

## Political Polarisation

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**VoxDevLits** are wiki-inspired literature reviews that aim to summarise the evidence base on narrowly defined topics related to development economics. Each Lit is written by a community of scholars working on the specific topic addressed in the review. They are intended for both policymakers and researchers. We aim to describe what we have learned from research and to highlight the important questions for which evidence is lacking. The Lits are living documents that will be updated approximately once per year. All published versions will be available on the VoxDev website so that scholars can cite the reviews with confidence that the version cited will be accessible in the future.

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Political polarisation has been rising sharply in both advanced and developing democracies, with implications for democratic accountability, institutional trust, and social cohesion. This VoxDevLit reviews recent empirical research on the causes and consequences of polarisation, with a focus on implications for low- and middle-income countries. We highlight structural and institutional drivers of polarisation, as well as the role of elite strategies and changes in the information environment, particularly the role of digital and social media. We also cover a growing body of research that identifies promising interventions to counter polarisation. These range from institutional reforms to shifts in media consumption and exposure, to social contact and psychological nudges at the individual level. We assess which interventions reduce polarisation, whether effects are sustained, and how results vary by context. We conclude by identifying gaps in the literature and the importance of adapting polarisation research to the political realities of low- and middle-income countries.

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# 1. Policy Summary

## 1.1 Why Polarisation Matters

Polarisation – ideological, issue-based, and especially affective – undermines democratic governance: it lowers trust, weakens electoral accountability, and raises policy uncertainty. These effects are often more severe in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) where institutions are weaker, media markets are less consolidated and identity cleavages (ethnic, religious, regional) overlap with party politics. Conventional policymaking in such environments can backfire; interventions must be designed for polarised contexts, not despite them.

### What Drives Polarisation

**Structural and societal foundations:** High and salient inequality, especially when it maps onto identity cleavages, entrenches zero-sum perceptions and hardens group boundaries.

**Institutions and elites:** Winner-take-all incentives, weak checks and balances, and strategic elite rhetoric (incivility, out-group threat cues) amplify divisions; populist strategies thrive in distrustful environments and can further polarise after victory.

**Information environment:** Rapid internet diffusion and social platforms foster ideological segregation, reward emotionally charged and misleading content, and reduce cross-cutting contact. Direct causal effects of social media on polarisation vary across settings, but segregation, engagement incentives, and algorithmic amplification consistently tilt discourse towards extremes.

**Psychology and emotion:** Anger, fear, and moralised content boost engagement and memory, biasing how citizens process facts; motivated reasoning and confirmation bias become default filters.

### Polarisation's Consequences

**Backsliding risks:** Affective polarisation lowers citizens' tolerance for democratic norms, enabling executive overreach and elite impunity.

**Weaker accountability:** Performance information is discounted or backfires among strong partisans; transparency alone does not guarantee sanctioning of malfeasance.

**Economic costs:** Polarisation raises policy uncertainty, depresses investment, and distorts households' expectations – effects that are especially costly where fiscal tools and safety nets are limited.

### 1.1.a What Works (and What Often Does Not) to Counter Polarisation

#### Promising Levers

##### 1. Social contact & shared identities

- Structured, respectful cross-group contact (offline or moderated online) reduces affective animus.
- Priming cross-cutting identities (national, professional, sports) improves openness to engagement.

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## 2. Psychological/meta-cognitive nudges

- Light-touch prompts that depoliticise evaluation (e.g. “avoid reacting emotionally”, “value open-mindedness”) reduce motivated reasoning and can prevent backlash to counter-attitudinal facts.

## 3. Elite Cues

- Cross-partisan signalling (bipartisan ads, joint appearances) increases willingness to engage, even if effects on hostility are modest.

## 4. Information environment reforms

- Sustained, voluntary exposure to credible cross-partisan content works better than one-off bots or forced feeds.

### Mixed or Limited Levers

- **One-shot fact-checks and corrections:** Improve specific beliefs but often fail to shift behaviour without trust and repetition, and risk backfiring in highly polarised contexts.
- **Forced cross-partisan exposure on social media:** Short, artificial exposures may increase animus; sustained, credible, and user-chosen exposure performs better.
- **Transparency campaigns in isolation:** In highly polarised electorates, performance audits alone may not punish incumbents – and can entrench partisans.

### 1.1.b Implementation Guidance for Policymakers and Practitioners

#### 1. Diagnose first

- If **affective** polarisation dominates, prioritise contact interventions, shared-identity framing, and elite tone-setting.
- If polarisation is **issue/ideological** or **media-driven**, invest in credible local outlets and sustained, user-driven cross-exposure.

#### 2. Front-load credibility

- Identify and use trusted messengers.
- Separate messengers from partisan brands; co-sponsor content across divides where feasible.

#### 3. Design for persistence and scale

- Favour repeated touchpoints (serial messages, recurring forums, ongoing programming) over one-off events.

#### 4. Pre-empt backlash

- Precede counter-attitudinal information with meta-cognitive prompts that attenuate affect and signal respect.
- Emphasise common goals and anchor interventions in shared interests.

### 1.1.c Research and Policy Gaps

- Evidence across contexts: We need more causal work in LMICs on elite incentives, platform reforms, and mass depolarisation at scale.
- Durability: Long-run follow-ups to distinguish fading effects from habit formation.

### 1.1.d Bottom Line

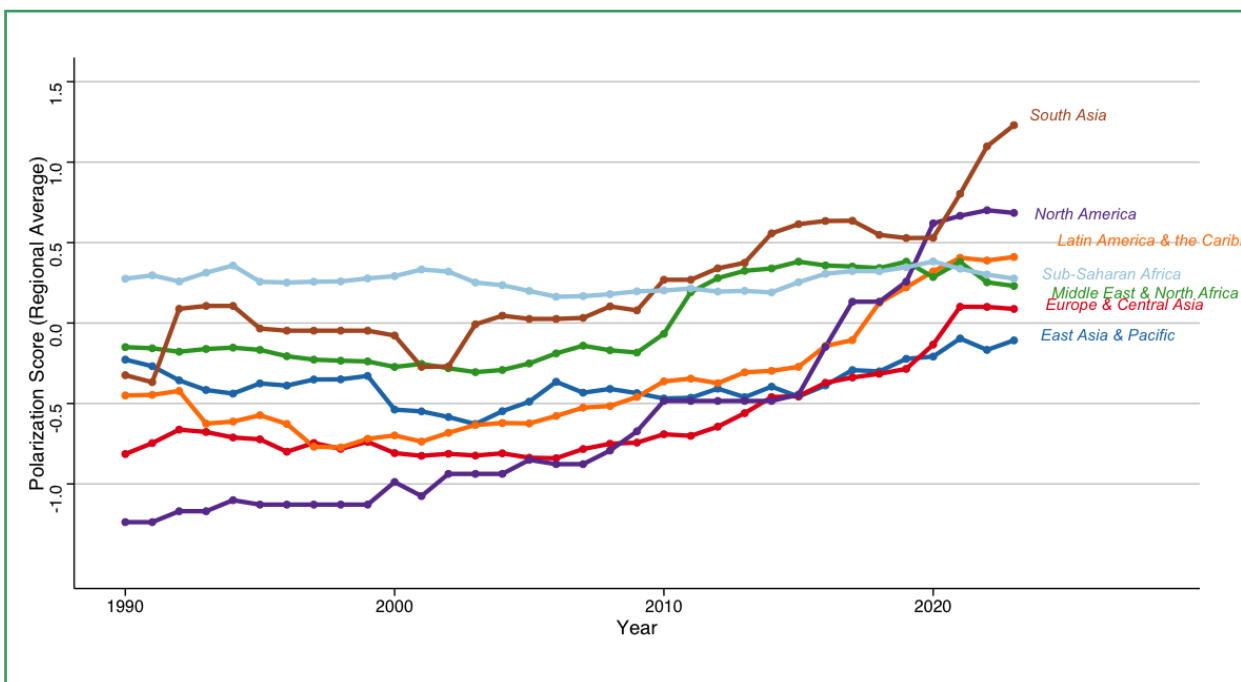
Polarisation is a governance challenge with economic and institutional costs. It is tractable, but only with context-aware strategies that (i) reduce affective polarisation, (ii) increase credible cross-group contact and information, and (iii) realign elite incentives. Success depends on trust, repetition, and legitimacy – and continuous evaluation.

