Polarization Matters Less Than Bridges[1]

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The term **polarization** has traditionally been used in political studies to describe an expansion in the distance between the two political parties that make up the majority of voters in a country. The **process of polarization**, on the other hand, refers to the positioning of these communities of actors towards opposite ends of an axis (left-right, liberal-conservative, among others).

In literature two types of polarization are distinguished, one that is social (or affective) and the other is issue-based. **Social polarization** refers to the increase in social distance between political parties. It is composed of three phenomena: greater partisan bias, greater emotional reactivity and greater activism. On the other hand, **issue-based polarization** refers to the traditional concept of polarization, indicating an increasing distance between parties' average positions on specific issues.

On the other hand, network theory illustrates the importance of gaps and **bridges** in the structure of relationships. Relationship networks are social structures in which actors form connections and interact with each other.

Through social interactions and network structure, multiple processes and phenomena occur such as information cascades, herd behaviour, the emergence and evolution of social norms, learning and contagion are a few of the most important ones.

If we stop at contagions, it is worth noting that the morphology of the network matters.

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[4] See for example: MASON, Lilliana. (2018). Uncivil Agreement: How politics became our identity. Chicago, US: The University of Chicago Press.
[5] See for example Networks, Crowds, and Markets (cambridge.org), and other works from Home Page - Matthew O. Jackson (stanford.edu)

How do information, ideas and behaviours spread? Simple and complex contagions

A simple contagion, for example, is how information or a virus spreads in social interactions and in the network of relationships. A weak relationship is enough for it to spread.

Complex contagion, on the other hand, is a contagion that involves some kind of personal risk, whether financial, psychological or reputational. People's behavior and behavioral change is linked to complex contagion. In this type of contagion, relationships must be strong between people, in general there is a sense of shared identity, of belonging, to family, friends, club, political party... In the topology of networks strong relationships matter because they promote intimacy and trust because people become responsible for their actions and that fosters solidarity and cooperation.

More important than emotional triggers, it is social reinforcement in redundant groups that facilitates complex contagion, and politicians have been shown to be complex contagions.

But since reinforcing or changing behavior requires redundancy, weak relationships are important if they link us to identity groups, to communities, that reinforce the behavior of one's community. These weak connections between groups can be very important in reinforcing or counterbalancing ideas, beliefs, behaviors.

These connections between groups is what is called the width of the network, they are the bridges between different communities and are crucial because of their counterbalancing role. Simple contagions occur through weak relationships but complex contagions occur through redundancy and overlapping clusters and strong relationships, but the more connected to different groups a person is, the more difficult it becomes to convince them due to counterbalancing influences.

Consequently, for the purposes of analyzing political polarization behavior, it is not only the poles that matter, but also the bridges, the weak connections, between the poles. The concept of bridges refers to the fact that, if these relationships are erased, each member of each community loses contact with the other community.

Within each community, identity group, pole, network interactions reinforce one's belief system and make it difficult to reach consensus on conflicting issues with other poles; something called "motivated reasoning bias". That is, the more we are criticized,

the more we become locked in defense in silos, in politically homogeneous and polarized echo chambers.

Enmization, the "them or us" is related to polarization but it is not a product of it but of the frame of reference of each identity that generates this "them" or "us". It is the result of few bridges between the poles.

A simplified way of presenting the extent to which polarization becomes a problem is then on two axes: number of poles and number of bridges.

And from this double-entry matrix, a typology can be created.

Table 6: Polarization: bridges and poles		
	Many Poles	Two Poles
Few Bridges	Factionalism	Polarization and Conflict
Many Bridges	Perfect Pluralism	Polarization and Democratic Coexistence

Source: OAS Observatory for the Democracy. Own creation.

Social media platforms illustrate this.

The following are infospaces of the Twitter network for different countries in election circumstances distributed in the four quadrants, according to the previous matrix.

