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A Comparative Analysis of Depolarization Strategies

Fallon Clark

Abstract

The salience of political polarization has increased rapidly in the last few years as this phenomenon has infiltrated countries across the globe, including the United States. A potential consequence of polarization is democratic decay, or the gradual transition of democracies into more autocratic regimes. Remedies proposed by scholars include electoral system reforms, inclusive rhetorical strategies, and civic dialogue initiatives, among others. This thesis investigates institutional and political remedies, relying on both quantitative and qualitative analyses, to determine whether these approaches to depolarization are effective in practice. The findings are applied to the US case.

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A Comparative Analysis of Depolarization Strategies

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Abstract

The salience of political polarization has increased rapidly in the last few years as this phenomenon has infiltrated countries across the globe, including the United States. A potential consequence of polarization is democratic decay, or the gradual transition of democracies into more autocratic regimes. Remedies proposed by scholars include electoral system reforms, inclusive rhetorical strategies, and civic dialogue initiatives, among others. This thesis investigates institutional and political remedies, relying on both quantitative and qualitative analyses, to determine whether these approaches to depolarization are effective in practice. The findings are applied to the US case.

1 Introduction

The salience of political polarization has increased rapidly in the last few years as this phenomenon has infiltrated countries across the globe, including the United States. Because it can lead to the gradual decay of democratic states into less democratic or authoritarian regimes, scholars have proposed a range of remedies, from electoral system reform to inclusive rhetorical strategies to civic dialogue initiatives. This thesis investigates institutional and political remedies through a combination of statistical analysis and case studies to determine whether these approaches to depolarization are effective in practice. I apply the findings to the United States' current political climate as well.

Polarization is “the process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’” (McCoy, 2018). In other words, the electorate becomes divided into two distinct camps. Polarization can be limited to the political arena, but it can also seep into society as well, creating a sense of “loathing” between the groups, called affective polarization (Mason, 2018). Affective polarization is most dangerous when multiple identities align along this divide. When this alignment occurs, members of each group are more likely to sort both geographically and socially, so they interact exclusively with those who share their identity (Mason, 2018).

Polarization, in moderation, can benefit a democratic system by simplifying the world for voters, but when extreme, it can cause democratic erosion. In highly polarized environments, voters are more willing to tolerate autocratic tendencies, trading off democratic principles for partisan interests (McCoy, 2018) (Svolik, 2019). Furthermore, polarization creates a zero-sum game, raising the stakes of loosing and creating incentives for elites to entrench their power undemocratically (Drutman, 2017). For instance, because each side views the other as an existential threat, opposition leaders may be more likely to use extra-constitutional measures to remove the incumbent in power (McCoy, 2018) (McCoy and Somer, 2021). Under polarization, bipartisan cooperation decreases, leading to legislative gridlock, or the persistent inability of the legislature to pass legislation, and institutional failure (McCoy, 2018) (Drutman, 2017). Gridlock can leave these institutions vulnerable to usurpation by anti-democratic actors and can decrease public trust in and support for democracy. Democratic decay is visible in the United States through the country's weakening democratic quality, “underscored by a drop in its Freedom House political rights score and downgrade to the category of ‘flawed democracy’ by the Economist Intelligence Unit” (McCoy and Somer, 2021). Polarization is self-reinforcing and spirals once it begins, so the American condition is in danger of worsening.

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To explain the occurrence of this phenomenon, the literature discusses two drivers: one focuses on social-psychological factors, and the other focuses on institutions and elites. Those in favor of the social-psychological explanation argue that polarization stems from basic human nature, highlighting the role of in-group bias and social-identity theory, which tell us that people will “choose ingroup victory over the greater good” (Mason, 2018, p. 54) and that humans prefer “Us” to “Them” by nature (Mason, 2018, p. 55). Polarization, in essence, starts within the masses. Scholars focused on the institutional and elite explanation assert that elites exaggerate the “Us” versus “Them” dynamic of polarization by exploiting grievances and delegitimizing opponents, while certain institutional arrangements incentivize these actions (McCoy, 2018) (Fomina, 2019) (Carothers, 2019) (Drutman, 2017) (Aydin-Duzgit, 2019). Lee Drutman, a big proponent of the institutional explanation, attributes the United States’ polarization to Trump’s efforts “to keep identity politics at the top of the political agenda” (Drutman, 2017), the winner-take-all system that keeps the US swinging from one extreme to another, the expanding powers of the executive that disincentivizes the president from governing moderately, and the influence of private money in campaigns that shifts elite attention away from the public good (Drutman, 2017). To fully understand polarization, we must consider both the institutional and psychological drivers and how they work together to generate and bolster divisions.

Some proposed remedies for this phenomenon focus on institutional changes, and the electoral system has been identified as a prime target for these reforms: Lee Drutman advocates for a change in American electoral rules to allow for proportional voting and for a change in campaign finance regulations to shift politicians’ attention from donor to constituent needs (Drutman, 2017). Drutman also sees potential in the decentralization of the congressional party structure to encourage more bipartisan coalitions (Drutman, 2017). Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer present remedies that attempt to “shift the logic of polarization from a vicious cycle to a virtuous one” by requiring politicians and institutions to respond to “the underlying grievances and deficiencies in representation, welfare, governance, and inclusion that made societies receptive to polarizing strategies in the first place” (McCoy and Somer, 2021). Among these possible solutions are the elimination of the Senate filibuster, the employment of ranked-choice voting, a guarantee of the rights of the defeated, and party reforms and leadership changes (McCoy and Somer, 2021). Others, like Arend Lijphart and Lawrence Ezrow hint at the benefits of increasing electoral system proportionality by implementing proportional representation (Lijphart, 1996) (Ezrow, 2008).

In terms of political remedies, scholars focus on creating norms of trust and cooperation, on using more tolerant rhetoric, or on broadening and reshaping existing party platforms. Lilliana Mason suggests reforming the Republican coalition to include cross-cutting identities and shifting both the Republican and Democratic platforms to enable cross-partisan voting (Mason, 2018). Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt propose a reformation of the Republican Party to expand the electoral base and marginalize extremists as well as a slight alteration of the Democratic platform to promote more inclusive economic policies (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019). Additionally, formal and informal pacts between members of the political elite where they agree to keep divisive issues off the political agenda, like Venezuela’s Pact of Punto Fijo, demonstrate potential depolarizing effects (Levine, 1974). In terms of rhetorical solutions, Levitsky and Ziblatt suggest that the Republican Party should avoid white-nationalist rhetoric (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019). F. Michael Wuthrich and Melvyn Ingleby discuss rhetorical strategies as well, speaking to the Turkish experience. The opposition candidate in the 2019 Istanbul mayoral election engaged in a campaign strategy focused on inclusion and respect for the populist in power and supporters of the opposing camp, calling the strategy *Radical Love*. Senem Aydin-Duzgit also highlights the tolerance of this newly elected Turkish mayor.

Although polarization harms democracy, most of the scholarship on this phenomenon is focused on its drivers and effects, not on strategies to resolve the issue. When the literature does examine strategies, it looks at them individually, refraining from using a comparative perspective to determine which has the highest chance of success. My research will contribute to the literature by proposing and evaluating remedies, with the goal of producing practical options for systems threatened by polarization.

The research will be divided into two sections: an analysis of increasing electoral system proportionality (an institutional remedy) and an analysis of elite-level norm changes (political remedies). The institutional portion, section 2, will include a cross-national analysis of contemporary polarization using a simple statistical regression. In this case, a country’s electoral system will be coded as the independent variable using data from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral

Assistance (IDEA), and the polarization level, captured using two measures, will be the dependent variable. Ideological polarization will be measured using Russell Dalton’s data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), while affective polarization will be measured using the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute’s measure of political polarization. In addition to the regression, the institutional portion will also include a case study analysis of interwar Spain, France, and Great Britain to dive into the context of their institutional arrangements and determine which set-up was most successful at diminishing polarization. Following this research, I will apply it to the United States today and scrutinize its viability for the American case.

Section 3 will study political norms, strategies, and rhetoric following a case-study approach. Among the cases will be the United States post-Civil War, Spain following its 1976 democratic reforms, and Turkey pre-pandemic when a CHP opposition candidate, Ekrem İmamoğlu, ran for mayor of Istanbul with a campaign strategy called *Radical Love*. The American and Spanish cases are characterized by formal and informal pacts between elite to avoid divisive issues, while the Turkish case examines inclusive rhetoric as a remedy. Literature has suggested that political strategies and norm development were key parts of these countries’ recovery from polarization (Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020) (Aydin-Duzgit, 2019) (Warburton, 2019) (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019). This section will also examine the implications of these remedies for the case of the United States in 2022.

This study indicates that increasing the proportionality of electoral systems will not solve America’s polarization problem—proportional representation systems either worsened or had no effect on polarization in the quantitative and qualitative studies. The political remedies offer more optimism as the pacting strategies and the use of inclusive rhetoric resulted in lower polarization in the short-run; however, the former requires violence as a trigger and comes at the high costs of exclusion and discrimination, and the latter depends on unpredictable and uncontrollable elite-behavior. Inclusive rhetoric may be effective in the long-run if elites cling to the strategy, though more research is required since this has only been recently implemented. It may not be a viable strategy in the US, however, as President Biden’s attempts to promote unity among the American electorate have failed to achieve their goals. If he is able to encourage the Democratic Party to pursue the same strategy, instead of attempting to revitalize American democracy himself, change may be more likely.

2 Institutional remedies

The recent spike in political polarization has been accompanied by a similar spike in related research. Much of the scholarship analyzing institutional arrangements—specifically electoral systems—and their effects on polarization condemns single-member district systems (SMDs). SMDs create zero-sum games and raise the stakes of each election, allowing elites to categorize the opposition as an existential threat to the democratic system and way of life. Given the novelty of this subject, however, disagreements over proposed solutions characterize the literature, specifically those calling for electoral system reforms. The debated reforms focus on whether proportionality in electoral institutions results in more severe or less severe divisions. This paper concludes that proportionality does not lead to a substantial decrease in political polarization and is not as effective at reducing hostilities as the scholarship claims.

Section 2.1 summarizes previous literature connecting electoral systems to political polarization. Section 2.2 presents a quantitative analysis, regressing political polarization on electoral system. Section 2.3 provides a qualitative analysis, looking at the impact of electoral system choice in Europe during the interwar period, with a focus on Spain, France, and Great Britain. Section 2.4 summarizes the findings and connects them to the US case.

2.1 Previous literature

The advantages and disadvantages of increased proportionality within electoral systems are debated among scholars studying polarization, but many agree that single-member districts and winner-take-all systems are detrimental to centripetal tendencies. The most obvious method for increasing proportionality is converting to a proportional representation (PR) system. The research on PR is mixed—some scholars believe it will reduce polarization, while others believe it creates conditions for its emergence. Lee Drutman, as part of his depolarization strategy, promotes proportional voting. This, he argues, would “create space for possible centrist or other alternative parties” (Drutman, 2017) and would lower the stakes of each election. Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer offer a similar reform at the state-level.

They seek to encourage “states to award their electoral votes proportionally based on state-level vote totals (rather than on a winner-takes-all basis)” (McCoy and Somer, 2021) to shift incentives from a zero-sum game.

Additionally, Arend Lijphart favors proportional representation systems for emerging democracies because it values minority representation and helps to “maintain unity and peace in divided societies” (Lijphart, 1996). He argues that PR systems are better for ethnically divided societies because the necessary power sharing for peaceful coexistence “can be more easily arranged” (Lijphart, 1996). More recent literature has supported this, finding no empirical evidence that polarization increases as electoral systems become more proportional. Lawrence Ezrow, after examining fifteen democratic party systems, finds “no evidence that the average party policy extremism systematically increases with electoral system proportionality” (Ezrow, 2008), nor any evidence of an indirect effect “via the influence of electoral systems on the number of political parties” (Ezrow, 2008).

George Tsebelis and Jesse M. Crosson examine a similar system but use the term “multiple-vote, proportional representation electoral system.” In their study, “each voter is endowed with multiple votes and can use as many of them as (s)he wants, to support different parties” (Crosson and Tsebelis, 2021). Tsebelis and Crosson performed this research in response to Cox (1990), which showed that the multiple-vote system is “centripetal,” or that it drives parties to the middle of the spectrum. Tsebelis and Crosson confirm Cox’s findings by concluding that “multiple vote systems act centripetally in multiple dimensions” (Crosson and Tsebelis, 2021). The pair reveals that this centripetal force is weak when polarization is high; however, even in cases of extreme polarization, Tsebelis and Crosson find that “a slight disturbance of the conditions (by introducing an additional party—even if it is very small) strengthens the centripetal properties of the multiple vote system” (Crosson and Tsebelis, 2021). This indicates that proportional representation systems may help reduce polarization, particularly before it reaches extremes.