## 2. Introduction

Political polarisation is increasingly recognised as a critical challenge for democratic governance. It shapes how citizens interpret facts, deepens distrust in institutions, and weakens electoral accountability – core ingredients not only for democratic legitimacy, but also for effective policymaking, service delivery, and social cohesion. While polarisation is often studied in the context of high-income democracies, its consequences may be even more severe in low- and middle-income countries, where institutional safeguards are weaker, media systems are more fragmented, and identity-based politics are more entrenched. In these settings, polarisation isn't just a threat to political competition – it can undermine development by weakening accountability, trust, and service delivery.

These are not isolated cases. Political polarisation has risen sharply across most regions over the past two decades. While most empirical research has focused on advanced democracies, data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project shows that polarisation is increasing across nearly every region – not just in the US and Europe, but also in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and South and Southeast Asia (Figure 1). This pattern holds both for elite rhetoric and mass attitudes, with growing divergence among political actors and declining trust across partisan lines.

**Figure 1.** Political Polarisation is Rising Across the World



Source: Regional averages of political polarisation from V-Dem (Coppedge et al. 2024) (Larreguy and Raffler 2025).

Much of the empirical research on polarisation remains concentrated in advanced democracies, where rich data on voting, party platforms, and congressional behaviour is available (e.g. Gentzkow et al. 2019, Draca and Schwarz 2024). However, a growing number of studies are beginning to explore polarisation in more fluid political systems, including emerging democracies where party systems are weak, institutions are less consolidated, and identity politics are more salient. These contributions are critical for understanding how polarisation operates across contexts, and for building policy-relevant strategies to mitigate its effects.

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Understanding polarisation is essential for scholars and policymakers working in development. In polarised settings, voters are more likely to view information through partisan lenses, reducing the effectiveness of transparency campaigns and performance audits, as well as the incentives for improving policymaking and service delivery. Elite actors, in turn, may face stronger incentives to deploy divisive rhetoric – especially where checks on executive power are limited. Section 3 reviews this evidence, with special attention to how these risks vary across institutional environments.

What drives polarisation? A large and growing literature identifies multiple reinforcing mechanisms, including social identity, institutional incentives, elite behaviour, and traditional and digital media. In some cases, polarisation reflects genuine conflict over values or policy preferences. In others, it is deliberately stoked by political actors seeking to mobilise support, distract from performance failures, or delegitimise opponents. Online and social media have amplified these dynamics by fuelling ideological segregation, promoting affective hostility between groups, and enabling echo chambers and algorithmic amplification. Section 4 explores these mechanisms, drawing on comparative evidence across regions.

While much of the early scholarship on polarisation emerged from the study of advanced democracies, recent research increasingly examines its causes and consequences in low- and middle-income settings. The global evidence base has expanded to exploring polarisation in fragmented information environments in less-institutionalised contexts. This VoxDevLit brings together work from economics, political science, and other disciplines to synthesise what we know about the rise of polarisation, its downstream effects on development, and the effectiveness of interventions designed to reduce it.

The VoxDevLit proceeds as follows. Section 2 defines core terms, distinguishing between ideological, issue-based, and affective polarisation, and polarisation among voters, elites, and the media. Section 3 reviews how polarisation contributes to democratic backsliding, weakened accountability, and policy uncertainty. Section 4 examines key drivers of polarisation, from social identity and elite strategy to media systems and algorithmic amplification. Section 5 synthesises evidence on interventions to mitigate polarisation, including social contact programmes, elite messaging, institutional reforms, and information-focused strategies. Throughout, we draw on findings from diverse empirical contexts, with special attention to implications for development and governance in low- and middle-income countries.

## 3. Conceptualising and Measuring Polarisation

Polarisation can take a number of forms, encompassing a range of political and social dynamics that differ not only in form but also in how they manifest across contexts. At its most basic level, polarisation refers to the degree to which political actors are divided along salient cleavages, but the form of polarisation and its consequences vary depending on who is polarised and along what dimensions. Table 1 summarises how we conceptualise different forms of polarisation as a function of the type of polarisation and actors involved.

The literature typically distinguishes between three different types of polarisation, each of which can apply to different actors: 1. *ideological polarisation*, or divergence in general policy preferences; 2. *issue polarisation*, or divergence on specific political topics; and 3. *affective polarisation*, or animosity towards opposing political groups. While these dimensions often overlap – ideological and affective polarisation are related phenomena, for example – descriptive evidence suggests that they do not always evolve in tandem (Riera and Madariaga 2023).

Within these categories, polarisation can centre around different actors: 1. individuals may become more extreme or hostile; 2. elites may adopt divisive rhetoric; and 3. media ecosystems may amplify or reflect polarised discourse.

**Table 1.** Conceptualising Political Polarisation

Actor/Type	Ideological Polarisation	Issue-based Polarisation	Affective Polarisation
Voters	Divergence in underlying values, worldviews, or ideological self-placement (e.g. left-right scale)	Differences in specific policy preferences (e.g. taxation, migration, climate)	Dislike, distrust, or perceived threat from opposing partisans
Elites	Increased partisan sorting and divergence in ideology at the party or candidate level	Divisions on key policy dimensions in legislative voting, speeches, or manifestos	Use of incivility, emotional appeals, or out-group targeting to mobilise supporters
Media	Slant in coverage or ideological orientation of outlets and audiences	Emphasis on divisive policy debates; selective coverage of issues by partisan media	Amplification of outrage, moral condemnation, or emotionally resonant misinformation

*Note: Polarisation can manifest through ideological worldviews, concrete policy disagreements, or emotional and social hostility. These dimensions often interact but require distinct measurement strategies.*

Furthermore, while much of the academic literature on advanced democracies uses the term ‘polarisation’ to describe these political dynamics, similar patterns are widely observed across more fluid political systems – even if labelled differently. The functional equivalents of polarisation can appear as identity-based political distrust, partisan social sorting, and information-processing biases aligned with political cleavages. These dynamics may be framed around ethnicity, religion, or regional divisions rather than ideological or policy positions, but they similarly shape citizen behaviour, elite strategy, and institutional performance. Research in contexts like Ghana, India, Kenya, Lebanon, and the Philippines has documented how group-based appeals, social segmentation, and divisive campaign rhetoric can fragment accountability, reduce responsiveness to citizens’ policy requests, and heighten affective mistrust between political camps. While these studies may not always use the language of affective or ideological polarisation, they offer critical insights into how similar dynamics play out in low- and middle-income settings.

## 3.1 Ideological Polarisation

Ideological polarisation refers to the increasing ideological divide among individuals within a society, typically marked by a shift towards more extreme political views and a movement away from centrist positions. In terms of measurement, ideological polarisation is often measured using spatial distance between policy preferences: using survey scales, text analysis of party positions, or ideal point estimates (such as the DW-Nominate scores commonly used to measure polarisation in US Congress, e.g. Poole and Rosenthal 1985, Canen et al. 2020). One way that ideological polarisation is distinguished from affective polarisation is that ideological polarisation can occur without hostility between groups, especially when it centres around principled disagreement over economic or social policies.

Ideological polarisation has been documented not only in countries with more established political parties like the US, but also in countries where partisan competition is newer or more fluid, such as Brazil, Turkey, and parts of South and Southeast Asia, where emerging parties have increasingly positioned themselves in ideological contrast to incumbents or elites.

In addition to the foundational work on ideological polarisation in party settings, recent work by Draca and Schwarz (2024) provides new evidence that ideological polarisation can also be rooted in the political orientations of citizens. Drawing on decades of data from the World Values Survey and the European Values

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Study, the authors employ unsupervised machine learning to classify individuals into latent ideological types based on their economic preferences, social attitudes, and views about core institutions. This approach reveals not only distinct ideological types, but also that the centrist groups are declining over time.

## 3.2 Issue Polarisation

Issue polarisation refers to the growing divergence in opinions on specific policy issues, where individuals increasingly align their positions with those of their political or ideological group. Rather than just generally holding different opinions, people become more consistently opposed on a particular issue with less room for moderate views. This form of polarisation can often occur regardless of individuals' broader ideological framework, especially when that issue is strategically politicised by elites or linked to social identity. Measurement of issue polarisation typically uses opinion surveys or voting behaviour in single-issue elections or referendums.

Conceptually, issue polarisation tends to refer to more than a simple difference in ideology or divergence in attitudes. Issue polarisation is often conceptualised as having a strategic basis, particularly when parties or politicians disproportionately amplify certain policy issues precisely to create public cleavages. In De Sio and Weber (2014)'s "issue yield" framework, parties focus on high-impact issues precisely to shift public alignment, effectively fostering polarisation.

This is especially the case when issue polarisation occurs in political contexts without strong ideological cleavages or institutionalised political parties. In these settings, issue polarisation often reflects efforts to exploit issues with group-based political salience. Politicians may exploit these divides to create 'wedge issues', generating polarisation even in systems where ideological debate is moderate or largely absent.

## 3.3 Affective Polarisation

Affective polarisation reflects the extent to which individuals feel animosity or distrust towards people, media sources, or political groups that hold opposing political views (Iyengar et al. 2019). Unlike ideological or issue-based polarisation, affective polarisation is less about substantive disagreement and more about how emotional and social cleavages can create an 'us vs them' dynamic in politics. At its most extreme, affective polarisation can lead to avoidance, dehumanisation, or even repression of political opponents.

Scholars increasingly conceptualise affective polarisation as a form of partisan social identity, where partisans are seen not only as political rivals, but fundamental threats to their values (Iyengar et al. 2019). Measurement of affective polarisation is typically measured using gaps in feeling thermometers or measures of out-group versus in-group trust. Applied to attitudes about elites, for example, Reiljan et al. (2024) use standardised cross-national indices to measure affective polarisation towards parties and leaders.

Affective polarisation is particularly relevant in settings where partisanship overlaps with social identities – ethnicity, religion, or linguistic groups – and where histories of conflict or repression can reinforce group-based distrust. However, even in contexts without a history of longstanding divides, elites can foster affective polarisation through aggressive rhetoric, elite cues, and strategic framing to foster political hostility and undermine norms of tolerance. Misperceptions about out-group demographics and values can exacerbate these divisions: voters tend to overestimate the extremism of opposing groups, for example, a bias that can contribute to polarisation even when ideological differences are minimal (Ahler and Sood 2018).

## 3.4 Who is Polarised? Polarisation Across Political Actors

Political polarisation can manifest differently depending on *who* is becoming polarised. While the preceding sections distinguished between ideological, issue-based, and affective forms of polarisation, this section focuses on the political actors through which polarisation operates – namely, individual citizens, political elites, and media institutions.

Understanding who is polarised is not just a matter of classification: it is essential for identifying causal mechanisms and designing interventions. For example, affective polarisation among voters may be rooted in elite rhetoric, but it may also reflect long-standing identity cleavages. Similarly, elite polarisation may reflect deliberate strategic positioning rather than shifting personal beliefs. Media polarisation, meanwhile, can both reflect and intensify these dynamics, shaping how information is framed and how audiences interpret it.

At the individual level, polarisation is not limited to emotional partisanship. While much of the literature has focused on affective polarisation, recent research has expanded to include social sorting, selective trust in information, and asymmetric beliefs about policy consequences. For instance, individuals' economic expectations have been shown to diverge dramatically depending on which party is in power, with partisans projecting highly optimistic or pessimistic futures depending on electoral outcomes (Coibion et al. 2020). In many contexts, these divides overlap with ethnicity, religion, or region, reinforcing polarisation even in the absence of conflict over citizens' preferred policies.

Among elites, polarisation can be both a reflection of voter preferences and a strategic response to political incentives. Formal theory highlights how candidates may polarise strategically: Callander and Carbajal (2022) develop a dynamic model in which elites move away from the centre to attract voters, who in turn shift their beliefs in response. Empirically, Gentzkow et al. (2019) show that Congressional speech in the US has become increasingly predictive of party affiliation, with rhetorical shifts outpacing changes in policy substance. This evidence suggests that polarisation is often embedded in elite communication styles and institutional incentives – not just ideological drift.

Just like elites, media institutions play a dual role: they both reflect polarisation and help shape its trajectory. Ideologically aligned media outlets and algorithmically curated platforms increase the likelihood of selective exposure to like-minded content. Thus, the more polarised people are, the more these media dynamics polarise them, which reinforces partisan identities and reduces trust in alternative sources.

These patterns suggest that polarisation is a multi-actor phenomenon, with implications for citizens, elites, and media ecosystems. Disaggregating actor-level polarisation clarifies its origins, how it spreads across institutions and information systems, and which levers are most effective for intervention.

## 4. Consequences of Political Polarisation

Polarisation is not only a feature of political and social preferences – it can also disrupt the behavioural and institutional foundations of democratic governance. We examine its consequences across three broad areas: (i) democratic backsliding, or the erosion of informal norms and institutional checks that constrain power and safeguard pluralism; (ii) accountability failures, as polarisation distorts how citizens process information, evaluate leaders, and respond to evidence of poor performance; and (iii) heightened policy uncertainty, which can affect investment and economic stability.

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## 4.1 Democratic Backsliding

A growing body of evidence suggests that political polarisation poses a serious threat to democratic institutions. Polarisation can erode informal norms – mutual tolerance, forbearance, and respect for institutional constraints – that sustain democratic governance (Haggard 2021, Lee 2022). As voters begin to perceive political opponents as existential threats, they become more tolerant of norm violations by their own side, increasing the appeal of populist or anti-democratic candidates (Guriev and Papaioannou 2022).

Importantly, the type of polarisation matters. Using data from 170 national election surveys across 53 countries, Orhan (2022) descriptively finds that affective polarisation – but not ideological polarisation – is significantly correlated with democratic backsliding, as measured by V-Dem’s Liberal Democracy Index.

This shift in voter sentiment creates a permissive environment for elite overreach. Experimental evidence from the US finds that affectively polarised citizens are more willing to support candidates who violate democratic rules if doing so prevents the opposition from gaining power (Graham and Svobik 2020). Similarly, Druckman et al. (2023) show that citizens systematically overestimate the extremism of political opponents and use these misperceptions to justify their own party’s norm-breaking behaviour.

Over time, these dynamics can accelerate institutional decline. Leaders may concentrate power under the guise of self-defence, weakening checks and balances. In countries with fragile institutional environments, polarisation among elites can even increase incentives for political violence. Esteban et al. (2015) link high ethnic polarisation and weak rent-sharing to increased risk of mass violence, highlighting the role of elite fragmentation in fuelling instability.

Emerging evidence suggests that polarisation is not just deepening but changing in form. Draca and Schwarz (2024) document the rise of ideological “clusters” marked by systemic distrust and disaffection with institutions, potentially heightening the appeal of populist disruption and weakening citizen commitment to democratic norms.

## 4.2 Accountability and Governance

Polarisation also distorts accountability by shaping how citizens access, interpret, and respond to information about government performance. In theory, ideological diversity in the media can improve monitoring and inform electoral choices (e.g. Ferraz and Finan 2008, Arias et al. 2022, Enríquez et al. 2024). But in polarised environments, citizens increasingly consume news from ideologically aligned sources (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010, Braghieri et al. 2025) and avoid information that contradicts their political views, even when they recognise that aligned sources may be biased (Alonso and Padró i Miquel 2025).

This pattern reflects both selective exposure – seeking out information that aligns with their views (Prior 2013, Iyengar et al. 2019), and selective interpretation – the tendency to dismiss counter-attitudinal content through motivated reasoning (Benabou and Tirole 2016, Groenendyk and Krupnikov 2021, Taber and Lodge 2006) or moderate their belief updating, even when applying Bayesian reasoning (Cheng and Hsiaw 2022, Gentzkow et al. 2025). In some cases, this can result in backlash, where exposure to counter-attitudinal information strengthens their pre-existing beliefs instead of weakening them.

As a result, voters in polarised contexts are less likely to punish underperforming incumbents, and in some cases, counter-attitudinal information can even backfire in terms of how individuals are expected to react

to hold their elected officials to account (Baysan 2022, Enriquez et al. 2025), polarising individuals further (Groenendyk and Krupnikov 2021, Baysan 2022). For example, Enriquez et al. (2025) show experimentally that information indicating relatively poor incumbent performance in the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic leads to increased electoral support for the incumbent among partisan voters in Mexico. Similar dynamics are documented in other polarised contexts, where performance information fails to shift vote choices or even increases partisan entrenchment (Baysan 2022). Paralleling the results on affective versus ideological polarisation on democratic backsliding in the previous section, Orhan (2022) finds descriptively that affective polarisation – but not ideological polarisation – also appears to weaken accountability.

These findings suggest that polarisation undermines one of the central promises of democratic governance: that voters will discipline leaders based on performance. Where affective divisions are strong, information campaigns and transparency reforms may have limited effects – or even counterproductive ones – unless paired with strategies to reduce partisan hostility or reframe civic identity.

### 4.3 Policy Uncertainty, Economic Stability, Investment

Political polarisation can heighten policy uncertainty, with broad implications for economic stability and development. Baker et al. (2014) attribute part of the steady increase in US policy uncertainty to increased political polarisation due to its implications for the policymaking process and policy choices. Similarly, Baker et al. (2020) use a panel of 23 countries to show that policy uncertainty increases during election periods, and especially in closely contested and polarised settings.

This uncertainty is reflected not only in macroeconomic indicators but also in how individuals perceive and respond to economic conditions. Coibion et al. (2020) show that individuals' expectations for inflation, unemployment, and economic growth vary based on whether their preferred party is in power. These divergent expectations suggest that polarisation distorts not just elite signals, but also how ordinary citizens interpret economic fundamentals.

A growing literature in macroeconomics explores the broader consequences of this uncertainty. Kempf and Tsoutsoura (2024) review evidence that polarisation affects firm behaviour, investor decisions, and the allocation of capital in both the US and other advanced democracies. For example, Azzimonti (2018) constructs an index of US partisan conflict using media coverage and finds that polarisation is associated with declines in aggregate investment.

Cross-national work similarly finds that polarisation can undermine foreign direct investment and fiscal flexibility. Ginn and Saadaoui (2025) find that party polarisation is correlated with reduced FDI inflows in parliamentary democracies, particularly in settings with weaker institutions. Grechyna (2021) models how polarisation limits governments' ability to respond to economic shocks and macroeconomic volatility. These patterns underscore the need to expand this research agenda to low- and middle-income countries, where policy tools may be more limited and economic shocks more destabilising.

