



Political Polarization and Its Impact on Democratic Stability

Areeba Khalid

ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
History Revised format: Out, 2018 Available Online: Dec, 2018 Keywords: Political polarization, democratic stability, affective polarization, democratic institutions, political parties	Political polarization has emerged as one of the most significant challenges confronting contemporary democratic systems. Although political disagreement and ideological competition are essential elements of representative democracy, polarization becomes harmful when citizens and political leaders divide into mutually hostile camps that refuse to recognize one another as legitimate participants in the democratic process. This article examines the relationship between political polarization and democratic stability through a qualitative and analytical review of comparative political scholarship, with particular attention to developing democracies such as Pakistan. It distinguishes ideological polarization from affective, elite, social, and institutional polarization and explains how these forms of division can reinforce one another. The analysis demonstrates that extreme polarization weakens democratic stability by reducing political compromise, encouraging legislative gridlock, undermining electoral legitimacy, politicizing state institutions, spreading disinformation, and increasing public tolerance for undemocratic actions committed by preferred political leaders. In deeply polarized environments, political competition is increasingly viewed as a struggle for survival rather than a legitimate contest over public policy. The article further argues that polarization is intensified by economic inequality, exclusionary political narratives, weak internal party democracy, partisan media, social-media echo chambers, institutional imbalance, and unresolved ethnic or ideological divisions. Pakistan illustrates how confrontation among political elites, distrust of electoral procedures, media fragmentation, and the personalization of party politics can weaken governance and national cohesion. The study concludes that democratic stability requires more than periodic elections. It depends on institutional neutrality, constitutional restraint, political dialogue, responsible media practices, civic education, electoral credibility, and a shared commitment to democratic rules. Sustainable depolarization should therefore focus not on eliminating political differences but on preventing disagreement from becoming hostility, dehumanization, and rejection of constitutional democracy.

Independent Researcher, Department of Political and Democratic Studies, Lahore, Pakistan

Email: areeba.khalid@example.com

Introduction:

Democracy is founded on disagreement. Political parties compete because citizens possess different preferences regarding taxation, welfare, religion, national identity, foreign policy, economic development, and the distribution of public resources. Healthy political disagreement allows competing interests to be represented, encourages accountability and gives voters meaningful alternatives. Consequently, polarization is not automatically incompatible with democracy. Moderate ideological differences can clarify electoral choices, mobilize citizens and stimulate policy debate. The democratic danger emerges when political disagreement is transformed into permanent social hostility. Under conditions of extreme or “pernicious” polarization, society becomes divided into opposing camps whose members distrust one another, question one another’s patriotism and treat political defeat as an existential threat. Political identity begins to dominate other social relationships, while compromise is interpreted as betrayal. McCoy, Raman, and Some describe this condition as a mutually reinforcing division in which political identities align with deeper social, religious, ethnic, regional or cultural cleavages. Their comparative research connects severe polarization with institutional deterioration and democratic erosion. Contemporary scholarship has also shifted attention from purely ideological polarization to affective polarization. Ideological polarization concerns the distance between citizens’ or parties’ policy positions. Affective polarization refers to emotional hostility, distrust and moral rejection directed toward members of opposing political groups. Citizens may not be highly divided on every policy issue, yet they may intensely dislike rival parties and their supporters. Such emotional divisions make democratic cooperation difficult because political opponents are no longer regarded as legitimate competitors. The international context makes this subject particularly important. V-Dem’s multidimensional approach evaluates democracy through electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative and egalitarian principles. Its 2026 dataset and democracy report demonstrate that democratic quality cannot be reduced to the holding of elections alone; civil liberties, institutional constraints, participation, deliberation and equality are equally important. When polarization damages these dimensions, elections may continue while the substance of democracy gradually declines.

