders or media vs. people) and according to whether it reflects increasing support toward members of one's group or dislike toward members of the other groups.

Why should we worry about political polarization? Research mostly from the US points to the pernicious effects of polarization, especially on democracy and governance. Polarization can impact democracy and governance through increased distrust among citizens and between citizens and political leaders and media. Polarization can distort people's perceptions of facts. For example, experimental evidence from the US indicates that in a polarized context, politization exacerbates the extent to which citizens argue against counter-attitudinal arguments, leading to increased polarization.[1] This is, in polarized contexts, people tend to be less open to different ideas and opinions. Additional evidence shows information disseminated over Twitter in the US and Facebook in Mexico is ineffective in persuading or even backfires regarding electoral accountability when presented with counter-attitudinal news.[2] In its extreme cases, polarization might even lead voters to choose undemocratic means to keep out-partisans unrepresented or out of the government.[3] Within elites, polarization can contribute to legislative gridlock.

The negative effects of polarization identified for the US likely extend to Latin America. Heightened distrust, distortion of perceptions of facts, and legislative gridlock are common phenomena in the region. The apparent democratic consensus after democratic transitions has been questioned and broken by the emergence of some anti-establishment movements. The democratic backsliding affecting several countries has occurred gradually, rather than abruptly, driven by intense political competition between increasingly hostile parties. **Figure 1** shows, using V-Dem data, that in the US and in the nine most populous countries of the region, the quality of liberal democracy and polarization have moved in opposite directions. Moreover, the evidence suggests those polarized societies are more susceptible to populism and the overturning of democracy, largely because people value their preferred policies and leaders over democracy.[4]

The negative effects of polarization identified for the US likely extend to Latin America. Heightened distrust, distortion of perceptions of facts, and legislative gridlock are common phenomena in the region.

Political and Social Polarization and Democratic Backsliding in the US and Latin America.

Political and Social Polarization and Democratic Backsliding in the US and Latin America. Political polarization is the extent to which society is polarized into antagonistic political camps, and social polarization is the extent to which society is divided over opinions on major political issues.

Data from V-Dem

Is political polarization a growing concern? Consistent and abundant evidence shows polarization among voters and elected officials has increased in recent decades for most countries, particularly in the US.[5] Importantly, increased perceptions of polarization have been inflated. That is, voters believe that other voters and politicians are ideologically more separated than they actually are.[6]