## 5. Causes of Political Polarisation

Political polarisation arises from societal foundations, strategic actions by political elites, psychological and emotional processes, and the contemporary media environment. While recent research emphasises the role of digital technology and social media, polarisation fundamentally rests on deep economic inequalities, demographic cleavages, and institutional frameworks that shape political competition. Political elites strategically exploit these underlying societal divides, often leveraging emotional appeals

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to intensify partisan identities. Moreover, the internet and social media amplify these divisions, creating self-reinforcing cycles of information segregation and misinformation. Understanding these multiple, reinforcing drivers provides a foundation for effective interventions aimed at reducing polarisation.

We therefore categorise the drivers of polarisation into four broad, mutually reinforcing categories: (i) societal foundations; (ii) institutional and elite-driven strategies; (iii) psychological and emotional factors; and (iv) the information environment, especially the role of the internet and social media.

## 5.1 Structural and Societal Foundations

Polarisation often originates from fundamental social and economic cleavages within a society. High levels of economic inequality can create conditions for polarisation by heightening perceptions of zero-sum competition and redistributive conflicts (Esteban and Ray 2011, Stewart et al. 2020). These risks are especially salient in developing countries, where inequalities often overlap with ethnic or regional cleavages. For instance, Huber and Suryanarayan (2016) show that ethnic inequality – not just ethnic diversity – is a key predictor of politicised ethnic identities and polarised party systems in less developed countries. When economic disparities align with social divisions, political preferences become more entrenched and emotionally charged.

Cross-national evidence further highlights the link between inequality and polarisation. Using tax and survey data from 21 countries, Gethin et al. (2021) document how income, education, and wealth structure support for different parties. They find that class-based voting cleavages are especially pronounced in settings where inequality is high, redistributive conflict is more salient, and political identities are more closely tied to socioeconomic status.

Demographic sorting also contributes to polarisation, especially when urban-rural, ethnic, or religious divisions coincide with partisan identities (Posner 2004, Baldassarri and Gelman 2008, Brown and Enos 2021). Even in the absence of ideological extremism, these deep-rooted social divisions can lead groups to view political competition as existential, exacerbating affective polarisation.

## 5.2 Institutions and Elites

While social structures create the conditions for polarisation, political institutions and elite strategies shape how those divides are activated and amplified. Electoral systems characterised by winner-takes-all rules or single-member districts tend to support polarisation by incentivising candidates to differentiate themselves from their opponents (McCarty et al. 2016). Where institutional checks are weak, these incentives may escalate, producing a political environment in which confrontation and conflict are rewarded over consensus and collaboration.

The relationship between elites and mass polarisation is mutually reinforcing, making it difficult to distinguish clear causal pathways. Elite polarisation can intensify voter polarisation – especially through identity-driven messaging, emotional appeals, and antagonistic rhetoric – while polarised electorates also incentivise elites to adopt sharper and more extreme positions. For example, Gentzkow et al. (2019) show a striking increase in partisan language in US Congressional speeches since the 1990s, underscoring how rhetorical strategies – not just policy disagreements – can deepen divides. Similarly, Rathje et al. (2021) show that elite social media posts expressing out-group animosity are especially likely to go viral, reinforcing both affective polarisation and elite incentives to stoke division. Experimental and observational studies confirm that exposure to uncivil rhetoric can heighten animosity among voters (Iyengar et al. 2019, Skytte 2021).

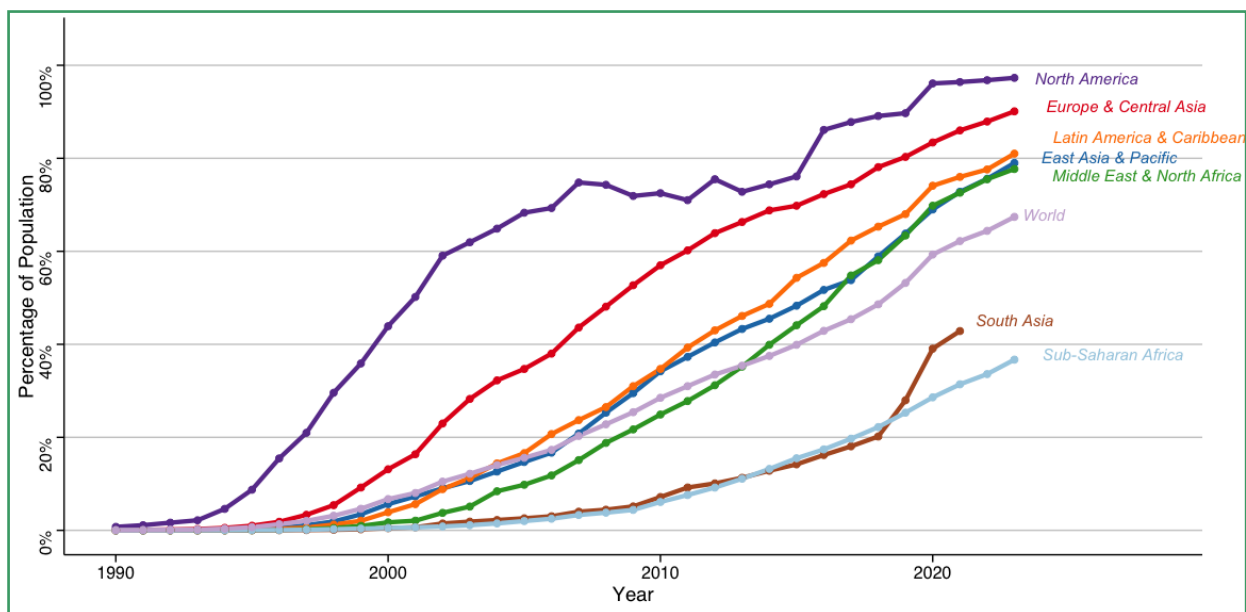
Populist and anti-establishment candidates, in particular, thrive in polarised environments. They often exploit voter distrust, amplify perceived threats from out-groups, and portray themselves as the sole voice of the majority against the elite (Guriev and Papaioannou 2022, Haggard 2021). They are especially adept at exploiting emotions to solidify existing cleavages or mobilise new grievances (Brader 2006, Widmann 2021, Galasso et al. 2024).

At the same time, their rise is itself a consequence of polarisation: fragmented societies provide fertile ground for populists to mobilise grievance-based support (Davis et al. 2025, Campante et al. 2017). In addition, polarisation may deepen even further after populist leaders take power. Their electoral victories can legitimise extreme positions, reshape political discourse, and intensify partisan divisions. For example, Bischof and Wagner (2019) find that voters become more polarised after the election of extreme candidates, suggesting that elite influence extends beyond campaigns into governing behaviour and political norms.

## 5.3 The Internet and Social Media

The rise of the internet and social media is widely viewed as one of the major forces shaping political polarisation around the globe (Larreguy and Raffler 2025). As shown in Figure 2, internet penetration has increased sharply across all world regions over the past two decades, mirroring global trends in rising political polarisation previously shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 2** Internet Penetration is Rising Across the World



Source: Percentage of population using the internet by region from the International Telecommunication Union (via World Development Indicators) (Larreguy and Raffler 2025).

Several studies provide descriptive cross-sectional or quasi-experimental evidence linking internet access to increased polarisation. Mobile internet infrastructure has enabled the spread of social media and transformed information environments. In Europe, Guriev et al. (2021) find that mobile internet access increases support for extreme left- and right-wing parties. In the US, Melnikov (2024) shows that mobile coverage is associated with ideological polarisation, driven by increased exposure to misinformation. Similarly, Lelkes et al. (2017) find that internet access contributes to affective polarisation.

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Recent work by Manacorda et al. (2022) further highlights the role of mobile internet in shifting political preferences. Using the staggered rollout of mobile broadband across Italy, they show that internet access increases support for communitarian and anti-establishment parties. This shift is not driven by direct exposure to political content, but rather by increased consumption of emotionally charged, non-political content that indirectly heightens affective responses to political issues. These findings suggest that mobile internet reshapes political preferences through indirect pathways rooted in affect and identity, not just elite messaging or political news exposure.

Experimental evidence on the direct effects of social media remains mixed. In relatively moderate settings, several studies suggest that social media contributes to polarisation. Deactivation experiments on Facebook (Allcott et al. 2020) and exposure experiments (Levy 2021) both find that social media use increases political polarisation. Enikolopov et al. (2024) show that social media's high level of homophily compared to offline interactions amplifies polarisation.

However, more recent studies in highly polarised contexts find weaker or null effects. Facebook and WhatsApp deactivation during the 2020 US and 2022 Brazilian elections (Allcott et al. 2024, Ventura et al. 2023), as well as Facebook algorithm manipulation (Guess et al. 2023a, Nyhan et al. 2023), show that exposure to ideologically aligned content may not increase polarisation as much as previously thought. In fact, Boxell et al. (2017) document that polarisation has increased most among demographic groups least likely to use the internet. These findings highlight the conditional nature of digital polarisation effects, which may be strongest in earlier stages of adoption or lower-polarisation contexts.

Despite the mixed evidence on direct effects, substantial work documents how digital platforms shape information environments in ways that indirectly facilitate polarisation. First, internet and social media use is characterised by ideological segregation. Studies show that users are disproportionately exposed to like-minded content across platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and Gab (Guess et al. 2023b, González-Bailón et al. 2023, Halberstam and Knight 2016, Cinelli et al. 2021). Online ideological segregation often exceeds that of offline media (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2011), driven by user preferences for ideologically proximate content (Mosleh et al. 2021, Hobolt and Tilley 2024).

Second, selective consumption and supply reinforce this segregation. Individuals prefer ideologically aligned news sources, both because they find them more credible (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006, Braghieri et al. 2024) and because partisan cues simplify information processing (Chopra et al. 2024, Peterson and Kagalwala 2021). Media outlets cater to these preferences, further entrenching slanted coverage (Mullainathan and Shleifer 2005, Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010). This gives rise to a self-reinforcing cycle of ideological homogeneity in both content consumption and production.

Third, as discussed in the previous section, social media platforms amplify emotionally charged and often misleading content (Melnikov 2024, Vosoughi et al. 2018). Negative and partisan posts are more likely to be shared and engaged with (Brady et al. 2017, Levy 2021, Guess et al. 2023b). This facilitates the spread of misinformation – particularly when platforms reward engagement over accuracy.

These mechanisms contribute to the formation of echo chambers and filter bubbles, where users are exposed primarily to ideologically consistent information. This reinforces prior beliefs, distorts perceptions of the political out-group, and limits cross-partisan engagement (Sunstein 2017, Levy and Razin 2019).

Overall, the evidence suggests that the internet and social media platforms contribute to polarisation through both direct and indirect channels. While the magnitude of these effects varies by context and study design, the mechanisms – segregated exposure, selective consumption, and algorithmic amplification – create environments that reward partisanship, undermine trust in neutral sources, and reduce opportunities for constructive cross-cutting engagement.

### 5.4 Psychological and Emotional Drivers

Political polarisation is not only a product of institutions or information environments – it is also sustained by powerful psychological and emotional mechanisms. Voters are not merely passive recipients of elite cues: they interpret political messages through cognitive and affective filters that reinforce existing beliefs and identities.

Emotions such as anger, fear, and moral outrage are especially potent drivers of polarisation. Political messages that evoke strong emotions capture attention, reshape attitudes, and increase political engagement (Brady et al. 2017, Vosoughi et al. 2018). Emotionally charged messages are especially salient, shaping how citizens interpret information and respond to political events. These messages are more likely to provoke visceral reactions that deepen affective divides and reduce openness to alternative views (Iyengar et al. 2019, Ruggeri et al. 2021, Mason 2018). These dynamics contribute not only to ideological entrenchment but also to affective polarisation: citizens growing animosity towards political opponents (Ahler and Sood 2018, Lees and Cikara 2019, Moore-Berg et al. 2020, Ruggeri et al. 2021). Moreover, psychologically, individuals disproportionately weight like-minded signals (Chandrasekhar et al. 2020, Enke and Zimmermann 2017) and engage in confirmation bias when confronted with counter-attitudinal information (Rabin and Schrag 1999).

Psychological predispositions towards in-groups, confirmation bias, and affective sorting are also amplified by features of the digital media environment (see Section 4.4). Digital platforms algorithmically reinforce ideological divisions, while social incentives online further amplify emotional and polarising content. As a result, even citizens with moderate views may become more entrenched over time – not because of changing beliefs, but because their emotional reactions are shaped by how political content is framed, delivered, and socially endorsed.

## 6. Interventions to Counter Political Polarisation

A growing body of research tests interventions aimed at reducing political polarisation or mitigating its effects on how citizens perceive, interpret, and engage with political information. These interventions build on the mechanisms identified in the previous sections – social cleavages, elite strategies, emotional drivers, and digital amplification – and offer diverse entry points for reform. While most studies focus on the role of information and media exposure, recent work spans a broader set of strategies, including elite rhetoric, institutional reforms, social contact, and psychological reframing. Table 2 summarises the major intervention categories.

