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Us vs. Them: Overcoming Polarization in Climate Change Debates.

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Abstract.

This paper explores the impact of political polarization and populism on climate change discourse. Political polarization, driven by ideological and affective divides, hampers effective climate communication and policy-making. Populist rhetoric, characterized by anti-elite sentiments and simplistic narratives, further exacerbates these divides. Social media platforms amplify these polarizing messages, creating echo chambers and reinforcing extreme views. Addressing this polarization requires nuanced communication strategies that bridge ideological gaps and promote fact-based, inclusive discourse, fostering better policy outcomes and collaborative solutions.

Keywords: Polarization, Climate Change, Misinformation, Populism.

Introduction.

Climate change is arguably one of the most pressing challenges of our time, posing significant threats to human well-being, ecosystems, and global stability. Despite the overwhelming scientific consensus on the reality and dangers of climate change, public opinion and political responses remain deeply divided. At the core of this issue lies the complexity of climate communication and the pervasive political polarization that hinders effective dialogue and action. The traditional assumption that individuals form their attitudes based solely on expert information and rational cost-benefit analyses has proven inadequate (Mills, 2012). Instead, it is increasingly recognized that climate communication must resonate with individuals' values and emotions to drive meaningful engagement (The Politicization of Climate Change and Polarization in the American Public's Views of Global Warming, 2001-2010, n.d.).

Political polarization, defined as the division of society into distinct ideological camps with little overlap and increasing hostility, has become a prominent feature of contemporary politics (Sippel et al., 2022). This polarization extends to climate change, where partisan identities significantly influence individuals' beliefs and concerns about global warming. In the United States, for example, a clear divide exists between liberals and conservatives, and between Democrats and Republicans, regarding the existence, causes, and severity of climate change. This divide is not just theoretical but is evident in empirical studies showing varying levels of concern and differing responses to climate messages depending on political affiliation.

The politicization of climate change has resulted in several detrimental outcomes. Firstly, it has created an environment where misinformation and disinformation thrive, complicating public understanding of climate science. Secondly, it has led to a breakdown of constructive dialogue and a lack of cooperation among key stakeholders, stalling policy development and implementation. The ideological entrenchment and emotional fervor associated with political polarization foster an

"us vs. them" mentality, where individuals and groups prioritize defending their ideological positions over seeking common ground and effective solutions (Sippel et al., 2022).

Moreover, the role of media, particularly social media, in exacerbating political polarization cannot be overstated. Social media platforms often act as echo chambers, where users are exposed predominantly to information that reinforces their pre-existing beliefs, leading to more extreme positions. This phenomenon is particularly concerning in the context of climate change, where polarizing messages are amplified, further fragmenting public discourse and making consensus on climate policies more elusive (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021).

The intricate dynamics of political polarization and its interplay with populism add another layer of complexity to the climate change debate. Populism, characterized by its anti-establishment rhetoric and simplistic solutions, often exploits and intensifies polarization. Populist leaders use direct, emotionally charged communication to mobilize supporters, framing climate policies as threats to economic interests or national sovereignty, thereby deepening skepticism and resistance among conservative populations (Domalewska, 2021).

In light of these challenges, this paper aims to analyze the multifaceted impact of political polarization and populism on climate change discourse. It seeks to understand how these factors shape public opinion and policy responses, and to explore strategies for mitigating their negative effects. By addressing the underlying causes of polarization and promoting more inclusive and fact-based communication, it is possible to foster more productive and collaborative approaches to tackling climate change. This study underscores the need for nuanced, culturally sensitive communication strategies that bridge ideological divides and encourage collective action towards sustainable and equitable climate solutions.

Political Polarization and Its Effects

The politicization of climate change has led to a divide between liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, with each side holding different beliefs and levels of concern about global warming. This divide is evident in the results of various studies. For example, a study in the US showed that the impact of climate change messages increased when attributed to leaders from the military or the Republican party. Furthermore, trust in politicians and the media regarding climate change is consistently low. This polarization and lack of trust in political and media figures on climate change has hindered effective climate communication and policy-making.

