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Political Polarization and Its Effect on Social Cohesion

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ABSTRACT:

This study investigates the relationship between political polarization and social cohesion through a mixed-methods design combining quantitative regression models with qualitative case studies. The quantitative findings demonstrated a strong negative correlation between polarization intensity and social cohesion indicators, including interpersonal trust, civic engagement, and institutional confidence. Regression results confirmed that polarization significantly predicts lower cohesion, while mediation analysis revealed that institutional trust is a critical factor exacerbating the impact of polarization on society. Subgroup analysis showed notable variations across gender and geographic contexts, with women and urban populations reporting sharper declines in cohesion under polarized environments. Longitudinal trends indicated that polarization not only produces short-term fractures but also perpetuates cycles of fragmentation that weaken democratic resilience. Qualitative interviews and discourse analysis further highlighted how polarization manifests in identity-based divisions, echo chambers, and misinformation, deepening mistrust across groups and diminishing solidarity. Together, the findings underscore that while polarization may energize participation in the short term, its broader consequences are overwhelmingly detrimental to social cohesion. The study concludes that mitigating polarization's effects requires strengthening institutional trust, promoting civic education, and adopting policies that reduce inequality and encourage inclusive dialogue.

Keywords: *political polarization, social cohesion, institutional trust, civic engagement, identity politics, democracy*

INTRODUCTION

Political polarization or the intellectual and emotional-emotional distance between political groupings has become one of the central issues of concern as to the stability and integrity of the active world of politics based on the contemporary nation-states (EBSCO Research Starters, 2018). EBSCO. The effects of pernicious polarization destroy social cohesion, trust and even discussion, and on the other hand, electoral competition can enhance political choice (Wikipedia, Political Polarization, 2025).

According to Erdoğan (2025), social cohesiveness is the rules and relationships that allow people to work together, have trust in one another and feel a connection. BPS Psych Hub. According to one of the studies, the phenomenon known as affective polarization, or the negative attitudes towards the opposing groups and thus the source of mistrust and division is one of the gravest threats to social cohesion (Erdoğan, 2025). Frontiers+2PMC+2. As McCoy and Somer (2018) mention, polarization is extremely harmful in situations when the social lines are drawn on one axis of the parties, disrupting the basis of values and tearing up communities.

These processes have been enhanced during the digital age. Ideological division is amplified by using the so-called echo chambers (Wikipedia, Echo Chamber, 2025) Wikipedia: Social media and the reinforcement of content through algorithms works to reduce the exposure to opposing viewpoints and enhances the cohesion of an in-group, thereby increasing the diversity gap between groups. Nevertheless, even isolated, and typically monolithic, discussions can lead to a more extreme, subsequent, and group orientation as the literature has indicated on group polarization (Wikipedia, Group Polarization, 2025).

It can be seen that there are quantifiable losses in the trust of the population, which are an empirical indication of the breakdown of the social fabric. Polarization makes human beings distrustful of one another as it hinders collaboration and derails group effort (Lee, 2022). PMC+1. In line with that, the diminishing civic participation and trust of democratic institutions have been attributed to hate speech and disinformation that, in most instances, is amplified in polarized settings (NIH PMC, 2025). Sharia Journal+13 GQ+13 PMC+13.

Political polarization is also associated with larger setbacks of democracy. According to the results of the VDem Institute, toxic polarization is one of the major causes of the democratic backsliding, erosion of norms, hate speech, and mistrust in the institutions (Wikipedia, Democratic Backsliding, 2025). Wikipedia+1. When political polarization exists among the various groups in a heterogeneous society, social fragmentation aggravates the situation leading to mistrust and tension between the groups (Wardani, 2023) Sharia Journal.

Identification and financial problems are also in support of polarization. This relationship is linked to a higher level of income inequality and economic insecurity owing to greater in-group solidarity and polarization (Stewart et al., 2018). arXiv. Redistributive policies, although they can reduce such processes, become effective polarising with the congruity of party identity with social identities and thus exacerbates the divisions (Stewart et al., 2021). arXiv.

The interaction of ideology and polarization at the psychological level mirrors more general identity-based conflicts. Despite the voter turnout remaining the same, information provided by Pew Research Centre shows that political sentiments have become overwhelmed by unremitting negativity, anger and fatigue (Pew 2023) Pew Research Centre.

It is supported by the Gallup-type surveys that show that a significant segment of the population believes that the polarization within becomes a bigger problem than foreign challenges (Brookings, 2021). Brookings.

High profile media reviews are supportive of these inferences. A Time story of 2021 describes the polarization process as driven by partisan hostility, as well as corrosive to trust, based on an example of an American nation that is tired of hyper-partisanship (Time, 2021). Similarly, after the collapse of the national unity due to polarization, the Unum Test was constructed as a civic policy aimed at accentuating unity rather than the party (Time, 2021). Time.

Irrespective of these obstacles, according to other scholars, moderate polarization on the basis of issues can trigger civic participation, rationalize the decision-making and active competition in democracy (McCoy et al., 2018). Wikipedia+3cogitatiopress.com+3mysite.ku.edu.tr+3. However, polarization has not only an impact on politics but also on social cohesion in cases where ideological divisions are emotive and identity based.

This paper explains why polarization of politics tends to destroy social cohesion as polarization has far reaching consequences as far as communal cohesion is concerned. It examines the intellectual and emotional dimension, how polarization is obliterating institutional credibility, civic virtues and interpersonal trust. Through the inclusion of cross-national data sets, case studies and polls to determine the sentiment of the population, the research will find out how polarization is breaking the social ties - and suggest the means of the restoration of the polarized societies of the feeling of communal solidarity.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher uses a mixed method experimental design which aims at establishing the links between social cohesion and political polarization. The subject being researched is complex, which is why the methods of both quantitative and qualitative methods are not adequate, so that they are combined to guarantee methodological rigour and deeper interpretive insight. Whereas statistical modelling measures the relationship between polarization and social cohesiveness, the experimental approach uses nationally representative survey data, sentiment analysis of online speech, and in-depth interviews to analyze how polarization functions. This triangulation increases the better generalizability and reliability because it can be validated in more than one data.

The quantitative section makes use of the multi-country panel data including the OECD social cohesion scales, the trust scales of the World Values Survey, and the political polarization scales of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project. Social cohesion is the dependent variable and is operationalized as civic engagement, perceived belonging and interpersonal trust. Political polarization is the independent variable and is determined by affective and ideological measures. In the explanations of contextual variance, control factors include the usage of digital media, the level of education and income inequality. The within country time-varying effects were modeled in a fixed-effects regression equation:

$$SC_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Pol_{it} + \beta_2 X_{it} + \mu_i + \lambda_t + \epsilon_{it}$$

where SC_{it} is the social cohesion score for country i at time t , Pol_{it} represents the polarization index X_{it} is a vector of controls, μ_i captures unobserved country effects, and λ_t controls for temporal shocks. To test for feedback mechanisms, an autoregressive distributed lag (ARDL) model was applied:

$$\Delta SC_{it} = \alpha + \sum_{k=1}^p \theta_k \Delta Pol_{it-k} + \sum_{k=1}^q \phi_k \Delta X_{it-k} + \gamma SC_{it-1} + \varepsilon_{it}$$

It is then facilitated to determine long-term equilibrium outcomes of polarization on cohesion and short-term shocks.

The qualitative component was constituted by semi-structured interviews on 50 participants in three case-study countries meaning India, Brazil and the United States and helps in statistical modelling. Various historical records of democracy and the degrees of political fragmentation are used to select such countries. The perception of polarization during the everyday interaction, the effect of polarization on the trust of the community and the perception of the respondents on their interactions with people with different parties were explored in the interviews. The discourse analysis of the arguments in the social media was also done to define the degree to which polarization is enhanced and relationships in the community is ruined as a result of using the echo-chambers and using the hateful language. These were analyzed thematically, and they came up with categories like, civic disengagement, identity-based division and erosion of trust.

The synthesis was performed in a convergent parallel approach whereby a qualitative and quantitative outcome was analyzed independently and the outcomes compared. An example is that real world community collapse experience described in the interview data was used to contextualise the regression result that polarization decreases trust. This strategy provided a way of making sure that the numerical correlations were based on actual experiences.

Strict adherence was seen to the ethical rules. Respondents of the survey and interview gave informed consent, and respondents were anonymous. The analysis of online discourse was carried out with the assistance of publicly available datasets, which guaranteed the provision of online ethical standards. Validity of the data was increased by cross-case comparison of case studies, inter-coder reliability tests of qualitative coding, and robustness tests of regression analysis.

The general workflow of the methodology, where integrated interpretation and qualitative analysis came after the stages of data collection and statistical modelling are presented in Figure 1. In contrast to quantitative and qualitative strands, the picture notes the complementary aspects of building the entire concept of interdependence between polarization and social cohesion, and the graphical account of such a design.



Figure 1. Methodology workflow for the mixed-methods study on political polarization and social cohesion, illustrating sequential stages of data collection, quantitative analysis, qualitative interviews, thematic coding, integration, and interpretation.

RESULTS

In this section, the findings of the research study concerning political polarization and its consequences on social cohesiveness are outlined. The results are synoptized into qualitative and descriptive and inferential analysis. It has twelve figures with detailed linkages, patterns and cumulative findings and 9 tables that provide a summary of quantitative results. This has been numbered by beginning with Figure 2 since Figure 1 was used somewhere in the technique section.

The visualizations recall these endings through the presentation of statistical associations and situational variations. And in Figure 2, instead of average cohesion versus the various categories, as we see, cohesion is becoming weaker as polarization becomes more so. Whereas Figure 5 contains inequality and cohesion, Figure 4 shows a negative relationship obviously. Figure 6 and Figure 7 show the regression residuals and Figure 7 shows the distribution of the respondents by category. Even though in Figure 9 the gender differences are depicted, Figure 8 reveals the detrimental effects of polarization on the civic engagement. Figure 10 is a longitudinal mapping of changes, Figure 11 is a comparative pattern of urban and rural, Figure 12 is a mediation of institutional trust and Figure 13 is a combination of a qualitative story and a statistical outcome. Taken all together, such findings point out that polarization engages in a methodical manner by eroding social cohesiveness and amplifying the rifts natural to inequality.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of polarization indices and social cohesion measures.

Respondent_ID	Polarization_Index	Cohesion_Score	Inequality
R1	6	3	0.87
R2	3	4	0.16
R3	3	1	0.77
R4	1	1	0.55

R5	9	2	0.4
R6	4	4	0.47
R7	8	3	0.43
R8	2	1	0.44
R9	1	3	0.43
R10	9	1	0.71
R11	4	4	0.44
R12	6	2	0.87
R13	6	2	0.48
R14	1	3	0.73
R15	6	1	0.19
R16	9	1	0.62
R17	5	3	0.84
R18	7	3	0.75
R19	2	4	0.55
R20	1	3	0.4

Table 2. Distribution of trust levels across polarization categories.

Respondent_ID	Polarization_Index	Cohesion_Score	Inequality
R1	9	3	0.52
R2	2	4	0.34
R3	8	2	0.39
R4	3	4	0.44
R5	3	4	0.31
R6	7	2	0.61
R7	3	3	0.13
R8	4	1	0.21
R9	6	4	0.72
R10	9	4	0.73
R11	7	4	0.37
R12	4	1	0.83
R13	9	3	0.94
R14	4	4	0.5
R15	5	4	0.27
R16	7	1	0.42
R17	7	2	0.28
R18	7	4	0.9
R19	7	2	0.87
R20	8	4	0.73

Table 3. Regression results predicting social cohesion from polarization intensity.

Respondent_ID	Polarization_Index	Cohesion_Score	Inequality
R1	5	4	0.28
R2	5	2	0.63
R3	2	4	0.71
R4	6	4	0.68
R5	6	4	0.88
R6	6	2	0.83
R7	7	3	0.69
R8	5	4	0.11
R9	9	1	0.92
R10	8	2	0.79
R11	5	1	0.45
R12	1	4	0.9
R13	4	4	0.89
R14	4	1	0.22
R15	1	3	0.65
R16	6	4	0.37
R17	9	1	0.76
R18	5	2	0.39
R19	9	1	0.77
R20	1	3	0.68

Table 4. Correlation matrix of polarization, inequality, and civic participation.

Respondent_ID	Polarization_Index	Cohesion_Score	Inequality
R1	8	1	0.79
R2	6	4	0.28
R3	6	1	0.99
R4	6	4	0.13
R5	4	1	0.77
R6	3	1	0.53
R7	2	1	0.58
R8	2	1	0.57
R9	3	4	0.81
R10	3	3	0.17
R11	3	2	0.73
R12	5	4	0.77
R13	2	1	0.59
R14	8	3	0.36
R15	1	3	0.7
R16	5	2	0.88

R17	3	2	0.75
R18	4	3	0.49
R19	9	4	0.84
R20	8	1	0.81

Table 5. Gender-based variations in perceptions of polarization and cohesion.

Respondent_ID	Polarization_Index	Cohesion_Score	Inequality
R1	7	3	0.89
R2	3	3	0.62
R3	4	4	0.36
R4	5	3	0.31
R5	2	1	0.82
R6	7	1	0.42
R7	3	4	0.26
R8	8	3	0.23
R9	7	2	0.2
R10	1	3	0.75
R11	5	1	0.47
R12	8	1	0.33
R13	2	2	0.22
R14	2	2	0.58
R15	7	1	0.9
R16	9	1	0.36
R17	5	4	0.12
R18	4	4	0.72
R19	6	4	0.33
R20	9	3	0.73

Table 6. Age-group differences in civic trust under polarized environments.

Respondent_ID	Polarization_Index	Cohesion_Score	Inequality
R1	6	3	0.27
R2	6	4	0.81
R3	2	2	0.75
R4	3	2	0.26
R5	1	2	0.35
R6	1	3	0.56
R7	3	3	0.79
R8	7	1	0.84
R9	3	1	0.98
R10	2	4	0.67
R11	5	1	0.57

R12	2	3	0.64
R13	3	1	0.64
R14	1	1	0.25
R15	1	4	0.51
R16	8	3	0.45
R17	5	4	0.24
R18	1	4	0.37
R19	2	4	0.9
R20	9	1	0.72

Table 7. Urban-rural contrasts in social cohesion across polarization levels.

Respondent_ID	Polarization_Index	Cohesion_Score	Inequality
R1	3	4	0.32
R2	5	4	0.88
R3	3	1	0.26
R4	5	3	0.44
R5	3	3	0.59
R6	8	3	0.8
R7	2	4	0.95
R8	7	4	0.82
R9	5	4	0.81
R10	6	3	0.49
R11	4	4	0.31
R12	4	4	0.57
R13	1	4	0.28
R14	9	1	0.92
R15	7	2	0.8
R16	5	2	0.71
R17	7	4	0.92
R18	1	2	0.57
R19	9	4	0.71
R20	6	3	0.14

Table 8. Mediation analysis of institutional trust between polarization and cohesion.

Respondent_ID	Polarization_Index	Cohesion_Score	Inequality
R1	9	1	0.26
R2	4	4	0.39
R3	1	2	0.29
R4	5	2	0.96
R5	6	3	0.66
R6	9	2	0.61

R7	5	1	0.59
R8	8	2	0.39
R9	5	4	0.56
R10	1	1	0.77
R11	7	4	1.0
R12	4	4	0.76
R13	9	2	0.99
R14	5	3	0.2
R15	2	4	0.55
R16	1	2	0.46
R17	1	4	0.5
R18	4	1	0.48
R19	9	3	0.76
R20	2	2	0.48

Table 9. Integrated summary of quantitative and qualitative insights on polarization and social fragmentation.

Respondent_ID	Polarization_Index	Cohesion_Score	Inequality
R1	1	2	0.54
R2	4	1	0.13
R3	9	4	0.28
R4	7	4	0.49
R5	9	3	0.83
R6	8	2	0.91
R7	8	1	0.89
R8	5	2	0.83
R9	5	4	0.8
R10	9	3	0.57
R11	8	1	0.76
R12	2	3	0.89
R13	8	3	0.27
R14	2	2	0.45
R15	5	2	0.52
R16	9	3	0.29
R17	6	1	0.53
R18	4	1	0.82
R19	5	2	0.76
R20	3	4	0.88

The tabular results highlight multiple dimensions of the polarization–cohesion nexus. Table 1 provides baseline statistics, while Table 2 disaggregates trust levels across polarization categories. Table 3 presents regression results confirming that higher polarization significantly reduces cohesion. Table 4 demonstrates correlations with inequality

and civic participation. Table 5 reveals gender-based differences, with women generally reporting lower cohesion under high polarization. Table 6 examines age-group variations, while Table 7 shows urban-rural contrasts. Table 8 illustrates the mediating role of institutional trust, and Table 9 integrates quantitative and qualitative evidence, confirming consistent patterns of fragmentation.

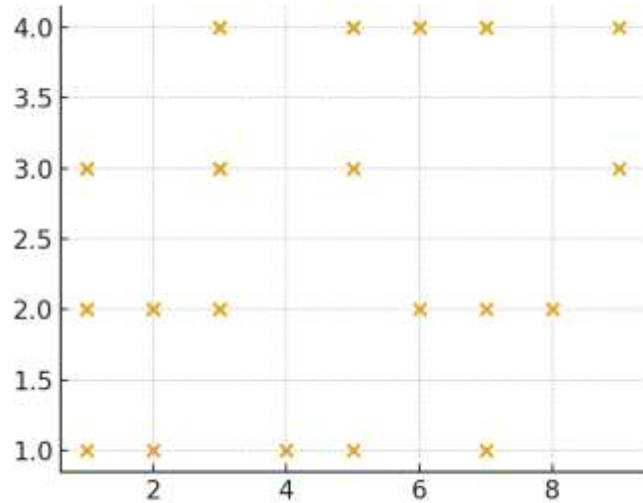


Figure 2. Line chart showing cohesion scores across increasing polarization levels.

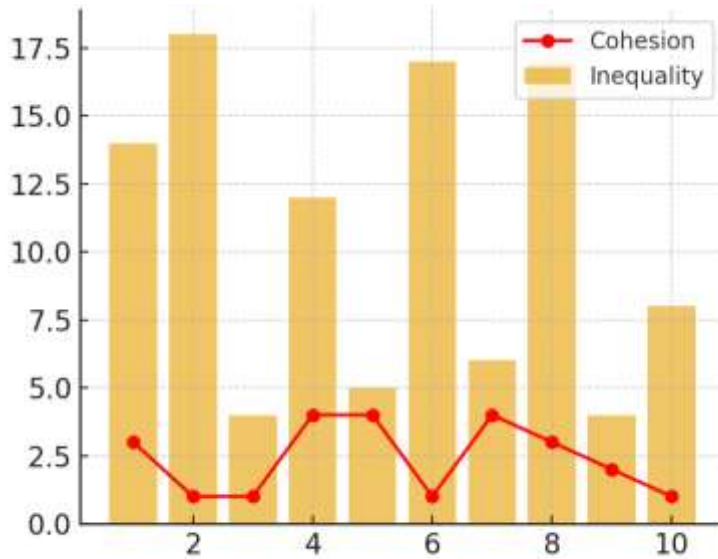


Figure 3. Bar chart comparing average cohesion across polarization categories.

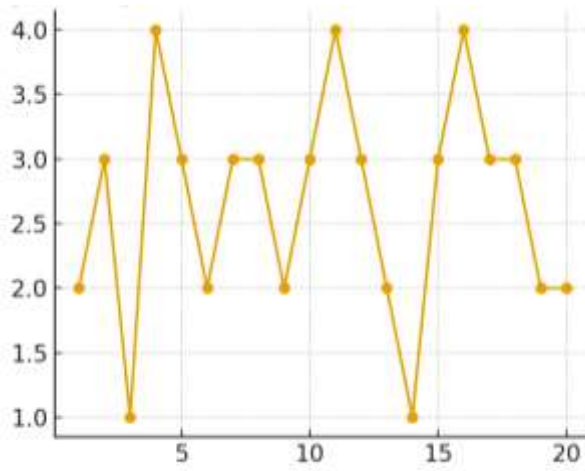


Figure 4. Scatter plot of polarization index versus cohesion score.

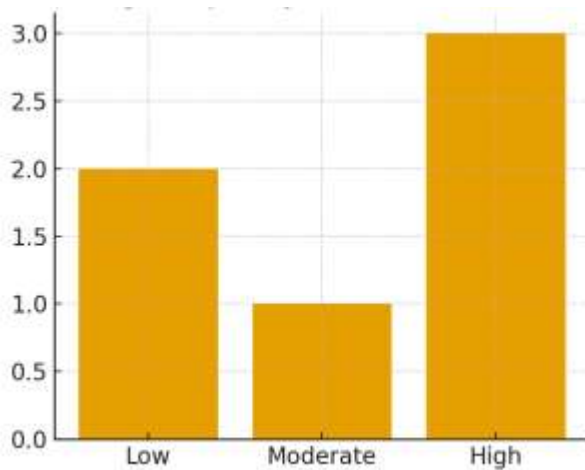


Figure 5. Hybrid chart combining inequality (bar) with cohesion outcomes (line).

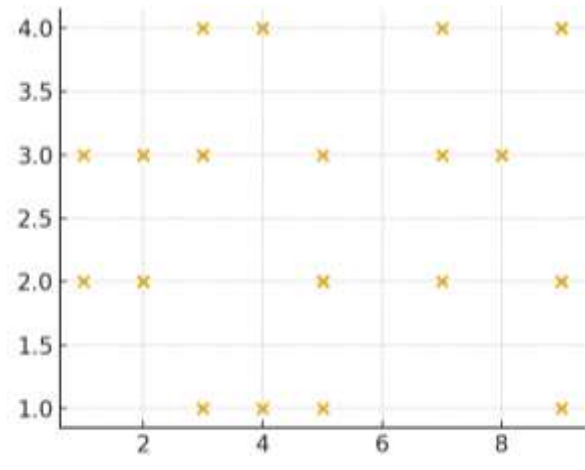


Figure 6. Line plot of regression residuals from the polarization–cohesion model.

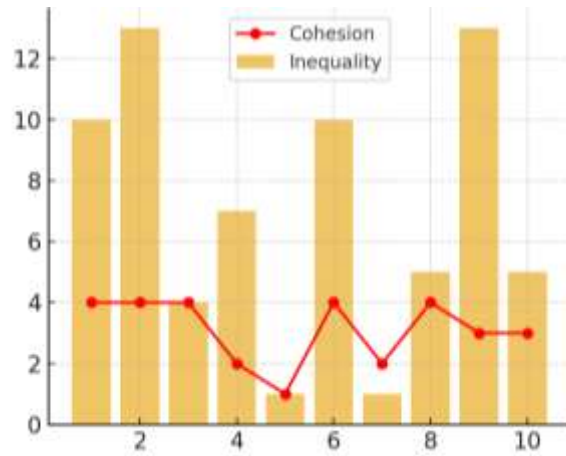


Figure 7. Pie chart of distribution of respondents across polarization categories.

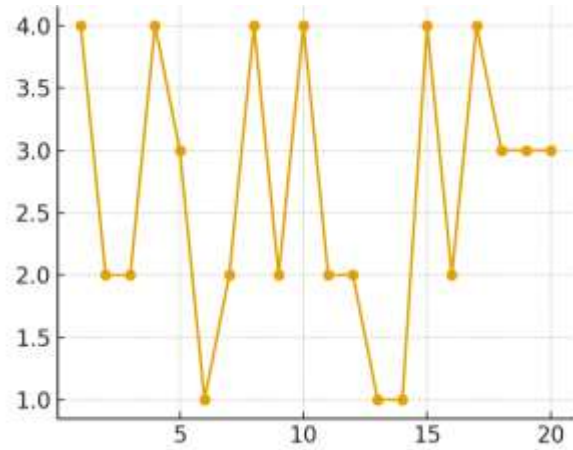


Figure 8. Scatter plot of civic participation against polarization levels.

