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By the People

The Role of Local Deliberative Forums in
Combating Affective Political Polarization

Selene Swanson

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Please direct inquiries to:
The Project on International Peace and Security
Global Research Institute
The College of William & Mary
427 Scotland Street
Williamsburg, VA 23185
pips@wm.edu

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The Role of Local Citizens' Assemblies in Combating Affective Political Polarization

Affective political polarization—or deep interparty antipathy—has increased rapidly in the United States in recent decades, threatening American democracy. This extreme polarization creates a weakness that can be exploited by foreign adversaries to undermine U.S. global leadership and reduce the appeal of democracy to Americans and observers abroad. Local governments can play an important role in addressing this threat by introducing deliberative forums designed to reduce affective political polarization within their communities. These forums will allow for meaningful contact between partisans, building trust and demonstrating that cross-partisan cooperation is possible.

Introduction

This paper explores the impact of rising affective political polarization on American democracy and U.S. global leadership. From the attack on the Capitol to protests outside of polling places, polarization has undermined the U.S. government's ability to legislate effectively. This dysfunction also makes Americans more susceptible to foreign disinformation and undermines faith in democracy both in the United States and abroad. In the end, the polarization currently crippling U.S. democracy will make the country less prepared to pursue its political, economic, and social interests around the world.

Deliberative forums should be established in politically divided localities across the country to strengthen American democracy and protect the United States' position of global leadership. These forums would reduce affective political polarization between neighbors and serve as a model of deliberative democracy.

Rising Affective Political Polarization

Several decades ago, or a generation ago, partisanship was something people took to the ballot box. Today, it's something we bring home and take to bed.

—Robert Jones¹

Affective political polarization, or deep interparty antipathy, is on the rise in the United States. Affective political polarization differs from ideological polarization: ideological polarization refers to the differences between partisans' positions on concrete policy issues, whereas affective polarization is about social identity and the degree to which a partisan likes their own group and dislikes the other. In the United States, Democrats and Republicans increasingly dislike members

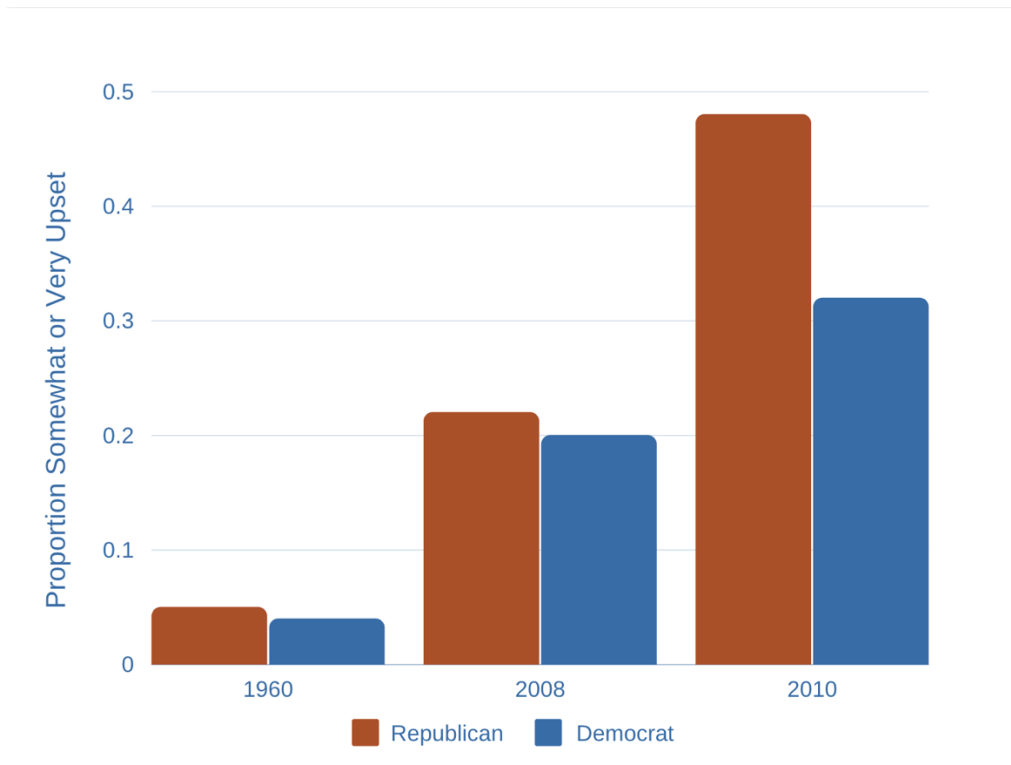
of the opposing party. This dislike extends beyond party elites to neighbors and coworkers. Strong affective political polarization increasingly describes the American political environment, which can be seen in polling data that measures attitudes toward outgroups.²

Attitudes Toward Outgroups

Affective political polarization is growing in the United States. This trend is evident across several metrics:

- **Negative feelings toward the out-party.** While partisans' feelings toward members of their own party have remained stable over the last three decades, measures of how warmly partisans feel toward members of the opposing political party have fallen significantly. The American National Election Survey (ANES) saw positive feelings toward out-party groups drop 15 points between 1988 and 2012. Positive feelings have decreased the most among those who are politically active. However, researchers also have observed a significant drop among non-activists. The number of people considered to be activists has risen in the last ten years, suggesting that increasing out-party antipathy is creating more highly engaged residents.
- **Increasing social divide across political identification.** Americans are divided socially from members of the opposing party. The proportion of Americans who would be unhappy if their child married someone of the opposing party has risen significantly in the last 60 years (see Figure 1). Four to five percent of partisans in 1960 reported that they would be “displeased” if their child married someone belonging to the opposing political party. By 2008, 27 percent of Republicans and 20 percent of Democrats said they would feel “somewhat upset” or “very upset” if their child married outside their political party. Social distance between Democrats and Republicans is accelerating. Almost half (49 percent) of Republicans and one third (33 percent) of Democrats reported that they were “somewhat” or “very” unhappy with the idea of interparty marriage in 2010.³ Party affiliation now dictates many Americans' choice of both friends and life partners.
- **Increasingly negative caricatures of the opposing party.** Stereotypes influence partisans' attitudes about members of the opposing party. These stereotypes lead partisans to vastly overestimate differences in identity, income, and ideology. A study published in 2018 found that Republicans think 43.5 percent of Democrats belong to a labor union, and Democrats think that 44.1 percent of Republicans earn more than \$250,000 a year. In reality, just 10.5 percent of Democrats belong to a labor union, and only 2.2 percent of Republicans have an annual income that exceeds \$250,000.⁴ Partisans consider their opponents to be ideologically extreme, uncooperative, and contemptuous. These assumptions perpetuate a cycle of polarization, as partisans assume that their political opponents are already hostile toward them.⁵ This difference between belief and reality is called the partisan perception gap.⁶ Any effort to address affective polarization must address the perception gap that prevents partisans from truly understanding one another's political positions.

Figure 1: Disapproval of Inter-Party Marriage



Comparative Perspective

Affective political polarization is more severe than other social divisions in America, and the United States compares unfavorably with other established democracies on this dimension.

- **The dominance of partisanship in American politics.** Affective political polarization is the most salient social division in the United States. Americans consistently report feeling more warmly toward members of different religions or races than toward members of the opposing political party.⁷
- **Comparatively steep rates of polarization.** The degree to which affective political polarization has increased in the United States is unique relative to other Western democracies. A Stanford study compared feeling thermometer data in nine Western democracies between 1975 and 2017. Of the nine countries, only four (the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Switzerland) demonstrated increasing sectarianism, or the tendency to view opposing ideologies as morally wrong. Sectarianism increased most rapidly in the United States. On average, the eight other Western democracies saw a small decline in out-party hate over the period of study, while the United States saw a slight increase in hate. By 2017, out-party hate was greater in the United States than in any other country studied.⁸ Polarization continues to grow during the current public health crisis. In the summer of 2020, 77 percent of Americans said that the country had grown more divided since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is 2.8 standard deviations higher than

the mean response in the thirteen other countries studied and 1.6 standard deviations above Spain, which had the second highest response.⁹

Affective political polarization tends to be self-perpetuating. Partisans derive a sense of social identity from their political affiliation, so they are driven to moralize their beliefs and seek out media sources that confirm their biases.¹⁰

Critics have offered a variety of explanations for the rise in polarization in the United States. Some argue it is the natural result of the United States' two-party system.¹¹ Others blame 'stacked' identities that increase the salience of political differences by consistently placing partisans on the opposite sides of social divisions. Still others look to the fractured media environment, the nationalization of state and local politics, and specific polarizing events. All of these factors play a role in perpetuating and amplifying severe affective political polarization within the United States.

Implications: The Erosion of U.S. Democracy and Leadership

“The U.S. government is paralyzed by political polarization...and other rivals make inroads internationally to America's detriment.”

– Former Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates¹²

Severe affective political polarization increases the threat to American democracy from foreign disinformation campaigns, heightens the danger Americans pose to their own democratic institutions, and undermines American global leadership and Washington's capacity to respond to international crises.

Empowering Foreign Disinformation

Russia, China, and Iran have used online disinformation to intensify existing polarization and undermine the American public's faith in democratic processes.¹³ Their success will inspire other U.S. adversaries to deploy the same methods.

In March 2021, the U.S. Department of State's Global Engagement Center identified three Russian intelligence-backed media outlets spreading disinformation on coronavirus vaccines in the United States.¹⁴ Russian disinformation overwhelmed U.S. government messaging and undermined many Americans' confidence in the safety and efficacy of FDA-authorized vaccines. This success was possible because the disinformation campaign took advantage of the lack of public trust in Washington engendered by severe affective political polarization. Americans were more willing to believe “fake news” about their political opponents or messages that challenged opponents' claims, which they then amplified on social media. In this manner, successful disinformation campaigns create a vicious cycle of increasing polarization.¹⁵

Danger to Democratic Institutions

The United States shows early signs of democratic backsliding.¹⁶ In the past decade, Freedom House has documented a fall in the United States' ranking among free countries. The United States is now more similar to relatively new democracies, like Panama, Romania, and Croatia, than established Western European democracies.¹⁷

Public and elite polarization together pose a threat to the United States' democratic institutions. The American public, for instance, exhibits an increasing tolerance for political violence. When partisans believe their enemies are evil, they are more willing to consider anti-democratic means of defeating them.¹⁸ Today, most Americans think the biggest threat to the American way of life comes from other Americans.¹⁹ It is unsurprising, then, that one in five American voters approve of the storming of the Capitol.²⁰ Both Republicans and Democrats display "democratic hypocrisy," meaning they support violations of democratic norms when it helps their party.²¹

At the same time, elite polarization has created a political system characterized by gridlock and inefficiency. As a result, between 2001 and 2017, public approval of Congress fell 21 points among Democrats and 18 points among Republicans.²² The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2017 ranked the United States as a "flawed democracy" for the first time due to Americans' growing dissatisfaction with the government's performance.²³

Threat to U.S. Global Leadership

Since World War II, the United States has used its power to promote democracy, capitalism, and free trade around the world. Heightened affective political polarization puts this mission at risk.

Infighting and unrest within the United States limit the country's ability to respond quickly to global crises.²⁴ Voters increasingly urge their representatives to focus on domestic partisan gladiatorial battles covered by cable news. Gridlock in Washington makes it difficult for members of Congress to legislate in a timely manner, leaving pressing economic and social issues unaddressed. In the past few years, it has become commonplace for the federal government to come within hours of a shutdown due to Congress' inability to agree on a budget package. The result is the erosion of democracy not only within the United States, but also abroad.

In the absence of strong leadership from the United States, Washington should expect increasing Chinese dominance on the world stage. Domestic discontent with the American political system will lead the United States' democracy promotion missions to lack credibility with new governments, encouraging them to turn instead to the alternative model offered by China

Deliberative Democracy and Polarization

Ordinary people, it turns out, are quite reasonable.

– The Economist²⁵

Widespread introduction of deliberative democracy forums, such as citizens assemblies, promises to be an effective countermeasure against growing affective political polarization in the United States.

Deliberative democracy forums create the conditions necessary for productive interaction between political opponents: “equal status between groups, common goals, cooperation and institutional support.”²⁶ These forums encourage participants to engage in issue-based discussion, in which they rely on a common set of facts often presented in briefing materials prepared by experts with opposing perspectives.

Above all, experiments in deliberative democracy share a common feature crucial to mitigating political polarization: interpersonal contact. These forums reduce affective polarization and the partisan perception gap by introducing partisans to the typical member of the opposing party. Mainstream media outlets, which often provide voters with their only exposure to members of the opposing party, often feature guests with extreme views, leading partisans to form mistaken beliefs about how radical the “other side” is.²⁷

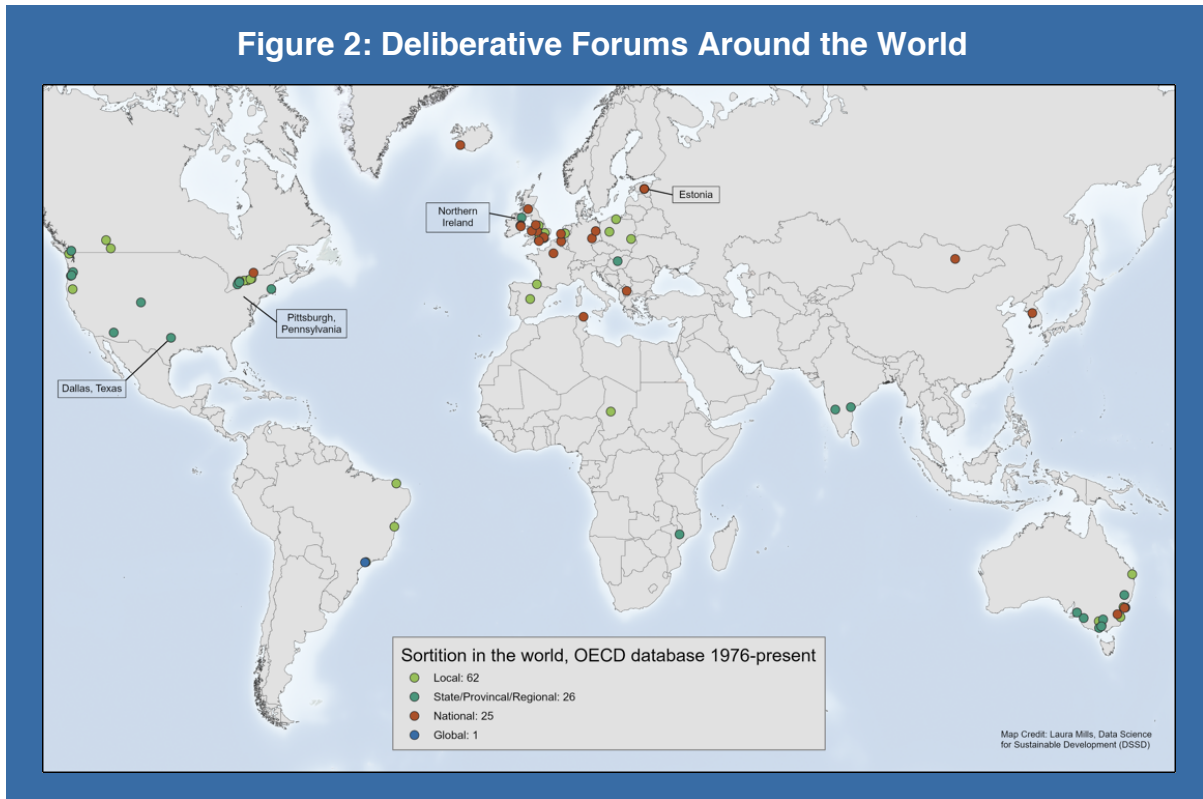
Deliberative democracy thus brings citizens from different backgrounds into contact in a setting designed to help bridge political divides and see the human motivations behind their opponents’ opinions. Research has consistently shown that contact reduces prejudice and stereotyping between different “races and ethnicities, sexualities, and abilities.”²⁸

Popular forums for deliberative democracy include citizens’ juries, participatory budgeting, deliberative panels and forums, and citizens’ assemblies.²⁹ These forums have been introduced at all levels of government, but they are most often held at the local level.³⁰ Figure 2 shows the location of citizens’ assemblies, sortition policy juries, and other deliberative groups identified by the Organization for Economic Development (OECD) in their 2020 report on deliberative democracy.³¹

A number of these deliberative forums have shown how structured contact in deliberative settings can reduce affective political polarization around the world.

- **Omagh, Northern Ireland Deliberative Poll.** In 2007, Stanford’s Center for Deliberative Democracy (CDD) held a Deliberative Poll in the Omagh District Council-area of Northern Ireland to gather citizens’ input on the future of local schools. This Poll was conducted in a deeply divided society—decades of violent conflict between Protestant and Catholic groups in Ireland had only recently come to an end, and deep intergroup antipathy remained. The Poll brought together parents whose children attended schools that were largely segregated by religion.

After the Poll, researchers observed an increase in support for policies that would involve greater religious mixing in schools. Both Protestant and Catholic participants reported seeing each other as more trustworthy.³² This example demonstrates that deliberative democracy can reduce polarization in societies that have a history of violent conflict.



- **America in One Room.** In September 2020, the CDD gathered 523 registered voters from across the country for a Deliberative Poll in Dallas, Texas. Over the course of four days, participants discussed politically charged topics, including DACA, Medicare for All, and the \$15 minimum wage.

Following the Poll, the CDD observed a significant reduction in affective political polarization among participants. The reduction was greatest among participants who initially held extreme views. Democratic participants reported a mean increase of 13 points in the warmth of their feelings toward Republicans, while the most polarized Democrats reported increases of 16 points or more. On average, Republican participants reported a 14-point increase in the warmth of their feelings toward Democrats. The most polarized Republicans reported increases of 17 points or more.

The researchers attribute these changes to the contact between groups. The results were most dramatic among people who held extreme views because they were least likely to have contact with the opposing group before the Poll. America in One Room demonstrates

that deliberative democracy has the potential to reduce affective political polarization even in a highly polarized pre-election atmosphere.³³

- **City of Pittsburgh Capital Budget.** The City of Pittsburgh held two Deliberative Community Forums to identify citizens’ priorities for the 2016 Capital Budget. Participants reported considering new perspectives during the Forums and indicated that they would be more likely to become engaged in the community in the future. They said that the Forums “allowed the sharing of stories and experiences with residents from other parts of the City.”³⁴ Similar exchanges were observed between experts advising the Forums.

Deliberative democracy initiatives in Pittsburgh have earned the city the designation, “Civically Healthy City,” from the National Conference on Citizenship. In Pittsburgh, citizens are more civically engaged compared to the average city in Pennsylvania and the United States. Compared to residents in the average U.S. city, Pittsburgh residents speak more with their neighbors and are 36.8 percent more likely to contact an elected official, despite having similar demographic profiles for age and education.³⁵ These Forums illustrate the power of deliberative democracy to facilitate intergroup interaction—and that these interactions can encourage greater political engagement.

- **Estonian Rahvakogu.** The Economist Democracy Index categorized Estonia as a “flawed democracy” in 2012 following a party financing scandal that led to mass protests and declining faith in the government. The country held its first Rahvakogu (people’s assembly) in 2013 to address the protesters’ demands. Over 60,000 people visited the assembly’s website in its first three weeks, and 2,000 users submitted policy proposals to the assembly.

The assembly chose 15 proposals to present to the Estonian parliament. Seven of the proposals have been adopted in some form, but the most important result of the Estonian citizens’ assembly was a cultural shift to allow increased citizen involvement in governance.³⁶ This example reveals that deliberative forums can restore citizens’ trust in both the government and each other—and ultimately improve the quality of democracy.

Deliberative forums are an effective means of reducing polarization, even in contexts where there is a history of violence and partisanship runs deep. These forums lead to greater political engagement, higher social trust, and an overall improvement in the quality of democracy.

Implementing Deliberative Forums at a Local Level

Given the success of these efforts at deliberative democracy, local governments, especially in areas experiencing significant political division, can introduce similar forums to address affective political polarization in their communities. Ideally, forums should be held on a regular basis to inculcate deliberative democracy in the locality’s political culture.

Why the Local Level?

The nationalization of politics is one of the main drivers of affective polarization.³⁷ Voters increasingly see local issues through the lens of their affiliation with a national political party. The introduction of deliberative forums at the local level would ground discussions of local issues in fact, not identity, and give neighbors of different political stripes the opportunity to see each other as partners facing a shared set of problems.³⁸ Participants' newfound understanding of people on the other side of the aisle will likely extend beyond their towns' limits.

It is not only participants in the forum that may experience a change in outlook. Researchers in Pittsburgh also observed increased understanding between experts from opposing sides who were tasked with creating a joint briefing document.³⁹

Deliberative forums also may change the outlook of non-participating members of the community by providing an example of cross-partisan cooperation. Residents are likely to see the results of that local cooperation in their daily lives. This exercise in deliberative democracy can build social trust and restore faith in local governance and the democratic system more generally.

Common Objections to Deliberative Forums Addressed

Are deliberative forums practical? Past deliberative forums reveal that the hurdles to creating these forums are not as high as one might expect, which may alleviate many common concerns about cost, logistics, and function.

- **High costs.** The primary cost associated with deliberative forums is compensation for participants. Citizens, such as jurors and poll workers, are compensated for their participation. The work done by participants in a deliberative forum is just as important. This investment in deliberative forums is a small price to ensure the long-term stability of U.S. democracy. While localities may choose to fund their deliberative forums directly, policymakers may also look to NGOs and nonprofits for funding and other assistance.
- **Recruiting diverse participants.** Participation in a deliberative forum involves a significant time commitment, and many local governments struggle to convince citizens to participate in the advisory boards and committees that already exist. When there are volunteers, they usually come from the same pool of highly engaged citizens. The problem of participation in deliberative forums can be addressed in three ways. First, the assembly should be made as accessible as possible. Childcare should be provided for parents of young children and accommodations for people with disabilities should be available onsite. Second, compensation can boost participation. Finally, participants can be randomly selected. Citizens' assemblies in Northern Ireland and Poland, for example, have successfully implemented random selection software to ensure demographically representative forums.
- **Fostering legitimacy.** Concerns about a deliberative forum's recommendations lacking legitimacy can be addressed by creating a transparent, fair, and representative method for

recruiting participants. Additionally, trained facilitators can give all relevant stakeholders an equal opportunity to speak at the forum and ensure that a balanced group of experts advise the group. Citizen juries have been used in the United States since before its founding to decide court cases with widespread acceptance of their legitimacy.

- **Trusting the people’s competence.** A necessary part of democracy is trusting regular people to make good decisions. Citizens are entrusted with this power whenever they participate in a referendum or serve on a jury. Participants in local deliberative forums are experts in the issues that affect their everyday lives. Expert and stakeholder presentations will supplement participants’ knowledge when deliberation requires special expertise.

Conclusion

Without the introduction of innovative countermeasures, the United States will become even more polarized, empowering foreign disinformation and threatening American democratic institutions and global leadership. Overall, 27 percent of Democrats and 36 percent of Republicans see the opposing party as “so misguided that they threaten the nation’s well-being.” This growing animosity stems from misperceptions that can be resolved through contact and shared deliberation.⁴⁰

Local governments have the opportunity to play an important role in combating affective political polarization by introducing deliberative forums within their communities. These forums will facilitate interpersonal contact between partisans, reducing biases and stereotypes toward members of the outgroup. The fruits of cross-partisan cooperation will be reflected in local change that community members can see in their own lives. Citizens will feel more confident and at ease engaging in political conversations with their former adversaries. Informed deliberation alters the way in which citizens gather information about their opposing partisans—reasoned evaluations are a key component of “good citizenship,” which fosters a group that is more willing to participate in politics with people of all opinions.⁴¹

This initiative cannot be delayed. It will become increasingly difficult for the United States to regain its position once lost and geographic polarization is decreasing the number of politically divided towns where cross-partisan deliberation is possible.⁴² Local policymakers must act now to secure their communities’ futures.

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