

The Complex Relationship Between Media and Political Polarization: Understanding How the Media Can Affectively (De)Polarize Citizens

Introduction

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In this introduction to the Special Section, we examine the complex relationship between media and political polarization—especially affective polarization. We consider differences in measurement and interdisciplinary perspectives. To fully understand the relationship between media and affective polarization, we must consider the people accessing media content (e.g., identities and (mis)perceptions), the media itself (e.g., source and content effects), and the interactions between media and people (e.g., media diets and behaviors). Additionally, we introduce the Complexities of Media and Affective Polarization Framework to provide an overview of current perspectives in media and affective polarization research. We call on scholars to calibrate measurements of affective polarization to increase clarity and further assess the complexities of media and affective polarization research. Further research should assess how media can reduce affective polarization.

Keywords: affective polarization, social media, news media

Political polarization is growing in many societies (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2017) and is defined as the increasing divide between groups. Some polarization is beneficial (e.g., increasing political participation; Wagner, 2021). However, political polarization can also create political dissatisfaction (Wagner, 2021) and support for partisan violence (Kalmoe & Mason, 2022). Many suggest that media exacerbate political polarization (see Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). However, understanding the relationship between political polarization and media is complex. While many suggest that media make

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polarization worse (e.g., Törnberg, 2022), others find that media are unrelated to political polarization (e.g., Udani, Kimball, & Fogarty, 2018) or may have a depolarizing effect (Beam, Hutchens, & Hmielowski, 2018).

Why are there divergent findings regarding the relationship between polarization and media? We propose five central reasons why it is challenging to make conclusions about this relationship. First, there are divergent forms of polarization—with varying antecedents and consequences (e.g., Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). Second, there are cross-cultural differences in media markets (Brüggemann, Engesser, Büchel, Humprecht, & Castro, 2014) and polarization (e.g., Boxell, Gentzkow, & Shapiro, 2022). Third, there are individual differences in how people assess and interact with media (de Rooij, Stecula, & Pickup, 2022). Fourth, there is diversity in both media content (social media vs. news media)—and media platforms (e.g., Facebook vs. TikTok), which leads to varying relationships with polarization (e.g., Yarchi, Baden, & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). Fifth, people's interactions with media (e.g., selective exposure; Arceneaux, Johnson, & Murphy, 2012) lead to complex relationships between polarization and the media. We suggest these complexities explain nuances in understanding the relationship between media and polarization. In this Special Section, we propose three aims focused on disentangling this relationship.

Aim 1: Systemize Understandings of the Relationship Between Political Polarization and Media

We systemize understandings of the relationship between media and political polarization. Here we introduce the Complexities of Media and Affective Polarization (C-MAP) Framework, which outlines divergent understandings of polarization in scholarly research, with a focus on affective polarization. This framework considers how affective polarization is measured, the interdisciplinary nature of research, and the diverse perspectives used to understand the relationship between media and affective polarization (see Figure 1). Based on this framework, we highlight multiple perspectives for assessing the relationship between media and affective polarization, which are, in part, considered by the articles in this Special Section.