However, Guy Lardeyret disagrees with Lijphart and other proponents of proportionality, positing that proportional representation actually discourages bipartism, or a two-party system, and exacerbates political divisions. He emphasizes that the two-party system “favors governmental stability and decision-making capacity as well as periodic alternations in power” (Lardeyret, 1996). In plurality systems, there is a homogenous majority, which leads to stability, efficiency, and alternation by allowing the elected official to remain in power throughout the designated term, to pass their legislative program, and to lose power in following elections should voters deem them unfit (Lardeyret, 1996). In contrast, coalition governments common to PR systems easily breakdown when disagreements occur between coalition members, leave the executive vacant during the coalition-building process, and lead to the same people in government following new elections (Lardeyret, 1996), none of which are conducive to stability. Additionally, by promoting representation of minorities, Lardeyret argues, PR systems incentivize parties to polarize issues and exacerbate the conflicts in society to gain votes (Lardeyret, 1996). Hence, it is a dangerous system for countries divided ethnically or culturally. And finally, Lardeyret highlights “PR’s tendency to give extremist parties a chance to participate in government” (Lardeyret, 1996) to conclude that PR systems are dangerous in polarized societies.

Pippa Norris echoes a similar concern for implementing proportional representation systems within countries that are deeply divided along ethnic or religious cleavages. PR systems are more inclusive through their promotion of coalition building within the government, and they incentivize parties to implement policies based on consensus (Norris, 1997). However, they “may also reinforce rather than ameliorate” (Norris, 1997) existing cleavages since the composition of the parliament reflects the major divisions within society. This emphasis can exacerbate polarization.

Empirical evidence supports the claim that PR systems can lead to polarization. Russell Dalton finds that “Proportional representation systems generally have higher levels of polarization than majoritarian systems” and that the influence of electoral systems is “stable. . . in most instances” (Dalton, 2021). Polarization can change in the short-term as a result of specific issues, like the economy or immigration, but “there is a tendency for polarization to return to an equilibrium point” (Dalton, 2021), according to Dalton. Moreover, Ferdinand Hermens notes that majoritarian systems, not PR systems, are responsible for promoting cooperation. In their pursuit of the marginal voters, or those that lack party loyalty, moderate parties have an advantage, given that the marginal voters’ ideology is close to the center. Extremist parties in majoritarian systems are at such a disadvantage with this group of voters that they tend to withdraw their candidates or moderate their platforms, leaving a competition between the moderate Right and Left (Hermens, 1941, p. 21). This moderation, in turn,

“tends to oil the machinery of democracy” (Hermens, 1941, p. 24) as “Parties with moderate views will readily cooperate in order to form a government; friction between them will be comparatively slight; and the work of government will go on in a satisfactory manner” (Hermens, 1941, p. 24).

The implementation of multi-member districts (MMDs) is another reform aimed at increasing proportionality, and just as the research on proportional representation systems is mixed, so is that discussing single-member districts and multi-member districts. Comparing the ideological extremism of candidates elected to the Arizona State Legislature via SMD and MMD systems, Anthony Bertelli and Lilliard E. Richardson, Jr. find that legislators elected in MMDs are more ideologically extreme than their SMD counterparts (Bertelli and Richardson, 2008). Additionally, they conclude that candidate ideal points are more dispersed, and hence extreme, across the MMD Arizona House of Representatives than across the SMD Senate (Bertelli and Richardson, 2008). If MMDs lead to more extremism, it follows logically that they could contribute to polarization; however, scholars, such as Ezra Klein, continue to propose implementing MMDs to depolarize the US.

Another commonly proposed electoral reform is ranked-choice voting, and although it is not the focus of this thesis, it should still be mentioned. Despite increasing proportionality when paired with MMDs (FairVote, 2021), that is not the primary goal of ranked-choice voting. Scholars propose this reform because of its moderating tendency—candidates are encouraged to appeal to centrist voters. Under ranked-choice voting regimes, voters rank candidates according to their preference. If no candidate receives the majority of first-choice votes, an instant runoff occurs, where “the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and voters who picked that candidate as ‘number 1’ will have their votes count for their next choice” (FairVote, 2021). This continues until a majority is achieved.

American scholar Lee Drutman offers this as one part of his depolarization reform package, asserting that this system of ranked-choices would allow voters to “vote their hearts—yet still express a preference for the ‘lesser evil’ of the two major-party candidates” (Drutman, 2017). He gravitates toward this solution because he regards America’s winner-take-all system as one of the main contributors to polarization. He argues that, “Because there is only one possible winner, any vote for a third party is essentially a ‘wasted vote’” (Drutman, 2017), and the resulting two-party system leads to instability as the country swings from one extreme to the other. Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer also view the winner-take-all system of American elections as a significant contributor to polarization. As a result, they also suggest ranked-choice voting as a solution, believing the reform will lead to more moderate campaigns as candidates attempt to secure the second choice vote as well as the first choice one (McCoy and Somer, 2021).

Another proponent of ranked-choice voting, Ezra Klein, cites Drutman when proposing election reforms for the US House of Representatives. Klein wants to replace gerrymandered districts with a combination of multi-member districts and ranked-choice voting (Klein, 2020). In this system, electoral zones would include multiple members of Congress, and voters would rank their preferences until the top candidates are discovered. For example, in a three-member zone, voting would occur until the top three candidates are found. Klein identifies three advantages to this system: (1) voters can choose their top candidate without fearing that their vote won’t matter; (2) voters don’t have to live in swing districts for their votes to matter; and (3) third parties become viable (Klein, 2020).

Thomas Carothers is another advocate of ranked-choice voting as a method of electoral reform. He believes such a system would discourage negative campaigning as candidates attempt to secure second- and third-choice votes, would reduce the influence of money in politics, and would help ensure that the winner is “broadly acceptable to most voters” (Carothers, 2019). He highlights San Francisco, Berkeley, Santa Fe, and Minneapolis’s adoption of this voting system at the local-level and Maine’s adoption at the state-level (Carothers, 2019).

Scholars remain in disagreement over which electoral systems best defend against polarization—majoritarian, winner-take-all systems or those that offer more proportionality, such as PR and MMD systems. In the sections that follow, I will examine how high levels of proportionality affect polarization using a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses to determine whether increasing electoral system proportionality can effectively reduce polarization. Below, a statistical analysis is employed, and polarization levels are regressed on a binary variable for the electoral system (SMDs against more proportional systems). Two measures of polarization are used: one that measures the dispersion of parties across the spectrum, or ideological polarization, and one that measures the level of hostility in society beyond politics, or affective polarization. To supplement this analysis, case studies of interwar Spain, France, and Great Britain are used. The research suggests that increasing proportionality is

not a viable strategy for depolarization.

2.2 Quantitative analysis: Electoral system and polarization

2.2.1 Measuring polarization

The first step in the analysis is choosing an effective indicator of polarization. In the past, such a division has been measured indirectly, through “the number of parties in an electoral system, the size of extremist parties, or the vote share for governing parties” (Dalton, 2008), because measuring the ideological positions of political parties has proven difficult. More recently, Russell Dalton acknowledged the short-comings of these proxies and created a new measure—one based on “the perceptions of the electorate in the nation” (Dalton, 2008). Using data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), he developed a Polarization index to measure the distribution of parties along the political spectrum.

To determine the position of each party along the Left-Right scale, Dalton used responses to the CSES survey, which prompted participants to place themselves and their countries’ parties along the spectrum. When writing his paper, “The Quantity and the Quality of Party Systems,” Dalton had access only to the data in Modules 1 and 2, which run from 1996-2001 and 2001-2006, respectively. Dalton has since calculated the Polarization index for Modules 3 and 4, publishing his results on the CSES website. These modules run from 2006-2011 and 2011-2016. This paper uses data from the third module to operationalize ideological polarization, as it allowed for the greatest number of observations.

Although ideological polarization is important, Dalton’s measure fails to capture the level of dislike between parties and party members outside of a political context, or affective polarization. As a result, I use the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute’s measure of political polarization to capture affective polarization. Their measure illustrates “the extent to which political differences affect social relationships beyond political discussions” (Hellmeier, 2021), defining high polarization as an environment in which “supporters of opposing political camps are reluctant to engage in friendly interactions, for example, in family functions, civic associations, their free time activities and workplaces” (Hellmeier, 2021). Affective polarization is measured on a five point scale, where zero indicates that members of opposing political camps have no problems engaging in friendly interactions and four indicates high levels of hostility.

2.2.2 Measuring electoral system

The electoral systems for all countries in this study were coded using information provided by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) database. The systems in countries of interest include: List PR, Mixed Member Proportional (MMP), Single Transferable Vote, Two-Round, Parallel, Alternative Vote, and First-Past-The-Post electoral systems. Because the literature suggests that single-member districts are most vulnerable to high levels of polarization, the electoral systems using single-member districts—Parallel, Alternative Vote, and First-Past-The-Post—are coded with a 1, and all others are coded with a 0 in the first regression. A second regression is run using a stricter definition of single-member-district systems. In this case, only First-Past-The-Post systems are coded with a 1, while all other are coded with a 0.

2.2.3 Control variables

In addition to polarization and electoral system, a number of controls are included in the regression: quality of democracy, level of inequality, and economic growth. The quality of democracy is measured using the sum of Freedom House scores for political rights and civil liberties across countries in the election year. The lower the Freedom House score, the higher the level of democratization. Inequality is also measured during the election year, using the Gini coefficient. A high Gini coefficient implies higher inequality. This data was pulled from the election year since the level of inequality does not fluctuate much from year-to-year. The growth of real GDP is used to measure economic growth, and this was observed two years prior to the election. One would expect that a lower Freedom House score, lower inequality, and strong economic growth would be associated with less severe polarization.

Table 1: Regression results using lenient measure of electoral system and ideological polarization

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Polarization ¹	Polarization ¹	Polarization ¹	Polarization ¹
Electoral System ²	-1.464*** (0.370)	-1.284*** (0.329)	-1.317*** (0.264)	-1.318*** (0.265)
Freedom House Score ³		-0.320 (0.191)	-0.084 (0.227)	-0.083 (0.218)
Inequality ⁴			-5.065 (3.195)	-5.079 (3.112)
GDP growth ⁵				0.001 (0.032)
Constant	3.699*** (0.214)	4.533*** (0.437)	5.704*** (0.759)	5.704*** (0.769)
$R^2 - adjusted$	0.180	0.280	0.365	0.349
R^2	0.199	0.313	0.409	0.409
Observations	44	44	44	44
F	15.618	22.828	18.546	13.650

Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Notes: 1. The dependent variable is the level of ideological polarization. 2. Electoral system is represented by a binary variable. Systems that use SMDs are coded using 1 and all others with 0. 3. Total Freedom House score is found by using the sum of the Political Rights and Civil Liberties scores. 4. Inequality is measured using the Gini Coefficient. 5. Real GDP growth was collected two years prior to the election.

Source: Author's computations based on data found [here](#).

Table 2: Regression results with strict measure of electoral system and ideological polarization

	(1) Polarization ¹	(2) Polarization ¹	(3) Polarization ¹	(4) Polarization ¹
First-Past-the-Post ²	-1.141** (0.395)	-1.434*** (0.383)	-1.209** (0.374)	-1.207** (0.385)
Freedom House Score ³		-0.410 (0.208)	-0.206 (0.290)	-0.214 (0.278)
Inequality ⁴			-4.289 (3.395)	-4.154 (3.300)
GDP growth ⁵				-0.011 (0.035)
Constant	3.551*** (0.210)	4.664*** (0.513)	5.631*** (0.743)	5.634*** (0.754)
$R^2 - adjusted$	0.022	0.196	0.248	0.231
R^2	0.045	0.233	0.301	0.302
Observations	44	44	44	44
F	8.357	7.868	10.353	7.696

Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Notes: 1. The dependent variable is the level of ideological polarization. 2. Electoral system is represented by a binary variable. Systems that use SMDs are coded using 1 and all others with 0. 3. Total Freedom House score is found by using the sum of the Political Rights and Civil Liberties scores. 4. Inequality is measured using the Gini Coefficient. 5. Real GDP growth was collected two years prior to the election.

Source: Author's computations based on data found [here](#).

2.2.4 Regression results

Table 1 presents the results of the regression using the more inclusive definition of SMDs and Dalton's measure of ideological polarization. In all four columns, the coefficient on electoral systems is negative and significant at the 99% level, which means that SMDs are associated with lower polarization, even when controlling for quality of democracy, the level of inequality, and GDP growth. This contradicts much of the research on this topic, which depicts single-member district systems as contributors to polarization through their production of zero-sum games.

Table 2 confirms this relationship with the strict measure of SMD systems; however, the coefficient on electoral system is only significant at the 95% level in the first, third, and fourth columns. The coefficient on electoral system is significant at the 99% level only when controlling for quality of democracy. Notably, none of the coefficients on the control variables are significant at any level in either regression. The signs on inequality and Freedom House score are inconsistent with expectations—lower inequality and higher levels of democracy are associated with higher polarization levels. Interestingly, the coefficient on GDP growth is on the cusp of zero, positive with the lenient SMD measure and negative with the strict measure. This implies that the relationship between GDP growth and polarization is unclear.

