



PROJECT MUSE®

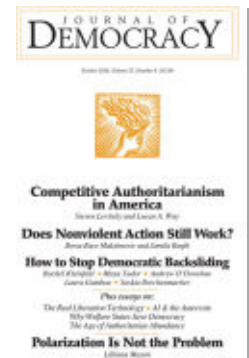
Polarization Is Not the Problem

Lilliana Mason

Journal of Democracy, Volume 37, Number 4, October 2026, pp. 105-114
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2026.a1001900>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/1001900>

POLARIZATION IS NOT THE PROBLEM

Lilliana Mason

Lilliana Mason is SNF Agora Institute Professor of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University. She is coauthor, with Nathan P. Kalmoe, of Radical American Partisanship: Mapping Violent Hostility, Its Causes, and the Consequences for Democracy (2022), and author of Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity (2018).

Partisan polarization is not the greatest threat to American democracy. It is a vivid and identifiable symptom of the real threat. And it is a popular frame because it blames no one. But because political polarization is a symptom, and not the root of the problem that ails us, “fixing” polarization will not restore American democratic health.

Having written two books and dozens of articles on the topic, it is clear to me that polarization in the United States is certainly a problem. The gridlock, anger, violence, and unaccountability that accompany partisan polarization are major impediments to the success of American democracy. But the actual source of American partisan polarization today (and often in the past) is the degree to which the nation is disagreeing about who belongs, who deserves the full dignity and protection of U.S. laws, and who is punished for breaking those laws.¹ For a very long time, the answer to these questions was simple—white, Christian, heterosexual men belong and deserve protection and dignity, and everyone else is subject to punishment for breaking laws or challenging this social order. Things were “better,” the story goes, back in the 1950s, when everyone knew their place. Polarization became a national problem when this story began to change.

I have written about the partisan divide in the United States as being structured by “mega-identities”—with party identities psychologically bound together with other powerful social identities such as race and religion. These identity-based alignments did motivate and exacerbate the partisan divide. But that party-based social divide along the lines of “who we are” is only part of the story. Much of the identity-based

alignment of the parties was a response to increasing social progress for traditionally marginalized groups. The divide between the parties was not limited to questions of “who we are”; it was also related to questions of “what we deserve,” “where we belong,” and perhaps more important, “what *they* deserve” and “where *they* belong.” It was related to questions of Americanness, equality, social progress, and pluralism.

Rapid Social Progress

Members of Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) provide a useful frame for understanding the rapidity of recent social progress. They have seen, in their lifetimes, a remarkable degree of social change. In the 1970s, the population of white Americans grew by more than eleven-million people. In the 1990s, the increase was only around six million. From 2000 to 2010, fewer than three-million white Americans were added to the population. And from 2010 to 2019, the number of white Americans shrank by 16,612 people.² Gen Xers, then, grew up in a country that looked increasingly different, in terms of racial makeup, from the country their parents had known.

Racial population change was not the only shift. For the eldest Gen Xers, their earliest years corresponded with the most significant expansion of civil rights in the United States since the end of the Civil War. This generation witnessed the implementation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965—including whatever anger and animosity this may have generated among their white elders. But those laws would also open the professional world to nonwhite people in a way never before seen in the United States. Between 1979 and 2019, the share of white workers in the American workplace fell from 88 percent to 78 percent, while the nonwhite workforce grew from 12 percent to 22 percent.³ Of course white Americans were still overrepresented in the workplace, but the shifting balance was enough to change professional standards and norms of behavior toward racially diverse coworkers. At the same time, people’s neighborhoods became more racially mixed, universities accepted more nonwhite students, and mass-media representations of “normal” America extended beyond just white citizens.

Gen Xers also watched as women in their generation enjoyed far more power in society than their mothers had. The average mother of a Gen Xer spent a significant part of her adult life unable to open a bank account or obtain a credit card without the permission of her husband or a male cosigner (this changed with the passage of the Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974). Gen X women were the first to grow up in an American society that offered them the financial freedom of full adults. There was also the first generation with widespread legal access to contraception (1965) and medically safe abortion services (1973). These women surged into the workforce and, especially, onto university ros-

ters. The first women's restrooms were not installed on the U.S. Senate floor until 1992—the year that the number of women senators tripled from two to six.⁴

The average mother of a Gen Xer spent a significant part of her adult life unable to open a bank account or obtain a credit card without the permission of her husband or a male cosigner. Gen X women were the first to grow up in an American society that offered them the financial freedom of full adults.