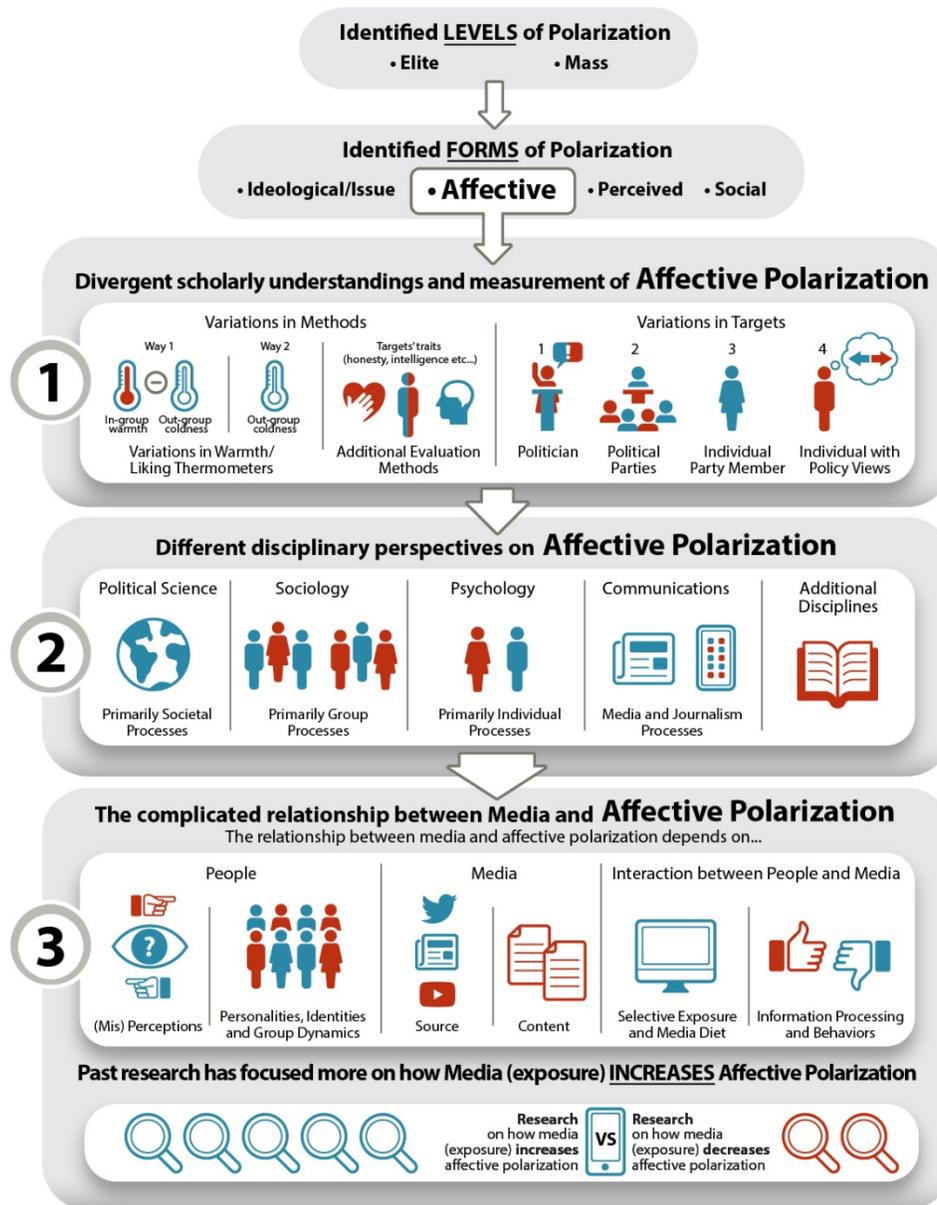


Figure 1. The C-MAP Framework.

Aim 2: An Interdisciplinary Perspective for Understanding the Relationship Between Media and Affective Polarization

Communication scholars, political scientists, psychologists, and others research the relationship between media and affective polarization. While interdisciplinary perspectives are ripe for opportunities to gain nuanced understandings, there can also be challenges to engage across disciplines, making communicating findings across disciplines difficult. In this Special Section, we bring leading scholars together from diverse academic disciplines to understand media and affective polarization.

Aim 3: Refocusing on When Media Do Not Inflammate Political Polarization

Few scholars consider when media *do not* inflame political polarization (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). However, new emerging literature explores which kinds of media content do not exacerbate polarization (e.g., Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016), and others consider the depolarizing effects of media (e.g., Kubin, Gray, & von Sikorski, 2023; Zoizner, Shenhav, Fogel-Dror, & Sheaffer, 2021). We encourage further research to explore situations where media do not necessarily inflame political polarization (and may even depolarize). In this Special Section, many articles consider contexts where media do not inflame (or even reduce) affective polarization.

Understandings of Political Polarization

Who Is Polarized?

Originally, polarization research was focused on elite polarization—or the polarization of politicians/elites. This work not only centers around questions of how polarized politicians' voting records are but also focuses on questions related to politicians' media usage and media coverage of politicians (Wagner & Gruscynski, 2018). In recent years, suspicions of growing mass polarization—or the polarization of average citizens—have surfaced. Although polls suggest increasing political polarization (e.g., in the United States; Pew Research Center, 2017), some question whether mass polarization exists (e.g., Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). The scope of this research is broad, focusing on questions such as citizens' beliefs (e.g., DellaPosta, 2020), media diets (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2010), and voting behaviors (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008). We view elite and mass polarization as divergent (but connected) levels of polarization (see Figure 1).

How Are People Polarized?

Political polarization was originally studied with a focus on distances in political attitudes (Iyengar et al., 2012). However, new understandings of political polarization have emerged (see Figure 1).

