

# Affective Polarization and Social Media: Theories, Models, and Contemporary Dynamics

Cintya Yadira Vera-Revilla<sup>1\*</sup>, Ricardo Enrique Grundy-López<sup>2</sup>, Gerardo Zegarra-Florez<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Social Communication, Catholic University of Santa María, Arequipa, Peru; cvera@ucsm.edu.pe

<sup>2,3</sup>School of Political Science and Government, Catholic University of Santa María, Arequipa, Peru.

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**Abstract.** This article examines the phenomenon of affective polarization in the contemporary context, emphasizing the role of social media in its configuration and expansion. Through a theoretical and empirical review, affective polarization is distinguished from ideological polarization, highlighting its roots in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and its intensification through dynamics such as partisan sorting and the formation of mega-identities (Mason, 2018). The study explores how digital platforms—through echo chambers, filter bubbles, and personalization algorithms—reinforce selective exposure, foster emotional radicalization, and intensify out-group hostility. Models such as opinion dynamics (Törnberg, 2022) and concepts like motivated reasoning (Taber & Lodge, 2006) help explain the deepening of social fragmentation. The democratic consequences of this phenomenon are also addressed, including the weakening of civic debate, political radicalization, and democratic backsliding. Finally, the article underscores the need for future research and political interventions that promote digital literacy, regulate platform algorithms, and foster unifying communication strategies, with the goal of strengthening democratic cohesion and addressing the challenges posed by the intensification of affective polarization in the digital age.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Affective polarization has emerged as one of the most relevant frameworks for understanding the intensification of contemporary political divisions. Unlike ideological polarization—which refers to the distancing of individuals along the left–right ideological spectrum (Iyengar et al., 2019)—affective polarization refers to the growing aversion and distrust toward members of the opposing political party (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). As these authors point out, affective polarization "emerges from the observation that opposing partisans have come to 'dislike and even hate' each other." The theoretical roots of this phenomenon lie in Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), which posits that individuals categorize others into in-groups and out-groups, generating positive affect toward the former and negative affect toward the latter. This natural tendency to favor one's own group becomes amplified in highly polarized political contexts, where divisions extend beyond ideological disagreements to encompass emotional and cultural differences.

The process of partisan sorting significantly contributes to the configuration of this phenomenon. According to Mason (2018), political, cultural, and social identities tend to align under partisan labels, giving rise to "mega-identities" that deepen the emotional distance between groups. This alignment not only reinforces political differences but often extends to realms such as cultural consumption and lifestyle choices (DellaPosta, 2020), contributing to an increasingly segmented society. Similarly, the contemporary media environment—particularly social media—has accelerated dynamics such as the formation of echo chambers (Sunstein, 2001), where users are primarily exposed to perspectives similar to their own, reinforcing preexisting beliefs. This phenomenon can be explained through the Selective Exposure Hypothesis, which holds that individuals tend to avoid information that contradicts their convictions and instead prefer content that confirms them (Sunstein, 2001).

In addition, studies on opinion dynamics have modeled how, through complex social interactions, small local changes can escalate into global patterns of polarization (Törnberg, 2022; Axelrod, 1997). These approaches have shown that social fragmentation does not arise solely from exclusive exposure to similar ideas, but also through mechanisms of selective information processing (Prior, 2013) and backfire effects, where counterarguments further strengthen initial beliefs (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Thus, affective polarization should not be understood merely as the inevitable consequence of political disagreement, but as a socially amplified process that erodes social cohesion. As Coser (1956) warned, a stable society requires multiple and cross-cutting conflicts to prevent a single division from absorbing all social differences. When political divisions monopolize conflicts, democratic cooperation weakens, increasing the risk of institutional instability.

Today, digital social media platforms function not only as spaces for interpersonal interaction but also as key arenas for the formation, reproduction, and transformation of political identities. Several studies have noted that the specific dynamics of social media—such as echo chambers (Sunstein, 2001) and filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011)—intensify selective exposure and foster affective polarization. Through personalized algorithms and mechanisms of social affinity (homophily), users tend to be exposed to ideologically similar content, limiting contact with divergent views (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). This tendency is exacerbated by the intensive use of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok—especially among adolescents and young adults—where negative emotions toward the political "other" are reinforced through patterns of interaction, content virality, and public confrontation (Bail et al., 2018; Yarchi, Baden, & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2020). These platforms, through their specific affordances (Nagy & Neff, 2015), facilitate both connection and political segregation, shaping user behavior based on their technological design and the surrounding sociopolitical dynamics.