Even those younger than Gen X might remember the more recent, and most notable, advances in LGBTQ rights. The national right to same-sex marriage was established by the Supreme Court only in 2015 (*Obergefell v. Hodges*). Public opinion on same-sex marriage has shifted rapidly in recent decades, with visible divergence between Democrats and Republicans: A 2025 Gallup poll found that 86 percent of Democrats and 69 percent of independents saw same-sex relationships as morally acceptable, versus only 38 percent of Republicans.⁵ In 1988, by comparison, fewer than 5 percent of Democrats or Republicans had “strongly agreed” that same-sex

couples should have the right to marry.⁶

All this is to illustrate the speed of recent social progress, certainly by historical standards. Perhaps not coincidentally, Gen X—the generation of Americans born in the years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act and the sexual revolution—is also currently the most conservative, pro–Donald Trump generation in the United States.⁷ This is not to single out Gen X, but to note that a great deal of earth-shaking social change has happened in the span of a single generation. This type of rapid transformation rarely goes unfelt or unnoticed.

Moral Disengagement

In other countries, when politics are organized around ethnic or religious lines (or both), social upheaval and political violence—even civil war—may break out.⁸ A similar dynamic is at play in U.S. politics, where the division between American parties along social and cultural lines has fueled a more contentious and distrustful partisan divide.⁹

One result of the growing divide between the parties on matters of racial and gender equality is the increasingly belligerent nature of that conflict. In our 2022 book, *Radical American Partisanship*, Nathan Kal-moe and I examined the extent to which U.S. Democrats and Republicans were willing not only to compete against and dislike one another, but also to vilify and dehumanize one another. Vilifying and dehumanizing

attitudes are indicators of *moral disengagement*, which allows people to harm one another while still feeling morally good.¹⁰ Across the world, large violent events have generally been preceded by widespread moral disengagement between the groups in conflict.¹¹

Polarization is the country's immune response to an unpopular, antidemocratic, and intentionally divisive faction grabbing for disproportionate power to the detriment of national success, reputation, and democratic self-government.

In measuring these feelings of animosity that Americans hold toward their political opponents, in surveys that Kalmoe and I fielded in 2017 and 2024, we found that very large and growing numbers of Americans are willing to think of their opponents as “threats to the United States” (60 percent in 2017 increased to 80 percent in 2024), to call them “evil” (40 percent in 2017 increased to 70 percent in 2024), and to think of them as

subhuman (20 percent in 2017 rose to 40 percent in 2024).

These numbers are relatively similar between Democrats and Republicans, which often leads political pundits to claim this is more evidence of “polarization,” and that both sides are equally to blame. However, a closer look tells a more interesting story. The people who are most likely to vilify and dehumanize their partisan opponents are Republicans who are *high* in racism and sexism and Democrats who oppose racism and sexism. The people who are least likely to vilify and dehumanize their political opponents are Republicans who are *low* in racism and sexism. One explanation for these patterns is that those Republicans who are racist and sexist vilify and dehumanize Democrats because they see the Democratic Party as a party of racial minorities and women; and Democrats who score low in racism and sexism will vilify and dehumanize Republicans because they consider Republicans to be racist and sexist. In other words, the people who are the most “polarized” in the U.S. electorate are those who *are* racist and sexist, and those who *oppose* racists and sexists.

On these issues, the parties have become increasingly divided. By 2024, Republicans scored significantly higher, on average, than Democrats and independents on racial resentment against black Americans, belief that women’s place is in the home, endorsement of Christian nationalism, and belief in “replacement theory” (the conspiracy theory that immigrants are part of a Democratic Party plot to replace white Christian Americans). These party differences did not exist in the 1980s, when Democrats were more racially resentful, Republicans were less misogynistic, and neither party broadly supported Christian nationalism or replacement theory.¹²

From this perspective, the “both sides” frame falls apart. The problem is not that the parties are divided. The problem is the existential threat that a reempowered ethnonationalist strain poses to pluralistic U.S. democracy writ large. The current level of political animosity is exactly what one would expect to see if an extremist faction attempted to rescind the hard-earned rights of the vast majority of the country’s citizens. The only way to re-oppress most of a country is to use anti-democratic and authoritarian tactics. And the only way to oppose those tactics is to push back as a population and clearly reject them. This is the argument happening in the United States, and its pathology is not anger—it is the movement to undermine a generation of rights.

