

Relationship Between Profanity and Political Polarization

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Abstract: This paper delves into the contentious issue of political polarization and explores the psychological underpinnings of anger within social media profanity and its contribution to political polarization, emphasizing its role in pushing individuals to adopt extreme viewpoints and resist compromise. First of all, it highlights the role of social media in shaping political discourse and its dominance in terms of political discussion platforms. While social media platforms provide a diverse space for individuals to express different viewpoints, they also foster echo chambers, reinforcing existing beliefs and isolating users from differing perspectives. It emphasizes the effect of the use of profanity and strong language on social media intensifying emotional reactions, pushing individuals toward extreme political positions, and deepening polarization. Profanity signals group membership and leads to more negative perceptions of opposing groups, exacerbating the polarization cycle. In conclusion, the essay calls for a critical examination of the impact of profanity and aggression in political discussions, especially on social media. It underscores the need for responsible and respectful discourse to mitigate the growing problem of political polarization. Ultimately, it emphasizes the importance of thoughtful communication in fostering a more constructive political environment.

Keywords: Political polarization, echo chamber, in group effect, profanity

1. Introduction

Politics encompasses the activities of government officials, members of legislative bodies, and individuals who seek to shape the governance of a country.[1] Throughout the history of human society, people have always gathered to deliberate on how a government should operate, whether it was in the bustling markets of Athens or the intellectual gatherings on tennis courts. While disagreements naturally arise in such discussions, it is often the intensity of emotions, such as anger, that can lead to undesirable outcomes, including violence.

In today's world, with the rapid evolution of media and the prevalence of social networking, the nature of political discourse has shifted from face-to-face interactions to online communication through text and social media platforms. Disagreements and the expression of anger are frequently evident in the profanity-laden posts that populate these digital spaces. Media corporations also play a role by capitalizing on strong emotions in their algorithms, creating echo chambers where like-minded individuals reinforce their political beliefs, thereby exacerbating political polarization.

Political polarization, as defined by the encyclopedia, denotes the widening gap between political attitudes, often reaching ideological extremes. The escalating polarization can result in reduced engagement in public political discourse and a decreased willingness to find common ground, ultimately leading to societal instability. Presently, many developed democratic nations worldwide grapple with the challenges posed by political polarization. For example, the United States has witnessed a significant increase in political polarization, as depicted in Figure 1.[2] Additionally, polarization has been on the rise in Britain following the Brexit decision, while in Europe, there is a growing prevalence of radical policy support among individuals born since 1980.[3] The polarization within these major powers carries the potential for substantial societal costs that must be addressed.