The relevance of this study lies in analyzing how the contemporary media ecosystem—dominated by social networks—not only reproduces ideological divisions but also promotes the affective dimension of polarization. As Iyengar and Westwood (2015)

argue, the rise of affective polarization cannot be understood without considering changes in patterns of information exposure and politically mediated interaction via digital platforms. In fact, recent research shows that social media can simultaneously expose users to a greater diversity of content and, paradoxically, reinforce hostile attitudes toward opposing groups through mechanisms of motivated reasoning and selective processing (Taber & Lodge, 2006; Bail et al., 2018). Understanding the dynamics of affective polarization in the context of social media is therefore essential for assessing the challenges facing contemporary democracy, where phenomena such as political radicalization (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016), the weakening of civic debate (Baek et al., 2012; Kruse et al., 2018), and democratic backsliding (McCoy & Somer, 2018) find fertile ground in the digital environment.

The present article aims to critically analyze the relationship between affective polarization and the use of social media, exploring the theories, models, and contemporary dynamics that explain its emergence and expansion. Through a rigorous conceptual review, it seeks to understand how digital platforms act as catalysts for the intensification of emotional divides between political groups, through phenomena such as echo chambers (Sunstein, 2001), filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011), and selective exposure processes (Prior, 2013). Additionally, it examines the role of social identity dynamics (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and the formation of partisan mega-identities (Mason, 2018) in shaping feelings of in-group favoritism and out-group aversion. In doing so, the article seeks to contribute to the academic debate on the risks affective polarization poses to social cohesion and democratic stability in the digital age, providing a theoretical and empirical framework for future research and intervention in this field.

## 2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

### 2.1. Affective Polarization

The concept of affective polarization has evolved over the past two decades as a central category for understanding emotional changes in political behavior within contemporary democracies. Initially developed by Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012), this approach proposes that polarization should no longer be understood solely as an ideological divergence along the left–right axis, but rather as a growing emotional hostility between supporters of different political groups. According to these authors, affective polarization “emerges from the observation that opposing partisans have come to ‘dislike and even hate’ each other.” Along these lines, Iyengar and Westwood (2015) expanded this idea by showing how distrust toward political out-groups is accompanied by positive feelings toward political in-groups, generating a dual emotional pattern of affinity toward one’s own group and rejection of political adversaries.

Through multiple reformulations, the concept has been defined as an “emotional distance” that separates not only beliefs but also political and social identities (Iyengar et al., 2012; 2019). Mason (2013, 2018) provided a complementary perspective by emphasizing that this affective distance is related to a process of partisan sorting, in which social, religious, cultural, and racial identities tend to align with partisan affiliations, forming what she terms “political mega-identities.” This process intensifies the perception of threat and differentiation between political camps.

From an empirical perspective, Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe (2015) documented that this form of polarization also translates into intense emotional reactions, with voters describing members of the opposing party in increasingly negative and cold terms. In subsequent studies, Iyengar and Krupenkin (2018) reinforced this notion by stating that affective polarization not only generates rejection of political opponents but also exacerbates loyalty to one’s own group, thereby intensifying political tribalism. Druckman and Levendusky (2019) further refined these contributions by arguing that affective polarization entails growing distrust toward politically defined out-groups, which has serious consequences for democratic deliberation, voting behavior, and the perceived legitimacy of institutions.

Affective polarization has moved from being an emerging phenomenon observed in opinion surveys to becoming a key analytical category for explaining the links between identity, emotion, and politics in an age of social polarization. Its development has been strongly influenced by the work of Iyengar et al., but has also been enriched by theoretical and empirical contributions from scholars such as Mason, Huddy, Druckman, and Levendusky, who have demonstrated that this type of polarization extends beyond ideological preferences and manifests in feelings of hostility, tribalism, and erosion of democratic trust.

### 2.2. Social Identity Theory, Political Identity Formation via Social Media, and Mega-Identities

Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), is one of the primary theoretical frameworks for understanding polarization in contemporary political contexts. This theory posits that individuals possess not only a personal identity but also a social identity, constructed through membership in various social groups. This identity serves cognitive and emotional functions, allowing individuals to organize their social environment and position themselves within it.

