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Political polarization and corruption:  
A theoretical and empirical review

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### Abstract

Notwithstanding the considerable scholarly and public attention that political polarization and corruption have attracted in recent years and the important mechanisms through which the former may influence the latter, research in this area remains limited and inconclusive. This article offers a comprehensive theoretical and empirical synthesis of the current state of research in this domain. It finds that a large fraction of the apparent contradictions can be attributed to the conceptual inconsistencies and ambiguity surrounding political polarization. The types of polarization that have an inherently hostile and uncivil element (usually referred to as affective or pernicious polarization) undermine democratic accountability, which leads to more corruption. The role of ideological polarization among parties and the general population is more complex: it may boost accountability and decrease corruption but can also contribute to the aforementioned harmful forms of polarization and enhance the role of partisan bias in public opinion formation, thereby increasing corruption. The overall effect of ideological polarization on corruption may depend on the nature and the degree of the former, as well as on mitigating contextual factors. The two may create a vicious circle as corruption also increases political polarization via various channels.

**Keywords:** political polarization; ideological polarization; affective polarization; corruption; partisan bias

## 1 Introduction

The multitude of ideas and ideologies is not a deficiency but a defining feature of democracies. Democratic institutions can be viewed as instruments to peacefully resolve disagreements that arise from this multiplicity (Ignatieff, 2022; Lipset, 1960). Ideological differences boost political competition and may thereby also contribute to accountability and lower corruption (Brown et al., 2011; Testa, 2012). However, severe divisions within societies can also undermine democratic processes and subvert democratic accountability (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; McCoy et al., 2018) and thus increase corruption.

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Therefore, it is not surprising that the literature on the relationship between (different types of) polarization and corruption is all but conclusive. The present – extensive, but not systematic – review aims to synthesize this stream of inquiry by presenting the mechanisms put forward so far and summarizing the empirical evidence supporting and/or refuting these mechanisms. Furthermore, the review also sheds light on blind spots and potential areas for future research. In a broader sense, the article contributes to corruption research, and the literature on the effects of political polarization, and partisan bias and seeks to relate these three streams.

The article is structured as follows. In Section 2, the concepts of political polarization and corruption are discussed. Section 3 presents a summary of the proposed mechanisms and related empirical findings. In Section 4, the findings of the review are discussed. Finally, Section 5 offers a summary and conclusions, and discusses potential areas for future research.

## 2 Conceptual framework

The term (political) polarization is used to describe a set of related but distinct processes or states (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008) in which ‘competing political forces diverge in their actions and ideas and lack any significant common ground’ (Carothers & O’Donohue, 2019, p. 8). A myriad of related terms is used in the literature to describe different manifestations of polarization. While some terms are used with different meanings, different terms may also refer to the same phenomenon. Given that distinct manifestations of polarization exhibit different patterns and induce distinct, often opposite causal mechanisms, this conceptual proliferation and inconsistency have resulted in significant confusion both in public discourse and academia (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Lelkes, 2016).

In its original sense, polarization refers to the ideological distance between political parties (Sartori 2005; first published in 1976). More recently, this phenomenon is also referred to as ideological polarization (Melki & Pickering, 2020), elite polarization (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008), and political polarization (Brown et al., 2011), and is usually measured either simply by the distance on a left-right scale (Melki & Pickering, 2020) or by the sum of parties’ ideological distance from the mean, weighted by their vote share (Apergis & Pinar, 2023).

In recent decades, scholars have also taken an interest in polarization at the mass, that is, the societal level. Mass polarization may involve ideological trends and patterns in societies: ideological consistency (or ideological alignment) may refer to issue alignment (i.e. the extent to which people’s positions on different policy issues are aligned), and alignment between party identity and issue attitudes (also referred to as party sorting; Fiorina & Abrams, 2008), whereas ideological divergence refers to the bimodality of the ideological distribution and/or the distance between different groups in terms of ideology (Lelkes, 2016).

Mass polarization, however, is not necessarily related to ideological differences. Affective (mass) polarization refers to the extent to which supporters of a party dislike and distrust supporters of the other party (Iyengar et al., 2019). Partisanship constitutes the root (i.e. the group identifier) of affective polarization, but its consequences reach

beyond politics, as it influences choices regarding friends, relationships, and residence (ibid). Combining elements of these multiple manifestations of polarization, pernicious polarization is defined as ‘a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of “us” versus “them”’ (Somer & McCoy, 2019, p. 13).

While the conceptualization of corruption is also contested (Mungiu-Pippidi & Fazeakas 2020), here I resort to the widely used definition that denotes corruption as the use of public office for private gain (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016). A large body of literature has focused on the determinants of corruption (for a review see Dimant & Tosato, 2018), identifying numerous economic, social, and political factors. Despite the surge of political polarization in many countries worldwide, its effect on corruption has received relatively little attention so far.

### 3 Causal mechanisms and empirical evidence

The following subsections describe the mechanisms through which (different types) of polarization may influence corruption and summarize related empirical evidence. Three broad streams of research are discussed: (i) research on the effect of ideological polarization on corruption; (ii) research on the effects of affective polarization on democracy and accountability; and (iii) research on the effect of partisan bias on corruption perceptions, and in a broader sense, public opinion formation. Although the latter two do not explicitly address the relationship between polarization and corruption, they have important implications regarding the nexus. The table in the Appendix provides an overview of the articles that focus on the relationship of interest specifically.

#### 3.1 The effect of ideological polarization on corruption

Ideological polarization may decrease corruption via various channels. Firstly, it may reduce corruption by enhancing accountability (Testa, 2010). If the ideological distance between parties is large, it is less likely that they will be in a coalition in the future. Therefore, politicians are more incentivized to expose the corrupt practices of the opposing parties (Brown et al., 2011; Melki & Pickering, 2020). Secondly, supposing that politicians care about both rents from corruption and ideology and that engaging in corruption reduces their chances for re-election, higher levels of ideological polarization increase the (ideological) costs of corruption and thus decrease the prevalence of corruption (Melki & Pickering, 2020; Testa, 2012). Thirdly, the ideological distance between parties also makes opposition voters more likely to perceive the government as corrupt<sup>1</sup> (Davis et al., 2004).

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<sup>1</sup> Although this only translates to political mobilization if the opposition is strong.

These mechanisms received broad empirical support from country-level panel analyses (Brown et al., 2011; Testa, 2010), a state-level panel analysis from the United States (Melki & Pickering, 2020), and an interview-based cross-sectional analysis focusing on Latin-American countries (Davis et al., 2004).

Other authors argue in favour of the opposite effect, that is, higher ideological polarization is associated with more corruption. Eggers (2014) presents a model in which voters consider both the ideology and the integrity of candidates at elections. Higher partisan stakes (i.e. the ideological distance between parties and their supporters) imply higher (ideological) costs of punishing corrupt politicians, and hence higher levels of corruption. Using constituency-level data from the 2010 election in the United Kingdom following the Expenses Scandal, in which corrupt practices of many members of Parliament (MPs) were exposed, Eggers found that not only were corrupt MPs punished to a lesser extent in more polarized constituencies, but these MPs – anticipating the former effect – were also more likely to be involved in the scandal.

Furthermore, a survey experiment found that ideological polarization increases the role of partisan cues vis-à-vis substantive arguments in the opinion formation of individuals (Druckman et al., 2013). Although the study did not consider corruption perceptions specifically, as partisan bias has been shown to influence the extent to which people condemn corrupt actions (see Section 3.3), the outlined mechanism arguably applies to corruption as well: ideological polarization makes people less responsive to corruption, which in turn reduces the electoral costs of corruption. Finally, ideological polarization may yield adverse effects on the legislative process, as large ideological distances between MPs or members of congress make compromises harder and may hence result in gridlocks (Barber & McCarty, 2015).

### **3.2 The effect of affective and pernicious polarization on democracy and accountability**

There has been a surge in recent years in research about the erosive effects of affective and pernicious polarization on democracy (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; McCoy et al., 2018; McCoy & Somer, 2019). Although this stream does not directly focus on corruption itself, the conceptual proximity and the important links between corruption and democracy – indeed, some scholars argue that, depending on how they are conceptualized, the two phenomena are not necessarily distinct (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2023) – imply that certain insights from these contributions have direct implications for the relationship between polarization and corruption as well.