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**Table 2.** Summary of Polarisation Interventions

Intervention	Evidence	Relevant Citations
Social Contact	Effective at reducing affective polarisation through contact, empathy, and shared identity framing.	Lowe (2021), Ghosh et al. (2025), Levendusky (2018), Ajzenman, Ferman and C. Sant’Anna (2023), Voelkel et al. (2024), Greene et al. (2024)
Elites / Institutions	Elite messaging can shift openness to outgroups; institutional reforms may moderate elite behaviour and reduce voter polarisation over time	Weiss, Green and Willer (2025), Bäck, Carroll and Renström (2023), Cruz, Labonne and Trebbi (2024), Peskowitz and Szewczyk (2022), Grose (2020)
Psychological	Shown to reduce motivated reasoning, increase acceptance of counter-attitudinal information, and boost open-mindedness, especially in lab or survey settings.	Bolsen and Druckman (2015), Baron (2019), Groenendyk and Krupnikov (2021), Enriquez et al. (2025), Larreguy and Tiburcio (2025)
Information / Traditional Media	Misinformation corrections can moderate policy attitudes, reduce affective polarisation and improve cross-party	Ahler and Sood (2018), Lazer et al. (2018), Lees and Cikara (2019), Guess et al. (2020), Druckman et al. (2022)
Social Media	Mixed effects: small / moderate reductions in issue or affective polarisation; depends on long-term exposure and baseline media trust.	Levy (2021), Broockman and Kalla (2025), Akbiyik et al. (2025), Bail et al. (2018), Guess et al. (2020), Larreguy and Tiburcio (2025)

*Note: This table summarises major intervention types by the categories used in the paper, including experimental and observational evidence on effectiveness.*

## 6.1 Social Contact and Dialogue Interventions

Interventions in this category focus on increasing constructive contact between partisan or identity groups to reduce prejudice and promote mutual understanding. Evidence shows that meaningful cross-group interactions – especially those emphasising shared identities or common experiences – can effectively reduce affective polarisation.

Some interventions focus on fostering positive dialogue and contact between individuals across the ideological aisle (Hartman et al. 2022). Experimental work in diverse contexts, from online deliberation platforms in the US (Fishkin et al. 2021, Levendusky and Stecula 2023, Combs et al. 2023) to in-person programmes in developing countries, suggests that structured interaction across group lines can significantly reduce hostility and increase empathy (Greene et al. 2024, Lowe 2021). For instance, Lowe (2021) shows that mixed-caste cricket teams in India significantly reduced caste-based biases, while Ghosh et al. (2025) demonstrate that collective rituals, such as singing the national anthem and wearing uniforms, can reduce in-group bias and increase willingness to interact with out-group members, particularly among the Hindu majority in youth camps.

Other interventions emphasise shared identities and cross-cutting affiliations as a way to build social contact across ideological divides. For example, Levendusky (2018) finds that highlighting a shared American identity reduces affective polarisation between Republicans and Democrats. Similarly, Ajzenman et al. (2023) shows that shared sports fandom increases the likelihood that users will follow cross-partisan accounts on social media. These results reinforce the idea that even modest signals of commonality can disrupt negative partisan stereotypes and encourage openness.

Building on this, Voelkel et al. (2024) conducted a large-scale field experiment with over 35,000 participants in the US to evaluate the effectiveness of more than 25 anti-polarisation interventions. They find that approaches emphasising shared identities and common experiences across partisan lines are among the most effective at reducing affective polarisation – highlighting the power of social contact framing even in low-touch or virtual formats.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, the creation of a new common identity can redefine the boundaries of in-groups and out-groups, potentially generating hostility towards another out-group (Fouka et al. 2021, Fouka and Tabellini 2022).

## 6.2 Elite-driven and Institutional Interventions

As noted in the previous sections, polarisation is not only a grassroots phenomenon. Political elites and institutions play a central role in shaping how divisions emerge, evolve, and are resolved. As such, a growing body of research explores interventions that target polarisation from the top down: through changes in elite messaging and institutional design.

Experimental evidence suggests that elite rhetoric can meaningfully influence citizens' attitudes and behaviours. For example, Weiss et al. (2025) find that bipartisan television ads in the US increased openness to cross-party conversations and willingness to engage in bipartisan behaviour, though they did not significantly reduce affective polarisation. More generally, when elites model respectful engagement across divides, they may help reset partisan norms and expand the perceived boundaries of legitimate disagreement.

In less developed democracies, recent work explores whether party campaign strategies can reduce polarisation among voters. Cruz et al. (2024) conduct a randomised experiment during the 2019 Philippine elections, testing a set of non-partisan informational messages and emotionally framed appeals. Information-based messaging had more consistent depolarising effects, particularly among opposition voters. These findings suggest that cues from candidates and political parties can shape political attitudes even in highly polarised settings, but their effectiveness hinges on message type and partisan alignment.

Beyond rhetoric, structural reforms that alter the rules of political competition may also help mitigate polarisation. For example, Grose (2020) shows that California's top-two primary system moderates legislative behaviour by incentivising broader appeals to the electorate. Similarly, Peskowitz and Szewczyk (2022) find that proportional electoral systems are associated with lower legislative polarisation than majoritarian ones, likely because they reduce the zero-sum nature of political competition.

While more causal evidence is needed – especially outside the US – these studies point to promising institutional levers for reducing elite-driven polarisation and its downstream effects on citizens.

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1 These findings straddle both interpersonal (contact-based) and intrapersonal (cognitive-affective) mechanisms, illustrating how relational and emotional framing can jointly reduce partisan hostility.

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## 6.3 Psychological and Cognitive Interventions

Psychological and cognitive interventions aim to reduce polarisation by targeting how individuals interpret and evaluate political information – especially when that information challenges their prior beliefs. These approaches do not simply seek to provide factual corrections; rather, they attempt to reshape the cognitive and emotional filters through which political messages are processed.

Many rely on subtle cognitive ‘nudges’ to reduce biased reasoning and increase receptivity to counter-attitudinal information. For example, Bolsen and Druckman (2015) use survey experimental evidence to show that warning against politicisation can counteract political effects when processing counter-attitudinal information.

Other ‘nudges’ work by activating positive dispositions. For example, making the value of open-mindedness salient has been shown to reduce partisan-motivated reasoning and increase acceptance of ideologically inconsistent facts (Groenendyk and Krupnikov 2021). Baron (2019) further suggests that priming open-mindedness affects information processing by shaping which sources individuals deem credible – operating on the upstream heuristics of trust in information.

Recent field experiments confirm the promise of these approaches beyond lab settings. In the politically polarised context of Mexico, Enriquez et al. (2025) show that priming voters not to react emotionally or politicise reverses the backlash typically triggered by providing counter-attitudinal performance information about incumbents. Larreguy and Tiburcio (2025) also find that similar nudges reduce motivated processing of counter-attitudinal news.

These interventions appear most effective when they operate at the meta-cognitive level: not aiming to replace beliefs, but to shift how beliefs are evaluated. By fostering critical reflection, dampening defensiveness, and loosening the grip of partisan identity on reasoning, they offer scalable and relatively low-cost tools for depolarisation. However, their impact likely depends on contextual factors such as political salience, social identity salience, and baseline institutional trust, highlighting the need for more research on when and where these tools are most effective.

## 6.4 Information Environment and Traditional Media

A major class of interventions seeks to reshape the information environment by altering media consumption patterns, moderating content, and correcting misinformation. These strategies aim to counter polarisation by improving access to credible information and reducing ideological misperceptions.