Difficult Discussions

The U.S. government has historically not been generous in deciding which Americans get to have a say in their government. In the time of the founding fathers, white landowning men made up the entirety of the electorate. Over time, vastly larger numbers of Americans have won the franchise, often through hard-fought battles. As the electorate has grown to include men of color, women, and the poor, it has become more pluralistic. Contemporary America, for all its flaws, has grown to be a diverse democracy that continually manages a vast array of opinions, identities, and cultures. That pluralism is a central reason for the vibrancy and innovation of American cultural, intellectual, and political power.

But each of these steps was the result of political and cultural conflict. As every new group of Americans was enfranchised, a powerful political movement opposed it. This opposition was often violent, coming both from the state and from individual citizens who believed that the ascendant group needed to be put back in its place. Much of this violence endures today. When marginalized groups have spoken out (often in a nonviolent manner) against the violence perpetrated against them, they have often incurred further anger and violence.¹³

On average, in a given three-month period between the last quarter of 2022 and the last quarter of 2025, local officials belonging to racial minority groups were about 6 percentage points more likely to receive violent threats than were white local officials.¹⁴ Further, as recently as 2025, women and people of color who held positions in state and local governments were significantly more likely to be threatened with violence than were their white, male counterparts. As a result, many have scaled back their regular professional activities. According to the Bridging Divides Initiative, in the third quarter of 2025, 68 percent of female local officials reported facing hostility (compared with 52 percent of male local officials), and 83 percent of female local officials reported that they had become less willing to engage in at least one political or civic activity (including running for another or higher office, running

for reelection, attending public events, posting on social media, or working on controversial topics).¹⁵

Political violence and animosity seem to regularly accompany social progress in America. Put another way, Americans, on the whole, have not been very good at having conversations about racism and sexism peacefully. This is especially true for those who perceive their status as under threat—they tend to consider such discussions “uncivil.” And indeed, such discussions frequently do become emotionally charged, including among political elites.¹⁶

At times when the United States has collectively agreed to stop talking about these topics, the temperature certainly declined. There have been many periods in American history when polarization was low, the social cohesion of those in power was high, governing across the aisle was amicable, and legislation was easily passed. During those periods, the decisionmakers, who were almost exclusively white Christian men, were treated by default as superior to other citizens. As long as they held disproportionate power, the government ran smoothly. Democrats and Republicans in the 1950s could agree on many things, as long as they also agreed that Jim Crow oppression in the American South was acceptable and that women belonged in the home. Once they started disagreeing about these things, and especially once they were no longer the only people allowed in the room, U.S. politics became significantly more contentious. Not everyone wanted to peacefully extend power to previously marginalized groups.

Worst Case

Violent conflicts such as civil wars are made more likely by, among other things, a population filled with grievance, especially between ethnic groups, and a government with weakened political institutions.¹⁷ We also know that when multiple social divides (racial, ethnic, religious) coincide, societies are more vulnerable to violence and collapse.¹⁸ Today, the vast majority of Democrats and Republicans whom we polled, at least 80 percent, are opposed to political violence; but when we ask about the acceptability of political violence “if the other side is violent first,” the share of those opposed drops to around 40 percent. There is today a real (if small) risk that American society will reach a tipping point of violent political engagement that will be impossible to stop once it starts. It has happened many times across the world.

But we are not there yet. Though vivid and attention-getting, real-world acts of political violence in the United States are still very rare, even as threats of violence against political leaders have been escalating rapidly, leading some politicians to leave office. But so far, most of these threats have remained just that.¹⁹ The current ethnonationalist movement in the United States can only succeed with an extraordinary

amount of violence; there is no other way to re-oppress the 70 percent of the population that is not white and male. This revanchist project is already being met with resistance.²⁰ Its success would be bloody, and it would mean the fall of U.S. democracy.

A Rare Opportunity

In survey after survey, the majority of the country is happy with the social progress of the last sixty years. But a faction exists that despises it. Today that faction has found a home in the Republican Party (though not all Republicans are on board).²¹ In an earlier era, its home was the Democratic Party—then the party of the Jim Crow South and Confederate retrenchment. Due to the institutional eccentricities of the U.S. political system, this bloc now has disproportionate power in all three branches of government, despite having generally unpopular views.