The main argument runs as follows. If severe affective/pernicious polarization prevails – usually induced by political entrepreneurs who reinvent and exploit existing political cleavages to mobilize and unite various societal groups (McCoy et al., 2018) – animosity between opposing groups and the perceived stakes of the political rivalry inflate and voters increasingly consider the opposing group illegitimate and an existential threat to their way of life (Arbatli & Rosenberg 2021). Consequently, they tolerate that politicians of their party violate democratic norms. The mechanism has received broad support both

from qualitative (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019; McCoy & Somer, 2019) and quantitative accounts (Orhan, 2022) and has also been underpinned by game-theoretic models (Kiss, 2012). Notably, the evidence is not completely unequivocal: a recent survey experiment found no relationship between affective polarization and democratic attitudes (Broockman et al., 2023).

Arguably, the above mechanism may also undermine public integrity and thereby lead to increased levels of corruption. Orhan's (2022) findings may be regarded as indirect evidence for this claim. The analysis, which was based on data from 53 countries between 1996 and 2020, found that affective polarization deteriorated democracy and accountability. Clearly, lower accountability paves the way for more corruption.

### 3.3 The effect of partisan bias on corruption perceptions

Another established body of research considers how partisan biases (or partisan cues) influence opinion formation. At its core lies the concept of partisan-motivated reasoning, whereby 'individuals interpret information through the lens of their party commitment' (Bolsen et al., 2014, p. 235). Partisan-motivated reasoning undermines decision-making as it decreases the relative weight of substantive arguments vis-à-vis partisan cues in citizens' political opinion formation (Bolsen et al., 2014; Druckman et al., 2013) and can deteriorate democratic accountability by making voters less sensitive to new information and thus decrease politicians' incentives to perform well (Little et al., 2022; Sartori, 2005). The effect of partisan cues (or biases) on public opinion formation received extensive empirical support, primarily from survey experiments (for a recent review see Little, Schnakenberg & Turner, 2022).

In a similar vein, partisan biases also influence how voters perceive corruption. Citizens evaluate corrupt actions differently depending on the partisan affiliation of the involved politician: they tend to be more forgiving with co-partisan politicians and more condemning towards members of other parties (Anduiza et al., 2013; Cornejo, 2023). Although citizens' opinions on corrupt acts do not directly translate into de-facto corrupt actions, in democratic contexts a relatively straightforward relationship exists. If due to the increasing role of partisan bias in opinion formation, voters tend to be forgiving towards their politicians' corruption scandals, corruption is likely to increase.

How does polarization relate to partisan bias? Firstly, ideological polarization of political parties was shown to increase partisanship (Iyengar et al., 2012; Lupu, 2015) and to enhance the effect of partisan cues (relative to substantive arguments) on political opinion formation (Druckman et al., 2013). Secondly, polarization at the mass level (including affective and pernicious polarization) involves the increase of partisan sentiment by definition and was also shown to increase political participation (Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018). In effect, the mechanism of partisan-motivated reasoning may be thought of as a segment of the mechanism linking affective/pernicious polarization and corruption (described in the previous subsection).

## 4 Discussion

Based on the presented review, it seems relatively clear that affective/pernicious polarization undermines democratic accountability and paves the way for more corruption. Likewise, a compelling body of evidence underpins that partisan bias decreases the importance of substantive information in voters' opinion formation, which in turn decreases the electoral cost of corruption. As for the effect of ideological polarization on corruption, evidence is contradictory: some studies present mechanisms and evidence of a negative link (i.e. ideological polarization reduces corruption), while others argue in favour of the opposite effect.

This contradiction may stem from the fact that ideological polarization may set off distinct mechanisms with opposing outcomes (Figure 1). It may foster democratic accountability and reduce corruption but may also induce processes that lead to more corruption. Firstly, although the relationship between ideological and affective/pernicious polarization is complex and debated, it seems that the former increases the latter (Bougher, 2017; Iyengar et al., 2012; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016). Secondly, ideological polarization also increases the weight of partisan cues in public opinion formation (Druckman et al., 2013) and hence decreases the electoral consequences of corruption.

