**Forum:** First General Assembly

**Issue:** Develop strategies to combat recent rise in social, political, and racial polarization in MEDCs

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Introduction

Social, political, and racial polarization has rapidly risen for the past few decades. Numerous situations represent this polarization in the More Economically Developed Countries (MEDCs) as there are noticeable shifts toward extreme political positions for citizens and the creation of competing social groups.

The advent of mass media and social media has triggered this event. There have been technologies that created exaggerated views on political conflict, spread misinformation, and reported biased information, which created isolated and segregated opinions and judgments. People’s intense engagement with information that aligns with their original beliefs is generated by “echo chambers” where alternative perspectives are mostly not contemplated. Also, as disparities in wealth and income get more apparent, more people feel socially marginalized or excluded, leading to social unrest and social polarization, reflecting the harm to democracy and society.

As a result, a long-term trend named “affective polarization” has emerged in countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia and has increased since the mid to late 1900s. It is a phenomenon where a country’s citizen feels more negative toward other political parties than their own. This was due to the change in the political parties’ behavior. Some parties suporrt specific ideologies and religions. For instance, in the United States, it is shown that “Republicans are now more likely to be religious, while Democrats are more likely to be secular” (Kimball).

Addressing and combatting these challenges requires a well-examined approach with efforts to bridge ideological and social gaps, promote unity with media literacy, and consider the root causes of this issue of polarization.

Definition of Key Terms

Social Polarization

Social polarization is associated with the dividing of society into distinct groups that may emerge from a lack of overlapping individuals’ beliefs and values across different groups. Social polarization is linked to conflicts, alienation, and societal tensions.

**Political Polarization**

Political Polarization is the division of a country’s entire population into two directly opposed political groups.

**Racial Polarization**

Racial polarization occurs when a population of individuals with different backgrounds is separated into distinct racial groups.

**Partisan**

Partisan is a term used to describe persons who demonstrate strong support for a party, cause, or person. They may display strong bias and blind adherence to the group or individual.

Background

Political Polarization



The rise of political polarization is evident in much of the world over the past few decades. In recent decades, political polarization has intensified and divided societies across the world. In the United States, polarization in terms of politics has been affecting the country since the 1970s, accumulating to the extent in which there are no overlapping ideologies between representatives of the two major parties of the US Congress.

 The driving forces of political polarization

In recent years, the political party that individuals are associated with has become more connected to both ideology and human attributes such as race and religion. Parties often use their ideology to construct opinions to attract the public’s attention for reelection, thus causing individuals to have less in common and increasing political polarization. Both Canada and the U.S. have experienced ideological differences between political parties increase more rapidly than other countries. Additionally, party sorting by race is another driving force. In the study Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization, the researchers note that “the increase in the non-white share has been twice as large in countries with rising affective polarization as in those with falling affective polarization”.

Research suggests that social media inflames political polarization. Social media algorithms can adjust a user’s news feed and recommendations based on their preferences, creating an online echo chamber that isolates their viewpoints. Many political figures dominate the media, with an increase in political messages posted on Twitter. Emotive and persuasive language are used to persuade and appeal to the public, easily influencing those who share similar ideologies as the message and causing outrage at those who share opposing viewpoints. Other platforms are seeing this increase in political debates including Facebook and Reddit which are sites of ferocious political argument. This not only increases political polarization but also affective polarization, in turn causing government shutdowns, violent protests, and attacks on elected officials.

Affective polarization

Affective polarization is a phenomenon in which citizens feel negatively toward members of opposing political parties. In the study Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization, Levi Boxell, Matthew Gentzkow, and Jesse M. Shapiro carry out an investigation of polarization levels over the last 40 years within nine wealthy, established democracies which include the United States, Canada, Britain, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland. The results demonstrate that over time, affective polarization has increased more in the United States than in any of the other countries. The gap in the U.S. increased by nearly 70 percent between 1978 and 2016, while Canada, Switzerland, and New Zealand saw smaller increases as well. Australia, Britain, Norway, Sweden, and Germany saw decreasing trends. When researching polarization in MEDCs, delegates are encouraged to investigate and analyze the polarization levels within the above countries and make comparisons to determine the solutions to combat political polarization within the countries that see increases in the number.

The relationship between income inequality and political polarization

Income inequality is a major root cause of both social and political polarization. Despite the efforts to achieve the goal of poverty reduction globally in the last three decades, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated income inequality by impacting those in poverty. In the book, Polarized America, McCarty et al. mention that the division of political groups among American citizens has been closely related to the rise in wealth disparity.

