TWO NATIONS, ONE DIVIDE:

EXAMINING THE ROOTS OF POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN TÜRKİYE AND THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract: Many factors have contributed to the global rise of political polarization in recent years – such as the electoral successes of populist leaders, the emergence of social media-based echo chambers, rising economic insecurities, and an intensifying rivalry between globalists and nationalists worldwide. In this context, a comparative study of polarization in the U.S. (United States of America) and Türkiye offers an intriguing opportunity. Examining the similarities and differences between their experiences may teach researchers a lot about the origins of polarization, its adverse effects on democratic governance and potential solutions. The Republicans and the Democrats in the U.S. have grown more ideologically opposed during the past decade in particular, leading to political violence as became evident with the 6th January 2021 Capitol Riot and the 13th July 2024 assassination attempt targeting Donald Trump. A great schism has also shaped Turkish politics as the long reign of the AKP (Justice and Development Party) since 2002 has polarized secularists and Islamists as well as Kurdish and Turkish nationalists. It will be argued that while authoritarian inclinations, political institutions, and historical legacies are distinctive to each setting; identity politics, economic inequalities, and social media driven echo chambers are major commonalities. A number of insights on reducing polarization will be derived from this comparative analysis, namely the need to build coalitions of parties/social movements representing different ideologies, reducing economic inequality, encouraging inclusive government, and promoting media diversity.

Keywords: *Political Polarization, Populism, Democratic Erosion, Türkiye, United States.*

Article Category: Political Science

Date of Submission: 26.07.2024

Date of Acceptance: 07.08.2024

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İKİ MİLLET, BİR AYRIM:

TÜRKİYE VE ABD'DE SİYASİ KUTUPLAŞMANIN KÖKENLERİNİN İNCELENMESİ

Özet: Popülist liderlerin seçim başarıları, sosyal medya temelli yankı odalarının ortaya çıkışı, artan ekonomik güvensizlikler ve küreselciler ile milliyetçiler arasında yoğunlaşan rekabet gibi pek çok faktör son yıllarda siyasi kutuplaşmanın dünya çapında yükselişine yol açtı. Bu bağlamda, ABD (Amerika Birleşik Devletleri) ve Türkiye'deki kutuplaşma olgusunun karşılaştırmalı olarak incelenmesi bize değerli bir fırsat sunmaktadır. Deneyimleri arasındaki benzerlik ve farklılıkları incelemek; araştırmacılara kutuplaşmanın kökenleri, demokratik yönetimler üzerindeki olumsuz etkileri ve kutuplaşmayı azaltıcı olası çözümler hakkında çok şey öğretebilir. ABD'de Cumhuriyetçiler ve Demokratlar arasında özellikle son on yılda derin bir ideolojik uçurum oluştu ve bu durum, 6 Ocak 2021 Capitol İsyanı ve Donald Trump'a yönelik 13 Temmuz 2024'teki suikast girişiminde açıkça görüldüğü üzere siyasi şiddete de yol açtı. AKP'nin (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) 2002'den bu yana süren uzun hegemonyası ise, laikler ve İslamcıların yanı sıra Kürt ve Türk milliyetçileri arasında da çekişmelere neden oldu; böylelikle 2000'li yılların başından bu yana kutuplaşma meselesi Türk siyasetini şekillendiren temel bir olgu haline geldi. Otoriter eğilimler, siyasi kurumlar ve tarihi miraslar iki ülke arasında farklılıklar gösterirken, kimlik siyasetinin yükselişi, ekonomik adaletsizlikler ve sosyal medyanın yönlendirdiği yankı odalarının belirmesi başlıca ortak noktalarıdır. Bu karşılaştırmalı analizde söz konusu ülkelerde ve dünya çağında kutuplaşmanın azaltılmasına ilişkin faydalı öneriler elde edilecektir ve bunların başında farklı ideolojileri temsil eden partiler/toplumsal hareketlerden oluşan koalisyonlar kurmanın gerekliliği, ekonomik eşitsizliği azaltma, kapsayıcı hükümet tarzını teşvik etme ve medya çeşitliliğini sağlamak gelmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Kutuplaşma, Popülizm, Demokratik Erozyon, Türkiye, ABD.*

Introduction

Political or ideological polarization refers to a situation where there is a dramatic decrease in the number of people/groups holding moderate views and a shift towards extremes in the distribution of political attitudes among the public and political elites. Political polarization has been the subject of a great deal of research, particularly in democracies where different political ideologies and parties are commonplace.[2] The scholarly literature provides several definitions of ideological/political polarization, with an emphasis on both personal and societal dimensions. Polarization can be better understood by looking to "*Social Identity Theory*".[3] Part of an individual's identity, according to this view, comes from the social group to which they belong, and that includes political parties. Adopting the ideological stances of a political party is a certain way for members to get closer to that group and further isolate themselves from others.

The polarization of political parties and elites is an important consideration. In order to set themselves apart from the competition and rally their support base, political elites frequently take on divisive and populist stances.[4] Partisan media, campaign rhetoric, and social networks are some of the ways in which this division among the elites could reach the general population. An even more divided electorate is the result of polarized political leaders who are able to sway popular opinion. Ideological divisions are exacerbated by the media and the information landscape. The explosion of social media and the development of biased news providers have led to the emergence of "*echo chambers*" in which people only see content that confirms their own views. As people become increasingly rigid in their ideological

[2] There are numerous works in the field of Comparative Politics that study the roots of political polarization across multiple countries. These works analyze various factors contributing to polarization, such as historical legacies, economic conditions, political institutions, media environments, and social dynamics. Several of these valuable works have been utilized to conceptualize the drivers of polarization in this article, see; William Crotty (2015), *Polarized Politics: The Impact of Divisiveness in the US Political System*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers; Jennifer McCoy & Tahmina Rahman & Murat Somer (2018), "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities", *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 62, no: 1, pp. 16-42; Christian F. Rostbøll (2024), "Polarization and the Democratic System: Kinds, Reasons, and Sites", *Perspectives on Politics* [Online], pp. 1-17; Daron Acemoglu & James Robinson (2012), *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*, New York: Crown Business; Christopher H. Achen & Larry M. Bartels (2016), *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Marjorie J. Spruill (2017), *Divided We Stand: The Battle Over Women's Rights and Family Values That Polarized American Politics*, New York: Bloomsbury; Benjamin Moffitt (2016), *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, Stanford: Stanford University Press; Sergei Guriev & Elias Papaioannou (2022), "The Political Economy of Populism", *Journal of Economic Literature*, Vol. 60, no: 3, pp. 753-832.

[3] Richard Jenkins (2014), *Social Identity 4th Edition*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 92-117.

[4] Adam M. Enders (2021), "Issues versus Affect: How Do Elite and Mass Polarization Compare?", *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 83, no: 4, pp. 1872-1877.

beliefs, this kind of selective exposure might cause them to strengthen their attitudes and further divide society.

Rather than viewing compromise as an essential part of democratic administration, polarized cultures tend to frame policy arguments in zero-sum terms. When one party has control of the government, it can become even more radical with the adoption of policies that further polarize the population and make collaboration in the future more difficult. Social cohesiveness can be eroded by ideological division at the societal level. People tend to engage in social sorting, where they establish networks and communities based on political affiliation, and they may grow less tolerant of opposing perspectives as they get more aligned with their ideological in-groups. This could deepen existing societal divides and hinder efforts to foster mutual understanding and communication across sectors.

To quantify ideological polarization, political scientists use a variety of tools. Research on political topics, party affiliation, and ideological self-placement is often conducted through surveys and public opinion polls. To measure the level of polarization and monitor its evolution over time, tools like factor analysis and scaling approaches are employed.[5] Furthermore, insights on elite polarization may be gained through content analysis of media and parliamentary statements. Researchers can gauge the degree of polarization in political discourse by analyzing the language and framing employed by politicians and media organizations. Researching ideological clustering and echo chambers in online communities can be aided by network analysis, which maps the interactions and information flows among members. This approach is especially helpful for examining polarization in social media contexts.[6]

Tackling the issue of ideological division is no easy feat. Some have suggested shifting the focus away from extremist ideas and toward more moderate ones by modifying the electoral system to include measures like open primaries and ranked-choice voting.[7] Individuals can be better equipped to navigate the information environment and less likely to fall for political propaganda if civic education is improved to foster critical thinking and media literacy. One way to promote understanding and lessen polarization is to promote deliberative democratic practices, which include citizens having organized and civil conversations about political

[5] Aaron Bramson & Patrick Grim & Daniel J. Singer & William J. Berger & Graham Sack & Steven Fisher & Carissa Flocken & Bennett Holman (2017), "Understanding Polarization: Meanings, Measures, and Model Evaluation", *Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 84 (January), pp. 115-159.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 118.
[7] Christian F. Rostbøll (2024), "Polarization and the Democratic System: Kinds, Reasons, and Sites", pp. 1-17.

matters. A better educated and less divided population can be achieved via the promotion of fair and diversified media coverage and the implementation of legislation to combat disinformation and misinformation. The complex issue of ideological polarization has far-reaching consequences for social cohesiveness and democratic rule. Political scientists strive to help create measures to reduce its harmful impacts and foster a healthy democratic debate by studying its sources, repercussions and possible cures.

Studying ideological polarization in the U.S. and Türkiye provides a fascinating chance to compare the various political, economic, and social factors that impact polarization dynamics. Ideological division has been more pronounced in both nations in the last several decades, despite their different historical paths and geopolitical situations. There is a lengthy history of democratic institutions and political rivalry in the United States, which was founded as one of the first democratic republics of the world in the late 18th century. The country's political structure has long been defined by a steady duopoly, with Republicans and Democrats holding sway. In the U.S., polarization has been on the rise in recent decades, with the two main political parties increasingly ideologically divided on cultural, economic, and social concerns. In contrast, Türkiye's history of democratization since the late 1940s has been more convoluted and tumultuous – frequently interrupted by military coups (in 1960, 1971, 1980, and 1997), civil strife (e.g. during the late 1970s) and political instability (e.g. during the 1990s). With the AKP's (Justice and Development Party) meteoric climb to power in the early 2000s, Turkish politics underwent a sea change, radically dividing secularists and Islamists as well as many ethnic and political factions.

A notable point of comparison is the political systems of the United States and Türkiye. The presidential system in the United States is characterized by checks and balances and separation of powers, in contrast to Türkiye's increasingly concentrated "*super-presidential*" executive power – with very limited checks and balances – following the constitutional referendum of 2017 that greatly increased presidential authority.[8] How political disagreements are handled, and power is allocated can be impacted by these institutional disparities, which in turn affect polarization dynamics. Political elites in both the United States and Türkiye have also played a major role in fueling ideological division. The United States has well-documented political elite division, especially inside the Congress.[9] There has been a decrease in bipartisan collaboration and legislative stagnation because of the growing

[8] Sinem Adar & Günter Seufert (2021), *Turkey's Presidential System after Two and a Half Years: An Overview of Institutions and Politics*, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik.
[9] William Crotty (2015), *Polarized Politics: The Impact of Divisiveness in the US Political System*, pp. 95-124.

ideological uniformity among the Republican and Democratic parties since the early 2010s. By appealing to the most fundamentalist beliefs of their supporters, leaders like Donald Trump have further split the political spectrum.