In a functional two-party system, extremists are strategically excluded. When there are only two parties, each party generally strives to be a large coalition of factions and neither can grow too extreme without risking electoral defeat. If the United States had multiple parties, the ethnonationalist movement would likely represent about a quarter of American voters. It would have no way to hold a majority in Congress, much less to elect a president or control multiple seats on the Supreme Court. It is not a coincidence that the current project of the Republican Party is to make it more difficult to vote.²² Most Americans prefer a diverse, pluralistic nation.²³

The vision of taking the United States back to a time when women and people of color “knew their place” is both unsupported by a majority of Americans and the cause of animosity between Democrats and Republicans. The solution is not to reduce the animus between pluralists and far-right extremists, but to recommit to the project of pluralistic American democracy. The movement against recent progress represents a minority of citizens, many of whom were disengaged with politics before the appearance of Donald Trump.²⁴ In the most optimistic view, the United States is at the precipice of the most pluralistic democratic society in its history—but only if voters understand this and cast their ballots for leaders who support equal rights for all citizens.

Across Western democracies, the average social attitudes of voters in political parties across the spectrum have been changing along with the framework of expanding political rights.²⁵ Far-right parties all over the world are working to undo that progress, and in places where they succeed, partisan animosity increases.²⁶ To restore a functioning and pluralistic democracy in the United States, reversing over a decade of democratic backsliding in the world’s oldest democracy, the thing to “fix” is not polarization. Polarization is the country’s immune response to an unpopular, antidemocratic, and intentionally divisive faction grab-

bing for disproportionate power to the detriment of national success, reputation, and democratic self-government. Tamping down that immune response only allows this minority faction to have greater control.

The United States can be a democracy in which every citizen shares the same rights and dignity before the power of the state, corruption is held to account, and benevolence toward other democracies is assumed. With the understanding that the country has yet to fully live up to these goals, we have certainly tried, at least until recently, to achieve them. We are now experiencing the backlash to that progress.

But the fury of the argument shows the importance of the outcome. When we focus on polarization as the problem, the solution is for everyone to quiet down and be “civil”—an outcome that benefits those who are willing to grab as much power as they can without concern for legality or civility. When we see the problem for what it is, the solution is to defend the most robust social progress in American history—progress that has already been codified into law and enjoyed by everyone alike. U.S. democracy needs leaders who are willing to defend those rights and voters who are willing to hold accountable the leaders who will not defend them. It does not need everyone simply to calm down.

This essay is part of the *Journal of Democracy* special series “Polarization and Political Violence,” made possible by the support of The Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation.

NOTES

1. Daniel Kreiss and Shannon C. McGregor, “A Review and Provocation: On Polarization and Platforms,” *New Media and Society* 26, no. 1 (2024): 556–79, published online 11 April 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231161880>.

2. William H. Frey, “The Nation Is Diversifying Even Faster than Predicted, According to New Census Data,” *Brookings*, 1 July 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/new-census-data-shows-the-nation-is-diversifying-even-faster-than-predicted>.

3. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “A Labor Day Look at How American Workers Have Changed over 40 Years,” *BLS Blog*, 1 September 2021, <https://www.bls.gov/blog/2021/a-labor-day-look-at-how-american-workers-have-changed-over-40-years.htm>.

4. Senate Historical Office, “Making Room for Women in the Senate,” *United States Senate*, 1 March 2022, <https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/senate-stories/making-room-for-women-in-the-senate.htm>.

5. Megan Brennan, “Record Party Divide 10 Years After Same-Sex Marriage Ruling,” *Gallup*, 29 May 2025, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/691139/record-party-divide-years-sex-marriage-ruling.aspx>.

6. Michael Davern et al., *General Social Survey 1972–2024* (Chicago: NORC, 2025), data accessed from *GSS Data Explorer*, <https://gssdataexplorer.norc.og/trends>.

7. Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, “How Groups Voted in 2024,” Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Cornell University, n.d., <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/how-groups-voted-2024>; Katerina Eva Matsa and Michael Lipka, “6 Facts About Fox News,” *Pew Research Center*, 17 July 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/07/17/6-facts-about-fox-news/>; Christopher J. Scalia, “Trump’s Dramatic and Ironic Gains with Gen X,” *American Enterprise Institute*, 29 November 2024, <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/trumps-dramatic-and-ironic-gains-with-gen-x>.