Four reasons can explain the relationship between the two phenomena. First, income inequality creates unfavorable comparisons with individuals in a society. Poverty is perceived as negative, which arouses subjective feelings of frustration and anger that ultimately result in extreme political viewpoints and ideologies. Second, those in poverty are observed to reduce out-group interactions, causing the individuals facing economic hardship to become polarized, and thus reducing the whole population to be vulnerable to a state of polarization. Third, increasing income inequality clearly defines and amplifies class identity in societies. People in different classes may hold different views, making it difficult to achieve political consensus. Fourth, extreme and unequal income distribution could impact political polarization as it may cause the size of the middle class to grow smaller. The middle class is extremely important to maintaining political stability. However, it is crucial to note that there is continual extensive debate regarding the impact of income disparity on political polarization. At the same time, it is possible that improved inequality in income distribution could potentially mitigate rising political polarization.

Racial Polarization

Racial polarization is prevalent across the world, with one instance being the United States. One stark and long-standing racial disparity is apparent in the differences in socioeconomic outcomes for Black and white Americans. The average income for a Black household in the U.S. is only 60% of median white household income, and the number of Black Americans living below the poverty line is more than twice that of white Americans. Although homeownership among Black Americans increased between 1940 and 1970, the number still does not reach half the level of white homeownership today. These racial gaps most likely have widened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Individuals within the country hold different views on racial inequalities. Although most are aware of the inequalities associated with race, they disagree on the causes and the ways to address the issue, as well as whether policymakers should make an effort to resolve the issue. These beliefs and views are polarized and thus cause the country to be racially polarized as a whole.

Major Parties Involved

**The United States (U.S.)**

The two major political parties in the United States are Republicans and Democrats, which experienced polarization due to ideological differences in social justice, economic situation, and immigration. The U.S. is one of the countries that is experiencing extreme polarization in all aspects; Republicans and Democrats are fighting about social issues, including LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality. This led to the far-right movement among the Republicans and the progressive movement for the Democrats. In response, various organizations recognized the rise of polarization and its effect, trying to combat it. Some Nonprofit organization or society have worked on spreading dialogue, understanding, and establishing unity by building programs within communities, educational programs, and campaigns to promote civil discourse.

**India**

In Asia, India has been experiencing societal and political polarization since the late nineteenth century. Many questioned whether India should be a secular country or a Hindu nation, following the majority that is Hindu. The division in political position, rise in media, and economic transformation have triggered conflict and polarization. Moreover, the “victory of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2019” (Lee) made the consequences worse. India had to bear more attacks and terrors from Pakistan to destroy their independence, the conflict between opposite parties that each protect pluralism and secularism intensified, and there has been increase in violence. On top of that, the COVID-19 pandemic caused political and racial conflict as more Muslim minority communities were in danger than before.

**Malaysia**

Malaysia has been plagued by racial, religious, and political polarization for decades. The ethnic divide between the Malay majority and minority groups, including Chinese and Indian Malaysians mainly caused polarization. There are also divisions between Islamists and secularists, which have hindered political compromises, delayed necessary reforms, and worsened political instability. Furthermore, polarization is not limited to the elite level but also affects the whole society, jeopardizing harmony and social cohesion. To remedy polarization in Malaysia, political elites have shifted towards the center and embraced inclusivity. This is done through adopting an inclusive national identity and promoting young leaders with a national outlook. On the other hand, civil society has been making efforts to bridge differences through interfaith dialogues and cross-ethnic learning programs. They also have advocated for alternative forms of political identity that focus on serious problems, including poverty, social inequality, and gender inequality.

**Italy**

In Europe, it is reported that the most polarized country is Italy. They have been facing racial polarization, primarily related to immigration or the integration of multiple countries. Italy has been experiencing significant inflows of migrants and refugees, primarily from North Africa and the Middle East. This sudden change created tensions and challenges related to the integration of diverse communities, which included difficulty in providing adequate housing, education, and employment opportunities. This has also led to stereotypes and prejudices toward the minority community. To reduce this impact, the Italian government has implemented integration policies, which attempt to facilitate the social and economic inclusion of immigrants. Some of the policies are language courses and job training programs. Moreover, Italy has enacted legislation to combat discrimination. New laws have been established to protect individuals from hate crimes.

**Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA)**

The DPPA has been providing indirect support to resolve this polarization issue on a global scale. They aim to provide political assistance and manage conflicts. To accomplish their goal, DPPA has been involved in early prevention and preventive diplomacy. The monitoring of global political status and potential conflict causes has reduced political conflicts, including polarization. They are also engaged in peacebuilding efforts, which support different countries settling down from conflict, and this is done through supporting institutions, promoting proper governance, and encouraging financial and societal support.

