Defining Polarisation
An Analysis and Typology

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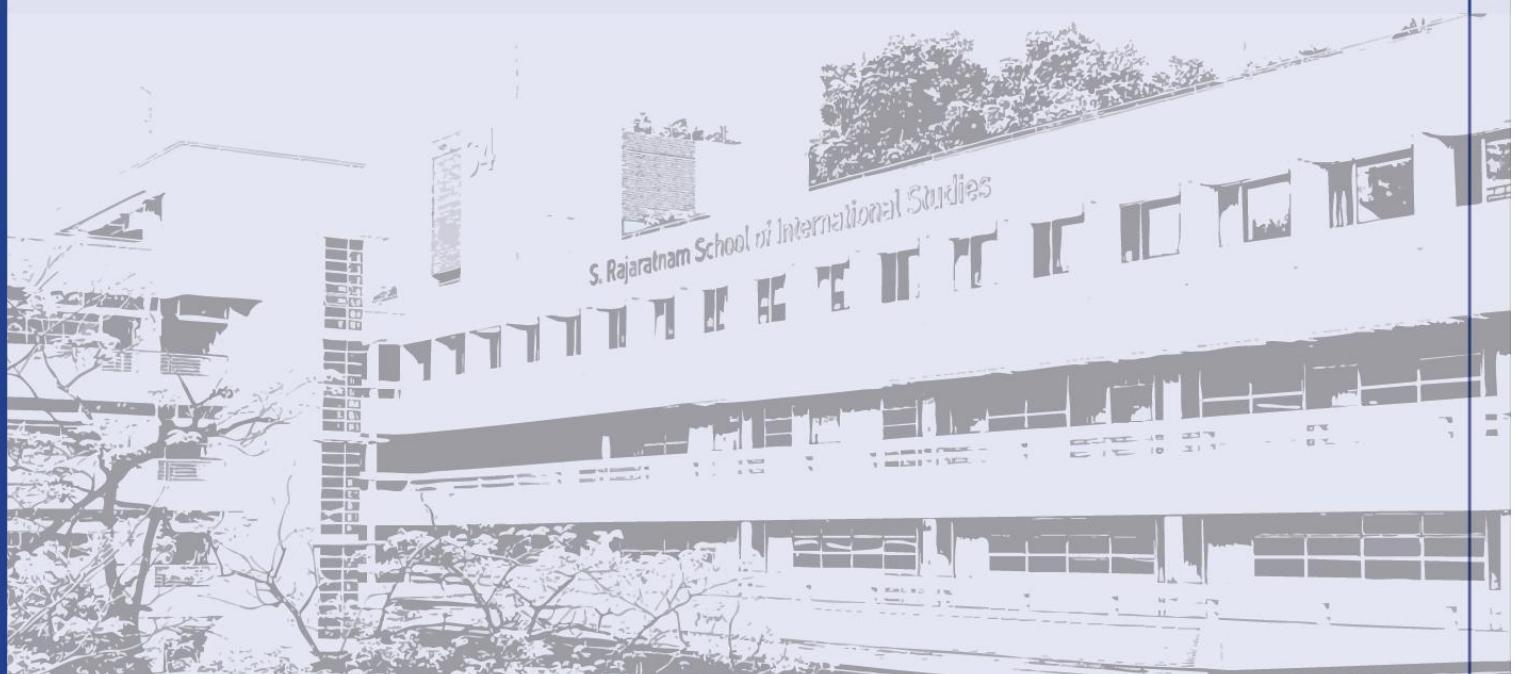
WP349

Table of Contents

Abstract

This paper is intended to provide an analytical description of what we mean when we invoke the term "polarisation". It begins with a six-fold typology to help identify what polarisation is, and, importantly, to predict where we see polarisation arising. The six-fold typology 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. Notably, these six components are not envisaged as discrete, but rather as overlapping. Next, the paper discusses some spheres in contemporary societies where we see polarised discourse. These spheres are: the distinction between cosmopolitan and anti-cosmopolitan worldviews; the perceived difference between religious and secular perspectives; the far right and its "others"; and the tension between authoritarianism and democratic impulses. Discussing the spheres helps lay out some context for understanding how polarisation arises. Two theoretical issues are then raised: first, whether polarised groups meet at their extremes, and, second, whether polarisation inevitably leads to violence. The paper ends with some conclusions that note both the theoretical and policy-relevant aspects.[1]

Introduction

The term "polarisation" is regularly used in academic writing, policy advice, and journalism. However, it is a word that rarely gets unpacked. The theologian and philosopher Augustine of Hippo once remarked that while we regularly use the word "time" and assume we know what it means, when we think deeply we find that it is in fact hard to define. Indeed, to this day, philosophers still argue over what "time" actually is, with physicists complicating our understanding of this concept. While polarisation is not as problematic a term, nevertheless, we can ask whether we really know what it means. 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, a situation, or the relationship between different groups become polarised? Is polarisation linked to conflict? This paper 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.[2] In researching for that talk, I encountered a blank in terms of definitions of polarisation.[3] This struck me as an aporia 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 paper mainly develops an analytical assessment of issues around what polarisation means as a concept. Though this paper has policy implications, those are mainly explored elsewhere.[4]

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 suggests 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 which can be seen or experienced somatically, that is not the case with political polarisation. We can, admittedly, experience changes. If

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[2] Studies in Interreligious Relations in Plural Societies Programme (SRP) Executive Programme, RSIS, "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.

