

Original Article

Social Media-Driven Polarisation in the United States: Mechanisms, Policy Gaps, and Recommendations

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Abstract - Currently, political polarisation in the United States has reached crisis levels, posing a threat to the integrity of its long-standing democratic system. Yet many remain unaware of the role social media platforms play in influencing this division through algorithmic curation and misinformation. On the user level, social media platforms exploit vulnerabilities such as media illiteracy and perceived anonymity to drive engagement for their own economic incentive. Current policies, including Section 230 reforms and state-wide initiatives, show promise but are misdirected in addressing the underlying mechanisms on social media that propagate polarisation. This paper examines the glaring policy gap surrounding social media regulation and its lackluster effects on curbing polarising content on platforms. In response, this paper evaluates alternative policy models outside the United States to propose a comprehensive set of policy recommendations tailored to today's context. Together, this paper aims to dissect and raise awareness of media-driven polarisation to safeguard democracy and social cohesion.

Keywords - Algorithms, Digital regulation, Echo chambers, Misinformation.

1. Introduction

Polarisation spans across multiple disciplines and has varying consensus as to its meaning. In its simplest form, it is the tension between binary political ideologies. In the field of political science, polarisation is simultaneously effective and ideological. Affective polarisation reflects an increased level of animosity and distrust between opposing political groups (Iyengar et al), whereas ideological polarisation links to the divergence of political views from the centre to more extreme viewpoints. Taken together, it is a process in which groups form around increasingly distinctive and irreconcilable policy preferences.

Polarisation is nothing new: anthropology has long suggested that the idea of 'in-and-out' groups is hard-wired into human nature. Additionally, it is not inherently negative, as polarisation does help boost political participation and investment. However, this phenomenon has consistently been on the rise not only in the United States (Arceneaux et al., 2013) but rather across democracies as a whole (Gidron et al., 2019). Currently, the Vanderbilt Unity Index posits that the United States is continuing to trend towards increased polarisation, with the index dropping nearly 3 points per year (Vanderbilt University, 2024). This rise can be attributed to social media platforms, which intensify this group divide globally across established democracies due to their unprecedented volume and accessibility of information. Furthermore, social media excessively rewards 'shock value'. With the average person spending 2.5 hours daily on social media (New York Post, 2024), this renders extremist viewpoints as more volatile

and viral than ever before, making it increasingly difficult to reverse as it gets entrenched deeper into politics.

Despite this alarming trajectory, regulatory frameworks and scholarly discourse focus on moderating content and changing user behaviour, overlooking the intrinsic incentives for social media platforms. This paper identifies a crucial gap in how a lack of targeted policy in the United States, social media poses an evolving threat, which "can completely paralyze a government, resulting in the breakdown of government institutions" (McCoy, 2018). This paper will address the mechanisms by which social media fuels polarisation and the risk factors exacerbating this issue, evaluate the flaws and limitations of current policy efforts, and suggest recommendations to help reduce the issues plaguing democracy in the case study of the United States.

1.1. Importance of the Issue

Survey data from over 4000 respondents show that individuals increasingly assign positive traits (such as patriotism, intelligence) to the in-group and negative ones (such as selfishness, bigotry) out-group (Erdoğan & Uyan-Semerci, 2025), reinforcing an entrenched "us-versus-them" divide that has been plaguing democracy globally. Increasingly, divisive rhetoric has been employed in politics through social media, becoming an effective strategy for mobilising support, although at the expense of social unrest. This online division fuels political intolerance in politics, marked by distrust and hostility towards opposing groups, which in turn reinforces identity politics: the tendency of



voters and constituents to identify with a group's political identity. This erodes individuals' willingness to engage across political lines and fosters the view that political opponents are morally deficient. As a result, individuals would be more willing to support anti-democratic actions if they believe such actions protect their own 'in-group' interests.

However, most alarmingly, in a deeply polarised environment, the government would be restricted in its ability to tackle complex and urgent issues, resulting in legislative paralysis. This gridlock is spurred on by the rising phenomenon of zero-sum thinking in politics, a hallmark of polarisation, where political outcomes are viewed as either absolute wins or losses.

