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**SOCIETAL POLARIZATION: AN EVOLVING
THREAT TO U.S. HOMELAND SECURITY**

by

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December 2023

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**SOCIETAL POLARIZATION:
AN EVOLVING THREAT TO U.S. HOMELAND SECURITY**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the context of escalating societal polarization and political violence in the United States, shedding light on their implications for homeland security. It poses the following research question: How does the social identity analytical method explain the rise of polarization and its attendant threats to homeland security in the United States? This study scrutinizes the role of social identities in shaping divisive perspectives and underscores the danger posed by polarization. The findings emphasize that polarization is not exclusively confined to differences in political beliefs but is intertwined with individuals' sense of identity, where deeply held affiliations and self-perceptions become significant drivers of division. This phenomenon poses a significant challenge to national unity and security. In response to these challenges, the thesis concludes by advocating comprehensive reforms in education, media accountability, and evidence-based research. Further, it highlights the importance of exploring global polarization trends and addressing the intersectionality of identities. This research identifies the multifaceted challenges arising from polarization and linked violence, emphasizing the urgent need for collaborative efforts to preserve national security and cohesion in the United States.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CISA	Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
LGBTQ+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other identities
MDM	misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation
PennMAP	Penn Media Accountability Project
PRRI	Public Religion Research Institute
SIAM	social identity analytical method
SIT	social identity theory

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past few decades, the United States has experienced an intensifying surge of societal polarization.¹ This phenomenon is not just about the widening gap in political ideologies or clashing worldviews, but the very fabric of society being strained, as evidenced in daily interactions, family discussions, political debates, and community gatherings.² Beyond verbal clashes and impassioned arguments on social media platforms, this polarization has manifested in more sinister ways, leading to actual acts of violence and civil unrest.³ Such incidents, linked to deep-seated societal divides, have escalated in frequency and degree to become genuine threats to the nation’s homeland security. This situation raises pressing questions: What are the underlying causes of this divide, what repercussions does the divide hold for the future, and most importantly, how can one begin to bridge this gap? This thesis seeks to answer these questions by exploring the intricacies of societal dynamics and examining the issue through the perspective offered by the social identity analytical method (SIAM).

The thesis emphasizes the evolving threat posed by societal polarization and violence to U.S. homeland security. Beyond eroding social cohesion, polarization creates fertile ground for radicalization, recruitment, and extremist ideologies.⁴ As polarization intensifies, so does the likelihood of violent acts, further eroding trust in essential institutions, impeding collaborative efforts, and hindering effective policymaking.

¹ Anne E. Wilson, Victoria A. Parker, and Matthew Feinberg, “Polarization in the Contemporary Political and Media Landscape,” *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* 34 (August 2020): 223–28, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2020.07.005>.

² Jill Kimball, “U.S. Is Polarizing Faster than Other Democracies, Study Finds,” News from Brown, January 21, 2020, <https://www.brown.edu/news/2020-01-21/polarization>; Bridget Bowman, “‘A Country on Fire’: New Poll Finds America Polarized over Culture, Race and ‘Woke,’” NBC News, April 26, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/first-read/-country-fire-new-poll-finds-america-polarized-culture-race-woke-rcna81592>.

³ Darrell M. West, “We Need to Take Political Violence Seriously,” Brookings, August 15, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/we-need-to-take-political-violence-seriously/>; Rachel Kleinfeld, “The Rise of Political Violence in the United States,” *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 4 (2021): 160–76, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2021.0059>; James A. Piazza, “Political Polarization and Political Violence,” *Security Studies* (forthcoming), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4156980>.

⁴ Piazza.

The thesis shows how SIAM explains the rise of polarization and its attendant threats to homeland security in the United States. To address these dynamics, it applies the principles of SIAM to distinct events and recent trends. A series of case studies encompassing a spectrum of identity-based conflicts—the U.S. Capitol assault on January 6, the Unite the Right rally, instances of political assassination and kidnapping attempts, domestic violent extremist attacks, and incidents of harassment and threats—indicates that polarization extends beyond divergent views. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in conflicts centered on race, politics, and religion.⁵ Moreover, how individuals perceive their social identities also plays a role. This research underscores the idea that the stark divisions in the United States arise from social identity dynamics and that polarization is a significant threat to the country’s homeland security. An individual’s identity—be it linked to political beliefs, cultural heritage, or socioeconomic classifications—significantly influences one’s self-perception and regard for others.⁶ This perception, paired with human bias toward one’s own group and setting oneself apart from outsiders, intensifies polarization. These innate divides become magnified when external elements such as media portrayals, leadership discourse, or pivotal socio-political happenings intervene, potentially escalating into acts of aggression.⁷ Deep-set identity conflicts can cultivate radical ideologies and factions and even manifest in outbreaks of violence and societal upheaval.⁸ Thus, they pose grave national security challenges.

⁵ David W. Brannan and Anders Strindberg, “The Social Identity Analytical Method: Facilitating Social Science-Based Practitioner Analysis of Violent Substate Conflict,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2023): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2256538>.

⁶ Brannan and Strindberg.

⁷ Lyn Van Swol, Sangwon Lee, and Rachel Hutchins, “The Banality of Extremism: The Role of Group Dynamics and Communication of Norms in Polarization on January 6,” *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice* 26, no. 3 (2022): 239–51, <https://doi.org/10.1037/gdn0000180>; Robert Axelrod, Joshua J. Daymude, and Stephanie Forrest, “Preventing Extreme Polarization of Political Attitudes,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 50 (2021): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2102139118>.

⁸ Kleinfeld, “The Rise of Political Violence in the United States”; Piazza, “Political Polarization and Political Violence”; Vera Bergengruen, “The United States of Political Violence,” *Time*, November 4, 2022, <https://time.com/6227754/political-violence-us-states-midterms-2022/>; Jennifer McCoy and Benjamin Press, “What Happens When Democracies Become Perniciously Polarized?,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 18, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/01/18/what-happens-when-democracies-become-perniciously-polarized-pub-86190>.

In synthesizing the findings, the application of SIAM to the U.S. context sheds new light on the dynamics of polarization. It highlights the significant role of social identities in shaping divisive views.⁹ However, the vast expanse of polarization suggests that while SIAM offers a valuable perspective, it might not capture the entirety of the issue. Factors like economic disparities, historical contexts, or existing institutional structures could play an equally, if not more, significant role in driving societal divides, signaling the need for a broader analysis.

The findings of the research underscore the pressing need for action to mitigate the threats posed by polarization to homeland security. This thesis provides a number of recommendations, ranging from reformed education and media literacy programs to media accountability and evidence-based research, and offers a roadmap for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners to navigate the challenging terrain of polarization. Furthermore, a call for more international comparative analyses of polarization and an exploration of SIAM's intersectionality applications points to promising directions for further research. A range of variables leads to this problem of polarization, so a variety of solutions is needed to overcome it.

⁹ Brannan and Strindberg, "The Social Identity Analytical Method."

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I. INTRODUCTION

January 6 was not an isolated event. The problem of domestic terrorism has been metastasizing across the country for a long time now, and it is not going away anytime soon.

—Christopher Wray¹

On January 6, 2021, the world watched as a collection of right-wing extremist and conspiracy theorist groups assaulted police officers and laid siege to the U.S. Capitol to disrupt legislative proceedings and prevent the certification of Joseph R. Biden’s presidency. Joined by a shared belief in electoral fraud and encouraged by an environment conducive to extremism, those present came from all walks of life and every corner of the nation.² Nevertheless, who were they? What motivated them to rally at the Capitol and ultimately commit acts of violence and illegal entry?

Evidence verifies that members of the following right-wing extremist groups took part in the January 6 riots: the Oath Keepers, the Proud Boys, the Three Percenters, and QAnon, among others.³ However, the momentum of these groups did not manifest overnight. Armed activists grew increasingly visible at protests of coronavirus restrictions in the early stages of the pandemic; racial justice protests, especially following the murder

¹ Eric Tucker and Mary Clare Jalonick, “FBI Chief Warns Violent ‘Domestic Terrorism’ Growing in US,” AP News, April 20, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/fbi-chris-wray-testify-capitol-riot-9a5539af34b15338bb5c4923907eeb67>.

² Ulrik Sagbakken, “A Review of Scientific Literature: Pertaining the Relationship between Social Media, Political Disinformation, and Political Polarization in the United States” (master’s thesis, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, 2022), <https://ntnuopen.ntnu.no/ntnu-xmlui/handle/11250/3008931>; Lyn Van Swol, Sangwon Lee, and Rachel Hutchins, “The Banality of Extremism: The Role of Group Dynamics and Communication of Norms in Polarization on January 6,” *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice* 26, no. 3 (2022): 239–51, <https://doi.org/10.1037/gdn0000180>.

³ Masood Farivar, “Researchers: More than a Dozen Extremist Groups Took Part in Capitol Riots,” Voice of America, January 16, 2021, https://www.voanews.com/a/2020-usa-votes_researchers-more-dozen-extremist-groups-took-part-capitol-riots/6200832.html; Michael Jensen, “It Wasn’t Just Proud Boys. Interconnected Extremists Converged on Jan. 6,” *Washington Post*, June 17, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/06/17/january-6-hearings-extremists-proud-boys/>.

of George Floyd in 2020; and political rallies in the fall of 2021.⁴ The mainstream media regularly features “violent ideas” once on the periphery.⁵ Citizens of the United States now seemingly embrace fractured identities, prioritizing their polarizing beliefs over “being American,” as described in the following paragraphs.

The preference for divisiveness and polarization, paired with atmospheric socio-political conditions favorable for extremism and politically motivated violence, has led to a volatile homeland security environment. American politics has become “an intergroup domain wherein people’s hate for opponents exceeds their affinity for co-partisans.”⁶ Contributing factors include a lack of trust in government; paranoia; widespread acceptance of conspiracy theories; questionable integrity and actions of politicians; unimpeded access to technology and social media that perpetuate mis-, dis-, and malinformation (MDM); and wildly biased “news” sources.⁷ Adding fuel to the fire, divisive public health, personal health, social justice, and political issues coalesced—emboldening and driving mainstream acceptance of extremist groups from across the spectrum—into the perfect storm now known as January 6. The attack on the U.S. Capitol revealed the evolving threat of polarization to the U.S. homeland and unfavorable trends in American civility, stability, and security.

As views migrate to the extremes, with the population’s fracturing into more radical group and subgroup identities, the United States faces a real and evolving domestic terrorism threat. Gaining a deeper understanding of the current situation in the nation requires a framework that confronts the issues of unchecked polarization and its role in

⁴ Andrew Hay, “Right-Wing Groups Clash with Counter Protesters in Several U.S. States,” Reuters, August 15, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-global-race-protests-stone-mountain-idUSKCN25B115>; Jason Wilson, “The Rightwing Groups behind Wave of Protests against Covid-19 Restrictions,” *Guardian*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/17/far-right-coronavirus-protests-restrictions>.

⁵ Rachel Kleinfeld, “The Rise of Political Violence in the United States,” *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 4 (2021): 160–76, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2021.0059>.

⁶ Gordon Heltzel and Kristin Laurin, “Polarization in America: Two Possible Futures,” *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* 34 (2020): 179, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2020.03.008>.

⁷ Samantha M. Korta, “Fake News, Conspiracy Theories, and Lies: An Information Laundering Model for Homeland Security” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2018), <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=811312>; Sgabakken, “Social Media, Political Disinformation, and Political Polarization.”

exacerbating extremism and ultimately leading to threats against homeland security. By reviewing the literature and leveraging the social identity analytical method (SIAM) as a framework, this thesis aspires to capture the rise of polarization in the United States over the last decade—exploring the causes and effects of political rhetoric, fake news, lies, and MDM and examining associated extremism. This thesis aims to reveal how significant a threat polarization poses to homeland security.

A. RESEARCH QUESTION

How does SIAM explain the rise of polarization and its attendant threats to homeland security in the United States?

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines the scholarly viewpoints on polarization in the United States. The research commences with academic debates about the current polarization in the country. Scholars point toward a rise of polarization, but there is a divergence of opinion about when this most recent upward trend in divisiveness began. The literature review features academic discussions about polarization’s distinct types and causes. It concludes with an analysis of academic debates concerning the effects and consequences of polarization. Most scholars agree that the United States is experiencing a rise in polarization and, without a course correction, express concern for the future of the nation’s democracy. The United States has experienced numerous examples of politically and ideologically motivated violence, and polarization continues to present itself as a legitimate and evolving threat to homeland security.

1. Polarization in America

American politics have become increasingly radicalized. Polarization continues to rise in the United States, and some scholars conceive of it as a long-term and sustained upward trajectory. Others envision it as cyclical; like a roller coaster, it rises and falls over time. Gordon Heltzel and Kristin Laurin offer two possibilities for the future of polarization

in America. First, “polarization is a self-reinforcing cycle that will continue to increase.”⁸ The second view sees polarization as “a pendulum that has reached its apex.”⁹ Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg assert that polarization in the United States has reached an all-time high and do not see an easy offramp for its decline.¹⁰ Likewise, Abramowitz and McCoy contend that throughout its history, America has experienced and overcome periods of deep political polarization, but “something feels different about this current period.”¹¹ They argue that former President Donald Trump’s deceptions and willingness to violate long-standing democratic norms—paired with the rise of partisan polarization, hostility, and mistrust—have changed the rules of American politics.¹² Whether polarization has hit its peak or continues to rise, it has already proven to be a significant issue facing the United States.

Even if misguided, political attitudes toward the opposing party drive beliefs and distrust. The percentage of Americans who show animosity toward opposing party members while maintaining an affinity for their politics has increased.¹³ Iyengar et al. concur that “a new type of division has emerged in the mass public in recent years: ordinary Americans increasingly dislike and distrust those from the other party.”¹⁴ In November 2021, the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) released the results of a national survey examining the expanding partisan divide around questions of American identity.¹⁵

⁸ Heltzel and Laurin, “Polarization in America,” 180.

⁹ Heltzel and Laurin, 181.

¹⁰ Anne E. Wilson, Victoria A. Parker, and Matthew Feinberg, “Polarization in the Contemporary Political and Media Landscape,” *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* 34 (August 2020): 223–28, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2020.07.005>.

¹¹ Alan Abramowitz and Jennifer McCoy, “United States: Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization in Trump’s America,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681, no. 1 (January 2019): 153, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218811309>.

¹² Abramowitz and McCoy, 153.

¹³ Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg, “Polarization in the Contemporary Political and Media Landscape.”

¹⁴ Shanto Iyengar et al., “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 22, no. 1 (2019): 129, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034>.

¹⁵ Megan O’Leary, “Competing Visions of America: An Evolving Identity or a Culture under Attack?,” Public Religion Research Institute, November 1, 2021, <https://www.prri.org/press-release/competing-visions-of-america-an-evolving-identity-or-a-culture-under-attack/>.

The PRRI survey confirms some respondents' convictions that "political violence might be necessary to fix the problems in America," based partly on beliefs about Trump's stolen election.¹⁶ Also, the survey results indicate the ongoing presence of the far-right ideologies that fueled the January 6 attack at the U.S. Capitol.¹⁷ Just a month before the 2020 presidential election, a Pew survey revealed that "roughly eight in ten registered voters in both camps said their differences concerned core American values and feared that a victory by the opposing party would lead to *lasting harm* to the nation."¹⁸ In this way, political parties see each other as an existential threat.

While research for this thesis does not reveal scholarly opinions questioning the recent rise of polarization in America, some scholars have highlighted the illusory effect of the media and other variables. For example, Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg claim that although affective polarization (opponent dislike) is on the rise in America, some of the ideological divides among the population arise from an illusion known as false polarization, created or embellished by news media, social media, and other factors.¹⁹ Likewise, according to analysts from Pew Research Center, America's relatively rigid two-party political system diverges from other polarized nations across the globe and may make differences appear larger than they are by consolidating so many social issues and political debates under two-party umbrellas.²⁰ Countries with multiple parties disaggregate specific environmental, economic, or similar issues, whereas U.S. parties represent an all-in-one approach. Remarkably, if perception is reality, severe opponent distrust and dislike have led some Americans to believe that addressing the problems in America may require political violence. As such, America's polarization should be ringing alarm bells.

Throughout this research, no literature has suggested that polarization is of little significance or concern. Most scholars offer moderate to more severe levels of concern

¹⁶ O'Leary, para. 2.

¹⁷ O'Leary.

¹⁸ Michael Dimock and Richard Wike, "America Is Exceptional in Its Political Divide," *Trust Magazine*, March 29, 2021, <https://pew.org/3bDV6Fa>.

¹⁹ Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg, "Polarization in the Contemporary Political and Media Landscape."

²⁰ Dimock and Wike, "America Is Exceptional in Its Political Divide."

about the current state of polarization in America. Kleinfeld points to the 1960s as the recent origin of political violence. She asserts that America has seen increased political violence incidents on both the left and right; however, it still comes “overwhelmingly from the right.”²¹ Further, Kleinfeld claims that “two subgroups on the right are most susceptible to acts of political violence: white Christian evangelicals and those who feel threatened by either women or minorities.”²² According to a recent PRRI poll, 30 percent of Republicans, as compared to 11 percent of Democrats, agree with the statement, “Because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence save our country.”²³ This figure is especially high among those who believe Trump’s false claim that President Biden and the Democrats stole the 2020 election.²⁴ By the same token, polls indicate that 6 percent of Democrats, 26 percent of Independents, and 68 percent of Republicans still believe that Donald Trump was robbed of the 2020 presidential election.²⁵ Polarization has led to an erosion of trust in American institutions, and many U.S. citizens now see violence as a legitimate means of addressing political and ideological problems.

2. Types of Polarization

Institutional polarization, affective polarization, and false polarization are the three types of polarization most referenced in scholarship. Although distinct in their definitions, they are interconnected. Scholars assert that *institutional polarization* processes—the trifecta of elites, news media, and social media—exacerbate people’s misperceptions of divisiveness throughout the electorate, known as *false polarization*.²⁶ In turn, false polarization results in a “self-perpetuating cycle” fueling animosity and mistrust—best defined as *affective polarization*—and a generalized, increasingly polarized

²¹ Kleinfeld, “The Rise of Political Violence in the United States,” 161.

²² Kleinfeld, 161.

²³ O’Leary, “Competing Visions of America,” para. 4.

²⁴ O’Leary, para. 4–5.

²⁵ O’Leary, para. 3.

²⁶ Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg, “Polarization in the Contemporary Political and Media Landscape.”

environment.²⁷ Therefore, minimizing false polarization may reduce institutional and affective polarization.

Political elites, amplified by news media and social media, have an outsized influence on institutional polarization.²⁸ Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg claim that political elites are inherently polarizing in combination with partisan news media and social media that propagate polarizing content.²⁹ Likewise, media outlets like Fox News and NewsMax allegedly peddle false, politically oriented information to viewers.³⁰ Scholars assert that U.S. elites, like mainstream and social media, are increasingly polarizing.³¹ Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg argue that institutional polarization is worsening partisan hostility and false polarization—leading to a perpetuating cycle of divisiveness.³² Therefore, promoting truth and facts in news and social media and encouraging integrity in political elites ought to result in lower institutional polarization.

Affective polarization, defined as mistrust and dislike of one’s opponent, is what comes to mind when people consider general polarization.³³ Abramowitz and McCoy describe the concept as “sympathy to the in-party and antipathy toward the out-party” whereas Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg characterize it simply as “opponent dislike.”³⁴ Within the American electorate, Abramowitz and McCoy claim that growing affective

²⁷ Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg.

²⁸ Christian Staal Bruun Overgaard and Samuel Woolley, “How Social Media Platforms Can Reduce Polarization,” Brookings, December 21, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/how-social-media-platforms-can-reduce-polarization/>.

²⁹ Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg, “Polarization in the Contemporary Political and Media Landscape.”

³⁰ Amanda Seitz, “Newsmax Peddles an ‘Alternate Universe’ of Jan. 6 Misinformation, Report Says,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-07-19/newsmax-peddles-jan-6-insurrection-misinformation-researchers-say>; Jeremy W. Peters and Katie Robertson, “‘The Whole Thing Seems Insane’: New Documents on Fox and the Election,” *New York Times*, March 8, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/07/business/media/fox-dominion-2020-election.html>.

³¹ Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg, “Polarization in the Contemporary Political and Media Landscape.”

³² Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg.

³³ James N. Druckman et al., “Affective Polarization, Local Contexts and Public Opinion in America,” *Nature Human Behaviour* 5, no. 1 (January 2021): 28–38, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-01012-5>.

³⁴ Abramowitz and McCoy, “Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization,” 138; Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg, “Polarization in the Contemporary Political and Media Landscape,” 1.

polarization accelerated after President Obama’s election in 2008.³⁵ Barack Obama, America’s first African American president, brought representation and voice to a minority population that had experienced a long history of discrimination while reinvigorating extreme groups from the right wing. One could infer that affective polarization has increased in America since 2008, leading to a more volatile and dangerous political environment.

Scholars frequently agree that misperceptions fuel false polarization, and institutional forces, including elites, the news media, and social media, can perpetuate it. Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg describe institutional polarization as the partisan belief or perception that the divide between political parties is much broader than it may be.³⁶ The media and political landscapes shape public perceptions of polarized political opponents. Scholars claim that these misperceptions may lead to false polarization, thus intensifying dislike of the opposing political party.³⁷ Fernbach and Van Boven agree that although political polarization in America is significant and increasing, partisans regularly overestimate its magnitude.³⁸ The problem with false polarization is that it inhibits compromise and expands actual polarization.³⁹ To reduce the risk posed by polarization generally, America should consider finding ways to minimize false polarization, which, in turn, would curtail affective and institutional polarization.