Important causes of division in the two nations stem from cultural and social aspects. Some of the most divisive topics in American culture today include immigration, racial identity, and cultural values. Political polarization has worsened due to the emergence of identity politics, in which social identities like gender, ethnicity, and religion are strongly linked to political choices. Deep cultural gaps, typically along political lines, are on display in debates over topics such as LGBTQ rights, immigration laws, and police brutality. Similarly, social identity plays a major role in polarization in Türkiye. Though secularists and minorities (i.e. Kurds and Alevis) are alienated by the AKP, a large segment of the populace connects with its emphasis on Islamic values and Turkish nationalism.[10]

The future of democratic rule in both nations is highly predicated on the degree of ideological division. Political violence has escalated, faith in democratic institutions has plummeted, and legislation has stalled due to division in the United States.[11] The efficacy of democratic rule is weakened when the government fails to resolve important matters because of political differences. An increase in authoritarianism and a weakening of democratic standards have also emerged as outcomes of division in Türkiye. The negative effects of polarization on democratic administration are seen in the erosion of judicial independence, the consolidation of power in the executive branch, and the repression of dissent. Weak democratic institutions are exacerbated by the difficulty in reaching consensus on critical topics due to the widening societal differences. To better understand the causes, effects, and possible solutions to ideological polarization, it is helpful to compare Türkiye and the United States. To combat polarization and foster a healthier democratic debate, scholars and politicians must first comprehend these processes.

The comparison between Türkiye and the U.S. in this article can provide valuable insights into how political polarization affects democracies with different historical and institutional contexts. We will explore whether there are universal drivers of polarization and democratic erosion or if these processes are deeply context dependent. The study can also contribute to

[10] Senem Aydın-Düzgit (2019), "The Islamist-Secularist Divide and Turkey's Descent into Severe Polarization", in Thomas Carothers & Andrew O'Donohue (eds.) *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization*, Washington: Brookings Institution Press, pp. 17-37.
[11] Rachel Kleinfeld (2024), "The Rising Tide of Political Violence: An Attempted Assassination of Trump Is Part of a Global Trend", *Foreign Affairs*, 19.07.2024. Date of Accession: 10.05.2024 from https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/rising-tide-political-violence.

the literature on authoritarian resilience, populism, and the global challenges facing democracies today. By comparing a relatively mature U.S. democracy with a younger and more fragile Turkish one, we can assess the conditions under which democratic norms are more likely to erode and the effectiveness of different responses to these challenges. For instance, lessons learned from Türkiye's experience with a strong executive branch and weakening checks and balances could inform debates on executive overreach and the importance of institutional safeguards in the U.S. In summary, this comparison is valuable for enriching the academic literature as well as providing practical lessons for policymakers worldwide.

1. Literature Review and Research Methodology

In recent years, several valuable academic works have studied political polarization in the U.S. and Türkiye separately, but a comparative analysis of the similarities and differences in the causes, manifestations, and consequences of polarization in both countries is still needed. Murat Somer's research delves into the destructive connection between political polarization and democratic erosion in Türkiye, discussing how ethnic, religious, and ideological identities are mobilized by political actors such as President Erdoğan to sustain divisions as an electoral success tactic.[12] Somer explores how political polarization creates conditions conducive to the rise of authoritarianism. Senem Aydın-Düzgit and Evren Balta focus on the perceptions of polarization by various civil society and political elites in Türkiye, concluding that a significant portion of intellectuals and politicians have noticed the intensifying level of polarization in the country.[13] The study uses data from a workshop and in-depth qualitative interviews to illustrate how polarization manifests in political behavior and attitudes. It discusses the implications of polarization for political stability and democratic practices in Türkiye. Cengiz Yılmaz and Özlem Özdemir's innovative multi-disciplinary study attempts to measure the impact of around a dozen factors on driving ideological polarization in Türkiye, from economic voting behavior to collective trauma effects.[14] Adam Szymański and Ahmet Furkan Cihangiroğlu's study focuses on the correlation between the AKP's intentional

[12] Murat Somer (2018), "Turkey: The Slippery Slope from Reformist to Revolutionary Polarization and Democratic Breakdown", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 681, no: 1, pp. 42-61.
[13] Senem Aydın-Düzgit & Evren Balta (2019), "When Elites Polarize over Polarization: Framing the Polarization Debate in Turkey", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no: 60, pp. 153-176.
[14] Cengiz Yılmaz & Özlem Özdemir (2012), "Factors driving the political polarization process in Turkey: Relative effects of a number of determinants ranging from economic voting behavior to collective trauma effects", *İktisat, İşletme ve Finans Dergisi*, Vol. 7, no: 311, pp. 9-39.

societal divisiveness and Türkiye's deteriorating economic performance.[15] It proposes the theory that the current level of polarization in the country is caused by the AKP administration's efforts to divert society's focus away from economic difficulties and onto other topics that may be exploited. Content analysis is the primary research approach employed by the scholars. They provide credence to the idea that Türkiye's decision-makers make extensive use of polarization as a diversionary political tactic.

Akin to Murat Somer's work on Türkiye, Rachel Kleinfeld discusses the intricate connections between democratic erosion and polarization in the U.S. while also arguing that the situation is increasingly tense and has already triggered dangerous levels of political violence between Democrats and Republicans in the streets.[16] Nathan J. Canen, Chad Kendall, and Francesco Trebbi studies the workings of political polarization in the U.S. as a force deliberately driven by the two parties to maximize their votes.[17] They conclude that the U.S.'s particular first-past-the-post system in which extremely small margins of a few thousand votes in half a dozen federal states may decide the victor of presidential elections is the main culprit behind the choice of political parties to resort to tactics of increasing polarization via demonization of their opponents. Shanto Iyengar et al. studies the impact biased media outlets and the rise of social media has had on the surge of political polarization in the U.S., also employing the social identity theory of the field of political sociology.[18] Gordon Heltzel and Kristin Laurin's work notes that the U.S. has reached record levels of polarization unseen in its entire history, arguing that political parties and media institutions have the utmost importance in determining whether polarization may continue to endanger American democracy.[19]

As can be deduced from the above literature, Türkiye and the U.S. have unique historical legacies that shape their political landscapes. In Türkiye, the legacy of the Ottoman Empire and the founding principles of the Republic play significant roles, while in the U.S., the

[15] Adam Szymański & Ahmet Furkan Cihangiroğlu (2023), "Deliberate polarization as a distractive political strategy in economic downturns: the case of Turkey", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* [Online]. Date of Accession: 10.05.2024 from https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13530194.2023.2251140.
[16] Rachel Kleinfeld (2023), "Polarization, Democracy, and Political Violence in the United States: What the Research Says", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Date of Accession: 10.05.2024 from https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/Kleinfeld_Polarization_final_3.pdf.
[17] Nathan J. Canen & Chad Kendall & Francesco Trebbi (2020), "Political Parties as Drivers of U.S. Polarization: 1927-2018", National Bureau of Economic Research, December, Date of Accession: 10.05.2024 from https://www.nber.org/papers/w28296.
[18] Shanto Iyengar & Yphtach Lelkes & Matthew Levendusky & Neil Malhotra & Sean J. Westwood (2019), "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States", *Annual Review of Political Science*, no: 22, pp. 129-146.
[19] Gordon Heltzel & Kristin Laurin (2020), "Polarization in America: two possible futures", *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, no: 34, pp. 179-184.

legacy of slavery and civil rights movements are crucial factors. Differences in political institutions, such as the former parliamentary system – and the new "*super-presidential system*"[20] since 2018 – in Türkiye versus the presidential system in the U.S., affect how polarization manifests and are managed. In both countries, media plays a critical role in shaping public opinion and reinforcing polarized views. However, the extent of government control over the media varies; with Türkiye experiencing more direct government intervention compared to the U.S. Identity politics is a significant driver of polarization in both countries, with religious and ethnic identities being particularly salient in Türkiye, while racial and ideological identities are more prominent in the U.S. Both countries face challenges to their democratic institutions due to polarization. In Türkiye, democratic erosion is often seen in terms of authoritarianism and repression, while in the U.S., it is reflected in institutional gridlock and declining public trust in democratic processes.[21] The comparative study of political polarization in the U.S. and Türkiye would reveal both commonalities and unique aspects of each country's experience. By examining these factors, scholars can better understand the mechanisms driving polarization and develop strategies to mitigate its adverse effects.

Though the two country case studies have been studied separately in the context of polarization in the aforementioned valuable works, this article seeks to offer original contributions to the literature with a comparative discussion. The article will combine the relatively under-studied political economy (focusing on the impact of economic insecurity on polarization) dimension with political science approaches (discussing the roles of political systems, leaders and social media). In addition, a key part of the analysis will be to conclude the study with a list of concrete policy recommendations to mitigate the damaging effects of polarization on democracy of both countries. As such, the potential effectiveness of various policy responses to polarization in both countries will be discussed (i.e. electoral reforms, education initiatives, and social programs aimed at reducing divisions) in an attempt to contribute to the growing scholarly literature. When researchers conduct comparative analyses of the political experiences of two countries, they employ a variety of methods to ensure a nuanced understanding – ranging from qualitative approaches, which provide depth and context, to quantitative techniques, which offer breadth and statistical rigor. This study

[20] Adar and Seufert (2021), *Turkey's Presidential System after Two and a Half Years*.
[21] Jennifer McCoy & Tahmina Rahman & Murat Somer (2018), "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities", pp. 16-42

will employ a combination of Case Study Method,[22] the MDSD (Most Different Systems Design)[23] and the Cross-National Statistical Analysis.[24]

2. What is Driving and Deepening Political Polarization?

The term polarization describes the sharp narrowing of political spectrum because of people's more radical views on important issues. Both the general population and political leaders are susceptible to this phenomenon, which can take many forms. To address the effects of ideological polarization on democratic government, social cohesiveness, and public policy, it is essential to understand the factors that contribute to it. Social identity, elite conduct, the information and media environments, psychological mechanisms, economic variables, cultural dynamics, and psychological processes are some of the drivers of ideological polarization that are examined in this article.

Social Identity Theory, which holds that people's involvement in social groups contributes to their self-concept, is a major factor in the ideological polarization that we see today.[25] Many people find their sense of self in their affiliation with a certain political party. People are more inclined to embrace the ideological stances of the political party with which they connect strongly. This leads to polarization since it strengthens group cohesiveness and makes in-groups and out-groups more different. The propensity to show preference for one's own group above other groups is known as in-group bias. As a result of this prejudice, people may treat those in their own group more favorably and devalue those in other groups. This manifests itself in politics as a stronger affinity for one's own party and a more negative attitude against the other. Members of the two major political parties in many democracies

[22] This method is a qualitative research approach used to explore complex phenomena within their real-life context. This method involves an in-depth, detailed examination of a small number of cases, allowing researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. The case study method is particularly useful in Political Science for studying intricate political systems, institutions, events, or processes. For more information, see; Arend Lijphart (1971), "Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method", *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 65, no: 3, pp. 682-693.

[23] The MDSD method compares countries that are different in many respects but have similar outcomes. This helps identify common factors that lead to similar outcomes despite the countries' differences. This method is suitable for this study because Türkiye and the U.S. have major differences in their degree of democratization, political culture, economic life, and institutions; yet both suffer from intense political polarization. See; Arend Lijphart (1971), "Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method", pp. 682-693.

[24] This method involves the comparative analysis of numerical data from multiple countries. Researchers use large datasets to identify patterns, correlations, and causal relationships between variables. In the case of this study, we look at the correlation between rising political polarization and income and wealth inequality in our two nations. See; David Collier (1993), "The Comparative Method", in Ada W. Finifter (ed.) *Political Science: The State of Discipline*, Washington DC: American Political Science Association, pp. 105-119.