[3] My research was not comprehensive, but involved a range of papers on Google Scholar, media usage, and questions to colleagues in political science and related areas. At most, these sources offered some generalisations. See, for example, Joan-María Esteban and Debraj Ray, "On the Measurement of Polarization", *Econometrica* 62, no. 4 (July 1994): 819–851.

[4] See Paul Hedges, "What is Polarisation? A Guide for Policymakers", RSIS Policy Report, February 2026.

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 today, we can see a difference.[5] We could ask various questions about what has changed or how we would characterise this difference, but this paper focuses on defining polarisation itself. In short, what drives this paper is the question: what is a polarised political, or ideological, situation, as opposed to simply one where there are strongly held differing views?

The typology offered here breaks down the definition of polarisation into six points. 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 highlight forms of discursive language and ideology that lead to polarisation. As such, these six are part of one package: where you have one you will typically have the others, with each acting to reinforce and build up the others. By defining six points this paper shows that there is greater depth to the ideological and behavioural position of polarisation than simply difference itself. Also, importantly, where we perhaps see one or two of these aspects within the discursive space, we should be aware that we are moving towards a polarised situation and action should be taken to avoid this danger.

We can lay out the six-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.

We can unpack each of these with a wider description.

1. **Refusal of dialogue**. I suggest that 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 their 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 genuine understanding 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 other form of 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

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[5] 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/.

difference of perspective. The world becomes split between the good and the bad. It is likely that dehumanising language will be part of this gulf.

3. **No compromise**. As a corollary of the previous two 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 of one's position. 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.[6]

4. **Monolithic identity**. There is a lack of multiple identities or perspectives. 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.[7] 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 this. No nuance or faltering 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; they will destroy the country or 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. This concerns the way that an assessment of what is good or what may be harmful is not simply about a scale of relative measures. Rather, the claim is that "our leader" being in power is not a relative good, but 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 six points, and that is in part because most can be conceptually related to one 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. In

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[6] See EBESCO, "Deindividuation", EBESCO Knowledge Advantage, https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/psychology/deindividuation.
[7] 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: 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).

what follows, we will pick out some further points and issues. Before that three key points need to be noted. The first is that 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. The second is that, 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.

Polarisation in Today's World

If we are said to live in increasingly polarised times, what then are the fault lines? Certainly, the world situation is not unprecedented, but it seems fair to say that in many polities we see breakdowns of communication and discourse indicative of the typology of polarisation outlined above. Without aiming for comprehensiveness, I will outline four areas or spheres where we see polarisation occurring in the world today. While these spheres are treated discretely here for discussion, they often overlap. Somewhat differing issues will be addressed in each case, either problematising or discussing the ways they may be seen to contribute to polarisation to help highlight complexities and nuances that arise.

1. Cosmopolitanism and Anti-cosmopolitanism

In her work in the last decade and more, the Australian sociologist Anna Halafoff described the main social division, certainly within Western societies of our times, as that between cosmopolitans and anti-cosmopolitans.[8] While not perhaps part of everyday language, it is certainly the case that this distinction has been part of the rise of polarisation.

There are two main figures behind the contemporary discourse on cosmopolitanism. On the one hand, the Anglo-American Africana philosopher of Ghanaian descent Kwame Anthony Appiah takes a very philosophical perspective, seeing all as needing to live as global citizens, which means being with each other in conversation and taking everyone else seriously.[9] He does not, though, suggest that we embrace a relativism where every culture or practice is given equal weight, or argue that cultural purity and integrity needs to be protected. Rather, he sees us as needing to find the best and most meaningful ways to connect and live together. This brief summary oversimplifies Appiah's conceptualisation of cosmopolitanism but paints a picture of his ideas for us here.

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[8] Anna Halafoff, *The Multifaith Movement: Global Risks and Cosmopolitan Solutions* (Springer, 2013).
[9] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (W.W. Norton, 2007).

From the sociological and political theory perspective, on the other hand, is Ulrich Beck's theory of cosmopolitanism.[10] Like Appiah's, this theory has a global vision, and in part Beck pushes back against an insular nationalism. For Beck, we must move beyond traditional ideas of identity and belonging in an increasingly globalised world. Identity, he notes, is always plural, complex, and multiple, and this characteristic will inevitably be shaped by global forces, and so we must accept an identity and sense of belonging that crosses traditional borders. In his explication of why this should be so, he takes up, among other ideas, two important issues that will be highlighted here. The first is the notion of "global risks". Beck notes that whether it be climate change or financial crises, we do not find the problems limited to national boundaries, and so they must be faced on a global level. Second, he takes cultural diversity in a globalising world as a given and argues that our very differences can be a source of strength, rather than weakness and division. Hence, diversity should be celebrated. Beck thinks that as we exchange across cultures we can develop a more globally connected and cosmopolitan world society.

However, the idea of cosmopolitanism can be stretched back further, with Halafoff seeing it not only embedded in Immanuel Kant but also in the Stoic philosophers of ancient Greece. She suggests that:

> the origins of modern cosmopolitan theory can be attributed to the Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). According to Kant, all people are naturally good yet concurrently immature and selfish. Everyone is capable of developing "higher" qualities, yet this can only take place in conditions of freedom, where a base level of peace is guaranteed by law and thereby by the state. In this way, the cosmopolitan condition is primarily one of "public security," a common security founded on the principle of "cosmopolitan rights" that Kant described as equal rights for all.[11]

Halafoff's summation of Kant is not simply historically interesting, or philosophically significant, but raises important questions because in some ways the distinction between cosmopolitans and anti-cosmopolitans is often phrased as the difference between progressives who want to embrace people regardless of culture, race, religion, gender or other identity markers, and those clinging to a more traditionalist stance. But right from this early stage of thinking about cosmopolitanism, it is grounded for Kant in a question of "public security". In other words, what are the grounds on which we can live in safety in society?