Ideological/Issue Polarization

Some suggest ideological polarization is the divergencies between the Left and the Right (Fiorina, 2014), while others suggest it is the alignment between party identity and ideology (Abramowitz & Saunders,

2008). Issue polarization stems from ideological polarization and focuses on division in attitudes toward specific policies or beliefs (e.g., Skytte, 2021).

Affective Polarization

Affective polarization is defined as the increasing warmth/liking toward one's political in-group versus growing coldness/dislike toward the political out-group (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2012). Furthermore, desired social distance (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019) and trait evaluations (Iyengar et al., 2012) are frequently included in definitions of affective polarization. Some evidence suggests affective polarization is driven by dislike for political opponents (Finkel et al., 2020).

Social Polarization

Social polarization focuses on peoples' emotions, judgments, and behaviors related to politics. High levels of social polarization relate to greater anger, partisan bias, and political activism (Mason, 2015). It is driven by partisan identities and political tribalism—even when people hold similar political attitudes (Mason, 2015)—and drives partisan animosity (Simas, Clifford, & Kirkland, 2020).

Perceived Polarization

Polarization is also a matter of perception. People perceive ideological polarization (Ahler, 2014) and affective polarization (Druckman, Klar, Krupnikov, Levendusky, & Ryan, 2022) similarly to how people perceive public opinion environments in regard to political issues (Matthes, Knoll, & von Sikorski, 2018). These perceptions tend to be overexaggerated (Lees & Cikara, 2020), lead to partisan animosity (Moore-Berg, Ankori-Karlinsky, Hameiri, & Bruneau, 2020), and may stem from exposure to certain media portrayals (Garrett, Long, & Jeong, 2019).

Scholars argue affective polarization is more problematic for democracy than other forms of polarization as it leads to intergroup conflicts that feel intractable (Overgaard, Masullo, Duchovnay, & Moore, 2022). Based on this, in this Special Section, we focus on how media relate to *affective polarization*.

Divergent Measurements of Affective Polarization

There are many ways to measure affective polarization (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021), making it difficult to compare results across studies. Many use feeling thermometers, which ask participants to report warmth/liking toward political targets (e.g., political opponents; Voelkel et al., 2023). Participants report warmth/liking toward political in-groups and out-groups, and the difference between these ratings is assessed (e.g., Lelkes & Westwood, 2017). In other cases, participants report their warmth/liking only toward out-groups (e.g., Gidron, Adams, & Horne, 2019) or evaluate the traits of targets (e.g., trustworthiness; Iyengar et al., 2012). Another variation in measurement is *who* participants are asked about (e.g., specific politicians (Min & Yun, 2018), political parties (Voelkel et al., 2023), or policy opponents (Hobolt, Leeper, & Tilley, 2020). Additionally, in multiparty political systems, determining who is a political opponent is less clear than in two-party systems, leading to a variety of measurements (e.g., Boxell et al.,

2022; Gidron et al., 2019; Wagner, 2021) and making it more complex to compare affective polarization cross-culturally (see Box 1, Figure 1).

There are many approaches to assessing affective polarization. While we do not suggest one measure is better than another, we caution scholars about making comparisons among results gathered with divergent measures of affective polarization (see Druckman & Levendusky, 2019). We urge researchers to develop more consistent measurements that can be used in both two-party and multiparty political systems.

The Interdisciplinary Nature of Affective Polarization Research

Affective polarization is at the cross-section of many disciplines, allowing for diverse perspectives in scholarship. Political science, which tends to focus on societal trends, has driven many understandings of affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012), for example, pointing to the connection between ideological sorting and affective polarization (e.g., Mason, 2015). Furthermore, many political scientists study depolarization via media content (e.g., Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016).

Psychology studies affective polarization primarily at the individual level. Research has studied the role of personality in predicting who is most likely to become affectively polarized (e.g., Luttig, 2018) and explores the role of political identity and extremism in affective polarization (e.g., Brown & Hohman, 2022). Furthermore, psychological research studies how media relate to affective polarization (e.g., Van Bavel, Rathje, Harris, Robertson, & Sternisko, 2021) and how media can reduce partisan animosity (e.g., Kubin et al., 2023). Relatedly, sociology (which tends to study group-level phenomena) has a small but emerging field exploring affective polarization. Frameworks around emotions, media, and affective polarization are being developed (e.g., Serrano-Puche, 2021).

Communication scholars assess how media relate to affective polarization. Examples include research on whether media drive affective polarization (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021), how selective exposure to media content shapes affective polarization (e.g., Wojcieszak, Winter, & Yu, 2020) in high-choice media environments (von Sikorski & Kubin, 2021), and whether partisan media drive affective polarization (Garrett et al., 2019).