[25] Isaac D. Mehlhaff (2023), "A Group-Based Approach to Measuring Polarization", *American Political Science Review* [Online], pp. 1-9.

increasingly regard each other with distrust and hate, a phenomenon that is borne out by these dynamics.[26]

Extremism in political ideology is also the product of powerful political figures, such as party leaders. If they want to stand out from the crowd and rally their supporters, they will frequently take more extreme stances. This kind of conduct is most noticeable when candidates are vying for party nominations in the primary by appealing to the party's more ideologically devoted members. This can lead to increasing polarization among political elites, which in turn affects the political climate as a whole. Political leaders' actions in legislatures also exacerbate divisiveness. Moderates within the party run the risk of being silenced when party leaders put an emphasis on discipline and unity. Methods like party-line voting and imposing party discipline on crucial votes only serve to heighten this dynamic.[27] Legislative deadlock and deepening polarization can ensue as a consequence of parties that are more ideologically united and less amenable to compromise.

Ideological polarization and the formation of political attitudes are both influenced by the media landscape. The proliferation of ideologically biased news organizations has led to the establishment of echo chambers in which people only see stories that confirm their own views. The biased framing and selective coverage that partisan media sources frequently use might further divide audiences by offering an inflated view of political problems. By using algorithmic filtering to create tailored information environments, social media platforms have further deepened division.[28] Because these algorithms give more weight to material that is similar to what consumers have already shown an interest in, they cause what are known as "*filter bubbles*". People in these "*bubbles*" are less likely to meet opposing viewpoints and more likely to encounter information that supports their current opinions. Polarization and the reinforcement of ideological beliefs can result from this kind of selective exposure.

Another factor contributing to division is the dissemination of false information through social media. Disinformation may distort people's perceptions of political problems and actors, which in turn can influence public opinion. False information spreads more easily and has more adherents when it fits in with people's ideological tendencies. Attempts to combat

[26] Benjamin Moffitt (2016), *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, pp. 134-147.
[27] Christopher H. Achen & Larry M. Bartels (2016), *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*, pp. 297-321.
[28] Chris Bail (2021), *Breaking the Social Media Prism: How to Make Our Platforms Less Polarizing*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Emily Kubina & Christian von Sikorki (2021), "The Role of (Social) Media in Political Polarization: A Systematic Review", *Annals of the International Communication Association*, Vol. 45, no: 3, pp. 188-206.

disinformation are frequently obstructed by specific ideological groupings' entrenched mistrust of the media. According to Cognitive Dissonance Theory, people feel guilty or uncomfortable when they have to face facts that go against their beliefs.[29] They may engage in dissonance reduction, which involves ignoring or downplaying the contradicting facts, in order to ease this pain. Political polarization makes people more inclined to ignore or downplay data that contradicts their preconceived notions, which only serves to harden their stances.

An expansion of the concept of cognitive dissonance, motivated reasoning proposes that people's biased processing of information to reinforce their ideological predispositions. As an example of this kind of processing, one may pay more attention to data that supports their existing worldview and less weight to data that challenges it. When people perceive new information in a way that confirms their ideological beliefs, motivated reasoning might cause them to become even more divided. Ideological polarization is driven, in large part, by emotions. Anger, fear, and contempt, according to the research, might heighten already extreme viewpoints. Emotional appeals in political discourse have the potential to galvanize supporters and demonize opponents. Another way that emotional reactions might deepen divided beliefs is by making people interact with political problems more viscerally and less rationally.[30]

One of the main – but largely under-studied – causes of ideological polarization is economic disparity.[31] The politicization of economic issues can occur when the wealth disparity grows, and economic concerns are amplified. Both right-wing (conservative and/or nationalist) and left-wing (socialist or "*left-liberal*"[32]) populist movements, with drastically differing views on how to fix the economy, might arise because of this dynamic. In addition to fueling animosity towards perceived elites and exacerbating sentiments of relative hardship, economic disparity can amplify polarization. Because of this upheaval, ultra-nationalist and populist discourse might flourish, as can the idea of blaming immigration and trade policies for the economy's problems. As a result of competing demands for economic policy, existing political differences have the potential to exacerbate ideological polarization.

[29] Eddie Harmon-Jones & Judson Mills (2019), "An introduction to cognitive dissonance theory and an overview of current perspectives on the theory", in Eddie Harmon-Jones (ed.) *Cognitive Dissonance: Reexamining a Pivotal Theory in Psychology*, New York: American Psychological Association, pp. 3-24.
[30] *Ibid*., pp. 11-19.
[31] Sergei Guriev & Elias Papaioannou (2022), "The Political Economy of Populism", pp. 753-832
[32] Doug Rossinow (2008), *Visions of Progress: The Left-Liberal Tradition in America*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Ideological division is fueled in large part by cultural identity and values. Many people feel very strongly about cultural problems like gender equality, LGBTQ rights, and immigration because of the tight connections between these topics and people's identities and beliefs.[33] When people feel their way of life is being threatened, it can cause a schism due to cultural differences in values. By painting cultural problems in divisive light, powerful politicians and news organizations may deepen these schisms. A person's religious ideas can influence their stance on several political matters, including foreign policy and social policies. Political parties risk escalating religious tensions when they form alliances with certain religious organizations. Disagreements on contentious moral issues, such as same-sex marriage and abortion, can exacerbate existing partisan divides. Another factor that might contribute to polarization is shifts in demographics, such as more racial and cultural variety. Diversity in society can lead to tensions over national and cultural identity. Political disputes about multiculturalism, affirmative action, and immigration may become more polarized as a result.

Electoral systems can impact the degree of ideological division in a country. More diverse political parties and more coalition-building are hallmarks of systems that use proportional representation to distribute seats. On the other hand, majoritarian voting systems like first-past-the-post might encourage political parties to take more extreme stances in order to stand out and rally their supporters. Therefore, the incentives for political players to polarize may be influenced by the design of election systems.[34] Governmental structure and party organization are examples of political institutions that drive polarization. Parties with strict party discipline and strong party control tend to be less flexible and more ideologically united. The filibuster in the U.S. Senate is one example of an institutional system that allows minorities to use their veto power, which can lead to partisanship and legislative deadlock. Thus, the level of ideological polarization in a community may be affected by the structure and operation of its political institutions.

Electoral reforms are one way to lessen the impact of ideological division. One way to encourage politicians to reach out to more moderate voters and lessen the spotlight on extremist ideas is to implement ranked-choice voting. Another way to lessen polarization is to have open primaries, where voters of all parties are welcome to participate – which would

[33] Christopher T. Stout (2020), *The Case for Identity Politics: Polarization, Demographic Change, and Racial Appeals*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press; Zein Murib (2018), "Trumpism, Citizenship, and the Future of the LGBTQ Movement", *Politics & Gender*, Vol. 14, no: 4, pp. 649-672.
[34] Kamil Bernaerts & Benjamin Blanckaert & Didier Caluwaerts (2023), "Institutional design and polarization: Do consensus democracies fare better in fighting polarization than majoritarian democracies?", *Democratization*, Vol. 30, no: 2, pp. 153-172.

likely lead to the nomination of more moderate candidates.[35] By encouraging deliberative democratic behaviors and strengthening civic education, we may create a more educated and involved populace, which in turn reduces division. Citizenship education has the potential to improve people's ability to understand and use various forms of media by fostering critical thinking and media literacy.

One notable way to reduce the economic grievances that fuel polarization is to implement policies that encourage inclusive development and social mobility, which in turn address economic inequality. Social safety nets, education and training programs, and progressive taxes are all examples of what may fall under this category. The economic drivers of division can be mitigated if policymakers tackle the underlying issues of economic inequality and dislocation.[36]

The following two sections of the article will examine the cases of the U.S. and Türkiye in an attempt to understand which of the aforementioned political/institutional, economic, and social factors covered in this section has driven and deepened polarization in these societies.

3. The Roots of Political Polarization in the U.S.

An increasingly distinctive feature of American politics is the extreme ideological division that exists inside the country. The chasm that has grown between conservatives (i.e. Republican Party supporters) and liberals (i.e. Democratic Party supporters) over the last several decades has serious consequences for the United States' global leadership, unity in society, and Washington's public policy. In this section, we look at the many causes of the growing ideological divide in the U.S., including past events, current politics, the role of social media, economic issues, political institutions, and societal shifts.

The 1960s Civil Rights Movement was a watershed moment in American history, ushering in massive societal and political shifts. A reorganization of political factions followed the movement's triumph in ending segregation and achieving racial equality. Once linked with the South before the 1970s, the Democratic Party grew more progressive and civil rights oriented, while the Republican Party began to attract conservative white people who were against these socio-political changes.[37] The ideological divisiveness that would worsen in the decades that followed was laid down by this realignment. In an effort to win over white

[35] *Ibid*., pp. 161-166.
[36] Alexander J. Stewart & Nolan McCarty & Joanna J. Bryson (2020), "Polarization under rising inequality and economic decline", *Science Advances*, Vol. 6, no: 50, pp. 1-9.
[37] David Darmofal & Ryan Strickler (2019), *Demography, Politics, and Partisan Polarization in the United States, 1828–2016*, London: Springer, pp. 34-61.

Southerners who were disillusioned with the party's leadership, the Republican Party adopted what was known as the "*Southern Strategy*" towards the end of the 20th century. The GOP was able to turn the South into a bastion by appealing to conservative ideals and the hostility to federal intrusion in state issues.[38] As a result of this change in strategy, the Republican Party shifted to support conservative policies and the Democratic Party to support liberal ones, further dividing American politics.

Political polarization in the U.S. has also been worsened by gerrymandering, which is the process of creating electoral districts in a way that benefits one political party at the expense of another. Gerrymandering lessens the motivation for politicians to court moderate votes by making districts safe for incumbents. Candidates, on the other hand, put all their energy into rallying their base, which typically includes voters with more radical ideologies. More polarized politicians are elected because of this process, which deepens ideological differences.[39] Several cases of recent years highlight how both major political parties have engaged in gerrymandering to gain political advantage, leading to numerous legal challenges and significant political debates – all of which have significantly intensified social tensions and consolidated bipolarization in the country.

Throughout the 2010s, the congressional map of North Carolina was challenged multiple times for being racially and politically gerrymandered. In 2016, a federal court struck down the map, stating that race was used predominantly in drawing two districts. The court ordered the state to redraw its districts, which were then challenged again for partisan gerrymandering.[40] Maryland's 6th Congressional District had traditionally been a Republican stronghold, but after the redrawing of the area by Democratic lawmakers to favor their party, it has shifted towards being a Democratic dominant zone.[41] The case reached the Supreme Court where the plaintiffs argued that the redistricting was an unconstitutional partisan gerrymander. The Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled in 2018 that the state's congressional map was an unconstitutional partisan gerrymander.[42] The map, drawn by Republicans in

[38] John White (2015), *What Happened to the Republican Party? And What It Means for American Presidential Politics*, New York: Routledge, pp. 4-28.
[39] Kamil Bernaerts & Benjamin Blanckaert & Didier Caluwaerts (2023), "Institutional design and polarization: Do consensus democracies fare better in fighting polarization than majoritarian democracies?", pp. 164-168.
[40] Zach Montellaro & Josh Gerstein (2022), "Supreme Court to hear case on GOP 'independent legislature' theory that could radically reshape elections", *Politico*, 30.06.2022, Date of Accession: 10.05.2024 from https://www.politico.com/news/2022/06/30/supreme-court-gop-independent-legislature-theory-reshape-elections-00043471.
[41] Brennan Center for Justice (2019), "Lamone v. Benisek", 29.07.2019, Date of Accession: 10.05.2024 from https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/court-cases/lamone-v-benisek.
[42] *Ibid.*

2011, was found to disproportionately favor their party. The court ordered a new map, which resulted in a more balanced representation in subsequent elections.