Conceptualizing Political Polarization:

Political polarization is a multidimensional process. Its most familiar form is ideological polarization, in which political actors move toward opposing ends of an ideological spectrum. Political parties may become divided over economic regulation, cultural values, religion, immigration, national identity or the constitutional distribution of power. Ideological differentiation can be democratic when it provides voters with genuine alternatives. However, extreme ideological distance makes bargaining more difficult because the policy preferences of opposing groups contain little common ground. Affective polarization is based on emotional attachment and hostility. Citizens develop positive feelings toward their political group and increasingly negative attitudes toward rival groups. Opponents may be portrayed as corrupt, immoral, unintelligent, disloyal or dangerous. Political affiliation consequently becomes a social identity through which individuals evaluate news, institutions and personal relationships. Research on affective polarization emphasizes that partisanship may operate like other powerful group identities, producing prejudice and discriminatory behavior even when substantive policy differences are limited. Elite polarization occurs when political leaders adopt uncompromising positions, reject informal democratic norms and mobilize supporters through divisive rhetoric. Elite behavior is particularly influential because citizens often use party leaders as sources of political information. When leaders question election results without credible evidence, attack judges, delegitimize journalists or describe opponents as enemies of the state, their supporters may adopt similar attitudes. Mass polarization refers to divisions among ordinary citizens, while institutional polarization develops when state institutions are perceived as aligned with particular political camps. Courts, election-management bodies, police agencies, accountability institutions, public broadcasters and administrative organizations lose legitimacy when their actions appear partisan. Even legally valid decisions may be rejected if citizens believe that institutions are serving political interests. Polarization

must therefore be distinguished from pluralism. Pluralism recognizes disagreement while accepting the equal political rights of opponents.

Major Drivers of Political Polarization:

Economic inequality is an important structural driver of polarization. When wealth, employment, education and public services are distributed unequally, citizens become more receptive to narratives blaming political elites, regions, ethnic communities or ideological groups for their insecurity. Economic frustration does not automatically produce polarization, but political entrepreneurs can convert material grievances into antagonistic political identities. The personalization of politics also intensifies division. In leader-centered parties, loyalty is attached to individuals rather than institutions, manifestos or democratic procedures. Criticism of a leader may be interpreted as an attack on the identity of the entire political community. Supporters may consequently defend unconstitutional conduct because they consider the leader indispensable to national survival. Weak internal party democracy further contributes to polarization. When political parties lack transparent leadership elections, policy-development mechanisms and meaningful participation by ordinary members, decision-making becomes concentrated in narrow elites. Leaders face fewer internal constraints and may benefit from confrontation because highly emotional supporters are easier to mobilize than citizens focused on policy performance. Traditional and digital media can amplify these tendencies. Partisan television programmers may reward confrontation because outrage attracts attention and commercial revenue. Social-media platforms allow political communication to circulate rapidly, but algorithmic selection, selective exposure and homogeneous networks can repeatedly expose users to information confirming their existing beliefs. False or misleading claims spread particularly effectively when they appeal to fear, anger and group loyalty. Research examining Pakistani political communication on Twitter between 2018 and 2022 identified hemophilic interaction patterns, in which political actors and audiences tended to connect with ideologically aligned groups. The study also demonstrated that digital networks reflected changes in political alliances and opposition coalitions, illustrating how social-media data can reveal broader patterns of political polarization. Historical and institutional factors are equally significant. Countries with unresolved ethnic, religious, linguistic or regional conflicts may be especially vulnerable when political leaders organize competition around these divisions. Majoritarian electoral systems can also create winner-takes-all incentives, particularly where control of the government provides extensive influence over administrative appointments, development resources and accountability institutions. Finally, polarization may be intensified by democratic disappointment. Citizens who experience corruption, unemployment, weak public services and repeated governance failures may lose confidence in conventional political processes. Populist leaders can exploit this dissatisfaction by claiming that only one authentic political movement represents the people, while all competing parties are illegitimate members of a corrupt establishment.

Mechanisms through Which Polarization Weakens Democratic Stability:

Legislative Gridlock and Policy Failure:

Democratic governance requires negotiation. Legislatures must approve budgets, enact laws and oversee executive institutions. Under extreme polarization, parties may reject beneficial policies simply because they originate from opponents. Parliamentary debate becomes symbolic confrontation rather than a mechanism for resolving collective problems. Persistent gridlock reduces public confidence in democracy. Citizens may conclude that elected institutions are incapable of responding to inflation, unemployment, public health emergencies, environmental problems or security challenges. This frustration can create support for executive centralization or non-democratic intervention.