3. Causes of Polarization

The literature reveals five main themes as causes of polarization: social/racial resentment, economic insecurity, political partisanship, the news media, and social media. Iyengar et al. explain that scholars study polarization in the spirit of social identity and seek

³⁵ Abramowitz and McCoy, “Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization.”

³⁶ Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg, “Polarization in the Contemporary Political and Media Landscape.”

³⁷ Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg.

³⁸ Philip M. Fernbach and Leaf Van Boven, “False Polarization: Cognitive Mechanisms and Potential Solutions,” *Current Opinion in Psychology* 43 (February 2022): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.06.005>.

³⁹ Fernbach and Van Boven.

to find the origins and causes of affective polarization through this lens.⁴⁰ From a social and racial resentment standpoint, Cox et al. claim that “a number of analyses have shown in recent years that Americans are politically polarized and prone to inhabit ideological ‘bubbles.’”⁴¹ Along those lines, Abramowitz and McCoy assert that former President Donald Trump’s populist appeal led to the social “revolt of the white working class.”⁴² They cite racial resentment as a significant factor in Trump’s election to president in 2016. Along the same line, Van Swol, Lee, and Hutchins claim that “Americans increasingly dislike members of the opposing political group.”⁴³ They contend that with the U.S. Capitol attack, numerous protesters that day likened themselves to “patriots,” believing that the election was rigged or stolen and that *action* was necessary. This belief and attitude about “protecting democracy” self-reinforced political (and social) identities and polarized attitudes. Tom Nichols instead attributes the rise of illiberalism and polarization to the U.S. population itself, as well as rising living standards, relative global peace, the increase of unrestrained narcissism, and resistance to change.⁴⁴ Nichols warns that everyday Americans, full of grievances, have joined forces with political entrepreneurs who capitalize on the creation of rage rather than on the encouragement of civic virtue and democratic cooperation.⁴⁵ In this way, social antipathy, racial resentment, worries about personal economics, populism, partisanship, and financially motivated news media and social media have created the perfect storm for heightened polarization. The convergence of these factors underscores the multifaceted origins of contemporary polarization, highlighting the imperative for comprehensive solutions to bridge the growing divide in American society.

⁴⁰ Iyengar et al., “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization.”

⁴¹ Daniel A. Cox et al., *Socially Distant: How Our Divided Social Networks Explain Our Politics* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 2020), 12, <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=849033>.

⁴² Abramowitz and McCoy, “Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization,” 140.

⁴³ Van Swol, Lee, and Hutchins, “The Banality of Extremism,” 243.

⁴⁴ Tom Nichols, *Our Own Worst Enemy: The Assault from Within on Modern Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁴⁵ Nichols.

Personal economic considerations and standings have also played a role in polarization. Beyond social and racial resentment, Abramowitz and McCoy cite economic anxiety, meaning economic insecurity and worries about the future of one’s economic prospects, as another contributing factor in Trump’s election to president in 2016.⁴⁶ Likewise, Axelrod, Daymude, and Forrest identify the role of economic self-interest in exacerbating polarization.⁴⁷ A model developed by researchers at Princeton University indicates how economic decline, rising inequality, and group polarization may be strongly connected.⁴⁸ The results show that group polarization soars when inequality increases and economic situations decline. Remarkably, divisions may remain deeply rooted even after financial conditions improve.⁴⁹ Economic anxieties contribute to increased polarization.

Nearly all relevant literature acknowledges politics and identity’s role in polarization. Ezra Klein suggests that “America is polarized, first and foremost, by identity.”⁵⁰ Klein asserts that everyone engaged in American politics traffics in identity politics. Gallup says that “identity politics generally refers to people evaluating issues through the lens of their association with a specific group.”⁵¹ Likewise, Iyengar et al. trace the origins of affective polarization to partisanship’s influence on social identity.⁵² According to Klein, “Our partisan identities have merged with our racial, religious, geographic, ideological, and cultural identities” over the last three to four decades.⁵³ Klein believes these “merged identities have attained a weight that is breaking much in our

⁴⁶ Abramowitz and McCoy, “Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization.”

⁴⁷ Robert Axelrod, Joshua J. Daymude, and Stephanie Forrest, “Preventing Extreme Polarization of Political Attitudes,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 50 (2021): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2102139118>.

⁴⁸ B. Rose Huber, “Polarization Increases with Economic Decline, Becoming Cripplingly Contagious,” Princeton School of Public and International Affairs, December 11, 2020, <https://spia.princeton.edu/news/polarization-increases-economic-decline-becoming-crippingly-contagious>.

⁴⁹ Huber.

⁵⁰ “*Why We’re Polarized* / Ezra Klein,” Berkeley Law Library Catalog, 2020, <https://lawcat.berkeley.edu/record/1185887?ln=en>.

⁵¹ Frank Newport, “Identity Politics in Context,” Gallup, December 3, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/357812/identity-politics-context.aspx>.

⁵² Iyengar et al., “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization.”

⁵³ Berkeley Law Library Catalog, “*Why We’re Polarized* / Ezra Klein.”

politics and tearing at the bonds that hold this country together.”⁵⁴ Similarly, explaining polarization’s origins, Julian Zelizer claims that, through his rhetoric and tactics toward opponents, former Speaker of the House (1989) Newt Gingrich shaped Congress and the Republican Party more than any other politician in American history.⁵⁵ Gingrich introduced what Zelizer describes as vicious, divisive, and weaponized politics.⁵⁶ The legacy of divisive politics lives on in today’s fractured Republican Party.

The news media has come under scrutiny for its role in enhancing divisiveness, if not fueling it. In terms of the media’s role in causing polarization, Cox et al. posit, “Americans consume media that confirms their political predispositions and restricts relationships to people who share them.”⁵⁷ Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg assert, “The political and media landscape shapes public misperceptions of how polarized political opponents are,” leading to false polarization.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, misperceptions feel real to their beholders. Van Swol, Lee, and Hutchins recognize “the role of the media, especially social media, in developing like-minded content sharing and polarizing, extremist group norms.”⁵⁹ Kleinfeld contends, “Violent ideas that were once confined to fringe groups have become more commonplace in the mainstream media, which results in a heightened call to extremist or violent action.”⁶⁰ Thus, intentionally or unintentionally, the for-profit American news media plays a significant role in perpetuating content that polarizes the people.

Like traditional news media, social media accelerates affective polarization. Naval Postgraduate School alumna Samantha Korta describes “the interconnectedness [of the internet], search engines, blogs, social networking platforms, and media/academic outlets,

⁵⁴ Berkeley Law Library Catalog.

⁵⁵ Julian E. Zelizer, *Burning Down the House: Newt Gingrich, the Fall of a Speaker, and the Rise of the New Republican Party* (New York: Penguin Press, 2020).

⁵⁶ Zelizer.

⁵⁷ Cox et al., *Socially Distant*, 12.

⁵⁸ Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg, “Polarization in the Contemporary Political and Media Landscape.”

⁵⁹ Van Swol, Lee, and Hutchins, “The Banality of Extremism,” 239.

⁶⁰ Kleinfeld, “The Rise of Political Violence in the United States,” 160.

and how these connections can be exploited to launder false or purposefully misleading information into public discourse.”⁶¹ Korta asserts, “Due to the interconnectedness and accessibility of the internet . . . , a well-crafted narrative, whether true or false, can be spread rapidly online.”⁶² Applying the same principles to outside forces, Seth G. Jones claims that adversarial nations—including Russia, China, and Iran—leverage irregular warfare, using social media to threaten Americans’ physical and cognitive security by increasing public discord and intentionally undermining democracy.⁶³ Sagbakken’s thesis provides several examples of “producers of disinformation,” including trolls, fake-news websites, and bots—all of which can be leveraged as criminal tools and nation-state weapons to affect Americans negatively.⁶⁴ Clint Watts agrees with Jones, asserting that “the United States presently faces a sustained effort by Russia, Iran, and China unfolding on social media platforms and websites hosted in the Western world, designed to undermine American legitimacy and subvert its democracy.”⁶⁵ In May 2022, the cybersecurity authorities for numerous Western countries published a joint cybersecurity advisory detailing Russia’s persistent nation-state threat to the United States and its allies.⁶⁶ Social media contributes to the acceleration of polarization; most concerning is that foreign adversaries have found social media to be America’s Achilles heel and are actively exploiting digital discourse against the American people.

⁶¹ Korta, “Fake News, Conspiracy Theories, and Lies,” v.

⁶² Korta, v.

⁶³ Seth G. Jones, *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran, and the Rise of Irregular Warfare* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021).

⁶⁴ Sagbakken, “Social Media, Political Disinformation, and Political Polarization.”

⁶⁵ Clint Watts, “Triad of Disinformation: How Russia, Iran, & China Ally in a Messaging War against America,” Alliance for Securing Democracy, May 15, 2020, <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/triad-of-disinformation-how-russia-iran-china-ally-in-a-messaging-war-against-america/>.

⁶⁶ In May 2022, “the cybersecurity authorities of the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom [released] this joint Cybersecurity Advisory . . . to warn organizations that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine could expose organizations both within and beyond the region to increased malicious cyber activity.” The cybersecurity authorities warned that this activity, including MDM campaigns, “may occur as a response to the unprecedented economic costs imposed on Russia as well as materiel support provided by the United States and U.S. allies and partners.” “Russian State-Sponsored and Criminal Cyber Threats to Critical Infrastructure,” Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency, May 9, 2022, <https://www.cisa.gov/news-events/cybersecurity-advisories/aa22-110a>.

4. Consequences of Polarization

Most scholars agree that, overall, polarization can harm democracy, social cohesion, and the ability to address society's complex challenges. Literature with contrary claims is scarce. Throughout its history, the United States has endured and overcome periods of severe polarization (e.g., the Federalists versus the Democratic-Republicans in the 1790s–1820s, slavery and the Civil War through the 1860s, the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s–1960s, the Vietnam War from 1955 to 1975, and Richard Nixon's scandal in the early 1970s); however, Abramowitz and McCoy assert that the current period is different because it challenges political norms, especially civility and mutual respect among politicians and political parties.⁶⁷ Similarly, Axelrod, Daymude, and Forrest assert the importance of democratic societies' requiring compromise: "Extreme polarization can undermine democratic systems by making compromise challenging, if not impossible."⁶⁸ Polarization lowers trust in the government while increasing gridlock and legislative inaction, echo chambers and misinformation, divisiveness, social fragmentation, instability, and the propensity for political violence.

Is the United States at risk of a second civil war? Kleinfeld claims that, since 2017, Republicans and Democrats have espoused similar views on the acceptability of violence.⁶⁹ In parallel, Barbara Walter has compared studies of conflict and civil wars worldwide.⁷⁰ Through her research and lessons learned from many countries, she identifies critical risk factors, from democratic backsliding to factionalization and the politics of resentment. The modern-day United States exhibits many of the same red flags evident in countries embroiled in civil war. Walter claims that a U.S. civil war today would begin with sporadic acts of violence and terror, augmented by social media.⁷¹ In this context, Kleinfeld believes polarization has led to an uptick in political violence, citing death threats against elections officials and public-health workers, the January 6 event, and the plot to

⁶⁷ Abramowitz and McCoy, "Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization."

⁶⁸ Axelrod, Daymude, and Forrest, "Preventing Extreme Polarization of Political Attitudes," 1.

⁶⁹ Kleinfeld, "The Rise of Political Violence in the United States."

⁷⁰ Barbara F. Walter, *How Civil Wars Start: And How to Stop Them* (New York: Crown, 2022).

⁷¹ Walter.

kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer as recent examples. As noted previously, Van Swol, Lee, and Hutchins contend that the U.S. Capitol attackers believed that Donald Trump’s 2020 election was stolen and that direct action was necessary.⁷² This conviction, that they were “protecting democracy,” led to a reinforced political (and social) identity and a polarized approach. These scholars suggest January 6 exemplifies what the far right has become today, but the threat did not end on that day; it continues to challenge homeland security—and democracy for that matter. Acknowledging polarization has reached “an all-time high in the United States,” Heltzel and Laurin recommend that “political and media institutions work to combat misperceptions that lead to polarization.”⁷³ Iyengar et al. conclude that “increasing affective polarization can have grave ramifications and offer similar ideas for its reduction: correcting misperceptions about party supporters and more generally making partisanship and politics less salient.”⁷⁴ America’s current state of discord has already manifested many dangerous examples of violent acts in the name of partisan allegiances. If allowed to increase further, the nation may experience severe consequences.

5. Summary

Several schools of thought outline the types, causes, and current polarization status in the nation. Scholars frame polarization in multiple ways, including institutional, affective, and false polarization. Most scholars agree that divisiveness and polarization are rising and have been since the 1960s, but more so since the election of former President Barack Obama in late 2008. Others characterize polarization as a pendulum that sways back and forth, with highs and eventual lows. Two camps detail the consequences of polarization; on one end of the spectrum, it is a nuisance for democratic practices, while on the other, it significantly threatens democracy. Yet America has many recent examples of politically motivated extremism and violence—especially from the right wing since 2008—most notably the January 6, 2021, assault on the U.S. Capitol. The United States

⁷² Van Swol, Lee, and Hutchins, “The Banality of Extremism.”

⁷³ Heltzel and Laurin, “Polarization in America,” 181.

⁷⁴ Iyengar et al., “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization,” 140.

has experienced numerous examples of politically and ideologically motivated violence, and polarization continues to present itself as a natural and evolving threat to homeland security.

C. RESEARCH DESIGN

As a Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) representative, I subscribe to a “one CISA” culture, yet cybersecurity and infrastructure security professionals feel separated. The ampersand in the agency name unintentionally creates an *other*. I have heard colleagues speak of the divide between cybersecurity and physical security missions and practitioners, with competition for recognition, resources, and funding, for example. The U.S. military experiences the same phenomenon, with loyalties divided among the services—the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Space Force, and Coast Guard.⁷⁵ U.S. society mirrors these examples, with its citizens split along partisan political lines. Simply put, Democratic, Republican, Libertarian, and other identities serve as patronage lines for social groups called political parties. Social identity theory (SIT) can illuminate this phenomenon and, effectively, all group dynamics. Generally, SIT describes how humans interact in groups.⁷⁶ It helps the practitioner describe how membership in a group affects an individual’s perceptions, behaviors, and actions.⁷⁷

This thesis leveraged SIAM to explain the rise of polarization in the United States in recent decades. SIAM was initially developed as a framework for simplifying and operationalizing the analysis of violent substate groups with its underpinnings in SIT.⁷⁸ For professionals working in the fields of organized crime, counterterrorism, and violent extremism, SIAM is a tool for applied strategic-level analysis. The method, intended for

⁷⁵ Each branch of the armed forces follows a strict hierarchical structure called a “chain of command,” which demands that each service member follows one’s patronage orders.

⁷⁶ Anders Strindberg, *Social Identity Theory and the Study of Terrorism and Violent Extremism*, Report No. FOI-R--5062--SE (Stockholm: FOI Total Defense Research Institute, 2020), <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--5062--SE>.

⁷⁷ Henri Tajfel, “Social Identity and Intergroup Behaviour,” *Social Science Information* 13, no. 2 (1974): 65–93, <https://doi.org/10.1177/053901847401300204>.

⁷⁸ David W. Brannan and Anders Strindberg, “The Social Identity Analytical Method: Facilitating Social Science-Based Practitioner Analysis of Violent Substate Conflict,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2023): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2256538>.

practitioners, facilitates a social science–based analysis of violent substate conflicts. According to Brannan and Strindberg, SIAM proposes critical questions to analyze a group, development, or event/incident.⁷⁹ These questions center on four analytical markers to uncover perceptions of a “limited good,” or limited resource for which a group contends.⁸⁰ For instance, in the polarized landscape, dominant public discourse, political control, and social impact are all limited goods for which the polarized in-groups compete.⁸¹ The framework questions the importance of visible patron–client relationships and how an in-group’s honor is publicly adjudicated through an ongoing series of positive and negative social honor challenges.⁸² These questions, centered on the analytical markers, aim to find relationships and frames identified by sociological scholarship as central to forming and sustaining a cohesive and sometimes combative in-group.⁸³ According to Brannan and Strindberg, “SIAM has emerged from iterative practice and

⁷⁹ Brannan and Strindberg.

⁸⁰ Brannan and Strindberg.

⁸¹ For example, the 2022 U.S. Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, 49 years after its ruling, illuminates how dominant public discourse, political control, and social impact are all limited goods for which the polarized in-groups contend. Many blue and red states rushed to pass new reproductive rights legislation aligned with partisan values on each side.

⁸² Brannan and Strindberg, “The Social Identity Analytical Method.”

⁸³ Brannan and Strindberg.

ongoing dialogue between academics and practitioners.”⁸⁴ This framework formed the basis of my research design.⁸⁵

A historical approach was well suited for assessing whether polarization is rising and offering a better understanding of the deepening divisiveness. This research began with an early historical view, from 1776 forward, of polarization in the United States, concentrating on the period from 2008 to 2023—from the election of former President Barak Obama, through the events of the U.S. Capitol assault, to the present day. A series of case studies presented in this thesis serve as illuminating examples of violence linked to polarization. Given the federal data associated with the problem set, the goal was to provide practitioners and policymakers with a better understanding of the social groups involved in polarizing the modern-day nation. These data indicate a significant uptick in domestic extremism, particularly among right-wing groups, over the last 15 years.⁸⁶ Ultimately, the

⁸⁴ Brannan and Strindberg.

⁸⁵ SIAM has been applied effectively in over 100 research publications. The 1990s saw the academic origins of the process at the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, and since 2007, practitioner dialogue has been driven by research at the Naval Postgraduate School’s Center for Homeland Defense and Security in Monterey, California. While numerous practitioner-scholars have contributed to the process, the following deserve special mention: Jacob Anderson, DHS/Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency; Svetlana Angert, DHS/Homeland Security Investigations; Nabeela Barbari, DHS/National Protection and Programs Directorate; Christopher Barney, Portland Fire & Rescue; Christina Bell, DHS/Customs and Border Protection; Devon Bell, Placer County Sheriff; Mike Biasotti; Michael Brown, DHS/Office of Terrorism Prevention Partnership; Caleb Cage; Brad Deardorff, Federal Bureau of Investigation; Ronald Dorman, DHS/Immigration and Customs Enforcement; Sunil Dutta, Los Angeles Police Department; Gregory Favre, Missouri Department of Public Safety; Richard Fleece, U.S. Secret Service; Jonathan Gaddy, Alabama Emergency Management Agency; Sevan Gerard, Los Angeles Fire Department; Max Geron, Rockwall Police Department; Kelly Huston, California Governor’s Office of Emergency Services; Joleen Jubela, DHS/Federal Emergency Management Agency; Victoria Lester-Saura, DHS/U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services; Keith Ludwick, Federal Bureau of Investigation; L. D. Maples, California Highway Patrol; Keith McKinney, DHS/Homeland Security Investigations; Christopher Milburn, Long Beach Fire Department; John Murray, Salinas Police Department; Julie Nations, Memphis Police Department; Lisa Palmieri, DHS/Office of Intelligence and Analysis; Serge Potapov, DHS/Federal Air Marshal Service; Cynthia Renaud, Santa Monica Police Department; Giacomo Sacca, Elizabeth Police Department; Anna Schermerhorn-Collins, Fire Department of the City of New York; Mike Schofield, Kansas City Police Department; Justin Schumacher, Oregon Health Authority; Michael Sedam, California Highway Patrol; Matthew Speer, DHS/Office of Intelligence and Analysis; Shawn Tupper, U.S. Department of Justice; and Aristotle Wolfe, California Highway Patrol.

⁸⁶ Seth G. Jones, “The Rise of Far-Right Extremism in the United States,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 7, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/rise-far-right-extremism-united-states>.

insight gained could ensure resources are more effectively allocated to mitigate future politically motivated violence.

The following analytical markers, which have proven highly effective in assessing terrorist organizations with solid collective identities, were used to compare and contrast group dynamics associated with polarization in America.⁸⁷ These include the in-group/out-group dynamic, the nominal in-group, in-group narratives, patron–client relationships, positive and negative honor challenges, and the sociological understanding of the limited good.⁸⁸ Partisan groups and those linked to recent politically motivated violence were examined through SIAM’s analytical markers to explain why groups behave the way they do. This thesis aspired to reveal how significant a threat polarization presents to homeland security.

D. CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This thesis comprises a comprehensive analysis of the state of polarization in the United States and its connection to violence, as well as the application of SIAM to understand these issues. Chapter II examines data and trends related to polarization in the United States. It explores both quantitative and qualitative data to gain a deeper understanding of the current state of polarization, including its extent, manifestations, and historical context. The chapter also investigates various factors affecting polarization, such as socio-political, economic, and cultural influences.

In Chapter III, the focus shifts to violence associated with polarization. This chapter provides detailed examples and case studies illustrating how polarization can lead to various forms of violence. It emphasizes the relationship between political polarization and violent incidents, shedding light on this critical issue.

Chapter IV introduces SIAM and defines its core principles. It explains how SIAM can be applied to analyze polarization and its link to violence, highlighting its relevance in

⁸⁷ David Brannan, Kristen Darken, and Anders Strindberg, *A Practitioner’s Way Forward: Terrorism Analysis* (Salinas, CA: Agile Press, 2014).

⁸⁸ The limited good is a limited resource, often related to the control of public discourse, group narratives, and group honor.

this context. Furthermore, the chapter demonstrates how SIAM serves as a valuable framework for gaining deeper insights into polarization dynamics and its consequences, particularly by offering a unique perspective on group identities and their societal impact.