One major factor that has exacerbated the ideological divide in the United States is the proliferation of politically biased media. News outlets on cable and internet, such as *MSNBC* and *Fox News*, target certain ideological groups, isolating viewers who see mostly content that supports their preexisting views.[43] For instance, *MSNBC* leans more toward leftist opinions, whereas *Fox News* is often believed to support conservative ones. A more divided media environment is the result of this segmentation, which isolates audiences into echo chambers where they only see content that confirms their own political views. By offering biased views on political matters and denigrating opposing opinions, this biased exposure to partisan media deepens pre-existing ideological gaps. The media environment becomes more fragmented as a result, making it harder for people of different ideologies to communicate and comprehend one another. By giving more weight to material that corresponds with users' established tastes and previous actions, algorithmic filtering on social media platforms also serve to deepen existing divisions. As a result, people become trapped in filter bubbles where they only see content that supports their own views, further dividing society along ideological lines. This dynamic is made worse by the fact that sensationalist and disinformational content is often shared on social media. The biased use of social media to disseminate misinformation and conspiracy theories during the 2020 presidential election is a prime example of how these platforms may exacerbate divisions in society.[44]

One of the main causes of ideological polarization is economic disparity. Growing economic inequality gives rise to animosity toward those seen as part of the privileged. Populist movements, which advocate for drastically different answers to economic issues, can arise on both the left and the right in response to economic upheaval, such as job losses caused by globalization and technological improvements. As many factions try to solve their economic problems with diverse policy suggestions, this dynamic exacerbates division. A growing disparity between the wealthiest Americans and everyone else has been a hallmark of America's income inequality for decades. The Gini coefficient, with 0 indicating complete

[43] Martin Haselmayer & Markus Wagner & Thomas M. Meyer (2017), "Partisan Bias in Message Selection: Media Gatekeeping of Party Press Releases", *Political Communication*, Vol. 34, no: 3, pp. 367-384; Kenneth Kim (2019), "The Hostile Media Phenomenon: Testing the Effect of News Framing on Perceptions of Media Bias", *Communication Research Reports*, Vol. 36, no: 1, pp. 35-44.
[44] McKay Coppins (2020), "The Billion-Dollar Disinformation Campaign to Re-Elect the President", *The Atlantic*, March 2020, Date of Accession: 10.05.2024 from https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/03/the-2020-disinformation-war/605530/.

equality and 1 indicating complete inequality, is the principal metric for income inequality. The Gini coefficient, the income share and the net average wealth of richest % 1 have all increased over the last several decades, showing widening inequality (see **Table 1**).

Many American workers have seen their wages remain stagnant due to the reduction in domestic employment in specific sectors brought about by the outsourcing of manufacturing and other jobs to nations with cheaper labor costs.[45] There is a robust relationship between income and level of education. The steep increase in the price of college in the United States has made it out of reach for many people with lower incomes and has only served to deepen the economic gap. Workers are less able to negotiate for improved working conditions and greater salaries due to the fall of unions and collective bargaining. Furthermore, many workers now face economic volatility due to the growth of the gig economy and insecure employment.[46] The rich have benefited from tax policies that have lowered taxes on higher wages and capital gains, which have widened the income gap. Many workers have seen their actual salaries decline because minimum wage rules have failed to keep up with inflation. Polarization and instability in politics can result from large economic gaps.

Table 1. The Evolution of Income and Wealth Inequality in the U.S.

	1975	**1990**	**2005**	**2020**
Share of Income Earned by Top % 1	% 8	% 13	% 17	% 20
Gini Index	35.7	38.3	41	39.7
Net Average Wealth of Top % 1	520K $	2.8M $	7.1M $	15.3M $
Net Average Wealth of Bottom % 50	12.2K $	12.4K $	12.7K $	13.6K $

Source: World Bank and World Inequality Database (as of 26 July 2024).

[45] Bryan Jung (2022), "Americans' Real Wages Fall Again as Inflation Soars to Fresh 40-Year High", *The Epoch Times*, 13.07.2022.
[46] Mindy Shoss & Shiyang Su & Ann Schlotzhauer & Nicole Carusone (2022), "Job Insecurity Harms Both Employees and Employers", *Harvard Business Review*, 26.09.2022, Date of Accession: 10.05.2024 from https://hbr.org/2022/09/job-insecurity-harms-both-employees-and-employers.

The wealth gap in the United States is far wider than the income gap. The wealthiest one percent of Americans control a disproportionately large amount of the country's wealth, while the poorest half of the population own almost nothing.[47] The advantages of money, social networks, and opportunity are more readily available to those who are born into it. Assets such as stocks, real estate, and enterprises have the potential to increase in value over time, and those with higher incomes have more possibilities to do so. Rising property prices and the subprime mortgage crisis have made it impossible for many people to enter the housing market, despite the fact that homeownership is a key method of accumulating wealth in the U.S. Campaign donations, lobbying, and media dominance give the wealthy a disproportionate amount of power over Washington, which they use to further their own interests and keep inequality in place.[48] A loss of faith in institutions and societal stability can result from widening income gaps. The possibility of social unrest grows whenever a sizable portion of the populace experiences a loss of agency. There is surely a correlation between the deepening of ideological polarization, increase of widespread social dissatisfaction due to chronic income and wealth inequality and the emergent political violence in the U.S.[49] A significant portion of radicalized "*Trumpists*", for example, have been argued to hail from low-income households.[50]

Foreign policy has also played a significant role in recent years in terms of deepening the divide between political parties and among the general populace in the United States. Historically, foreign policy had been a domain where bipartisan cooperation was more common, as the U.S. navigated global conflicts like the Second World War and the Cold War.[51] For example, a notable instance of cooperation was seen in the aftermath of attacks on September 11, 2001, as a foreign policy consensus emerged with both major parties supporting military action in Afghanistan. However, the subsequent invasion of Iraq in 2003, based on controversial claims about weapons of mass destruction, significantly fractured this unity. The Democratic Party increasingly viewed the war as unjustified and mismanaged, while many Republicans supported it as a necessary step in the "*War on Terror*".[52] The

[47] For more details, see; Thomas M. Shapiro (2017), *Toxic Inequality: How America's Wealth Gap Destroys Mobility, Deepens the Racial Divide, and Threatens Our Future*, New York: Basic Books.
[48] Rebecca Solnit (2024), "In the Shadow of Silicon Valley", *London Review of Books*, Vol. 46, no: 3, pp. 7-11.
[49] Krige Siebrits (2022), "Economic Inequality and Political Polarization", *Taiwan Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 18, no: 1, p. 41.
[50] Burt Neuborne (2019), *When at Times the Mob Is Swayed: A Citizen's Guide to Defending Our Republic*, New York: The New Press.
[51] Michael H. Hunt (1987), *Ideology and U. S. Foreign Policy*, New Haven: Yale University.
[52] Melvyn P. Leffler (2005), "9/11 and American Foreign Policy", *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 29, no: 3, pp. 395-413.

intense debates over the legitimacy, execution, and consequences of the Iraq War exacerbated existing ideological divides, contributing to long-lasting partisan bitterness.

Polarization between Republicans and Democrats on issues of foreign policy further increased during the tenure of President Barack Obama. Conservatives criticized Obama for being too passive in international conflicts and perceived his foreign policy as weakening America's global stance.[53] In contrast, many liberals criticized him for continuing military interventions and the ethical implications of drone warfare.[54] The Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA – Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) in 2015 is another significant example. The agreement, which aimed to curb Iran's nuclear program in exchange for lifting economic sanctions, was lauded by many Democrats as a diplomatic triumph, but vehemently opposed by Republicans who viewed it as dangerously lenient and detrimental to U.S. and Israeli security interests.[55] This division extended beyond Congress, influencing public opinion and media narratives, thereby deepening the partisan divide.[56]

Donald Trump's presidency marked a dramatic shift in U.S. foreign policy, characterized by his "*America First*" doctrine. His administration's approach to international relations was highly polarizing. Key decisions, such as withdrawing from the Paris Climate Agreement, pulling out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), renegotiating NAFTA, and the contentious dealings with NATO allies, were divisive. Republicans largely supported Trump's stance as a necessary recalibration of U.S. foreign policy to prioritize national interests. In contrast, Democrats criticized his actions as reckless and damaging to Washington's global standing and alliances.[57]

President Donald Trump's personal approach to Russian President Vladimir Putin was notably conciliatory. Trump repeatedly praised Putin and expressed a desire to improve U.S.-Russia relations, which sparked significant controversy and allegations of undue leniency.[58] Despite Trump's personal overtures, his administration implemented several measures that were tough on Russia. Key actions included imposing sanctions on Russian individuals and

[53] Kenneth A. Schultz (2017), "Perils of Polarization for U.S. Foreign Policy", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 40, no: 4, pp. 7-28.
[54] *Ibid.*
[55] *Ibid.*
[56] Gary C. Jacobson (2011), "Obama and the Polarized Public", in James A. Thurber (ed.) *Obama in Office: The First Two Years*, New York: Routledge, pp. 19-40.
[57] Shah M. Tarzi (2019), "The Trump Divide and Partisan Attitudes Regarding US Foreign Policy: Select Theoretical and Empirical Observations", *International Studies*, Vol. 56, no: 1, pp. 46-57.
[58] Florian Böller & Lukas D. Herr (2020), "From Washington without Love: Congressional Foreign Policy Making and US-Russian Relations under President Trump", *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 26, no: 1, pp. 17-37.

entities for activities such as human rights abuses in Ukraine. The administration also expelled Russian diplomats in response to the poisoning of a former Russian spy in the UK. The Biden administration has taken a markedly firmer stance toward Russia, emphasizing accountability and strengthening alliances. President Joe Biden's administration swiftly imposed a new wave of sanctions on Russia. Biden has emphasized the importance of a united front against Russian aggression, especially in Eastern Europe. This approach contrasts with Trump's occasional criticism of NATO and his focus on burden-sharing among member states. The Trump and Biden administrations have adopted significantly different approaches to U.S.-Russia relations. Trump's tenure was marked by a dichotomy between his personal affinity for Putin and the administration's enforcement of sanctions and strategic measures. In contrast, Biden has pursued a more consistently confrontational and principled stance, engaging Russia from a position of firm resolve in the context of the ongoing Ukraine War. These contrasting approaches reflect broader differences in foreign policy philosophy that originate out of the bipolar ideological positions of Republicans and Democrats.

4. The Impact of Political Polarization on Democracy in the U.S.

Political polarization in the U.S. has also worsened due to the emergence of identity politics, in which social identities like gender, ethnicity, and religion are strongly linked to political choices.[59] Separate political factions representing the interests of particular identity groups might emerge as a result of identity politics. This has the potential to be a potent instrument for promoting social justice, but it also has the risk of adding to polarization by fostering inflexible borders of identification and diminishing chances for communication and cooperation across different groups. "*Culture wars*" on issues such as racial justice, abortion, gun control, and LGBTQ+ rights frequently show how divided American society is.