The study of the sharp increase in polarization in the US has not been paralleled by the study of polarization in Latin America. As Figure 1 indicates, the increase in polarization has followed similar trends in the US and Latin America.
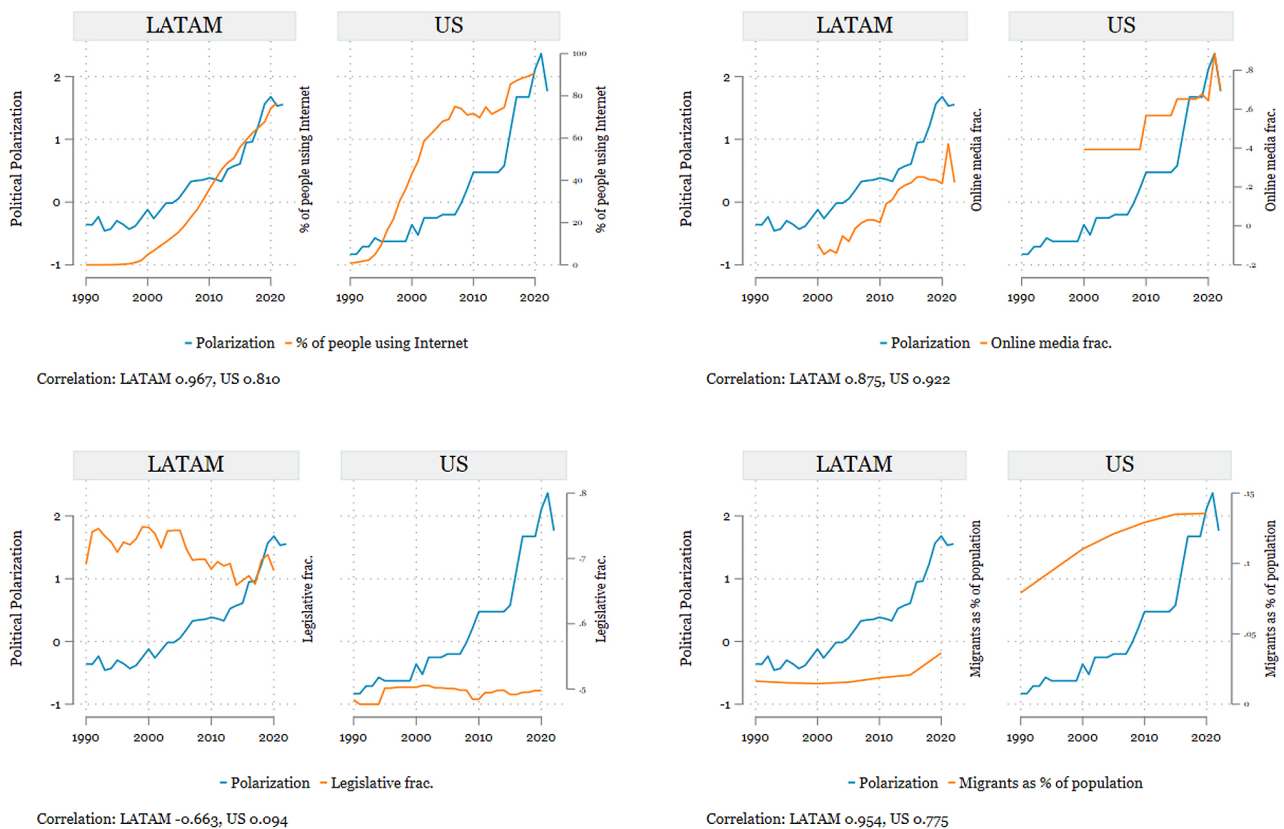
Correlates of Polarization

What might explain the growing political polarization in the US and Latin America? A recent study explores the correlates of polarization across 12 OECD countries since the 1980s. The authors mainly find that changes in polarization are associated with

the increased prevalence of 24-hour news channels—such as CNN and Fox News—the share of non-white population, and polarization of the elites.[7] In **Figure 2**, we have replicated their analysis with data for the US and the mean of the nine most populous Latin American countries.[8]

Unlike their findings, first, we observe a strong positive correlation between the share of people who use the internet and polarization in the US and Latin America. Second, online media fractionalization is positively associated with polarization in both contexts. Third, the immigrant population correlates strongly with polarization in the US and Latin America. Fourth, in contrast to these authors, we find that legislative fractionalization, which captures the chances of randomly selecting two members of Congress from different parties and is thus a proxy for elite polarization, does not correlate positively with polarization anywhere.

Figure 2:
Political and Social Polarization and Democratic Backsliding in the US and Latin America.

Correlation: LATAM 0.967, US 0.810

Correlation: LATAM 0.875, US 0.922

Correlation: LATAM -0.663, US 0.094

Correlation: LATAM 0.954, US 0.775

V-DEM is the source for the main variable and for online media fractionalization. Data on the share of people who use the internet and the total population come from the World Bank. Data on legislative fractionalization and migrants as a share of the population come from the IADB's Database of Political Institutions and DataMIG (Census Bureau for the US), respectively.

Beyond these common factors, the sources behind the rise in polarization in Latin America and the US likely differ. The ideological divisions are not the same. In Latin America, the right-left and liberal-conservative continuum is less useful in capturing the main debates and political fights due to, among other issues, multipartyism. Large national political parties are often more ideologically fluid (e.g., Argentina's Justicialist Party, Brazil's Social Liberal Party, and Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party). At the same time, especially in the last years, an establishment versus anti-establishment clash, which cuts across traditional ideological and policy differences, has driven polarization in the region. Traditional parties and movements have been replaced by new ones led by populist figures (e.g., Mexico's MORENA and Venezuela's Fifth Republic Movement), reshaping conceptions of in- and out-partisans.

