

# P R E S E N T A T I O N

## OLD AND NEW POLARIZATION: DEMOCRACY, ELECTIONS AND CONFLICT IN MEXICO

MARIANO SÁNCHEZ TALANQUER 

*El Colegio de México*

mariano.sanchez@colmex.mx

**A**ny examination of contemporary Mexican politics quickly alludes to an age-old concept of renewed descriptive and analytical significance: polarization. The widespread diagnosis rests, more or less explicitly, on three pillars: first, political polarization has been on the rise in Mexico in recent years; second, while the phenomenon may have antecedents, there is something distinct about today's polarization; third, the new polarization poses a problem for democracy and the functioning of the political system, potentially even contaminating daily social interaction among citizens.

This is not a unique phenomenon to Mexico. In many democracies around the world, from the youngest to the oldest—until recently considered “consolidated” and therefore irreversible, perhaps with undue confidence—societies appear to analysts as riven by visceral and irreconcilable antagonisms, not only partisan but also cultural and identitarian in nature. Exacerbated animosity, the analyses continue, has turned elections into no-holds-barred battles, in which contenders transgress the rules of the democratic game without reservation and appeal to the electorate in emotional rather than rational terms, thereby fostering intolerance and discord.

Correlatively, the conditions for democratic deliberation seem to be thinning, to the point of rendering it exceptional if not impossible. This thinning does not stem solely, or perhaps even primarily, from an underlying, irresolvable

contradiction between the interests of different social groups; on the contrary, it is at least partially caused by new barriers to political dialogue and negotiation, which contemporary political systems and electorates themselves find it difficult to overcome.

In the transition to the digital age, the filtering and intermediation capabilities of traditional media outlets, much like those of political parties themselves, have waned rapidly. This has led to a form of communication that is as open and unregulated as it is aggressive and unintelligible. The public sphere is increasingly contaminated by disinformation and slander, as well as fragmented into self-referential bubbles. At the heart of these transformations are digital platforms whose aggressive business models, based on the multiplication of *views* and *likes*, structurally lead to the most strident and simplistic voices rising to prominence. Subjected to the algorithms of social media and the competition for notoriety among *influencers*, public conversation becomes not only more polarized, but more unsubstantial. Thus, a vicious circle is reproduced, in which contemporary societies seem hopelessly entrapped: as public problems become more complex and challenging, diagnoses become more simplistic, political positions more intransigent, antagonisms more primary.

The consequences for public deliberation are compounded by other possible impacts that, taken together, have turned current political polarization into a focus of academic analysis and concern. Without aiming for exhaustiveness, two additional implications can be listed—both central to the functioning of democracy and even to its very survival. The first concerns the quality of political representation and the possibilities for accountability. Understood as ideological-programmatic diversity, polarity is an important feature of party systems. It means that different social interests and currents of thought have found an institutional outlet in the electoral arena; it also implies that not all parties are the same, so that citizens have real alternatives from which to choose.

But today's polarization is not necessarily defined by an insurmountable distance between well-developed bodies of ideas, and it also has other ramifications. It can, in fact, short-circuit accountability and programmatic representation itself. When political behavior is primarily defined by the unremitting rejection of "the others" (labeled as dangerous or perverse), factors such as government performance or the fulfillment of programs and promises take a back seat. To maintain support, it is sufficient for the opposition to continue to appear unacceptable enough. Political leaders can thus escape punishment for poor governance, violation of core campaign promises, or ideological inconsistency: in a polarized environment, supporting opposing political options can take on hues of immorality and even treason, akin to switching sides in the midst of war.

It is then evident that political polarization cannot merely be understood as a given fact, arising naturally from social distinctions or competitive dynamics. On the contrary, it constitutes a variable, or perhaps more precisely a *process*, that political elites themselves may have an interest in instrumentalizing. In need of popular support to gain and maintain power, leaders may well find the politics of demonization beneficial. This leads to the concern regarding democratic viability itself: as animosity towards other political options grows, so does tolerance for democratic transgressions by allies or leaders of the "right" side—when it comes to containing illegitimate antagonists, almost any maneuver is justified. Thus, contenders may become embroiled in a destructive zero-sum game, whose final move may represent the breakdown of the democratic framework itself and the stifling of institutionalized pluralism.

How does Mexico fit into the contemporary landscape of polarization? This issue of *Foro Internacional*, the last one prior to Mexico's 2024 presidential elections, includes three peer-reviewed articles that delve into the existing political polarization within the party system and in Mexican society itself. The texts, originally presented and discussed at the colloquium "Processes

of (De)politicization: Theoretical and Methodological Approaches and Case Studies,” organized in September 2023 by the Center for Sociological Studies of El Colegio de México, and coordinated by Dr. Willibald Sonnleitner, approach polarization from various analytical perspectives. They also draw on different methodological tools, ranging from quantitative analysis of surveys and socioterritorial voting patterns to ethnographic observation of public demonstrations against government initiatives aimed at reforming (or, for some, at capturing) the National Electoral Institute (INE).

Upon reading the texts, it becomes clear that polarization, like other political concepts, defies a univocal definition. It is a term with a plurality of uses and meanings, yet indispensable for studying electoral mechanics in Mexico, the evolution of the representative system, the problems of political parties, and the relationship between political elites and citizens. The conclusions reached depend on the scales and spaces in which it is measured (from the national to the regional and local, from the metropolitan to the sectional level); on the actors under consideration (from political or intellectual elites to the masses); and, also, on the type of polarization, in a spectrum ranging from ethnic or class differences reflected in electoral behavior, to purely partisan, ideological, symbolic or affective divisions, which may or may not have a socio-structural referent.

Together, the articles represent an important and timely contribution to our understanding of the dynamics of representation and political conflict in Mexico. They problematize some of the more common assumptions in the discussion about contemporary polarization and make it clear that, in some of its facets, this is not a new or necessarily harmful phenomenon, but rather a connatural part of democratic life. Furthermore, the authors draw an indispensable analytical line between polarization itself and what is said and perceived about it.

At the same time, the articles warn about a deep process of party dealignment in Mexico, which combines with a more

emotional, unmediated, and moralizing politics. In addressing polarization and its instrumentalization, they draw attention to the rise of Manichean and stigmatizing positions, whose effect is the double degradation of the public sphere and democratic coexistence. Far from the image of a society split into antagonistic halves, the rigorous analysis presented in these articles reveals an electorate that is demanding, in search of alternatives, difficult to pigeonhole. In sum, an electorate whose political pluralism does not easily fit into hegemonic discourses or binary classifications of identities and political preferences.