Finally, Chapter V presents the key findings resulting from the research. It synthesizes these findings, drawing upon data analysis, case studies, and the application of SIAM. These findings provide a comprehensive overview of the state of polarization and its association with violence. Additionally, Chapter V offers practical recommendations derived from the research, intended to inform policymakers, stakeholders, and the broader community about potential strategies to mitigate polarization and its adverse consequences. The chapter also presents areas for future research, underlining the need for continued exploration of the intricate dynamics of polarization, violence, and the use of analytical frameworks like SIAM.

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II. THE STATE OF POLARIZATION IN AMERICA

In recent years, the United States has faced a significant challenge that extends beyond traditional political debates and ideological differences. The emergence of political polarization, characterized by a growing divergence in beliefs and attitudes among citizens, has had a profound impact on the nation’s democratic landscape. Understanding the root causes and potential solutions for this polarization is now more critical than ever. It goes beyond simple differences in policy preferences; polarization has seeped into public discourse, societal interactions, institutions, and communities, and even led to acts of violence. This chapter plays a crucial role in dissecting the complexities of political polarization. It aims not only to provide a historical account but also to offer guidance for fostering a more unified and inclusive democratic society.

Chapter II explores the significant rise of political polarization in the United States, highlighting its rapid acceleration compared to other democracies and the negative consequences it brings, including increasing calls for secession and declining trust in government and institutions. The chapter identifies key contributing factors, such as ideological extremism, media influence, identity politics, gerrymandering, geographic sorting, socioeconomic disparities, political primaries, and cultural shifts, while underscoring the urgent need to address “truth decay,” the erosion of truth and trust that amplifies polarization.

A. DATA AND TRENDS

The escalating polarization evident in recent data, heightened calls for secession or restructuring, the radicalization of U.S. politics, waning trust in government and major institutions, and the pervasive issue of truth decay collectively underscore a critical and alarming trend in American society. As these challenges intensify, there is a need to comprehend their interconnected nature and work toward fostering unity, trust, and informed public discourse to safeguard the foundations of democracy and national security.

1. Polarization on the Rise in America

Recent data and trends support the claim that polarization is on the rise in the United States. Polarization refers to the increasing ideological divide and the growing divergence between different political, social, and cultural groups within a society. Deep political polarization has been a problem for the United States at different times in its history, but this most recent wave appears novel.⁸⁹ According to research coauthored by Stanford University economists Levi Boxell and Matthew Gentzkow and Brown University economist Jesse Shapiro, Americans' attitudes about members of rival political parties have deteriorated more quickly over time than citizens' attitudes in Europe and other notable democracies.⁹⁰ The researchers employed a "feeling thermometer" to rank sentiments on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 represented no negative feelings against other parties, using data from four decades of public opinion surveys in nine countries. They discovered that, in 1978, citizens evaluated their own political party members an average of 27 points higher than they did members of the other major party.⁹¹ In 2016, Americans gave their own party an average rating 45.9 points higher than the opposition party.⁹² In other words, there was an increase in hostility against members of the other party by an average of 4.8 points every 10 years.⁹³ This study points to an alarming reality, not only that polarization continues to rise in the nation but that the United States is polarizing more rapidly than other developed democracies.

2. Heightened Calls for Secession or Restructuring

Heightened calls for secession or restructuring of the United States have trended over time. As seen in Figure 1, a June 2021 survey by Bright Line Watch found that high

⁸⁹ Abramowitz and McCoy, "Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization."

⁹⁰ Levi Boxell, Matthew Gentzkow, and Jesse M. Shapiro, "Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization," Working Paper 26669 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2021), https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w26669/w26669.pdf.

⁹¹ Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro, 2.

⁹² Jill Kimball, "U.S. Is Polarizing Faster than Other Democracies, Study Finds," News from Brown, January 21, 2020, <https://www.brown.edu/news/2020-01-21/polarization>.

⁹³ Kimball.

percentages of respondents claim they would be ready to leave the United States to join a new federation of states in their area.⁹⁴ The survey indicates support for the proposal has increased among several partisan groups and in several areas of the country since Biden’s inauguration; however, it is more popular among Republicans in Republican-majority regions and among Democrats in Democratic-majority regions.

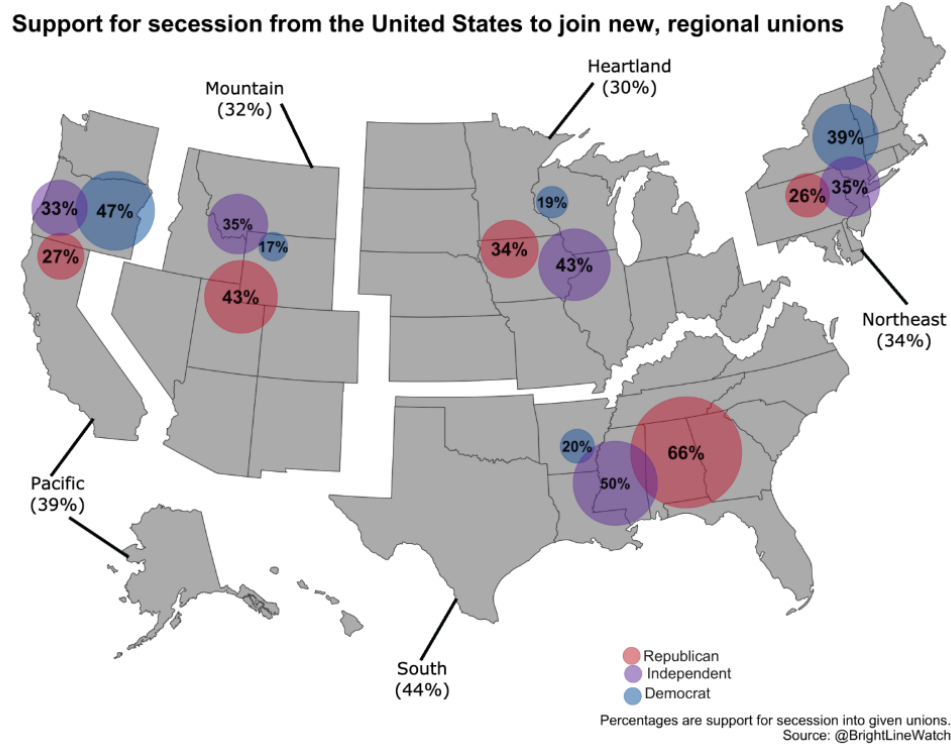


Figure 1. Survey Results Showing Support for Secession to Join New Regional Unions.⁹⁵

In February 2023, U.S. Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene tweeted,

We need a national divorce. We need to separate by red states and blue states and shrink the federal government. Everyone I talk to says this. From

⁹⁴ “Still Miles Apart: Americans and the State of U.S. Democracy Half a Year into the Biden Presidency,” Bright Line Watch, accessed July 13, 2023, <http://brightlinewatch.org/still-miles-apart-americans-and-the-state-of-u-s-democracy-half-a-year-into-the-biden-presidency/>.

⁹⁵ Source: Bright Line Watch.

the sick and disgusting woke culture issues shoved down our throats to the Democrat’s traitorous America Last policies, we are done.⁹⁶

Such calls to action are not limited to secession, as individual states and counties express interest in seceding based on political identities and alignments. In 2022, numerous Texas Republicans adopted a party program that urged the state government to approve a secession vote.⁹⁷ At the local level, in Maryland, some Republican state legislators of three counties have sought to secede and join West Virginia. The claim is that the counties would fare better in West Virginia, one of just two states where former president Trump won every county and a state made up primarily of rural areas.⁹⁸ These heightened calls for secession and restructuring reveal a growing sentiment of division within the United States, with increasing support among different partisan groups and regions, posing a significant challenge to national unity and governance.

3. Radicalization of U.S. Politics

Research indicates that radicalization in U.S. politics has increased. In the United States, polarization has risen, and some academics believe that it is on a long-term, continuous upward trajectory.⁹⁹ Likewise, most scholars agree that, overall, the consequences of polarization are detrimental to democracy, social cohesion, and the ability to address society’s complex challenges. One of the prominent indicators of polarization is the increasing divide between Republicans and Democrats. Studies have shown that *party* polarization has been steadily increasing in the United States over the past few decades.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Shannon Pettypiece, “Marjorie Taylor Greene Calls for a ‘National Divorce’ between Liberal and Conservative States,” NBC News, February 20, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/marjorie-taylor-greene-calls-national-divorce-liberal-conservative-sta-rcna71464>.

⁹⁷ Act Relating to Proposing a Referendum to the People of the State of Texas on the Question of Whether This State Should Leave the United States of America and Establish an Independent Republic, H.B. 1359, 87th Leg. (Tex. 2021), <https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/87R/billtext/pdf/HB01359I.pdf>.

⁹⁸ Nicholas Reimann, “Here’s Why Some in Maryland Want to Secede and Join West Virginia,” *Forbes*, October 23, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nicholasreimann/2021/10/23/heres-why-some-in-maryland-want-to-secede-and-join-west-virginia/>.

⁹⁹ Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg, “Polarization in the Contemporary Political and Media Landscape”; Abramowitz and McCoy, “Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization.”

¹⁰⁰ Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg, “Polarization in the Contemporary Political and Media Landscape”; Kimball, “U.S. Is Polarizing Faster than Other Democracies”; Van Swol, Lee, and Hutchins, “The Banality of Extremism.”

This phenomenon is evident in the widening ideological gap between the two major political parties, increasing partisan animosity, and the decline of moderates within each party.¹⁰¹ Thus, the widening divide in U.S. politics, marked by escalating polarization and radicalization, presents a significant concern as it threatens the foundations of democracy, social cohesion, and the nation’s capacity to address societal issues.

A Brookings Institution study asserts that many observers worry about the disappearance of the political center. The center is regarded as essential to moderate, nonpartisan public policymaking, which is widely preferred by the American public in a political system that necessitates accommodation and compromise to effect change.¹⁰² Without a political center, ideological and partisan radicalization may increase, thereby enhancing the public’s dislike of politicians and eroding trust in the political process.

4. Waning Trust in Government

The United States is experiencing waning public trust in its government and institutions. A Pew Research Center poll has revealed trends in this regard. According to Pew, about 75 percent of citizens believed that the federal government would act honorably nearly always or most of the time when the National Election Study first surveyed participants in 1958.¹⁰³ By the 1960s, as the Vietnam War intensified, public confidence in the government started to erode. In the 1970s, the Watergate affair and deteriorating economic conditions contributed to the loss even further. The mid-1980s saw a recovery in public trust before it began to decline once more in the mid-1990s. However, as the economy expanded in the late 1990s, so did public confidence. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, public trust was at its highest point in three decades, but it then quickly fell. Since 2007, the percentage of people who say they always or primarily trust the government has not risen above 30 percent. Remarkably, Pew has found that “today,

¹⁰¹ Sarah A. Binder, “The Disappearing Political Center: Congress and the Incredible Shrinking Middle,” Brookings, September 1, 1996, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-disappearing-political-center-congress-and-the-incredible-shrinking-middle/>.

¹⁰² Binder.

¹⁰³ Peter Bell, “Public Trust in Government: 1958–2022,” Pew Research Center, June 6, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/06/06/public-trust-in-government-1958-2022/>.

29 percent of Democrats and Democratic-leaning Independents say they trust government just about always or most of the time, compared with 9 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaners.”¹⁰⁴ These results indicate an overall lack of public trust in the federal government, but conservatives trust the government less than their liberal counterparts do.

5. Diminishing Trust in Major Institutions

In general, American citizens not only hold a negative view of their government institutions but also increasingly mistrust political, economic, and social institutions. According to a Gallup study, the trend is clear that people are growing more and more disenchanted with almost all major institutions.¹⁰⁵ Public mistrust in institutions—be they banks, major corporations, organized religion, newspapers, or school boards—is on the rise.¹⁰⁶ Politics can hardly be held responsible for all of these changes; during the Great Recession, for instance, trust in banks suffered a sharp decline.¹⁰⁷ However, analysis shows growing partisan polarization, and the Republican Party’s ongoing campaign to create discord among a variety of institutions contributes to this effect.¹⁰⁸

In his book *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Jonathan Haidt explores the psychological and cultural factors that shape individuals’ political beliefs. Haidt highlights the concept of moral foundations, revealing that when people prioritize distinct values like care, fairness, loyalty, authority, sanctity, and liberty, they foster diverse moral perspectives.¹⁰⁹ Haidt’s analysis underscores the influence of group identity, confirmation bias, and emotional reactions in politics, often

¹⁰⁴ Bell.

¹⁰⁵ “Confidence in Institutions,” Gallup, June 22, 2007, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/Confidence-Institutions.aspx>.

¹⁰⁶ Jeffrey M. Jones, “Confidence in U.S. Institutions Down; Average at New Low,” Gallup, July 5, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/394283/confidence-institutions-down-average-new-low.aspx>.

¹⁰⁷ Sarah Feldman, “Trust in Banks Still Recovering after Great Recession,” Statista, September 14, 2018, <https://www.statista.com/chart/15465/trust-in-banks-still-recovering-after-great-recession>.

¹⁰⁸ Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux and Zoha Qamar, “What Happens When Americans Don’t Trust Institutions?,” *FiveThirtyEight*, July 8, 2022, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/what-happens-when-americans-dont-trust-institutions/>.

¹⁰⁹ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013).

fueling polarization.¹¹⁰ Although Haidt does not directly address party strategies, he lends insight into the psychological roots of political behavior and the complexities of moral pluralism in societies. For example, the Republican Party, like any political entity, might engage in actions perceived as discordant among governmental institutions, driven by a mix of ideological convictions, strategic considerations, and perceptions of accountability.¹¹¹ The growing mistrust of major institutions in the United States is a notable trend, influenced by various factors, including partisan polarization and political strategies. Understanding these dynamics, as explored by Jonathan Haidt, can shed light on the complexities of political behavior and moral differences in society.

A lack of trust has many cascading effects on society. Analysts warn that this widespread lack of trust in the institutions that govern society is harmful and may be difficult to repair.¹¹² Both sides feel as though they are losing, despite the political divide, according to Daniel Drezner, a professor of international politics at Tufts University. Drezner suggests nations and populations that are pessimistic about the future frequently make poor decisions.¹¹³ Social and cultural politics provide competing sets of values, cultural idioms, and meanings that undermine trust between opposing political parties. It is challenging to heal these divisions, especially given that practically every institution with a claim to authority supports one side or the other on most topics.¹¹⁴ The widespread lack of trust in societal institutions has repercussions, hindering effective governance and deepening political divisions. This pessimism, as noted by Drezner, can lead to suboptimal decision-making, underscoring the urgency of bridging the trust gap to enable constructive dialogue and cooperation among opposing political factions.

¹¹⁰ Haidt.

¹¹¹ Haidt.

¹¹² James Warren, “Trust in Government Is on the Wane,” *U.S. News & World Report*, January 24, 2018, <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/op-ed/articles/2018-01-24/trust-in-government-is-on-the-wane>.

¹¹³ Warren.

¹¹⁴ Henry E. Brady and Thomas B. Kent, “Fifty Years of Declining Confidence & Increasing Polarization in Trust in American Institutions,” *Daedalus* 151, no. 4 (2022): 43–66, https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01943.

6. Truth Decay

Another influencing trend involves truth decay, defined by the RAND Corporation as “the diminishing role of facts and analysis in American public life.”¹¹⁵ Over the past two decades, this phenomenon has proliferated, undermining civic dialogue, paralyzing politics, and creating a widespread lack of assurance about what is true and what is not.¹¹⁶ More recently, a RAND analyst has asserted that “America’s troubled relationship with facts is putting national security at risk.”¹¹⁷ Truth decay has been dubbed a significant vulnerability, an obvious weakness, and a potent weapon in the hands of adversaries by experts from across RAND. However, the full picture of its harm to the United States has only started to emerge.¹¹⁸ Thus, the prevalence of truth decay poses a critical challenge as it erodes the foundations of informed public discourse and even jeopardizes national security. Recognizing its far-reaching implications is essential in addressing this issue and restoring trust in factual information for American society.

B. FACTORS AFFECTING THE DEGREE OF POLARIZATION

Several factors contribute to the degree of polarization in America, and the influence of these multifaceted, interconnected dynamics can vary over time. This section explores some of these significant contributors to polarization.

1. Ideological Extremism

The ideological positions of political parties and their supporters play a crucial role in polarization. As party platforms and political discourse become more extreme, polarization proliferates among voters and politicians alike.¹¹⁹ When political leaders and

¹¹⁵ “Countering Truth Decay,” RAND Corporation, accessed July 13, 2023, <https://www.rand.org/research/projects/truth-decay.html>.

¹¹⁶ RAND Corporation.

¹¹⁷ Doug Irving, “Truth Decay Is Putting U.S. National Security at Risk,” *RAND Blog*, June 28, 2023, <https://www.rand.org/blog/rand-review/2023/06/truth-decay-is-putting-us-national-security-at-risk.html>.

¹¹⁸ Irving.

¹¹⁹ Axelrod, Daymude, and Forrest, “Preventing Extreme Polarization of Political Attitudes.”

parties take rigid positions and resist compromise, they exacerbate polarization.¹²⁰ Citizens of the United States now embrace fractured identities in prioritizing their polarizing beliefs over the ideal of “being American.”¹²¹ A preference for discord, fractured identities, and favorable socio-political conditions for extremism—including distrust in the government, acceptance of conspiracy theories, and biased media—have created a volatile environment. This situation has been exacerbated by unimpeded access to technology and social media that spread misinformation, contributing to an atmosphere of instability and violence.¹²²

To add fuel to the fire, the United States has seen its share of divisive issues over the last several years. These include government-imposed restrictions and lockdowns during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic; incidents of perceived social injustice; protests, counter-protests, and riots; an uptick in mass shootings and renewed calls for gun control; claims of a stolen U.S. presidential election; and most recently, a Supreme Court ruling affecting reproductive rights. These factors combined have emboldened ideological extremist groups and led to their mainstream acceptance by the populace. This situation has led to many incidents of violent action across the nation. Yet, according to Pew Research Center, “partisanship continues to be the dividing line in the American public’s political attitudes, far surpassing differences by age, race and ethnicity, gender, educational attainment, religious affiliation or other factors.”¹²³ Political parties’ and their supporters’ ideologies are a major factor in polarization.

¹²⁰ Iyengar et al., “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization.”

¹²¹ Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware, “The Terrorist Threat from the Fractured Far Right,” *Lawfare* (blog), November 1, 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/terrorist-threat-fractured-far-right>.

¹²² Jennifer Kavanagh et al., *The Drivers of Institutional Trust and Distrust: Exploring Components of Trustworthiness* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA112-7.html; “Disinformation,” PEN America, October 24, 2022, <https://pen.org/issue/disinformation/>; Thomson-DeVeaux and Qamar, “What Happens When Americans Don’t Trust Institutions?”; Bell, “Public Trust in Government.”

¹²³ Pew Research Center, *In a Politically Polarized Era, Sharp Divides in Both Partisan Coalitions* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2019), 5, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/12/17/in-a-politically-polarized-era-sharp-divides-in-both-partisan-coalitions/>.

2. Media Landscape

The media environment, including traditional media outlets and digital platforms, also has a substantial impact on polarization. The rise of partisan news outlets and social media algorithms that reinforce pre-existing beliefs can create echo chambers and limit exposure to diverse viewpoints.¹²⁴ According to Santos, Lelkes, and Levin, social networks can rewire the attitudes of individuals over time to reflect the opinions of their connections.¹²⁵ Media polarization can further entrench existing divisions and amplify polarized narratives.¹²⁶ Thus, recognizing the media's role in amplifying polarization highlights the need for media outlets and digital platforms to take responsibility in promoting diverse perspectives and facilitating constructive dialogue, which could help mitigate the polarization that currently plagues the United States.

Social media is an evidentiary tool for investigating wrongdoing. Recently, the House Select Committee looking into the mob attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6 requested documents about hundreds of people, including members of Congress, from a wide range of social media and tech companies.¹²⁷ In addition to these particular requests, the committee has expressed a broader interest in how misleading information about the 2020 election propagated on websites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, including how algorithms aided in the promotion of disinformation and extremism.¹²⁸ Such congressional interest highlights the crucial role of social media data in investigations related to significant events and indicates growing concerns about the spread of misinformation and extremism facilitated by algorithmic platforms.

¹²⁴ Paul Barrett, Justin Hendrix, and Grant Sims, "How Tech Platforms Fuel U.S. Political Polarization and What Government Can Do about It," Brookings, September 27, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-tech-platforms-fuel-u-s-political-polarization-and-what-government-can-do-about-it/>.

¹²⁵ Fernando P. Santos, Yphtach Lelkes, and Simon A. Levin, "Link Recommendation Algorithms and Dynamics of Polarization in Online Social Networks," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 50 (2021): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2102141118>.

¹²⁶ Eli J. Finkel et al., "Political Sectarianism in America," *Science* 370, no. 6516 (2020): 533–36, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abe1715>.

¹²⁷ "Congress Demands Facebook, YouTube and Others Turn Over Jan. 6–Related Documents," Reuters, August 27, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-house-committee-seeks-social-media-records-related-capitol-attack-2021-08-27/>.

¹²⁸ Barrett, Hendrix, and Sims, "How Tech Platforms Fuel U.S. Political Polarization."

