POLICY REPORT

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What Is Polarisation?
A Policy Guide

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RSiS 30

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

This report sets out a six-fold typology to help identify what polarisation is, and, importantly, to predict where we see polarisation arising.

The six-fold typology of polarisation is: (1) refusal of dialogue; (2) framing the other as the enemy; (3) no compromise; (4) monolithic identity; (5) a discourse of danger; and (6) an absolutist ideology. Each is explicated as a distinct aspect of polarisation.

Following an examination of the policy implications, the report ends with some suggestions for tackling polarisation, including: use of discourse analysis to spot the potential for polarisation emerging; the need to balance dialogue (early stages) with more prescriptive enforcement against polarised language and groups employing it, but with an awareness that this may be counter-productive yet also aware of the philosopher Karl Popper's "paradox of toleration"; understanding that not all polarised language/positions are inherently socially harmful; and, the need for education to spot and avoid polarising discourse.

Introduction

The term "polarisation" is regularly used in academic writing, policy advice and journalism. However, it is a word that rarely gets unpacked. We are told that we live in unprecedented times, in a fragmented world, where polarisation is increasingly prevalent. But what is the difference between polarisation and strong disagreement? When does a society, or situation, or the relationship between different groups become polarised? Is polarisation linked to conflict? This report provides a typology to help us think more clearly about what we mean when we use the term polarisation.

The typology owes its origin to a talk on religious and non-religious forms of polarisation presented as part of an executive programme aimed at policymakers, educators, and community and religious leaders.[1] In researching for that talk, I encountered a blank in terms of definitions of polarisation.[2] This struck me as a gap in the literature. It raised a scholarly issue: what is meant by "polarisation"? But also a policy or public-facing question: what does polarisation look like, and hence what markers suggest that we are moving towards a polarised situation or are in a polarised society? This report is offered both as an analytical contribution and as policy-relevant scholarship.

Polarisation: Concept and Typology

The term polarisation may bring images to our minds. These may be quite literal, such as the North Pole and the South Pole of our globe, or how those terms are applied to the differing ends of a magnet. Either way, the notion of poles conveys the idea of things diametrically opposed, polar opposites, even in some form of antagonistic relationship to each other. Such images can only take us so far when we think about what polarisation may mean in a political or social context. Moreover, while these physical images suggest differences that can be seen or experienced physically this is not the same with political polarisation. Of course, we can experience changes that show polarisation. If we looked at the relationship and debate between, to take one example, the Democratic and Republican parties in the United States in the 1970s or 1980s and compared that to their relationship and debate in the 2020s we can see a difference.[3] We could ask various questions about what has changed or how we would characterise this difference, but here I want to focus on defining polarisation itself. In short, what drives this report is the question: what is a polarised political, or ideological, situation as opposed to simply one where there are strongly held differing views?

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[1] Studies in Interreligious Relations in Plural Societies Programme (SRP), RSIS, Executive Programme "Fragmented Fronts: Religion, Secular Ideologies and Challenges to Social Harmony", Singapore, 20–21 August 2025. Original paper: Paul Hedges, "The Discursive Landscape Today: Religious and Secular Forms of Polarisation", 20 August 2025, unpublished.

[2] I develop the discussion around this further in an RSIS Working Paper. See Paul Hedges, "What is Polarisation? A Definition and Guide", RSIS Working Paper (forthcoming).

[3] See, for example, Drew DeSilver, "The Polarization in Today's Congress Has Roots that Go Back Decades", Pew Research Center, 10 March 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/03/10/the-polarization-in-todays-congress-has-roots-that-go-back-decades/.

The typology offered here will break down the definition of polarisation into six points. It may be noticed that there is overlap between these points, and often some points are the results, or corollaries, of other points. In one sense polarisation is about absolute difference, but we can also pick out various ways that this manifests, or point to forms of discursive language and ideology that lead to polarisation. As such, these six are part of one package and where you have one you will typically have the others, with each acting to reinforce and build up the others. By defining six points I show that there is greater depth to the ideological and behavioural position of polarisation than simply difference itself. Also, importantly, where we see one or two of these aspects within the discursive space, we should be aware of the danger that we are moving towards a polarised situation and action should be taken to avoid this.

We can lay out the 6-point typology with six headline phrases:

(1) refusal of dialogue;
(2) framing the other as the enemy;
(3) no compromise;
(4) monolithic identity;
(5) discourse of danger; and
(6) absolutist ideology.