While some of Kant's theorising is overly idealistic or even naïve – that society, or rather people, would mature or evolve towards his "higher" qualities, meaning that

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[10] See, for example, Ulrich Beck, *Cosmopolitan Vision* (Polity Press, 2006). See also L. Martell, "Beck's Cosmopolitan Politics", *Contemporary Politics* 14, no. 2 (2008): 129–143, and Anna Halafoff, "Netpeace and the Cosmopolitan Condition: Multifaith Movements and the Politics of Understanding", *Political Theology* 11, no. 5 (2010): 717–37.

[11] Halafoff, "Netpeace and the Cosmopolitan Condition", p. 718, citing Immanuel Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, ed. Pauline Kleingeld, trans. David L. Colclasure (Yale University Press, 2006).

in liberal societies we would be able to live without laws eventually as the good would become our inner nature – we can still take in the significance of what he says about security. To turn to a British example, but also part of something more widely seen across Europe, we have seen attacks on hotels holding asylum seekers, with violence against police as well as the potential danger to staff in these places, not to mention the families inside.[12] There is, undoubtedly, a set of policy decisions, often caving into demands of far-right actors (i.e., the removal of the right to work of asylum seekers), that has led to asylum seekers being housed at taxpayer expense in hotels (predominantly a COVID-era policy) in the context of the United Kingdom.[13] Part of this is related to attempts by populists to appeal to a historical majority that feels its grip on control is under threat. This majority privilege that seems destabilised is what Peggy McIntosh has described as "an invisible package of unearned assets".[14] Their demands have led to a political polarisation where the position of not just asylum seekers but also other migrants and those not identified as part of an imagined white British heritage has been vilified, and where it is increasingly hard to find any common ground for dialogue.[15]

Another, arguably extreme, example of the anti-cosmopolitan impulse is the white nationalist grouping within American evangelicalism.[16] Admittedly, not all white American evangelicals are white nationalists, though polling data suggests that a very large proportion are.[17] Historically, much of the anti-cosmopolitanism in that context concerns the so-called racial divide being deeply rooted among the evangelical and Southern Baptist communities in the southern states of the United States, who were often most resistant to civil rights. Indeed, in many places in the United States, one will still find white and Black churches in the same towns segregated not by law, as they used to be, but out of stark divisions embedded to this day in that society. It may, at times, be natural that different communities will have different churches, mosques, synagogues, temples or other places of worship because of differences in worship styles or rituals, language, and other factors. But the racial division in the United States is very much about skin colour, or we may also say "blood purity", in these churches.

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[12] Jenny Phillimore and Olivia Petie, "What Life Is Like for the Asylum Seekers in Hotels Being Attacked by Far Right Groups", *The Conversation*, 5 August 2024, https://theconversation.com/what-life-is-like-for-the-asylum-seekers-in-hotels-being-attacked-by-far-right-groups-236020.

[13] Jonathan Darling, "How the UK Became Dependent on Asylum Hotels", *The Conversation*, 30 June 2025, https://theconversation.com/how-the-uk-became-dependent-on-asylum-hotels-258767.

[14] Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack", *Peace and Freedom Magazine*, July/August 1989, 10–12, https://www.nationalseedproject.org/key-seed-texts/white-privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack.

[15] Kiran Stacey, "Members of Far-Right Party Organising Asylum Hotel Protests across UK, Facebook Posts Show", *The Guardian*, 23 August 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/aug/23/members-of-far-right-party-organising-asylum-hotel-protests-across-uk-facebook-posts-show.

[16] On the background to such groups, see, for example, Kristen Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (Liveright Publishing, 2020). On connections between Christianity and extremism, see Paul Hedges and Luca Farrow, "Christian Far-Right Extremism: Theology and Typology", RSIS Commentary 22048, 17 May 2022, https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/christian-far-right-extremism-theology-and-typology/.

[17] See the discussion in Paul Hedges, *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies* (University of California Press, 2021), pp. 158–61.

2. The Secular and the Religious

The distinction between religion and the secular is not between binary opposites. A religious person may be thoroughly secular without being any less religious.[18] Equally, a secular person who is an atheist may believe fully in respecting the rights and dignity of those who hold religious views.

A thorough background of the entwined histories of these terms is beyond the scope of this paper,[19] but we can note that, historically, the term "secular", meaning "of this world", denoted a priest living in the world as opposed to one within a monastery. The separation of two realms of life, one religious and the other secular, is very much a modern, Western conception – though it has resonances with global precedents and developed, in part, as Europe discovered nations such as China and their modes of life, thinking, and governance.[20]

Here, therefore, polarisation is not seen as inherent, and two key points will be set out in defining a secular society. First, a secular society is one which is not, in some way, a theocracy, meaning that a single religion does not govern and get to decide the laws of that land. Moreover, with religious diversity under secularism, people are also not forced to follow one person's or one tradition's version of any particular religion. Therefore, diversity that is both intra- and inter-religious is possible. Secularism, therefore, means that the laws of a single version of one religion are not the norm for everyone. In short, there is freedom from religion being enforced.