Beyond the threats posed by social media, mainstream news has changed over the last several decades, with some outlets prioritizing partisan pandering and economic gain over factual information. As an example, to avoid a trial in the case filed by Dominion Voting Systems, which would have revealed how the network knowingly and intentionally propagated false information about the 2020 presidential election, Fox News recently agreed to pay the firm almost \$800 million in settlements.¹²⁹ As described by writers for the Associated Press, “The stunning settlement emerged just as opening statements were supposed to begin, abruptly ending a case that had embarrassed Fox News over several months and raised the possibility that network founder Rupert Murdoch and stars such as Tucker Carlson and Sean Hannity would have to testify publicly.”¹³⁰ Following the decision, Justin Nelson, a lawyer for Dominion said, “The truth matters. Lies have consequences.”¹³¹ Thus, media companies can be held to account for causing real damage.

3. Identity Politics

The term identity politics has come to denote a broad range of political activity and thought that is rooted in the perception of common injustices experienced by members of particular social groupings.¹³² It involves organizing and advocating political, social, and cultural issues based on specific aspects of a person’s identity, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religion.¹³³ Identity-based divisions can contribute to polarization.¹³⁴ When political issues become intertwined with social identity, it can lead

¹²⁹ David Folkenflik and Mary Yang, “Fox News Settles Blockbuster Defamation Lawsuit with Dominion Voting Systems,” NPR, April 18, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/04/18/1170339114/fox-news-settles-blockbuster-defamation-lawsuit-with-dominion-voting-systems>.

¹³⁰ David Bauder, Randall Chase, and Geoff Mulvihill, “Fox, Dominion Reach \$787M Settlement over Election Claims,” AP News, April 19, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/fox-news-dominion-lawsuit-trial-trump-2020-0ac71f75acfac52ea80b3e747fb0afe>.

¹³¹ Jeremy W. Peters and Katie Robertson, “Dominion–Fox News Trial: Fox News Settles Defamation Suit for \$787.5 Million, Dominion Says,” *New York Times*, April 18, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2023/04/18/business/fox-news-dominion-trial-settlement>.

¹³² Cressida Heyes, “Identity Politics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Stanford University, 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/identity-politics/>.

¹³³ Heyes.

¹³⁴ Grace Sullivan, “Political Polarization, Identity Politics and Social Media,” *Observer*, November 11, 2022, <https://ndsmcobserver.com/2022/11/political-polarization-identity-politics-and-social-media/>.

to heightened polarization as individuals align themselves with groups that share their identities and ideologies.¹³⁵ Political identity formations often work to protect the political freedom of a particular community excluded within its larger context, as opposed to organizing purely around belief systems, programmatic manifestos, or party allegiance.¹³⁶ Identity politics is a vital tool for advocacy and civic participation. Participation in politics is motivated by self-awareness and one’s political experiences.¹³⁷

In the United States, this phenomenon of identity politics has become closely intertwined with polarization for several reasons. First, it can foster an “us-versus-them” mentality, as individuals align themselves primarily with their own identity group, leading to a focus on group interests rather than shared values.¹³⁸ Second, identity-based media outlets and echo chambers can reinforce existing beliefs, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives and deepening polarization.¹³⁹ Third, political parties and movements may use identity politics to mobilize their base, heightening emotions and creating a divisive atmosphere.¹⁴⁰ Additionally, competing narratives and values between identity groups can intensify conflicts while the rise of social media provides a platform for both positive activism and the spread of extreme viewpoints, misinformation, and harassment.¹⁴¹ Moreover, identity politics can lead to cultural backlash and resentment from those who

¹³⁵ Brannan, Darken and Strindberg, *A Practitioner’s Way Forward*; Iyengar et al., “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization.”

¹³⁶ Heyes, “Identity Politics.”

¹³⁷ Alicia Garza, “Identity Politics: Friend or Foe?,” Othering & Belonging Institute, September 24, 2019, <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/identity-politics-friend-or-foe>.

¹³⁸ Amy Chua, “How America’s Identity Politics Went from Inclusion to Division,” *Guardian*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/mar/01/how-americas-identity-politics-went-from-inclusion-to-division>.

¹³⁹ Julie Jiang, Xiang Ren, and Emilio Ferrara, “Social Media Polarization and Echo Chambers in the Context of COVID-19: Case Study,” *JMIRx Med* 2, no. 3 (2021): e29570, <https://doi.org/10.2196/29570>; Cox et al., *Socially Distant*.

¹⁴⁰ Rich Barlow, “If ‘Identity Politics’ Elected Trump in 2016, What Will Happen in 2020?,” BU Today, February 26, 2020, <https://www.bu.edu/articles/2020/identity-politics-election-2020/>.

¹⁴¹ Cox et al., *Socially Distant*.

feel marginalized or excluded, further contributing to polarization.¹⁴² By employing the SIAM framework, Chapter IV explores and analyzes identity politics further.

4. Gerrymandering

The practice of drawing electoral districts to favor one political party over another, known as gerrymandering, can contribute to polarization. By creating safe districts for one party, gerrymandering incentivizes candidates to cater to extreme positions among their constituents, as they are less likely to face strong competition from the opposing party.¹⁴³ Although not all academics agree that gerrymandering is a primary cause of polarization, they concur that partisan redistricting can amplify partisan divides and that steps should be taken to increase transparency and reduce partisan influence in the redistricting process.¹⁴⁴ Austin, Texas, serves as a recent and notable example. To secure their majority in the Texas congressional district for years to come, Republican lawmakers concentrated as many Democrats into as few districts as possible to maximize the number of Republican districts.¹⁴⁵ Regardless of the strategy, gerrymandering is about elected officials from either party retaining their position of authority by changing the demographics of their districts, thus making successive elections easier to win.¹⁴⁶ The repercussions are serious. Speaking openly, U.S. lawmakers from both majority parties have acknowledged that gerrymandered House districts have contributed to the chamber's heightened partisanship.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴² Francis Fukuyama, "Against Identity Politics," *Foreign Affairs*, August 14, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/americas/2018-08-14/against-identity-politics-tribalism-francis-fukuyama>.

¹⁴³ Julia Kirschenbaum and Michael Li, "Gerrymandering Explained," Brennan Center for Justice, June 9, 2023, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/gerrymandering-explained>.

¹⁴⁴ Fred Dews, "A Primer on Gerrymandering and Political Polarization," Brookings, July 6, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-primer-on-gerrymandering-and-political-polarization/>.

¹⁴⁵ Ross Ramsey, "Analysis: Gerrymandering Has Left Texas Voters with Few Options," *Texas Tribune*, April 20, 2022, <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/04/20/texas-redistricting-elections/>.

¹⁴⁶ Kirschenbaum and Li, "Gerrymandering Explained."

¹⁴⁷ Dana Bash, Abbie Sharpe, and Ethan Cohen, "How Gerrymandering Makes the US House Intensely Partisan," CNN, January 25, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/25/politics/gerrymandering-us-house-partisan/index.html>.

5. Geographic Sorting

People’s choices in where to live and with whom to associate also contribute to polarization. Increasingly, Americans are sorting themselves geographically, living in communities that align with their political and ideological leanings.¹⁴⁸ Authors Bill Bishop and Robert Cushing examine this phenomenon in their book *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart*. Bishop and Cushing assert that Americans have spent the last 40 years grouping themselves into socially and politically similar neighborhoods and cities. U.S. citizens select the groups, churches, clubs, and community organizations with ever-increasing specificity based on how well they fit with their values and way of life.¹⁴⁹ The effect is a nation that has become so “ideologically homogeneous” that residents are unaware of or unable to connect with individuals who reside just a short distance away.¹⁵⁰ Sorting reduces exposure to diverse viewpoints and reinforces existing beliefs.¹⁵¹ A 2015 analysis by the *Washington Post* concluded that “something like 30 percent of the growth in House polarization may be attributable to geographic clustering of the electorate over time.”¹⁵² People are grouping themselves geographically and settling in communities that share their political and ideological views, which increases polarization. This trend highlights how geographic sorting is intensifying political and ideological divisions, creating echo chambers, and hindering understanding among neighbors with differing views.

Political polarization stems from the interplay of geographic sorting and political contrivance. Geographic sorting involves the choice of citizens to reside in communities

¹⁴⁸ Bill Bishop and Robert G. Cushing, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2009).

¹⁴⁹ Bishop and Cushing.

¹⁵⁰ Bishop and Cushing.

¹⁵¹ Amy Ross Arguedas et al., *Echo Chambers, Filter Bubbles, and Polarisation: A Literature Review* (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.60625/risj-etxj-7k60>.

¹⁵² James A. Thomson and Jesse Sussell, “Is Geographic Clustering Driving Political Polarization?,” *Washington Post*, December 7, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/03/02/is-geographic-clustering-driving-political-polarization/>.

with similar political views, resulting in like-minded neighborhoods.¹⁵³ In contrast, political contrivance involves intentional strategies that exploit divisions for political gain, often through polarizing rhetoric.¹⁵⁴ These factors interact: geographic sorting provides receptive audiences for polarizing messages while political contrivance deepens divisions within homogeneous communities.¹⁵⁵ This feedback loop can perpetuate polarization.¹⁵⁶ Addressing the issue requires understanding and addressing both geographic sorting and political contrivance.

6. Socioeconomic Factors

Economic inequality and socioeconomic divisions can influence polarization. When individuals feel their economic interests are threatened or ignored, they may align with political ideologies that promise to address their concerns.¹⁵⁷ Economic anxieties can contribute to heightened polarization on issues such as income redistribution, welfare programs, and economic regulation.¹⁵⁸ Group polarization, increasing inequality, and economic deterioration may be closely related, according to a model created by a group of researchers, including Nolan McCarty of Princeton University. The model hypothesizes that when economic pressure and inequality increase, group polarization increases. Then, despite a later improvement in financial situations, these differences remain entrenched.¹⁵⁹ Addressing economic inequality and socioeconomic divisions could help mitigate

¹⁵³ Gregory J. Martin and Steven W. Webster, “Does Residential Sorting Explain Geographic Polarization?,” *Political Science Research and Methods* 8, no. 2 (April 2020): 215–31, <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2018.44>.

¹⁵⁴ Jennifer McCoy and Benjamin Press, “What Happens When Democracies Become Perniciously Polarized?,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 18, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/01/18/what-happens-when-democracies-become-perniciously-polarized-pub-86190>.

¹⁵⁵ Bishop and Cushing, *The Big Sort*.

¹⁵⁶ Thomson and Sussell, “Is Geographic Clustering Driving Political Polarization?”

¹⁵⁷ Huber, “Polarization Increases with Economic Decline.”

¹⁵⁸ Alexander J. Stewart, Nolan McCarty, and Joanna J. Bryson, “Polarization under Rising Inequality and Economic Decline,” *Science Advances* 6, no. 50 (2020): eabd4201, <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abd4201>.

¹⁵⁹ Huber, “Polarization Increases with Economic Decline.”

polarization. Efforts to reduce inequality, promote economic mobility, and ensure equal opportunities for all can help bridge socioeconomic gaps and foster social cohesion.

7. Political Primary Elections

Primary elections in the United States significantly shape the political landscape by influencing candidate selection and electoral dynamics. Multiple variables including voter turnout demographics, party activist participation, and media coverage dynamics affect primaries. Primary voting tends to draw in and amplify the voices of more ideologically driven activists.¹⁶⁰ Consequently, candidates who align with these activists' viewpoints often gain favor, potentially sidelining more moderate contenders who might represent a wider range of citizens within a state or district.¹⁶¹ This bias can result in the selection of candidates with more extreme positions, affecting the overall composition of parties.¹⁶² Furthermore, primary campaigns often prompt candidates to cater to their party's core supporters, who may hold stronger ideological beliefs.¹⁶³ In pursuit of securing a nomination, candidates might adopt more rigid stances and employ heightened rhetoric, deepening the perceived divisions between the two main political parties.

The competitive nature of primaries can also foster a more critical and confrontational campaign atmosphere as candidates strive to distinguish themselves from fellow contenders within the same party, potentially intensifying the overall tone of political discourse.¹⁶⁴ Additionally, successful primary candidates might feel compelled to uphold unwavering ideological positions, potentially constraining their ability to find common ground and negotiate on policy matters.¹⁶⁵ These dynamics contribute to

¹⁶⁰ Ron Elving, "In a Time of National Division, Polarizing Primaries Are Part of the Problem," NPR, June 18, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/18/1105927483/in-a-time-of-national-division-polarizing-primaries-are-part-of-the-problem>.

¹⁶¹ "The Primary Problem," Unite America, accessed August 16, 2023, <https://www.uniteamerica.org/reports/the-primary-problem>.

¹⁶² Unite America.

¹⁶³ Elving, "In a Time of National Division."

¹⁶⁴ Jordan Kujala, "Donors, Primary Elections, and Polarization in the United States," *American Journal of Political Science* 64, no. 3 (2020): 587–602.

¹⁶⁵ Elving, "In a Time of National Division."

legislative challenges and reinforce a sense of divergence.¹⁶⁶ The media’s focus on contentious primary contests between candidates with differing ideological views can amplify the rhetoric and issues that contribute to divides, shaping public perspectives and potentially increasing division.¹⁶⁷ The primary election system’s inclination to favor candidates with strong ideological inclinations shapes the political landscape by influencing candidate choices, campaign strategies, and ultimately, voter options.¹⁶⁸ While promoting political engagement, this dynamic can also limit the space for more moderate voices and make bipartisan cooperation more intricate, potentially influencing the observed level of political polarization in the United States.¹⁶⁹

8. Social and Cultural Change

Societal transformations and cultural shifts influence polarization. Issues related to civil rights, cultural values, and social norms often become contentious and polarizing.¹⁷⁰ Ezra Klein claims, “Our partisan identities have merged with our racial, religious, geographic, ideological, and cultural identities” over the last three to four decades.¹⁷¹ Klein further argues these “merged identities have attained a weight that is breaking much in our politics and tearing at the bonds that hold this country together.”¹⁷² These observations highlight the significant influence of changing societal and cultural dynamics on polarization as partisan affiliations become intertwined with other identity factors, thus reshaping U.S. politics and society.

Debates over such topics as abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, immigration, and racial justice have the potential to fuel polarization as they tap into deeply held beliefs and values. An April 2023 national NBC poll revealed that political and cultural divisions inside the

¹⁶⁶ Elving.

¹⁶⁷ Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg, “Polarization in the Contemporary Political and Media Landscape.”

¹⁶⁸ Unite America, “The Primary Problem.”

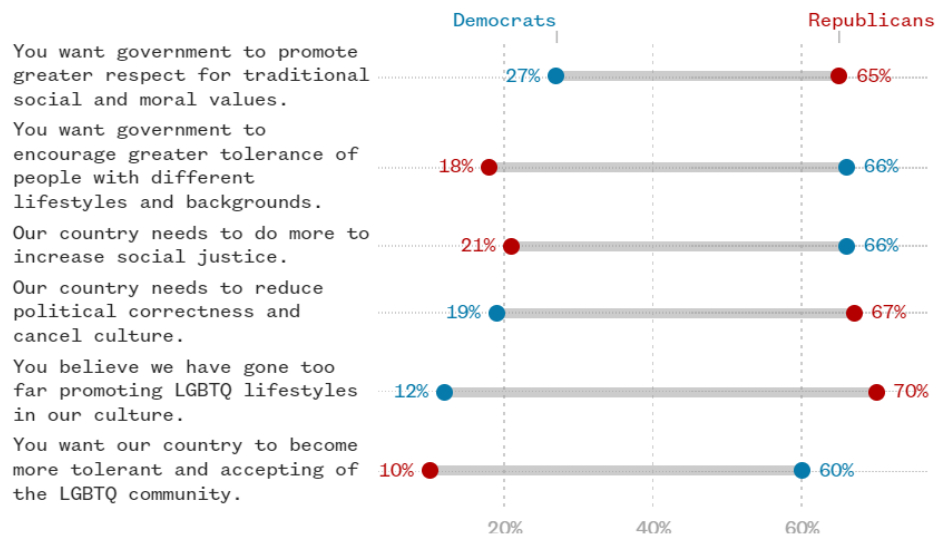
¹⁶⁹ Unite America.

¹⁷⁰ Iyengar et al., “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization.”

¹⁷¹ Berkeley Law Library Catalog, “*Why We’re Polarized* / Ezra Klein.”

¹⁷² Berkeley Law Library Catalog.

United States have merged. “The survey revealed a country on fire, seething with anger at our political leaders and too often at each other,” said Democratic pollster Jeff Horwitt of Hart Research, who conducted the poll alongside Republican pollster Bill McInturff of Public Opinion Strategies (see Figure 2).¹⁷³ These results highlight the volatile nature of debates surrounding topics that intersect with political divisions and ignite anger among the American populace.



Source: NBC News survey conducted April 14-18, 2023. The margin of error for 1,000 adults is +/-3.1%.

Figure 2. NBC News Poll Shows Sharp Political Divides over Social Issues.¹⁷⁴

Some data points stand out: 59 percent of adults who were asked whether American society is racist said it is, with 79 percent of Black adults and 69 percent of Latino adults agreeing.¹⁷⁵ These ethnic divisions occur at a time when Republican presidential hopefuls are embracing the culture wars to win over the party’s grassroots supporters. According to

¹⁷³ Bridget Bowman, “‘A Country on Fire’: New Poll Finds America Polarized over Culture, Race and ‘Woke,’” NBC News, April 26, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/first-read/-country-fire-new-poll-finds-america-polarized-culture-race-woke-rcna81592>.

¹⁷⁴ Source: Bowman.

¹⁷⁵ Bowman.

NBC News reporting, “The field of candidates . . . [has] largely united around rejecting ‘woke’ perspectives and supporting restrictions on transgender people, particularly in schools or for gender-affirming care for minors.”¹⁷⁶ The broad divergence in values, opinions, and beliefs between today’s Democrats and Republicans must be considered in the discussion on polarization. Nevertheless, these distinctions raise the question of whether difference causes the polarization or vice versa.

C. CONCLUSION

The state of political polarization in America is a multifaceted phenomenon with profound implications for the nation’s democratic fabric. As explored in this chapter, the United States finds itself at a critical juncture, grappling with a surge in ideological divides that transcend traditional boundaries and sow discord within its societal landscape. The data and trends presented here paint a sobering picture of a nation struggling with heightened polarization, dwindling trust in institutions, and a disconcerting embrace of ideological extremism.

The factors contributing to this polarization are numerous and interconnected, with each playing a significant role in deepening the divisions that challenge the very essence of democratic governance. From the influence of media narratives to the allure of identity politics, from the distortions of gerrymandering to the socioeconomic disparities that feed discontent, each factor amplifies the existing fault lines and further fragments public discourse.

Amid this intricate web of causes and consequences, a critical concern emerges: America’s struggle with sorting facts from fiction is trending in the wrong direction and requires urgent attention from policymakers. The rise of truth decay and the erosion of public trust in institutions serve as a stark reminder that the foundation of a healthy democracy relies on an informed citizenry and a shared understanding of reality. Restoring trust is but one aspect of mitigating polarization, which thrives in an environment of misinformation.

¹⁷⁶ Bowman.

III. VIOLENCE LINKED TO POLARIZATION

The United States has witnessed a surge in political polarization, marked by increasingly entrenched ideological divisions and a growing propensity to interpret issues through partisan filters. The repercussions of this polarization extend beyond mere policy disagreements, permeating various facets of society and even inciting incidents of violence.¹⁷⁷ Although most Americans engage in political discourse peacefully, polarization has played a contributory role in acts of aggression, hostility, and, in some cases, tragic violence. This section aims to illuminate specific episodes of violence directly attributed to political polarization in the United States.

The chapter briefly explores each incident briefly, reviewing its contextual factors and ramifications. Analyzing these instances should yield insight into the challenges posed by a fractured society and the critical importance of nurturing productive dialogue, cultivating empathy, and fostering inclusivity. Such efforts are not only essential for healing divisions but also imperative for upholding homeland security by preventing potential threats stemming from societal polarization.

A. U.S. CAPITOL ASSAULT ON JANUARY 6

The assault on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, was not an isolated incident but the culmination of a rising trend of political violence born out of extreme polarization. The presence of militant groups, the spread of conspiracy theories, and the erosion of trust in democratic processes converged to create an environment ripe for such confrontations.

Despite having heard from many of his top political advisors and legal counsel that he had lost the election, on December 19, 2020, then-President Donald Trump tweeted, “Statistically impossible to have lost the 2020 Election. Big Protest in D.C. on January 6th.

¹⁷⁷ James A. Piazza, “Political Polarization and Political Violence,” *Security Studies* (forthcoming), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4156980>.

Be there, will be wild!”¹⁷⁸ Weeks later, supporters of Donald Trump, including members of far-right extremist groups the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, and QAnon, stormed the Capitol building to disrupt the certification of the 2020 presidential election results.¹⁷⁹ The violence that ensued resulted in injuries, property damage, and the associated deaths of seven individuals, including U.S. Capitol Police Officer Brian D. Sicknick.¹⁸⁰ Air Force veteran Ashli Babbitt was fatally shot by police as rioters attempted to breach the House chamber.¹⁸¹ Since her death, Babbitt has become a martyr among Trump followers due to his continuous insistence that she was murdered. At pro-Trump demonstrations, her name and likeness can now be seen on T-shirts and flags.¹⁸² In this way, a cultural myth lionizes the participants as warriors and patriots.

The assault on the U.S. Capitol took place against the backdrop of deeply divided politics, driven by a complex interplay of factors. The events of that day can be traced back to a series of influences that contributed to the unfolding turmoil. The immediate aftermath of the fiercely contested 2020 presidential election, characterized by significant partisan

¹⁷⁸ Tom Dreisbach, “How Trump’s ‘Will Be Wild!’ Tweet Drew Rioters to the Capitol on Jan. 6,” NPR, July 13, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/13/1111341161/how-trumps-will-be-wild-tweet-drew-rioters-to-the-capitol-on-jan-6>.