Within this framework, people tend to categorize themselves and others into social groups—referred to as in-groups and out-groups—based on attributes that are often minimal or even trivial. As Tajfel and Turner (1979) note, “humans quickly develop distinctions between in-groups and out-groups based on minimal characteristics.” This categorization leads to an automatic tendency to favor one’s in-group (producing positive emotions such as trust, pride, or solidarity) and simultaneously reject or distrust out-groups, fostering attitudes of dislike or even hostility.

This mechanism, aimed at preserving a positive image of the group with which one identifies, has significant implications in contexts of political conflict. As the authors point out, group identity shapes perception and judgment, and can intensify to the point of structuring how individuals experience politics, turning ideological disagreements into affective rejection of the opposing group.

In this sense, Social Identity Theory provides a solid foundation for analyzing the phenomenon of affective polarization, understood as the intensification of positive feelings toward one’s own political group and negative feelings toward opponents. Various studies have emphasized that this form of emotional polarization is rooted in identity processes rather than rational disagreements over public policies or party platforms (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

This phenomenon is particularly intensified by the intensive use of social media, especially among adolescents and young adults. In fact, the concept of Political Identity Formation via social media helps explain how the digital ecosystem accelerates the early development of partisan identities. As Törnberg et al. (2021) and Mason (2018) suggest, “social media accelerates the formation of political identities among adolescents”. Continuous exposure to ideological discourse, affiliation with virtual political communities, and interaction with emotionally charged content reinforce identification with certain political groups and deepen

emotional divides with others.

In the same vein, Mason (2018) introduces the concept of mega-identities to describe the merging of various social identities—such as those based on race, religion, social class, or gender—into a single partisan axis that sharply divides society. According to Mason, “partisan identities tend to absorb unrelated divisions, forming mega-identities” (Mason, 2018). This phenomenon increases the intensity of polarization, as political disagreements cease to be about specific policy differences and instead become total confrontations between ways of life, values, and core identities.

Thus, Social Identity Theory, in dialogue with studies on digital networks, political identity formation, and the emergence of mega-identities, provides a comprehensive theoretical framework to explain how partisan loyalties are shaped, how political emotions are radicalized, and how polarization deepens in contemporary democratic societies.

### 2.3. Psychosocial Foundations of Affective Polarization: Groups, Contact, and Information

Understanding affective polarization cannot be limited solely to the analysis of contemporary political dynamics; it must be rooted in fundamental psychological and social processes that shape how individuals perceive and relate to others. Among the key concepts that explain its emergence and consolidation are the Minimal Group Paradigm, Contact Theory, Selective Exposure, Motivated Reasoning, and Identity-Protective Cognition.

The Minimal Group Paradigm, developed by Tajfel et al. (1971), revealed that even minimal or arbitrary differences between individuals are enough to elicit strong feelings of loyalty toward the in-group and discriminatory attitudes toward the out-group. The authors showed that even small shared similarities are sufficient to activate social identity mechanisms and generate polarization. This innate inclination to establish social divisions helps explain why, in the political sphere, citizens can experience intense emotions of hostility toward members of opposing parties, even in the absence of profound ideological differences.

On the other hand, Allport's (1954) Contact Theory argues that interactions between different groups have the potential to reduce prejudice and soften social barriers, as long as certain conditions are met—such as equal status, shared goals, cooperation, and institutional support. This perspective suggests that appropriate interaction between supporters of different parties could reduce affective polarization. However, the current digital ecosystem—dominated by echo chambers and filter bubbles—limits opportunities for constructive contact, hindering the mitigation of intergroup hostility.

Additionally, the phenomena of Selective Exposure and Motivated Reasoning, initially proposed by Festinger (1954) and later expanded by Taber and Lodge (2006), indicate that individuals tend to seek out information that confirms their preexisting beliefs and simultaneously justify the rejection of dissonant information. According to these authors, this cognitive predisposition leads users to reinforce prior opinions while avoiding exposure to divergent perspectives. In the context of affective polarization, this biased information processing not only intensifies ideological alignment but also amplifies negative emotional responses toward political opponents.