Erosion of Electoral Legitimacy:

Competitive elections require uncertainty regarding outcomes but certainty regarding procedures. Parties should believe that they may lose a particular election while retaining an opportunity to compete again. Polarization disrupts this principle when political actors portray defeat as proof of fraud and victory as the only acceptable outcome. When electoral institutions are repeatedly accused of manipulation, public trust declines. Protest and legal challenge are legitimate democratic responses to

credible irregularities, but generalized rejection of electoral procedures can make peaceful transfers of power increasingly difficult. Rival groups may develop incompatible versions of political reality in which each believes that only its preferred outcome can be legitimate.

Tolerance of Undemocratic Behavior:

One of the most serious effects of polarization is the willingness of voters to tolerate violations of democratic rules by politicians from their preferred party. Citizens may oppose authoritarianism in principle but support restrictions on media, judicial independence or opposition rights when these actions provide partisan advantage. Solid argues that polarization weakens the public's capacity to act as a democratic check because voters face a trade-off between protecting democratic principles and advancing partisan interests. Graham and Solid similarly found that stronger partisanship and policy polarization reduce voters' willingness to reject candidates who violate democratic norms. This produces a dangerous cycle. Leaders recognize that loyal supporters are unlikely to punish democratic violations. They therefore face fewer electoral costs for attacking independent institutions, manipulating procedures or restricting opposition activity. Each violation increases distrust and encourages rival parties to adopt similar tactics when they gain power.

Politicization of State Institutions:

Stable democracies require institutions that are sufficiently independent to apply rules consistently. Polarization creates pressure to use accountability agencies, police organizations, regulatory authorities, public media and administrative appointments against political opponents. Even the perception of selective treatment can damage legitimacy. Supporters of one party may regard a court judgment as evidence of judicial independence, while supporters of another interpret the same decision as partisan persecution. Once institutional credibility collapses, legal decisions lose their capacity to peacefully settle disputes.

Decline of Social Cohesion:

Affective polarization extends political conflict into workplaces, universities, families and communities. Citizens become less willing to communicate with opponents, consume common information or cooperate in civic activities. Rumors and stereotypes replace direct interaction. The deterioration of social trust weakens democratic resilience. Democracies survive crises when citizens remain capable of collective action despite political differences. When society is divided into mutually hostile camps, even national emergencies may be interpreted through partisan narratives.

Political Violence and Democratic Backsliding:

Extreme rhetoric may normalize threats and violence. If opponents are portrayed as traitors or enemies, intimidation can appear morally justified. Violent incidents then reinforce fear and encourage demands for repression. Comparative analysis of episodes of severe polarization found that 26 of 52 democracies reaching pernicious levels of polarization subsequently experienced a downgrade in democratic status. Although this relationship does not prove that polarization alone caused every decline, the pattern demonstrates the substantial risks associated with prolonged, antagonistic political division.

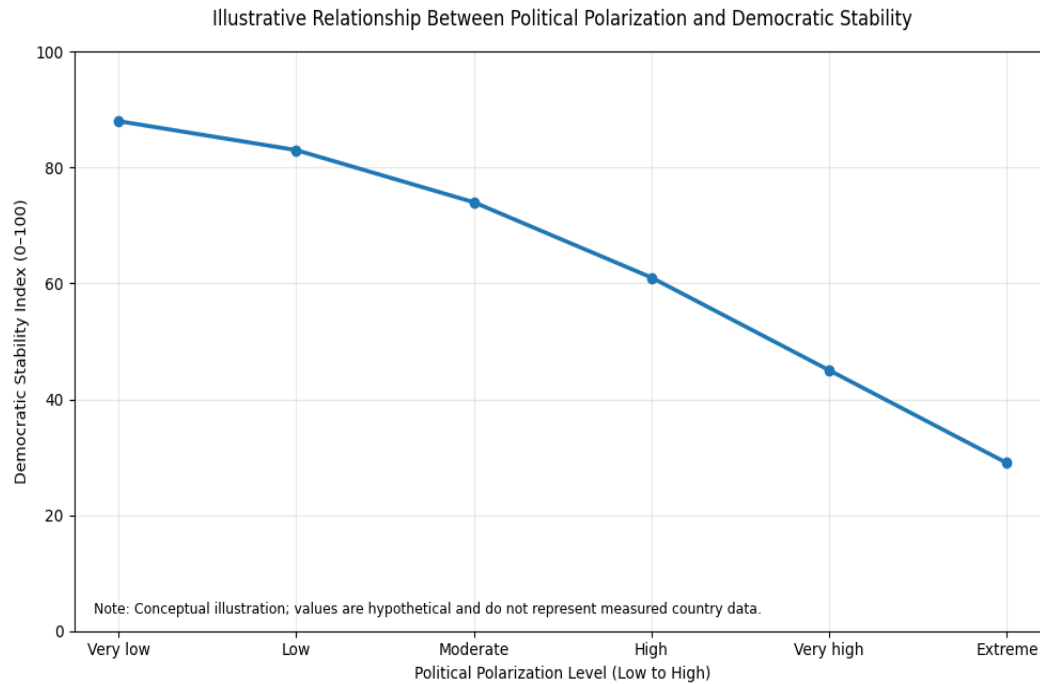
Political Polarization and Democratic Stability in Pakistan:

Pakistan's democratic development has historically been influenced by institutional imbalance, interruptions in constitutional government, weak party organization, personalized leadership, civil-military tensions, regional inequalities and contested relationships among state institutions. These factors have created conditions in which political competition frequently becomes confrontational. Polarization in Pakistan is not limited to disagreement among political parties. It includes divisions concerning political leadership, the role of state institutions, electoral credibility, accountability, religion, nationalism, provincial interests and media narratives. Political supporters increasingly interpret institutional actions through partisan identities. A historical study by Kantar argued that polarized politics presented a major challenge to democracy in Pakistan by intensifying identity conflicts and allowing political elites to mobilize social divisions for strategic advantage. More recent Pakistani scholarship similarly connects polarization with national-integration challenges, political intolerance and weakening social cohesion. A 2025 study in the Journal of Pakistan Administration

concluded that political polarization in Pakistan had deepened over the preceding decade and was associated with governance failures, declining institutional trust, public alienation and social fragmentation. The study also identified media narratives, elite conflict, disinformation, ideological divisions and economic inequality as important contributing factors. The personalization of political competition is especially important. Political parties are frequently identified with dominant leaders or families. As political loyalty becomes personalized, supporters may evaluate constitutional principles according to whether they benefit their preferred leadership. Accountability proceedings are interpreted either as essential justice or political victimization, depending on partisan alignment. Parliamentary confrontation creates additional instability. Opposition parties may boycott proceedings, reject consultation or rely primarily on street mobilization. Governments may respond by limiting opposition space rather than building consensus. Consequently, parliament's role as the central institution of political negotiation is weakened. Media polarization reinforces these divisions. Television channels, commentators, online activists and social-media influencers may adopt recognizable partisan positions. Political information is increasingly filtered through competing narratives, making it difficult for citizens to agree even on basic facts. Misinformation becomes powerful when it confirms existing suspicion. Polarization also affects policy continuity. Economic, educational, local-government and institutional reforms require implementation across multiple political administrations. When each government rejects the policies of its predecessor, long-term planning becomes difficult. Political energy is diverted toward accountability conflicts, protests and struggles over institutional authority. However, Pakistan's diverse society also possesses resources for democratic resilience. Federalism, parliamentary representation, an active civil society, professional associations, independent journalism, political participation and a large youth population can support democratic consolidation. These resources require institutions capable of converting diversity into representation rather than confrontation.

Strategies for Reducing Polarization and Strengthening Democracy:

The objective of democratic reform should not be to eliminate political disagreement. Complete political uniformity would itself be undemocratic. The goal should be to prevent disagreement from becoming dehumanization, institutional destruction and rejection of constitutional procedures. First, electoral credibility must be strengthened. Election-management institutions should operate transparently, publish clear procedures, communicate decisions effectively and provide accessible mechanisms for complaints and recounts. Political parties should agree in advance on electoral rules rather than accepting procedures only when they expect to win. Second, parliament should be restored as the primary arena for political negotiation. Regular consultation between government and opposition, empowered parliamentary committees and meaningful debate can reduce dependence on street confrontation. Major institutional and electoral reforms should be based on broad political agreement. Third, political parties should improve internal democracy. Transparent leadership selection, policy conventions, youth participation and internal dispute-resolution mechanisms can reduce personalization. Parties organized around programmes rather than individuals are more likely to compete over policy performance. Fourth, state institutions must demonstrate neutrality. Accountability agencies, police organizations and regulatory bodies should apply consistent standards irrespective of party affiliation. Transparent appointments and stronger legislative oversight can improve credibility. Fifth, media literacy should become part of educational and civic programmes. Citizens should be trained to verify sources, identify manipulated images, distinguish reporting from commentary and recognize emotionally provocative disinformation. Social-media companies should provide greater transparency regarding political advertising, coordinated manipulation and recommendation systems. Sixth, responsible political communication should be encouraged. Leaders have a democratic responsibility to criticize opponents without portraying them as enemies of the nation. Party codes of conduct, parliamentary ethics rules and professional media standards should discourage incitement, dehumanizing language and unsupported allegations.