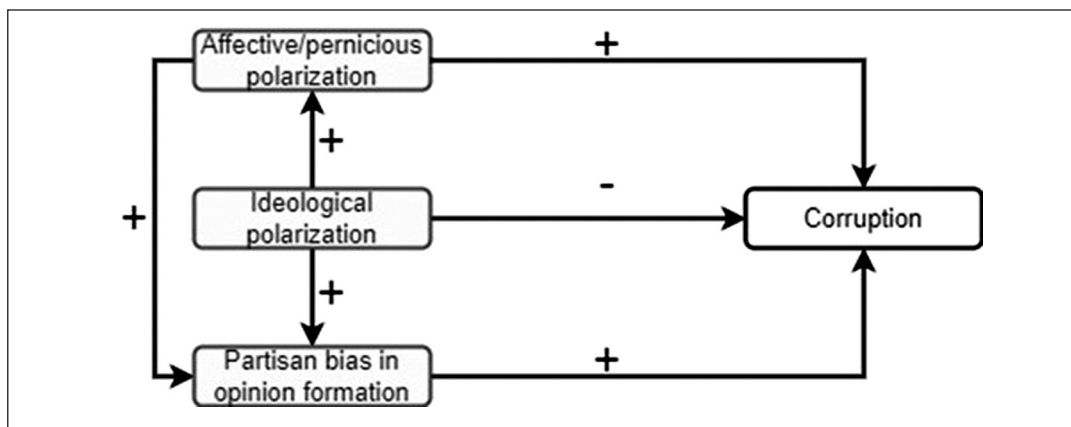


Figure 1 The effects of types of polarization on corruption

What may the overall effect of ideological polarization on corruption be? The answer likely depends on contextual factors (such as formal and informal norms mitigating the effect), and the nature and degree of ideological polarization. Arguably, if ideological polarization is significant, but remains limited to an extent that a civil disagreement is still possible, its effect on corruption may be negative, that is, it reduces corruption. By contrast, if the extent and the nature of ideological divisions are such that the norm of mutual toleration (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) erodes and societal divisions turn antagonistic, democratic accountability deteriorates and corruption increases. Therefore, although the specific underlying cleavages and other contextual factors certainly play an important role, one may hypothesize a U-shaped relationship between ideological polarization and corruption.

## 5 Summary and conclusions

The presented review sought to provide a theoretical and empirical synthesis of the literature on the effect of political polarization on corruption. The following main conclusions emerge. The relationship of interest largely depends on the exact type of polarization. Indeed, a fraction of the apparent contradictions in this stream of research may be dissolved by discerning different types of polarization. The types of polarization that involve a hostile and uncivil element (i.e. affective and pernicious polarization) increase corruption by loosening democratic accountability. These conclusions are consistent with recent research on the economic effects of partisan polarization (Patkós, 2023). The effect of ideological polarization is ambiguous: it can act as a constraint on corruption, but it may also fuel affective/pernicious polarization, and increase the role of partisanship in political opinion formation, which in turn leads to more corruption. The overall effect of ideological polarization may depend on mitigating contextual factors and the extent of the former.

Corruption may also increase polarization. As new political parties may emerge, seeking to challenge the corrupt elite, the political arena becomes more fragmented and polarized (Apergis & Pinar, 2023). Furthermore, corruption fuels anti-establishment sentiments, which are both employed and exacerbated by populist actors (Engler, 2020). As populism (as an ideology) ‘considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups’ (Mudde, 2004, p. 543), it fuels affective/pernicious polarization (Roberts, 2022). Therefore, polarization and corruption exhibit a circular causal relationship, thereby creating a vicious circle.

The review sheds light on the following gaps and potential avenues for further research. Firstly, the reviewed studies use simple, readily available ‘one-dimensional’ indices to measure (perceptions of) corruption. This approach assumes that the term corruption refers to a relatively homogeneous set of phenomena. By contrast, a growing number of scholars highlight the importance of discerning different types of corruption (e.g. Ang, 2020; Graycar, 2015; Hajnal, 2024). Future contributions could go beyond the one-dimensional approach and assess how polarization influences or is influenced by distinct types of corruption.