One recent example is the fight for transgender people to have equal access to restrooms.[60] Similarly, the deep ideological schism on reproductive rights is reflected in the continuing fight over abortion rights, which is illustrated by the divisiveness surrounding numerous legal cases to the Supreme Court and limitations at the state level.[61] Social movements and protests are prime instances of people becoming deeply divided along ideological lines. Since its

[59] For more details, see; Christopher T. Stout (2020), *The Case for Identity Politics: Polarization, Demographic Change, and Racial Appeals*.
[60] Tom Dart (2017), "Transgender 'bathroom bill' leaves Texas Christians deeply divided", *The Guardian*, 06.08.2017.
[61] Greer Donley (2022), "Medication Abortion Exceptionalism", *Cornell Law Review,* Vol. 107, no: 3, pp. 627-704.

inception, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has been at the center of the national conversation about police brutality and racial equality. Reflecting profound ideological differences, some see BLM as an affront to law and order, while others see it as an essential reaction to systematic racism.[62] The contrasting viewpoints on social and racial justice concerns are further demonstrated by the counter-protests, such the pro-Republican "*Blue Lives Matter*" movement that backs police officers.

The consequences of ideological polarization for democratic rule are substantial. Legislative deadlock is one of the most noticeable outcomes. Finding common ground is becoming more and more difficult as the ideological gap between the parties grows. This dynamic leads to deadlocks in policymaking, which in turn hinders the government's capacity to do its job and leaves important problems unsolved. Political instability and a decline in public faith in democratic institutions are both exacerbated by legislative deadlock. For example, when it comes to healthcare reform, immigration laws, and budget allocations, it is very uncommon for parties to remain firmly committed to their ideological convictions, leading to impasses in the debates. The Affordable Care Act (ACA), sometimes known as "*Obamacare*" is a prime example of this deadlock. The political chasm over healthcare policy was on full display in the 2010 passing of the ACA with not a single Republican vote and the several attempts by Republicans to dismantle it that followed.[63] Another sign of parliamentary deadlock caused by ideological division is government shutdowns. The longest U.S. shutdown ever, which lasted 35 days from December 2018 to January 2019, is the most recent and glaring example of this. A controversial topic reflecting larger arguments about immigration and national security, the financial cost of a border wall became the source of this closure when President Trump and congressional Democrats could not come to an agreement. The impact of ideologically driven shutdowns on government operations and public faith in democratic institutions is glaringly obvious.

By giving an advantage to candidates who can win over the most radical members of their party, the primary election process of the U.S. political system also tends to deepen pre-existing divisions. Candidates take more ideologically conservative stances to win over their party's base during the primary. In the 2016 presidential primaries, this phenomenon was on full display as Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, who embodied the party's most radical

[62] Alvin B. Tillery Jr. (2019), "What Kind of Movement is Black Lives Matter? The View from Twitter", *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics*, Vol. 4, no: 2, pp. 297-323.
[63] For more details, see; Steven Brill (2015), *America's Bitter Pill: Money, Politics, Back-Room Deals, and the Fight to Fix Our Broken Healthcare System*, New York: Random House.

elements, garnered substantial support. This dynamic has the potential to further polarize candidates and the political environment as a whole.

The Capitol Riot on 6 January 2021 was one of the most egregious instances of political violence resulting from ideological strife. A group of armed pro-Trump militias attempted to change the 2020 presidential election results by storming the U.S. Capitol. This historic assault on a pillar of American democracy demonstrated the tremendous zeal with which some people are prepared to act in accordance with their deeply divided political views. This incident demonstrated how ideological divisions may quickly lead to bloodshed, which in turn undermines democratic rule. Rising levels of domestic terrorism and hate crimes are further signs of sharp ideological divisions. Extremist ideology is a common motivator for domestic terrorist attacks and hate organizations, according to the FBI and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC).[64] The Pittsburg synagogue incident in 2018, in which a shooter targeted Jewish worshippers, and the 2017 Charlottesville demonstration, in which white supremacists fought with counter-protesters in the streets, are examples of how violent acts against perceived adversaries can result from extreme ideas.

Republicans and Democrats could not be more divided about climate change. Despite Republicans' skepticism of climate science and opposition to regulatory measures, surveys reveal that Democrats are more inclined to recognize the scientific consensus on climate change and favor actions to address it.[65] The contrasting policies of the last several administrations are evidence of how this divide influences policymaking. The stark difference between the Obama and Trump administrations' approaches to climate action and environmental regulation highlights the influence of ideological divisions on policy responses to pressing global issues. The COVID-19 epidemic also served to highlight and worsen the already existing ideological divide. There was a marked party divide in the reactions to public health initiatives like vaccination drives and mask requirements. Research shows that Republicans, swayed by political figures and media accounts that minimize the seriousness of the illness, were less inclined to wear masks and take vaccines.[66] In regions where people

[64] Southern Poverty Law Center (2018), "General Hate", 08.08.2018, Date of Accession: 10.05.2024 from https://web.archive.org/web/20180408201658/https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/general-hate.
[65] For more details, see; Naomi Klein (2019), *On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal*, New York: Allen Lane.
[66] Katharina Gabriela Pfaff & Thomas Plümper & Eric Neumayer (2023), "Polarized Politics: Protest Against COVID-19 Containment Policies in the USA", *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 138, no: 1, pp. 23-46.

were more resistant to health measures, illness and death rates were greater, and this polarization made it harder to execute consistent public health programs.

To combat polarization, it is crucial to encourage collaboration and conversation across different political parties. Efforts to promote bipartisan cooperation among legislators have the potential to heal ideological wounds and create a more cooperative political climate. One group working to lessen partisanship and increase the efficacy of legislation is the Problem Solvers Caucus in Congress.[67] Its members come from both parties and are dedicated to finding common ground on important topics. One other way to reduce polarization via lessening the effect of biased news and algorithmic filtering is to increase media literacy and promote diversified media intake. In order to combat the spread of false information in today's media landscape, people can benefit from educational programs that teach them to think critically and analyze media effectively. Another way to combat the rise of echo chambers is to encourage people to read news stories from a range of outlets.

Rebuilding social cohesiveness requires promoting community involvement and conversation that transcends ideological barriers. To lessen polarization, there should be initiatives that unite people in talking about their problems and finding solutions they can all agree on. Intergroup contact interventions, town hall gatherings and civic dialogues all provide opportunities for people with different perspectives to meet face-to-face and have meaningful discussions. Legislative deadlock, election procedures, media consumption patterns, social disputes, and other facets of American culture and politics attest to the country's extreme degree of ideological polarization. This section has discussed how polarization affects government, social cohesiveness, and public safety in the U.S. Promoting bipartisan collaboration, improving media literacy, and encouraging community involvement are all necessary steps in the multi-pronged fight against polarization. We may strive for a more united and inclusive society by identifying and resolving the root causes of polarization.

5. The Roots of Political Polarization in Türkiye

There has been a great deal of ideological division in Türkiye since the early 2000s. Its political stability, social cohesiveness, and economic progress are all severely impacted by this split. Historical legacies, political dynamics, media impacts, economic variables, and societal changes are some of the many aspects and causes of ideological division in Türkiye that are examined in this section. These factors can provide light on where polarization in

[67] For more details, see; Josh Gottheimer & Tom Reed (2017), "Let's Stop the Bickering and Fix the Health Care System", *New York Times*, 04.08.2017.

Türkiye has come from and how it will shape the future of the country. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk launched a secular modernization movement called Kemalism when he established the Turkish Republic in 1923. In its pursuit of making Türkiye a secular modern nation-state, this ideology prioritized secularism, Turkish nationalism, and cultural Westernization. The long-standing friction between secularists and Islamists in Türkiye was caused by this vision clashing with the deeply established Islamic traditions. Secular elites are generally seen by the Turkish conservative political tradition as disconnected from the religious majority due to this schism, which has altered the political scene.[68]

The divisiveness in Türkiye was further exacerbated by the country's history of military coups. In an effort to limit the impact of political Islam and other anti-Kemalist ideologies (e.g. socialism), the Kemalist military stepped into politics on many occasions (1960, 1971, 1980, and 1997), seeing itself as the protector of Atatürk's secular and nationalist Republic. More animosity and distrust developed between religious conservatives and secularists as a result of these actions. The ideological divide was further widened when conservatives and Islamists viewed the military's activities as anti-democratic. A notable change occurred in Turkish politics with the emergence of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP or AK Parti) in the early 2000s. With its foundations in political Islam, the AKP was able to win over religious and conservative groups who had felt left out by the secular ruling class.[69] Its programs, which mixed social conservatism with economic liberalism, were well-received by the Turkish people and helped propel the party to victory in successive elections (i.e. in 2002, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2018, and 2023). On the other hand, polarization has worsened due to the AKP's rise to power and its authoritarian tendencies, which have helped to consolidate power and silence critics.[70]

A major contributor to the divisiveness in Türkiye has been the leadership style of President Erdoğan. Society is more divided as a result of his polarizing speeches, which he has used on numerous occasions to target secularists/Kemalists, socialists, feminists, liberals, Kurdish and Alevi rights activists, and many opposition parties (e.g. CHP – Republican People's Party)

[68] For a detailed study, see; Senem Aydın-Düzgit (2019), "The Islamist-Secularist Divide", pp. 17-37.
[69] Elvan Aktas (2017), "The rise and the fall of the Turkish economic success story under AKP (JDP)", *Contemporary Islam*, no: 11, pp. 171-183.
[70] Yunus Sözen (2020), "Studying autocratization in Turkey: political institutions, populism, and neoliberalism", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no: 63, pp. 209-235; Melis G. Laebens & Aykut Öztürk (2021), "Partisanship and Autocratization: Polarization, Power Asymmetry, and Partisan Social Identities in Turkey", *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 54, no: 2, pp. 245-279; Hakan Yavuzyılmaz & Dimitris Tsarouhas (2023), "Opening the box of parties and party systems under autocratization: evidence from Turkey", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 23, no: 4, pp. 901-920.

and non-governmental organizations.[71] The political landscape has been further divided by President Erdoğan's method of government, which involves consolidating authority, weakening checks and balances, and intimidating opposition with long-term imprisonment sentences.[72] There is a great deal of ideological tension because of his divisive storylines, which frequently include portraying political opponents as dangers to national security.[73]

Partly as a result of government control and censorship, the Turkish media landscape has grown split. The media landscape is significantly biased towards pro-government narratives since many critical media outlets have been either taken over or repressed by the AKP administration.[74] There has been a lot of pressure on independent and alternative media, with journalists facing jail, fines, and legal harassment. Independent and opposition media are under intense pressure, in contrast to pro-government outlets like *Sabah* and *A Haber*, which relentlessly promote AKP narratives and policies. *Cumhuriyet*, *Sözcü*, and *Halk Tv* are just a few examples of the critical publications and television networks that face ongoing threats of censorship, legal action, and penalties. As a result of media polarization, preexisting ideological gaps are further deepened and various parts of society are exposed to wildly divergent information. Despite giving a new venue for dissenting opinions, social media has exacerbated divisions in society. By limiting users' exposure to content that disagrees with their views, social media platforms can essentially act as echo chambers, further solidifying users' ideological convictions. Disinformation and propaganda circulated on social media have deepened existing tensions, with opposing viewpoints on contentious matters like the Kurdish question, foreign policy direction, animal rights issue, and economic growth adding fuel to the fire.[75] Social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter had a significant role in organizing and mobilizing the 2013 Gezi Park protests, which began as a local environmental