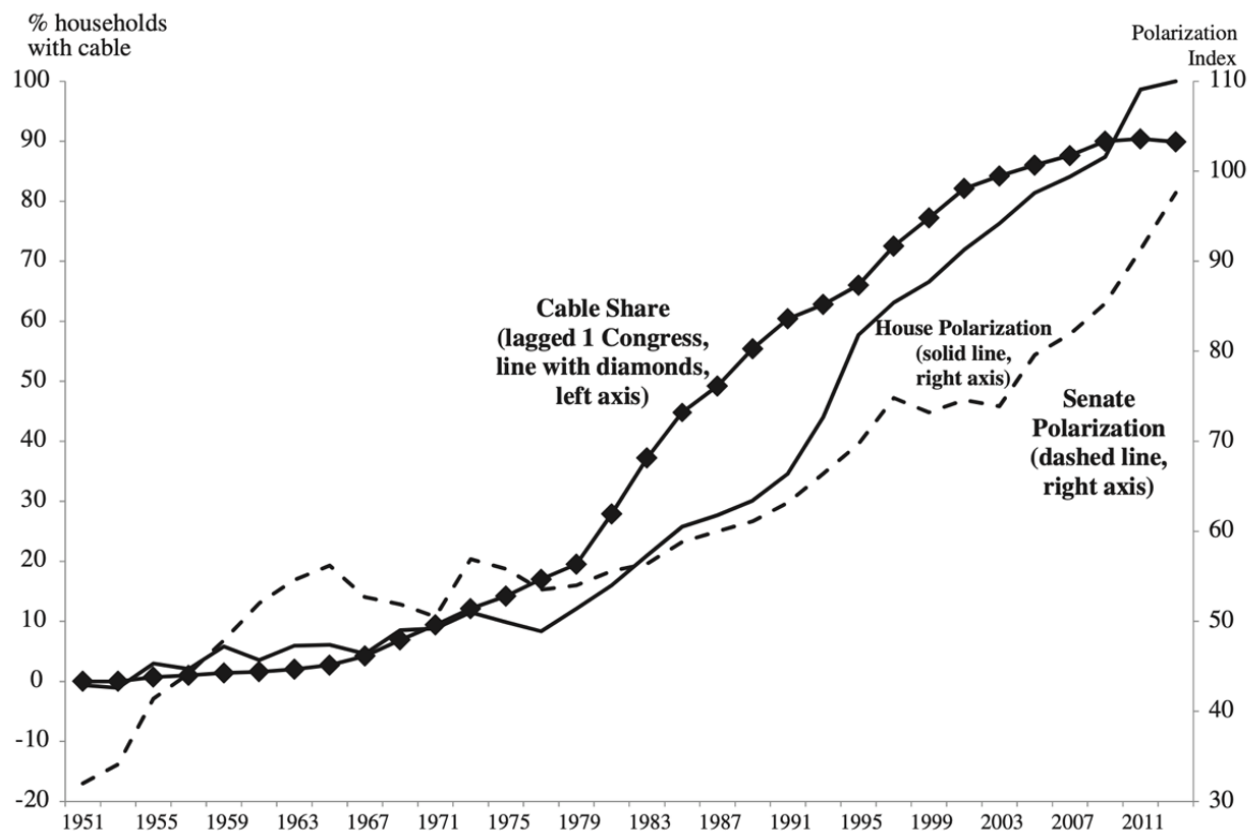


Figure 1: Cable TV Share, Polarization in the U.S. House and Senate

2. Analysis of the relation between rage and political polarization

First, rage alone is polarizing the people in politics. According to the encyclopedia, political polarization refers to the divergence of political attitudes to ideological extremes. Almost all discussions of polarization in political science consider polarization in the context of political parties and democratic systems of government. Anger on the other hand an emotion characterized by antagonism toward someone or something recognized by the brain as being wrong. Although that it might just be a different point of view, when the brain recognizes as being as something opposing, it begins to generate the emotion of anger. This is especially the case with politics where everyone has a say on what they believe should be the “right” way to govern and benefit the country. It is believed that people who usually are involved in politics are strongly nationalistic and patriotic, a study says that national identity is the only form of national attachment to predict political involvement[4] positively; thus, the emotions are even more magnified. Studies have found that individuals who

report feeling angry are more likely to hold extreme political beliefs and are less likely to compromise on political issues. For example, citizens with aggressive personality traits expressed significantly greater support for political violence, and their support doubled when exposed to political messages infused with violent metaphors [5]. Research has found that anger can drive partisan polarization or the tendency for individuals to identify more strongly with their political party and to view members of the opposing party more negatively. Since anger causes people to not compromise on those differing ideas, people seek others who share the same view as them because of the psychological effect called the in-group effect.

The ingroup effect and political polarization are related psychological and sociopolitical phenomena that can influence people's attitudes and behaviors in the context of politics. The ingroup effect theory includes ideas of an ingroup and an outgroup. An ingroup is a social group that a person identifies as part of, based on factors like nationality, race, religion, socioeconomic status, or political affiliation. An outgroup is a social group that a person does not identify with, based on similar factors as would cause that person to identify with an ingroup.[6] Usually, people would provide members of their ingroup with more favorable conditions than outgroup members. Usually, democratic parties like America consist of two parties, in this case, the Democrats and the Republicans. The republicans would be considered an outgroup for the democrats, same vice versa. Because of the in-group effect, the democrats would favor the democrats more, republicans would favor the republicans more and often ignore the other side. This effect not only causes people to only look to the side of the argument that they belong to, therefore ignoring the different sides of the argument but also associates with anger. Ingroup identification increases with happiness toward the ingroup and anger toward the outgroup. Whereas identification decreases with rage toward the ingroup and joy toward the outgroup. Thus, we expect an interaction effect of the type of emotions and object of emotions on the change in identification.[7] Anger fuels the creation of ingroups and outgroups, which ultimately widens political polarization.

3. Analysis of the relationship between profanity, anger, media, and echo chambers

Oftentimes, swearing is a medium to express anger and dissent, especially when there are arguments during conversations. On the other hand, social media is a mix of people from different cultures and experiences; thus, almost everyone on media holds an individualist and distinct point of view. Since the large pool of users is pulled for political discussions, it is often heated to a very extreme point. The media platforms often use algorithms that show users content similar to what they have already engaged with and further eliminate the opposing ideas in order to favor the user for advertisements and continuation of usage, thus creating "echo chambers" which is a situation in which beliefs are amplified or reinforced by communication and repetition inside a closed system.[8] This closed system of the echo chamber creates ingroups and outgroups --- where information within the echo chamber is agreed amongst ingroups, and any information outside of the system is considered a participant of the outgroup---specifically for online settings since it is involved with media algorithms.

The media setting is essential within this conversation because, in the modern developed world, media is the dominant way of idea-sharing and remains the most diverse platform for political discussions. For instance, Twitter has 528.3 million active users each month.[9] A new Pew Research Center analysis of English-language tweets posted between May 1, 2020, and May 31, 2021, by a representative sample of U.S. adult Twitter users finds that one-third (33%) of those tweets are political.[10] Thus, when the media creates echo chambers and ingroup effects regarding politics, it is likely that its effects are primarily exacerbated due to its nature of being the dominant platform for political discussions.