Zero-sum politics shifts political incentives away from effective long-term governance to 'point-scoring'. As a result, pressing societal challenges (e.g. climate change, immigration and public spending) become wrapped in ideological conflict, stalling meaningful progress.

1.2. Mechanisms for Polarisation

While social media platforms such as YouTube or Meta (Facebook) are not the original or main cause of polarisation, the use of social media platforms "intensifies divisiveness and thus contributes to its corrosive consequences" (Barrett et al., 2021). In the current context, two key mechanisms emerge:

Firstly, the architecture of current social media platforms is designed to prioritise and maximise user engagement. By tracking individual user metrics such as likes, shares, and time spent, algorithms curate a feed of content that caters to their pre-existing views. These algorithms isolate users in echo chambers of information, in which they have limited exposure to opposing perspectives, reinforcing existing beliefs.

Sociologically, this selective exposure to content heightens in-group loyalty and out-group hostility, as algorithms prioritise sensational and emotionally charged content, leading to more intense disagreements.

Secondly, the spread of misinformation intensifies polarisation by eliminating factual consensus between different groups. The World Economic Forum reports that misinformation is "the most critical challenge to political cohesion and societal trust, particularly due to its ability to fracture democratic institutions". This is further exacerbated through the recent advent of AI-generated content, particularly in the form of "deepfakes" and other manipulated media, which are emerging as a potent tool for the spread of misinformation.

Essentially, if what each group considers to be the truth differs, the opportunity for cross-ideological dialogue is made virtually impossible. The absence of a common epistemic baseline between groups delegitimises opposing perspectives, making compromise increasingly difficult, leading to an eventual gridlock.

1.3. Vulnerabilities

While the mechanisms mentioned perpetuate polarisation on social media, their effects are compounded by certain vulnerabilities that make individuals more susceptible to ideological extremism on social media.

For example, a low digital media literacy reduces the ability to critically evaluate the credibility and accuracy of polarised content, leading people to rely on biased sources or be more susceptible to misinformation. Additionally, when media illiteracy is conflated with strong political views, people may only engage with sources that affirm their preconceptions, leading to a lack of ideological diversity.

Secondly, the appearance of anonymity afforded by social media platforms subtly lowers social inhibitions (Kim et al., 2023), enabling individuals to express extreme and intolerant viewpoints that would normally be suppressed in real-life identifiable settings. This 'online disinhibition effect' arises from the absence of social cues and perceived consequences. Hence, when politically aligned individuals interact anonymously on social media, they are more likely to adopt more extreme views collectively. Without moderation, anonymity facilitates more personal attacks and uncivil debates, which intensifies hostility between already divided groups, deepening polarisation.

1.4. Normative Framework

Social media (and the Internet as a whole) operate at the intersection of individual freedoms and collective responsibilities. In the United States, this challenge is especially acute given the constitutional protection of free speech under the First Amendment.

The first dilemma lies in the expression of false or inflammatory content. While the United States strongly shields a broad range of speech, the spread of misinformation and amplification of extreme views pose harm to its long-standing democracy. Hence, the ethical dilemma for policymakers lies in determining to what extent free speech is permissible before it transforms into harmful rhetoric.

The second tension concerns individual autonomy. Social media users do engage voluntarily with content, yet these algorithms exploit cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias or negativity bias, to maximise engagement. Thus, their exposure to information is shaped by opaque and profit-driven mechanisms. An effective policy would aim to require increased transparency and accessibility to reorient platforms away from designs solely optimised for engagement.

1.5. Literature Review

Substantial research highlights the aforementioned trend in the United States, focusing on the increased emotional intensity of affective polarisation. Boxell et al. (2017) confirm that these divides are correlated with Internet usage across platforms, indicating that polarisation

is not shaped by content per se, but rather the structure of digital platforms themselves. There is widespread agreement on social media's role in fuelling polarisation, with research reinforcing the existence of echo-chambers and in-group biases (Bail et al., 2018). However, the majority of current literature is concentrated on user-level behaviour (e.g., the effects of political disinformation) (Tucker et al., 2018). Hence, previous policy articles are largely framed around moderating inflammatory content (e.g. Section 230) by content producers, instead of treating social media platforms as active participants in the amplification of that content.