[71] Murat Somer (2018), "Turkey: The Slippery Slope from Reformist to Revolutionary Polarization and Democratic Breakdown", pp. 42-61; Oğuzhan Göksel (2019), "Foreign Policy Making in the Age of Populism: The Uses of Anti-Westernism in Turkish Politics", *New Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 9, no: 1, pp. 13-35.
[72] Bertil Emrah Oder (2021), "Turkey's Democratic Erosion: On Backsliding and the Constitution", *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, Vol. 88, no: 2, pp. 473-500.
[73] Berk Esen & Sebnem Gumuscu (2023), "How Erdoğan's Populism Won Again", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 34, no: 3, pp. 21-32.
[74] Ryan Lavigne (2019), "The End of Opposition: The AKP's Ten-Year War on Press Freedom in Turkey", *UCLA Journal of Islamic and Near Eastern Law*, no: 17, pp. 1-29; Vedat Demir (2021), "Freedom of the Media in Turkey Under the AKP Government", in Hasan Aydin & Winston Langley (eds.) *Human Rights in Turkey: Assaults on Human Dignity*, London: Springer, pp. 51-88.
[75] Didem Türkoğlu & Meltem Odabaş & Doruk Tunaoglu & Mustafa Yavaş (2022), "Political Polarisation on Social Media: Competing Understandings of Democracy in Turkey", *South European Society and Politics*, Vol. 27, no: 2, pp. 223-251.

protest and grew into huge anti-government rallies across the country.[76] In reaction, the government tried to restrict online activism and block social media sites, drawing attention to the way in which these platforms exacerbate ideological divisions. Meanwhile, pro-AKP narratives are pushed by pro-government social media operations that utilize bots and trolls to harass opposition individuals, further dividing the online sphere.[77]

Another major factor that contributes to division in Türkiye is economic disparity. The AKP has presided over periods of robust economic growth in the 2000s and early 2010s; however hyper-inflation, income inequality, and wealth inequality have remained rampant, and the economy has been in a downward spiral since the mid-2010s (see **Table 2**). Economic development has disproportionately favored urban areas, especially in the west, over rural and eastern areas.[78] There is a correlation between the economic gap and ideological gulfs; generally speaking, rural regions are more religious and conservative, whilst metropolitan areas are more secular and liberal. Therefore, ideological polarization may be fueled by economic grievances, as various groups try to resolve their problems through different political channels. Proponents of the AKP's economic policies say they have helped the country flourish thanks to their emphasis on building and real estate as well as other massive infrastructural projects.[79] On the other hand, those who are against these policies say that they cause corruption, economic instability, and environmental damage.[80] Economic model debates highlight larger ideological differences; the AKP supports a pro-business, neoliberal free-market agenda, while the opposition parties, especially the CHP, call for more social welfare and wealth equality. Economic policy polarization affects voter preferences and public opinion. As inflation and income and wealth inequality has reached increasingly severe levels over the years under the AKP rule, economic dissatisfaction has come to the foreground of bipolarization and further deepened divisions (see **Table 2**).

[76] Oğuzhan Göksel & Omer Tekdemir (2018), "Questioning the 'Immortal State': The Gezi Protests and the Short-Lived Human Security Moment in Turkey", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 45, no: 3, pp. 376-393.
[77] Erkan Saka (2018), "Social Media in Turkey as a Space for Political Battles: AKTrolls and other Politically motivated trolling", *Middle East Critique*, Vol. 27, no: 2, pp. 161-177; Seçil Toros & Emre Toros (2022), "Social media use and political participation: the Turkish case", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 23, no: 3, pp. 450-473.
[78] For a comprehensive study, see; Güneş Aşık & Ulaş Karakoç & Şevket Pamuk (2023), "Regional inequalities and the West–East divide in Turkey since 1913", *The Economic History Review*, Vol. 76, no: 4, pp. 1305-1332.
[79] For a detailed study of Türkiye's political economy of development under the AKP rule, see; Görkem Altınörs & Ümit Akçay (2022), "Authoritarian neoliberalism, crisis, and consolidation: the political economy of regime change in Turkey", *Globalizations*, Vol. 19, no: 7, pp. 1029-1053.
[80] Fırat Kimya (2019), "Political economy of corruption in Turkey: declining petty corruption, rise of cronyism?", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 20, no: 3, pp. 351-376.

Table 2. The Evolution of Inflation and Income and Wealth Inequality in Türkiye

	1995	**2005**	**2015**	**2022**
Share of Income Earned by Top % 1	% 21.5	% 18.2	% 20.9	% 20.4
Gini Index	38.5	42.6	40.8	43.7
Share of Wealth by Top % 1	% 46	% 37	% 39.5	% 37.4
Share of Wealth by Bottom % 50	% 1	% 3.3	% 3.2	% 3.2
Inflation Rate	% 89	% 8.1	% 7.6	% 72.3

Source: World Bank and World Inequality Database (as of 26 July 2024).

Another factor that has exacerbated division is the AKP's dependence on patronage and clientelism to sustain its support base.[81] A severely divided political economy has resulted from accusations that the party is utilizing state resources to favor its supporters and penalize those who oppose it. Further erosion of faith in institutions and deepening of ideological differences have resulted from corruption scandals, including as the 2013 corruption investigation involving high-ranking officials and businesses linked to the AKP. Opposition supporters' animosity and mistrust of the government is intensified by the widespread belief that it participates in corrupt practices and shows favoritism/nepotism.[82]

Ideological divisions in Türkiye also stem from the Kurdish Question. There are now significant rifts in Turkish society as a result of the protracted armed conflict between the Turkish Armed Forces and the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) – which is recognized by Türkiye, the U.S., Britain, Japan, the EU (European Union), and NATO (North Atlantic Organization) as a terrorist organization.[83] Turkish nationalist ideology and some Kurdish

[81] Düzgün Arslantaş & Şenol Arslantaş (2022), "How does clientelism foster electoral dominance? Evidence from Turkey", *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, Vol. 7, no: 3, pp. 559–575.
[82] *Ibid.*; Fırat Kimya (2019), "Political economy of corruption in Turkey: declining petty corruption, rise of cronyism?", pp. 365-370.
[83] *Le Monde* (2022), "NATO deal with Sweden and Finland: Ankara celebrates 'national victory,' worries mount in Stockholm", 29.06.2022, Date of Accession: 10.05.2024 from

activists' demands for autonomy and more cultural rights frequently clash. The violent conflict has persisted despite intermittent peace negotiations and reforms, which have not unfortunately succeeded in reducing bipolarization among Turkish and Kurdish nationalists.[84] The political climate has become even more complex and politicized as a result of the AKP's inconsistent position on the Kurdish Question, which has ranged from negotiations to military solutions over the years.

In recent years, foreign policy has played an increasingly significant role in exacerbating divisions within Türkiye – not unlike in the United States. In the early years of the AKP's rule, Türkiye pursued a foreign policy aimed at integrating with the European Union (EU). This policy, which included democratic reforms, enjoyed broad support across the political spectrum as it promised enhanced democratic governance.[85] However, as EU accession talks stalled, Erdoğan's foreign policy increasingly adopted a neo-Ottoman vision, seeking to expand Turkish influence across the Middle East, North Africa, and the Balkans. This vision appealed to nationalist and conservative segments of Turkish society, but it also alienated secularists and liberals who viewed this approach as a departure from Türkiye's Western-oriented approach.[86] Türkiye's involvement in the Syrian Civil War and its contentious relationship with Israel has been particularly polarizing. The AKP's support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas in Gaza has drawn criticism from secular and some nationalist factions who argue that such policies compromise Türkiye's security and economic interests.[87] Conversely, conservative and Islamist groups have supported these policies as aligning with Türkiye's moral and strategic interests.

Türkiye's relations with Western allies, particularly the United States and NATO, have been another source of polarization. Erdoğan's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defense system, have strained Türkiye's relations with its NATO allies. This move has been defended by the AKP as a sovereign right and a means to diversify Türkiye's defense partnerships. However, it has been criticized by opposition parties who view it as jeopardizing Türkiye's

https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/06/29/nato-deal-with-sweden-and-finland-ankara-celebrates-national-victory-worries-mount-in-stockholm_5988325_4.html.

[84] Burak Bilgehan Özpek (2019), "The State's Changing Role Regarding the Kurdish Question of Turkey: From Consistent Tutelage to Volatile Securitization", *Alternatives*, Vol. 44, no: 1, pp. 35-49.

[85] Paul Kubicek (2005), "The European Union and Grassroots Democratization in Turkey", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 6, no: 3, pp. 361-377.

[86] M. Hakan Yavuz (2022), "The Motives behind the AKP's Foreign Policy: Neo-Ottomanism and Strategic Autonomy", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 23, no: 5, pp. 659-680.

[87] Hakki Taş (2022), "Erdoğan and the Muslim Brotherhood: An Outside-In Approach to Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 23, no: 5, pp. 722-742.

strategic alignment with the West and its membership in NATO.[88] The CHP, Türkiye's main opposition party, presents a markedly different vision for the country's foreign policy. One of the central tenets of the CHP's foreign policy is a strong commitment to closer integration with Western institutions, particularly the EU and NATO. The CHP advocates for revitalizing Türkiye's EU accession process, which has stalled under Erdoğan. The party believes that EU membership would not only bolster Türkiye's economy but also reinforce democratic values and human rights.[89] This stance contrasts sharply with the AKP's drift away from the EU, driven by both the slow pace of negotiations and a pivot toward more independent regional policies.

The AKP has pursued a pragmatic and strategic engagement with Russia, characterized by a willingness to cooperate on various fronts despite underlying tensions. Key areas of cooperation include energy, defense, and regional conflicts. The AKP views Russia as an important partner in diversifying Türkiye's energy sources, exemplified by the TurkStream pipeline, which delivers Russian natural gas to Türkiye and Europe. In the Middle East, particularly in Syria, the AKP has balanced cooperation and competition with Russia. Both countries support opposing sides in the Syrian Civil War but have managed to coordinate actions through mechanisms like the Astana Peace Process. The CHP has been a vocal critic of the AKP's decision to purchase the S-400 system, arguing that it jeopardizes Türkiye's strategic relationship with NATO and the United States. The CHP contends that the acquisition undermines Türkiye's defense interoperability with its NATO allies and exposes the country to unnecessary risks, including economic sanctions, and diplomatic isolation.[90] The CHP also critiques the AKP's perceived leniency towards Russia's authoritarianism and human rights record. The CHP argues for a foreign policy that upholds democratic values and human rights, suggesting that closer ties with Russia under Erdoğan compromise these principles.[91]

The AKP and CHP differ significantly in their approach to relations with Russia. The AKP's strategy is characterized by pragmatic engagement and strategic cooperation, particularly in energy and defense, despite the resulting tensions with NATO. In contrast, the CHP advocates for a more cautious approach, emphasizing the importance of maintaining strong

[88] Vicken Cheterian (2023), "Friend and Foe: Russia–Turkey relations before and after the war in Ukraine", *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 34, no: 7, pp. 1271-1294.
[89] M. Hakan Yavuz & Ahmet Erdi Öztürk (2023), *Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and the New Republican People's Party in Turkey*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 123–138.
[90] *Ibid.*
[91] *Ibid.*

ties with Western allies and upholding democratic values. These differences reflect broader ideological divides and strategic visions within Turkish politics, shaping the country's foreign policy direction.