More specifically, Motivated Reasoning, as defined by Taber and Lodge (2006), describes how people process information in a biased manner to protect their political identities and core beliefs. Rather than modifying their views in the face of contradictory evidence, polarized individuals often reinterpret data in ways that strengthen their original positions, further deepening emotional distance between political groups.

Finally, the concept of Identity-Protective Cognition, formulated by Kahan (2017), posits that individuals tend to resist or filter information that threatens their group-based attachments. From this perspective, people avoid accepting dissonant information not only to defend their opinions but also to preserve their emotional bond with their reference political group, thereby avoiding internal conflicts and social ruptures.

Taken together, these concepts make clear that affective polarization is not merely a rational disagreement over political positions, but a phenomenon rooted in basic mechanisms of social categorization, cognitive bias, and emotional defense of group identity. Recognizing and analyzing these processes is essential to addressing the challenges that affective polarization poses to democratic cohesion today, and to designing strategies that promote more open and inclusive political deliberation.

## 3. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DIGITAL MEDIA AND POLARIZATION

The intensification of affective polarization in the contemporary context cannot be fully understood without analyzing the decisive role played by digital media. A complex network of theories and concepts helps explain how digital platforms act as catalysts for increasingly deep emotional divisions between political groups.

One of the most fundamental conceptual frameworks is the Selective Exposure Hypothesis, formulated by Sunstein (2001). This hypothesis asserts that users tend to seek information that confirms their preexisting beliefs while avoiding content that may contradict them. This tendency is not neutral: by avoiding cognitive dissonance, individuals reinforce their opinions and consolidate their group identity. As a result, digital media become environments that reinforce homogeneous worldviews, facilitating the formation of echo chambers, where dialogue with opposing perspectives is drastically reduced (Sunstein, 2001; Pariser, 2011).

The echo chamber phenomenon is amplified by homophily, or the preference for interacting with people who share similar characteristics or beliefs, as noted by McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook (2001). This natural inclination toward similarity not only strengthens internal group cohesion but also exacerbates emotional and cognitive differences toward out-groups, intensifying feelings of hostility and distrust.

This effect is further compounded by the concept of filter bubbles, proposed by Pariser (2011). In this case, it is not only a matter of conscious preference that limits exposure to alternative perspectives, but also the algorithmic design of the platforms. Algorithms personalize the information presented to users, favoring content aligned with their interests and prior convictions while significantly reducing exposure to divergent viewpoints (Pariser, 2011; Bakshy et al., 2015). Thus, ideological isolation is not only self-imposed but also technologically facilitated.

These dynamics have profound effects on information processing. According to Prior (2013), the phenomenon of Selective Processing implies that new information is interpreted through the filter of existing beliefs. In this way, even when individuals are exposed to counterarguments, their political identity leads them to dismiss these perspectives, reinforcing their initial opinions. This resistance to cognitive change is confirmed by the Negative Influence Model or Backfire Effect, proposed by Nyhan and Reifler (2010), which describes how exposure to opposing arguments can paradoxically strengthen one's original stance.

Moreover, the phenomenon of Radicalization through Media, documented by Levendusky and Malhotra (2016) and Chan, Cassius, and Fu (2019), describes how repeated exposure to ideologically homogeneous—and often extremist—content fosters categorical rejection of the political “other.” Additional research by Hong and Kim (2016) and Rathje et al. (2021) shows that

extremist content tends to spread more widely on social networks, amplifying both affective and social radicalization.

This phenomenon is closely related to Identity-Driven Polarization, proposed by Achen and Bartels (2016) and further developed by Mason (2018), who argue that today, political differences are no longer primarily structured around ideological issues, but around rigid group identities. Political party affiliation becomes a core marker of personal identity, increasing affinity for the in-group and contempt for the out-group.

The interaction environment provided by social media also significantly contributes to the intensification of these dynamics. Research by Baek et al. (2012) and Kruse et al. (2018) describes a Toxic Social Media Environment, characterized by incivility, constant provocation, and ad hominem attacks. This environment not only prevents respectful dialogue across differences but also solidifies a pattern of continuous emotional confrontation.

