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Polarisation and the threat to democracy

The US is suffering under a tyranny of unrepresentative minorities. To safe democracy and fight polarisation majoritarian control is needed

The leaking of a memo indicating that the United States Supreme Court will likely rule that women do not have a constitutional right to abortion has inflamedpolitical divides which are deeper and more dangerous than those facing any other wealthy democracy. As one recent study put it, the US suffers uniquely high 'pernicious polarization' — the division of society into political camps whose defining feature is mutual hatred and fear. Such intense polarisation is associated with a wide range of negative outcomes, including policy gridlock, democratic erosion, and even violence.

Since polarisation threatens many European democracies, thinking about the American case may help those trying to avoid similar developments domestically. To paraphrase Karl Marx, it may be that the country that is more polarised shows to others the image of their own future.

The limits of representation

Perhaps the most obvious cause of damaging polarisation in the US is the translation of the country's deep economic and social cleavages into political ones. Economically, over the past generation or so the US has been characterised by higher income and wealth inequality, allied to lower social mobility, than any other advanced industrial democracy. The 'losers' from these trends — disproportionately low-income, low-education, and non-urban whites — have been incorporated into the Republican party, while globalised capitalism's 'winners' — highly-educated and skilled urban dwellers — increasingly vote Democratic.

Socially, cleavages over race have long been the main challenge facing American democracy. But, again, over the past generation or so these ethnic cleavages have increasingly aligned with political ones, particularly for the Republican party which receives about 80 per cent of its votes

from white citizens. As we know from contemporary developing countries such as Kenya, Lebanon, and Iraq, as well as many cases from Europe's past, when ethnic and political cleavages coincide the results are often deadly. (This trend did diminish somewhat over the past electoral cycle, with the Republican party picking up the support of more conservative Hispanic and even some black voters.)

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True, not all Americans are strong partisans: 40 per cent of US voters identify as independents. In addition, even on a variety of 'hot button' issues, such as abortion or gun control, voters express significant agreement, despite the Republican and Democratic parties offering dramatically different approaches. Perhaps as a result, 60 per cent of American voters believe both 'parties do a poor job of representing the American people'.

Election without a majority

Yet here lies another crucial part of the polarisation puzzle. Although treatments of democratic backsliding often focus on the dangers of unrestrained majoritarianism, the pernicious polarisation that threatens democracy in America stems not from a tyranny of the majority but rather a tyranny of minorities. The polarising and destructive influence unrepresentative and even extreme minorities exert on US political parties — and through these parties on American democracy more generally — relate to important but not innate institutional features of the political system.

Partisan gerrymandering, for example, has created a growing number of seats in Congress reliably won by one party. Such safe seats give politicians little incentive to appeal to wavering voters, much less those outside their party. Indeed, according to a recent report, extreme gerrymandering has contributed to a situation where 83 per cent of seats 'lean so Democratic or so Republican … that the only election of consequence is the primary election'.

Primaries are another key contributor to the minoritarian bias of American parties. Only a minority of voters — neither demographically nor ideologically representative of their own party's voters or the electorate more generally — vote in party primaries, giving such devoted partisans a disproportionate influence over who runs for office. Making matters worse, primaries are often won by candidates who secure only a plurality rather than a majority of votes cast and 'low plurality members

score about a third more ideologically intense … than majority-backed members, controlling for the partisan position of members' districts'.

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All of this, of course, is made worse by the role played by money in American politics. For example, in the decade since the *Citizens United* Supreme Court ruling — that freedom of speech implied corporations had the same rights as individuals to finance campaigns — more money has flowed directly to candidates, rather than via an organised national party, facilitating the election of extremists who would not otherwise have been nominated. 'Social media' have probably also contributed, allowing candidates to bypass parties and get their message directly to voters.

The cumulative result of these factors is, as one study concluded, a system where 'a small minority of Americans decide the significant majority of our elections'. The primary and electoral system 'disenfranchises voters, distorts representation, and fuels extremism –– on both the left and, most acutely (at present), the right'. This probably explains, another observer notes, 'the stunning incongruity between Congress's average 20 percent approval rating and its more than 90 percent reelection rate'.

Easy and difficult solutions

What can be done? Majoritarian control over America's parties needs to be re-established. That unrepresentative and often extreme candidates who appeal to only a minority of even their own party's voters are often chosen to run for office and then, by virtue of uncompetitive districts or reliably Democratic or Republican states, win elections, fuels the polarisation and dissatisfaction threatening American democracy today.

Some factors promoting minority power in the US are hard to fix — such as the Senate, which is probably the most 'undemocratic' legislative body in the democratic world, 'giving small states, like Wyoming exactly as many Senators as large states, like California, even though California has more than 68 times as many people as Wyoming'.

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Others could however be more easily changed. Candidates should not be able to win elections without the support of a majority (in the case of presidential elections, think of the recent French contest). Rank-choice voting, which

disproportionate influence over particularly the Republicans but also the Democratic party.

ensures majority winners and provides strong incentives for candidates to appeal to more than a narrow slice of the electorate, should be instituted. Primaries should be reformed so as to diminish the chances that extreme (and minoritarian) candidates are chosen ('top four primaries' are a suggested solution).

Regardless, the lesson of the American case is clear. A variety of factors have contributed to a situation where unrepresentative, extreme minorities exert disproportionate influence over particularly the Republicans but also the Democratic party, fuelling pernicious polarisation and growing frustration within the electorate. Citizens of other countries looking to avoid such a serious downward spiral should take note: while unconstrained majorities are certainly dangerous, overly powerful minorities also present a clear and present danger to democracy.

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