¹⁷⁹ Alanna Durkin Richer and Michael Kunzelman, “Explainer: A Look at Far-Right Extremists in Jan. 6 Riot,” AP News, June 10, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/capitol-siege-proud-boys-donald-trump-congress-government-and-politics-a8baa24af07b20ab792f4ef6f4481fac>; Deanne Winslett, “New Data Map Illustrates Connections between January 6th Defendants and Extremist Groups,” National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, January 5, 2023, <https://www.start.umd.edu/news/new-data-map-illustrates-connections-between-january-6th-defendants-and-extremist-groups>.

¹⁸⁰ Chris Cameron, “These Are the People Who Died in Connection with the Capitol Riot,” *New York Times*, January 5, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/05/us/politics/jan-6-capitol-deaths.html>.

¹⁸¹ Graham Kates, “Ashli Babbitt Identified as Woman Killed by Police during U.S. Capitol Riots,” CBS News, January 7, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ashli-babbitt-killed-us-capitol-riots-trump-supporter/>.

¹⁸² Michael Biesecker, “Ashli Babbitt a Martyr? Her Past Tells a More Complex Story,” AP News, January 3, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/ashli-babbitt-capitol-siege-a15c7e52a04d932972b7a284c7a8f7df>.

divides and the widespread propagation of misinformation, set the stage for the attack.¹⁸³ Supporters of then-President Donald Trump embraced unfounded allegations of extensive voter fraud, despite numerous legal decisions and endorsements of the election’s integrity by electoral officials.¹⁸⁴ Thus, misinformation became truth to these believers.

Adding fuel to the fire, President Trump himself repeatedly propagated baseless narratives claiming that the election had been stolen from him.¹⁸⁵ His relentless rhetoric included calls to “stop the steal” and urged his followers to challenge the election outcomes.¹⁸⁶ This rhetoric found a potent reverberation in the echo chambers of social media and other communication platforms, nurturing a growing sense of grievance and mistrust among his supporters.¹⁸⁷ President Trump’s unfounded election claims had a significant impact as they fueled mistrust and heightened political polarization and social divisions within the United States.

The proliferation of conspiracy theories played a pivotal role in exacerbating the volatile environment. Conspiracy theories, propagated and amplified through social media channels, further contributed to the volatile atmosphere that led to the events of January 6.¹⁸⁸ Notably, the QAnon conspiracy theory, which falsely posits a deep-state scheme against Trump, and the notion that the Capitol protests were infiltrated by Antifa distorted the perceptions of certain participants, entrenching them in a skewed version of reality.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸³ Jan Wolfe, “Trump’s False Claims Debunked: The 2020 Election and Jan. 6 Riot,” Reuters, January 6, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trumps-false-claims-debunked-2020-election-jan-6-riot-2022-01-06/>; Gabriel R. Sanchez and Keesha Middlemass, “Misinformation Is Eroding the Public’s Confidence in Democracy,” Brookings, July 26, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/misinformation-is-eroding-the-publics-confidence-in-democracy/>; Judy Woodruff, “Exhaustive Fact Check Finds Little Evidence of Voter Fraud, but 2020’s ‘Big Lie’ Lives On,” PBS NewsHour, December 17, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/exhaustive-fact-check-finds-little-evidence-of-voter-fraud-but-2020s-big-lie-lives-on>.

¹⁸⁴ Woodruff, “Little Evidence of Voter Fraud.”

¹⁸⁵ Wolfe, “Trump’s False Claims Debunked.”

¹⁸⁶ Woodruff, “Little Evidence of Voter Fraud.”

¹⁸⁷ Sanchez and Middlemass, “Misinformation Is Eroding the Public’s Confidence in Democracy.”

¹⁸⁸ Tonya Mosley and Allison Hagan, “How Social Media Fueled the Insurrection at the U.S. Capitol,” WBUR Boston, January 7, 2021, <https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2021/01/07/social-media-capitol-mob>.

¹⁸⁹ David Klepper, “Conspiracy Theories Paint Fraudulent Reality of Jan. 6 Riot,” PBS NewsHour, January 1, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/conspiracy-theories-paint-fraudulent-reality-of-jan-6-riot>.

Thus, misinformation and conspiracy theories shaped the beliefs and actions of individuals, ultimately contributing to the events of January 6 and the broader challenges of political polarization and social discord.

The Trump movement encompassed a wide range of extremists of various stripes. The participation of organized far-right extremist groups, including white supremacists, militia factions, and other radical elements, added another layer to the unfolding events.¹⁹⁰ These groups capitalized on the prevailing political climate, seizing the opportunity presented by the assault to further their own extremist ideologies and agendas.¹⁹¹ January 6 might exemplify how political entrepreneurs capitalize on flashpoints to amplify their message.

Central to the assault's targeting was the U.S. Capitol, selected for its dual significance. Beyond its role in certifying the 2020 presidential election results, the Capitol holds profound symbolic weight as the heart of American democracy. By breaching its halls, the insurrectionists aimed not only to disrupt the formal certification process but also to challenge the very legitimacy of the democratic process itself.¹⁹² This act of symbolic defiance sought to project power and amplify the discord that had been building within the political landscape. The assault on the U.S. Capitol on January 6 emerged from a nexus of influences, including contested election results, divisive rhetoric, conspiracy theories, the involvement of extremist groups, and the deliberate targeting of a symbolically charged institution.

However, the motivations behind the attack do not represent the broader population or all Trump supporters. According to a CBS News poll, 83 percent of Americans

¹⁹⁰ Barbara Sprunt, "Jan. 6 Panel Shows Evidence of Coordination between Far-Right Groups and Trump Allies," NPR, July 12, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/12/1111132464/jan-6-hearing-recap-oath-keepers-proud-boys>.

¹⁹¹ Klepper, "Conspiracy Theories Paint Fraudulent Reality of Jan. 6 Riot."

¹⁹² "The January 6 Attack on the U.S. Capitol," American Oversight, September 26, 2023, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/the-january-6-attack-on-the-u-s-capitol>.

disapproved of the actions of those who forced their way into the Capitol.¹⁹³ A relatively small subset of individuals who were driven by a combination of political grievances, conspiracy beliefs, and extremist ideologies carried out the attack. The events of January 6 underscore the dangers of political polarization, the spread of disinformation, and the potential for violence when deep ideological divisions go unchecked. This incident also highlights the extent to which political divisions can escalate into direct confrontations, posing a threat to democratic institutions and the rule of law. It underscores the dangers of widespread disinformation, conspiracy theories, and the erosion of trust in electoral processes.

B. UNITE THE RIGHT RALLY

The Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, brought together white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and other far-right groups in a demonstration that turned violent. The march originally started as a protest against the removal of a Confederate statue of General Robert E. Lee.¹⁹⁴ NPR reporter Debbie Elliott quoted then-Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke as saying, “‘This represents a turning point for the people of this country.’ . . . ‘We’re going to fulfill the promises of Donald Trump because he said he’s going to take our country back.’”¹⁹⁵ Duke’s supporters, and other like-minded individuals, descended on Charlottesville. However, hundreds of locals who disapproved of bigotry responded to the demonstration, taking to the streets and yelling, “Get Nazi scum off our streets.”¹⁹⁶ Clashes erupted between rally participants and counter-protesters, culminating in tragedy when a white supremacist drove his car into a crowd, killing counter-protester Heather

¹⁹³ Jennifer De Pinto, “A Look at How Americans Have Viewed the Jan. 6 Capitol Attack—CBS News Poll Analysis,” CBS News, June 9, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/january-6-capitol-attack-cbs-news-poll-analysis/>.

¹⁹⁴ Neil MacFarquhar, “Jury Finds Rally Organizers Responsible for Charlottesville Violence,” *New York Times*, November 23, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/23/us/charlottesville-rally-verdict.html>.

¹⁹⁵ Debbie Elliott, “The Charlottesville Rally 5 Years Later: ‘It’s What You’re Still Trying to Forget,’” NPR, August 12, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/08/12/1116942725/the-charlottesville-rally-5-years-later-its-what-youre-still-trying-to-forget>.

¹⁹⁶ Elliott.

Heyer and injuring several others.¹⁹⁷ This incident laid bare racial tensions and deep-rooted divisions. It demonstrated the alarming influence of hate groups and highlighted the challenges of confronting white supremacy and extremism in an increasingly polarized environment.

C. POLITICAL ASSASSINATION AND KIDNAPPING ATTEMPTS

Assassination attempts on political figures have been linked to political polarization. The 2011 shooting of U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords and the 2017 shooting at a congressional baseball practice serve as examples.¹⁹⁸ More recently, there was a failed attempt to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer and a home invasion of then-Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi.¹⁹⁹ These acts of violence targeting elected officials reflect growing animosity and resentment fueled by extreme political rhetoric.

Political protest may have played a part in the shooting of Gaby Giffords. Jared Loughner was sentenced to life in prison for the shooting that killed six and injured 13 people, including Representative Giffords, outside a Tucson grocery store during a constituent rally.²⁰⁰ Preceding the rampage, Loughner had made several online comments indicating his mistrust of the government and police.²⁰¹ About a month before the shooting, he posted the following message online: “There are important figures in my dreams that accomplished political aspirations: Hitler, Hillary Clinton and Giffords to

¹⁹⁷ MacFarquhar, “Jury Finds Rally Organizers Responsible.”

¹⁹⁸ Associated Press, “Jared Loughner, Who Shot Gabrielle Giffords in Tucson, Ranted Online,” CBS News, April 11, 2014, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jared-loughner-who-shot-gabrielle-giffords-in-tucson-ranted-online/>; Michael D. Shear, Adam Goldman, and Emily Cochrane, “Congressman Steve Scalise Gravely Wounded in Alexandria Baseball Field Ambush,” *New York Times*, June 14, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/14/us/steve-scalise-congress-shot-alexandria-virginia.html>.

¹⁹⁹ Wilson Walker, “Update: ‘Where’s Nancy?’; Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s Husband ‘Violently Assaulted’ during Home Invasion,” CBS San Francisco, October 28, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/sanfrancisco/news/house-speaker-nancy-pelosis-husband-assaulted-during-san-francisco-home-invasion/>.

²⁰⁰ Michael Muskal, “Jared Loughner Sentenced to Life in Tucson Mass Shooting,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 2012, <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-xpm-2012-nov-08-la-na-nn-jared-loughner-life-in-prison-20121108-story.html>.

²⁰¹ Associated Press, “Jared Loughner Ranted Online.”

name a few.”²⁰² The media reported that Loughner suffered from undiagnosed schizophrenia, which likely played a factor.

During a practice before the 2017 congressional baseball game, a shooter opened fire and seriously injured U.S. Representative Steve Scalise in Alexandria, Virginia. Scalise and four other Republican members of Congress were injured in a shooting spree by James T. Hodgkinson, who was reportedly upset with then-President Trump.²⁰³ The incident involved a protracted gunfight with police, and Hodgkinson was ultimately shot and killed by law enforcement.²⁰⁴ In June 2021, Andre McCabe, former deputy director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), came under fire from Scalise for questioning the attacker’s intent. Scalise took to Twitter, stating the gunman had belonged to a Facebook group called Terminate the Republican Party, had arrived at the ballfield ready to shoot Republicans, and confirmed that each victim was a Republican before pulling the trigger.²⁰⁵ Thus, this incident highlights the intensity of political divisions and the potential consequences when individuals with extreme views act on their grievances.

In October 2022, former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s husband, Paul Pelosi, was attacked during a home invasion of the couple’s San Francisco residence by a man wielding a hammer.²⁰⁶ The Pelosi residence was specifically targeted, according to officials.²⁰⁷ The alleged perpetrator, David Depape, who attacked Paul Pelosi was looking for the speaker of the house. Depape addressed Mr. Pelosi before the attack and yelled, “Where is Nancy?

²⁰² Associated Press.

²⁰³ Peter Hermann et al., “Lawmaker Steve Scalise Is Critically Injured in GOP Baseball Shooting; Gunman James T. Hodgkinson Is Killed by Police,” *Washington Post*, April 8, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/multiple-people-injured-after-shooting-in-alexandria/2017/06/14/0289c768-50f6-11e7-be25-3a519335381c_story.html.

²⁰⁴ Shear, Goldman, and Cochrane, “Congressman Steve Scalise Gravely Wounded.”

²⁰⁵ Carly Roman, “Scalise Slams McCabe for Saying FBI ‘Doesn’t Exactly Know’ Motive of Congressional Baseball Shooter,” *Washington Examiner*, June 16, 2021, <https://news.yahoo.com/scalise-slams-mccabe-saying-fbi-002100196.html>.

²⁰⁶ Walker, “Where’s Nancy?”

²⁰⁷ Emily Shapiro et al., “Attack on Nancy Pelosi’s Husband Was Not Random, Police Chief Says,” ABC News, October 29, 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/nancy-pelosis-husband-violently-assaulted-san-francisco-home/story?id=92280229>.

How is Nancy doing?”²⁰⁸ Local law enforcement responded and witnessed the hammer attack on Mr. Pelosi. After his arrest, Depape, who reportedly suffers from mental illness, confessed to officers that “he was sick of the ‘level of lies’ coming from Washington, DC, . . . [claiming,] ‘I’m not going to stand here and do nothing, even if it cost me my life.’”²⁰⁹ Thus, those who are mentally disturbed may act out fantasies through political violence.

The plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, which came to light in October 2020, involved a group of individuals who conspired to kidnap and potentially harm the governor.²¹⁰ The FBI, in conjunction with state and local law enforcement agencies, uncovered a plot by an extremist anti-government group called the Wolverine Watchmen to kidnap Governor Gretchen Whitmer.²¹¹ The group consisted of individuals who held extremist views and expressed grievances against the government, particularly related to COVID-19 restrictions implemented by the state, and perceived future threats to firearms ownership.²¹² Governor Whitmer criticized then-President Donald Trump for enabling the plot’s development, claiming that he had provided “comfort to those who spread fear, hatred, and division.”²¹³ Later, Trump referred to the kidnapping scheme as a “fake deal.”²¹⁴ In this instance, the motives of the conspiracy seemed exclusively political.

According to CNN’s reporting, in August 2023, “FBI agents shot and killed Utah man Craig Robertson while attempting to arrest him for making threats against President

²⁰⁸ Walker, “Where’s Nancy?”

²⁰⁹ Paul LeBlanc, “Suspect in Paul Pelosi Attack Awoke Him by Standing over His Bedside, Documents Show,” CNN, November 2, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/02/politics/paul-pelosi-attack-latest-depape-court/index.html>.

²¹⁰ Eliza Fawcett, “Three Michigan Men Sentenced to Prison Terms for Aiding Plot against Whitmer,” *New York Times*, December 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/15/us/whitmer-kidnap-sentence-michigan.html>.

²¹¹ Fawcett.

²¹² Joey Cappelletti, “Whitmer Kidnapping Plot Co-leader Sentenced to 19 Years in Prison,” PBS NewsHour, December 28, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/whitmer-kidnapping-plot-co-leader-sentenced-to-19-years-in-prison>.

²¹³ Cappelletti.

²¹⁴ Cappelletti.

Joe Biden prior to the president’s visit to the state.”²¹⁵ Robertson faced federal charges, including threats against the president and against federal law enforcement officers.²¹⁶ He had posted online threats, including references to firearms and sniper rifles, targeting Biden and other Democratic politicians. The case underscores the heightened level of threats against leaders in the run-up to the 2024 election, as highlighted by FBI Director Christopher Wray.²¹⁷ Robertson’s online posts indicated his awareness of FBI monitoring.²¹⁸ As of this writing, the FBI is conducting a review of the incident, and the U.S. Secret Service, responsible for high-level government officials’ protection, is also involved. John Kirby, the National Security Council coordinator for strategic communications, praised law enforcement’s response, highlighting the potential consequences of rhetoric’s turning into actions.²¹⁹ All of these threats fit in with the rising tide of political violence.

D. DOMESTIC VIOLENT EXTREMIST ATTACKS

Violent incidents associated with extremist ideologies, such as white supremacy, anti-government sentiments, or radicalized religious beliefs, have also occurred intermittently in the United States. The 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, the 2015 shooting at the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, and the 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue attack are tragic illustrations of such incidents. In the case of Oklahoma City, the events at Waco and Ruby Ridge and espoused anti-government ideologies motivated Timothy McVeigh.²²⁰ The Charleston and Pittsburgh attacks, motivated by extremist

²¹⁵ Hannah Rabinowitz, Betsy Klein, and Arlette Saenz, “Utah Man Killed by FBI Agents after He Allegedly Made Threats against Biden ahead of President’s Visit,” CNN, August 9, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/09/politics/fbi-utah-man-joe-biden/index.html>.

²¹⁶ Rabinowitz, Klein, and Saenz.

²¹⁷ Lindsay Whitehurst and Sam Metz, “FBI Agents Shoot and Kill Utah Man Suspected of Threatening President Joe Biden,” AP News, August 9, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/utah-biden-fbi-assassination-threat-ba3cc1d3b2f6cca8bd429febdcf04219>.

²¹⁸ Whitehurst and Metz.

²¹⁹ Whitehurst and Metz.

²²⁰ Mark Lawson Fetter, “The Criminal Behavior and Motivations behind McVeigh’s Decision to Bomb the Murrah Federal Building” (master’s thesis, California State University, San Bernardino, 2002), <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd-project/2251>.

beliefs, targeted minority communities and places of worship, resulting in the loss of life and profound grief.²²¹ All serve as a reminder of the consequences when polarization intersects with radicalization and intolerance.

Additionally, political demonstrations and clashes between opposing groups with different ideological affiliations have resulted in violence. Groups such as Antifa, the Proud Boys, and other far-right or far-left organizations have engaged in confrontations in various cities across the United States.²²² As an example, in June 2021, eight people were injured as chaos broke out on the streets of Portland, Oregon, with fights between Antifa and right-wing groups.²²³ In New York City, at a drag story hour event outside an LGBTQ+ community center, demonstrators and counter-protesters fought each other, with several of the latter appearing to be Proud Boys members.²²⁴ Of course, the aforementioned Unite the Right rally serves as another example of this trend.²²⁵ These clashes highlight the dangers of unrestricted aggression and the potential for escalating violence when opposing sides with deeply rooted beliefs come into direct conflict.

E. HARASSMENT AND THREATS

Incidents of harassment, threats, and intimidation have been reported against politicians, activists, and public figures due to their political beliefs or affiliations. The Anti-Defamation League and Princeton University researchers are creating the first-ever national database that tracks instances of threats and harassment directed at public

²²¹ Matt Zapposky, “Charleston Church Shooter: ‘I Would Like to Make It Crystal Clear, I Do Not Regret What I Did,’” *Washington Post*, May 24, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/charleston-church-shooter-i-would-like-to-make-it-crystal-clear-i-do-not-regret-what-i-did/2017/01/04/05b0061e-d1da-11e6-a783-cd3fa950f2fd_story.html; Campbell Robertson, “Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooting Trial: What to Know as Jurors Recommend a Death Sentence,” *New York Times*, August 2, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/tree-of-life-shooting-trial.html>.

²²² John Bacon, “Right-Wing Protesters, ‘Antifa’ Clashes Bring Chaos to Streets of Portland, Oregon,” *USA Today*, June 30, 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/06/30/antifa-right-wing-protesters-clash-streets-portland-oregon/1611630001/>; Olga Fedorova, “Protesters Are Bloodied and Arrested at NYC Drag Story Hour,” NBC News, March 20, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/protesters-bloodied-arrested-nyc-drag-story-hour-rcna75724>; MacFarquhar, “Jury Finds Rally Organizers Responsible.”

²²³ Bacon, “Right-Wing Protesters, ‘Antifa’ Clashes.”

²²⁴ Fedorova, “Protesters Are Bloodied and Arrested at NYC Drag Story Hour.”

²²⁵ Elliott, “The Charlottesville Rally 5 Years Later.”

figures.²²⁶ White nationalists have started to target Boston Mayor Michelle Wu.²²⁷ Washington State Representative Pramila Jayapal was stalked by a gun-wielding subject outside her home.²²⁸ U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York has publicly stated that she gets an “astronomical amount of threats every day.”²²⁹ Senator Susan Collins of Maine recently stated, “I wouldn’t be surprised if a senator or a member of the House were killed.”²³⁰ The rise of social media platforms has amplified these incidents, making it easier for individuals to target and harass others based on their ideological differences.²³¹ Such acts of aggression not only harm individuals but also have a chilling effect on free expression, civic participation, and the willingness to engage in open dialogue.

Threats and harassment toward election officials have risen sharply since the 2020 election.²³² For example, Colorado Secretary of State Jena Griswold, a Democrat, has received numerous electronic threats via social media and email since the 2020 election. As reported by the *Washington Post*, one disturbing Facebook message warned, “Watch your back . . . I KNOW WHERE YOU SLEEP, I SEE YOU SLEEPING. BE AFRAID, BE VERY AFRAID.”²³³ On Instagram, another message read, “Penalty for treason?”

²²⁶ Jennifer A. Kingson, “First-Ever National Database Shows Women Public Officials Targeted 3.4x More Often than Men,” *Axios*, November 1, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/11/01/princeton-threats-officials-elections-harassment>.

²²⁷ Zoe Mathews, “Mayor Wu: Boston Has Become a Target for White Supremacists and Right-Wing Extremists,” *WGBH Boston*, August 18, 2022, <https://www.wgbh.org/news/local-news/2022/08/18/mayor-wu-boston-has-become-a-target-for-white-supremacists-and-right-wing-extremists>.