1. **Refusal of dialogue**. Polarisation requires a lack of dialogue. That is to say, the parties involved perceive themselves as being so different that it is almost no longer meaningful to engage respectfully and thoughtfully with your opponents. The shouting of slogans and an inbuilt assumption that the other side has nothing of value to offer means that any form of dialogue is simply out of the question. Any claimed dialogue may be performative, often involving displays of victory rather than really understanding the other with the possibility of each side changing its mind.

2. **Framing the other as the enemy**. The other side is not simply someone with whom you have differences; they are the enemy. The difference between a political opponent and a political enemy is a vast gulf. In any election, or in any contest, one has opponents and one tries to win, like two people playing chess or tennis. But if the person on the other side is an enemy this raises a question of threat, not simply a difference of perspective. The world becomes split between the good and the bad. It is likely that dehumanising language will be part of such polarisation.

3. **No compromise**. As a logical corollary to the two previous points, there can be no compromise. One has the correct position and nothing worthwhile can come from the other side. To compromise is a betrayal. It means giving way to something not simply inferior but positively harmful. No meeting in between, no middle ground, exists in the ideological space of polarisation. This also means that voices of moderation may be silenced, either explicitly or through fear of being ostracised within the group. In other words, deindividuation occurs within polarised communities.

4. **Monolithic identity**. In situations of tension, we, as humans, naturally hunker down into party camps, of in-groups and out-groups, and often assume a monolithic identity. There is thus a lack of multiple identities or perspectives within each camp.[4] This also means that difference is not tolerated within your own camp. If you are the good and have the truth, then this easily becomes invested in a singular monolithic vision. It is, as the saying goes, either my way or the highway. To be a member you must have unswerving allegiance to the party, the leader, the way, the church, or whatever it is that defines your camp. No nuance or faltering from this monolithic vision becomes possible.

5. **Discourse of danger**. When there is polarisation, there is a discourse of danger, harm and destruction. In other words, the opponent, or the enemy as we have noted, will not simply run the country in a way that is not as good as your own but they will destroy the country, or will harm your way of life. Therefore, letting them win is existentially dangerous. The notion of danger inevitably underlies the very possibility and rationale of being in a polarised landscape. This may well lead to censorship or banning of language, groups, media, comedy or other parties deemed to be against the absolutist ideology.

6. **Absolutist ideology**. Absolutes are essential to the discourse. Questions of what is good or what may be harmful are not simply placed on a scale of relative measures. That is to say, having our leader in power is not a relative good; it is the *only* path to security, freedom, peace or whatever ideal is at stake. All truth, goodness, purity, etc., is invested wholly within "my party", "my religion", "my way". This relates to the lack of dialogue; absolute truth and goodness is pitted against absolute falseness and evil. The discursive language must be invested with certainty and absolute value.

As noted, there is overlap and similarity between each of these characteristics and that is in part because most can be conceptually related to another, but also because some may grow from the others. However, equally, we can see that each one is reinforced by the others, so every point is a way that polarisation is intensified.

Three key points must be highlighted here. First, people on either side of a polarised debate may end up living in different worlds. If the communities of trust vary, and with it the sources of news, media and information, then – as well as being polarised – any form of dialogue and reconciliation becomes much harder. Second, beyond the more objective pointers in the typology, the tone of the debate may also indicate polarisation. Belligerent language and rhetorical styles may also contribute to or be signs of polarised battle lines even if people try to make their words sound moderate. Finally, the use of so-called dog whistles may occur where seemingly innocuous phrases signify hardened battle lines to those in the camp. They may also be used for justifiable deniability, or be taken as signs of oppression against "common sense" or "cultural" expression.

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[4] See Henri Tajfel and John Turner, "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behaviour", in *Political Psychology*, eds., Henri Tajfel and John Turner (Psychology Press, 2004), pp. 276–93. For an account related to prejudice and dehumanisation of the other, see Paul Hedges, *Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia and Antisemitism in Global Contexts* (Bloomsbury, 2021).

Policy Implications

Knowing the markers of polarisation would allow policymakers to anticipate the emergence of polarised political discourses. To operationalise the work of spotting polarisation, a discourse analysis approach looking out for absolutist words and related language could be undertaken. While this may have been time consuming, AI algorithms could be used to spot signs, with humans taking over to verify and monitor highlighted instances.[5] There may also be signs that slip beyond algorithms or will be grey areas.

In terms of the six-point typology, while it has been noted that each interrelates with the others and often reinforces or leads to the other, it may be expected that aspects of one will arise first or become most prominent. There may also be indications that civil discourse is moving towards polarisation. Such indications may arise from particular political actors, a specific party, or perhaps non-political actors, whose discursive framing sets the world in the form of absolutes and may involve one group refusing discourse with the surrounding society.

It is expected that some form of dialogue would be the best way to overcome the early stages of polarisation. Any heavy-handed intervention may inflame tensions and exacerbate the moves towards polarisation. The political psychologist Leor Zmigrod has suggested that the pathway into ideological thinking, which has resonance with what is seen here as polarisation, is like a logarithmic spiral.[6] That is to say, with each move towards the extremist "centre", towards the most ideological/polarised ground, the position becomes tighter and tighter, like the coils on a snail's shell. As such, if one is on the pathway towards polarisation, perceived external pressures may propel a faster spiral towards an even more ideologically committed opposition to the perceived other.

However, too much of a laissez-faire approach is dangerous, and dialogue may not be useful with those seeking to utilise strong, polarised discourse to enhance their position. We have seen, in various polities, strongly ideological parties driving discourse once they are given a stake in the debate. Framing what may be a metropolitan and political elite against the people, or the immigrant as an enemy, or using wider language of purity and danger can appeal to primal instinctive tendencies of fear, where we naturally divide self and other, in-group and out-group, friend and foe. We may note here Karl Popper's famous paradox of intolerance, where allowing open space for those who wish to take away others' freedoms may be self-destroying.[7] Paradoxically, limiting certain forms of speech and certain freedoms may be the only way to ensure both "free

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[5] It must be remembered that AI is not, despite the name, "intelligent" but merely, in the current most common form, a type of text prediction based on large language models (LLMs). As has been shown in many instances, it can "hallucinate" or make things up, cannot analyse, and has clear limits to its potential given the limitations of what an LLM can do.

[6] Leor Zmigord, *The Ideological Brain: A Radical Science of Susceptible Minds* (Viking, 2025).

[7] Karl Popper, *the Open Society and its Enemies*, Vol. 1 (Routledge, 1945), see Bastiaan Rijpkema, "Popper's Paradox of Tolerance", *Think* 11, no. 32 (2012): 93–96, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/think/article/abs/poppers-paradox-of-democracy/F99CA4DC88347BC0E660026B303C3224.

speech" and "freedom" (for all). This may involve another paradox: that what may appear to be an "absolutist" ban on certain forms of polarising speech or ideas may be part of the work of anti-polarisation and depolarisation. A clear distinction would need to be maintained on the restrictions of expression, especially as claims of "fanaticism" have been made historically against many groups.[8]

Not all forms of polarisation will involve a desire to take away the rights of others or their freedoms. While we have seen the rise of a generally right-wing, authoritarian-inclined populism in many Western and other countries, this is not the only form. In some societies, we may see something like polarised discourse in some quietist groups. For instance, the Amish in the United States separate themselves very starkly from the surrounding society but pose no danger to the overall political order. The possibility for such segregated groups may be affected by the size of a country; in very small states this may be less viable. Therefore, discernment is needed before assuming that all polarisation is inherently problematic. At the same time, the very real potential for violence must be taken into account. In the current situation, the far right seems to be leading polarised political violence, but historically and, in some contexts, Islamist and left-wing polarised discourses may be the main danger.

Importantly, policymakers should ensure that education takes place to make people aware not just of the importance of spotting the signs of polarisation, but also of when their own language and framing of issues may become polarised. This is partly about education on how to disagree well and respectfully, but also education on the critical analysis of ideas and discourse. Such education should be embedded in schools and tertiary institutions, as well as lifelong learning avenues, given the changing shape of polarised discourse and platforms of dissemination.

The clear question is how do we avoid, or tamp down, polarisation and the markers of polarisation. It is posited here that any of the six typological pointers – i.e., (1) refusal of dialogue; (2) framing the other as enemy; (3) no compromise; (4) monolithic identity; (5) a discourse of danger; and, (6) an absolutist ideology – should signal the need for action to change the discursive space and avoid any further escalation down the spiral pathways of ideological polarisation.

[8] See Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea*, expanded version (Verso, 2017).

About the Author

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He is co-editor of *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology*, editor-in-chief of the Occasional Paper series *Interreligious Relations*, and sits on the editorial board of numerous journal and book series. He works in such areas as interreligious studies, theory and method in the study of religion, intercultural and interreligious dialogue, religion and politics, prejudice studies, and decolonising academia. He has published 16 books and over 90 scholarly papers. His most recent books are *Christian Polytheism? Polydox Theologies of Multi-devotional and Decolonial Praxis* (Routledge, 2025), *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies* (University of California Press, 2021), and *Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia, and Antisemitism in Global Context* (Bloomsbury, 2021).

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