

# Polarization, diversity, and democratic robustness

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Polarization is dangerous for democracy. Though the U.S. Constitution was designed to harness rivalry with a diverse, redundant, and modular set of institutions, if that rivalry curdles into the belief that your competitors are your enemies, those institutions may not be strong enough to hold a nation together.

In a Perspective piece in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, SFI External Professor Jenna Bednar (University of Michigan) argues that polarization poses three perils in particular.

The first problem is that people tend to gather with those who think similarly and avoid those who think differently, accentuating a distaste for those who differ. Second, [elites](#) can manipulate the public through fear, persuading their followers that others pose an [existential threat](#)—and then that fear can feed on itself, beyond all control. And third—and most dangerous, Bednar argues—is that the positions of the population become simplified, with less room for individual variation in beliefs. This can happen, for example, when each group polices the beliefs of its members and punishes those who don't conform with the established party line. This creates a loss of diversity in opinions that imperils democracy just as species diversity loss imperils ecosystems.

**More information:** Jenna Bednar, Polarization, diversity, and democratic robustness, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2021). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2113843118](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2113843118)

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