Summary:

Political polarization is simultaneously a normal feature of democratic competition and a potential threat to democratic survival. Moderate ideological differences can improve representation by giving voters meaningful alternatives. Polarization becomes destructive when political identity develops into social hostility and rival groups cease to recognize each other as legitimate participants in public life. The analysis presented in this article shows that severe polarization damages democratic stability through several interconnected mechanisms. It reduces legislative compromise, produces policy paralysis, weakens trust in elections, politicizes state institutions and encourages citizens to tolerate undemocratic behavior by preferred leaders. It also fragments the information environment, spreads disinformation and transforms political competition into a zero-sum struggle. Affective polarization is especially dangerous because it extends beyond disagreement over policy. Citizens begin to judge opponents as morally inferior, disloyal or threatening. Under these conditions, democratic principles become conditional. Supporters may defend judicial interference, media restrictions, electoral manipulation or selective accountability when such actions disadvantage the opposing political camp. Pakistan demonstrates how polarization can interact with institutional imbalance, weak party democracy, leader-centered politics, media fragmentation, economic inequality and contested electoral legitimacy. Confrontation among political elites reduces parliament's capacity for negotiation and undermines policy continuity. Institutional decisions are frequently interpreted through partisan narratives, making peaceful dispute resolution more difficult. Nevertheless, polarization is neither permanent nor irreversible. Democratic stability can be strengthened through transparent elections, neutral institutions, parliamentary dialogue, internal party reform, civic education, responsible journalism and cross-party cooperation. Economic and social inclusion is also essential because political hostility flourishes where citizens experience insecurity and exclusion. The most important democratic principle is not political agreement but mutual legitimacy. Political groups must accept that opponents have an equal right to organize campaign, govern and criticize within constitutional limits. A stable democracy therefore requires political actors to remain competitors rather than enemies. Reducing harmful polarization does not require citizens to abandon their beliefs. It requires them to defend those beliefs without destroying the institutions that allow peaceful disagreement to continue.

References:

Kantar, N. (2009). Polarized politics: The challenge of democracy in Pakistan. *International Journal on World Peace*, 26(2), 31–63.

- Alma, I. (2025). Political polarization in Pakistan: Implications for governance and social cohesion. *Journal of Pakistan Administration*, 46(1), 112–154. <https://doi.org/10.65755/jpa-20254601-101>
- Blair, A., Galleass, A., Draco, A., & Solo, F. (2023). Social media polarization reflects shifting political alliances in Pakistan. *arXiv*. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2309.08075>
- Carothers, T., & O'Donohue, A. (Eds.). (2019). *Democracies divided: The global challenge of political polarization*. Brookings Institution Press.
- Graham, M. H., & Svulik, M. W. (2020). Democracy in America? Partisanship, polarization, and the robustness of support for democracy in the United States. *American Political Science Review*, 114(2), 392–409.
- Ishaque, W., Mukhtar, M., & Tanvir, R. (2022). Political polarization and challenges of national integration in Pakistan. *Annals of Social Sciences and Perspective*, 3(1), 153–166. <https://doi.org/10.52700/assap.v3i1.185>
- Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, 129–146. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034>
- Mason, L. (2018). *Uncivil agreement: How politics became our identity*. University of Chicago Press.
- McCoy, J., Rahman, T., & Somer, M. (2018). Polarization and the global crisis of democracy: Common patterns, dynamics, and pernicious consequences for democratic polities. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), 16–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218759576>
- McCoy, J., & Somer, M. (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), 234–271. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218818782>
- Svulik, M. W. (2019). Polarization versus democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 30(3), 20–32.
- Nord, M., Altman, D., Fernandes, T., Good God, A., & Lindberg, S. I. (2026). *Democracy Report 2026: Unraveling the democratic era?* V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg.