

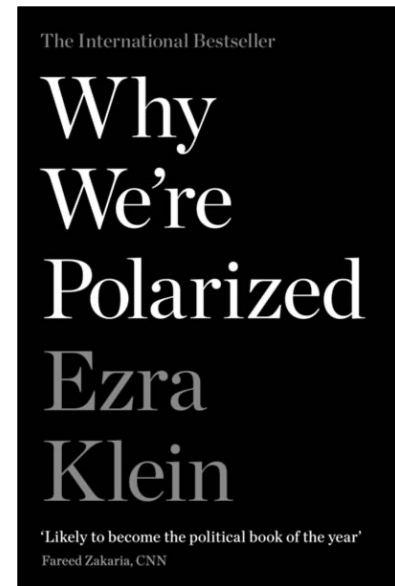
Ezra Klein, **Why We're Polarized**, London, UK: Profile, 2020, 312 pp., \$14.39 (hardcover), \$13.99 (paperback).

Reviewed by

João Carlos Sousa

Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL)

Ezra Klein is a journalist and the author of **Why We're Polarized**. As the founder of the podcast "The Ezra Klein Show," he has focused on the role of the media in the quality of politics and democracy over the last few years. In fact, this is the main theme for his book, the successive precariousness of political debate and the contribution of journalism to this process. In *Why We're Polarized*, the author seeks to contribute to the fight against political polarization, a problem that drives him in this crusade. Although Klein is not exactly a typical academic, he shrewdly handles and articulates empirical evidence and the theories and concepts that bring the debate up to date. This is an essential read for academics, but also for those who fear for democracy and see a serious dysfunctionality of contemporary democracies in the polarization of public debate. Throughout the exhibition, it becomes clear that the North American reality is the one in which Klein focuses, although he occasionally resorts to European examples as a way of providing explanatory power.



Klein starts by asking, "What didn't happen?" (p. IX). In an era of a wealth of information and knowledge, voters and institutions did not act in their own interests in electing Trump. At the center of this transformation is polarization, which proceeds in the following terms: "As institutions and political actors become more polarized, they polarize the public even more" (p. XIX).

The last few decades have seen the shift from Democrats to Liberals and from Republicans to Conservatives. Among the consequences, we highlight the drastic reduction of the electorate that *floats* between the two parties, but also the erosion of the *common ground*. But what is upstream of this "entrenchment" of voters from each party? Klein advances the party's commitment to put itself increasingly in the face of a feeling of opposition, overcoming ideological commitment and consummating the "negative partisanship" (pp. 10–11), in which what unites us is the feeling of opposition to the "other."

In the 20th century, there were other phases of strong political polarization that required political compromises, such as the Dixiecrats regarding a cleavage between the Southern and Northern states. In recent decades, the trend is toward greater heterogeneity between the Democratic and Republican parties. Both parties are moving away, generating the phenomena of intolerance and hostility, with urban and rural divides.

The construction of identities is based on empowering us to antagonize and harass *others*. In this context, elections exacerbate the effect of competition and rivalry. Indeed, actors can be categorized as "into

the engaged—who view political participation as ‘what does this one say about me?’ and as the *least engaged*—who start from the perspective ‘what can politics do for me?’” (pp. 62–63; emphasis added). The political identity transcends partisanship, consummating the politics of mega identity 2.0 filling the worldview.

There are several ways to deal with politics. Cynicism is about what is heard and consumed in the media, putting political attitudes in permanent tension. The second way involves the intensification of epistocracy, understood as the democracy of the informed and politicized. In this way, a growing rift between the different political and party factions is fostered. Klein believes “the smarter a person is, the dumber politics can make him” (p. 92).

Fear of change resulting from the demographic transition is pushing the White electorate toward a conservative position within the Republican party. Cultural power walks a decade ahead of demographic change. This shift is driven by the power of the U.S. media. Among the causes of this transformation is the role of the media, namely television and digital social networks, in putting urban and more diverse young consumers in contact. The author concludes: “The result is that the Left feels a cultural and demographic power that can only occasionally translate into political power, and the Right exerts political power, but feels increasingly discarded and culturally delimited” (p. 112).

The issue is not about access, but about interest in political information. The emergence of polarized media through the emergence of a large number of choices enhances identity politics, intensifying political polarization. For example, many Republican voters, and in particular, Trump supporters, are avid consumers of Fox News, even though this news outlet disseminates a conservative discourse of distrust of political institutions. The more exposed to this kind of journalism, the greater the distortions of political representations.

Also, journalism today suffers from direct competition from the public and its constant scrutiny. The content produced is made to be shared, so that people can identify themselves, sharing on their own social networks, allowing access to who they are and what they feel, which Klein conceives of as *identity journalism*. For the author, the sharing and diffusion of content on digital social networks is a precious indicator of identity affirmation, such that what individuals share online is a strong indication of who they are and what they think.

Reading the other side only reinforces our certainties. The echo chamber theory states that “we isolate ourselves to hear information that only says what we are right, becoming radicalized” (p. 159). On Facebook and Twitter, for example, people find the news that “they” discovered for them and that they most likely liked. In these chambers, refutation prevails at the expense of reflection. News stations also contribute to the polarization of political and party elites. For their part, the party elites have already polarized the media, contributing to the intensification of polarization among citizens and voters. Journalists have also become polarized.

Trump has shrewdly interpreted the way the contemporary media operates. His success has consisted of his focus on conflict, what is supposed to be secret, and also what is already being talked about in digital social networks (pp. 166–167). To simplify, in a media ecosystem made up of identity media, identity content must arouse passions. Indeed, the media that carry out political coverage are biased, but not necessarily to the left or right; they favor what is loud, outrageous, colorful, inspiring, and confrontational.

Currently, supporters are more mobilized than undecided. The current moment is one of weak parties and strong partisanship (p. 176). According to Klein, parties no longer have control over presidential nominations. This power, formerly of the party elites, passed to the mobilized supporters of each candidate. The stronger the party, the lower the level of polarization. Also, the greater restrictions on funding, the greater the polarization of parties. Where rules enhance individualized giving, candidates are more polarized. According to Klein, there are two types of donors: individual and institutional, with the first being more polarized, and the second being corporate.

The deterritorialization of local politics is a consequence of the intensification of identity politics. This is why Klein proposes that we look at local politics since it is composed of tangible issues and potential consensus. We live in places with people like us. The transformative potential is greatest in local politics, comprising actors who are more effective and competent to interpret the policy. Trump's election was the culmination of the radicalization of the Republican party, a den of revenge and rage (p. 227). Trump's discursiveness permanently appeals to an identity positioning, along the lines of that delivered by Fox News.

Liberals have more of a diversity of information sources that they trust, unlike conservatives, who rely on a very restricted group of news sources. According to the author, conservative media (e.g., Breitbart, Limbaugh) have a corrosive discourse on the trust of institutions: "Over and over again, you see conservative media working to discredit other forms of media and even other forms of information" (p. 237).

In addition to other merits, the author brings to the discussion the role of the media as passive and active actors in the growing political polarization and the degradation of political debate in Western democracies, even emphasizing the relevance of digital social networks such as Facebook and Twitter in communication politics and the consequent tribalization of political discourses. This facet of the book clearly fills a gap that recent works have neglected (e.g., Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Mouffe, 2019).

However, the author's conception of polarization is criticized in two ways: when it is based on a process that feeds on itself, in a complex chain of steps, which reproduce sequentially—autopoiesis; and when an extremely tautological reasoning is revealed, insofar as the polarization is triggered at the level of political institutions, polarizing the actors and, as a consequence, leading to a demand for the polarized political offer. In the end, Klein concluded, this electoral success, to some extent, reinforces the polarization of institutions and political leaders.

References

Eatwell, R., & Goodwin, M. (2018). *National populism: The revolt against liberal democracy*. London, UK: Pelican.

Mouffe, C. (2019). *For a left populism*. London, UK: Verso.