Tables 3 and 4 repeat these regressions with the V-Dem Institute's measure of affective polarization, using the lenient and strict measures of electoral system, respectively. In each table, the coefficient on electoral system loses significance at all levels, and the sign changes from negative to positive. The positive sign makes more sense given the literature denouncing majoritarian systems, though the insignificance of the coefficient indicates that the electoral setup is less important than this literature implies. In these regressions, the coefficients on Freedom House score and inequality become positive, and the coefficient on GDP growth becomes consistently positive, though most remain insignificant. In column 2 of Table 4, the coefficient on Freedom House score becomes significant at the 90% level when

Table 3: Regression results with lenient measure of electoral system and affective polarization

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Polarization ¹	Polarization ¹	Polarization ¹	Polarization ¹
Electoral System ²	0.466 (0.496)	0.248 (0.633)	0.257 (0.624)	0.249 (0.636)
Freedom House Score ³		0.413 (0.217)	0.357 (0.305)	0.361 (0.306)
Inequality ⁴			1.201 (2.782)	1.127 (2.855)
GDP growth ⁵				0.005 (0.044)
Constant	-1.106*** (0.272)	-2.194** (0.657)	-2.476** (0.719)	-2.472** (0.736)
$R^2 - adjusted$	-0.010	0.106	0.086	0.062
R^2	0.014	0.149	0.153	0.153
Observations	42	42	42	42
F	0.880	1.811	2.096	1.662

Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Notes: 1. The dependent variable is the level of ideological polarization. 2. Electoral system is represented by a binary variable. Systems that use SMDs are coded using 1 and all others with 0. 3. Total Freedom House score is found by using the sum of the Political Rights and Civil Liberties scores. 4. Inequality is measured using the Gini Coefficient. 5. Real GDP growth was collected two years prior to the election.

Source: Author's computations based on data found [here](#).

polarization is regressed using only the strict measure of electoral system and the Freedom House score. The positive signs on Freedom House score and inequality are expected: a higher level of polarization is associated with a higher FH score, or less democratization, and more inequality. The coefficient on GDP growth is less consistent with expectations: A higher level of polarization is associated with more GDP growth. However, this coefficient is close to zero and insignificant.

In addition to democratization level, economic inequality, and GDP growth, other factors may influence polarization. This includes the influx of immigration leading up to an election, the media environment and the language used in reporting, as well as the level of social capital in a country. Immigration data was not available for all countries in question, which would have significantly decreased our sample size, and operationalizing the media environment and social capital proved difficult. The absence of these variables, however, should not threaten my results as they pertain to the effect of electoral system on polarization. Omitted variable bias requires that: (1) the omitted variable is correlated with the regressor, X ; and (2) the omitted variable has an effect on the dependent variable, Y (Stock and Watson, 2019, p.170). I expect that these variables fail to meet the second requirement as immigration, the media environment, and social capital appear to be independent of electoral system.

The conflicting results using ideological and affective polarization indicate that a more proportional electoral system contributes to a larger distribution of parties along the political spectrum but does not affect the extent to which party politics seeps into aspects of society beyond politics. In other words, a more proportional electoral system may result in a wider range of political beliefs, but the choice of electoral system, either way, does not encourage social sorting or hostility between voters. Increasing proportionality will not reduce polarization, and SMDs may not be as divisive as the literature indicates.

Table 4: Regression results with strict measure of electoral system and affective polarization

	(1) Polarization ¹	(2) Polarization ¹	(3) Polarization ¹	(4) Polarization ¹
First-Past-the-Post ²	0.634 (0.684)	0.968 (0.708)	0.932 (0.722)	0.929 (0.740)
Freedom House Score ³		0.445* (0.219)	0.412 (0.304)	0.416 (0.308)
Inequality ⁴			0.726 (2.724)	0.627 (2.792)
GDP growth ⁵				0.007 (0.043)
Constant	-1.069*** (0.251)	-2.294** (0.659)	-2.461** (0.706)	-2.455** (0.720)
$R^2 - adjusted$	-0.015	0.125	0.104	0.080
R^2	0.010	0.168	0.170	0.170
Observations	42	42	42	42
F	0.861	2.464	2.293	1.776

Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Notes: 1. The dependent variable is the level of ideological polarization. 2. Electoral system is represented by a binary variable. Systems that use SMDs are coded using 1 and all others with 0. 3. Total Freedom House score is found by using the sum of the Political Rights and Civil Liberties scores. 4. Inequality is measured using the Gini Coefficient. 5. Real GDP growth was collected two years prior to the election.

Source: Author's computations based on data found [here](#).

2.3 Case study: Interwar Europe

The quantitative analysis above indicates that increased proportionality in an electoral system is not a viable solution for polarization, having no significant effect on affective polarization and resulting in higher levels of ideological polarization when controlling for quality of democracy, the level of inequality, and GDP growth. To further investigate the relationship between proportional representation and polarization, I examine a collection of case studies from interwar Europe: Spain, France, and Great Britain. During this period, Europe was characterized by high levels of polarization and subsequent democratic collapse, and scholars have suggested that electoral systems played a role in this instability. The analysis below reveals that proportional representation was associated with higher levels of hostility: Spain experienced the most severe polarization under the most proportional system, while Great Britain experienced relative stability under the least proportional system.

2.3.1 Spain

Like many interwar European countries, the Spanish Republic faced a crisis between 1931 and 1936, during which democracy deteriorated. The Spanish situation was unique—it was the only country whose breakdown culminated in a violent civil war. Throughout this crisis, Spain had an extremely polarized multiparty system (Linz, 1978, p. 145) with cleavages related to class, religion, and regional conflicts (Linz, 1978, p. 142), and political parties were only conditionally loyal to the democratic regime. Their support was only guaranteed “so long as certain values they held higher than democracy could be pursued within the democratic framework” (Linz, 1978, p. 149). The divide pitted the Nationalists, who were composed mostly of Roman Catholics, military leaders, landowners, and businessmen (Britannica, 2021) against the Republicans, who were mostly urban and agricultural laborers, as well as the educated middle class and supporters of socialism (Britannica, 2021). The Civil War erupted in 1936 when the Nationalists attempted a military coup and failed to overtake the Republican government (Britannica, 2021). The Nationalists won the war, and Spain was brought under the rule of a dictator—Francisco Franco—until his death in 1975, when the country began to transition back into a democratic state. As will be shown in the discussion below, the PR electoral system prior to the war contributed to the high polarization. Additionally, the decrease in proportionality within the Spanish electoral system between the Second Spanish Republic and the post-Franco democracy was associated with a decrease in polarization levels. This indicates that increased proportionality is not the great solution to polarization that the literature claims.

During the Second Spanish Republic, the state was equipped with a proportional representation (PR) electoral system. According to Juan Linz, because it allotted a “disproportionate number of seats... to a relative minority” (Linz, 1978, p. 168), this system encouraged “major parties to court minor parties by including their candidates in joint lists and to deemphasize distinctions between allies, at least at the national level” (Linz, 1978, p. 168). Another factor influencing this coalition-building was that a “minimum quorum” was required “to qualify to obtain seats and to avoid a runoff in which divided opponents could unite to gain a disproportionate advantage” (Linz, 1978, p.168). Moderate parties found allies in extremists in their search for power.

In addition to allowing radicals into the government, the PR system in Spain also reinforced “the lack of solidarity within the political class and the tense style of the parliamentary process” (Linz, 1978, p. 170) that was created by “the enormous discontinuity and inexperience of the political personnel of the regime” (Linz, 1978, p.170) since only 11.7% of members that served between 1931 and 1936 also served in parliament between 1916 and 1923 (Linz, 1978, p. 170). The legislature lacked the relationships necessary to build informal communication within the elite that could have counteracted polarizing tendencies, according to Linz. This was perpetuated by an electoral system that produced high turnover.

Despite condemning Spain’s proportional representation system for its role in polarizing the political environment—“the Spanish system seems to have combined the disadvantages of extreme multipartisan, centrifugal polarization and confrontation of two major blocs, causing a bimodal distribution and the elimination of the Center, and assuring minor extremist groups of a disproportionate number of candidates” (Linz, 1978, p. 169)—he is wary of placing blame for the democratic breakdown solely on the electoral system. Instead, he blames the elite who “were aware of the dysfunctional consequences of the electoral system” who failed to make any “serious effort to reform the system” (Linz, 1978, p.169). This failure of the elite, however, does not absolve the system of blame as it was the source

of the problem. Linz even admits that it required reform, stating that “a reform of the electoral law might have reduced the polarization of 1936” (Linz, 1978, p. 185).

Although recognizing that the electoral system contributed to the breakdown of Spanish democracy by perpetuating polarization, Linz abstains from criticizing PR systems, generalizing the danger to systems “that necessitat[e] coalition with extremists and produc[e] overrepresentation in Parliament of the winning coalition, [leading] to a fragmented and polarized situation that was probably more dangerous to democracy than proportional representation would have been” (Linz, 1978, p.149) ¹. By separating the electoral system from polarization, Linz contradicts the work of Ferdinand Hermens, who ties PR to polarization—“it is a device which divides the nation against itself” (Hermens, 1941).

Hermens emphasizes the elements of PR that contribute to polarization: its tendency to support extremists and prevent unity. By allowing small minorities to gain seats in the legislature, PR bestows upon them an “inestimable” privilege (Hermens, 1941, p. 25). The seats let these parties remain on the ballot, allow them to advertize themselves, and force their opponents to acknowledge them and provide even more publicity, whether good or bad (Hermens, 1941, p. 25). Further, the parliamentary members receive both a salary, which translates to funding for the party, and, in many democracies, immunity, which can allow them to defame opponents (Hermens, 1941, p. 25). Thus, PR opens the door of legislatures to extremists and provides key resources to sustain them.

To obtain these resources, extremists are encouraged to campaign for the “protest vote” by “blaming existing difficulties not only on one of the democratic parties but on the ‘democratic system’ as a whole” (Hermens, 1941, p. 26). What’s most dangerous is that this worldview is never tested, so long as democratic institutions are in place. Extremists, even if in government, can shed responsibility for the state’s condition by either blaming the party or parties in power or by blaming the other members of their coalition (Hermens, 1941, p. 33). In this blaming, the extremists reinforce the idea of exclusionary membership—the “Other parties are looked upon as a different political sect, and contact with them means contamination” (Hermens, 1941, p. 34). This leads to the social sorting associated with polarization when it leaves the political dimension. Under these conditions, other cleavages begin to disappear or align with the divides espoused by the party elites. In the end, “artificial lines are drawn, and national unity is destroyed” (Hermens, 1941, p. 35). Hermens contrasts PR systems and majoritarian systems using this outcome: whereas the latter prevents these developments, once the former “has prepared the way for division it will easily proceed, gathering strength as it grows by reason of the conditions which it creates” (Hermens, 1941, p. 35). As a result, Hermens would argue that the proportional representation system in Spain was dangerous to its democracy because it allowed extremists into the legislature, opened the door for coalitions including them, and resulted in a polarized system.

Following the Spanish Civil War, the country plunged into a dictatorship under Francisco Franco from 1939 until his death in 1975. Following his demise, Juan Carlos became the King of Spain and began to push for liberal democracy (Cortada and Cortada, 1996b, p. 114). This transition between Franco’s reign to democracy became “evolutionary” under Juan Carlos’s rule, taking “place under the constant guidance and legitimate authority of a single head of state” (Gunther, 1991, p. 215). He included “political representatives of all significant sectors of Spanish society” (Gunther, 1991, p. 215) in the negotiations to establish the new democratic institutions.

Polarization subsided with the enactment of this new democratic experiment. James N. Cortada and James W. Cortada believe that “the anticompromistic feature of traditional Spanish political behavior” was eased mostly by “conversations in the home” (Cortada and Cortada, 1996b, p. 106), praising increasingly tolerant social norms. In addition, they incorporate a discussion of the electoral system into their analysis, indicating that Spain’s adoption of a PR system *restricting* proportionality helped reduce polarization. After Franco’s rule, the country adopted the D’Hondt formula for proportional representation, which favors large parties over small ones. Further, it encourages long-term coalitions and moderation by promoting political alliances that develop beyond a single-issue and dissolve after a vote (Cortada and Cortada, 1996b, p. 108).

Richard Gunther also implies that the new electoral system helped reduce polarization. He compares Spain and Portugal during this period, which both adopted the D’Hondt system. Spain’s version was characterized by a greater number of electoral districts and a smaller number of representatives

¹Considering the American context, the same can be said: To remain in office, the Republican party has aligned with and accepted its more radical members, and the majoritarian system typically results in overrepresentation of the winning party by nature.

elected from each. Gunther argues that the “smaller number of deputies from each district” in Spain led to less proportionality and allowed single-party minority governments to occur (Gunther, 1991, p. 246). These minority governments would then be prompted to work with either the left or right to pass legislation, depending on the issue, encouraging compromise and disincentivizing hostility (Gunther, 1991, p. 246).

