

## LP<sup>2</sup> 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.

(This is a repeat of a study group offered in Fall 2022.)

**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

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**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

**READING:**

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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";

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

### **QUESTIONS:**

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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