Second, there is freedom of both religion and non-religion. People are free to choose whichever religion they want, or to have no religion. Within this, the freedom of religion entails people being not simply free to believe, but, as the human rights language says, also free to manifest their religion. So worship, schools, teaching, dress codes, and other manifestations of religiosity are all respected and accepted. Freedom of religion regulations do stipulate limits though, which may be for public safety and security, or health reasons. Ideally, such limits will be negotiated with the religious authorities in mutually agreed ways. One good example was Singapore's issuance of a fatwa that Muslims could skip attending mosques during COVID to avoid spreading the virus. This position drew from historical fatwas and the Muslim experience of how earlier generations had dealt with plagues and pandemics.[21] Hence, rather than a secular law being deemed as imposed, the state and religious authorities coordinated for the common good.

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[18] See Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, p. 179. See also Paul Hedges, "The Confusion over Secularism", RSIS Commentary CO25107, 13 May 2025, https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/the-confusion-over-secularism/.

[19] For an overview, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, pp. 371–77.

[20] See Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, pp. 374, 376, and Heiner Roetz, "The Influence of Foreign Knowledge on Eighteenth Century European Secularism", in Marion Eggert and Lucian Hölscher, eds., *Religion and Secularity: Transformations and Transfers of Religious Discourses in Europe and Asia* (Brill, 2013): 9–33.

[21] See Mohamed Bin Ali and Ahmad Saiful Rijal Bin Hassan, "Temporary Closure of Mosques: Sharia Flexibility in Singapore", RSIS Commentary 20069, 13 April 2000, https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/global-health-security-temporary-closure-of-mosques-sharia-flexibility-in-singapore/.

The secular is not something which is against religion or its antithesis, but is really about the management of multicultural societies. We could debate particulars about how no society perfectly adopts these principles. Moreover, some interpretations of secularism are more anti-religious. However, even controversies that, in some places at least, signal a deeply polarised debate between religion and atheism have foundations that are nuanced and complex. We may briefly outline one controversy here: the abortion debate. For some Christians, this is about an absolute good versus evil, two polar opposites. "No compromise because life begins at conception" is a refrain often heard from those who shout most loudly, but there are actually very different traditional Christian opinions, room for compromise, differences of opinion, and space for dialogue.[22]

The Christian tradition has, on the whole, opposed the practice of abortion, associating it with fornication and adultery in the context of the early church, where abstinence from sex was considered an ideal. However, there is no biblical condemnation. The Bible associates life with breath throughout,[23] and so something without breath is generally not taken as alive. Moreover, the early tradition made a distinction between an unformed foetus and something that had assumed the bodily form of a human being. Exodus 21: 22–25 forms the locus classicus of this discussion. To summarise, it states what penalty ensues if two men are fighting and a man's pregnant wife is struck accidently. One plain reading of this text is that if there is mischief, i.e., a miscarriage, then the husband may demand a fine. But if the wife dies or is injured then what applies is the *lex talonis*, or law of an eye for an eye, a life for a life. However, an early translation, or interpretation, of this passage was contained in the *Septuagint*, the Greek translation taken over by the early Christian church, which makes a clear distinction between an unformed foetus and a formed foetus to determine whether the *lex talonis* would apply. Hence it distinguishes between early and late-stage pregnancies. This stance held sway through around 2,000 years of Christian history.

While the Bible never addresses abortion, an early Christian text, the *Didache*, a summation of Christian teaching, is clear that abortion is unacceptable.[24] But, as noted,

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[22] For a social reading of Christian teachings on abortion, see Ignacio Castuera, "A Social History of Christian Thought on Abortion: Ambiguity vs. Certainty in Moral Debate", *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 76, no. 1 (2017): 121–227. For a conservative theological account, see John Noonan, "Abortion and the Catholic Church: A Summary History", *Natural Law Forum* 12 (1967): 85–131.

[23] See Robert G. Bratcher, "Biblical Words Describing Man: Breath, Life, Spirit," *The Bible Translator* 3, no. 2 (1983): 201–09. Many texts, including some academic texts (often written by Christian ethicists and not biblical scholars), say the Bible teaches that life begins at conception but this is factually incorrect.

[24] The actual language is often about the Greek term *pharmakeia* (also found in Galatians 5:20). While often translated as "sorcery", every known Greek usage refers to "medicine, drug, remedy", and if read literally, as many anti-abortion proponents want, seems to ban Christians from using any form of medical science. As such, the actual texts need to be read in a social and historical context, which points away from any absolute ban on abortion. See Paul Badham, "Christian Belief and the Ethics of In-Vitro Fertilization and Abortion", *Monash Bioethics Review* 6 (1987): 7–18. More widely, see Rohini Hensman, "Christianity and Abortion Rights", *Feminist Dissent* 5 (2020), https://doi.org/10.31273/fd.n5.2020.763.

the concern was adultery, i.e., the assumption that seeking abortion is related to sexual dalliances. Moreover, two important early Christian saints, Jerome and Augustine of Hippo, say that we do not know when the soul enters the body, hence when it becomes a person. They follow the tradition that there is no soul in an early-stage foetus but we do not know when the soul enters it. This view complicates the idea that all abortion is forbidden; until the late 19th century, excommunication was not imposed for early-stage abortions, only for late-stage ones.[25] Church tradition, in a move associated with Thomas Aquinas, also allows surgical removal that will kill the foetus if the mother's life is at risk. Under the law of double effect, it is argued that if something is done to save a mother's life, even if this will inevitably kill the foetus, then it is allowed as the aim is not to directly kill the foetus.