Gunther, however, does not only focus on the electoral system’s role in reducing polarization. He also credits the elite who developed the new constitution with reducing antagonism and polarization because they “rejected the notion that majority parties should take advantage of their voting in order to maximize the interests of their respective clienteles” (Gunther, 1991, p. 233) and engaged in a “politics of consensus” (Gunther, 1991, p. 233). This indicates that the depolarization in Spain required a tolerant political strategy, rather than institutional reforms.

Whether or not the reform of the electoral system was the sole driver changing the political environment in interwar Spain from one riddled with hostility and crippled by the inability of parties to compromise, the modification of the proportional representation system was associated with a decrease in polarization. Gunther and Cortada both note how a decrease in proportionality under the D’Hondt system promoted long-term coalition building and moderation, while Linz and Hermens demonize the PR system and its acceptance of extremists and accompanying centrifugal forces. This contradicts the literature praising proportionality and its centripetal tendencies, generally.

2.3.2 France

The French Third Republic lasted from 1870 to 1940, when the country was conquered during WWII. This regime lasted longer than both the First and Second Republics and was relatively resilient (Hermens, 1941, p. 121). Although French political parties were not large or well organized, they had no trouble forming governments because the elites were not obstructionists—“It never required weeks or months, as it frequently did in so many PR countries, where rigid parties developed which were not strong enough to exercise power alone, but often enough able to prevent anyone else from obtaining a majority” (Hermens, 1941, p. 122). However, the lack of organized political parties resulted in instability because deputies who lost their seats when parliaments were dissolved had to bear all of the expenses of a new campaign, leading to debts and fatigue.

Hermens also attributes some of France’s instability to the PR element in the country’s elections: the second ballot. Under this system, if a candidate (either for parliament or the presidency) fails to receive a majority of the votes in the first round, then a second round occurs. During the latter, any party can run a candidate, even if they were not on the original ballot, and only a plurality is needed to win (Hermens, 1941, p. 124). This gives smaller and more extreme parties an advantage they don’t normally have in a majoritarian system, where they are forced into coalitions with larger parties to win. As a result, Hermens argues that “the system of the second ballot has led to the perpetuation of party division” (Hermens, 1941, p. 125).

Cortada and Cortada also note the tendency for this combination electoral system to produce winners toward the more extreme ends of the spectrum (Cortada and Cortada, 1996a, p. 87). Voters are most likely to choose parties outside of the mainstream when they are fed up with the current politics and “frustrated” with government inaction (Cortada and Cortada, 1996a, p. 87). The pair attributes these votes to the individualism emphasized in French culture (Cortada and Cortada, 1996a, p. 87), but these votes for the extremists are facilitated by the second ballot and attempts at proportional voting. Without the institutional opening for small parties, French individualism would not be enough alone to encourage and empower extremists.

Hermens uses the French case study to bolster support for the majoritarian system, outlining the moderation that stems from appeals to the marginal, or swing, voter. He emphasizes how Socialist deputies rejected radicalism because they required support from centrists to maintain their seats; this was only possible under a majoritarian system, according to Hermens, because the candidates did not need the support of the radical party elites. The marginal voter held all of the power. He argues that the connection between the elected officials and the marginal voters “was the tie which kept French politics together” (Hermens, 1941, p. 135). PR is dangerous because parties can focus solely on the supporters of their party, tempting them to remain on the extreme ends of the spectrum.

Another example of a more extreme party catering to the marginal voter is France’s Communist Party. In 1924, PR was applied to a handful of districts, and where it was present, Communists found success. Four years later, when the majoritarian system was back in play, their numbers took a big hit,

and they remained weak until an economic crisis incited a protest vote in 1936. During this election, the Communists moved away from their more radical tendencies to join a leftist coalition called the Popular Front. This was their only route to power under the majoritarian system. Whereas under PR, radical parties would gain power, they were shut out or forced to moderate by the majoritarian system. The French case demonstrates how the majoritarian system in place prevented polarization from getting out of hand.

2.3.3 Great Britain

During the interwar period, the British system of government operated under a majoritarian electoral system. The nation has had a First-Past-the-Post, single-member district electoral system since 1885, and it is considered the birthplace of FPTP systems (Project, 2005). In the time leading up to this period, Hermens simulates electoral results for a PR system in Britain by taking the vote distribution under the majoritarian system and assuming that “the only effect of PR would be to produce a ‘just distribution’ of the seats in proportion to the votes cast” (Hermens, 1941, p. 115). He finds that, between 1885 and 1910, the more proportional system would have “severely” decreased the votes of the original majorities, which he argues would’ve given substantial bargaining power to smaller factions within the majority and “destroyed the basis for one-party-majority governments” (Hermens, 1941, p. 115).

In the elections following WWI, the parties who earned either a majority or key seat in a coalition had obtained more seats in parliament than PR would have permitted. Based on these simulations, Hermens asserts that “under PR the English type of government would no longer exist” (Hermens, 1941, p. 117), emphasizing how PR discourages cooperation: Under PR, new parties would distinguish themselves from those currently in the system, creating a worldview uniquely their own, and fostering an environment that promotes extremism and discourages cooperation with outsiders (Hermens, 1941, p. 118). This ties into Hermen’s argument that PR violates the “classical concept of representation.” This is the idea that an elected official represents the entire nation, not just his voters. PR prompts elected officials to act as “a representative of [their] particular class or party rather than of the nation as a whole” (Hermens, 1941, p. 100), so they are “no longer able to act in the best interests of the entire country” (Hermens, 1941, p. 100). The British case is one revealing a connection between political stability and FPTP electoral systems.

2.4 Conclusions

The United States is characterized by extreme polarization, and this hit headlines with the election of President Trump in 2016, though there are indications that hostilities had been growing prior. The coronavirus pandemic only worsened hostilities between Democrats and Republicans as debates over masks and vaccines alienated the two groups from each other and pushed people onto social media and into echo chambers. The polarization reached a peak in January 2021 when supporters of President Trump stormed the Capitol to prevent the certification of President Biden’s electoral victory. The opposing camps interpreted the event in two irreconcilable ways: Democrats insisted that their conservative counterparts instigated an insurrection and an assault on democracy, while Republicans insisted that it was “legitimate political discourse,” according to a statement released by the Republican National Committee in February 2022.

To solve this issue, many scholars suggest reforming the American electoral system to increase proportionality, such as the implementation of proportional representation and multi-member districts. Most American scholarship condemns the country’s single-member districts and winner-take-all system; however, consensus on the correct reforms remains out of reach. This disagreement is what motivated my research.

Both the quantitative and qualitative analyses above demonstrate that increased proportionality is not a solution for polarization. The regressions of polarization on electoral system reveal that SMDs actually decrease ideological polarization, or the dispersion of parties along the left-right spectrum, and have no significant effect on affective polarization, or the level of hostility between citizens within and beyond the realm of politics. The case studies also reveal that countries with lower levels of proportionality in their electoral systems saw less polarization. Spain had the most severe polarization, which culminated in a civil war, and experienced a decrease in those levels with the advent of the D’Hondt PR system, a restriction on proportionality. France had less severe polarization than Spain

during the interwar period and had only a small PR element in its electoral system—the second ballot. Great Britain did not see polarization during this period with its majoritarian system, the antithesis of proportionality. Research suggests that PR either worsened or had no effect on polarization. Current literature promoting proportionality fails to take into account the historical application of these reforms—PR and multi-member districts are not the hail Mary that America needs.

That said, additional research into the potential depolarizing tendencies of ranked-choice voting in single-member-districts is needed. Unlike ranked-choice voting in MMDs, in SMDs, proportionality would remain unchanged. The only effect would be to moderate parties by imploring them to target centrist voters for their second-choice vote, which could lend itself to a reduction in hostility between parties. The United States, with its array of SMDs, would be a great place to experiment with this strategy, and this has already started at the state-level. On January 19, 2022, the Alaska Supreme Court upheld a 2020 electoral reform measure that changes the primary and general election voting system by implementing ranked-choice (Pildes, 2022). Under the new policy, candidates present themselves as either affiliated with a party, undeclared, or nonpartisan in the primary, and the top four candidates move on to the general; the winner in the general election is then chosen using ranked-choice (Pildes, 2022). This was implemented with the hope of increasing moderation by forcing candidates to appeal broadly for the second choice of voters in addition to the first choice (Pildes, 2022). Richard H. Pildes claims that the midterm elections will shed light on the viability of this option with the re-election campaign of Alaskan Senator Lisa Murkowski, a Republican who voted to convict former President Trump during the impeachment trial last year. She has tended to appeal to the center since at least 2010, and Trump has endorsed a more extreme candidate, promising to campaign against Murkowski. With Alaska’s implementation of ranked-choice voting, as well as New York City, Maine, Utah, and now, potentially, Nevada, only time will tell whether this electoral reform strategy can discourage extremism and decrease polarization.

3 Political remedies

Political remedies include reforms focused on political norms, strategies, and rhetoric. This paper uses Steven Levitsky and David Ziblatt’s definition of norms, which describes them as the “shared codes of conduct that become common knowledge within a particular community or society—accepted, respected, and enforced by its members” (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019, p. 101). Juxtaposed with institutional remedies, the political remedies are more personal, relying on individual actors or groups of individual actors to overhaul the political environment. The political remedies investigated below include the creation of formal and informal pacts between the elite to pursue cooperation at all costs and the use of inclusive campaign rhetoric by a prominent political party and its candidates.

Section 3.1 discusses previous literature on political remedies. Section 3.2 examines case studies, including the United States post-Civil War, Spain post-1976, and Turkey in 2019, to determine whether these strategies are effective in practice. The US and Spain cases reveal that formal and informal pacts between the elite to avoid divisive issues can work to reduce polarization, though the trigger for organization is typically violence, the costs are exclusion and discrimination, and the effects are temporary as cleavages remain under the surface. Turkey’s experience with inclusive rhetoric suggests that polarization can be reduced using this strategy in the short-run, though the long-term impacts are unknown.

3.1 Previous literature

A political method for reducing polarization manifests in the actions of the elites, the norms they espouse, and the strategies they pursue. For example, Daniel H. Levine suggests that Venezuela’s democracy found success after 1958 because of a change in elite-level norms from the first democratic experiment between 1945 and 1948 and the previous dictatorships. The previous, brief stint with democracy ended in a military coup because the main party, the *Accion Democrática* (AD), refused to compromise and “religious, military, business, agrarian, and competing electoral elites” (Levine, 1974, p. 94) began to see their power as a threat. In the second experience with democracy, political parties continued to play a central role in the political system—they were the “principal agents for the expression of political conflict, and most political transactions [were] filtered through the net of party

leadership” (Levine, 1974, p. 84). As a result, the elite could contain political conflict at a high level and prevent it from disseminating to the masses (Levine, 1974).

Following the military rule in the decade prior to democracy’s emergence in 1958, party elites began to recognize the costs of intense conflict and the potential benefits of cooperation. They created the Pact of Punto Fijo, which was characterized by the “explicit decision of political elites to reduce interparty tension and violence, accentuate common interests and procedures, and remove, insofar as possible, issues of survival and legitimacy from the political scene” (Levine, 1974, p. 93). Under this pact, the major parties recognized the legitimacy of their opposition, called for the depersonalization of conflict, emphasized mutual interests, and committed to democratic institutions (Levine, 1974, p. 93-4). Norms of restraint and compromise were elevated, and conflict became institutionalized in the party organizations, elections, the legislature, and official agencies. Levine argues that the combination of normative and structural changes within Venezuela after 1958 were “central to the evolution of the political system...and to its ability to survive the sorts of crises which wrecked the initial democratic experiment of the postwar years” (Levine, 1974, p. 83).

Scott Mainwaring and Anibal Perez-Linan’s work is tangentially related. Instead of examining the direct effect of norms on the level of polarization, they look at the effect of norms on the breakdown of democracy. Using a quantitative analysis of Latin American countries, the scholars conclude that “Democracies are more likely to survive when political actors have a strong normative preference for democracy and when they avoid radical positions” (Mainwaring and Perez-Linan, 2013, p. 124). A strong normative preference for democracy makes political actors “more willing to endure policies that hurt their interests because they perceive such policies as based on legitimate, binding decisions” (Mainwaring and Perez-Linan, 2013, p. 126). The willingness to acquiesce to the opposition ties in closely to norms of compromise and restraint.

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt also focus on the connection between political norms and democratic breakdown, though they add a connection to polarization. The pair of scholars emphasize that democracies have the greatest chance of survival “where written constitutions are reinforced by their own unwritten rules of the game” (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019, p. 101) or democratic norms, as these norms prevent “day-to-day political competition from devolving into a no-hands-barred conflict” (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019, p. 101)—i.e. they prevent polarization. The most important democratic norms, according to Levitsky and Ziblatt, are mutual toleration, or accepting the opposition as having a legitimate claim to power, and institutional forbearance, or “avoiding actions that, while respecting the letter of the law, obviously violate its spirit” (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019, p. 106). The absence of these norms leads to high stakes elections and opponents begin to view each other as existential threats, diminishing the possibility for cooperation and compromise.

In the case of the United States, Levitsky and Ziblatt propose elite-focused reforms aimed at rebuilding these types of norms. The two advocate for an expansion of the Republican party electoral base and the marginalization of its extremist elements. On the Democratic side, Levitsky and Ziblatt suggest altering the platform to contain more universalistic welfare policies instead of means-tested programs to decrease the resentment resulting from stagnated economic progress (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019, p. 228). Lilliana Mason’s proposed depolarization strategies also apply to party elites: She suggests reforming the Republican coalition to include cross-cutting identities and shifting both the Republican and Democratic platforms to enable cross-partisan voting (Mason, 2018).

Levitsky and Ziblatt, in addition to the aforementioned political strategies, offer rhetorical solutions to restore democratic norms as well. Specifically, they argue that the Republican party needs to avoid white nationalist rhetoric (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019). Also proponents of rhetorical-based solutions to polarization, F. Michael Wuthrich and Melvyn Ingleby emphasize the importance of inclusive campaigns, focusing on the strategy of *Radical Love* used by the opposition candidate in the 2019 Istanbul mayoral election. This strategy promoted inclusion and respect for the populist in power and supporters of the opposing camp (Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020).

3.2 Case studies

The following section walks through three case studies to see whether elite-driven reforms are effective in practice, including the United States after the Civil War, Spain after Franco’s rule, and Turkey today. The US and Spanish cases focus on formal and informal pacts between the elite to avoid pursuing divisive policies, while the Turkish case examines the use of an inclusive campaign strategy. The cases suggest that formal and informal pacts may help reduce polarization in the short-run; however,

violence is often needed as a trigger, costs are high, and effects are temporary. Inclusive rhetoric also appears to work in the short-run, though its durability depends on the elites' willingness to continue in their pursuit of tolerance, and elite behavior tends to be unpredictable and uncontrollable.

3.2.1 United States: Post-Civil War

American polarization peaked with the eruption of the Civil War in 1865. The United States was divided over the issue of slavery—Southern Democrats fought to uphold the institution, whereas Republicans from the North fought to abolish it. Because these two groups were geographically sorted, identities aligned beyond partisanship to include class and urbanization level. The intensity of the slavery debate was so severe that southern states attempted to secede from the nation, viewing the emancipation of slaves, upon whom their economic well-being and perception of status rested, as a threat to their standard of living and democracy as they understood it.

With the Union victory and the conclusion of the war, the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments were passed, abolishing slavery and granting former slaves citizenship and the protection of the Constitution, but tensions lingered. According to Levitsky and Ziblatt, opposing camps began to accept each other as legitimate with the passage of time and “only after the issue of racial equality was removed from the political agenda” (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019, p. 124). The Compromise of 1877 and the failure of Senator Henry Cabot Lodge’s 1890 Federal Election Bill played a large role in this marginalization of racial equality (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019, p. 124). The former ended the electoral dispute of the 1876 presidential competition, securing a victory for Republican President Rutherford B. Hayes in exchange for the removal of federal troops from the south. This compromise effectively ended Reconstruction and allowed Democrats to establish a single-party rule in the South, leading to institutionalized segregation and the impingement of civil rights for Blacks living in the region. The acquiescence to southern power led to a recognition of “the principle of white supremacy in the South and made the federal government a partner in its consolidation and expansion” (L., 1951, p. 446). And with the failure of Senator Lodge’s election bill came the end of “federal efforts to protect African American voting rights in the South, thereby ensuring their demise” (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019, p. 124). Racial equality efforts were largely cast aside until the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-twentieth century.

Polarization remained relatively tame throughout the early twentieth century, and during the 1950s, especially, the two parties were engaged in “a bipartisan love match,” according to *The Washington Post*. Republican President Eisenhower was credited with molding the “American consensus” (Drutman, 2020, p. 35) and “mov[ing] his party to the center, developing a brand of ‘modern Republicanism’ very similar to the Democratic Party” (Drutman, 2020, p. 35), incentivizing cooperation from the Democrats. Further, the historical context was extremely unique: the United States had just endured the Great Depression and two world wars, and the Cold War was already underway (Drutman, 2020, p. 36). These events inspired unity among Americans. Historian Louis Hartz, writing in 1955, also emphasized how the parties “agreed on the basic tenets of democratic capitalism—property rights, individual liberty, and majority rule [which] left little to fight about in national politics—as long as one ignored a long history of racial and cultural conflicts” (Drutman, 2020, p. 36). And these conflicts were ignored during this period.

With the race issue off the table, norms of cooperation and toleration characterized politics. The “fundamental threat” (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019, p. 124) of racial equality no longer antagonized Southern Democrats, and American politics became racially homogenized: The two parties were able to work toward common goals (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019, p. 144). Figure 1 presents US polarization levels in the twentieth century according to the Varieties of Democracy Index, and this variable measures affective polarization or the extent to which hostilities have spread beyond politics to society as a whole. Although polarization preceding the Civil War was not calculated, we can compare the levels from the twentieth century to today’s, which represent intense polarization. Polarization in the first half of the century averaged 1.256, whereas the twenty-first century has averaged 2.764—2021’s polarization, the highest recorded on the chart is 3.93, over three times greater than recorded in 1900. There was a brief increase in hostilities when racial issues reached the top of the agenda in the 1960s with the Civil Rights Movement, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, but this was followed by a short-lived decline from 1970–80. The 80s began a trend of increasing polarization. However, to discount the racial elements of contemporary polarization would be a mistake. According to Johanna Kalb, the 1965 Voting Rights Act “launched a fundamental realignment of the parties

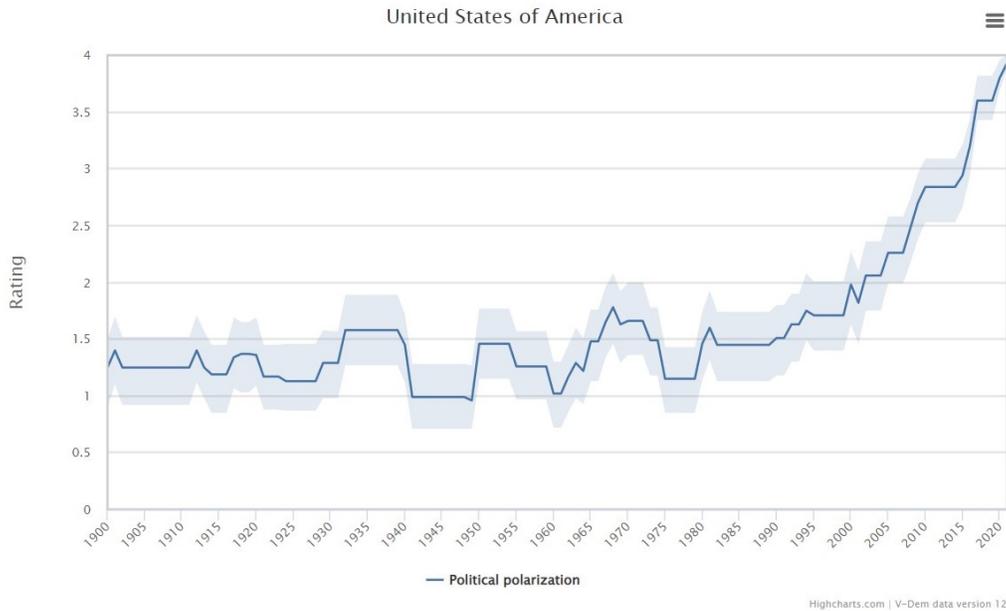


Figure 1: This graph plots the level of polarization in the US from 1900 to 2021.

that began to polarize the electorate along racial lines” (Kalb, 2018, p. 57) as southerners became convinced that the Democratic Party was committed to “black interests at the expense of white ones” (Kalb, 2018, p. 58).

Once the Jim Crow injustices became impossible to ignore, liberal Democrats allied with “liberal and moderate Republicans primarily from the Northeast against conservative Republicans in the West” (Drutman, 2020, p. 59). This pursuit of civil rights reforms forced southern conservative Democrats to convert to the Republican Party, which was filled with elites rallying against civil rights, from Barry Goldwater to Richard Nixon (Drutman, 2020, p. 62). Nixon and other Republican leaders “saw the backlash to civil rights and the rioting of the previous few years as an opportunity to exploit” (Drutman, 2020, p. 60) and began to adopt a strategy of “dog whistle politics,” which uses “coded language and imagery” (Drutman, 2020, p. 63) to discuss racial issues. Instead of promoting overtly racist policies, they preached, for example, about “law and order” or “fiscal responsibility” (Drutman, 2020, p. 63). As elites elevated culture war concerns and racial equality, the divisions in society became exacerbated.

Whereas in the early 1900s, politicians implicitly agreed to overlook racial exclusion to keep the peace, the second half of the century and the first quarter of the twenty-first have been defined by different norms: More and more politicians initiated policies aimed at protecting the civil liberties of Black Americans. These original norms of overlooking racial injustice helped stave off polarization—the era of consensus “depended on a consensus to keep civil rights off the national agenda” (Drutman, 2020, p. 82)—but there is a huge problem with this method. As articulated by Levitsky and Ziblatt, “the norms that would later serve as a foundation for American democracy emerged out of a profoundly undemocratic arrangement: racial exclusion and the consolidation of single-party rule in the South” (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019, p. 125). Many Americans were left without fundamental civil and human rights, and they remained susceptible to discrimination and violence—a large cost to pay for cooperation and consensus.

3.2.2 Spain: Post-1976

Between 1936 and 1939, Spanish citizens were engaged in a brutal civil war that ended with the institution of an authoritarian regime under Francisco Franco. Following the death of Franco in 1975, Spain began transitioning from a dictatorship to a democracy. During this transition, the political elite developed and adopted the *pacto de olvido*, or the pact of forgetting, which was an unofficial agreement to “refrain from seeking accountability for past wrongs” (Eisikovits, 2015, p. 75) committed during the

Civil War. It culminated in a 1977 amnesty law. The act, translated into English, amnesties “all acts of political intent, *whatever their result*, typified as crimes and misdemeanors” [emphasis added] (Shevel, 2011, p. 139), thus guaranteeing “that perpetrators of institutional violence committed under the dictatorship [and during the war] would not be punished” (Shevel, 2011, p. 139) for a range of harms, including “mass killings and...repression” (Shevel, 2011, 139). In addition to foregoing accountability for these harms, the pact further ensured that the political elite avoided legislative initiatives that would reinvigorate old divides (Eisikovits, 2015, p. 75). As a result of this pact, the two sides of the political spectrum successfully implemented a new democracy, characterized by compromise, from the left agreeing to a parliamentary monarchy and the right granting autonomy to ethnic minorities (Eisikovits, 2015, p. 139). The elite in Spain made a conscious effort to leave political tensions and conflicts in the past, creating a norm of mutual toleration.

“Reconciliation, consensus, and forgetting the past” became “the foundations” of Spanish democracy (Gelonch-Sole, 2013, p. 513). The elite norm of amnesia infiltrated the masses, and any “mention of the civil war was, as *The Economist* put it, ‘kept out of everything, from politics to dinner-party conversations’” (Encarnacion, 2008a). Further, this amnesia ensured that discussions pertaining to the dictatorship and the politically-motivated crimes during the war and Franco’s regime were “expelled from academic, cultural, social, and political life” (Escudero, 2014, p. 132). Through forgetting, the elite could work beside their former enemies. Another component of this pact was the renouncement of the past. This included both the renouncement of the dictatorship by Franco supporters, as well as a renouncement of the Second Spanish Republic and its 1931 Constitution by democracy advocates (Escudero, 2014, p. 132). This compromise precipitated further agreements.

The pact was driven primarily by fear: fear of another civil war or dictatorship, fear of democracy failing (Encarnacion, 2008b, p. 440). This fear, both at the elite level and among the masses, was heightened by the failed military coup of 1981, *El Tejerazo*, during which Lieutenant Colonel Antonio Tejero, attempted to dismantle the budding democracy (Encarnacion, 2008b, p. 440, 443). The Spanish were reminded of the fragility of their new form of government and were inspired to come together to protect it. However, the threat of a return to civil war or military rule permeated Spanish society from the moment of Franco’s death as political violence became common. This “wave of political violence” (Encarnacion, 2008a, p. 40) during the transition was perpetrated by extremists on both the right and the left. The left engaged in political assassinations through the terrorist group Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), which began the murders in 1973 with Admiral Carrero Blanco, Franco’s political heir, and continued to increase the numbers of the dead from 43 in 1975 to 78 in 1978 to 118 in 1980 (Encarnacion, 2008a, p. 40). These political assassinations echoed those that precipitated the civil war in 1936 (Encarnacion, 2008a, p. 40). The right was also responsible for political violence, including the Atocha Massacre, during which six members of the Communist Party were killed (Encarnacion, 2008a, p. 40). The right-wing extremists carried out over 70 assassinations between 1977-80 (Encarnacion, 2008a, p. 40).

Additionally, a sense of self-preservation motivated the pact. Both sides, Republicans on the left and Nationalists on the Right, stood to lose much if indictments for crimes from the civil war and Francoist eras were pursued. The right was guilty of mass killings of Republicans and Republican-supporters (Encarnacion, 2008b, p. 450), while the left targeted priests during the war, committed to Stalin’s policies, and massacred nationalists and nationalist sympathizers (Eisikovits, 2015, p. 76). Because of their shared guilt, both parties were interested in leaving the past buried.

Figure 2 presents a graph of polarization in Spain between 1900 and 2021 that was compiled by the Varieties of Democracy Index. Political Polarization in this case refers to affective polarization, or the extent to which tensions expand into society beyond politics. As expected, polarization is high leading up to the Civil War, during the Civil War, and immediately after. There is a significant drop in polarization in the late 1970s, around the implementation of the Pact of Forgetting and the 1977 Amnesty Law, and polarization remains fairly low for about thirty years, until the early 2000s. Following 2007, polarization has been increasing steadily. During this year, the Law on Historical Memory was passed.

The law “formally denounced Franco’s regime...called for the removal of prominent Francoist symbols and memorials, and committed to help exhume and honour victims of the dictatorship” (Eisikovits, 2015, p. 77) who remained in mass, unmarked graves. The movement to “recover...Spain’s historical memory” (Shevel, 2011, p. 141) was begun in 2004 by the Spanish Socialist Party. Notably, there was no attempt to revoke the 1977 amnesty law (Encarnacion, 2008b, 438). The Law on Historical Mem-



Figure 2: This graph plots the level of polarization in Spain from 1900 to 2021.

ory reveals the pact of forgetting’s failure to resolve disputes—the suppression of history prevented a formal reconciliation and forced the victims of Franco’s repression into silence. The conflict was merely pushed to the future, to a more stable period not characterized by a democratic transition. The right pushed back against these attempts at reconciliation, while the left accused their opposition “of keeping a veil over ‘the Spanish Holocaust’” (Encarnacion, 2008b, p. 438). Omar Encarnacion described the conflict over the new law as “a civil war all of its own” (Encarnacion, 2008b, p. 438) and Nir Eisikovits acknowledged that the temporary truce “became an impediment to further democratic development” (Eisikovits, 2015, p. 79); however, Oxana Shevel believes that Spanish society remained relatively unified despite the disagreements. Shevel notes that the law prevented another occurrence of severe polarization by “recognizing all victims of political violence and creating legitimacy and a public place for competing memories of the past, rather than by the state establishing or designating one version of historical memory for the country overall” (Shevel, 2011, p. 146).

The Spanish case reveals that norms of amnesia only temporarily bridge the gap between opposing camps. The Republicans failed to obtain justice for the brutality they suffered at the hands of the Nationalists and, later, Franco, and the issue inevitably made its way to the top of the political agenda years later. Society’s cleavages lingered under the surface, threatening the political stability of the nation once again. A direct causal relationship cannot be drawn between the increase in polarization seen in Figure 2 around 2007 to the Law of Historical Memory, but there are indications that the resurfacing of this issue has negatively impacted Spanish politics.

3.2.3 Turkey: Contemporary politics

The Venezuelan, American, and Spanish cases reveal that formal and informal pacts between political elites to overlook divisive issues and pursue cooperation above all are characterized by three problems: (1) their triggers; (2) their costs; and (3) and their durability. The trigger of elite action in each case was polarization so severe that violence ensued: The Pact of Punto Fijo followed a brutal military rule that had exposed the costs of intense conflict; the United States experienced a deadly civil war; and, Spain was burdened by both. In terms of costs, Venezuela excluded the masses by bestowing autonomy on political parties and elites to reduce conflict and maintain peace, the United States withheld fundamental rights from a large portion of its population, and Spain refused to grant justice to the victims of Franco’s dictatorship. Despite these high costs, the effects were only temporary. Hugo Chavez was able to take power in Venezuela, a controversial leader whose reign divided the country into two camps—his supporters and his opposition. In the United States, polarization is again severe

enough to incite violence: Some Republicans, unhappy with the election of Democratic President Joe Biden, stormed the capital to prevent the certification of the election results in January of 2021. Spanish polarization, according to V-Dem, is on the rise, though this recurrence of hostility seems to be the least severe. The case of Turkey, however, offers another path for recovery: a campaign strategy promoting respect, cooperation, and acceptance. This strategy was coined *Radical Love* and was employed by the Republican People’s Party (CHP) and its candidate, Ekrem İmamoğlu, during the 2019 Istanbul mayoral election.

At the time of the 2019 elections, which asked voters to fill 30 metropolitan and 1,351 district municipal mayoral seats, Turkey was characterized by “alarming levels of polarisation and significant economic stagnation” (Demiralp and Balta, 2021, p. 8). The Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002 by preying on the longstanding secular-religious cleavage in Turkish politics and criticizing “the existing elites whom most voters blamed for the tumultuous 1990s and the disastrous 2000-2001 financial crisis” (Sommer, 2022, p. 308). As the party remained in power, it began to employ increasingly polarizing rhetoric—Murat Sommer notes that Turkey reached “full-fledged bimodal and pernicious (self-propagating) polarization” (Sommer, 2022, p. 309) between 2014-2018. During this window, Turkey experienced a failed coup and a transition from a parliamentary system to a presidential one as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan attempted to consolidate and protect his power as head of state (Sommer, 2022, p. 310-1). He projected a dichotomy of “Us” versus “Them,” supporters of the government vs opponents, in classic populist fashion.

However, the AKP was not the only party to develop polarizing rhetoric: The opposition employed divisive language as well. For example, during the June 2018 presidential run, the Republican People’s Party (CHP), one of the main opposition parties, selected Muharrem İnce as their candidate, and he employed “an aggressive campaign” and a “combative tone,” emphasizing that Erdoğan was the “real elitist” (Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020, p. 29). Despite mobilizing the opposition and turning up two-million people at one of İnce’s final rallies before the election, this strategy ultimately “seemed to galvanize Erdoğan’s base and to drive socially conservative fence-sitters into the arms of the AKP” (Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020, p. 29). Notable, almost no members of the AKP base voted for İnce, demonstrating the high degree of polarization and the lack of cross-party voting. Erdoğan remained in power, securing 52.6% of the vote, compared to a mere 30.6% for İnce (Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020, p. 29).

The opposition adopted a new strategy the following year in the 2019 elections: *Radical Love*. The national campaign manager for the CHP, Ates İlyas Bassoy, outlined the campaign strategy in a booklet titled, *The Book of Radical Love*, where he “advises campaigners to avoid attacking Erdoğan, insulting his supporters, or becoming entrapped in ideological debates” (Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020, p. 32) and promotes keeping an open mind and listening more (Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020, p. 32). The two primary components of the strategy are “ignoring the populist while loving his supporters; and...focusing on voters’ felt needs and concerns” (Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020, p. 32). When constructing this strategy, “technology’s impact on contemporary social life” (Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020, p. 29) was at the forefront of Bassoy’s mind: “In his view, attachment to smartphones and immersion in social media have so drastically impaired our attention spans and our ability to engage in face-to-face communication that society is pervaded by a sense of restless loneliness and anxiety” (Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020, p. 29). In an interview with Wuthrich, he emphasized how populist polarization “takes advantage of citizens’ emotional isolation to sow division” (Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020, p. 31), so a major theme of *Radical Love* was unity.

Ekrem İmamoğlu, the CHP candidate in the 2019 Istanbul municipal elections, was hand-selected for the nomination because the party strategists discovered that “he had the right mix of attributes and minimal political baggage to appeal to a cross section of Istanbul voters” (Gall, 2019). His campaign in particular used slogans such as “Love will win!” (Demiralp and Balta, 2021, p. 14) and “Everything will be fine!” (Lindenstrauss and Remi, 2019, p. 1) and avoided naming names—“İmamoğlu carefully avoided referring to [his mayoral opponent, Binali Yıldırım,] negatively or even saying his name,” calling him “my opponent” when necessary (Demiralp and Balta, 2021, p. 13). He also tried to avoid using “AKP,” instead opting to refer to the party as “the understanding that ruled Istanbul for a quarter century” (Demiralp and Balta, 2021, p. 13) and only used Erdoğan’s name twice in his recorded speeches between May 16th and the June 23rd election (Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020, p. 32). Further, when he did refer to the President, he addressed him respectfully, using “my president” and emphasizing that the two were on good terms (Demiralp and Balta, 2021, p. 11). This differs

significantly from İnce’s run, during which the candidate “addressed the president with the informal ‘you’ (*sen*), and mocked him on Twitter over trivialities such as his use of a teleprompter” (Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020, p. 32).

İmamoğlu’s respect extended to AKP supporters as well. *The Book of Radical Love* emphasizes that “Every person is wise” (Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020, p. 32) and “Politics divides people, but people have many common concerns outside of politics” (Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020, p. 34), attempting to convince campaigners to respect all citizens. The candidate, following this lead, revealed in speeches that “he harbored no antipathy toward AKP voters and would strive to serve all citizens of Istanbul regardless of their political affiliation, life-style, or socio-economic background” (Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020, p. 32). He also demonstrated this when he joined prayers and local *ifrar* meals during Ramadan, showing that, despite his party’s secular character, he recognized the value of religion in his opponent’s lives (Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020, p. 32). Through his inclusive rhetoric, İmamoğlu reached citizens “who otherwise would have voted for the government in Turkey’s increasingly polarised atmosphere” (Gumus and MacGillivray, 2020, p. 10) and “undercut the populist’s claim to be the sole incarnation of the people’s will” (Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020, p. 33), rendering populist polarization attempts ineffective (Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020, p. 33).

Radical Love helped lead İmamoğlu to victory not once but twice. After winning the March 2019 election with 48.8% of the vote, compared to the AKP’s 48.6% (Demiralp and Balta, 2021, p. 6), the National Electoral Council annulled the election in response to protests from AKP leaders who claimed the election was rigged (Selcuk and Hekimci, 2020, p. 1508). A second election occurred in June of the same year, and instead of a 0.02% lead, İmamoğlu came out on top by a 9% margin: 54.2% versus 45.0% (Demiralp and Balta, 2021, p. 6). The CHP candidate stuck with his inclusive rhetoric, and the AKP candidate shifted his own strategy during the new election campaign—Yıldırım adopted “a more moderate tone concerning the Kurdish issue and dropped the discourse about nationalism, anti-Kurdish sentiments and the survival of the Turkish Republic” (Yildiz, 2019). Following the loss, Erdoğan himself hinted that the AKP would meet to discuss the results and their failed strategy, including the use of “polarizing language during the campaign period” (Soylu, 2019). These shifts in the AKP’s perspective signal a potential short-term moderating effect of an inclusive rhetorical strategy, though any stronger claims require further research.

3.3 Conclusion

The American and Spanish case studies, as mentioned above, reveal that formal and informal pacts between the elite to ignore highly contested issues can reduce polarization in the short-run, though the threshold for invoking these agreements is typically violence or military rule, they involve the exclusion of voices or the discrimination of minorities, and the cleavages eventually return conflict remains unresolved beneath the surface. Informal pacts to leave racial equality off the political agenda following the civil war have already failed to ease hostilities in the long-run in America—the same issues are overwhelming the political environment yet again—and current voters, with the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement in recent years, appear unwilling to ignore the issue once again. The cost of peace is too high if it involves perpetuating inequality. As a result, pacting strategies do not appear viable for the contemporary United States; however, inclusive campaign strategies do offer more hope.

The success of *Radical Love* as a campaign strategy in the 2019 municipal election and the behavioral shift of the AKP following both the March and June losses hints at a short-term moderating effect of inclusive rhetoric. However, as Wuthrich points out, *Radical Love* “is not a sustainable political ideology” as it fails to include “substantive principles around which to build an enduring political party or movement” (Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020, p. 38). Inclusive rhetoric will need to be a conscious choice of the elite for the foreseeable future if it has any chance of having a long-term impact, yet elite behavior is unpredictable and uncontrollable. Additionally, Wuthrich warns, “İmamoğlu’s inclusive and hands-on campaign in many ways resembles the strategy of another former Istanbul mayor once hailed as a social and political bridge-builder: Erdoğan himself” (Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020, p. 38).

In terms of the American case, this strategy does not seem to offer much hope. Like İmamoğlu, President Joe Biden emphasized unity during his campaign for the 2020 presidential election, highlighted best at a campaign rally in Philadelphia in 2019 when he stated, “Our politics have become so mean, so petty, so negative, so partisan, so angry and so unproductive. Instead of debating our opponents, we demonize them...Instead of questioning judgement, we question motives. Instead of

listening, we shout. Instead of looking for solutions, we look to score political points. No more, no more” (Elliot, 2019). He is condemning the distrust and hostility resulting from American polarization, and although he was victorious, his rhetoric made no dent in the nation’s divisive discourse. He echoed the same themes during his first speech as president-elect in November 2020, imploring citizens “to put away the harsh rhetoric, lower the temperature, see each other again, listen to each other again” (Glueck and Kaplan, 2019), but his words were powerless to thwart the impending insurrection that January. America is so polarized that his pleas are falling on deaf ears—Republicans don’t want to listen to a president they believe is working against their interests, and Democrats don’t want to listen to a president they believe is catering to their opponents. Results might differ, however, if, like the Turkish case, the party at large employs inclusive rhetoric—not a single candidate. If half of the electorate, as opposed to just one man (no matter how powerful his office), adopts moderate speech and a propensity for cooperation, we may see broader, deeper change.

4 Conclusion

As we have seen, political polarization is a contemporary challenge for democracies worldwide. In a broad sense, it can be understood as “the process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’” (McCoy, 2018), but in the above analysis, we recognize that there are two main types of polarization: ideological and affective. Ideological polarization describes the dispersion of parties along the left-right spectrum, while affective polarization depicts the level of hostility between party-members in society, beyond politics. We see social and geographic sorting when affective polarization is present (Mason, 2018). This reinforces divisions as citizens begin to associate and interact only with those who share their views (Mason, 2018).

Polarization undermines democracy when extreme in a number of ways, from encouraging anti-democratic behavior to prevent the opposition from taking power (McCoy, 2018) (Svolik, 2019) (McCoy and Somer, 2021) to decreasing bipartisan cooperation and producing legislative gridlock (McCoy, 2018) (Drutman, 2017). When the United States’ Freedom House score fell and it was downgraded to a “flawed democracy” by the Economist Intelligence Unit (McCoy and Somer, 2021), we saw the toll of polarization on even one of the world’s oldest democracies. Practically, this decay has also been visible during the coronavirus pandemic with the heated debates over mask and vaccine mandates, the distrust of government institutions, the demonizing rhetoric from the Trump campaign, the resistance to certify President Joe Biden’s electoral victory, and the ensuing insurrection at the Capitol on January 6, 2021. The most recent demonstration of political tensions between the Republican and Democratic Parties was the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Some Republicans were praising Russian President Vladimir Putin, feeling more respect for him than for US President Biden, and t-shirts with the slogan “I’d Rather Be Russian Than A Democrat” began circulating.

To determine the best course of action for the United States, this thesis examined institutional and political remedies. In terms of institutional remedies, the focus was on whether increasing the proportionality of electoral systems could decrease polarization, and this was evaluated using a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses. For the quantitative analysis, I regressed polarization on electoral system, using two different measures of each variable. Polarization included both ideological polarization, garnered using Russell Dalton’s data from Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), and affective polarization, found using the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute’s measure of political polarization. Electoral system included both a strict and lenient measure of single-member-district (SMD) systems, with the strict measure only classifying First-Past-The-Post systems as SMDs. Research suggests that PR either worsened or had no effect on polarization, indicating that increased proportionality is not a viable solution for polarization. The qualitative analysis only bolsters these conclusions.

The case studies used for the qualitative analysis included interwar Spain, France, and Great Britain, with Spain having the most proportional electoral system (a proportional representation system) and Great Britain having the least proportional system (a First-Past-The-Post system). In addition to high proportionality, Spain also experienced the highest polarization levels and was the only European nation to erupt into a civil war during the interwar period. Its polarization levels decreased with the advent of the D’Hondt PR system, which actually restricted proportionality. France’s polarization during this time was less severe, and the explanation lies, at least partially, in its

mostly majoritarian system. Scholars attribute the presence of polarization to its second ballot, which brought proportionality into the electoral system by allowing any party to run a candidate and win with a plurality if no party won with a majority in the first round. Great Britain was relatively stable during the interwar period under a majoritarian system, that with the least proportionality. PR and multi-member districts are not the hail Mary that America needs, despite the advocacy by scholars.

For the analysis of political remedies, I examined formal and informal pacts to overlook divisive issues at the elite level as well as the use of inclusive rhetoric and campaign strategies. For the former, I investigated the United States after the Civil War and Spain following its 1976 democratic reforms. For the latter, I investigated Turkey during its 2019 municipal elections. A study of the formal and informal pacts between elites revealed three problems: (1) the triggers; (2) the costs; and (3) the durability. The United States, Spain, and Venezuela, which was examined in the previous literature section, all adopted these pacts after polarization became so severe that it incited violence. In the cases of the US and Spain, civil war prompted the pacts. Additionally, the costs with these remedies were high: The United States continued to deny Black people fundamental rights, while Spain failed to deliver justice to the victims of Francisco Franco's brutal dictatorship. And despite these high costs and dangerous triggers, the reduction in polarization was only temporary. As the issues that were once pushed off of the agenda resurface, old divides have begun to cripple society once again.

The United States saw a disaster in 2020 not quite at the level of a civil war, but one that many scholars thought could have united the country against all odds: a global pandemic. This, however, failed to trigger any sort of formal or informal pact among the elites and instead became a breeding ground for division as science became politicized. These pacting strategies also don't seem to have potential in the United States because of the high costs—the Black Lives Matter and Me Too Movements in recent years have shown that the electorate will not tolerate the exclusion and forgetting required to bridge the gap between camps. Additionally, this strategy has already failed in the long-run with the return of polarization.

The Turkish case, which analyzes the effects of the Republican People's Party's campaign strategy of *Radical Love*, holds more hope for change, at least in the short-term. When the ruling party, the AKP, was faced with electoral losses in the 2019 Istanbul mayoral election, their candidate began to moderate his campaign leading up to the June re-run to appeal to a broader voter-base, and the head of the AKP, Turkey's President Erdoğan, said that the party leadership would be reconvening to discuss their failures, including the use of polarizing rhetoric. This reevaluation signals that change may be possible. However, elite behavior is unpredictable and uncontrollable, and a conscious choice will need to be made in the years following to stick with inclusive rhetoric. Change is not guaranteed.

President Biden has already begun to attempt this inclusive rhetorical strategy in the United States both leading up to his election and since he took office. Above all, he has emphasized unity and compromise, but this has done little to ease tensions on either side. His pleas are falling on deaf ears. The American electorate is so entrenched in their own echo chambers that the message is not reaching half of the populace, while those that might hear it don't want to listen to a president who is appeasing their opponent, especially one they view as a threat to democracy itself. American polarization is too far gone for one man to bridge the gap on his own. Our only hope for change via this strategy is if the Democratic Party as a whole unites behind it.

This study examines only a few of the paths the United States might take to reduce its polarization and prevent democratic erosion. Future research should continue to explore remedies. In the realm of electoral reforms, one option seems to hold some promise: ranked-choice voting. This area requires additional research, and one opportunity for analysis is the upcoming 2022 midterm elections in Alaska. This state passed a law implementing ranked-choice voting following the 2020 election, and it was recently upheld by their Supreme Court, making the midterms the first test of its performance. Theory suggests that ranked-choice voting reduces polarization by incentivizing and rewarding moderate campaigning as candidates must secure a second-choice pick in the event that no one wins by a majority. Alaskan Senator Lisa Murkowski is a center-right Republican who will be facing a challenge from the far right. Only time will tell if the moderate candidate will find success. Other areas that have implemented this election format and could be ripe for studying include New York City, Maine, Utah, and, potentially, Nevada. In terms of political remedies, the impending presidential election in Turkey in 2023 should be followed closely to see the types of rhetoric used by both sides. Will both sides continue to decrease their polarizing language after inclusive rhetoric saw success in 2019, or will the election become another all-out battle between the opponents?

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5 Appendix

This section provides further information on the variables used in the quantitative analysis in Section 2, including both polarization and electoral system measures, level of democratization, inequality, and GDP growth. Data collection methods for the polarization measures and the Freedom House scores are also explained more fully below.

5.1 Measuring polarization

In Section 2, two definitions of polarization were used. The first referred to ideological polarization, or the dispersion of parties along the Left-Right spectrum, and the second referred to affective polarization, or the level of hostility in society beyond politics. The graphs below describe the polarization variables.

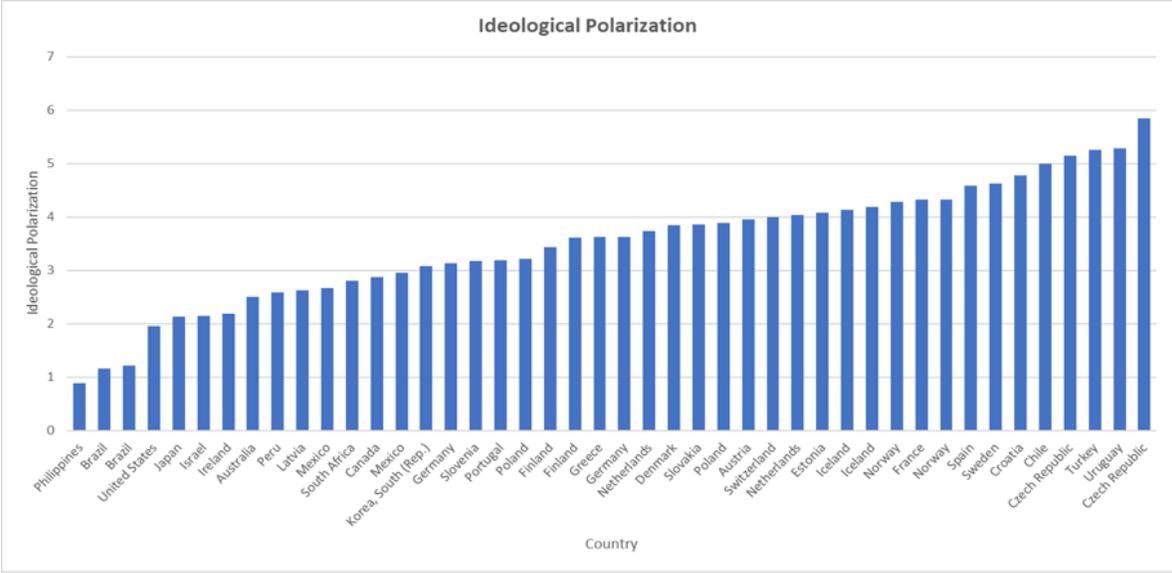


Figure 3: This graph plots the distribution for the ideological polarization variable. This data was collected by Russell Dalton using information obtained via a Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) module that was sent out with various national election studies. In the survey, voters were asked to place themselves and up to six parties in their country on a Left-Right scale, where 0 represented the Left and 10 represented the Right. Dalton then calculated a polarization index based on the following equation: $PI = \sqrt{\sum (party\ vote\ share_i) * [party\ L/R\ score_i - party\ system\ average\ L/R\ score]^2 / 5}$. The data used in this research was pulled from Module 3, which ran between the years of 2006-11.

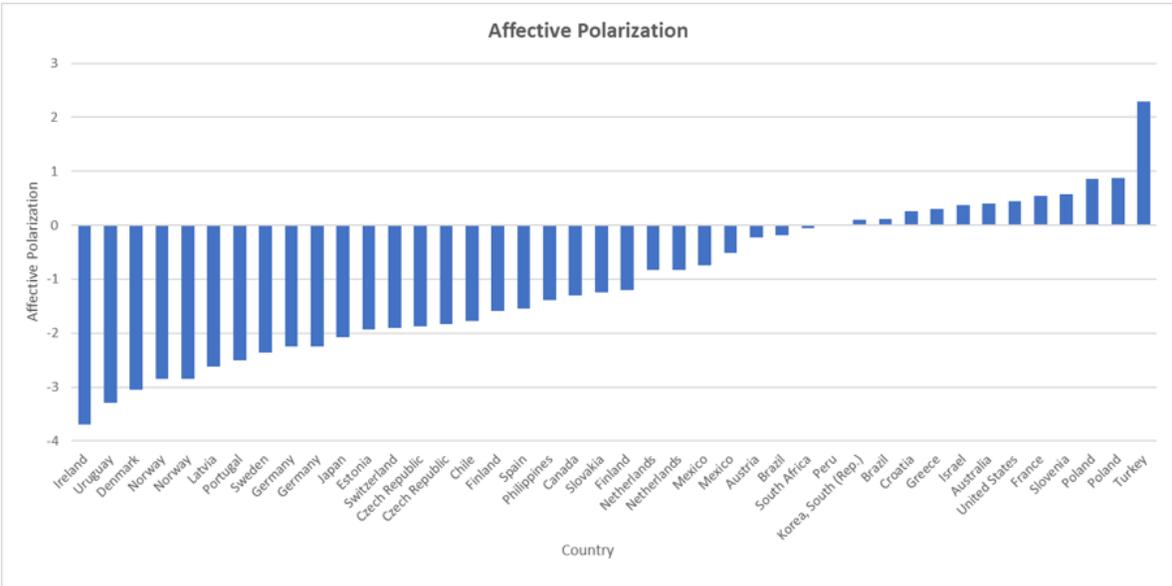


Figure 4: This graph plots the distribution for the affective polarization variable. This data was collected by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute by surveying upwards of 3,500 country experts who were asked whether society was "polarized into antagonistic, political camps" (Hellmeier, 2021). This was measured on a five-point scale, where 0 indicated "Not at all. Supporters of opposing political camps generally interact in a friendly manner" and 4 indicated "Yes, to a large extent. Supporters of opposing political camps generally interact in a hostile manner" (Hellmeier, 2021).