The polarization on climate change has resulted in a breakdown of constructive dialogue and a lack of cooperation and compromise among different stakeholders. This has led to a stagnation in policy development and implementation, as well as a perpetuation of misinformation and disinformation about climate change (The Politicization of Climate Change and Polarization in the American Public's Views of Global Warming, 2001-2010, n.d). Moreover, the polarization on Climate Change has created an "us vs. them" mentality, where individuals and groups are more concerned with defending their ideological positions rather than finding common ground and working towards effective solutions (Sippel et al., 2022).

Defining Polarization.

The study of political polarization has been a significant focus in politics, with Giovanni Sartori as its main inspiration. While the debate on polarization has gained prominence primarily in the United States recently, it is essential to note that there is also a growing body of literature on political polarization related to Europe or inclusive of European countries (Powell, 2010; Curini & Hino, 2012; Enyedi, 2016; McCoy et al., 2018). Additionally, the US party system being authentically two-party only among large Western countries gives unique aspects to the concept of polarization that are not found in studies relating to multi-party contexts.

In recent times, the debate on political polarization develops mainly through two concepts: ideological and policy differentiation, understood as the divergence of opinions initially measured on the traditional right-left axis and later expanded to specific divisive issues; and emotional separation based on negative emotions (bordering on hatred) towards "the other," increasingly seen as an enemy rather than an adversary. A third form of polarization, considered harmful to democracy, is defined as a process in which multiple differences within a society tend to align along a single artificial dimension founded on the "us vs. them" concept.

The field of ideological polarization and policy can be divided between maximalists (Jacobson, 2000; Abramowitz, 2010, 2013; Jacobson, 2015; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017) and minimalists (Fiorina et al., 2005; Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Levendusky, 2009). The former argued that ideological polarization on policies was a phenomenon that permeated elites and voters. On the other hand, the latter believed that the electorate was less interested in policy differences and substantially more centrist and moderate compared to the elites. It seems that maximalist views have prevailed over minimalist ones even though recent debates have centered around the concept

of "false polarization," with studies documenting how voter perception of ideological distance on policies is greater than actual distance (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2015; Westfall et al., 2015; Wilson et al., 2020).

Affective Polarization.

The concept of affective polarization emerged in 2012 and focuses on the increasing prevalence of negative emotions towards those with different political ideas, both among the elites and the electorate. This has sparked a vigorous debate focusing on its causes, pitting proponents of the identity approach (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2015; Iyengar et al., 2019; West & Iyengar, 2020) against advocates of ideologically based polarization and policies (Jacobson, 2015; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). The identity approach is rooted in studies on collective identity which argue that any form of group membership tends to activate two types of emotions: positive when evaluating one's own group and negative when evaluating an external group (Tajfel et al., 1971; Billig & Tajfel, 1973).

The identity approach argues that partisan identity serves as a social identity similar to race and gender, deeply influencing various aspects of individuals' lives. According to Iyengar et al. (2019), this identity impacts decisions ranging from economic choices and workplace affiliations to personal relationships and social interactions.

In this model, affective polarization is a result of people associating themselves with a political party. This association leads to positive feelings towards fellow party members, known as in-group favoritism, and negative feelings towards members of opposing parties, referred to as out-group animosity. This dynamic demonstrates how partisan identity shapes social behavior, creating divisions based on political affiliations and contributing to the broader phenomenon of affective polarization in society.

Ideological and Policy Polarization.

The school of ideological and policy polarization attributes the main cause of affective polarization to the increasing ideological differences, whether real or perceived, among elites and the electorate. These differences on numerous issues—not primarily partisan identity—are seen as the

root of negative sentiments toward opponents and the breakdown in communication among elites (Fiorina et al., 2005; Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017).