This discussion of biblical, Jewish, and Christian views on abortion and when life begins may seem somewhat abstract. However, it raises the issue that claiming that life begins at conception is not the only Christian point of view. It is certainly not a biblical position. We could also note that some Christians argue for allowing abortion under some circumstances based on biblical and theological arguments.[26] As such, taking abortion as a basis for a polarised religious–secular position that denies dialogue is deeply problematic. Like so much in our contemporary world, polarised positions ignore complexity.

3. The Far Right and Its Others

The far right, or extreme right, is a widely and loosely used term, but it is employed here because it also helps us see some connections and associations. Writing in 2021, Professor Kumar Ramakrishna stated the following:

> Three types of Extreme Right movements appear of particular interest: White Supremacist, Buddhist and Hindu extremists. According to Julia Ebner, the Extreme Right comprises groups and individuals that espouse "at least three of the following five features: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and strong state advocacy"; the Far Right represents the "political manifestation of the extreme right".
>
> Ebner's point that non-violent Far Right political figures and parties are ideologically related, albeit distantly, to the relatively more violence-prone Extreme Right, were a distinct feature of White Supremacist, Buddhist and Hindu extremist movements in 2020.[27]

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[25] See Badham, "Christian Belief and the Ethics."

[26] See, for example, the arguments by Presbyterian priest Rebecca Todd Peters in Stephanie Russell-Kraft, "A Christian Argument for Abortion: A Q&A with Rebecca Todd Peters", *The Nation*, 11 April. 2018, https://www.thenation.com/article/a-christian-argument-for-abortion-a-qa-with-rebecca-todd-peters/, and more fully in Rebecca Todd Peters, *Trust Women: A Progressive Christian Argument for Reproductive Justice* (Beacon Press, 2018).

[27] Kumar Ramakrishna, "The Growing Challenge of the Extreme Right", RSIS Commentary 20011 (20 January 2021), https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/the-growing-challenge-of-the-extreme-right/, citing Julia Ebner in Jacob Davey and Julia Ebner, "'The Great Replacement': The Violent Consequences of Mainstreamed Extremism", Institute of Strategic Dialogue, 2019, https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-

Ramakrishna, making use of Ebner's ideas, gives us the following distinction:

- The extreme right: militant, potentially violent, ideologically motivated groups
- The far right: the political wing of these groups, which may be less directly violent but shares ideological crossover.

It also gives us a definition or typology where to be in the far or extreme right you need at least three of these five elements:

- nationalism
- racism
- xenophobia
- anti-democracy
- strong state advocacy

Analytically, this is an inaccurate definition of the far right, because one can find far-left movements that are nationalist, racist, anti-democratic and have strong state advocacy. Also, there are problematic issues when we ascribe the term "right wing" to some of these religious groupings in the same way as we would to political groups. However, in the absence of an adequate definition, we may, for current purposes, use this definition with caveats. Importantly, there are often common enemies of these far-right groups, with Islamophobia and antisemitism being common across many groups and organisations.[28] We could also discuss the connections between populism and the far right. However, that would entail distinctions and debates that go beyond the scope of this paper.[29]

It is worth noting also that in many places today we see far-right politics mixed with religious claims, which would include: Russian imperialism aligned with Orthodox Christian ideology; militant expansionist settler Zionism as an alleged biblical mandate; white Christian exceptionalist nationalism within American evangelicalism; and, militant Hindutva ideology in India combined with prejudice against Muslims and Christians.[30] In many cases we find a polarising discourse associated with the far right, and, certainly, responses to this can be deeply polarised too.[31]

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content/uploads/2019/07/The-Great-Replacement-The-Violent-Consequences-of-Mainstreamed-Extremism-by-ISD.pdf.

[28] See Paul Hedges, "Countering the Far-Right", RSIS Commentary 18045, 16 March 2018, https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co18045-countering-the-far-right/, and Paul Hedges, "Violent Christian Extremism: Wither Interreligious Ties", RSIS Commentary 21027, 11 February 2021, https://www.academia.edu/62783654/Violent_Christian_Extremism_Interreligious_Ties. Notably, though, today some right-wing groups have renounced antisemitism because if the main enemy is Islam, then Jews and Israel may become allies.

[29] On the question of definitions, origins and changing meanings of the terms, see Anton Pelinka, "Identity Politics, Populism and the Far Right," in *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Politics* (Routledge, 2017): 618–29. See also Paul Hedges, "Countering the Far-Right", RSIS Commentary 18045, 16 March 2018, https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co18045-countering-the-far-right/.

[30] On some connections of this to prejudice, see Hedges, *Religious Hatred*.

[31] Eva Rifá, Joan Massachs, Emanuele Cozzo, and Julian Vicens, "Far-right Party Influence on Polarization Dynamics in Electoral Campaign", *Physics and Society* (2024), https://arxiv.org/html/2410.23177v1.

4. Authoritarianism and Democracy

Many of the groups or movements we have mentioned have overlaps with movements that veer towards authoritarian forms of government. The connection between growing polarisation and movements drifting away from democracy should be clear within the political sphere.[32] If opposition forces are framed not simply as having different ideas but as actually harmful to your country, your values and your whole way of life, or even as an enemy intent on destroying the nation as it exists, then the obvious corollary is that they must be barred from government. Therefore, undermining the democratic system, or restrictions on often mainstream media groups, is framed by authoritarian groups as a legitimate defence of our values, our way of life, our children, our heritage. Alternatively, certain groups, parties or the media may be positioned as anti-patriotic and therefore undermining the country. Such framing is typically not based on evidential grounds but in the discourse of opposition to the leader, the party, the ideology, etc.