²²⁸ Amy Cheng, “Man Arrested with Gun outside Rep. Jayapal’s Home Charged with Stalking,” *Washington Post*, July 29, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/07/29/rep-pramila-jayapal-brett-forsell-stalker-seattle/>.

²²⁹ John L. Dorman, “AOC Says Her Office Struggles to Keep Up with the ‘Astronomical’ Level of Daily Threats That She Receives: NYT,” *Business Insider*, October 2, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/aoc-congressional-threats-additional-security-members-capitol-police-2022-10>.

²³⁰ Stephanie Lai, Luke Broadwater, and Carl Hulse, “Lawmakers Confront a Rise in Threats and Intimidation, and Fear Worse,” *New York Times*, October 1, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/01/us/politics/violent-threats-lawmakers.html>.

²³¹ Barrett, Hendrix, and Sims, “How Tech Platforms Fuel U.S. Political Polarization.”

²³² Cat Zakrzewski, “Election Workers Brace for a Torrent of Threats: ‘I Know Where You Sleep,’” *Washington Post*, November 8, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/11/08/election-workers-online-threats/>.

²³³ Zakrzewski.

Hanging or firing squad. You can pick Griswold.”²³⁴ According to results from a Brennan Center for Justice survey, 45 percent of local election officials said they fear for the safety of their colleagues.²³⁵ Many election officials have endured criticism, intimidation, and death threats for election results that certain politicians and people do not like. Political leaders have interfered with the jobs of these officials by shunning or removing those who speak out about election security, and in some states, new legislation has subjected officials to criminal penalties for even minor offenses or for acting proactively to assist their constituents.²³⁶ As a consequence, election worker turnover is increasing at an alarming rate.²³⁷ Simply put, according to the Brennan Center, “The people who run our elections are exhausted and afraid.”²³⁸ In the wake of the 2020 election, the worrying surge of threats and harassment toward elections officials indicates the corrosive impact of polarization on democratic foundations and the urgent need for collective action.

F. CONCLUSION

In the face of a surge in political polarization, the United States has encountered a rise in violent incidents linked to this deepening ideological divide. The episodes of violence explored in this chapter underscore the ramifications of unchecked polarization, transcending policy disagreements to manifest in acts of aggression, hostility, and even tragedy. These incidents have shaken the foundations of democracy, posing a grave threat to societal cohesion, public safety, and the integrity of democratic institutions.

The assault on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, stands as a reminder of the dangers inherent in extreme polarization. This event, far from an isolated incident,

²³⁴ Zakrzewski.

²³⁵ Ruby Edlin and Lawrence Norden, “Poll of Election Officials Shows High Turnover amid Safety Threats and Political Interference,” Brennan Center for Justice, April 25, 2023, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/poll-election-officials-shows-high-turnover-amid-safety-threats-and>.

²³⁶ Edlin and Norden.

²³⁷ Jess Bidgood, “America’s Election Workers Are Leaving in Droves,” *Boston Globe*, October 23, 2022, <https://apps.bostonglobe.com/nation/politics/2022/10/democracy-under-siege/election-workers-leaving-in-droves/>.

²³⁸ Michael Waldman, “The Great Resignation . . . of Election Officials,” Brennan Center for Justice, April 25, 2023, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/great-resignation-election-officials>.

represents a culmination of factors, including the spread of conspiracy theories, the presence of extremist groups, and the erosion of trust in democratic processes. It serves as a permanent testament to the urgent need for society to address the corrosive effects of polarization, as the consequences of inaction can be dire.

The Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, political assassination and kidnapping attempts, domestic extremist attacks, and incidents of harassment and threats collectively illuminate the corrosive impact of polarization on societal harmony. These examples illustrate the perilous nexus between deeply entrenched beliefs, radicalization, and the escalation of violence. They underscore the importance of proactive measures aimed at fostering understanding, empathy, and open dialogue to defuse the tension and hostility bred by extreme polarization.

The repercussions of these violent incidents extend far beyond their immediate impact. They reveal the extent to which political polarization can tear the social fabric, undermine democratic norms, and diminish the space for productive discourse. If left unaddressed, this trend poses a threat to democracy and the rule of law.

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IV. THE SOCIAL IDENTITY ANALYTICAL METHOD

The current socio-political environment presents complex intergroup conflicts that warrant in-depth analysis for more effective policymaking. Polarization, accompanied by its potential to incite violence, calls for advanced analytical methods. SIAM emerges as a significant tool in this context. This chapter introduces the SIAM framework, emphasizing its capabilities in understanding the multifaceted aspects of polarization, whether political, social, or cultural. It starts by defining SIAM and then examines its relevance in shedding light on various facets of polarization. The concluding segment reflects on the broader implications of SIAM for conflict analysis and potential pathways to resolution. Through the frameworks of sociology, anthropology, and conflict studies, this chapter seeks to provide greater insight into societal polarization and the challenges it poses.

A. SIAM DEFINED

SIAM is an analytically rigorous tool to decipher the complexities inherent in conflicts between groups. Integrating knowledge from fields like sociology, psychology, anthropology, and conflict studies, it provides a comprehensive lens to assess conflicts that span a variety of entities, from extremist organizations to street gangs.²³⁹ Initially designed to tailor SIT's analytical approach to operational requirements, it has been adopted by numerous local, state, and federal law enforcement entities across the United States.²⁴⁰ This method emerged from a continuous discussion between scholars and practitioners at the Naval Postgraduate School's Center for Homeland Defense and Security.²⁴¹ This section unpacks the essence of SIAM, highlighting its primary components and the unique markers it employs to elucidate these conflicts.

In an interconnected world characterized by complex human interactions, the study of conflicts between groups has taken on heightened importance. These groups, each with distinct beliefs, goals, and origins, often find themselves in opposition, leading to

²³⁹ Brannan and Strindberg, "The Social Identity Analytical Method."

²⁴⁰ Strindberg, *Social Identity Theory and the Study of Terrorism*.

²⁴¹ Strindberg.

repercussions felt on local, regional, and global scales.²⁴² In this context, SIAM bridges various disciplines to offer a rounded view of these conflicts. It focuses on deeper behavioral, structural, and societal factors, especially in situations where resources are limited.²⁴³ SIAM has become increasingly popular among law enforcement analysts addressing terrorism, violent extremism, and other substate violent entities because of its precise predictive capabilities.²⁴⁴ Similarly, SIT has given rise to several focused conflict resolution frameworks, further showcasing its utility in anticipating actions and events.²⁴⁵ In this way, it could provide valuable insights and tools to support the thesis.

A primary strength of SIAM lies in its set of four analytical markers. The first marker, the *limited good*, captures how groups perceive resources as finite, thus leading to competition.²⁴⁶ It explores how groups prioritize these resources, which in turn shapes their broader narratives and strategies.²⁴⁷ Then, there is a focus on *comparative group status*, which addresses the dynamics of honor and shame in conflicts between subnational groups in a resource-constrained environment.²⁴⁸ Here, SIAM emphasizes the role of social standing, offering insights into how groups strive for recognition, safeguard their reputation, and navigate challenges to maintain or enhance their status in a dynamic environment.²⁴⁹ Thus, competition is inherent to group dynamics.

Leaders are often the glue that holds groups together. Thus, SIAM examines leadership dynamics within groups, focusing on interactions between leaders and followers under the *role of extended leadership*.²⁵⁰ This perspective underscores the importance of

²⁴² Saul Mcleod, “Social Identity Theory In Psychology (Tajfel & Turner, 1979),” Simply Psychology, October 5, 2023, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/social-identity-theory.html>.

²⁴³ Brannan and Strindberg, “The Social Identity Analytical Method.”

²⁴⁴ Strindberg, *Social Identity Theory and the Study of Terrorism*.

²⁴⁵ Strindberg.

²⁴⁶ Brannan and Strindberg, “The Social Identity Analytical Method.”

²⁴⁷ Brannan, Darken, and Strindberg, *A Practitioner’s Way Forward*.

²⁴⁸ Brannan and Strindberg, “The Social Identity Analytical Method.”

²⁴⁹ Brannan, Darken, and Strindberg, *A Practitioner’s Way Forward*.

²⁵⁰ Brannan and Strindberg, “The Social Identity Analytical Method.”

trust, loyalty, and mutual support in determining group actions and interactions with external parties.²⁵¹ This process, also described as the *patron–client relationship*, is key to understanding the nature of the group and its capacity to shape an in-group narrative through leadership.

Groups contend for dominance, so SIAM analyzes *actions taken*, the specific steps groups adopt in the face of conflict.²⁵² This perspective not only covers confrontations but also accounts for broader strategic initiatives that groups deploy to assert their position and react to challenges.²⁵³ The interplay can be observed between subnational social groups competing for the public’s political perceptions or the positive and negative interactions between subnational groups and the government—otherwise known as the *challenge–response game*.²⁵⁴ SIAM’s comprehensive analysis of group dynamics, including actions and strategic initiatives, offers a deeper understanding of conflicts and their implications for society and governance.

Applying SIAM involves using these markers systematically to gain deeper insights into conflicts. This process entails answering key questions related to each marker to uncover motives, strategies, and interplay within the conflict.²⁵⁵ The strength of SIAM resides in its ability to identify crucial events, relationships, and root causes that drive conflict dynamics.²⁵⁶ In the arena of subnational social group and conflict analysis, SIAM emerges as an interdisciplinary approach rooted in scholarship and relevant for considering the polarized reality of the current discursive landscape. Recognizing the multi-layered nature of intergroup conflicts, SIAM offers a path for understanding how diverse groups operate in tight resource situations, how they determine their standing, and how they address challenges. Through a look at SIAM’s methodology, the intention here is to better decode the intricate dynamics of intergroup conflicts in today’s complex environment.

²⁵¹ Brannan, Darken, and Strindberg, *A Practitioner’s Way Forward*.

²⁵² Brannan and Strindberg, “The Social Identity Analytical Method.”

²⁵³ Brannan and Strindberg.

²⁵⁴ Brannan, Darken, and Strindberg, *A Practitioner’s Way Forward*.

²⁵⁵ Brannan and Strindberg, “The Social Identity Analytical Method.”

²⁵⁶ Brannan and Strindberg.

B. SIAM APPLIED

In contemporary American politics and society, the phenomena of political polarization and escalating violence have become increasingly prominent. Understanding the factors that contribute to these challenges demands a deeper approach. This section explores the application of SIAM as a tool for unraveling the complexities of political polarization and the emergence of violence in the United States. Through the lens of SIAM, a greater understanding of the socio-cultural and psychological forces that underpin political polarization and the manifestation of violence emerges, providing a broader perspective on these pressing concerns in contemporary America.

1. Political Polarization

Understanding the socio-political climate of a nation demands both depth and nuance, particularly in the face of America's rising populism.²⁵⁷ Regarding populism, politicians have frequently taken advantage of the widespread perception that the U.S. political system is corrupt and has been rigged throughout history.²⁵⁸ SIAM's analytical lens offers a better understanding of the factors driving political polarization.

At the heart of SIAM's analysis lies the perception of the limited good.²⁵⁹ In contemporary U.S. politics, this concept has only been exacerbated by populist narratives. Populism inherently thrives on the distinction between the "people" and the "elite."²⁶⁰ By championing the cause of the "common man," populist leaders underscore the scarcity of resources, implying that the elite have been hoarding opportunities and advantages for themselves.²⁶¹ The 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections stand testament to this

²⁵⁷ Arthur Brooks et al., "Deep Dive: The Rise of Populism in America: What It Looks Like, Why It Happens, and Prescriptions for Change," video, 1:29:22, Aspen Ideas Festival, June 29, 2018, <https://www.aspenideas.org/sessions/deep-dive-the-rise-of-populism-in-america-what-it-looks-like-why-it-happens-and-prescriptions-for-change>.

²⁵⁸ Sidney Milkis and Nicholas Jacobs, "Populism and American Democracy," Miller Center, November 16, 2021, <https://millercenter.org/vital-center/populism-and-american-democracy>.

²⁵⁹ Brannan and Strindberg, "The Social Identity Analytical Method."

²⁶⁰ Mark White, "When Populism Meant Collective Strength against a Rigged System," Plebity, May 25, 2021, <https://www.plebity.org/article/when-populism-meant-collective-strength-against-a-rigged-system/>.

²⁶¹ Brooks et al., "Deep Dive."

observation, with rhetoric from both sides highlighting potential losses—whether rights, values, or resources—if the opposing side were to gain an advantage.²⁶² In this case, the populist perspective seeks to control the perception of what it means to be appropriately American.²⁶³ Thus, SIAM’s examination of the limited-good concept and its nexus to populist narratives sheds light on how political discourse shapes perceptions of what it means to be American, ultimately impacting the dynamics of contemporary U.S. politics.

SIAM’s focus on the centrality of patron–client relationships resonates strongly in an age of populism. Leaders position themselves as the “saviors” of their followers, promising to rescue them from the perceived threats the “other side” presents.²⁶⁴ The fervent support for figures like former President Donald Trump can be contextualized here. His assurances to guard against perceived menaces—whether from immigration policies or alleged establishment politics—have resonated deeply with a segment of the population.²⁶⁵ On the flip side, the populist undertones in Senator Bernie Sanders’s campaigns, emphasizing the power of grassroots movements against corporate giants, have fostered a similar patron–client dynamic with his base.²⁶⁶ Therefore, SIAM’s examination of patron–client relationships underscores the influence of populism in contemporary politics, revealing how leaders on both ends of the political spectrum leverage this dynamic to garner support and shape their followers’ perceptions of the other side.

Public adjudication of honor and shame has only been magnified in the digital age. Social media platforms amplify these dynamics, with political figures and their actions

²⁶² Kobi Hackenburg, William J. Brady, and Manos Tsakiris, “Mapping Moral Language on US Presidential Primary Campaigns Reveals Rhetorical Networks of Political Division and Unity,” *PNAS Nexus* 2, no. 6 (2023): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgad189>.

²⁶³ See, for instance, Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 106–119.

²⁶⁴ Andrew Restuccia, “The Sanctification of Donald Trump,” *Politico*, April 30, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/04/30/donald-trump-evangelicals-god-1294578>.

²⁶⁵ Jérôme Viala-Gaufroy, “What Explains Donald Trump’s Enduring Appeal with Republican Voters?,” *The Conversation*, June 15, 2023, <http://theconversation.com/what-explains-donald-trumps-enduring-appeal-with-republican-voters-207871>.

²⁶⁶ Erica Groshen and Harry J. Holzer, “Bernie’s Populism—and What It Says about the Job Market,” *Brookings*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-sanders-is-winning-and-how-2020-democrats-should-approach-the-economy/>.

incessantly judged and categorized.²⁶⁷ The populist wave further accentuates this trend. Populist leaders, adept at using these platforms, often polarize public opinion even more.²⁶⁸ The notion of us-versus-them finds fertile ground, making spaces like Twitter (now X) virtual battlegrounds where political figures become either heroes championing the cause of the masses or villains perpetuating the interests of the elite.²⁶⁹

SIAM's challenge–response marker highlights how modern politics often prioritize political competition over effective policymaking. Populist narratives intensify this trend by emphasizing challenges to the status quo. The challenge and response dynamic illuminates the tit-for-tat nature of current political dialogues.²⁷⁰ As parties and figures are locked in this dynamic, policies and reforms often become secondary to political one-upmanship.²⁷¹ The populist narrative only intensifies this phenomenon, as the central theme revolves around challenging the existing status quo.²⁷² The discourse around the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare, is illustrative. While its introduction was hailed as a challenge to existing healthcare structures, the response it elicited from its critics, especially in populist circles, was intense and immediate.²⁷³ This pattern of prioritizing political rivalry over policy outcomes underscores the challenges in achieving meaningful governance and bipartisan cooperation in an era marked by polarization.

In weaving together SIAM and the contextual understanding of populism, it becomes evident that political polarization in the United States is not a simple byproduct of differing ideologies. It is a complex interaction of social identity constructs, resource

²⁶⁷ Laura Jacobs, “Social Media: Populists’ Partners in Crime,” *The Loop* (blog), March 29, 2023, <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/social-media-populists-partners-in-crime/>.

²⁶⁸ Jacobs.

²⁶⁹ Barrett, Hendrix, and Sims, “How Tech Platforms Fuel U.S. Political Polarization.”

²⁷⁰ Brannan and Strindberg, “The Social Identity Analytical Method.”

²⁷¹ Jill Colvin, Sara Burnett, and Jonathan J. Cooper, “Republican Candidates Fight Each Other, and Mostly Line Up behind Trump, at the First Debate,” AP News, August 23, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/first-republican-debate-2024-elections-gop-89812d5aa1ed6a4ebe7373ff36858250>.

²⁷² Brooks et al., “Deep Dive.”

²⁷³ Julie Rovner, “Why Do So Many People Hate Obamacare So Much?,” NPR, December 13, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2017/12/13/570479181/why-do-so-many-people-hate-obamacare-so-much>.

perceptions, relationships, and interactive dynamics across geographic and demographic varieties in America. The populist wave, which champions clear distinctions and prioritizes emotional resonance over nuanced dialogue, amplifies this complex interplay between social groups.

2. Political Violence

The United States, particularly in recent years, has seen an uptick in violence associated with deep political polarization. Although many analysts have turned to traditional socio-political explanations for these phenomena, SIAM speaks to foundational conflicts between social groups in this environment.²⁷⁴ At the heart of SIAM is the research stressing the importance of structural and cultural dispositions between social groups.²⁷⁵ Instead of simply labeling violent actors as radical fringes of the political spectrum, SIAM prompts one to comprehend their actions in light of individuals and groups vying for dominance in resource-limited environments.²⁷⁶

Consider the events leading up to and during the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in 2017. On the surface, it was a demonstration of white nationalist beliefs and far-right ideologies, but through the SIAM lens, a more detailed perspective emerges. In many ways, the rally illustrated which groups perceived that their cultural and political space was under threat. The statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, slated for removal, became a symbol of the limited good.²⁷⁷ That symbol of hate to many remained a symbol of historical resonance to others unable to dissociate slavery and insurrection from a history they continued to evoke. To far-right groups, the statue's removal meant erasing their history and identity—their perceived loss was seen as a gain for the groups

²⁷⁴ Brannan and Strindberg, “The Social Identity Analytical Method.”

²⁷⁵ Brannan and Strindberg.

²⁷⁶ Brannan and Strindberg.

²⁷⁷ Sam Jackson, “Don’t Assume the Militias at the Charlottesville Rally Were White Supremacists. This Is What They Believe Now,” *Washington Post*, September 8, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/09/08/remember-those-militias-at-the-charlottesville-unite-the-right-rally-heres-what-they-believe/>.

advocating its removal.²⁷⁸ This perceived *relative deprivation* on the part of the in-group, which perceived the statue’s removal as a loss, was set within an internally perceived zero-sum game.²⁷⁹ This research does not set out to justify or sympathize with the in-group’s perception. Rather, it seeks to explain the in-group’s perception of relative deprivation as part of the broader effort to analyze polarization more effectively.

The patron–client relationship is evident in many violent polarization-driven events. During these incidents, prominent figures or entities often direct or influence the course of events. In the context of the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, the relationship between then-candidate Donald Trump and a segment of his supporters demonstrated this influence.²⁸⁰ Trump’s rhetoric often painted a picture of an America losing its greatness, with implicit and explicit calls to “Make America Great Again.”²⁸¹ This message galvanized certain groups to view themselves as “defenders” of U.S. identity and values, leading to repeated confrontations and incidents of violence.²⁸² The patron–client relationship can significantly influence violent polarization-driven events, as seen in the case of Trump’s rhetoric during the 2016 election, which encouraged certain groups and contributed to confrontations and incidents of violence.

Publicly adjudicated honor and shame play out distinctly in today’s digital age. For instance, the confrontations and skirmishes between groups like the Proud Boys and Antifa

²⁷⁸ Jacey Fortin, “The Statue at the Center of Charlottesville’s Storm,” *New York Times*, August 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/us/charlottesville-rally-protest-statue.html>.

²⁷⁹ On the issue of relative deprivation, see Jonas R. Kunst and Milan Obaidi, “Understanding Violent Extremism in the 21st Century: The (Re)Emerging Role of Relative Deprivation,” *Current Opinion in Psychology* 35 (2020): 55–59, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.03.010>. For an explanation of how this works in potential political violence, see Fathali M. Moghaddam, “The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration,” in *Psychology of Terrorism*, ed. Bruce Bongar et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²⁸⁰ MoveMe, “#MAGA,” in *#MoveMe: A Guide to Social Media and Social Movements* (Berkeley: Berkeley Haas School of Business, n.d.), <https://moveme.berkeley.edu/project/maga/>.

²⁸¹ Kim Eckart, “New Nationwide Survey Shows MAGA Supporters’ Beliefs about the Pandemic, the Election and the Insurrection,” UW News, February 5, 2021, <https://www.washington.edu/news/2021/02/05/new-nationwide-survey-shows-maga-supporters-beliefs-about-the-pandemic-the-election-and-the-insurrection/>.

²⁸² Eckart.

often spill over from online social media platforms to the streets.²⁸³ Each side attempts to present the other in a negative light, defending its own honor while shaming its adversaries.²⁸⁴ The online environment, which enables the dissemination of various political perspectives that lead to polarization, contributes to the zero-sum nature of conflict.²⁸⁵ Platforms such as YouTube widely circulate video clips of physical conflicts, leading to further polarization and setting the stage for subsequent clashes in the physical and cyber environments.²⁸⁶ In today’s digital age, the public battles over honor and shame have real-world consequences.