8. Joel Sawat Selway, “Cross-Cuttingness, Cleavage Structures, and Civil War Onset,” *British Journal of Political Science* 41, no. 1 (2011): 111–38, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123410000311>.

9. Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*, 1st ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

10. Albert Bandura, “Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 3, no. 3 (1999): 193–209, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0303_3.

11. Albert Bandura, *Moral Disengagement: How People Do Harm and Live with Themselves* (New York: Worth Publishers, 2016).

12. John Sides, “Young Republicans Are Becoming More Conservative,” *Good Authority*, 17 June 2026, <https://goodauthority.org/news/young-republicans-are-becoming-more-conservative>.

13. See, for example, Southern Poverty Law Center, “Hostile Opposition to the Civil Rights Movement,” <https://www.splcenter.org/learning-for-justice/hostile-opposition-to-the-civil-rights-movement>; Erin Kilbride, “‘This Is Why We Became Activists: Violence Against Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer Women and Non-Binary People,’” *Human Rights Watch*, 14 February 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/02/14/why-we-became-activists/violence-against-lesbian-bisexual-and-queer-women-and-non>; Mona Lena Krook, *Violence Against Women in Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

14. Civic Pulse, “Likelihood of Experiencing an Event in a Three-Month Period,” <https://www.civimpulse.org/research/democracy-and-elections/threats-harassment>.

15. Bridging Divides Initiative, “Women, Democrats Report Sharp Increase in Negative Impacts from Hostility, New Survey Results Show, as Rates for All Local Officials Remain High,” Bridging Divides Initiative, Princeton University, 11 December 2025, <https://bridgingdivides.princeton.edu/updates/2025/women-democrats-report-sharp-increase-negative-impacts-hostility-new-survey-results>.

16. Michelle Goldberg, “Republicans’ Race to the Bottom,” *New York Times*, 28 February 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/28/opinion/meadows-tlaib.html>.

17. Karin Dyrstad and Solveig Hillesund, “Explaining Support for Political Violence: Grievance and Perceived Opportunity,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64, no. 9 (2020): 1724–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002720909886>; Elaine K. Denny and Barbara F. Walter, “Ethnicity and Civil War,” *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014): 199–212, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343313512853>; Barbara F. Walter, “Why Bad Governance Leads to Repeat Civil War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 7 (2015): 1242–72, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002714528006>.

18. Edward Alsworth Ross, *The Principles of Sociology* (New York: Century, 1920).

19. Dalya Berkowitz and Rachel Kleinfeld, *Political Violence in the U.S.* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2026).

20. Ashley Grams, "Citizens from Across U.S. Come to Minnesota to Learn ICE Resistance Tactics—CBS Minnesota," CBS News, 26 February 2026, <https://www.cbsnews.com/minnesota/news/minnesota-teaches-ice-resistance-tactics>.

21. Sarah Bryner et al., "Understanding Evolving Republican Attitudes Towards Democracy," Johns Hopkins University's SNF Agora Institute and Public Agenda, November 2025, <https://snfagora.jhu.edu/resources/understanding-evolving-republican-attitudes-towards-democracy>.

22. "The SAVE America Act by the Numbers: How Millions of Eligible Voters Could Be Affected," Voter Participation Center, 13 March 2026, <https://www.voterparticipation.org/the-save-america-act-by-the-numbers-how-millions-of-eligible-voters-could-be-affected>.

23. Kelly Hurst, "How Americans View Racial Diversity Ahead of the Country's 250th Anniversary," Pew Research Center, 25 March 2026, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2026/03/25/how-americans-value-racial-diversity-ahead-of-the-countrys-250th-anniversary>.

24. Lilliana Mason, Julie Wronski, and John V. Kane, "Activating Animus: The Uniquely Social Roots of Trump Support," *American Political Science Review* 115 (November 2021): 1508–16.

25. Pippa Norris, "Measuring Populism Worldwide," *Party Politics* 26, no. 6 (2020): 697–717, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068820927686>.

26. Dylan Paltra, Marius Sältzer, and Christian Stecker, "Affective States: Cultural and Affective Polarization in a Multilevel-Multiparty System," *Political Behavior*, published online, 1 December 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-025-10088-6>.