We have seen what is often termed democratic backsliding in countries from the United States to Turkey, and Hungary to India, where explicitly far-right political movements have come to power, or where extreme forms of religious nationalists are in government.[33] Admittedly, the far left has also been, through much of the 20th century, a force for anti-democratic governance. However, there seems at the moment a far greater move towards centralised executive power among parties on the right and associated with religious nationalism, and with it a weakening of the checks and balances in a democratic system, such as the separation of executive and judicial powers. In either case, in what we may term strong ideological stances, whether political or religious, we often see a desire to restrict power to one group and strong polarisation.

At this stage, it would be useful to note, though, that while restricting certain forms of free speech may seem to be a form of authoritarianism it can actually be an antidote to it. That is to say, when limits are placed on the speech of certain groups, such restrictions may, contrarily, be the best way to counter polarisation and a potential descent into authoritarianism. In other words, restricting the speech of those promoting polarisation and seemingly exhibiting authoritarian impulses, i.e., those who may wish to restrict the rights of others if they come into power, can be a way to protect free speech and democratic rights, and resist polarisation. Here, we can invoke Karl Popper's famous paradox of intolerance, where allowing open space for those who wish to take away others' freedoms may be self-destroying.[34] If there is the risk that such

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[32] Michal Krzyżanowski and Matt Ekström, "The Normalization of Far-right Populism and Nativist Authoritarianism: Discursive Practices in Media, Journalism and the Wider Public Sphere/s", *Discourse and Society* 33, no. 6 (2022): 719–729.
[33] See Heather Ashby, "Far-Right Extremism Is a Global Problem", *Foreign Policy*, 15 January 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/15/far-right-extremism-global-problem-worldwide-solutions/.
[34] Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Vol. 1 (Routledge, 1945). See also Bastiaan Rijpkema, "Popper's Paradox of Tolerance", *Think* 11, no. 32 (2012): 93–96,

actors could come to power and impose authoritarian or totalitarian rule and restrictions – silencing the voices of others – then, rather than providing every voice an equal space in the political debate, Popper suggests that some voices should not be tolerated. In times of stress, social and economic, for instance, such authoritarian parties may find that their message becomes part of a populist package of solutions that is electorally potent. Paradoxically, therefore, limiting certain forms of speech and certain freedoms may be the only way to ensure both "free speech" and "freedom" (for all). This may involve the practical manifestation of the same 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 historically been made by some jurisdictions, or powerful actors, against many groups that make it easy to dismiss or criminalise them.[35]

Not all forms of polarisation will involve a desire to take away the rights of others or their freedoms. While, in many Western and other countries, we have seen the rise of a generally right-wing, authoritarian-inclined populism, 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 offer 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. However, it raises the issue that 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, militant Islamic and left-wing polarised discourses may be the main danger.

Issues with Polarisation

It is worth bringing up two issues that help us think about polarisation and how it manifests. One issue is whether polarised groupings actually meet at their extremes, often termed the horseshoe theory,[36] or at least have similarities. The other issue is the association of violence with polarisation and whether it occurs naturally as part of the matrix or needs some particular impetus.

Polarisation and Similarity

Our images of polarisation may suggest diametrical opposition, but also similarity. While geographically distant, both North and South Poles are united as frozen, polar regions, though with distinct ecologies. Likewise, the psychology of extreme ideologies

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https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/think/article/abs/poppers-paradox-of-democracy/F99CA4DC88347BC0E660026B303C3224.

[35] See Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea*, expanded version (Verso, 2017). Strongly held and expressed alternative views are certainly not necessarily the voices of "fanatics".

[36] See, for example, Hüseyin Pusat Kildiş, "Horseshoe Theory and Covid-19", *E-International Relations*, 23 July 2020, http://markfoster.net/dcf/horseshoe_theory.pdf.

shows similarities in how they manifest regardless of the particular shape of their worldviews.[37]

We may also note what is often termed "co-radicalisation", where extremists, or terror groups, on seemingly different spectrums (for instance, between, on the one hand, militant neo-Islamic jihadism and, on the other, extreme right, Islamophobic, white nationalists) are inspired by the excesses of the other to further extend their own violence; hence, in various ways each may resemble the other in some respects.[38] Today, there is also the phenomenon of the hybrid, or "salad bar", approach to radicalisation and extremism, where some "pick'n'mix" from opposing sides, such as the extreme right and militant neo-Islamic jihadism.[39] If we talk about polarisation at a political discursive level, some, no doubt, may object that this does not involve violence and so is distinct. Nevertheless, we may expect the groups to be in competition, which means they are very much aware of, and need therefore to be in relation to, the other.

There are also cases where groups that seem utterly diverse do meet. Recently, this has occurred in relation to what are often taken to be extreme right- and left-wing groups around COVID vaccine resistance. Scepticism towards modern medicine has long been part of one grouping of generally left-wing "wellness" advocates who support alternative medicine. This crosses into environmentalists whose advocacy is part of a back-to-nature discourse, with ideas about vegetarianism or veganism, a return to indigenous knowledge against modernity, and other conceptions, including conspiracy theories. At the same time, the far right are often strong promoters of anti-COVID conspiracy theories, including claims that it was all a hoax, and also spread fear about COVID vaccines. There has also been a long-standing form of right-wing environmentalism seen in, for instance, Nazi ideology with ideas about a return to the land. While issues of racism and xenophobia have often polarised these extreme left and extreme right groups, they found common cause during the COVID lockdowns, often in online spaces.[40] Such commonality among polar opposites appears to be a classic case of the so-called horseshoe theory, where two extremes find crossover and even common ground to work together.