Timeline of Events

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Date | Description of event |
| Early 1830s  | Antebellum Period. Due to the issue of slavery, the United States became excessively polarized. Southern states that favored slavery dominated the United States government.  |
| 1870-1900 | Gilded Age. The United States encountered inordinate polarization during this time. Multiple violent incidents were seen across the nation. With expanded party polarization, Republicans were strengthening their hold on industrial areas.  |
| 1950s-1960s  | After World War II and when there were differences in ideologies between the two major parties, the degree of political bipartisanship increased.  |
| 1989~  | This is the Post-Cold War Era. The breakdown of the Soviet Union with the Cold War ending, there were massive changes in political, economic, and social situations in Europe.  |
| 1992  | Pat Buchanan delivered a speech in 1992, at the Republican National Convention, where he declared a culture war within the country.  |
| 1994  | The Democrats failed to keep control of the House of Representatives.  |
| 1952 | The Congress went Republican.  |
| 2000~  | The idea of political polarization started to be mentioned in the U.S. elections from 2000.  |

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

There are few explicit actions or organizations created to resolve the issue as it is recent and ongoing. However, some countries are making efforts to find ways to solve polarization slowly.

One of the most significant causes of the rise in polarization is the misleading information in the media. In response, in 2013, the Aspen Insitute in the United States organized the "Dialogue on Public Libraries," which gathered diverse stakeholders to discuss public libraries' role in promoting social cooperation and community engagement (Kapeller). Many organizations in the United Kingdom have initiated media literacy campaigns to guide individuals in critically assessing information online, navigating online resources, and understanding perspective and biases. It aimed to reduce social and racial polarization and their excessive biases on fake news, but there was no dramatic reduction in the polarization or conflicts, so it is difficult to judge its effectiveness.

For the European Union (EU), they supported initiatives to address the issue, which includes projects encouraging social cooperation and combating unjst discrimination to promote peace and communication across communities among the member states. Numerous studies and research were presented to examine and assess whether solutions are reasonable or not. To fully consider existing problems and provide insight into future challenges, such as climate change, trade, and conflict, studies announced the key is to create or adjust long-term policies, including industrial policies, to expand European values and foundations collaboratively.

Some conflict resolving programs were launched to reduce conflict. For instance, in Northern Ireland, there was an Agreement called the "[Good Friday Agreement](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/IE%20GB_980410_Northern%20Ireland%20Agreement.pdf)." It was signed in 1998 and was crucial in addressing political and religious polarization in the history of Northern Ireland as it aimed to address issues related to governance, military, and regulations. It established the groundwork for a government that shares power as it is a Multi-Party Agreement and underscored the significance of comprehensiveness. This was viable in specific countries with Agreements but not on a global scale, as there are not many peace agreements regarding polarization. There should be more local government engagements to study the problem and resolve through collaboration actively.

Possible Solutions

* Intergroup contact is a potential solution to consider when resolving the issue of polarization. The “contact hypothesis” suggests that getting to know each other and interacting with one another can reduce prejudice between groups. However, social contact can either bring more extreme views or reduce these distinct viewpoints. Delegates are encouraged to research “Citizen Assemblies” as a model for enabling more meaningful contact between groups in conflict. For instance, Ireland has run several successful Citizens’ Assemblies that have made policy recommendations.
* Social media platforms are recognized to be fueling polarization. However, companies of these platforms can play a significant role in mitigating polarization. Research demonstrates that people favor sensational content that presses their emotional buttons. These videos often receive virality and incentivize politicians and news outlets to post divisive content as that is what would most likely attract engagement and views. Companies of these media platforms should seek to recommend more positive information regarding all groups to decrease polarization.
* Misconceptions are present within all divided groups, and media platforms could seek to correct these misconceptions. When a user engages with a video that spreads misinformation, platforms could alert users that the content is not accurate and insert links to more accurate content.
* Polarization can be limited through institutional reforms such as decentralizing political power or amending electoral rules.

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**Appendix or Appendices**

1. <https://www.eai.or.kr/new/en/etc/search_view.asp?intSeq=21201&board=eng_issuebriefing> (Political Polarization in Asia)

*This website is useful as it provides an overview of polarization in multiple countries in Asia. It goes into depth for all countries and explains the situation with details about history and outcomes.*

1. <https://wiiw.ac.at/economic-polarisation-in-europe-causes-and-options-for-action-dlp-5022.pdf> (Economic Polarization in Europe)

*This website is useful as it describes polarization in Europe regarding a wide range of aspects. It mentions different possible policies that should develop, previous attempts, and future initiatives to resolve this issue.*

1. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/social-media-and-democracy/social-media-echo-chambers-and-political-polarization/333A5B4DE1B67EFF7876261118CCFE19> (Social Media, Echo Chambers, and Political Polarization)

*Social media is responsible for perpetuating and fueling polarization and the above chapter provides a study of the relationship between the two. Understanding social media’s role and the various aspects involved in engaging with a post may assist delegates with forming and constructing their resolution.*