In parallel, the concept of Social Media Affordances, developed by Nagy and Neff (2015), describes how the technical properties of platforms—such as the ease of creating closed groups, algorithmic personalization, and content recommendation mechanisms—shape user interaction. These affordances are not neutral: they promote ideological homogeneity and reinforce social segmentation, thereby facilitating affective polarization.

Although social media offer opportunities for political participation, their impact is not linear. According to Boulianne (2019, 2020) and Zhu et al. (2017), using social media for political information can enhance engagement and interest in politics, but at the same time, it can reduce satisfaction with democracy due to the polarized environment that often dominates these spaces.

In line with this, it has also been found that political exposure on social media increases civic interest among adolescents and young adults (Holt et al., 2013; Bode et al., 2014; Kahne & Bowyer, 2018). However, such participation may lead to affective polarization when it occurs within ideologically homogeneous contexts. As the Participatory Theory of Mass Communication (Carpentier, 2011, 2016) suggests, digital media have displaced the traditional one-way communication model, allowing users not only to consume but also to produce and exchange content, further reinforcing ideological bubbles.

Finally, the type of social media platform also plays a significant role: while platforms based on strong ties, such as Facebook and Instagram, tend to foster homogeneous and closed environments, networks based on weak ties, such as Twitter and TikTok, expose users to a broader diversity of perspectives—though also to a higher risk of emotional conflict (Yarchi et al., 2021; Settle, 2018).

Taken together, these dynamics show that affective polarization in the digital environment is neither accidental nor spontaneous. It is the result of structured interaction among cognitive predispositions, technological dynamics, algorithmic biases, and social behavior patterns. Understanding these relationships is crucial for designing strategies that can mitigate polarization and strengthen democratic cohesion in the digital age.

#### 4. MODELS OF POLARIZATION IN DIGITAL MEDIA

Models of affective polarization in the digital age help to demonstrate that this phenomenon is not an isolated occurrence, but rather the result of a complex interaction among cognitive mechanisms, social dynamics, and media structures (Table 1). Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing effective interventions that safeguard democratic deliberation and promote social cohesion in times of increasing fragmentation.

Table 1: Models and concepts on affective polarization.

Model/Concept	Author(s)	Year	Strengths	Limitations
Cultural dissemination model	Axelrod	1997	Explains how diversity can emerge from similarity; provides visualization of enduring cultural fragmentations.	Assumes symmetry in interactions; does not reflect real-world hierarchies and asymmetries.
Opinion dynamics	Flache & Macy; Banisch & Olbrich; Törnberg	2006– 2022	Simulates global patterns of social polarization using quantitative models.	Overly simplifies individual processes of perception and motivation.
Discursive argumentation	Mercier & Sperber	2011	Explains reasoning as a means to defend positions rather than seek truth.	Does not clearly define the conditions under which opinion change may occur.
Media diet	Lu & Lee; Padró-Solanet & Balcells; Guess	2019– 2022	Emphasizes the importance of informational pluralism in digital environments.	Methodological difficulty in measuring true individual media diversity.
Affective polarization beyond partisan politics	Suarez Estrada, Juárez & Piña-García	2022	Expands the concept of polarization to non-partisan social domains; highlights new emotional dynamics.	Lacks robust empirical models for measurement.
Media-induced meta-perception model	Overgaard	2024	Introduces a mediating mechanism between media consumption and emotional polarization.	Requires further empirical validation across cultural contexts.
Divisive and unifying media content	Huddy & Yair; Wojcieszak & Warner	2020– 2021	Identifies communication strategies to reduce or increase polarization.	Selective exposure limits the impact of conciliatory messages.

Axelrod's (1997) Cultural Dissemination Model represents one of the earliest computational attempts to understand how differentiated local cultures can emerge from interactions among similar individuals. Axelrod demonstrated that even minor differences can be amplified in contexts of positive influence, leading to long-lasting cultural fragmentation. The model's main strength lies in its ability to illustrate how diversity can emerge from similarity; however, its main limitation is the assumption of symmetrical social interactions, which rarely hold in real-world environments characterized by hierarchies and power asymmetries.

Subsequently, the field of Opinion Dynamics has evolved into a broader area within complex systems research, analyzing how local interactions among individuals affect the evolution of collective opinions (Flache & Macy, 2006; Banisch & Olbrich, 2019). As Törnberg (2022) highlights, these models allow for the simulation and prediction of social polarization patterns. Their key strength lies in quantitative modeling capacity; however, their principal weakness remains the excessive simplification of individual processes of perception, cognition, and motivation.