Drivers of Polarization: Evidence and Associated Interventions

Three primary drivers of political polarization have been identified: **(1) the creation of *echo chambers***, that is, groups of like-minded people who reinforce their preexisting beliefs by similar information exposure and repeated communication, **(2) the *supply and biased processing of slanted information***, and (**3**) **the rise of *political elites who sow division* in the societies they govern.** Together, these drivers represent stages in which individuals adopt identities or group affiliations and form opinions or attitudes toward both in-group and out-group members. We discuss empirical evidence, primarily from the US and, whenever available, from Latin America or related contexts, to examine each of these drivers and their implications for understanding polarization in the region. We also provide an overview of interventions implemented in the US, as well as rare examples from Latin America, that target specific mechanisms underlying polarization, and assess their potential to address political polarization in the region.

Echo Chambers

Takeaways: Echo chambers contribute to creating and reinforcing erroneous beliefs about out-group members, and thus to polarization. Promoting contact and conversations between out-partisans, and even providing experiences of out-group members, helps highlight commonalities and reduce misperceptions, and ultimately helps overcome echo chambers and reduce polarization.

What are echo chambers? Evidence from the US indicates citizens tend to form and interact within homogenous groups, consume congruent information, and reproduce it among like-minded individuals of their in-group both in person and online.[9] The resulting biased information consumption and sharing leads to overweighting of like-minded, similar information, given that individuals tend to neglect the extent to which the information signals they receive are correlated.[10] Ultimately, different groups receive and internalize very different information, resulting in greater ideological polarization.[11]

How do echo chambers contribute to polarization? People might have wrong perceptions due to the lack of interactions with certain out-groups, which leads to erroneous beliefs, often incepted by elites, that are reinforced by within-group communication. For example, the results of survey experiments in the US suggest that whereas people tend to overestimate

the extent to which those outside of their group dislike them, providing accurate information corrects this bias.[12] Additional survey data indicate both Democrats and Republicans (particularly extremists) dislike each other and overestimate the level of dislike of the other group toward them.[13] This type of sorting, especially in the US, has been fueled by the fact that partisan lines increasingly capture other relevant social and demographic cleavages and trends, such as attitudes toward science.

What do we expect for Latin America? We also expect that the presence of echo chambers is an important driver of polarization in the region. Being the most unequal region on the planet, people largely interact in socio-economically homogenous environments. Recent research identified the emergence of well-defined echo chambers on Twitter amid the mayoral election in Medellin, Colombia, in 2019.[14] Members of these networks spread misinformation, attacking the opposing candidate. What might be different than in the US context, however, is the relevant cleavages and thus dimensions driving echo chamber formation and subsequent polarization. For example, whereas common drivers of cleavages, such as race and socio-economic status, are closely intertwined in both Latin America and the US, the degree of intertwining varies significantly across countries in Latin America. In Brazil and Paraguay, poverty is largely concentrated among indigenous and afro-descendant population, but the relationship is much weaker in Chile and Uruguay.[15] We thus expect racial differences to be more likely to contribute to polarization in the former than in the latter.

> One of the main reasons why affective polarization declines after interactions with or receiving information from out-partisans is that people focus on their commonalities rather than their differences.

Interventions

How do interventions aimed at countering polarization that is associated with echo chambers work and are they effective? They focus on promoting contact between out-partisans, highlighting commonalities between them and reducing misperceptions about each other.[16] Evidence from the US indicates affective polarization declines when even the most radical out-partisans interact and dialogue. For example, a recent study of the America in One Room Initiative, an event in which a diverse group of voters from around the US met and deliberated for one week, found participants displayed lower levels of affective polarization in terms of policies and attitudes.[17] Republicans and extreme voters saw the largest effects. Other studies find that when Republicans and Democrats talk with each other, whether about politics or other topics, animosity is reduced.[18] Importantly, these findings have been implemented by several non-profit organizations, such as Braver Angels and Bridge USA, that facilitate intergroup conversations to combat prejudice and highlight commonalities.[19]