The challenge–response dynamic is evident in interactions between groups. Black Lives Matter protests, sparked first by Trayvon Martin’s death in 2013, often saw counter-protesters advocating “Blue Lives Matter” or “All Lives Matter.”²⁸⁷ This continuous cycle, where one group’s actions or slogans are countered by another’s, creates an environment of perpetual confrontation.

By employing the SIAM methodology, scholars can discern patterns transcending mere political affiliations or ideologies. Human group behavior, especially in the context of perceived threats and competition, exhibits these automatic responses.²⁸⁸ SIAM offers a perspective wherein polarization-linked violence is not solely about differing ideologies; it is rooted in deeply seated behavioral patterns of in-groups, manifesting in modern contexts. SIAM, thus, provides an enhanced understanding of the issue, shedding light on the complicated socio-cultural dynamics at play. Recognizing these undercurrents is

²⁸³ Hatewatch, “Facebook’s Fight Club: How the Proud Boys Use the Social Media Platform to Vet Their Fighters,” Southern Poverty Law Center, August 2, 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/08/02/facebooks-fight-club-how-proud-boys-use-social-media-platform-vet-their-fighters>.

²⁸⁴ “Proud Boys,” Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed September 9, 2023, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>.

²⁸⁵ See, for instance, Daniel Byman, *Spreading Hate: The Rise of White Supremist Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 93–122.

²⁸⁶ Telegraph, “Proud Boys and Antifa Clash in Violent Protest in Portland,” video, 1:39, YouTube, August 23, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIK17paHe4U>.

²⁸⁷ Christopher E. Smith, “Blue Lives Matter versus Black Lives Matter: Beneficial Social Policies as the Path Away from Punitive Rhetoric and Harm,” *Vermont Law Review* 44 (2020): 463–91.

²⁸⁸ Brannan and Strindberg, “The Social Identity Analytical Method.”

necessary for formulating effective solutions to address the violence emerging from polarization.

3. Social and Cultural Polarization

At the heart of America’s most potent debates lie race, gender, LGBTQ+ rights, and religion. Perhaps seen as subjects of contention, they are foundational to people’s identities and perceptions of their place within the larger society.²⁸⁹ The pulsing beats of nationalism and ethnonationalism emphasize these debates, reflecting broader societal issues onto individual experiences and self-perceptions.²⁹⁰ Understanding the influence of identity-driven debates on U.S. society provides valuable insights into the complexities of contemporary social and cultural polarization.

Dueling identities may be responsible for the overreaction to transgender rights. For instance, the debate on transgender rights, encapsulated by the “bathroom bills,” superficially appears to be a tug-of-war between conservative and progressive viewpoints.²⁹¹ Yet, through the SIAM prism, it demonstrates the limited-good principle.²⁹² To some, changing norms signify a destabilizing of their cultural or moral compass, while for the transgender community, these changes affirm one’s identity and sense of self.²⁹³ This perspective highlights how the debate on transgender rights reflects deeper societal tensions and concerns over cultural norms and identity. Examining it through the limited-good principle reveals it is not only a conservative-versus-progressive issue but a complex clash of values and identities, thus contributing to the debate’s intensity. The Black Lives Matter movement is also seen more effectively through SIAM. Instead of a mere call for political reform, it becomes a profound challenge to systemic

²⁸⁹ “Social Identity Theory: Overview,” *SAFS Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Blog*, July 8, 2021, <https://sites.uw.edu/safs-dei/2021/07/08/social-identity-theory-overview/>.

²⁹⁰ Jerry Z. Muller, “Us and Them: The Enduring Power of Ethnic Nationalism,” *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 2 (2008): 18–35.

²⁹¹ Lana Ulrich, “Explaining Bathroom Bills, Transgender Rights, and Equal Protection,” *Constitution Daily* (blog), May 6, 2016, <https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/explaining-bathroom-bills-transgender-rights-and-equal-protection>.

²⁹² Brannan and Strindberg, “The Social Identity Analytical Method.”

²⁹³ Brannan and Strindberg.

constructs and established national narratives.²⁹⁴ It is a call to reshape an American identity to be inclusive and recognize its varied racial lineages in relation to the lived experiences captured in the Black Lives Matter in-group narrative.

The U.S. immigration debate, especially the contentious border wall discussions, further amplifies the challenge–response dynamic inherent in the nation’s cultural conversation.²⁹⁵ Through SIAM, the border wall, often framed as a solution to a perceived problem, can be viewed as more than a physical barrier. For its proponents, it symbolizes a safeguarding of the United States’ national and cultural identity, rooted in their vision of nationalism. Its detractors, however, see it as a divisive measure that contradicts the nation’s identity as a land of immigrants, further complicating an ethnonationalist landscape.²⁹⁶ Such a debate is not solely about policy; it is tied deeply to notions of honor, societal norms, and the nation’s self-perception.²⁹⁷ This attachment suggests that policy alone is insufficient to bridge the polar division identified in the research.

SIAM also offers a unique lens through which to examine the consequences of partisan media in the United States. Media outlets not only disseminate information but also shape and frame narratives in ways that resonate with specific identities and group dynamics.²⁹⁸ SIAM helps in discerning how such media outlets amplify group distinctiveness, creating a sense of us-versus-them among their consumers. This identification can solidify in-group loyalty, as well as foster distrust and antagonism toward perceived out-groups.²⁹⁹ An understanding of how the media engages with and enhances social identity constructs underlines its contribution to the deepening divides and heightened polarization seen in American public discourse.

²⁹⁴ Brannan and Strindberg.

²⁹⁵ Brannan and Strindberg.

²⁹⁶ Brannan and Strindberg.

²⁹⁷ Muller, “Us and Them.”

²⁹⁸ Mike Cummings, “Partisan Media? Cable Viewers Shift Attitudes after Changing the Channel,” Yale News, April 13, 2022, <https://news.yale.edu/2022/04/13/partisan-media-cable-viewers-shift-attitudes-after-changing-channel>.

²⁹⁹ Andrew M. Guess et al., “The Consequences of Online Partisan Media,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 14 (2021): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2013464118>.

Religion also plays a significant role in these polarizing debates. For example, in the context of LGBTQ+ rights, religious beliefs often intersect with identity and cultural values.³⁰⁰ Some religious groups hold conservative views on gender and sexuality, contributing to the intensity of the debate over transgender rights. Additionally, religion can intersect with discussions about immigration, as religious institutions sometimes advocate humanitarian approaches while others emphasize the preservation of national and cultural identity.³⁰¹ These intersections highlight how religion further complicates and deepens the polarization surrounding these contentious issues.

In reviewing the complexities of American societal debates, it becomes evident that issues like race, gender, and LGBTQ+ rights are deeply intertwined with individuals' sense of identity and their understanding of societal positioning. These subjects are not only political battlegrounds but also reflections of broader cultural narratives and evolving societal values. SIAM provides a tool to deconstruct these debates, highlighting the influence of identity-driven perspectives. From the transgender rights debate to movements like Black Lives Matter, from immigration discussions to the role of partisan media, each issue reveals layers of identity, cultural values, and group dynamics. Using SIAM facilitates a more nuanced understanding, emphasizing the importance of recognizing the deep-rooted identity concerns that drive public discourse.

4. Social and Cultural Violence

Throughout U.S. history, moments of social and cultural violence have served as somber reminders of the underlying tensions within the nation's diverse makeup. SIAM offers a lens to examine the roots of such violent episodes, emphasizing the influence of identity and group dynamics.

The in-group narrative can drive unthinkable acts. Take, for instance, the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, which tragically took 168 lives.³⁰² The masterminds behind this

³⁰⁰ "Lecture II: Religion and Polarization," Edmond & Lily Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard University, accessed October 19, 2023, <https://ethics.harvard.edu/event/lecture-ii-religion-and-polarization>.

³⁰¹ Edmond & Lily Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard University.

³⁰² Fetter, "Criminal Behavior and Motivations."

act, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, were profoundly influenced by far-right extremist ideologies.³⁰³ To them, the federal government was more than a bureaucratic entity; it was an oppressive out-group infringing on their perceived freedoms.³⁰⁴ Their actions were not spontaneous but the culmination of deep-seated beliefs that justified violence as a means of “defense.”³⁰⁵ In this way, violence is not an aggression but a defense.

Another example is the Charleston church shooting in 2015. Dylann Roof’s act of murdering nine African Americans in a place of worship was not merely a crime of hate.³⁰⁶ It expressed a supremacist ideology that took pride in white racial superiority.³⁰⁷ For Roof, he reclaimed this honor, pushing back against what he saw as the erosion of white identity. Such acts of violence drive home the realization of how powerful supremacist beliefs can be in forging internal bonds within certain groups while simultaneously kindling deep-seated animosities against others.

The event on January 6, 2021, when the U.S. Capitol came under assault, offers yet another layer of complexity to this narrative. A mixture of misinformation, unfounded claims of election fraud, and deeply partisan narratives converged to spark this crisis.³⁰⁸ Groups like the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys, among other far-right factions, interpreted

³⁰³ Fetter.

³⁰⁴ Matthew M. Sweeney and Arie Perliger, “Explaining the Spontaneous Nature of Far-Right Violence in the United States,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 6 (2018): 52–71.

³⁰⁵ Fetter, “Criminal Behavior and Motivations.”

³⁰⁶ Zapotosky, “Charleston Church Shooter.”

³⁰⁷ Associated Press, “Dylann Roof’s Confession, Journal Details Racist Motivation for Church Killings,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 10, 2016, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/nation-world/ct-dylann-roof-charleston-shooting-20161209-story.html>.

³⁰⁸ Scott Patterson, “Jan. 6 Capitol Attack: Key Moments Leading to Riot and How It Unfolded,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 9, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/jan-6-key-moments-leading-up-to-the-attack-on-the-capitol-11654796246>.

the opportunity as a call to arms.³⁰⁹ Examined through SIAM, a concoction of shared identities, fused with perceived threats to democratic values, became a potent catalyst for violent resistance.³¹⁰ Many involved genuinely believed that their democratic rights were under siege and viewed their actions as a last stand in defense of their vision of the United States.³¹¹ This event demonstrated that narratives, especially when unchecked by factual counterpoints, can culminate in extreme us-versus-them standoffs, further widening the chasms in an already polarized society.³¹² The U.S. Capitol assault highlights the dangerous consequences of misinformation, polarized narratives, and identity-driven conflicts in society.

Moreover, events like the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville display the simmering tensions beneath their surface. The rally became a cauldron of far-right ideologies, with participants fervently expressing feelings of marginalization.³¹³ The perceived erosion of white cultural dominance was a central grievance, illustrating the depth of in-group loyalty and the intensity of out-group hostility. Additionally, the Atlanta spa shootings in 2021 demonstrated the dire consequences of societal pressures that amplify pre-existing biases, made manifest in pandemic-induced anti-Asian sentiments.³¹⁴ These events are reminders of the dangers of unchecked prejudices' leading to violence against targeted groups.

³⁰⁹ Associated Press, "2 More Oath Keepers Are Sentenced to Prison Terms for the Jan. 6 Capitol Attack," NPR, May 27, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/05/27/1178600441/oath-keepers-capitol-attack-sentenced>; Michael Kunzelman, Lindsay Whitehurst, and Alanna Durkin Richer, "Proud Boys' Enrique Tarrío Gets Record 22 Years in Prison for Jan. 6 Seditious Conspiracy," AP News, September 5, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/enrique-tarrio-capitol-riot-seditious-conspiracy-sentencing-da60222b3e1e54902db2bbbb219dc3fb>.

³¹⁰ Brannan and Strindberg, "The Social Identity Analytical Method."

³¹¹ Rob Kuznia, "Assault on Democracy: Paths to Insurrection," CNN, June 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2021/06/us/capitol-riot-paths-to-insurrection/>.

³¹² Mina Cikara, Matthew M. Botvinick, and Susan T. Fiske, "Us versus Them: Social Identity Shapes Neural Responses to Intergroup Competition and Harm," *Psychological Science* 22, no. 3 (March 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797610397667>.

³¹³ Jackson, "Don't Assume the Militias Were White Supremacists."

³¹⁴ Michelle Chen, "'She Could Have Been Your Mother': Anti-Asian Racism a Year after Atlanta Spa Shootings," *Guardian*, March 16, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/mar/16/anti-asian-racism-atlanta-spa-shootings-anniversary>.

Partisan media, too, has played a significant role in intensifying social and cultural divides in the United States. According to a new survey courtesy of Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights and the Associated Press–NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, “Nearly three-quarters of U.S. adults say the news media is increasing political polarization in this country, and just under half say they have little to no trust in the media’s ability to report the news fairly and accurately.”³¹⁵ By presenting information through a biased lens, these media outlets often prioritize narratives that affirm and amplify the views of their core audiences, at times sidelining objective facts or presenting them out of context.³¹⁶ This continuous reinforcement of particular ideologies can create echo chambers, where consumers only hear information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs (i.e., confirmation bias).³¹⁷ Over time, this effect can solidify convictions, breed distrust in alternative viewpoints, and contribute to an us-versus-them mentality.³¹⁸ When this kind of deep polarization intersects with societal or political flashpoints, it can escalate tensions to a point where some individuals or groups may resort to acts of violence, believing they are defending their socially constructed in-group values or way of life against perceived out-group threats.

As an example, following the FBI search warrant execution at former President Donald Trump’s private Mar-a-Lago estate, Fox News personalities implied that the FBI was targeting conservative values, ideologies, and politicians.³¹⁹ Figure 3 depicts a broadcast by Laura Ingram asserting the Department of Justice’s tactics were a danger to the republic. The right-leaning media strove to promote narratives for like-minded

³¹⁵ David Klepper, “Americans Fault News Media for Dividing Nation: AP-NORC Poll,” AP News, May 1, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/poll-misinformation-polarization-coronavirus-media-d56a25fd8dfd9abe1389b56d7e82b873>.

³¹⁶ Guess et al., “The Consequences of Online Partisan Media.”

³¹⁷ Hailey Reissman, “Cable News Networks Have Grown More Polarized, Study Finds,” Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, August 1, 2022, <https://www.asc.upenn.edu/news-events/news/cable-news-networks-have-grown-more-polarized-study-finds>.

³¹⁸ Michael A. Hogg, “The Search for Social Identity Leads to ‘Us’ versus ‘Them,’” *Scientific American*, September 1, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamerican0919-84>.

³¹⁹ Gideon Taaffe, “Right-Wing Media Demand the FBI Be Dismantled and Defunded after Mar-a-Lago Search,” Media Matters for America, August 9, 2022, <https://www.mediamatters.org/fox-news/right-wing-media-demand-fbi-be-dismantled-and-defunded-after-mar-lago-search>.

individuals, pitting the government against the people and attempting to erode confidence in a government institution—the FBI—and any other institutions it felt were a threat.³²⁰ This example highlights how media outlets can amplify identity-driven narratives, erode trust in government institutions, and contribute to societal polarization.



Figure 3. Fox News Headline following the FBI-Executed Search Warrant.³²¹

This type of rhetoric and misinformation has real-world consequences. Just three days after Fox News and other right-leaning news media villainized the FBI, 42-year-old Ricky Walter Shiffer Jr., armed with an assault rifle, attempted to breach and attack the FBI’s Cincinnati Field Office.³²² Shiffer had right-wing extremist views, as evidenced by his social media history.³²³ The cumulative effect of partisan media not only involves the

³²⁰ Amanda Seitz, “Report: Conservative Newsmax Peddles Jan. 6 Misinformation,” AP News, July 18, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/capitol-siege-donald-trump-misinformation-afa51409a16672232b55fa62b432aba4>; Folkenflik and Yang, “Fox News Settles Blockbuster Defamation Lawsuit.”

³²¹ Source: Taaffe, “Right-Wing Media Demand the FBI Be Dismantled.”

³²² Tom Dreisbach, “An Attempted Attack on an FBI Office Raises Concerns about Violent Far-Right Rhetoric,” NPR, August 12, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/08/12/1117275044/an-attempted-attack-on-an-fbi-office-raises-concerns-about-violent-far-right-rhe>.

³²³ Daniel Trotta and Kanishka Singh, “Police Shoot Dead Armed Man Who Tried to Breach Ohio FBI Building,” Reuters, August 12, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/fbi-says-armed-person-attempted-breach-its-cincinnati-building-2022-08-11/>.

dissemination of skewed information but also fans the flames of social or cultural conflicts that might, in extreme cases, manifest as violence.

C. CONCLUSION

SIAM serves as a versatile and interdisciplinary framework for analyzing societal polarization and violence, offering broad implications for policymaking, conflict analysis, and potential pathways to resolution. SIAM's four analytical markers—the limited good, comparative group status, the role of extended leadership, and actions taken—lend valuable insights with far-reaching consequences. In terms of policy implications, SIAM equips policymakers with a potent tool for enhancing their understanding of intergroup conflicts. By systematically examining motives, strategies, and interactions within these conflicts, policymakers can make more informed decisions. For example, understanding how the limited-good concept fuels political polarization can guide policymakers in crafting more inclusive and equitable policies that address perceived resource scarcity and its role in division. Moreover, SIAM's interdisciplinary approach is invaluable for conflict analysis and resolution. It enables conflict analysts to delve deeper into the complexities of polarization and violence, going beyond surface-level ideological differences. Analysts can identify root causes, key events, and relationships that drive conflict dynamics, ultimately leading to more effective conflict resolution strategies.

SIAM also encourages more informed and nuanced discussions around societal polarization and violence. It highlights the significance of identity-driven perspectives, group dynamics, and resource perceptions in shaping these issues. Consequently, it promotes discussions that consider the multifaceted nature of conflicts, moving beyond simplistic narratives. Furthermore, SIAM offers insights into early warning signs of violence by recognizing the role of identity and group dynamics. This understanding can aid in the development of preventive measures to mitigate conflict escalation before it turns violent. It points out the importance of addressing issues related to identity and resource perceptions to maintain social cohesion. SIAM's examination of the impact of partisan media on polarization emphasizes the critical need for media and information literacy. Individuals must be equipped to critically evaluate information sources, recognize bias,

and avoid falling into echo chambers. This literacy serves to counteract polarizing narratives in the media. Last, SIAM's focus on understanding the challenges faced by marginalized groups within polarized societies stresses the importance of inclusivity. Policymakers, leaders, and society as a whole can use this insight to promote social cohesion, equal representation, and the protection of minority rights.

SIAM offers a holistic and interdisciplinary approach to unraveling the complexities of societal polarization and violence. Its implications extend far beyond academic research, reaching into the realms of policymaking, conflict resolution, informed dialogue, prevention, media literacy, and inclusivity. By embracing SIAM's analytical markers and insights, homeland security practitioners can work toward a more comprehensive understanding of these issues.

V. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This last chapter provides findings, recommendations, and areas for further research. The findings and recommendations are intended to inform policymakers, scholars, and practitioners working to address polarization and associated violence in the United States.

A. STATEMENT OF FINDINGS

This research examined the subjects of societal polarization and violence, employing SIAM as an analytical framework. The thesis sought to explore the complexities underlying conflicts between groups, offering insights into these multifaceted issues. The following subsections offer the key findings.

1. Polarization Is a Threat to U.S. Homeland Security

Societal polarization and violence are an evolving threat to homeland security within the United States. This threat not only corrodes social cohesion but also provides opportunity for the emergence of radicalized individuals and groups, significantly jeopardizing the nation's security.³²⁴ Within polarized environments, the conditions are ripe for the radicalization and recruitment of individuals who are drawn to extremist ideologies.³²⁵ Often, the process of radicalization unfolds within these polarized communities, ultimately leading to the recruitment of individuals into extremist groups.³²⁶ As societal polarization increases, so does the likelihood of violent acts.³²⁷ Extremist individuals and groups, fueled by their ideological convictions and a sense of identity-driven righteousness, may carry out violent attacks, targeting perceived adversaries,

³²⁴ Piazza, "Political Polarization and Political Violence."

³²⁵ Nathan P. Kalmoe and Lilliana Mason, *Radical American Partisanship: Mapping Violent Hostility, Its Causes, and the Consequences for Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

³²⁶ Van Swol, Lee, and Hutchins, "The Banality of Extremism."

³²⁷ Kleinfeld, "The Rise of Political Violence in the United States."

government institutions, or minority populations.³²⁸ Moreover, prolonged polarization erodes trust in essential institutions, including law enforcement, government agencies, and the justice system.³²⁹ This erosion can significantly impede efforts to address security threats efficiently and collaboratively.

The divisions within society also result in social fragmentation, rendering society powerless to achieve unity and collective action when confronted with security challenges.³³⁰ A fragmented society is less resilient in responding to crises and threats. The accelerant of social media drives polarized narratives and confrontations, leading to disinformation campaigns, online radicalization efforts, and persistent discord among the population.³³¹ Indeed, the divisions within society, coupled with the influence of social media and polarized narratives, not only foster social fragmentation but also diminish the collective capacity to respond effectively to security challenges.

The polarization-driven threat environment includes the potential for domestic terrorism. Radicalized individuals or groups may plan and execute acts of terrorism, targeting civilians, government officials, or symbolic institutions.³³² The challenges associated with policymaking in polarized environments prevent formulating and implementing effective policies to address security threats.³³³ Political gridlock and rhetoric fueled by polarization often obstruct the enactment of necessary legislative and administrative measures.³³⁴ The United States should remain cognizant of the challenges it is experiencing.

³²⁸ Van Swol, Lee, and Hutchins, “The Banality of Extremism”; Piazza, “Political Polarization and Political Violence.”

³²⁹ Kavanagh et al., *The Drivers of Institutional Trust and Distrust*.