6. The Impact of Political Polarization on Democracy in Türkiye

Not unlike the wide divide between the Republicans and Democrats in the U.S., Turkish politics mostly revolve around the ideological clash between the ruling party (from 2002 to present) AKP and the established main opposition CHP – albeit there are other significant parties in the country such as the AKP's ally Turkish nationalist MHP (Nationalist Action Party), pro-Kurdish DEM (Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party), the rising new Islamist opposition YRP (New Welfare Party), and the ZP (Victory Party) known for its fanatical anti-immigrant stance and far-right populist leader Ümit Özdağ. Campaign speeches from the AKP and the CHP have frequently shown how far apart their ideologies are. In the most recent 2023 presidential elections and 2024 municipal elections, for example, there was intense rivalry, with Erdoğan portraying the contest as a fight for the "*survival*" of the country and the CHP highlighting democratic principles and effective leadership.[92] Turkish politics is characterized by this ideological bipolarization, as seen in the contrast between the AKP's emphasis on national identity, Islam, and traditional values, and the CHP's discursive focus on secularism, modernity, and democracy.

Another illustration of the AKP-CHP division was the constitutional referendum that took place in 2017, leading to the change from a parliamentary to a super-presidential administration. Voters' polarized views were on full display in the referendum's close 51.4 % approval rate. Proponents of the shift included the AKP and its ally MHP, who contended that the shift would lead to more stable and efficient government. Opposition groups like the CHP warned that it would weaken democratic safeguards and pave the way for dictatorship. The bitter campaigns, characterized by claims of media bias and unethical tactics, demonstrated the wide ideological divide between those who favor and those who oppose the presidential system.

Part of the reason people are so divided is because of the conflict between religious conservatism and secularism. Secularists view the AKP's policies which support religious

[92] M. Hakan Yavuz (2023), "A Torn Country: Erdoğan's Turkey and the Elections of 2023", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 30, no: 3, pp. 81-94; Meral Ugur-Cinar (2023), "Elections and Democracy in Turkey: Reconsidering Competitive Authoritarianism in the Age of Democratic Backsliding", *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 94, no: 3, pp. 445-451; Ezgi Elçi (2024), "Right-wing populism in Turkey and the 2023 elections", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 24, no: 2, pp. 297-317.

education, Islamic ideals in public life and the building of many mosques as a departure from Atatürk's secular ideas.[93] Equal rights for women and gender parity are also hotly debated topics. The AKP's traditionalist views on gender roles and family values are frequently at odds with those of feminists, socialists, and secularists who fight for equal rights for women at every field of life. AKP proposals to limit abortion or alter family law were two examples of legislation that received the ire of women's rights activists and illustrated the ideological gap. Every year on International Women's Day, there are marches that highlight how divided people are on gender issues; these feminist marches are frequently opposed by police.[94]

One well-known instance of – and perhaps the most notable turning point for the deepening of polarization – the violent political outcomes that can result from extreme ideological division was the 2013 Gezi Park demonstrations. Demonstrations against the government spread across the country after they started as a modest protest in Istanbul against the planned reconstruction of a park. The government's and its critics' schism was on full display in the harsh police reaction that led to the deaths and severe injuries of numerous protestors.[95] A wide range of groups such as Kemalists, environmentalists, feminists, socialists, anti-capitalist Muslims, LGBTQ groups, Alevi rights activists, and pro-Kurdish activists came together during the rallies to oppose Erdoğan's growingly autocratic leadership.[96] Protesters were portrayed by the government as traitors and foreign agents, which only served to further split the population and exacerbate ideological divisions. Another noteworthy instance in Türkiye's divisiveness and bloodshed occurred during and after the failed coup attempt on 15 July 2016. Following the coup attempt, the government ordered a widespread purge of those it held responsible for the coup from the ranks of the military, the courts, universities, and the public service.[97] The coup and its aftermath highlighted the wide ideological divide across the country – even among religious conservatives as the FETÖ (Gülenist Terrorist Organization)

[93] Sebnem Gumuscu (2024), "The AKP and Stealth Islamization in Turkey", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 25, no: 3, pp. 371-397.
[94] Emily McGarvey (2023), "International Women's Day: Istanbul women defy ban on protests", *BBC News*, 09.03.2023, Date of Accession: 10.05.2024 from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64897655.
[95] Kıvanç Atak & Donatella della Porta (2016), "Popular uprisings in Turkey: Police culpability and constraints on dialogue-oriented policing in Gezi Park and beyond", *European Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 13, no: 5, pp. 610-625.
[96] Oğuzhan Göksel & Omer Tekdemir (2018), "Questioning the 'Immortal State': The Gezi Protests and the Short-Lived Human Security Moment in Turkey", pp. 381-387.
[97] Gizem Tuğba Özkut & Jülide Aşçı (2020), "Long-Lasting State of Emergency: Use of (In)security for Consolidation of Power in Turkey", *Democracy and Security*, Vol. 16, no: 3, pp. 189-209.

members leading the coup attempt were members of an Islamist fraternity that had recently switched from close ally to an ardent enemy of the AKP administration.[98]

A new but extremely intense schism has opened in Turkish society as a result of the influx of Syrian refugees. With more than 3.6 million officially, Türkiye is the world's largest home for Syrian refugees.[99] Rising levels of nationalism and anti-immigration sentiment are direct results of the social and economic stresses allegedly brought on by the influx of so many refugees. Opposition parties such as the ZP (Victory Party) have harshly criticized the AKP's open-door policy towards Syrian migrants, despite its lauded humanitarianism. This matter has escalated into a major political flashpoint in Türkiye, highlighting deeper ideological differences between anti-immigrant Turkish nationalists and secularists on one hand and relatively more pro-immigrant religious conservatives on the other side.

As noted by notable scholars such as Murat Somer and as has been the case in the U.S., democratic erosion has been a major outcome of ideological division in Türkiye.[100] Democratic norms and institutions have been weakened by the consolidation of power in the hands of the executive and the weakening of the independence of the judiciary. A zero-sum political climate has emerged as a result of polarization, making compromise harder and making political opponents seem like existential dangers. Because of this setting, authoritarian behaviors have flourished, and democratic safeguards have been compromised. The deteriorating levels of collaboration and confidence between various ideological factions are clear signs of socio-political disintegration. The CHP and AKP, secularists and religious conservatives and Turkish nationalists, and pro-Kurdish groups are deeply divided, leading to an atmosphere of mutual animosity and distrust. This disintegration of society makes it harder to solve common problems that call for widespread collaboration and weakens social cohesiveness.

The only way to combat division in Türkiye is to support more inclusive forms of government. That all parts of society have a say and are heard in decision-making is an important aspect of political reconciliation. It is critical to work toward bridging ideological divides via conversation and compromise. A more inclusive and less divided political climate

[98] Hatem Ete (2018), "Reframing the July 15 Coup Attempt: A Political and Sociological Examination", *Bilig*, no: 87, pp. 179-202.
[99] For more details, see; Suat Kınıklıoğlu (2020), "Syrian refugees in Turkey: changing attitudes and fortunes", Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik Working Paper, Date of Accession: 10.05.2024 from https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2020C05/.
[100] Murat Somer (2018), "Turkey: The Slippery Slope from Reformist to Revolutionary Polarization and Democratic Breakdown", pp. 42-61.

may be achieved by bolstering democratic institutions, safeguarding the rule of law, and guaranteeing the independence of the judiciary. To lessen divisiveness, media changes are equally essential. Promoting educated public discourse and providing a forum for many opinions may be achieved via ensuring an independent and diversified media environment. Crucial measures include safeguarding press freedom, fighting disinformation, and promoting ethical journalism. People can learn to reject the effect of biased media and develop critical thinking skills through media literacy classes. Resolving economic inequality is critical in reducing polarization-inspiring social and economic issues. Social cohesiveness may be enhanced by policies that encourage equitable economic development, lessen geographical inequalities, and provide every person a chance to succeed. To combat economic inequality and its roots, we need social safety nets and strategic investments in healthcare, education, and infrastructure.

Conclusion: Comparative Analysis and Theoretical Implications

Many democracies (e.g. France, Britain, and Germany) throughout the globe are dealing with varying degrees of political polarization. Given their very different political, social, and historical backgrounds, studying Türkiye and the U.S. side by side has offered us a great chance to learn about the dynamics of political division. Since Türkiye's first transition to a multi-party democracy in 1950, the country has had enormous difficulties with democratization, military tutelage, and political turmoil. Today, the country is evaluated to be a "*hybrid regime*" at best – for instance by Economist Intelligence Unit – while there are also more critical observers such as the world-famous Freedom House Index that has downgraded the country from "*partly free*" to "*not free*" since the mid-2010s.[101] In contrast, the United States has had a far longer history of democratization – though not without major problems, severe crises and fluctuations (e.g. institution of slavery until 1865, the 1861-1865 Civil War, de jure racial segregation until the late 1960s, and ongoing de facto racial segregation). Today, the U.S. is generally seen as a "*free society*" and "*consolidated/advanced democracy*" by observers.[102] However, it is important to note that it has been experiencing a degree of democratic erosion in parallel with high polarization as its overall democratic score declined

[101] Economist Intelligence Unit (2023), "Our World in Data – Democracy Index". Date of Accession: 10.05.2024 from https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/democracy-index-eiu; Freedom House (2024), "Freedom in the World 2024 Report – Turkey", Date of Accession: 10.05.2024 from https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-world/2024.

[102] Acemoglu and Robinson (2012), *Why Nations Fail*; Kamil Bernaerts & Benjamin Blanckaert & Didier Caluwaerts (2023), "Institutional design and polarization: Do consensus democracies fare better in fighting polarization than majoritarian democracies?"; Moffitt (2016), *The Global Rise of Populism*.

from being a "*full democracy*" with 8.2 points (out of maximum 10.0) in 2006 to 7.8 points in 2023 (now a so-called "*flawed democracy*") according to Economist Intelligence Unit.[103] The Freedom House Index also acknowledges this negative trajectory as their latest report argues that the score of the U.S. democracy declined from 89 points (out of maximum 100) in 2017 to 83 points by 2024.[104] Looking at how polarization has played out in these two different nations reveal the common dynamics at play as well as case-specific causes of polarization.

From the aforementioned sections, it can be surmised that identity politics is a major factor in the division that exists in both the United States and Türkiye. Political affiliations in the United States are frequently defined by racial, religious, and ideological characteristics. Identity politics has a history of polarizing voters, as shown in the civil rights struggle, the growth of evangelical Christianity, and, more recently, in the development of the Tea Party and Trumpism (MAGA movement). In Türkiye, ideological (Kemalist vs. conservative), religious (secular vs. Islamist, Sunni vs. Alevi), and ethnic (Kurdish vs. Turkish) characteristics all play a major role in dividing the country. Disagreements have become even more pronounced due to the ongoing Kurdish Question, the Syrian refugee crisis, growing economic problems (e.g. inflation and income inequality), and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's combative style and longstanding hegemony.

Economic inequality in particular has been found to be one of the shared drivers of intense polarization in both countries. Both left-wing (like Bernie Sanders) and right-wing (like Donald Trump) populist movements have emerged in the United States as a result of the rising economic inequality that has disenfranchised the middle class and working class. Discontent has also been exacerbated in Türkiye by economic difficulties including inflation, unemployment, and regional inequities. During the 2000s and early 2010s, Türkiye had macro-economic stability (single-digit inflation, globally valuable currency, and relatively high average purchasing power) and political stability stemming from democratic reforms undertaken as part of the country's European Union accession negotiations. From the mid-2010s onwards, however, several interrelated factors (i.e. deterioration of the country's global image, democratic erosion, and macro-economic difficulties) have increased socio-economic and political tensions. As inflation and purchasing power difficulties are more pronounced in

[103] Economist Intelligence Unit (2023), "Our World in Data – Democracy Index", Date of Accession: 10.05.2024 from https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/democracy-index-eiu.
[104] Freedom in the World 2024 Report – Turkey", Date of Accession: 10.05.2024 from https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-world/2024.

metropolitan areas, polarization between urban dwellers and rural population intensified.[105] This can clearly be seen in the electoral choices of the divergent communities – the urban areas becoming increasingly anti-AKP whereas the rural ones remaining mostly pro-AKP as was evident in the 2023 presidential elections and 2024 municipal elections.[106]

A lot will depend on the Turkish economy, including its growth, unemployment, and inflation rates. Reducing political tensions may be possible with effective economic reforms and raising living standards. It will also be critical to address economic imbalances, especially those between rural and urban communities as well as between the richest % 1 and the bottom % 50 of the population. Both economic disparity and the difficulty of climbing the social ladder will also remain major issues in the United States. Reducing the socioeconomic underpinnings of polarization may be achieved by policies that address income disparities, improve access to healthcare and education, and increase economic possibilities. The changing nature of work due to factors like automation, globalization, and technology progress will have an effect on people's sense of economic stability and justice, which in turn may influence their political views and the degree to which they are divided.