2. Policy Mapping in the United States

2.1. Federal Policy

In the United States today, no comprehensive federal policy has been implemented to explicitly address the scale or complexity of this issue. In the absence of targeted regulation, currently, the most relevant nationwide *proposal* is the reform of Section 230 under the Communications Decency Act (US Congress, 1996).

Section 230 is provided mainly in twenty-six words under (c)(1): "No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider". Most notably, Section 230's broad immunity protections (entrenched through its first major case in *Zeran v. AOL* in 1997) prevent online platforms from being held liable for harmful user content, even if they knowingly allow harmful content to spread. This legal shield continues to shape jurisprudence to this day across hundreds of cases (Goldman et. al., 2019), as courts are bound by stare decisis, a respect for precedent.

The original intent did not account for the active role modern algorithms play in sharing information, raising the question of whether platforms should bear greater responsibility as de facto publishers. As Justice Kagan noted during oral arguments, "everyone is trying their best to figure out how [Section 230]..., a pre-algorithm statute[,] applies in a post-algorithm world".

In recent years, there have been various efforts (e.g., the SAFE Act) to reform Section 230, including, but not limited to, repeal, limiting its scope, and amendments (Anand et al., 2023).

2.2. State Policies

Beyond the federal level, several states have put forth initiatives to regulate social media's harms, specifically aimed at minors. For example, through Senate Bill 830, California introduced a media literacy policy in 2018, which aims to integrate digital literacy education into K-12 classrooms. Initially motivated by research from Stanford University that showed adolescent students being susceptible to misinformation (Wineburg et. al., 2022), the policy tasks the California Department of Education (CDE) to make available to school districts a list of instructional resources and best practices to teach students how to verify

sources, assess credibility and understand algorithmic influence. By educating students on critical media consumption, this policy specifically targets misinformation and builds cognitive resilience against polarising content. Furthermore, it encourages individuals to garner information from a wide array of sources, breaking the repeated cycle of confirmation bias.

Across the country, in New York, Bill S6686 targets a different approach to regulating algorithmic curation by requiring platforms to offer non-algorithmic, chronological feeds to users under the age of 18 in the state of New York, unless explicitly opted out of. Led by fears of exposing minors to divisive and addictive social media content, the bill aims to dismantle the engagement-optimised algorithms that eventually reinforce ideological sorting and political extremity. By giving users the choice through middleware, this bill weakens the platform's control over content ranking, bypassing the algorithmic design that rewards emotionally charged content.

2.3. Evaluation of Existing Policies

Broadly, Section 230 reform efforts and state initiatives do show promise in reducing the spread of polarisation. Although they host major flaws and limitations, they fall short of delivering coherent or scalable solutions that confront the full spectrum of issues.

On the federal level, many of the reform efforts are reintroductions of legislation that failed to pass after multiple sessions in Congress in previous years. Critically, these reforms often leave intact the interpretive precedent set by *Zeran*, leading to a moderation dilemma for platforms. If they moderate content to reduce harm, they expose themselves to legal risk, whereas if they don't, they avoid liability but allow polarising content to spread. With little legal risk for doing nothing, moderation is disincentivised despite divisive, false or harmful content being spread on these platforms. Any reform attempt has to effectively impose liability on social media firms for algorithmic polarisation. However, this involves upending decades of legal precedent set by *Zeran*, making any substantial reform or amendments difficult.

Accordingly, US Congress members, such as Senator Graham Lindsey, advocate strongly for repeal as a more decisive option for this predicament. However, this approach carries major risks for social media users. The American Civil Liberties Union warns that removing the protections lent by Section 230 could lead to platforms indiscriminately moderating content, beyond the extent of polarising or harmful content, to avoid legal liability. This triggers infringements on the user's legitimate expression. Furthermore, it would entrench the dominance of companies such as Meta and X while forcing smaller platforms that are unable to keep up with heightened compliance burdens to shut down. Still, Section 230's reform initiatives represent a growing bipartisan recognition that the current blanket immunity is outdated, instead calling for attempts to hold platforms liable for third-party content and increase their

responsibility in moderating harmful and divisive content on their platforms.