Other disciplines have also contributed to understandings of media and affective polarization. Computer scientists track affective polarization in online discussions (Borrelli, Iandoli, Ramirez-Marquez, & Lipizzi, 2022), and interdisciplinary teams have assessed when media drive polarization (e.g., Lorenz-Spreen, Oswald, Lewandowsky, & Hertwig, 2023) and how to combat it (e.g., Voelkel et al., 2023). See Box 2 in Figure 1 for a depiction of interdisciplinary approaches.

The Complicated Relationship Between Media and Affective Polarization

To understand the complex relationship between media and affective polarization, we suggest one must consider the following components: (1) the people accessing media, (2) the media itself, and (3) the interactions between people and media. See Box 3 in Figure 1 for the illustration.

The People Who Access Media

To understand the relationship between media and affective polarization, one must consider *who* accesses media content. We outline some of these person-level factors below:

(Mis)perceptions

Perceptions drive decisions and behavior (Enders & Armaly, 2019). Unfortunately, many perceptions (especially those related to politics) are misperceived (Lees & Cikara, 2020). People (mis)perceive societal polarization (Ahler, 2014) and how their opponents feel about them (Moore-Berg et al., 2020). These misperceptions can be exaggerated by the media (Garrett et al., 2019). We suggest peoples' (mis)perceptions affect the relationship between media and affective polarization.

Personality and Individual Differences

Personality research is an important consideration in politics. For example, high levels of need for closure are related to affective polarization (Luttig, 2018), while high levels of intellectual humility are related to less affective polarization (Bowes, Blanchard, Costello, Abramowitz, & Lilienfeld, 2020). Furthermore, personality shapes media use (Xu & Peterson, 2017). Openness to experience predicts pro-attitudinal news use among Democrats but cross-cutting exposure among Republicans (Kim & Kim, 2018). Additionally, preexisting belief systems and prior attitudes influence media usage (de Rooij et al., 2022).

Identities

Social identities are central to political beliefs (Greene, 2004), and scholars suggest political identities are central drivers of affective polarization (Mason, 2018). However, social identities also shape media usage, increasing the likelihood people will choose media content in line with their prior beliefs (Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, & Polavin, 2020).

Group Dynamics

Certain groups of people (e.g., more ideologically extreme groups) are more likely to become affectively polarized (Harteveld, 2021) and have more extreme (polarized) networks on social media (Klein, 2019). Furthermore, dynamics within societies can shape the relationship between media and affective polarization (e.g., variations in societal polarization, political systems [e.g., two-party vs. multiparty], and (social) media markets; Boxell et al., 2022; Brüggemann et al., 2014).

The Media

The media are essential for understanding the relationship between media and polarization. We outline some elements of media that are key for understanding its relationship with polarization below:

Source Effects

The source of media content matters. For example, people prefer content from pro-attitudinal (vs. counter-attitudinal) media sources (Arceneaux et al., 2012). Additionally, media sources vary in how polarizing their content is (Hyun & Moon, 2016), potentially leading to divergent effects on viewers. Furthermore, certain social media platforms induce greater affective polarization than others (Yarchi et al., 2021).

Content Effects

Media content is also vital for understanding how media relate to affective polarization. Both news media and social media (e.g., Marozzo & Bessi, 2017) content include increasingly more polarizing language. Furthermore, there is consistent evidence that when people read information in line with their worldviews, they become more affectively polarized. It is unclear whether counter-attitudinal content affectively polarizes (see Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021).

The Interaction Between People and Media

Media and people are not stand-alone entities but also interact, further complicating understandings of media and affective polarization. We outline some of these interactions below:

Selective Exposure and Media Diets

People are not passive receivers of media. Rather, they selectively expose themselves to news and social media (i.e., develop media diets). People tend to selectively expose themselves to content that confirms preexisting beliefs (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020). Greater selective exposure to news media drives affective polarization (Kim, Broussard, & Barnidge, 2020) though it is unclear whether exposure to social media affectively polarizes (e.g., Beam et al., 2018). Selective exposure to pro-attitudinal media content consistently drives affective polarization (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021).