5.2 Measuring electoral system

For the quantitative analysis, electoral systems were coded as single-member districts versus more proportional systems. All data was collected by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA).

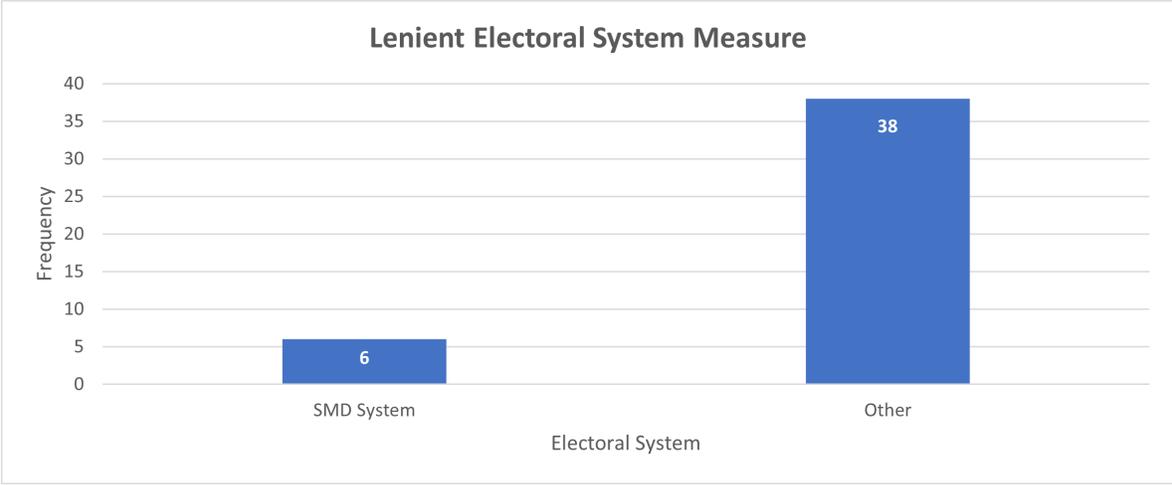


Figure 5: This graph plots the distribution for the lenient electoral system measure. The lenient electoral system measure included First-Past-The-Post, Alternative Vote, and Parallel Systems as single-member-districts, and each of these institutional frameworks were coded with a 1. All other electoral systems were coded with a 0.

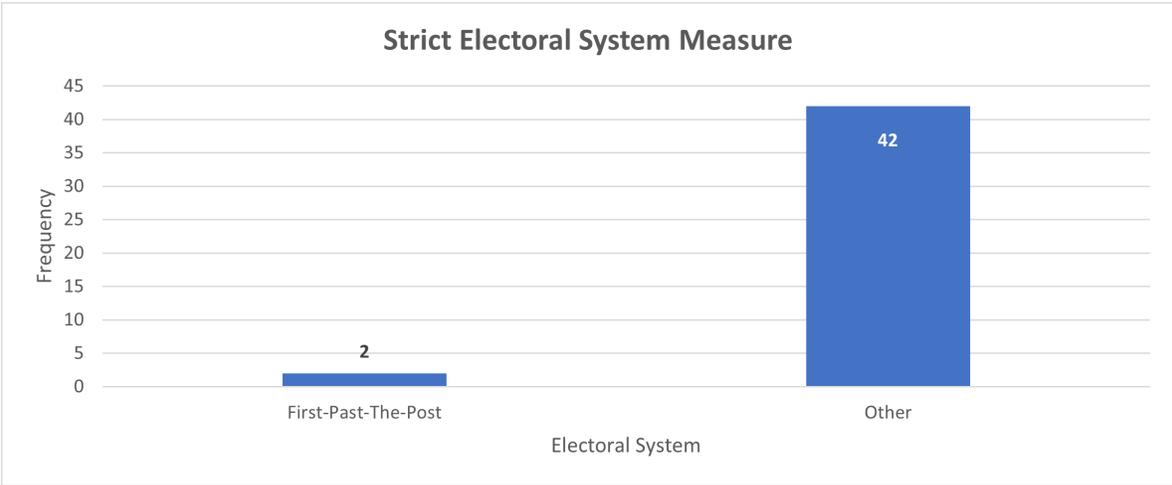


Figure 6: This graph plots the distribution for the strict electoral system measure. The strict electoral system measure included only First-Past-The-Post Systems as single-member districts, and this was the only institutional framework that was coded with a 1. All other electoral systems were coded with a 0.

5.3 Control variables

The control variables used in the regression included the level of democratization, economic inequality, and GDP growth for the country of interest. These qualities were measured using Freedom House scores, the Gini coefficient, and real GDP growth per capita, respectively.

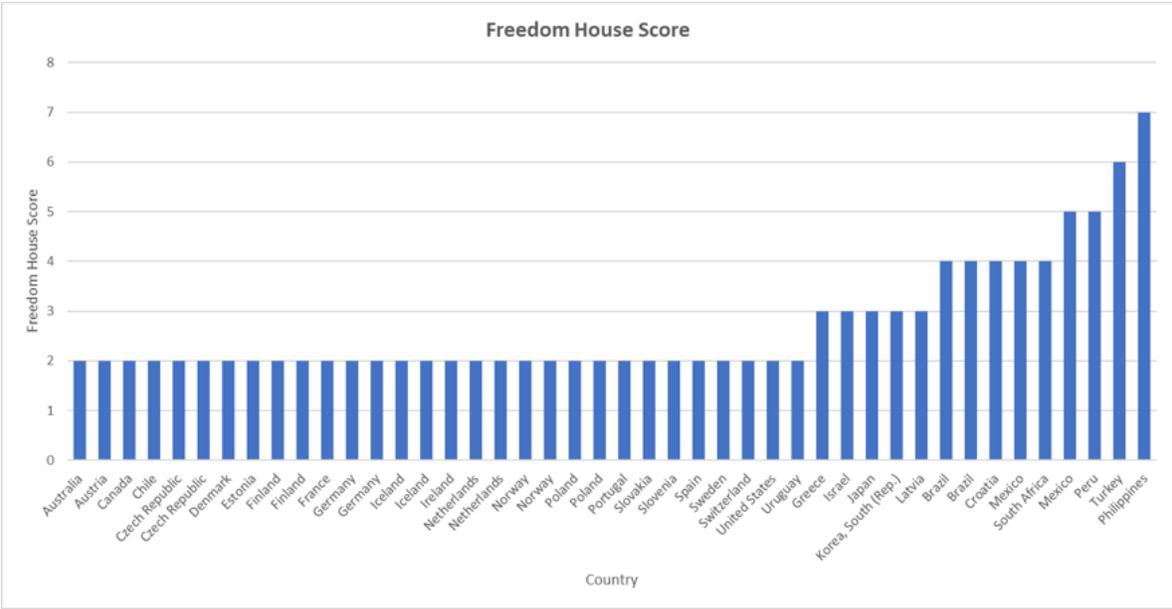


Figure 7: This graph plots the distribution of Freedom House scores. To obtain the value used in the regressions, the Freedom House scores for political rights and civil liberties during the election year were added together. Each of these categories was scored on an eight-point scale, where 1 indicated most democratic and 7 indicated least democratic. The countries are rated by "a team of in-house and external analysts and expert advisors from the academic, think tank, and human rights communities" (FreedomHouse, 2022) using "a broad range of sources, including news articles, academic analyses, reports from nongovernmental organizations, individual professional contacts, and on-the-ground research" (FreedomHouse, 2022).

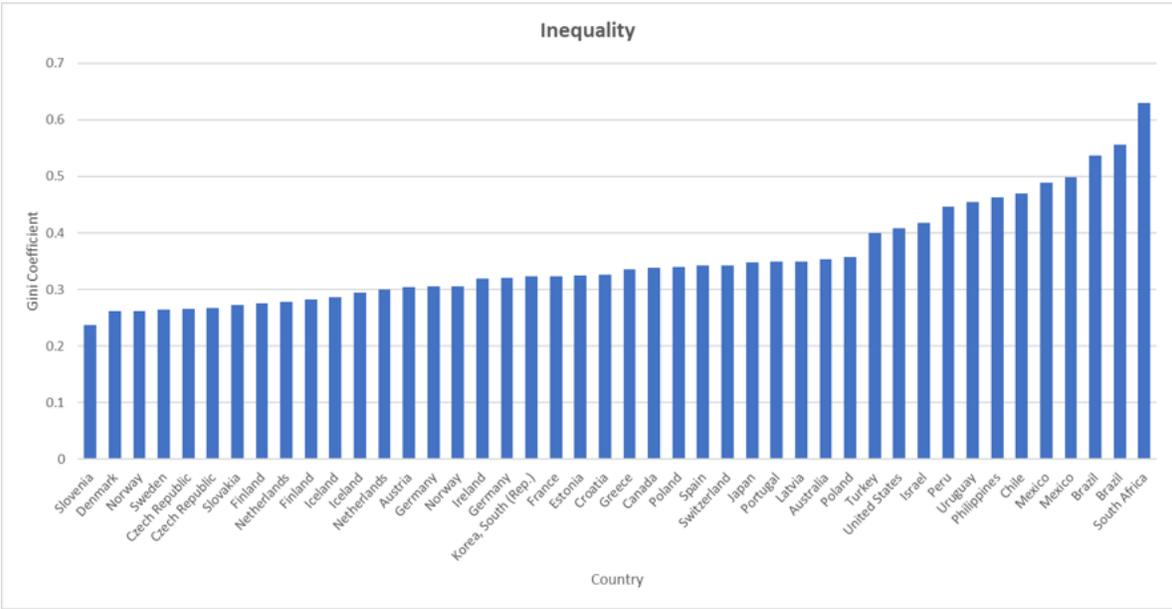


Figure 8: This graph plots the distribution for the Gini coefficient. The Gini coefficient measures produces a measure for inequality between 0 and 1, where 0 is perfect equality and 1 is perfect inequality. The data was collected during the election year.

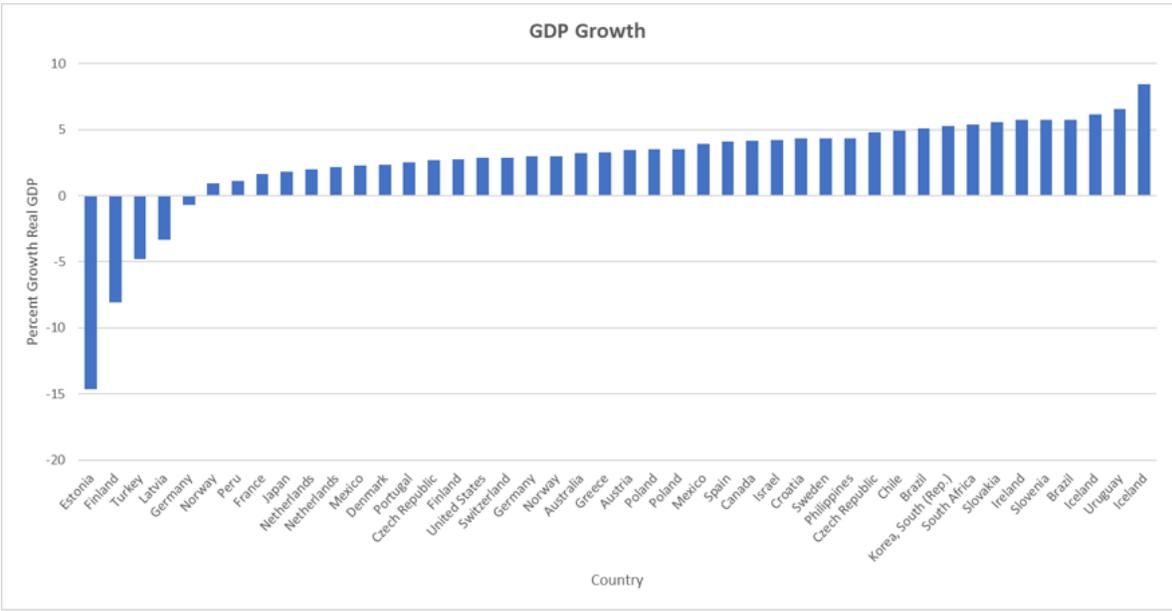


Figure 9: This graph plots the distribution of real GDP growth. This was observed two-years prior to the election in the countries of interest.