Another body of work evaluates fact-checking and corrective information campaigns. These interventions aim to reduce polarisation by correcting false beliefs – especially misperceptions about political opponents. Timely, credible corrections can temper extreme attitudes, particularly when framed in a non-partisan way (Guess et al. 2020, Lazer et al. 2018). However, their effectiveness hinges on audience trust and political context.

Other interventions focus more directly on correcting misinformation about political out-groups. In the US, Ahler and Sood (2018), Lees and Cikara (2019), and Druckman et al. (2022) show that correcting exaggerated or false beliefs about political opponents can significantly reduce affective polarisation. Even when belief change occurs, behavioural indicators (e.g. media consumption, cross-party engagement) may remain unchanged unless trust in media also increases.

Evidence from sub-Saharan Africa underscores how similar dynamics can operate in ethnically polarised environments. While they are not framed in terms of polarisation, studies in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire show that balanced or non-partisan media can reduce ethnically charged political attitudes (Adida et al. 2020, Conroy-Krutz and Moehler 2015). In Sierra Leone, Casey (2015) finds that access to community radio increased citizens' political knowledge and led them to vote based on candidates' proposed policies rather than their ethnic backgrounds. Though these studies do not directly measure affective polarisation, they suggest that trusted, balanced media can promote ideological moderation and cross-group understanding in multi-ethnic, low-trust settings.

Taken together, these findings suggest that success depends not just on exposure but also on credibility, sustained engagement, and group identity salience. Interventions that build media trust and deliver content through trusted messengers may be more effective in polarised or divided contexts.

### 6.5 Social Media and Algorithmic Interventions

A related set of interventions targets the structure of online platforms, where algorithmic curation amplifies emotionally charged, ideologically aligned content. Several studies test whether disrupting these algorithmic dynamics reduces polarisation.

One approach focuses on increasing exposure to counter-attitudinal or balanced news sources. In the US, Levy (2021) finds that encouraging Facebook users to follow cross-partisan outlets increases consumption of those outlets and reduces affective polarisation, though not issue-based polarisation. By contrast, Broockman and Kalla (2022) show that sustained exposure to CNN among Fox News viewers moderates policy attitudes, even if it has no effect on affective polarisation. These findings highlight both the promise and limitations of media exposure interventions when affective divisions are entrenched.

Bail et al. (2018) find that exposing Twitter users to counter-attitudinal content via bots increased rather than reduced polarisation, likely due to backlash effects. However, more organic forms of exposure – such as encouraging users to follow real, cross-partisan news outlets – appear more effective, as discussed above.

Akbiyik et al. (2025) provide more nuanced evidence from the Turkish context. They show that while short-term exposure to ideologically distant news on Facebook and Twitter can initially backfire, sustained exposure over time reduces ideological polarisation, particularly when the ideological distance between users and the media source is smaller. In turn, while there are short-term reductions in affective polarisation, they tend to dissipate over time.

These studies suggest that social media interventions may require a dual approach: reducing misinformation and simultaneously increasing media trust. Repeated, voluntary exposure to credible, ideologically diverse sources – rather than one-time corrections or artificial bots – appears more promising for building long-term resilience to polarisation online.

While polarisation interventions vary widely in design and setting, several themes emerge. First, durable impact often requires sustained engagement, whether through repeated exposure, ongoing interaction, or long-term reforms. Second, interventions must match context: strategies that succeed in high-trust environments may be less effective or even backfire in low-trust or divided settings. Finally, emotional and cognitive cues matter as much as information. Effective polarisation interventions often aim not just to change what people know, but how they reason, relate to others, and emotionally respond to political information.

## 7. Conclusion

Political polarisation – whether affective, ideological, elite-driven, or digitally amplified – can undermine key pillars of democratic governance: information processing, institutional trust, and accountability. These challenges are especially acute in low- and middle-income countries, where institutions and media ecosystems tend to be more vulnerable and political cleavages more likely to overlap with entrenched social, ethnic, or religious divisions.

Still, the emerging empirical literature offers cause for cautious optimism. A range of experimental and quasi-experimental studies across diverse contexts demonstrates that polarisation is not inevitable. Carefully designed interventions – from elite messaging to media reforms to psychological nudges – can reduce hostility, improve reasoning, and reshape how citizens engage with political information.

For policymakers and practitioners, five cross-cutting lessons stand out.

**First, polarisation must be treated as a central consideration for any intervention, not just those directly aimed at reducing it.** In polarised contexts, even seemingly neutral reforms – such as budget allocations or infrastructure projects – can be filtered through partisan or identity-based lenses. This can lead to resistance, misinterpretation, or disengagement, regardless of a policy's technical merit. Effective intervention design must therefore anticipate potential backlash and proactively incorporate strategies for trust-building, inclusive framing, and credibility. Public reception hinges not only on a policy's substance, but also on how it is communicated: who delivers the message, how it is framed, and the emotional and social signals it conveys.

**Second, trust is a necessary precondition.** Many interventions – especially those involving corrective information or cross-cutting exposure – depend on citizens perceiving the source as credible. Without baseline trust in media, elites, or institutions, efforts to bridge divides may entrench them instead.

**Third, both elites and citizens matter.** Even in contexts where elite behaviour sets the tone of polarisation, citizen responses determine whether those cues are amplified or resisted. Structural reforms targeting elite incentives – e.g. changes to primary systems, campaign rules, or electoral institutions – can reduce polarisation over time. But these must be paired with citizen-facing strategies like civic education, media literacy, and interpersonal contact to reshape norms from the bottom up.

**Fourth, interventions work best when targeted to specific mechanisms.** Affective polarisation often responds to social contact and psychological nudges. Ideological polarisation may require incentive-based or institutional levers. Interventions that address the relevant mechanisms in a given context are more likely to succeed.

**Fifth, long-term resilience demands more than short-term fixes.** While behavioural nudges or media tweaks can yield measurable gains, durable depolarisation will require investment in independent media, inclusive institutions, and vibrant civil societies. Short-term interventions should be designed to complement and reinforce these longer-term goals.

Finally, a critical research frontier is contextual diversity. Most causal evidence still comes from the US or other high-income democracies, limiting relevance for settings where the risks of polarisation may be most severe. This is not just a gap in geographic coverage, but in conceptual relevance: interventions developed in the Global North may not translate directly into settings with different political, social, and institutional constraints. Encouragingly, a small but growing body of work – from India to the Philippines

to a number of countries in sub-Saharan Africa – is beginning to fill this gap. Continued investment in context-sensitive research, especially from the Global South, is essential.

Polarisation is not just a challenge of ideology or partisanship – it is a barrier to effective governance that requires institutional, informational, and social responses. Responding to it requires a diverse toolkit that reflects the diversity of political systems, media environments, and social cleavages around the world. The most promising interventions are adaptive, context-aware, and grounded in local realities. Strengthening governance in polarised environments will require political will, sustained learning, and a commitment to designing in polarised contexts, not despite them.

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