In both nations, the media is crucial in creating and exacerbating divisions. *Fox News* and *MSNBC* serve conservative and liberal viewers, respectively, in the divided American media landscape. Same roles are played by the pro-AKP *TRT* and *A Haber* on one hand and the anti-AKP *Sözcü* and *Halk Tv* outlets on the other side in Turkish media system. By isolating users in echo chambers where they only see content that confirms their own opinions, social media also serves to deepen this chasm. There is a lot of partisanship in Türkiye's media because the government controls most of the stations albeit there are a lot of alternative outlets. Government propaganda and opposition mobilization both make use of social media channels, which further emphasizes the importance of these platforms.

Political divisiveness is greatly impacted by the unique historical legacies of both Türkiye and the United States. Despite the United States' proud tradition of democratic rule, long-standing differences have emerged over contentious topics including immigration, civil rights, and slavery. Although it offers stability, the two-party system also reinforces extreme opposites. The division in Türkiye is shaped by its military coup past, the Ottoman Empire's legacy, and the founding ideas of the Turkish Republic under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. This

[105] Serdar Göcen (2023), "Inflation and income inequality linkages: do institutions matter?", *Applied Economics* [Online].
[106] Yüksek Seçim Kurulu (2024), "Sandık Sonuçları ve Tutanaklar", Date of Accession: 10.05.2024 from https://sonuc.ysk.gov.tr/sorgu.

country's secularist-Kemalist vs. Islamist-conservative schism has its origins in the early 20th century modern nation-state formation process and has lasting effects on modern politics. Hence, though the historical trajectories of Türkiye and the U.S. are divergent, historical legacy serves to drive polarization in both societies for sure.

The political and institutional system of the United States, characterized by presidentialism, separation of powers, and the first-past-the-post (FPP) electoral system, plays a significant role in shaping the dynamics of political polarization. The U.S. presidential system creates a high-stakes, winner-takes-all competition. Unlike parliamentary systems (e.g. Germany) where power is more diffusely distributed among several parties on a proportional basis, the presidential system concentrates executive power in a single individual, leading to intense partisan competition for control of the presidency. This exacerbates polarization, as Republican and Democratic parties and their voters become more entrenched in their positions to secure the presidency. Both the executive and the legislature are directly elected, which often create conflicts between these branches, especially under divided government. Such conflicts intensify polarization, as each branch claims a mandate from the electorate, leading to zero-sum confrontations rather than cooperative governance.

The FPP (First-Past-the-Post) electoral system in the U.S. strongly incentivizes a two-party system, as smaller parties struggle to win seats. This binary choice intensifies polarization by reducing the diversity of political representation and forcing voters into a dichotomous decision. FPP often results in a lack of proportionality between the percentage of votes received and the number of seats won, leading to feelings of disenfranchisement among voters of the losing party. This exacerbates polarization by creating a sense of injustice or illegitimacy among those who feel their views are not adequately represented. The U.S. political system's structure, with its emphasis on presidentialism and the FPP electoral system, combine to create a political environment that fosters intense partisan competition, legislative gridlock and a polarized electorate.

Türkiye's political and institutional system, characterized by an all-powerful presidentialism, limited separation of powers and a weak judicial balance, is closely connected to the dynamics of political polarization in the country. The 2017 transition to a highly centralized presidential system has concentrated executive power in the hands of President Erdoğan. This centralization reduces checks and balances and diminishes the role of other branches of government, leading to a more polarized political environment. The president's ability to govern with minimal oversight creates an "*us versus them*" mentality, where Erdoğan's

supporters and opponents become deeply entrenched in their positions. The Turkish parliament's role has been significantly weakened under the presidential system, limiting its ability to serve as a check on executive power. This erosion of legislative independence has led to a rubber-stamp parliament, where meaningful debate and opposition are stifled. This lack of a strong, independent legislative branch reduces opportunities for political pluralism and dialogue, contributing to a more polarized political landscape.

The limited separation of powers in the country results in the executive branch dominating other branches of government, reducing their ability to function independently. This dominance creates a polarized environment where political competition is reduced to a struggle for control of the presidency, sidelining other political institutions and actors. The judiciary in Türkiye has been increasingly politicized, with judicial appointments and decisions often reflecting the interests of the AKP. This undermines the judiciary's role as an impartial arbiter and erodes public trust in the judicial system. When the judiciary is seen as an extension of the executive branch, it contributes to polarization by reducing avenues for legal recourse and reinforcing the perception of a biased system. A weak judicial balance allows for the suppression of political dissent through legal means, such as the prosecution of opposition figures, journalists, and activists. This legal repression further polarizes society by creating an environment where opposition voices are silenced, and political debate is stifled. The centralization of power in the executive, the erosion of legislative and judicial independence, and the suppression of dissent all contribute to an environment where political polarization is both a cause and a consequence of the system's design in Türkiye. This polarization is likely to persist as long as the system remains highly centralized and lacks effective checks and balances.

The United States' relative democratic resiliency in the face of adversity stands in stark contrast to Türkiye's current experience away from democracy towards authoritarianism. The theoretical implication could be that less-consolidated democracies (with weaker separation of powers) such as Türkiye have a much higher risk of erosion when facing intense polarization. The Machiavellian uses of polarization by the AKP as a means of political control is demonstrated by the commonly employed rhetoric of "*patriotic us*" versus "*degenerate them*".[107] Indeed, President Erdoğan's style of governance in this way is extremely similar to former President (and current nominee) Trump's aggressive discourses

[107] Ezgi Elçi (2024), "Right-wing populism in Turkey and the 2023 elections", pp. 309-314.

towards what he considers "*traitorous liberals*" of Hollywood, *New York Times*, or *CNN*.[108] In the United States, there have been worries about a decline in democracy, especially under Trump's presidency. However, despite intense partisanship and conflict, a level of democracy in the U.S. has been preserved through civil society and institutional balances. Nevertheless, democracies in both nations currently face serious risks stemming from polarization – albeit said risks are higher in Türkiye. The Capitol Riot on 6 January 2021 and the assassination attempt on Trump's life on 13 July 2024 are examples of what tragedies can possibly occur as a result of political violence, legislative paralysis, and the degradation of democratic standards in the United States' increasingly polarized political climate.

Polarization has a devastating effect on social cohesiveness. Communities in the United States have grown increasingly hostile toward individuals who hold different political opinions as a result of polarization. The Turkish government's social policies have also further intensified religious and ethnic tensions, which in turn weaken societal cohesiveness. The difficulties of preserving national unity in a deeply divided society are particularly shown by the lingering Kurdish Question. Ineffective policymaking and governance emerge as an outcome of polarization. In the United States, when politicians are too divided to work together, crucial topics like healthcare, immigration, and climate change devolve into political fights. As a result of partisanship, Türkiye's policymakers are accused of making irrational choices that put party interests ahead of the public good.[109] Gains in the near term but instability in the long run result from the AKP's prioritization of power consolidation above inclusive and durable policy solutions.

Another key factor will be how involved and politically minded Türkiye's youth are. Perhaps new divisions will be formed, or old ones will be widened by politically conscious and technologically savvy youth. The Kurdish Question and the relationship between religious and secular identities will remain important. A lessening of polarization can be achieved through campaigns that encourage openness and communication among diverse cultural and ethnic groups. American divisiveness will be shaped by ongoing discussions on cultural and identity issues, including LGBTQ+ rights, racial justice, and immigration. Efforts to lessen tensions can be supported by policies and discourse that prioritize inclusion and diversity appreciation.

[108] Caroline Nagel (2019), "Populism, immigration and the Trump phenomenon in the U.S.", *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, Vol. 37, no: 1, pp. 12-16.
[109] Berk Esen & Sebnem Gumuscu (2023), "How Erdoğan's Populism Won Again", pp. 26-29.

The significance of encouraging inclusive government is one important takeaway from the U.S. and Türkiye comparative research. One way to lessen the impact of division is to work towards building ruling coalitions that transcend party lines. To support more moderate politicians, this might entail voting reforms in the United States, such ranked-choice voting. Tensions in Türkiye might be alleviated by encouraging communication amongst religious and ethnic minority groups and by guaranteeing that all citizens have a voice in government via empowering civil society organizations. The key to effectively controlling division is bolstering democratic institutions. In the United States, it is crucial to safeguard voting rights, promote media diversity, and strengthen the independence of the judiciary. Reversing authoritarian policies, safeguarding journalistic freedom, and reestablishing judicial independence are of the utmost importance in Türkiye. In order to foster democratic ideals and keep governments responsible, both nations may benefit from strong civil society participation. Another way to lessen division is to tackle economic inequality. Some of the issues that drive division can be alleviated in both the U.S. and Türkiye through policies that try to reduce wealth and opportunity inequality. A more just society, free of populist and polarizing rhetoric is possible via investments in healthcare, social safety nets, and education.

Examining the causes of political polarization in Türkiye and the United States sheds light on shared and distinct characteristics. While authoritarian inclinations, historical legacies, and media environments are distinctive to each setting, identity politics, economic inequalities, and media environments are found to be major commonalities. There must be a concerted effort to lessen the impact of polarization because of its far-reaching consequences, which endanger democratic stability, social cohesiveness, and good governance. Both nations may take steps to build a more stable and united society by tackling economic disparity, encouraging inclusive governance, and strengthening democratic institutions. The results of 2024 presidential election in the U.S. (Donald Trump versus Kamala Harris) and a potential early presidential election in 2026 or 2027 in Türkiye – in which incumbent Erdoğan may face a strong challenge from the charismatic CHP mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu – can be expected to make decisive impacts on the future of polarization in the two nations. If the victorious political leaders decide to steer their societies away from the long-entrenched populist usage of polarization, they may be able to trigger new eras of political reconciliation in their respective countries.

By offering a moderate alternative, a united social and political opposition to the ruling AKP has the potential to decrease polarization in Türkiye. On the other hand, if the Turkish

opposition chooses to embrace tactics that are just as divisive, they risk increasing it. The level of bipartisan collaboration in the U.S. Congress is of the utmost importance. Any attempts at bipartisan cooperation have the potential to lessen polarization, which has been exacerbated by gridlock and partisan strife. Polarization will be shaped by the words and deeds of influential political personalities, such as the President-to-be following the 2024 elections. Leaders who promote harmony and shared values can assist in mending fences, while those who use differences for personal benefit, like Trump, will only serve to deepen the rifts. What type of leadership the newly nominated Democratic candidate, Kamala Harris, might make – after President Joe Biden withdrew from seeking reelection – will determine the extent to which partisan divisions are widened.

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