The concept of Discursive Argumentation, developed by Mercier and Sperber (2011), adds a crucial cognitive dimension to the study of polarization. According to these authors, human reasoning functions primarily as a rhetorical tool aimed at persuading and defending one's positions rather than seeking objective truth. Consequently, when individuals are confronted with opposing



information, they often strengthen their existing views instead of reconsidering them. The strength of this theory lies in showing that discursive exchanges do not necessarily promote rational deliberation. Its limitation, however, is its lack of clarity regarding the specific conditions under which debate might actually lead to opinion change.

The analysis of Media Diet has also become a key approach to understanding contemporary affective polarization. Researchers such as Lu and Lee (2019), Padró-Solanet and Balcells (2022), and Guess et al. (2018) have shown that low ideological diversity in media consumption fosters emotional radicalization and reinforces partisan identities. The value of this concept lies in emphasizing the importance of informational pluralism; nevertheless, it faces the methodological challenge of accurately measuring the actual diversity of the media environments to which individuals are exposed—especially within highly personalized digital platforms.

More recently, the understanding of Affective Polarization Beyond Partisan Politics has expanded thanks to the work of Suarez Estrada, Juarez, and Piña-García (2022), who argue that emotional divisions are not confined solely to the domain of political parties, but also shape other forms of social participation, such as feminist movements. This perspective highlights that affective hostility may be directed at any actor challenging power structures, thus broadening the traditional concept of polarization. A key strength of this proposal is its ability to make visible emotional dynamics beyond partisan frameworks; its main limitation, however, lies in the lack of robust empirical models developed to rigorously measure this conceptual expansion.

A significant advancement in the study of affective polarization is the Media-Induced Meta-Perceptions Model, proposed by Overgaard (2024). This model suggests that exposure to media content—whether divisive or unifying—shapes individuals' perceptions of how opposing groups see them. In this sense, media not only inform but also mold the emotional structure of intergroup relations. Its main strength lies in introducing a psychological mediating mechanism between media consumption and emotional polarization. However, its limitation is the need for further empirical validation across diverse cultural contexts.

Finally, the concept of Divisive and Unifying Media Content, developed by Huddy and Yair (2021) and Wojcieszak and Warner (2020), explores the types of messages that either exacerbate or mitigate affective divisions. While divisive content amplifies antagonism, unifying messages have the potential to reduce intergroup hostility. The value of this conceptualization lies in its practical applicability for designing communication strategies that promote social cohesion. However, a significant limitation is that, due to selective exposure, many users tend to avoid or dismiss conciliatory messages that contradict their prior beliefs.

## 5. NEW PERSPECTIVES: BEYOND PARTISAN POLARIZATION

Contemporary understandings of affective polarization have expanded beyond traditional partisan divisions to include other forms of social disciplining, as proposed by Suarez Estrada, Juarez, and Piña-García (2022). These authors introduce the concept of affective polarization beyond partisan politics to analyze how hostile emotions operate not only between political parties but also regulate women's political participation, limiting their modes of action and public expression. This conceptual expansion reveals that emotional dynamics can be used as instruments of social control against transformative movements such as feminism, beyond traditional electoral frameworks.

This phenomenon is better understood through the lens of affective politics, which considers emotions as technologies of governance (Jupp et al., 2016; Ahmed, 2014; Savigny, 2020). According to these approaches, emotions such as fear, shame, or anger are not individual or spontaneous but socially organized to shape behavior and reinforce normative orders, particularly those related to gender. Ahmed (2014) and Bargetz (2015) argue that affects structure collective social orders and reinforce patterns of subordination. In this way, affects not only reflect social structures but also sustain and perpetuate them.

In the context of digital media, this logic of affective governance translates into toxic digital violence. As documented by Ananías Soto and Sánchez Vergara (2019), and Gallacher et al. (2021), social media have become spaces where symbolic violence and explicit threats are deployed against politically mobilized women. Suarez Estrada et al. (2022) point out that feminist protests are targeted by disciplinary discourses that seek to emotionally subjugate activists through humiliation, hatred, and fear, thereby reinforcing their marginalization in public space. This violence aims not only to silence but also to create emotional climates of delegitimization and isolation.

