

The emergence and perils of polarization

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We can't understand polarization unless we analyze it as a complex system, argue SFI External Professor Scott Page (University of Michigan) and co-author Delia Baldassarri in a commentary for a special feature on the dynamics of political polarization in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

Polarization occurs both in ideology (beliefs about the world and

appropriate policies) and emotion (distrust and disconnection between the groups), and it is the [feedback loops](#) between these two types of [polarization](#) that make it such a difficult problem to solve. Positive [feedback](#) loops—where divergence creates more divergence—build polarization in the first place; negative feedback loops stifle attempts to build bridges across groups.

Different models of polarization highlighted in the special feature shed light on particular aspects driving it. One model assumes that people become more like those who agree and diverge from those who disagree. That simple force transforms an ordinary array of varying opinions into two camps. A second [model](#) highlights the role that technology plays in enabling this movement, making it easier to link with those with similar views and to avoid those who disagree. And a third views polarization as a result of the overwhelming complexity and multidimensionality of the issues voters face: Incapable of deciding issue by issue, citizens look to elites and [political leaders](#) to simplify, and party leaders have incentives to build loyal, ideologically clustered networks of supporters.

Getting out of our polarized state, which according to some models will demand more effort than was required to get into it, will hinge on a deep understanding of the multiple forces that got us where we are now. The different theoretical explanations these models provide offer a start on that.

More information: Delia Baldassarri et al, The emergence and perils of polarization, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2021). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2116863118](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2116863118)

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