The emerging field of pernicious political and social polarization (McCoy et al., 2018; McCoy & Somer, 2018; Somer & McCoy, 2018) adopts a comparative approach, examining the fractures that underpin political polarization. These include traditional divides like right-left, center-periphery, and religious conflicts, as well as newer splits such as cosmopolitan-nationalist. This research suggests that polarization becomes detrimental to democracy not because of the genuine entrenchment of these old or new fractures, but rather due to the way political elites exploit these divisions. They reduce complex issues into a simplistic "Us vs. Them" narrative through polarizing communication strategies. The perilous aspect of this polarization lies in masking normal differences within the larger fracture, creating artificial political identities that act as social identities. This research perspective acknowledges that polarization can have positive democratic potential until it turns pernicious due to the tactics of savvy political leaders who use polarizing communication to stir social resentment. They employ specific rhetoric, often populist, to blame particular groups, thereby reinforcing the Us versus Them divide (McCoy & Somer, 2018).

The Populist Factor.

Much has been written about the difficulty of defining populism, as demonstrated by the fact that any study on this topic cannot avoid starting with an explanation of the adopted concept. Populism has been defined as an ideology, a style, and a strategy. In the first case, reference is made to Mudde's popular definition of ideology based on a thin core vision of the world that opposes corrupt elites to pure homogeneous people; it has a strong anti-establishment value and sees politics as an expression of popular will. This ideology has a narrow scope which allows it to align with stronger ideologies, typically nativism or socialism. This definition is undoubtedly the most widely adopted in political science, although there are criticisms in this regard (de la Torre & Mazzoleni, 2019).

Populism is described by Mudde as an ideology with a straightforward core, featuring a binary opposition between the corrupt elite and the pure, unified people. It emphasizes anti-establishment sentiments and views politics as an expression of the will of the populace. Its narrow focus enables it to align with more robust ideologies like nativism or socialism. Although this definition is widely used in political science, it has not escaped criticism (de la Torre & Mazzoleni, 2019).

Populist rhetoric is characterized by its confrontation between the people and the elite, emphasis on popular will, use of uncomplicated language, and promotion of emotional elements such as anxiety or enthusiasm (Betz, 1994; Mazzoleni et al., 2003; Abts & Rummens, 2007; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). This method allows for the recognition of populist characteristics even within established political parties, a trend that is growing more prevalent. Ultimately, populism can be viewed as a tactic employed by charismatic leaders leading populist movements with the goal of gaining power (Weyland, 2001; Kriesi & Pappas, 2015; Weyland, 2017). This approach relies on unfiltered communication between the leader and disorganized supporters, a pattern noted in Latin American populism. Critics have pointed out that this strategy overly emphasizes leadership. The existence of multiple definitions of populism indicates challenges in using the concept and interacting with different research viewpoints.

Research on populism and its relation to democracy is diverse. Some scholars see it as a threat to representative democracy, citing its anti-pluralist tendencies and risks to minority rights (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Müller, 2014), while others view it as a corrective mechanism for unbalanced democracies (Canovan, 1999; Mouffe, 2018). Some researchers suggest that populism can be both a threat and a corrective to representative democracy, depending on the context. They critique democratic regimes for insufficient popular participation, advocate for increased direct involvement, and reintroduce divisive issues to the political agenda (Urbinati, 2019; Taggart, 2002; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). A shared perspective among these viewpoints is the conceptualization of populist democracy which regards the populace as the paramount source of political legitimacy (Canovan et al., 1999; Kaltwasser et al., 2014; Rummens et al., 2017).

Impact on Democracy.

Studies on political polarization have also examined its impact on democracy. Previous scholars such as Dahl, Sartori, and Linz and Stepan highlighted the dangers of excessive polarization, while current literature agrees that high levels of political polarization pose a significant challenge to representative democracy. Advocates of the identity approach claim that an ongoing cycle of negative emotions between leaders and the public results in political deadlock and dysfunction.

In alignment with the theory of pernicious polarization, it is argued that the deliberate use of polarizing rhetoric by elites—often populist in nature—undermines the electorate's trust in democratic institutions and values. This perspective acknowledges that political polarization can

potentially be beneficial for democracy by helping citizens differentiate between political options, mobilizing political participation, and strengthening parties (Campbell, 2016; Enyedi, 2016; LeBas, 2018). However, these virtuous effects become negligible when polarization leads leaders and citizens to perceive opponents as existential threats, thereby facilitating behaviors and policies that erode democratic principles (McCoy & Somer, 2021). Considerable research has shown that a proportional electoral system can help reduce ideological polarization to some extent. Other factors like the number of political parties and the ability to form coalition governments post-elections also have an impact. The widening policy differences among elites and voters make it harder for political forces to cooperate and compromise (Abramowitz, 2017).