A key mechanism in this dynamic is anti-feminist discourse via social media, conceptualized by Åhäll (2018) and Ahmed (2014). These digital discourses reinforce traditional gender stereotypes and promote affective divisions rooted in hatred and shame. Åhäll (2018) explains that this type of discourse organizes a binary affective field of “us” versus “them,” in which feminists are constructed as a moral and social threat. Anti-feminist discourse thus not only discredits demands for equality but also mobilizes emotional responses against any form of gender dissent.

The notion of polarization as an affective governance strategy, proposed by Reckwitz (2016) and further developed in this context by Suarez Estrada et al. (2022), integrates these elements into a broader model: deliberate emotional polarization is used to affectively discipline mobilized collectives. Through the creation of collective affective regimes, specific emotions are prescribed as legitimate (e.g., shame, fear, obedience), while others must be suppressed (e.g., anger, solidarity, hope), particularly among protesting women. This strategy promotes political demobilization and the reproduction of traditional social hierarchies.

In response to this machinery of emotional disciplining, the framework of feminist affective politics, developed by Hemmings (2012), Pedwell and Whitehead (2012), and Savigny (2020), emerges as a counterforce. This approach highlights how emotions can also serve as tools of resistance and social transformation. Through the conscious mobilization of affects such as solidarity, hope, and anger, feminist movements challenge imposed emotional dichotomies and work to transform unjust social orders. Rather than passively accepting prescribed emotions, feminist affective politics turn emotion into a creative and liberatory political force.

Together, these concepts reveal that affective polarization in the digital environment not only fragments traditional partisan political actors but also operates as an emotional governance apparatus against emancipatory movements. Digital violence, anti-feminist discourse, and disciplinary affective regimes illustrate the deeply emotional dimension of contemporary social control. However, they also open spaces for new forms of resistance that, through the politicization of emotion, strive for a more inclusive and affectively just democracy.

## 6. CONSEQUENCES OF AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

Affective polarization, understood as the emotional distancing between political groups, is neither an isolated nor circumstantial phenomenon. Rather, it is the result of a complex web of cognitive mechanisms, social dynamics, and media structures. One of its primary consequences is partisan sorting, a process described by Mason (2018) and Levendusky (2009),

in which social, cultural, and political differences align under partisan identities, forming homogeneous "megaparties" that not only reinforce in-group identity but also deepen perceptions of the out-group's illegitimacy. This process is further expanded by the Oil Spill Model of Polarization, proposed by DellaPosta (2020), which explains how partisan identity spills beyond the traditional political sphere, permeating everyday aspects such as consumer habits and cultural preferences. In this way, polarization becomes an omnipresent phenomenon that shapes entire social identities.

Coser's (1956) Theory of Social Cohesion and Cross-Cutting Cleavages warns that social stability depends on the existence of multiple, non-aligned conflicts. However, when the only relevant dividing line is partisan, social cohesion breaks down, fostering environments where understanding and cooperation become increasingly difficult. While recent studies, such as those by Guess, Nyhan, Lyons, and Reifler (2018), question the extent to which social media isolate users in echo chambers, other research emphasizes that algorithms and filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011) reinforce selective exposure and promote ideological homogenization, thus increasing affective polarization.

Populism also acts as a catalyst in this process. From the Ideational Approach to Populism (Hawkins, 2009; Mudde, 2004), populism presents a moralized conflict between a "pure people" and a "corrupt elite," fueling narratives of people-centrism and anti-elitism (Mudde, 2004; Hawkins et al., 2019) that radicalize perceptions of political adversaries. These narratives are far from neutral—they are adaptive (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013)—and construct an affective imaginary grounded not only in political ideas but also in emotions of belonging and exclusion. Negative Affective Polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012, 2019; Druckman & Levendusky, 2019) reinforces this pattern, manifesting in feelings of distrust, contempt, and even hatred toward the opposing group, while populist storytelling strategies (Nordensvard & Ketola, 2022) further amplify these emotions through moralized narratives.