Information Processing

How people process the information they see in the media also matters. Scholars posit people process information in the media through central and peripheral routes (e.g., Elaboration Likelihood Model; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In the central route, media content is assessed on its merits. Contrarily, peripheral route processing uses heuristics and cues (e.g., characteristics of media sources) to inform attitudes. Importantly, both the content people see (Yeghyan & Lang, 2010) and the dispositions people have (Cacioppo, Petty, Kao, & Rodriguez, 1986) influence how they process media.

Media Behaviors

The interactions between media and people are also based on user behaviors, which shape how media relate to affective polarization. When people like, share, or comment under media content, they

engage in active media use (Verduyn, Ybarra, Résibois, Jonides, & Kross, 2017). This can drive the spread of polarizing media content via algorithms (Brady, Crockett, & Van Bavel, 2020). Furthermore, commenting behaviors can drive (de)polarization based on what people choose to comment (e.g., Stylianou & Sofokleous, 2019).

When the Media Do Not Inflammate Political Polarization

Previous research primarily focuses on how media exacerbate affective polarization (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). However, an emerging subfield is now considering what kind of media content *does not* exacerbate polarization (e.g., Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016). Other scholars are also considering when media can affectively depolarize. Evidence suggests the media can reduce affective polarization by discussing political strategies (Zoizner et al., 2021) and mentioning warm relationships among politicians (Huddy & Yair, 2021). We encourage further research to explore when and where the media *do not* exacerbate affective polarization and also explore when the media can affectively depolarize.

Toward a Better Understanding of Media and Affective Polarization

To understand the relationship between media and affective polarization, scholars must acknowledge the complexities of this relationship. Affective polarization is not consistently measured (e.g., Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021) and is researched in a variety of disciplines, which brings not only diverse perspectives but also challenges with communication across disciplines. Furthermore, media and affective polarization are affected by the people who access media, the media itself, and the interactions between people and the media, making the relationship nuanced and complex. Finally, current research primarily assesses how media increase affective polarization. Based on these realities, we propose a call to action for research on media and affective polarization.

1. *Calibration*: Scholars should calibrate measures of affective polarization to be more consistent with one another (and thus more comparable across studies) and focus on finding ways to consistently measure affective polarization cross-culturally (e.g., two-party vs. multiparty systems). Furthermore, scholars should align their work not only with those from their discipline but also with research from other related fields. We believe interdisciplinary perspectives will enrich the literature and encourage more cross-disciplinary discussions.
2. *Recognition of complexity*: Scholars should further consider the complex nature of the relationship between media and polarization. Findings are nuanced, and our understandings of this relationship should be as well. Furthermore, scholars should grapple with the complexity of affective polarization (e.g., actual vs. perceived affective polarization and elite vs. mass affective polarization) in understanding how it relates to media while also considering how varying media sources (e.g., partisan vs. moderate, Facebook vs. TikTok) and varying media content relate to affective polarization.

In this Special Section on the role of media in polarization, we tackle some of these points by focusing on interdisciplinary research from highly regarded communication scholars, psychologists, and political scientists. Each article addresses the complex relationship between media and affective polarization

from a unique perspective, as outlined in the C-MAP Framework (Figure 1). Brief descriptions of each article are outlined below:

1. *Matthes, Nanz, Kaskeleviciute, Reiter, Freiling, Neureiter, Stubenvoll, Sherrah, Juricek, Munzir, and Noronha* focus on how *media behavior* relates to affective polarization, finding that active uses of social media (e.g., sharing) exacerbate affective polarization while passive uses (e.g., informing oneself) do not.
2. *Nai and Maier* assess how *media content* (i.e., news reporting on political campaigns) shapes affective polarization. They find media coverage of negative messages, character attacks, and incivility (as compared with positive messages, policy attacks, and civil attacks) indirectly predicts growing affective polarization.
3. *Sude and Knobloch-Westerwick* consider the interactions between people and media by assessing *individuals' perceptions* and *media content*. They find that when partisans browse online forums where they are in the minority opinion (as compared with the majority), they perceive a less-favorable national opinion climate (to their own beliefs), which in turn reduces affective polarization toward opponents.
4. *Harrop, Roozenbeek, Madsen, and van der Linden* assess a *media intervention* to reduce the reliability of polarizing social media content. Evidence suggests an inoculation-based intervention may, in some cases, reduce the perceived reliability of polarizing social media content and does not exacerbate affective polarization.
5. *Harris, Rathje, Robertson, and Van Bavel* develop a theoretical model for understanding the role of social media in exacerbating political polarization and intergroup conflict. The authors consider the *interactions between people and social media content* that can drive both ideological and affective polarization and real-world behaviors.

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