Emotion Vs Rational.

In recent scholarship, a novel, albeit smaller, branch of research, identified as "demand side research," has emerged within the broader studies on populism. This stream examines the prevalence of populist attitudes among voters (Akkerman et al., 2013; Spruyt et al., 2016) and investigates how specific emotions might account for the support of populist parties (Bakker et al., 2016; Salmela & von Scheve, 2017). Emotions such as fear and social envy have been identified as particularly influential in driving populist voting behaviors (Rooduijn & Burgoon, 2018; Anduiza et al., 2019). However, there is ongoing debate about the emotional underpinnings of support for right-wing populist parties (Mols & Jetten, 2020).

The connection between emotions and polarization is a crucial area of study known as affective polarization. This research examines the negative emotions directed towards out-groups, which can be caused by factors such as ideological differences, partisan identity, and political elite behavior. Populism research aims to pinpoint specific emotions and their causes behind populist support, often distinguishing between right-wing and left-wing populism. In contrast, affective polarization research treats negative sentiments towards out-groups as a unified phenomenon, seeking to uncover its causes. Both research domains explore the role of emotions in influencing voting behavior and other actions. Affective polarization literature generally agrees on the causes of rising negative emotions, highlighting partisan/political identity as social identity, policy differences, elite behavior, negative communication, and media influence.

On the other hand, understanding the emotional causes of right-wing populism is complex. Critics argue that these causes may be more about nativism than populism itself. When examining the

relationship between emotions and political participation, studies on affective polarization indicate that hostility towards out-groups is a significant motivator for political engagement (Iyengar et al., 2018; McCoy, 2018; Valentino et al., 2011). Conversely, research on populism yields mixed findings, with some studies showing no significant correlation between emotions and participation, while others suggest a positive relationship (Huber & Ruth, 2017; Anduiza et al., 2019).

Populist Communication.

Populist communication is characterized by rhetoric that contrasts "us" versus "them." This is evident in several ways: a dichotomy between corrupt elites and a pure, homogeneous people; opposition to the establishment, implying radical change and delegitimization of traditional political actors; and the exaltation of popular will as the primary source of power legitimacy, above all else (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). In addition to rhetoric, populist communication includes a demagogic style directed straight to the people, aiming to provide simplistic answers to complex issues, and the instrumental use of widespread emotions such as anxiety, disillusionment, fear, and enthusiasm. Furthermore, it combines verbal radicalism and symbolic politics with political marketing techniques (Betz, 1994; Mazzoleni et al., 2003).

Populist communication is defined in three main approaches—ideological, stylistic, and strategic—all of which acknowledge the central importance of communication. In the ideological approach, communication serves as a vehicle for a thin-centered ideology; in the stylistic approach, it constitutes the essence of populism; and in the strategic approach, it is the tool through which charismatic leaders communicate with followers. Although the strategic approach identifies the charismatic leader as a key element, it is the leader's communication style that is the most distinctive feature. The difficulty in defining a charismatic leader and the lack of specific references in the literature on how populist charismatic leadership should manifest in different party organizations, given the diversity among populist parties, supports this view. However, there is a clear reference to disorganized followers, who are mobilized through the direct connection created by the leader's communication.

Political Communication and Polarization.

The role of polarizing communication is central to the study of political polarization. Different theoretical approaches consider the use of divisive and aggressive rhetoric by political elites as a primary factor in increasing polarization (Krupnikov & Piston, 2015; Usherwood & Wright, 2017; Nai & Sciarini, 2018; Druckman et al., 2020). In the identity approach, leaders and elites use (social) media to enhance social identification with their party, thereby intensifying affective polarization (Levendusky, 2013; West & Iyengar, 2020). The ideological and policy polarization school posits that elites focus on contentious policies, which heighten the perceived policy distance among the electorate and provoke anxiety and fear about the opposition implementing adverse policies, all through targeted communication (Mutz, 2006, 2007; Prior, 2013; Levendusky & Malhotra, 2015; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). The polarization perspective highlights how elites use polarizing communication to create an artificial divide between Us and Them, which the media then amplifies within politics and society to build consensus.