Even if people cannot meet others with opposing views, hearing from their experiences can be useful. Perspective-getting can be as successful as or more successful than meeting people to reduce hostility towards an out-group, especially if it focuses on their personal experiences. A recent field experiment in the US showed perspective-getting consistently reduces exclusionary attitudes toward unauthorized migrants.[20] Similarly, providing a more accurate description of out-partisans can reduce animosity, because it is driven by attitudes toward extreme (stereotypical), not median, opposing members. Scholars have observed that US voters have a biased image of out-partisans, and have shown with experimental survey data that correcting those misperceptions reduces affective polarization.[21] Organizations such as All Sides promote these types of interventions in the US.

One of the main reasons why affective polarization declines after interactions with or receiving information from out-partisans is that people focus on their commonalities rather than their differences. For example, survey experimental evidence in the US suggests highlighting the (common) American identity reduces affective polarization between Republicans and Democrats.[22]

Finally, additional evidence shows content moderation, which we consider a way to limit information dissemination that reinforces in-group beliefs, reduces polarization. A study in Germany found the enactment of content moderation laws in 2017 decreased offensive activity on both Facebook and Twitter by far-right groups and reduced hate crimes.[23] Along these lines, several non-profit organizations, such as Foxglove and Superrr, and initiatives, such as The Santa Clara Principles, aim to moderate content in the US.

What about interventions from Latin America? The evidence is much scarcer and indicates the successful interventions in the US work equally well in Latin America. Experimental evidence from Mexico suggests getting opposing people to engage in cooperative interactions online has the potential to reduce polarization.[24] Similarly, an online experiment in Brazil showed people are more likely to follow back a person on Twitter from an opposing political party if they root for the same football team, which highlights the importance of identifying the commonalities that might trump affective polarization.[25] To our knowledge, no analogous initiatives, or non-profit organizations, are present in Latin America that, as in the US, facilitate intergroup conversations and moderate content to reduce polarization, which suggests a great opportunity for policymakers.

Supply and Biased Processing of Slanted Information

Takeaway: Ideological news has contributed to greater political polarization. Despite its potential to counter polarization by exposing people to more ideologically diverse information sources, social media has contributed to increased polarization. The most promising interventions to counter polarization are those that expose individuals to counter-attitudinal news sources.

What is the role that the supply of information has played in the recent growth of polarization? In the US, the emergence of ideological news has causally contributed to polarizing the electorate. For example, both the introduction of Fox News to the channel repertoire of a town in 2000 and an early position of the channel in the cable lineup in 2008 increased

the vote share for the Republican Party in the corresponding presidential election.[26] Moreover, evidence shows the effects are driven by individuals initially both moderate and extreme.[27] However, if people consume a diverse set of biased news, polarization might even decrease. Namely, the simultaneous proliferation of right-wing and left-wing media could reduce polarization. Unfortunately, this theoretical possibility is unlikely to be realized when individuals consume like-minded information, discounting news from discordant sources.[28]

Additionally, causal evidence suggests the introduction of the internet and social media have contributed to political polarization. For instance, mobile broadband internet has been found to increase polarization in the US and increase votes for extreme parties in Europe.[29] Similarly, social media's algorithms have been found to promote exposure to like-minded news,[30] which strengthens echo chambers, thus contributing to polarization in non-electoral times.[31] Again, although some authors argue social media does not necessarily increase polarization, because consumers are exposed to diverse information,[32] getting individuals to consume discordant information is challenging.