³³⁰ Ezra Klein, *Why We’re Polarized* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020); McCoy and Press, “What Happens When Democracies Become Perniciously Polarized?”

³³¹ Guess et al., “The Consequences of Online Partisan Media”; Walter, *How Civil Wars Start*, 102–28.

³³² Piazza, “Political Polarization and Political Violence.”

³³³ McCoy and Press, “What Happens When Democracies Become Perniciously Polarized?”; Nicholas Riccardi and Linley Sanders, “Americans Widely Pessimistic about Democracy in US, AP-NORC Poll Finds,” FOX 5 Atlanta, July 17, 2023, <https://www.fox5atlanta.com/news/americans-pessimistic-democracy-us-poll>.

³³⁴ Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg, “Polarization in the Contemporary Political and Media Landscape.”

2. Perception of Limited Resources Drives Polarization

This research identified how the perception of limited resources exacerbates societal polarization. This perception extends beyond political, social, and cultural boundaries and is characterized by the belief that resources are finite.³³⁵ For example, political parties drive narratives that potential losses—whether of rights, values, or resources—are unbearable because they mean the opposing side gains an advantage over the other.³³⁶ As groups internalize this perception, it informs their narratives, strategies, and actions. The concept of a limited good serves as a cornerstone of contemporary political discourse.³³⁷ Leaders, both political and cultural, frequently capitalize on this notion to mobilize their constituencies, emphasizing the need to secure resources against competing groups.

3. Comparative Group Status and Honor–Shame Dynamics

The dynamics of comparative group status and the influence of honor and shame have become central factors in molding conflicts between subnational groups, heightening polarization and accentuating the quest for recognition and the preservation of group reputation.³³⁸ The quest for recognition and the protection of group reputation play pivotal roles in intensifying polarization.³³⁹ As groups vie for social standing and strive to safeguard their public image, these dynamics foster an environment where honor and shame become powerful motivators for group behavior.³⁴⁰ The impact of comparative group status and the dynamics of honor and shame in subnational conflicts highlights their crucial roles in amplifying polarization, underlining the relentless pursuit of recognition, and reinforcing the importance of protecting group reputation.

³³⁵ Brannan and Strindberg, “The Social Identity Analytical Method.”

³³⁶ Hackenburg, Brady, and Tsakiris, “Mapping Moral Language.”

³³⁷ Brannan and Strindberg, “The Social Identity Analytical Method.”

³³⁸ Brannan and Strindberg.

³³⁹ Cikara, Botvinick, and Fiske, “Us versus Them.”

³⁴⁰ Brannan and Strindberg, “The Social Identity Analytical Method.”

4. Critical Influence of Leadership Dynamics

Leadership dynamics within these groups exert a profound influence on their actions and interactions. The role of extended leadership, characterized by trust, loyalty, and mutual support, plays a central role in shaping group behaviors and the construction of in-group narratives.³⁴¹ This dynamic resembles a patron–client model and is instrumental in understanding the nature of the group and its capacity to foster a cohesive narrative that resonates with its members.

5. Actions Taken Go beyond Confrontations

Societal polarization is not confined to confrontations; it encompasses a spectrum of actions that groups undertake to further their objectives. These actions include broader strategic initiatives aimed at influencing public perceptions, challenging established power structures, or asserting dominance.³⁴² This backdrop is evident in the challenge–response game, a core concept within SIAM. It provides valuable insights into the dynamics governing interactions between subnational groups.

6. The Amplifying Role of Populism in Polarization

This research has underscored the amplifying effect of populism on societal polarization. Populist leaders adeptly leverage the perception of a limited good to create patron–client dynamics that foster an us-versus-them narrative.³⁴³ This approach intensifies confrontations and often prioritizes political rivalry over substantive policy outcomes.³⁴⁴ The thesis finds that populism thrives on the perceived distinction between the common people and the elite, framing the latter as hoarding resources and opportunities for themselves.³⁴⁵ Populism significantly exacerbates societal polarization by exploiting

³⁴¹ Brannan and Strindberg.

³⁴² Piazza, “Political Polarization and Political Violence.”

³⁴³ Abramowitz and McCoy, “Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization”; Brannan and Strindberg, “The Social Identity Analytical Method.”

³⁴⁴ Milkis and Jacobs, “Populism and American Democracy.”

³⁴⁵ White, “When Populism Meant Collective Strength”; David Smith, “What American Populism Really Means,” Foundation for Economic Education, March 17, 2017, <https://fee.org/articles/what-american-populism-really-means/>.

the notion of a limited good and cultivating divisive narratives, ultimately prioritizing political competition over effective policymaking.

7. Partisan Media’s Contribution to Deepening Divides

The research has identified the influential role of partisan media outlets in deepening societal divides. These outlets not only disseminate information but also shape and frame narratives to resonate with specific identity groups.³⁴⁶ This phenomenon leads to the creation of echo chambers, where consumers are exposed primarily to information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs (i.e., confirmation bias).³⁴⁷ Over time, this reinforcement of particular ideologies fosters a growing distrust of alternative viewpoints and, in extreme cases, contributes to the escalation of polarization and violence.

8. Supremacist Ideologies as Drivers of Violence

Research has highlighted the potency of supremacist ideologies as drivers of violence. Acts of violence, as observed in incidents such as the Oklahoma City bombing, the Charleston church shooting, and the U.S. Capitol assault, are rooted in extremist beliefs, identity-driven perspectives, and group dynamics.³⁴⁸ These incidents demonstrate how extremist ideologies can culminate in acts of violence driven by the perceived need to defend one’s identity and perceived privileges.³⁴⁹ Supremacist ideologies have proven to be powerful catalysts for violence, whereby extremist beliefs and the defense of perceived privileges lead to destructive actions.

³⁴⁶ Reissman, “Cable News Networks Have Grown More Polarized, Study Finds”; Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, *Truth Decay: A Threat to Policymaking and Democracy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB10002.html.

³⁴⁷ Jiang et al., “Social Media Polarization and Echo Chambers”; Cummings, “Partisan Media?”; Guess et al., “The Consequences of Online Partisan Media.”

³⁴⁸ Kleinfeld, “The Rise of Political Violence in the United States”; Vera Bergengruen, “The United States of Political Violence,” *Time*, November 4, 2022, <https://time.com/6227754/political-violence-us-states-midterms-2022/>; Fetter, “Criminal Behavior and Motivations”; Sweeney and Perliger, “Spontaneous Nature of Far-Right Violence”; David Neiwert, “Patriots of the Insurrectionist Kind,” PBS American Experience, April 13, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/ruby-ridge-patriots-insurrectionist-kind/>.

³⁴⁹ Walter, *How Civil Wars Start*, 98–101.

9. Identity’s Intersection with Societal Debates

The research has demonstrated that deeply rooted identity concerns intersect with societal debates, including those related to race, gender, sexual orientation rights, and religion. These subjects are not just political battlegrounds; they are reflections of broader cultural narratives and evolving societal values.³⁵⁰ The examination of these debates through SIAM reveals how deeply entrenched identity-driven perspectives influence public discourse.³⁵¹ Therefore, recognizing these identity-driven perspectives is essential for a balanced understanding of societal debates and ensuring informed discourse.

B. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following subsections form a comprehensive set of recommendations aimed at guiding policymakers, scholars, and practitioners in addressing the challenges posed by societal polarization and its accompanying threats in the United States. The objective here is to offer a roadmap that, if implemented thoughtfully and collaboratively, can help mitigate polarization, reduce extremism, lower the probability of violence, and weaken the security threat. Some of these recommendations could face significant headwinds and would be more challenging to implement than others. Likewise, some recommendations might be more effective than others—all items are not created equal.

1. Recommendations for Reformed Education

Support civic education reform. To mitigate the threats posed by societal polarization and extremism, the United States should embark on a broad reform of its educational system. Central to this reform should be an emphasis on standardized state-level requirements for civic education, which should be integrated into the curriculum from an early age through higher education. This initiative would entail designing and implementing courses that focus on civics, democracy, critical thinking, and ethical

³⁵⁰ Fukuyama, “Against Identity Politics”; Zack Stanton, “How the ‘Culture War’ Could Break Democracy,” *Politico Magazine*, May 20, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/05/20/culture-war-politics-2021-democracy-analysis-489900>; Simon Heffer, *Identity Politics: The Threat to Society* (Sydney: Centre for Independent Studies, 2021), <https://www.cis.org.au/publication/the-threat-of-identity-politics/>.

³⁵¹ Brannan and Strindberg, “The Social Identity Analytical Method.”

decision-making. Through this curriculum, students would gain a better understanding of the democratic processes that underpin the country and develop the skills necessary to engage in constructive dialogue and civic responsibility.³⁵² Moreover, experiential learning opportunities, such as model government simulations and community service programs, should be encouraged to provide students with practical experiences that reinforce their civic education.

Invest in media literacy programs to ensure that citizens can safely navigate an increasingly complex information environment.³⁵³ The U.S. government should allocate resources to create and implement media literacy programs nationwide. These programs should target citizens of all ages, from students to adults, and impart the skills needed to critically analyze and evaluate media sources. The RAND Corporation has developed media literacy standards to counter truth decay, which could be a launchpad for future efforts in this arena.³⁵⁴ Recognizing the fragmented nature of the United States education system, agreed standards of media literacy should remain a priority among state and national leaders. Citizens should readily identify disinformation and misinformation, discern fact from opinion, and recognize the potential for bias in news reporting. Collaborative efforts involving media organizations, educators, and community leaders should prove instrumental in ensuring the effectiveness of these initiatives.

2. Media Accountability through Civil Society

Civil society needs to promote media accountability. As Benjamin Franklin once wrote, “Half the truth is often a great lie.”³⁵⁵ The media’s role in shaping public opinion and exacerbating polarization cannot be overstated. Therefore, it is imperative to promote

³⁵² Julia H. Kaufman et al., *Defining and Measuring Civic Infrastructure* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA112-24.html.

³⁵³ “Why Today’s Students Need Media Literacy More than Ever,” Fresno Pacific University, December 17, 2018, <https://ce.fresno.edu/news/why-today-s-students-need-media-literacy-more-than-ever/>.

³⁵⁴ Alice Huguot et al., *Media Literacy Standards to Counter Truth Decay* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA112-12.html.

³⁵⁵ Steve Contorno, “‘Half a Truth Is Often a Great Lie’: Did Benjamin Franklin Really Say That?,” PolitiFact, December 17, 2013, <https://www.politifact.com/article/2013/dec/17/did-benjamin-franklin-say-half-truth-often-great-l/>.

media accountability and ethical journalism standards. Efforts such as the University of Pennsylvania’s Penn Media Accountability Project (PennMAP) should continue to be funded and supported.³⁵⁶ Encouraging media organizations to uphold these standards by prioritizing fact-checking, unbiased reporting, and responsible editorial practices should be a priority. Although the idea of having a government-supported independent media watchdog or ombudsman with the authority to investigate and address instances of media bias or misinformation is appealing and could significantly contribute to ensuring responsible journalism, it is likely infeasible in the United States. The closest example of an existing media watchdog in the country is Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, which has been active since 1986.³⁵⁷ Simultaneously, promoting the aforementioned media literacy among the public, equipping citizens with the tools to critically assess information, and holding media accountable for their reporting are essential.

3. Develop Social Media Guardrails

Given the importance of introducing social media regulations in the United States, understanding the significant political and legal challenges entailed is vital. In today’s rapidly changing digital environment, social media platforms hold considerable sway over public conversations, and they can either worsen or alleviate polarization.³⁵⁸ To make progress in this area, the United States could initiate collaborative efforts involving the government, legislators, civil society, and technology companies to establish these regulations for social media platforms. Although neither have been highly acclaimed, Facebook’s content moderation efforts and X’s (formerly Twitter’s) disinformation policies could inspire further efforts.³⁵⁹ Thus, while the path to effective social media

³⁵⁶ “PennMAP: Penn Media Accountability Project,” University of Pennsylvania Computational Social Science Lab, accessed September 28, 2023, <https://css.seas.upenn.edu/project/penn-map/>.

³⁵⁷ “About/Mission Statement,” Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, August 30, 2012, <https://fair.org/about-fair/>.

³⁵⁸ Arguedas et al., *Echo Chambers, Filter Bubbles, and Polarisation*; Christopher A. Bail et al., “Exposure to Opposing Views on Social Media Can Increase Political Polarization,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 37 (2018): 9216–21, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1804840115>.

³⁵⁹ Faiza Patel and Laura Hecht-Felella, “Facebook’s Content Moderation Rules Are a Mess,” Brennan Center for Justice, February 22, 2021, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/facebook-content-moderation-rules-are-mess>.

regulation in the United States is complex, a cooperative approach between various stakeholders can offer a roadmap, drawing from previous attempts, to ensure platforms constructively influence public discourse.

Any new attempts at social media guardrail regulations should have a clear focus on identifying and addressing extremist content, MDM, and algorithms that create echo chambers. Ensuring transparency in algorithms and content moderation is crucial for limiting the spread of polarizing content and nurturing online spaces that encourage healthy and constructive conversations.³⁶⁰ Furthermore, the United States could consider the recent European Union Digital Services Act as a potential blueprint for future social media guardrails.³⁶¹ This legislation reflects the European Union’s efforts to regulate digital services and platforms, tackling issues like content moderation, transparency, and accountability. Although the regulatory landscape may differ between regions, the underlying principles and concepts from these regulations can offer valuable guidance and ideas for shaping social media regulations in the United States. Customizing any model to align with the specific requirements and legal framework of the United States is vital, while acknowledging that achieving this goal may be challenging.

4. Investment in Evidence-Based Research and Solutions

Prioritize funding for further research. Informed policymaking and prevention strategies depend on a robust understanding of the drivers of polarization and extremism. To facilitate such work, funding should be allocated to academic institutions and think tanks to conduct extensive research. Examples include the RAND Corporation’s truth decay initiative and violent extremism research and American University’s Polarization & Extremism Research & Innovation Lab—whose mission is to “prevent radicalization to violent extremism by strengthening community resilience.”³⁶² Overall, this research

³⁶⁰ Santos, Lelkes, and Levin, “Link Recommendation Algorithms”; Druckman et al., “Affective Polarization, Local Contexts and Public Opinion in America.”

³⁶¹ “The Digital Services Act Package,” European Commission, October 9, 2023, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act-package>.

³⁶² “The Polarization & Extremism Research & Innovation Lab (PERIL),” American University, accessed September 28, 2023, <https://www.american.edu/spa/peril/>; RAND Corporation, “Countering Truth Decay.”

should delve into the social, psychological, and political factors that contribute to polarization and violence within the United States. By supporting rigorous and evidence-based research efforts, the nation can better grasp the root causes of these challenges, enabling policymakers to formulate effective strategies that address them at their core.

Recognizing and building on existing programs designed to reduce political polarization is essential. For example, the University of Arizona’s National Institute for Civil Discourse has developed programs that promote respectful and productive political discourse.³⁶³ Additionally, leadership development programs, such as the Aspen Institute’s congressional program and the Harvard Kennedy School’s bipartisan program, offer training and opportunities for lawmakers to develop skills in negotiation, compromise, and effective communication.³⁶⁴ Supporting and expanding such programs can equip political elites with the tools necessary for bridging divides.

5. Promoting Fact-Based Discourse

Promoting the truth over lies and reducing toxic political rhetoric—while emphasizing the fragility and protection of democracy—are paramount in U.S. efforts to counteract polarization and extremism. The integrity of politicians and elites plays a pivotal role in mitigating polarization and promoting truth in public discourse.³⁶⁵ Elected officials and leaders should prioritize honesty, transparency, and ethical conduct in their actions and communications. Setting an example of integrity can help counteract the spread of fiery

³⁶³ “National Institute for Civil Discourse,” University of Arizona National Institute for Civil Discourse, accessed September 28, 2023, <https://nicd.arizona.edu/>.

³⁶⁴ “Congressional Program,” Aspen Institute, accessed September 28, 2023, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/congressional-program/>; “Newly Elected Members of Congress Invited to Harvard Kennedy School’s Institute of Politics for Bipartisan Orientation Program,” Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics, accessed September 28, 2023, <https://iop.harvard.edu/news/newly-elected-members-congress-invited-harvard-kennedy-schools-institute-politics-bipartisan>.

³⁶⁵ John Gramlich, “Partisans Agree Political Leaders Should Be Honest and Ethical, Disagree Whether Trump Fits the Bill,” Pew Research Center, January 30, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/30/partisans-agree-political-leaders-should-be-honest-and-ethical-disagree-whether-trump-fits-the-bill/>.

rhetoric and demonstrate a commitment to the principles of democracy.³⁶⁶ U.S. leaders must lead by example, promoting honesty and ethics to combat polarization and uphold democratic values.

A key aspect of promoting integrity is holding politicians and elites accountable for spreading disinformation or engaging in divisive rhetoric. Independent fact-checking organizations, media watchdogs, and concerned citizens should monitor and publicize instances of dishonesty or unethical behavior.³⁶⁷ This accountability may serve as a deterrent and encourage leaders to prioritize truthfulness.³⁶⁸ Politicians and elites should also recognize their responsibility in shaping public discourse. Encouraging media outlets to adhere to ethical journalism standards, fact-checking, and unbiased reporting is essential. The establishment of an independent media watchdog, as suggested by the RAND Corporation’s truth decay concept, can foster responsible journalism and reduce the virality of falsehoods.³⁶⁹ For a more truthful and united public discourse, it is crucial that leaders are held to account, and the establishment of independent oversight mechanisms should play a role in ensuring responsible communication.

Last, and most importantly, the fragility and protection of democracy should be considered by all who hold or aspire to hold political office. Politicians and elites should consider the importance of democratic values, institutions, and norms.³⁷⁰ They should be educated on the risks associated with extremism, polarization, violence, and MDM,

³⁶⁶ Mike Levine, “Ex-Oath Keepers Spokesperson Warns Right-Wing ‘Propaganda’ Is ‘More Dangerous than Bullets,’” ABC News, January 6, 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/oath-keepers-spokesperson-warns-wing-propaganda-dangerous-bullets/story?id=82094999>; Kleinfeld, “The Rise of Political Violence in the United States.”

³⁶⁷ “Holding Power Accountable: The Press and the Public,” American Press Institute, December 18, 2019, <https://americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/holding-power-accountable-the-press-and-the-public/>.

³⁶⁸ Achilleas Karadimitriou et al., “Investigative Journalism and the Watchdog Role of News Media: Between Acute Challenges and Exceptional Counterbalances,” in *Success and Failure in News Media Performance: Comparative Analysis in The Media for Democracy Monitor 2021*, ed. Josef Trappel and Tales Tomaz (Nordicom, Sweden: University of Gothenburg, 2022), 101–25, <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855589>.

³⁶⁹ RAND Corporation, “Countering Truth Decay.”

³⁷⁰ “Policy Recommendations: Strengthening Democracy,” Freedom House, accessed October 10, 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/policy-recommendations/strengthening-democracy-abroad>.

framing these issues as threats not only to homeland security but perhaps to the very essence of American democracy.

C. AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This thesis has examined the complex realms of societal polarization and violence, yet numerous avenues for additional research and exploration exist. The multifaceted nature of these subjects requires ongoing study to enhance the practitioner's understanding and inform effective strategies for addressing them. The following are two key areas that warrant further investigation.

1. Comparative Analysis of International Polarization

Although the primary focus of this thesis has centered on the intricacies of polarization within the United States, comparable polarization features are observable in many other countries across the globe. Therefore, a compelling area for future research lies in conducting a comprehensive comparative analysis of polarization trends across various nations. This international perspective offers the opportunity to discern common drivers of polarization that transcend borders while also identifying factors that are distinctly shaped by a nation's socio-political context.

A comparative analysis of international polarization dynamics holds promise in advancing the understanding of this complex phenomenon. By examining polarization across diverse countries, researchers may be able to pinpoint shared themes such as the role of media, social media, identity politics, and populist movements in fostering divisions within societies. These overarching patterns can serve as the basis for developing more universal strategies and interventions aimed at addressing polarization and violence on a global scale.

Examining the context-specific drivers of polarization in different countries is equally essential. Variations in history, culture, governance structures, and geopolitical factors can result in distinct polarization dynamics within each nation. Understanding these nuances is important for tailoring effective approaches to mitigate polarization in specific contexts and for respecting the unique challenges that each country faces. Furthermore, a

comparative analysis can shed light on the transnational aspects of polarization. In an increasingly interconnected world, polarization trends in one country can influence and interact with those in others. Investigating the ways in which international polarization trends cross borders, fuel extremist ideologies, or impact international relations can provide invaluable insights into the global implications of these topics.

A comparative analysis of international polarization represents an area for future research. It has the potential to uncover both universal and context-specific drivers, enabling the development of more effective strategies to address polarization and violence on a global scale. This research not only contributes to the understanding of societal divisions but may also foster cooperation among nations to collectively confront the challenges posed by polarization in the modern world.

2. SIAM and Intersectionality in Polarization

Further research should focus on expanding the application of SIAM to investigate the intersectionality of identities in the context of polarization. This research should explore how various dimensions of identity, such as race, religion, gender, and other factors, interact and contribute to the intensification of polarization. By employing SIAM, researchers can investigate the ways in which these intersecting identities shape individuals' beliefs, behaviors, and group affiliations within polarized environments.

Additionally, this research should aim to identify and evaluate inclusive strategies that effectively bridge divides and promote understanding among individuals with complex, intersecting identities. It should assess the policy implications of identity-driven polarization, including the development of innovative frameworks and strategies to promote social cohesion and inclusivity in the face of polarization driven by intersecting identities.

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