Political Narrative Theory (Polletta et al., 2011) and the concept of Sensemaking through Storytelling (Bruner, 1991; Nordensvard & Ketola, 2022) help explain how such narratives organize and simplify complex social experiences, creating interpretive frameworks that exacerbate affective polarization. At the same time, populism functions as a performative act (Laclau, 2005), not merely describing realities but creating new social divisions through emotionally charged discourse filled with anger, fear, and resentment. Additionally, negative campaign rhetoric employed by political elites (Druckman et al., 2021; Gentzkow et al., 2019) has proven to be a powerful tool for increasing affective polarization among citizens.

From the perspective of social psychology, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains that people tend to categorize themselves as "us" (in-group) versus "them" (out-group), fostering favoritism and rejection that intensify in highly polarized contexts. Social sorting (Mason, 2018; Torcal, 2023) further accentuates this divide, merging racial, religious, cultural, and political identities under partisan labels, thereby weakening intergroup social ties and reinforcing confrontation dynamics.

While ideological and affective polarization are distinct, they intertwine in complex ways, as noted by Rogowski and Sutherland (2016) and Torcal (2021). Ideological polarization refers to differences in political positions, whereas affective polarization is based on emotions, creating contexts in which mere affiliation with the opposing group elicits rejection, regardless of ideological content. Affective polarization measurement tools (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019), such as feeling thermometers and trait evaluations, highlight the deepening of this emotional divide.

Although some studies on affective depolarization (Druckman et al., 2019; Beam et al., 2018) propose strategies to reduce hostility, the current media environment—dominated by personalization and selective exposure logics (Iyengar et al., 2009; Kelly Garrett et al., 2014)—undermines such efforts. Social media, despite their potential to enhance political participation (Boulianne, 2019, 2020), reinforce radicalization dynamics (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015), fostering adversarial environments as seen in phenomena like trench warfare dynamics (Karlsen et al., 2017).

In this context, affective polarization contributes directly to democratic backsliding (McCoy & Somer, 2018), eroding the commitment, consensus, and tolerance essential to democratic stability. Through processes such as social media radicalization, polarized media consumption (Prior, 2013; Levendusky, 2013), the spread of disinformation (Del Vicario et al., 2017), social fragmentation (Settle, 2018), and ideological extremism (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016), affective polarization threatens to undermine the very foundations of contemporary democratic coexistence.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

This article confirms that the impact of social media on the configuration of affective polarization has been both profound and multifaceted. Digital platforms not only act as catalysts for traditional ideological divisions but also intensify emotions of hostility, distrust, and aversion toward opposing political groups. Through dynamics such as the formation of echo chambers (Sunstein, 2001), filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011), homophily (McPherson et al., 2001), and selective exposure to extremist content (Hong & Kim, 2016; Rathje et al., 2021), social media shape increasingly homogeneous and emotionally charged interaction environments. The radicalization of political identities—accentuated by phenomena such as the creation of mega-identities (Mason, 2018) and motivated reasoning (Taber & Lodge, 2006)—reflects how the technological design of these platforms facilitates and reinforces affective polarization in unprecedented ways.

The democratic and social implications of this intensification are profound and alarming. Affective polarization weakens the very foundations of democratic coexistence by diminishing tolerance for dissent, eroding institutional trust, and undermining the possibility of rational public deliberation (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Druckman & Levendusky, 2019). It also fosters political radicalization (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016), increases social fragmentation (Settle, 2018), and contributes to the broader phenomenon of democratic backsliding (McCoy & Somer, 2018). At the societal level, emotional segregation processes affect not only voting behavior but also the social fabric as a whole, deepening cultural, ethnic, and class divisions that hinder cooperation and the consensus essential to a healthy democratic society.

In light of this scenario, it is imperative that future research continues to investigate the specific mechanisms through which digital platforms amplify affective polarization, with particular attention to contextual and cultural differences. More empirical studies are needed to explore effective interventions, such as meta-perception correction strategies (Lees & Cikara, 2020) or the promotion of unifying content (Huddy & Yair, 2021). Moreover, from a public policy perspective, it is urgent to design regulations that promote informational pluralism, limit the spread of extremist content, and encourage more transparent and responsible algorithmic design. Finally, it is crucial to foster digital and emotional literacy programs that strengthen citizens' critical capacities to resist polarizing dynamics and actively contribute to rebuilding a more inclusive, deliberative, and democratic public sphere.

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