What about Latin America? In this regard, the region resembles the US. As Figure 2 suggests, we expect traditional ideological and social media to have contributed to polarization. In Latin America, traditional media has historically been concentrated, with a few TV broadcasters, newspapers, and radio stations holding almost all the market share. Among other factors, the excessive engagement of governments in media markets, first via autocratic restrictions and then via publicity purchasing or regulations, created comparatively homogenous news environments. Electoral competition and the proliferation of the internet and social media have led to a more diverse and biased information supply, and thus news consumption that is likely biased. Currently, although not as openly ideological as in the US, the main media players in Latin America exhibit clear biases in their coverage, while consumers sort into like-minded news sources. Moreover, Latin American countries have widespread internet access, and most of their population is active on social media, which has likely contributed to the recent trends in polarization. Evidence shows access to mobile broadband internet has contributed to the growing polarization in Mexico, but less so when individuals have more ideologically heterogeneous social networks.[33]

Interventions

What do interventions aimed at tackling polarization do to counter the supply and biased processing of slanted information, and are they effective? Three types of interventions have taken place in the US. First, some interventions expose individuals to ideologically opposing information. Their results are promising but temporally limited and restricted to off-election times. Noticeably, asking Facebook users to follow non-ideologically aligned news outlets on Facebook increases the consumption of those news sites and decreases affective polarization, but has no effect on political opinions within a month.[34] Similarly, making regular Fox News viewers watch CNN routinely moderated their political attitudes but did not reduce affective polarization.[35] Importantly, the effects on political attitudes disappear after months. However, changing media diets by increasing exposure to partisan online media is not always effective, with some interventions even generating a backlash. For instance, evidence shows exposure to ideologically opposing views through a Twitter bot increased political polarization within one month.[36]

A second type of intervention has focused on deactivating individuals from social media, with success limited to non-electoral times. For instance, one study found deactivating from Facebook during non-electoral times leads to lower political polarization.[37] However, another study shows no effect of Facebook deactivation ahead of the 2020 US elections.[38] Similarly, deactivating multimedia in WhatsApp before the 2022 Brazilian elections did not affect polarization.[39]

Lastly, preventing backfiring by, among other efforts, debiasing individuals before presenting information has been the focus of recent successful studies. Preemptively suggesting people avoid becoming politicized or being more open-minded makes them more trustful and receptive to non-ideologically aligned information.[40]

What about interventions in Latin America? Studies along these lines from the region reach similar conclusions. Promising evidence from Mexico suggests that although political information disseminated on Facebook can generate backlash, nudging individuals not to become polarized before introducing the information source prevents backfiring and contributes to information internalization.[41] However, an experiment during the 2019 presidential debates in Argentina identified that neither exposing people to counter-attitudinal information nor decreasing their engagement with social media reduced polarization. Conversely, these two interventions backlashed and boosted polarization among subjects already sorted in echo chambers.[42]

The Rise of Divisive Political Elites

Takeaway: Political elites can sow polarization through divisive narratives, but the evidence in this regard is mostly qualitative.

What is the role that political elites play in explaining the growth in polarization? US evidence indicates polarization of the elites may lead to polarization of voters and that voters tend to be more partisan if they believe their political system is more polarized.

Politicians can contribute in many ways to polarization. Regardless of their intention, they simplify multiple issues and divisions and present all-encompassing options that oppose others. During electoral periods, hostility and partisanship increase due to negative advertisements between political candidates. The use of aggressive political narratives and general incivility toward political rivals might be an effective strategy, but it can increase polarization by steering underlying differences.

What about the evidence from Latin America? As in the other mechanisms of polarization, evidence from the region in this regard is scarce. One of the few quantitative analyses finds electoral instability is correlated with polarization in Latin America.[43] Qualitative evidence points to the role of politicians in sowing polarization in Latin America.[44] A simple overview of the political dynamic since the turn of the century suggests an increase in the use of polarizing messages from the political elites. Throughout the region, new popular leaders who resort to divisive discourse have either risen to power or deeply shaped the party systems. From Chavez's Venezuela to Bolsonaro's Brazil, this realignment has broken former

consensus and created hostility among rivals, jeopardizing the primacy of democracy over political victory. Thus, in this dimension, Latin America seems to be in line with the developments in the US.