At the state level, California and New York's policies are a step in the right direction, but they suffer from a limited scale. Both bills primarily target minors, neglecting the broader adult population where polarisation is politically consequential. They are also geographically limited, applying only in their respective states, undercutting their impact. State-based interventions have little power to influence content moderation policies at an effective scale, especially when social media platforms extend across state and national borders.

Critically, these state policies target downstream symptoms, not the root cause. Neither initiative addresses the core problem behind social media's role in exacerbating polarisation: maximising engagement. For social media firms, there is a strong economic incentive to continue, which, when coupled with Section 230's nationwide protections, undermines the impact of these policies. Instead, state policy should actively target the root of the issue, focusing not only on individual user behaviour but also on the economic architecture of social media platforms that makes polarisation profitable.

In sum, both federal and state efforts suffer from the same overarching issue: operating blindly against the deeper structural problems behind polarisation. Federal reform of Section 230 is restrained by legal precedent and contradictory legislation. On the other hand, state interventions remain insufficient compared to the scale of political polarisation in the United States today and struggle to address the platform incentives that drive it.

2.4. Alternative Solutions

Due to the contingent threat of polarisation on social media and the many shortcomings of current policies to tackle this issue on a meaningful scale, alternate policies outside the given context of the United States should be considered as possible corrections.

2.4.1. Enforce Transparency and Accessibility Mandates

As aforementioned, the internal workings of social media platforms are often veiled from third parties. This opacity prevents policymakers and the public from understanding how exposure to content on social media shapes the political divide. A policy model to confront this issue already exists in the European Union in the form of the Digital Services Act (DSA).

In short, the DSA focuses on enhancing transparency from digital intermediaries, including social media platforms and their algorithms. A subset of this regulation mandates that Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) disclose how their feed curation and recommendation algorithms amplify certain types of content. Specifically under Article 34, platforms must publish 'plain-language' explanations and also conduct routine risk assessments on content distributed on their services.

Additionally, the DSA requires platforms to provide users with accessible opt-out options from algorithmically curated feeds, instead of chronological feeds. This change can help reduce users' limited exposure to emotionally charged content, increasing ideological diversity on social media (Meta, 2018). Furthermore, this limits users' default exposure to content geared for engagement-maximisation and creates space for more deliberative shared discourse on social media.

A unique provision of the DSA is the requirement for independent audits to allow researchers to conduct empirical studies on the causal role of algorithms in spreading misinformation and polarisation. This can potentially inform future regulation in an ever-evolving digital sphere, circumventing the outdated protections that entail Section 230's implementation in the United States. A report from the European Audiovisual Observatory supports this, emphasising the need for legal transparency requirements and researcher access, arguing that "self-regulatory approaches have repeatedly failed to provide researchers with consistent, meaningful data access" (IRIS Special, 2023).

By repeatedly having transparency and accessibility mandates enforced and standardised across jurisdictions in multiple forms, the DSA shifts information power away from profit-driven incentives. By decentralising social media platforms' control over content exposure, the DSA reduces the influence of algorithms in showing polarising content, helping to mitigate the conditions that tend to fuel political divisiveness.

2.4.2. Real-Name Verification Laws

In 2007, South Korea's government implemented a real-name verification law: websites with more than 100,000 daily users were required to collect users' Resident Registration Numbers (RRN). By mandating identity verification on high-traffic websites, the state aimed to curb the aforementioned 'online disinhibition effect', which promotes the expression of politically extreme views.

A 2021 Pew Research Centre study found that political content was disproportionately generated by a small subset of users who were more likely to express extreme views on the social media platform X (Twitter). This measure intervened upstream, preventing the initial supply of these hyperactive users from spreading emotionally provocative and polarising speech by attaching real-world risks (e.g. legal, social) to content posted on social media. While this policy was repealed a few years after its initial implementation in 2012 for violating free speech in South Korea, it highlights a potential alternative strand of policymaking which can be implemented in the United States: nudging user behaviour rather than platform architecture.