The above case of two extremes meeting even seems to involve at least some form of conceptual leakage at the ideological level beyond mere pragmatism. One point is that polarised groups often need to go to extremes and this means that conspiracy theories may be prevalent in both because, to maintain an absolutist ideology of adherence, simply sticking to empirical data and commonly agreed facts can be

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

[38] See Douglas Pratt, "Islamophobia as Reactive Co-radicalization", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 26, no. 2 (2015): 205–18.

[39] Kumar Ramakrishna, "The 'Salad Bar' of Extremist Ideologies in Youth Radicalisation: A New Threat?", RSIS Commentary 25191, 16 September 2025, https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/the-salad-bar-of-extremist-ideologies-in-youth-radicalisation-a-new-threat/.

[40] Elias Visontay, "Far Right 'Exploiting' Anger at Lockdowns to Radicalise Wellness Community, Police Say", *The Guardian*, 24 February 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/feb/25/far-right-exploiting-anger-at-lockdowns-to-radicalise-wellness-community-police-say. Also, Wenting Yu, Z. Chen, X. Meng, X., and Q. Yan, Q., "Propagating COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories: The Influence of Right-Wing Sources", *SAGE Open* 14, no. 2 (2024), https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/21582440241258026.

problematic.[41] As noted, aspects of the psychology would also be expected to be similar. This can involve the way that extremely strong identity with your group (even if this entails, as above, connection with a seemingly different group/ideology) can become so central that one's network becomes one's whole centre of focus against the mainstream or outsiders. We may note that strong in-group formation, perhaps around what are termed fused identities (where one's individual identity becomes merged with the wider group), may play a part, especially as tensions grow.[42]

Common enemies may also exist, and while, for instance, currently the far left and far right may be split on their attitudes to Islam, antisemitism has a role in both, forming part of left-wing discourse in some cases and being a staple of the far right. Yet, today, some right-wing groups are even finding common ground with militant Zionist groups against Islam.[43]

If we ask whether polarised groups have common ground or similarity, we should be clear about the basis of commonality. Ideologically, there are often clear differences, though populist discourse may blur any right–left dichotomy, but there may also be places where some groups may meet. There are also facets of common psychology, group formation and a tendency towards conspiracy theories. We should not generalise, therefore, about whether polarised groups have similarities as these may vary, sometimes overlapping, sometimes not overlapping. And while there may be aspects of common psychology, thinking and group formation, these may manifest in differing results in any specific case.

Polarisation and Violence

It would be too stark to say that political polarisation and violence are synonymous. However, polarisation – more than deep divides – lays the ground in which violence can easily spread. From demonising and dehumanising rhetoric, to talk of enemies and existential threats, polarisation is fertile ground for anything from clashes on the streets to political assassinations, even riots, coups and revolution. This trend can be seen globally in the current context from places such as Brazil[44] or Turkey,[45] while political

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[41] See Robbie M Sutton and Karen M Douglas, "Conspiracy Theories and the Conspiracy Mindset: Implications for Political Ideology", *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* 34 (2020): 118–122.

[42] On the fusion of identities, see Harvey Whitehouse, *Inheritance: The Evolutionary Origins of the Modern World* (Belknap Press, 2024). Notably, as Whitehouse notes, this may not involve what we typically see as extremist groups, with it being found in military units, where one has to, especially in conflict, rely entirely upon trust in one's comrades.

[43] See Hedges, *Religious Hatred*. Notably, not all Zionism is Islamophobic nor militant and the term should not be used to denote a monolithic ideology. See Paul Hedges, "Being Jewish, a Good Neighbour, and Abhorring War", RSIS Commentary 25150, 8 July 2025, https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/being-jewish-a-good-neighbour-and-abhorring-war/.

[44] Assessorias de comunicação Terra de Direitos e Justiça Global, "Third Edition of the 'Political and Electoral Violence in Brazil' Survey Reports Record Cases in 2024", *Terra de Direitos*, 16 December 2024, https://terradedireitos.org.br/en/news/news/third-edition-of-the-political-and-electoral-violence-in-brazil-survey-reports-record-cases-in-2024/24103.

[45] Andrew O'Donohue, "Why Türkiye Is at a Tipping Point Between Democracy and Authoritarianism", Carnegie Endowment, 26 March 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2025/03/turkey-protests-erdogan-democracy-authoritarianism?lang=en.

assassinations have occurred in recent times in both the United Kingdom and the United States.[46] However, it is not clear that violence is inevitable in polarisation.

The language of polarisation – of the opponent being an enemy, of them threatening a way of life, even the very security and well-being of a country (often seen locally as meaning the safety of my family, etc.),[47] of good versus evil – certainly puts in place a context in which "defence" may be a justification for violent action. However, to take a different case, groups such as the Amish in the United States, who exist apart from society and may be said to be in a polarised stance vis-à-vis the mainstream population, are quietist and nonviolent in their political stance and seemingly pose no threat. Again, Salafi groups may range from the supporters of militant neo-Islamic jihadism to those who take quietist, apolitical positions.[48] However, where there are quietist groups, we will not see the kind of public rhetoric of demonisation arising in the tension between two or more of such groups, and with it a quest for power (though quietist and minority groups may be the targets of violence). As such, we should focus on the political context of polarised contestation.