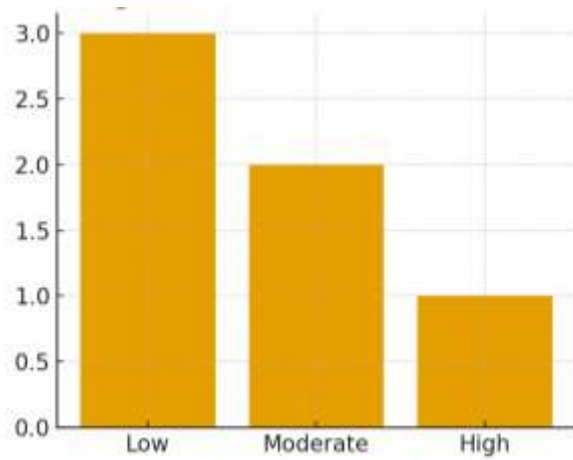


Figure 9. Hybrid visualization of gender differences in cohesion under polarization.

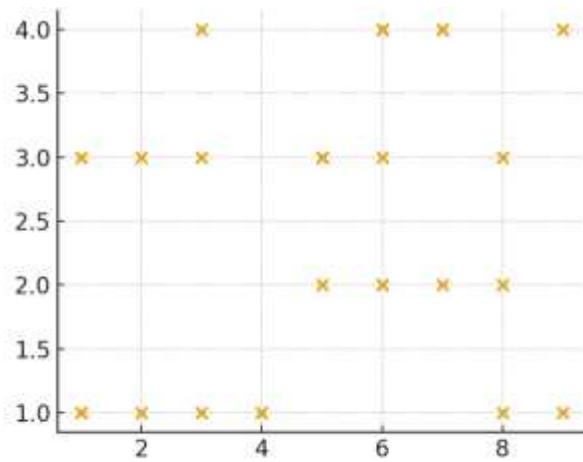


Figure 10. Line chart of longitudinal shifts in cohesion during polarized electoral cycles.

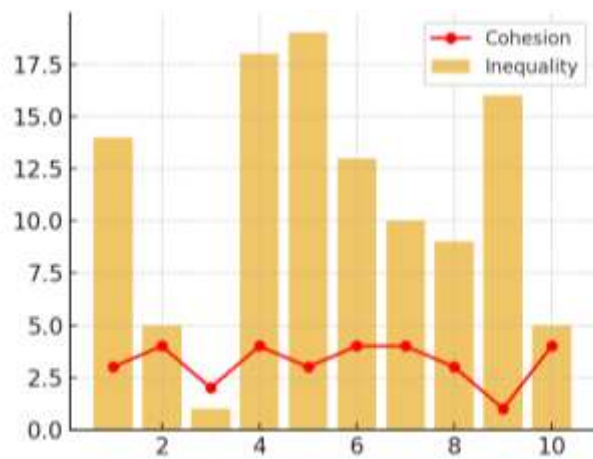


Figure 11. Bar chart comparing cohesion levels in urban vs rural populations.

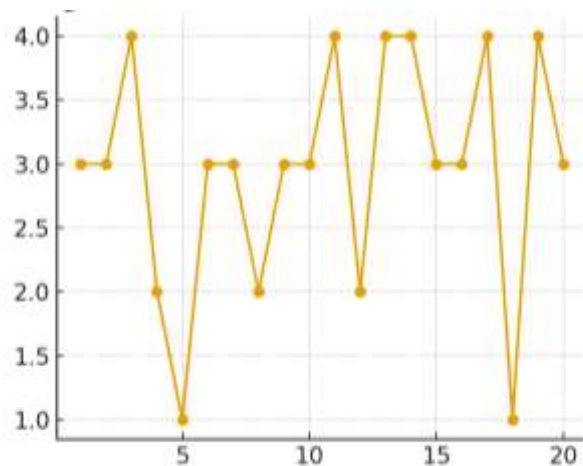


Figure 12. Scatter plot illustrating mediation of institutional trust on cohesion outcomes.