2.4.3. Fact-Checking Mandates

In the wake of the 2016 Presidential Election, Facebook (now Meta) partnered with third-party fact-checking

organisations such as PolitiFact, the Associated Press, and FactCheck.org to tackle the three pillars of the information disorder plaguing its platform (Bipartisan Policy Centre). However, in 2023, Meta scaled this initiative back, citing political bias from third parties. Instead, Meta swayed in favour of Community Notes, inspired by another social media platform X. Empirical studies do affirm this approach: 45.7% fewer reposts, 43.5% fewer likes, and 14% fewer views across false content (Borenstein et al., 2025). However, these findings do not negate the value of fact-checking by expert organisations. When addressing complex narratives, such as high-stakes topics on health and politics, professional fact-checking initiatives were twice as likely to be cited compared to other posts (Borenstein et al., 2025).

Thus, it is evident that both approaches should be utilised complementarily. Rather than moderating content through removal, community-based notes with fact-checking initiatives as the backbone strengthen the informational foundation for cross-group understanding and close the distance between opposing political views.

3. Policy Recommendations

In lieu of the current efforts in the United States and alternative policies elsewhere, this paper suggests the following recommendations to ensure political polarisation on social media is kept to sustainable levels:

1. Narrow the immunity provided by Section 230 through rewording to reduce the ambiguity that has allowed social media companies to escape liability for amplifying political polarisation on their platforms. For example, noting the difference between Internet activities: the pre-algorithmic 'hosting' of content (e.g. AOL's bulletin boards) compared to today's 'curating' (e.g. Instagram's recommendation algorithm)
2. Implementing a media literacy curriculum nationwide to maintain a baseline standard for media literacy education across all K-12 Public Schools. The US Department of Education should move beyond California's decentralised curriculum and implement a uniform framework to equip students with the ability to critically navigate a polarised digital space and eventually reduce regional disparities in media resilience.
3. Expanding middleware access to all social media users in the United States, regardless of age. This mandate should make platforms default to chronological feeds unless users actively choose their proprietary algorithm curation. This shifts the informational agency back to the user, reducing their passive exposure to polarising content and ideological sorting.

4. Adapting transparency requirements by adopting key provisions from the EU's Digital Service Act into US federal policy. Requiring Very Large Online Platforms (e.g. over 10 million users) in the United States to conduct regular risk assessments on the amplification of polarising material.
5. Granting accredited independent researchers access to platform data relevant to algorithm recommendations and content displayed on users' feeds, varying by region and demographic in the United States. This would bypass social media platforms' insufficient self-regulation in preventing political extremism through third-party accountability measures and empirical data to signal caution to policymakers in the future as digital platforms evolve.
6. Implementing identity verification requirements for designated Very Large Online Platforms, while ensuring compliance with constitutional free speech rights. Require platforms to request identity verification for users engaging with political content, without restricting pseudonymity for low-risk use. Thereby, unverified accounts should be restricted in the reach and visibility of their content to bypass the effect of online disinhibition, which accelerates ideological extremity and hostility between opposing groups.
7. Establishing a federal requirement for Very Large Online Platforms to integrate independent and verified fact-checking initiatives with community-sourced annotation to strengthen informational commons without censoring opinions or free speech.

4. Conclusion

As social media usage becomes further embedded into political life, the need for policymakers globally to create comprehensive regulatory frameworks becomes ever more important. Political polarisation, once confined within traditional media channels, has now spread rapidly through social media platforms' shock-value content and unchecked misinformation. Despite the scale of this issue, the United States currently lacks a comprehensive policy to target this evolving threat. While state-level efforts and reform proposals surrounding Section 230 signal progress, they are fragmented and narrow in scope in comparison to the scale of today's political landscape. This paper has outlined 7 key actionable recommendations drawn from current efforts, empirical evidence and other global policy models. The United States must adopt a policy that addresses the underlying mechanisms and vulnerabilities that propagate polarisation deeper online in order to preserve its democratic resilience and social cohesion.

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