This paper is not the place to discuss the routes by which humans justify violence against other humans,[49] but, as noted above, polarised language lays the groundwork in which violence may become seen as justified. While the emergence of violence will be contextual and will depend on various factors, from mental health to ideological frameworks, we should expect polarisation to promote the very real likelihood of violence at various levels.[50] This will often sit within a situation where the actual, or perceived potential, for violence from one side feeds into an escalating need to stay ahead for the other, which relates to the co-radicalisation we noted, or can be considered in terms of wider mimetic theory.[51]

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[46] On the murder of British MP Jo Cox, see Ian Cobain and Matthew Taylor, "Far-right Terrorist Thomas Mair Jailed for Life for Jo Cox Murder", *The Guardian*, 23 November 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/nov/23/thomas-mair-found-guilty-of-jo-cox-murder. On the murder of American far-right provocateur Charlie Kirk, who had seemingly given succour to far-right violence against Democrats in the past, see Mohammad Aaquib, "Charlie Kirk's Manufactured Martyrdom and the Test for American Muslims", *Middle East Monitor*, 13 September 2025, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20250913-charlie-kirks-manufactured-martyrdom-and-the-test-for-american-muslims/?amp, and also see Sean Mordowanec, "Liberals Hype Tyler Robinson's Conservative Roots After MAGA Backlash", *Newsweek*, 12 September 2025, https://www.newsweek.com/charlie-kirk-murder-tyler-robinson-maga-liberals-2129055.

[47] This is often gendered, with extremist rhetoric being about protecting womenfolk though much rhetoric of the far right in the Anglophone world is currently centred on protecting "the children".

[48] Mohamed bin Ali, "Salafis, Salafism and Modern Salafism: What Lies behind the Term?", RSIS Commentary CO15057, 2015, www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/CO15057.pdf.

[49] For an overview and theory of this, see Hedges, *Religious Hatred*. Specific important studies include Albert Bandura, "Selective Moral Disengagement in the Exercise of Moral Agency", *Journal of Moral Education* 31, no. 2 (2002): 101–19, 103, and Max Bergolz, *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community* (Cornell University Press, 2016).

[50] It is often suggested in prejudice studies that there is no such thing as "innocent prejudice", i.e., there are no small, minor or harmless forms of speaking in ways that stereotype and potentially belittle another person/group because violence never occurs in a vacuum and even genocide begins with language. See Hedges, *Religious Violence*, chapter 2.

[51] See, for example, Mia Bloom, "Terrorism: Competition, Mimicry and Claims of Responsibility", in *Handbook of International Relations*, ed. Cameron G. Thies (Edward Elgar, 2025): 310–28.

Conclusions

Knowing what the markers of polarisation are would allow us to anticipate the emergence of polarised political discourses. 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.

One way that those on the ground could operationalise the work of spotting polarisation is by implementing a discourse analysis approach, looking out for absolutist words and related language. 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.[52] However, it is important to note that there may be grey areas or signs that could slip beyond algorithms.[53]

In terms of the six-point typology, while each interrelates with the others and often reinforces or leads to another, it may be expected that aspects of one will arise first or become most prominent. There may also be indications that the discursive space of civil discourse is moving in ways indicative of polarisation. This may arise from particular political actors, from a specific party or perhaps from 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. As such, it should not be assumed that the typology represents some form of checklist or scale from more to less extreme polarised discourse. Having said this, the route to polarisation may quickly intensify as one heads towards it. 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.[54] That is to say, with each move towards the extremist "centre", the most ideological/polarised ground, the position becomes tighter and tighter, like the coils on a snail's shell. Rather like going into the rabbit hole online in chasing conspiracy theories, one may be within a self-referencing realm of discourse that makes the pull of polarisation stronger and stronger. It may also be the case that on the pathway towards polarisation, perceived external pressures may accelerate one's spiral towards an even more ideologically committed opposition to the perceived other. This may be reinforced either by a divided media landscape, where each side simply has a community of trusted information that is radically different from others, or online, in areas such as social media, where the echo chamber effect and the role of algorithms may lead one into spheres of activity and discourse that constantly reinforce one's own worldview.

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[52] 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.

[53] Many far-right or extremist groups are quite adept at finding euphemistic language, employing memes, or using coded terminology that will appear bland and innocuous to either AI or an algorithm, or even be quite innocent to the untrained eye, but which hold prejudiced meanings, even potentially inciting violence, to those within the in-group.

[54] Zmigord, *The Ideological Brain*.

It is not primarily the role of this paper to suggest resistance to polarisation, but epistemic humility and critical thinking will be ways to resist the pull of polarised thinking, especially the kind of lure towards prejudice and authoritarianism that seems to go alongside it. When you exercise critical thinking, you will question your own sources, your own thought processes, and the worldview of those promoting such ideas. This is not to say that having experts and engaging in fact-checking will be a simple or obvious way to counter polarisation. In many cases, we have seen populist leaders and particularly those on the right dismissing "experts" or castigating critics as part of an elite (who may variously be framed as liberal, unpatriotic, metropolitan, etc.) and not to be trusted. Hence, acting quickly in response to moves towards polarisation will be important.

This typology and discussion is offered to scholars in the field, as well as policymakers and other interested parties, as a way of better understanding and spotting polarised discourse and therefore averting it. It is believed that it offers a comprehensive framework for describing polarisation as well as sufficient context to understand the complexities and nuances of how it manifests in social, media, political and public discourse.

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