Interventions

Are any interventions aimed at limiting the political polarization sowed by political elites? Unfortunately, not to our knowledge. Non-causal, and thus weaker, evidence suggests social polarization declines when coalitions of parties (in parliamentary systems) co-govern [45] and when parties have a higher share of women parliamentarians.[46] Causal evidence from the US indicates polarization also declines when voters perceive that opposing political leaders interact warmly.[47] Hence, specific policies, such as gender quotas, widely prevalent in Latin America, and electoral rules that promote elite cooperation, such as runoff elections, may have mitigated the rise in polarization in the region.

Next steps

What is next for policymakers in Latin America? The bulk of studies trying to understand how to counter polarization comes from the US. However, we have discussed reasons to believe their conclusions extend to Latin America. Therefore, the US provides promising lessons for tackling political polarization, which the media and the political elites have increasingly mentioned as a key problem to solve in Latin America. Supporting initiatives that reduce partisan animosity and content moderation, promote the consumption of ideologically varied news, and point to political elites who use polarizing messages for political profit in the region is necessary.

About the Authors

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Notes

1 Groenendyk and Krupnikov (2021).

2 Bail et al. (2018) and Enriquez et al. (2022).

3 Kingzette et al. (2021).

4 Graham and Svolik (2020) and Svolik (2019).

5 See, e.g., Boxell et al. (2020), Canen et al. (2020), Draca and Schwarz (2020), and Gentzkow et al. (2019).

6 Rudolph and Hetherington (2021), Moore-Berg et al. (2020), and Lees and Cikara (2019).

7 Boxell et al. (2020).

8 As in Figure 1, our measures of polarization and some correlates come from V-DEM, and additional correlates are from the Inter-American Development Bank's (IADB) Database of Political Institutions and World Bank (WB).

9 See Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010), González-Bailón et al., (2023), Levy (2021), Martin and Yurukoglu (2017), Guess et al. (2023), and Nyhan et al. (2023).

10 Chandrasekhar et al. (2020).

11 Recent evidence around the 2020 US elections counters this argument (Nyhan et al., 2023). However, the experiment took place at a time of very heightened political polarization, when a marginal change in the social media algorithm is unlikely to have had a meaningful impact on political polarization.

12 Lees and Cikara (2019).

13 Moore-Berg et al. (2020).

14 Lombana-Bermúdez et al. (2022).

15 CEPAL (2016).

[16] Hartman et al. (2022) and Voelkel et al. (2023).

[17] Fishkin et al. (2021).

[18] Rossiter (2021) and Combs et al. (2023).

[19] Swanson (2021).

[20] Kalla and Broockman (2023).

[21] Ahler and Sood (2018).

[22] Levendusky (2018).

[23] Jiménez Durán et al. (2022).

[24] Greene et al. (2022).

[25] Ajzenman et al. (2023).

[26] DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007) and Martin and Yurukoglu (2017).

[27] De Benedictis-Kessner et al. (2019) and Levendusky (2013).

[28] Cheng and Hsiaw (2022) and Gentzkow et al. (2021).

[29] Guriev et al. (2021).

[30] See Allcott et al.'s (2020) field experimental design of getting people to deactivate Facebook and Levy's (2021) experiment designed to get people to consume counter-attitudinal news sources.

[31] Nyhan et al. (2023) show no effect of Facebook deactivation ahead of the 2020 US elections, a time of heightened political polarization.

[32] Barberá (2015).

[33] Enríquez, Larreguy, and Lujambio (2023).

[34] Levy (2021).

[35] Broockman and Kalla (2023).

[36] Bail et al. (2018).

[37] Allcott et al. (2020).

[38] Nyhan et al. (2023).

[39] Ventura et al. (2023).

[40] Bolsen and Druckman (2015) and Groenendyk and Krupnikov (2021).

[41] Enríquez, Larreguy, and Lujambio (2023).

[42] Di Tella et al. (2021).

[43] Moraes and Béjar (2022).

[44] McCoy and Somer (2019).

[45] Horne et al. (2022).

[46] Adams et al. (2022).

[47] Huddy and Yair (2021).

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