Graphic 41: Bridges and Poles Represented in Twitter Conversations
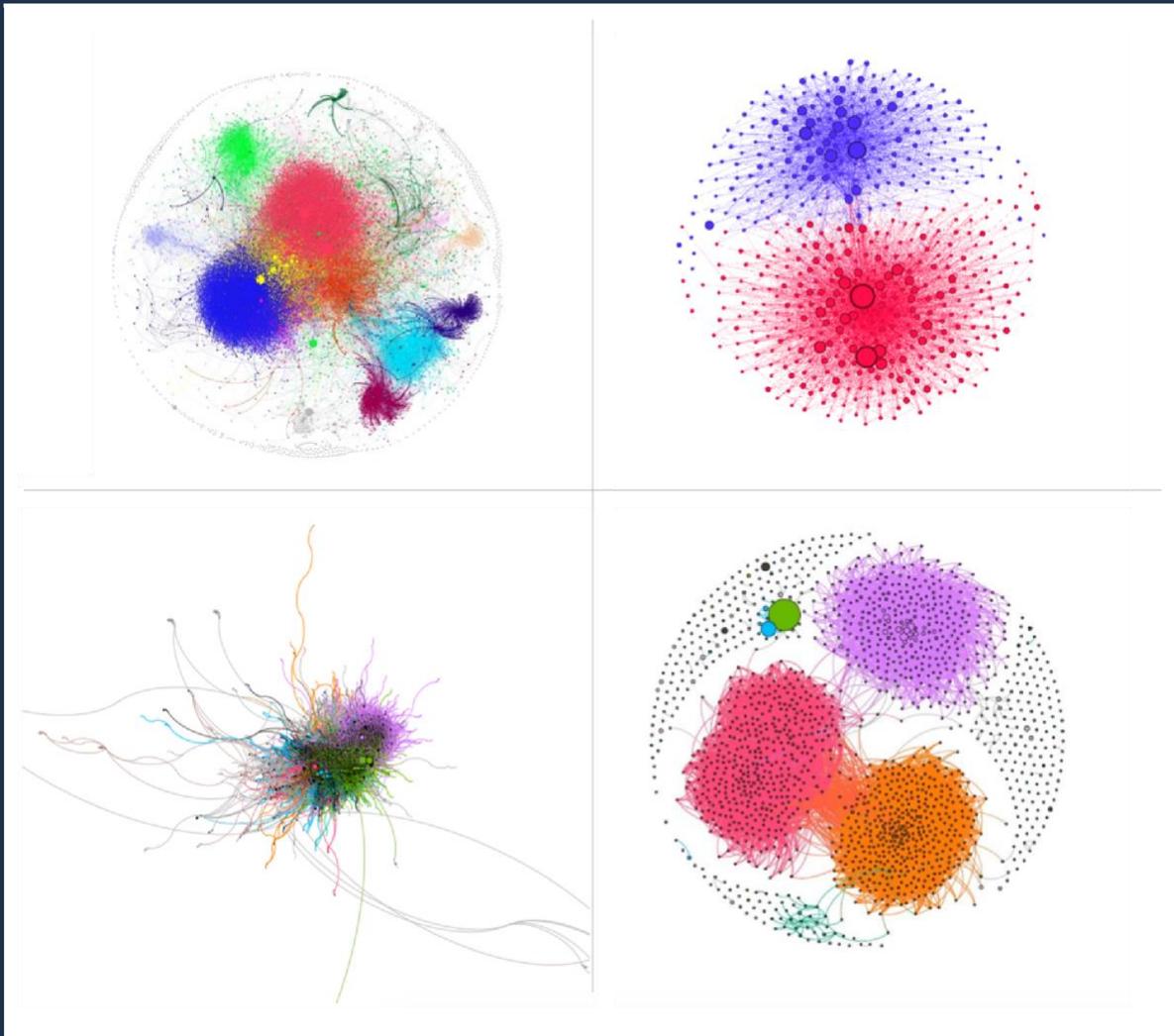
Source: Twitter. Own creation.

The Twitter infospaces correspond to countries that match the proposed typology.

The upper quadrant presents the grid of a polarized country with recurrent conflict and violence.

In the upper left quadrant is the network in a country with many factions and few bridges, which is reflected in its parliament and suffers from a lack of governance, also recurrent.

In the lower left quadrant is a country with many factions but also many bridges. Without being a perfect pluralism, it is very similar.

Finally, in the lower right quadrant, three poles are shown. However, the purple community is not a political community but a community of outside accounts. The pink and orange communities are political and show a large number of bridges between them. It is a country always considered in high positions in the rankings of different indicators of Democracy. In addition to the large number of bridges, it has another characteristic common to countries with strong democratic institutions, and that is precisely the low capacity of external actors to influence internal actors.

In short, polarization in political science has always been associated with the tendency to divide society into extreme positions and to actual and potential conflict. However, the illustrations presented in this article show that two elements have to come together for actual or potential conflict to appear: the extreme positions and the bridges between them.

Bridges are also important for governance even when there is pluralism of positions so that this does not turn into factionalism. Bridges that ensure greater density of relations between interest groups at the economic level, identity groups at the social level and ideological families at the political level. Bridges and fabrics.

Social cohesion understood "as the strength, quality and diversity of relationships between individuals, groups and communities, together with the links between society and the state, markets and other institutions, all based on trust, respect, mutuality and equality of opportunity, for the dignity and well-being of each person and the common good of all" . Cohesion to confront polarization, economically, socially and politically.

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[6] crs_social_cohesion_indicators_bank-jl-websingle_1.pdf