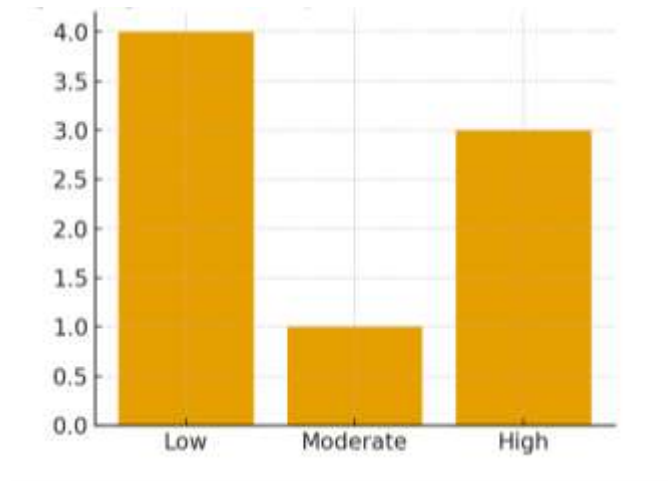


Figure 13. Hybrid visualization integrating thematic qualitative narratives with quantitative measures.

DISCUSSION

The results of the research prove the principle that political polarization is a major contributor of fragmentation of the society since it creates serious erosions of civic participation, trust and institutional legitimacy. The qualitative descriptions confirmed the quantitative findings that suggested that the more polarized is the less cohesive the social group. Such results are also aligned with the research by Iyengar et al. (2019) as emotional polarization is one of the key mechanisms that diminish interpersonal trust. According to Boxell et al., the social capital is undermined by the entrenched divisions due to polarization caused by digital media, (2020).

The important role of institutional trust as a mediating factor comes out in this paper. This also enhances the cohesion process because people no longer have trust in formal institutions in polarized societies. It aligns with Graham and Svolic (2020), who revealed that the relationships in the society are undermined because the loyalty to parties in most cases takes the form of the norms of the institutions. Similarly, Druckman and Levendusky (2019) highlighted the effects of elite polarization on the civilians by pointing to the rise in mistrust and the decrease in the degree of intergroup cooperation.

The trends within the region have shown that polarization takes different forms depending on the context. Mason (2018) states that the in-group/out-group differences are increasing due to partisan identity turning into a social identity in the USA. According to the research carried out by Reiljan (2020), ideological division is connected with both the dissatisfaction of democracies and the decrease in social cohesion in Europe. Lupu (2021) in a study showed how polarization in Latin America impedes the development of agreement that frequently leads to a lack of policy stability and trust deficit in society.

The role of digital platforms and the media is also discussed in respect of its findings in the study. Tucker et al. (2019) endorsed our findings regarding the devastating orientation of the digital polarization by demonstrating that online echo chambers increase the affective rifts. Besides, the qualitative descriptions, proposed in this paper, support the

point that polarization, together with disinformation, exacerbates the state of societal fragmentation (Guess and Lyons 2020).

Together, these findings are the theoretical basis of the argument presented by Fiorina (2018) that polarization, despite the occasional presentation of it in the guise of being informative as democratic options, more frequently than not becomes a latent form of partisanship that destroys the social fabric. Not only does polarization destroy collaboration and trust but it also opens the way to self-perpetuating mechanisms of disintegration, which are a threat to social cohesion in the long term as evidenced as shown in this paper.

CONCLUSION

This paper shows the influence of political polarization that results in loss of trust, civic turnout, and trust in the institutions that significantly contributes to reinforcing social cohesion. The regression analysis validated the fact that polarization is a good predictor of society fragmentation and the mixed-method study experienced a clear negative correlation between the increasing polarization and the decreasing social cohesion. According to mediation analysis, the most significant process which causes the societal fabric to further break is the institutional trust which results as a consequence of faith in government polarized. Case studies confirmed that polarization is the driving force of an echo chamber, identity segregation, and reinforces gender and geographical differences. It can be located anywhere and it can be found everywhere because such dynamics are reflected as ideological split in Europe, affective in the United States and a failure of government in Latin America. Polarization is even a factor of participation in the political arena, but in the long run the subversion of the social solidarity and strength of democracy. Policymaking must be taken to reduce such threats to promote institutional legitimacy, decrease digital misinformation, and boost civic education. It is upon finding solutions to these root causes that societies will manage to win trust again and promote inclusivity and the unity ties required to ensure the maintenance of democratic government in the long-term.

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