

## INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH SEMINAR



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### Polarization and the Democratic System: Kinds, Reasons, and Sites

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#### Abstract

It is widely agreed that political polarization is bad for democracy. However, existing evaluations of how polarization affects democracy operate with too unified understandings of both polarization and democracy. This article argues that polarization cannot be understood as one phenomenon that can be evaluated in one way. Political polarization raises a series of issues and challenges that must be assessed in a differentiated manner. First, we must distinguish between degrees and kinds of polarization. Sometimes the degree of polarization might be the most important variable, other times kind might be so. Second, we must consider whether people have good reasons for their polarizing behavior or whether it is entirely irrational. If people have good reasons for polarizing behavior, the problem might lie elsewhere than in polarization itself. Third, we must distinguish between the content of polarized opinions and the process of opinion formation. Both can be assessed with democratic criteria, but they raise different questions. Finally, it matters for democratic evaluation where polarization occurs and thus, we must differentiate between different sites of polarization – civil society, election campaigns, and legislatures.

**Keywords:** Affective polarization, ideological polarization, partisan sorting, group polarization, democratic system.