

# Democracy: From polarization to common ground

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**Jared Wesley, PhD, discusses how the Common Ground team at the University of Alberta helps individuals renew their commitment to decency and respect within democracies. This conversation addresses issues concerning political polarization and research on populism**

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Several liberal democracies appear caught in a negative feedback loop, as political polarization and democratic backsliding reinforce and accelerate each other. To break the vicious cycle, we need to reinvest in pluralism – the belief that a healthy society thrives not by marginalizing our opponents, but by honouring and incorporating a diversity of perspectives into our democratic processes. Our Common Ground team at the University of Alberta is helping people renew that basic commitment to decency and respect in our democracies.

Polarization refers to widening gaps among political groups. Some level of it is healthy. After all, competing visions of society give voters meaningful choices and help fuel political engagement. But polarization becomes corrosive when it turns affective, that is, when citizens not only disagree with opponents but view them as immoral, untrustworthy, or illegitimate. This form of polarization is less about ideas and more about identity, sorting citizens into virtuous in-groups (“us”) and vilified out-groups (“them”).

## Populism and polarization

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Populism thrives in such an environment. Populist leaders frame politics as a fight between the righteous “people” and a corrupt “elite,” often defining both categories in exclusionary ways. They stoke grievances, undermine institutions, and villainize dissenters. Their rhetoric and tactics fuel suspicion and antagonism. In such settings, posture matters more than policy. Conviction replaces persuasion, and the goal becomes not solving problems but marginalizing enemies.

This pattern is not confined to one side of the political spectrum. Populism can emerge on the left or right. Its danger lies in how it frames politics: as zero-sum, with only virtuous winners and villainous losers.

This climate is toxic for liberal democracy, which depends on norms such as mutual toleration, respect for rules, and the willingness of losers to concede. When political opponents are framed as enemies, these norms begin to unravel. Elected leaders may sidestep the law, weaken the judiciary, and attack the media, all while claiming to represent the people. In polarized contexts, supporters may excuse these transgressions if it means keeping “the enemy” out of power.

This spiral can lead to gridlock, disillusionment, and public distrust. Over time, democracy becomes more fragile. The storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, shows how quickly democratic erosion can escalate into a crisis.

While the affective polarization at the heart of these problems is real, it is often exaggerated. People tend to overestimate how extreme the other side is, which some anthropologists point to as part of the innate tribalism that drives us as humans. Studies show that citizens misjudge both the ideological radicalism and emotional hostility of their opponents. These misperceptions can become self-fulfilling, pushing people toward more extreme positions in response.

## **Does polarization feed populism?**

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Media echo chambers, social media bubbles, and partisan narratives fuel this false polarization. It narrows our understanding of others and undermines our sense of shared reality. As we isolate ourselves in information silos, our views of the other side grow more distorted and less human.

Thus, polarization feeds populism, populism erodes democratic norms, and these slipping standards further deepen polarization. This is the cycle we must break. Fortunately, there is a way out, and it starts with rehumanizing our politics.

We must resist the urge to reduce opponents to caricatures or enemies. We need to expand our definitions of “we” and “us,” and shrink the boundaries of “they” and “them.” This means telling more inclusive stories about our communities, stories that highlight shared values and common challenges.

## **Political polarization research**

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Our research at the University of Alberta’s Common Ground initiative shows that much of political polarization stems from stereotypes about who counts as a “real” member of society. Some want to make our communities in that image, while others want to erase that archetype entirely. Challenging those stereotypes is essential. We need to broaden our idea of who counts as an honourable, contributing citizen.

This means seeing value in difference: not just tolerating it, but embracing it. We must back leaders who prioritize cooperation over conflict and problem-solving over posturing. But we must also recognize how we, as citizens, fall victim to the many pitfalls that undermine our democratic discourse, from gaslighting and veiled threats of violence to false dichotomies and ad hominem attacks.

Learning to overcome these tendencies takes time, humility, and a willingness to understand those with different views. That’s why our Common Ground team is developing a toolkit: to help people counter the tribal instincts dominating our public sphere ([CommonGroundPolitics.ca](http://CommonGroundPolitics.ca)).

These resources, including our new TownSquare game, encourage community-builders to develop habits of perspective-taking: seeking first to understand others before attempting to correct or confront them. Even if your goal is to change someone's mind or behaviour, the first step is to develop mutual understanding – common ground – which is sorely lacking in many democracies across the globe. Our tools help politicians, activists, and everyday people recognize their own role and potential in depolarizing our politics.

This approach is not without critics. Author Anand Giridharadas once remarked that some people accuse him of encouraging others to “hug a Nazi” when he asks them to build common ground. His response: maybe don't start with the Nazis, but perhaps begin with the idea that not everyone who disagrees with you is as irredeemable as a Nazi. There are limits to tolerance in any democracy, but today's problem is that those boundaries are being drawn far too narrowly, not too broadly.

## **Polarization: Looking ahead**

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Polarization is not necessarily a sign of democratic decay. But when it morphs into tribalism, it threatens the civic norms and shared narratives that sustain liberal democracy. Pushing back on these forces begins with citizens. We must reclaim the pluralist spirit that sees strength in diversity and legitimacy in disagreement.

We must remind ourselves that our opponents are not enemies, but fellow citizens. We must reimagine politics not as a war between tribes, but as a collective effort to build communities where everyone belongs. We must not only elect people who share these values, but commit ourselves to living them in our own day-to-day lives.

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