Political communication operates within a dynamic framework, involving an interdependent relationship among politicians, media, and the public (Sánchez Medero, 2021). Over the last ten years, there has been a significant rise in research on political polarization. A recent review examined how politicians who use polarizing content gain more visibility and support in both social and traditional media. Studies have shown an increasing polarization in media content over the years, across different platforms (Quattrociocchi et al., 2024). Regarding the content disseminated by political elites, there is a noticeable scarcity of research on depolarizing communication strategies. One notable exception is the study of pernicious polarization, which recently examined how opposition elites might engage in depolarizing behaviors (McCoy & Somer, 2021).

Modern political communication operates within a complex framework involving politicians, media, and citizens (Sánchez Medero, 2021). In recent years, research on polarization has underscored the central role of communication. Studies agree that politicians using polarizing content gain increased visibility and support, both on social media (Mariotti et al., 2021; Rathje et al., 2021) and traditional media (Wagner & Ylä-Anttila, 2018). Furthermore, the increase in polarization within media content over recent years is evident (Chinn et al., 2020; Marozzo & Bessi, 2017). Selective exposure to media that align with one's own views increases polarization. However, the effect of exposure to counter-attitudinal media is controversial, with some studies

suggesting it reduces polarization while others indicate it exacerbates it (Heiss et al., 2019). Experiments indicate that social media tend to further polarize individuals both ideologically and affectively (Banks et al., 2021; Kim & Kim, 2019; Heiss et al., 2019; Cho et al., 2020; Suhay et al., 2018). Regarding traditional media, most research suggests an increase in both ideological and affective polarization, especially when exposed to political scandal articles or uncivil communications (Rothschild et al., 2021; Levendusky, 2013; Druckman & Levendusky, 2019). Few studies have investigated how to reduce polarization.

For traditional media, fact-checking programs and counter-attitudinal content can reduce ideological polarization (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020; Lee, 2017), while positive contact between opposing groups and uncivil communications from internal sources can reduce affective polarization (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Wojcieszak et al., 2021). One experiment indicated that deactivating Facebook during the 2018 U.S. midterm elections reduced affective polarization (Allcott et al., 2020).

Discussion.

The intricate relationship between populism and polarization plays a significant role in shaping public discourse and policy making, particularly in the context of climate change. Populism, often characterized by a polarizing communication style that pits a 'pure people' against a 'corrupt elite,' can be seen as a subcategory of broader political polarization. This communication style is simplistic, emotionally charged, and anti-establishment, aligning with the concepts discussed in the literature (McCoy & Somer, 2018). Populism manifests through direct, unmediated communication between charismatic leaders and their followers, further driving polarization. This is evident in the increased visibility and support for politicians who employ polarizing rhetoric, significantly impacting public perception and policy responses to critical issues like climate change (Wilson et al., 2020). The use of such rhetoric fosters an environment where complex issues are reduced to binary choices, often undermining the democratic process by delegitimizing opponents and eroding trust in institutions (Domalewska, 2021).

The role of social media in exacerbating group polarization is well-documented. Social media platforms create echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs, leading to more extreme positions (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). This dynamic is particularly relevant in the context of climate change, where debates often become polarized. The amplification of polarizing messages on social

media contributes to a fragmented public discourse, making it challenging to achieve consensus on climate policies (Krishnan & Anoop, 2023). Research on online climate change discourse on Twitter has shown that affective polarization significantly influences the quality and tone of the debates, often leading to entrenched and hostile interactions (Heffner, 2021).