4. Relationship between profanity and political messages

The use of swear words can lead to defensive reactions from those who feel attacked and offensive reactions from those who think their speech is being restricted. Strong language, including swear words, can signal group membership and affiliation. When individuals hear language, they perceive it as supportive of their in-group, and it can reinforce their identification with that group and lead them to view opposing groups more negatively. This can lead to a cycle of escalating aggression and polarization.[11]

The simplicity of swear words being a quick expression of thought on complicated topics like political discussions led to the strong emotion passing through the screen. Furthermore, swear language and profanity is amplifying the emotions of human beings. The tenseness of swear words adds to the expression of anger on the media posts, creating a more polarized environment, even worse. A study by researchers at the University of Cambridge found that Twitter users who used swear words were more likely to be politically engaged and express more extreme political views. The researchers analyzed over 10 million tweets and found that individuals who used swear words were more likely to support political parties on the extreme ends of the political spectrum.[12] Another study found that using swear words in political tweets was associated with increased engagement, with tweets containing swear words receiving more likes, retweets, and replies than tweets without swear words.[13] Since profanity is more aggressive, it will express more emotion toward one specific side of an argument, thereby causing more polarization. Moreover, the echo chamber effect of social media delivers more extremist-valued posts to the already polarized users, generating even more extreme positions. Therefore, a cycle of political polarization is created.

5. Negative impacts of political polarization

Addressing the pervasive issue of political polarization is of utmost importance, and it's essential to understand why we should care about it. This phenomenon can have far-reaching negative consequences on contemporary politics on a global scale, primarily in eroding trust in governments and causing paralysis in international policymaking.

One significant aspect of political polarization is the role of propaganda in conveying political messages. A study found that perceived dirty campaigning positively correlated with a growing distrust in politicians over time.[14] In recent years, political distrust among citizens has increased substantially. For instance, nearly half of young adults (46%) now fall into the low-trust category. This issue extends beyond governance alone, as approximately 49% of Americans believe the decline in interpersonal trust is due to people becoming less reliable.[15] Such widespread mistrust can lead to political unrest and public instability as people lose faith in the civil system of government and begin seeking alternative forms of governance. Such quests for revolution and change often involve violence and mistakes, leading to undesirable outcomes.

In our current global context, characterized by global warming, economic stagnation, and natural disasters, the world must unite and reinforce policies to create a better future. Encouraging the use of renewable energy is a prime example of such mutually beneficial policies. However, political polarization can hinder cooperation on these vital issues, leading to a lack of consensus. Moreover, the prevailing political distrust can delay policy implementation until it is too late for humanity to take action.

In conclusion, addressing political polarization is not merely a matter of political discourse; it is essential for preserving trust in governments, promoting effective policymaking, and tackling urgent global challenges. Failure to do so may have dire consequences for the future of our society and the planet.

6. Conclusions

This paper has explored the intricate relationship between profanity, anger, media, and political polarization. It has shed light on the profound impact of these elements on the political landscape and the consequences they entail.

Political polarization is a pressing issue, evident in many developed democratic nations, and it poses significant challenges to societal harmony and governance. The essay has outlined how anger, often expressed through profanity, contributes to the widening divide between political attitudes, pushing individuals towards extreme positions and hindering compromise. This escalation of emotions can drive partisan polarization, creating a cycle of negativity and deepening the divide.

The role of media, especially social media platforms, has been emphasized in perpetuating this problem. These platforms, while providing a diverse space for political discourse, also create echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs and isolate users from differing perspectives. Algorithms that prioritize user engagement often exacerbate this issue by filtering out opposing viewpoints, further fueling polarization.

Furthermore, the use of profanity in political discussions has been shown to intensify emotional reactions and signal group membership. It can lead to more negative perceptions of opposing groups, deepening the polarization cycle. The simplicity and directness of swear words make them a quick means of expression, but they also amplify emotions, making political discourse more polarized and less constructive.

The consequences of political polarization are substantial. It erodes trust in governments, hampers effective policymaking, and can lead to political unrest and public instability. In an era marked by global challenges like climate change, economic stagnation, and natural disasters, the inability to cooperate due to political polarization could have catastrophic consequences.

In this context, responsible and respectful discourse becomes imperative. Addressing political polarization is not just a matter of political discourse; it is essential for fostering trust, finding common ground, and tackling pressing global issues. Failure to do so may jeopardize the future of our society and our planet. It is our collective responsibility to navigate the complexities of political polarization and strive for a more constructive and inclusive political environment.

Undoubtedly, social media platforms provide a space for diverse discussions and a wide array of perspectives. However, the unfortunate consequences of profanity, aggression, and the echo chamber effect cannot be ignored. While political polarization has always been a part of society, it is neither productive nor beneficial to expedite or intensify it. Therefore, it is crucial for all users of social media to pause and consider the impact of their next political post before hitting the send button.

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