Secondly, most of the contributions focusing on the link between political polarization and corruption specifically used large-*n* quantitative methods. While this approach has significant advantages, small- and medium-*n* qualitative methods (such as set-theoretic methods, and process tracing) may complement the existing body of research. Set-theoretic methods may be particularly suitable to assess the conditions under which ideological polarization yields positive/negative effects on corruption. Thirdly, as noted, there has been a significant interest in the consequences of affective and pernicious polarization on democracy. Future contributions in this domain may also assess whether and how these types of polarization affect corruption, potentially discerning different types of the latter.

## Appendix

### Summary of empirical articles focusing on polarization and corruption specifically

Table 1 Summary of the reviewed articles

Article	Theoretical argument		Independent variable(s)		Dependent variable(s)		Evidence		
	Year	Title	Journal	Concept	Measurement	Concept	Measurement	Data/Scope	Method/design
Anduiza	2013	Turning a Blind Eye: Experimental Evidence of Partisan Bias in Attitudes Toward Corruption	Comp. Political Studies	Partisan bias	Manipulated by providing information about the party color of a corrupt politician	Perceived corruption	Survey question (how corrupt respondents deem a particular corrupt act)	Experiment in Spain with 2300 participants	Online survey experiment
Apergis	2023	Corruption and Partisan Polarization: Evidence from the European Union	Empirical economics	Corruption	CPI and the WGI's Corruption Control Index	Partisan polarization	Five different polarization measures are applied	25 EU countries between 2003 and 2017	Panel data analysis
Brown	2011	Political Polarization as a Constraint on Corruption: A Cross-National Comparison	World Development	Political polarization	The largest ideological distance (left-right) between the four biggest parties	Corruption	An aggregate of various datasets on corruption	Many countries, 1996–2006	Panel data analysis



Table 1 (continued)

Article		Theoretical argument		Independent variable(s)		Dependent variable(s)		Evidence	
First author	Year	Title	Journal	Concept	Measurement	Concept	Measurement	Data/Scope	Method/design
Davis	2004	The Influence of Party Systems on Citizens' Perceptions of Corruption and Electoral Response in Latin America	Comparative Political Studies	Ideological polarization	Ideological distance of parties	Corruption perceptions	Measured by interview questions	Interviews with 3396 people from Chile, Costa Rica and Mexico (representative sample)	Cross-sectional regressions
Eggers	2014	Partisanship and Electoral Accountability: Evidence from the UK Expenses Scandal	Quarterly Journal of Political Science	Partisan stakes	Ideological distance of competing parties	Corruption	The likelihood that MPs engage in corruption	UK elections after the 2009 Expenses Scandal	Cross-sectional regression
Melki	2020	Polarization and Corruption in America	European Economic review	Ideological polarization	Distance of the two parties' conservative/democrat score (0-100).	Corruption	Number of federal convictions for corruption-related crimes per capita	US, 1976 to 2004, 48 states	Panel data analysis, Instrumental variable to check the direction of causation

Table 1 (continued)

Article		Theoretical argument		Independent variable(s)		Dependent variable(s)		Evidence	
First author	Year	Title	Journal	Concept	Measurement	Concept	Measurement	Data/Scope	Method/design
Orhan	2022	The Relationship between Affective Polarization and Democratic Backsliding: Comparative Evidence	Democratization	Affective polarization	Difference of in/out-party feelings weighted by vote shares	Democratic quality (in the robustness check, accountability as DV)	Liberal democracy index of V-Dem (accountability index of V-Dem)	170 election surveys in 53 countries	Regression
Testa	2010	Bicameralism and corruption	European Economic review	Polarization	Two measures: a simple index of ideological distance, and another based on Esteban and Ray's (1994) approach	Corruption	CPI and Kaufman et al.'s (2004) Index	35 countries between 1996 and 2004	Panel data analysis

Notes: (i) The table includes empirical articles which focus on the relationship between polarization and corruption specifically. (ii) Some articles assess various mechanisms. The summaries in the table include information only about the relationship of interests.

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