The political divide in climate change opinions highlights significant variations across different countries and U.S. states. Studies underscore how cultural and socio-ecological contexts, such as reliance on fossil fuels, amplify the influence of political orientation on climate change opinions (Heiss et al., 2019). This divide is further deepened by populist leaders who exploit these contexts to frame climate change debates in a polarizing manner (McCoy & Somer, 2018). The framing of climate policies as threats to economic interests or national sovereignty can intensify skepticism and resistance among conservative populations, further polarizing public opinion (Domalewska, 2021). Sentiment analysis approaches reveal that public perceptions of climate change are often shaped by the emotional and moral framing used in elite discourse (Gupta et al., 2021; Krishnan & Anoop, 2023).

Addressing the political divide in climate change opinions requires nuanced communication strategies that account for cultural and socio-ecological factors. Efforts to depolarize the climate change debate should focus on creating inclusive narratives that bridge ideological divides and promote balanced, fact-based discourse (Wilson et al., 2020). Understanding the mechanisms of group polarization can help develop strategies to foster constructive dialogue and collaborative solutions to climate challenges. This involves countering the polarizing effects of social media and populist rhetoric by promoting diverse perspectives and facilitating meaningful engagement across different societal groups (Krishnan & Anoop, 2023). Debunking misinformation and fostering positive interactions between opposing groups can also reduce polarization and improve the quality of public debate (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020).

The increasing role of political communication as a trigger for both ideological and affective polarization is confirmed by ongoing research. New theoretical perspectives emphasize the importance of populist communication and the role of political elites in driving polarization. Future empirical studies should validate the framework of populism as a subcategory of polarization through its polarizing communication style, particularly in the context of climate change discourse. By mitigating the polarizing effects of populist communication and social media dynamics, it is

possible to foster more inclusive and effective discussions on climate change. This approach can ultimately lead to better policy outcomes and collaborative solutions, ensuring a sustainable and equitable future.

Conclusion.

This study began with the aim of understanding the phenomena of polarization and populism within the discourse on climate change. The intricate relationship between populism, polarization, and climate change discussions on social media reveals significant insights into how public opinion and policy-making are influenced. Populism, with its polarizing communication style that pits 'pure people' against 'corrupt elites,' drives polarization by simplifying complex issues and fostering distrust in democratic institutions. This dynamic is exacerbated by social media platforms that create echo chambers, where users are exposed to content that reinforces their existing beliefs, leading to further radicalization.

The discussion highlights the critical role of social media algorithms in promoting polarizing content that generates high engagement through polemics and negativity. These platforms are designed to maximize user interaction, often at the expense of balanced and factual discourse. Consequently, users' exposure to diverse perspectives is limited, hindering the acceptance of accurate information and fostering an environment where misinformation can thrive.

The heuristic nature of human cognition, as elaborated by Kahneman (2011), further complicates these dynamics. Social media encourages fast, emotional thinking, which exacerbates biases such as confirmation bias. This cognitive shortcut leads users to favor information that aligns with their preexisting views, making it challenging to engage with differing opinions or factual corrections.

Empirical studies by Quattrociocchi and colleagues (Cinelli et al., 2021; Cinelli et al., 2020) provide valuable insights into these dynamics, demonstrating that while less credible information does not necessarily spread faster, the type of content significantly influences public reactions and polarization. Their work underscores the need for a multidisciplinary approach to fully understand the complexities of online behavior and its impact on public discourse.

Future research will delve deeper into the study of echo chambers and folk theories to better understand the mechanisms of polarization on social media. By examining these phenomena, scholars can develop more effective strategies to promote diverse perspectives and mitigate the polarizing effects of social media algorithms and rhetoric.

Addressing the political divide in climate change opinions requires nuanced communication strategies that account for cultural and socio-ecological factors. Efforts to depolarize the climate change debate should focus on creating inclusive narratives that bridge ideological divides and promote balanced, fact-based discourse. Understanding the mechanisms of group polarization can help develop strategies to foster constructive dialogue and collaborative solutions to climate challenges.

In conclusion, the increasing role of political communication as a trigger for both ideological and affective polarization is confirmed by ongoing research. New theoretical perspectives emphasize the importance of populist communication and the role of political elites in driving polarization. By mitigating the polarizing effects of populist communication and social media dynamics, it is possible to foster more inclusive and effective discussions on climate change. This approach can ultimately lead to better policy outcomes and collaborative solutions, ensuring a sustainable and equitable future.

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