

LP² STUDY GROUP PROPOSAL FOR FALL 2022

POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND DEMOCRACY'S FUTURE

Coordinators: Maury Harris and Jerry Webman

Is political polarization eroding the foundations of our democracy? How are the accompanying culture wars fraying personal relationships and the sense of shared community? This study group will address theories of polarization, its history and recent changes and its various causes. The political consequences for government and democracy as well as remedies will be assessed.

Maury Harris is a retired economist with a career at the Federal Reserve System and Wall Street. He has coordinated study groups on financial bubbles, government fiscal deficits, COVID-19 economics, and the histories of the New York City economy, Native Americans and Texas.

Jerry Webman is a retired economist and investment strategist for Oppenheimer. He also has taught at Princeton University and has a political science PhD from Yale University.

Type of Study Group: Presentation followed by discussion.

Readings and other Materials/Online Services:

Why We're Polarized by Ezra Klein;
Selected articles to be provided by email.

***** **SYLLABUS - A WORK IN PROGRESS** *****

WEEK 1

TOPIC: Introduction to concepts and measurement

READING: Klein, pp. 1-42

QUESTIONS:

Define political polarization. How is polarization measured? How has polarization changed over time?

WEEK 2

TOPIC: The psychology of polarization

LP² STUDY GROUP PROPOSAL FOR FALL 2022

READING: Klein, pp. 43-79

QUESTIONS:

Why do societies polarize? What are the characteristics of polarized groups?

What are some psychological characteristics of polarized individuals?

WEEK 3

TOPIC: Partisanship and demographic and economic trends

READING:

Klein, pp. 80-134

QUESTIONS:

How is political partisanship related to demographics? How does economic status affect partisan identification? Does partisanship change with evolving economic trends?

WEEK 4

TOPIC: News media roles

READING:

Klein, pp. 139-170 and pp. 234-240

QUESTIONS:

How has the role of media changed over time? What are the characteristics of specific media devotees? What are the commercial motivations for partisan media?

WEEK 5

TOPIC: Social media roles

READING:

“How Social Media Fuels US Political Polarization and What To Do About It”;
“How Tech Platforms Fuel US Political Polarization and What Government Can Do About It”

QUESTIONS:

How has the evolution of social media enhanced political partisanship? What might be public policy options to address social media excesses?

WEEK 6

TOPIC: US political implications of polarization

LP² STUDY GROUP PROPOSAL FOR FALL 2022

READING:

Klein, pp. 171-234;

Political Order and Political Decay by Francis Fukuyama, pp. 455-488.

QUESTIONS:

What's cause and what's effect? Polarization and political disfunction.

What's the role of "money politics" in promoting polarization? And gridlock?

WEEK 7

TOPIC: Polarization and politics outside of the US

READING:

"What Happens When Democracies Become Perniciously Polarized?"

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/01/18/what-happens-when-democracies-become-perniciously-polarized-pub-86190> ;

"Review: Comparative Democratization and Democratic Backsliding" by David Andersen, *Comparative Politics* 2019,

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26663952>

QUESTIONS:

What are the characteristics of democracies that have greatly polarized?

Can democracy survive extreme polarization? Can democracy be restored?

WEEK 8

TOPIC: Lessons from Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany

READING:

Death of Democracy by Benjamin Carter Hett, selections;

"Political Extremism in the 1920s and 1930s: Do German Lessons Generalize?" by Alan de Bromhead, Barry Eichengreen and Kevin H. O'Rourke.

QUESTIONS:

Why did democracy fail in inter-war Germany? Hint: it wasn't inflation.

What are the lessons for this historic failure of democracy?

WEEK 9

TOPIC: Role of political leaders in polarization

READING:

"Demagogues And Democracy";

"Civics 101: Keep Demagogues Out Of Democracy";

LP² STUDY GROUP PROPOSAL FOR FALL 2022

“Status Anxiety Is Blowing Wind Into Trump’s Sails” by Thomas B. Edsall,
The *New York Times*, 2/9/22.

QUESTIONS:

Are politicians the product and exploiters or the cause of polarization?
How have leaders rebuilt a political center and effective governance?

WEEK 10

TOPIC: A Conservative’s Views on Polarization and Politics

GUEST SPEAKER:

Professor Sam Abrams—co-author of *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*

WEEK 11

TOPIC: Possible outcomes of polarization

READING:

Klein, pp. 240-268

WEEK 12

TOPIC: Potential remedies

READING: TBD