

Would You Show Up at Work After Election Day?: Exploring the Role of Political Polarization in Business Organizations

Stream: Organizational Behavior

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Abstract

The workplace has become the most prominent social context for facilitating cross-cutting and politically charged conversations (Mutz & Mondak, 2006). These conversations involve a plethora of discussants with diverse and often polarizing political views which enter the work environment as a social context that brings together dissimilar perspectives in one place, unlike surroundings where individuals are surrounded by friends, family members, and neighbors with whom they are more likely to share same political beliefs (Johnson & Roberto, 2018). It was found that different political views can negatively impact interpersonal relationships in business organizations, hindering the capacity to fulfill organizational objectives (Javidan et al., 2023).

Research questions

As a result, political polarization implicates the operations of modern organizations – from deciding to disclose corporate environmental policies to shaping the mediatization and public communication corporate narratives, and even influencing intentions for employee absenteeism and leaving organizations (Kim et al., 2020; van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021; Brant, 2024). Motivated by this and the growing discrepancies between different political alternatives, which became prominent in the most recent United States elections, we aim to understand the literature surrounding the phenomenon of political polarization and its implications on business organizations, synthesize the findings in a framework, propose strategies for mitigating this polarization in the work environment as well as pinpoint pathways for future research. Namely, we propose the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: What is the role of political polarization in business organizations?

RQ2: What theoretical frameworks and research methodologies have been employed to investigate political polarization in organizational contexts?

RQ3: What is the future research agenda for political polarization and business organizations?

Theoretical background

Little is known about the effects of political polarization in terms of how team members with different political views collaborate, make decisions, and work together in the context of a

business entity (Cooke et al., 2024). This happens because many managers are confused about which strategy to use to tackle this issue: staying silent, encouraging political discussions, prohibiting them, or opting for additional alternatives (Hernandez & Pratt, 2024).

To explain the impact of political polarization on business processes and the company, itself, we use a three-layered theoretical approach to analyze this phenomenon from individual, team, and organizational perspectives. In this sense, the research is grounded in the triangulation of the social identity theory, group faultlines theory, and contact theory. The social identity theoretical lens suggests that individuals categorize themselves and others into groups (e.g., political affiliations) to enhance self-esteem, leading to rising polarization when individuals strongly identify with one group, considering it the one with the right beliefs, and view opposing groups as a threat or in a negative or neutral light (Steffens et al., 2021). On the other hand, the group faultlines theory presents hypothetical dividing lines in a modern organization that may split it into various subgroups considering the alignment of the individual attributes or political views of its members, which later influence team processes and performance outcomes (Thatcher & Patel, 2012). The contact theory can explain that increased contact among employees and teams within an organizational context who have diverse perspectives can reduce intergroup prejudice and enhance positive consequences for the organization (Pettigrew et al., 2011).

Methodology

To address the research questions in our study, we adopt an integrative literature review approach. “Integrative review is a form of research that reviews, critiques, and synthesizes representative literature on a topic in an integrated way such that new frameworks and perspectives on the topic are generated” (Torraco, 2005). Our primary motivation for choosing this method is our commitment to conducting a comprehensive review of all published literature on the topic across multiple research communities, to reconcile differing concepts and methodologies (Cronin & George, 2023). To gain a deeper understanding of what various research studies reveal about the topic and to distill their primary findings, we will employ a thematic synthesis process.

Given our focus on the impact of political polarization on modern organizations, we used our research questions to derive the keywords for formulating the search query outlined below: (“Political polarization” OR “cross-cutting political discourse” OR “political divide” OR “ideological polarization” OR “partisan divide”) AND (“job” OR “work” OR “workplace” OR “company” OR “business” OR “firm”).

To ensure comprehensive coverage of the studies retrieved, we executed the search query across the databases Web of Science, Scopus, EBSCO, and JSTOR. Following the rigorous Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021) and the five stages of conducting integrative reviews (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017), obtaining and cleaning the data went from 1) identification of the research problem, 2) systematic data collection, 3) data evaluation, and 4) data analysis, to 5) interpretation and presentation, with the last two stages being ongoing.

The initial dataset resulted in 2,177 articles (Web of Science = 343; Scopus = 69; EBSCO = 1,735; JSTOR = 30) while the preliminary dataset which would be the eventual basis for the integrative review consists of 37 articles, which is expected to increase with snowballing and an implementation of the final integrative review stages. The most impactful studies identified so far are provided in Appendix A.

Conclusion

The purpose of this extended abstract is to evaluate the soundness of our research idea and approach for conducting an integrative review on the role of political polarization in modern business organizations, synthesize the current findings of this underexplored research niche, and provide pathways for future research. Thus, we would be able to identify variables that may exacerbate or alleviate the impacts of political polarization and come up with data-based insights for organizational policies, corporate social responsibility, and social cohesion. This represents the first step in our research journey and will serve as a basis for discussion at the research incubator. The feedback received during the workshop will guide us in refining our theoretical framework and research design as we progress toward the final study.

We believe that by shifting the analysis of the effects of political polarization from societal repercussions into the workplace, the study will contribute to further analyzing the current insights on the polarized workplace and how managers can maintain and improve collaboration, productivity, and positive organizational outcomes, holistically and strategically.

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Appendix A: Most impactful articles

Article title	Author(s)	Journal	Citations	Topic / focus	Used method
The workplace as a context for cross-cutting political discourse	Mutz & Mondak (2006)	Journal of Politics	398	Organizational behavior	Poisson regression
Coming to grips with a changing class structure - An analysis of employment stratification in Britain, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland	Oesch (2006)	International Sociology	198	Organizational behavior	Ordinary least squares regression
The color of shareholders' money: Institutional shareholders' political values and corporate environmental disclosure	Kim et al. (2020)	Journal of Corporate Finance	55	Finance	Logistic regression
Polarized business cycles	Azzimonti & Talbert (2014)	Journal of Monetary Economics	52	Economics	News-based index analysis
Political polarization: Challenges, opportunities, and hope for consumer welfare, marketers, and public policy	Weber et al. (2021)	Journal of Public Policy & Marketing	42	Marketing	Review
Reinforcing spirals at work? Mutual influences between selective news exposure and ideological leaning	Dahlgren et al. (2019)	European Journal of Communication	36	Business communication	Structural equation modeling
Politicization of corporations and their environment: Corporations' social license to operate in a polarized and mediatized society.	van der Meer & Jonkman (2021)	Public Relations Review	35	Business communication	Review
Firm partisan positioning, polarization, and risk communication: Examining voluntary disclosures on COVID-19	Benton et al. (2022)	Strategic Management Journal	29	Strategic management	Secondary data analysis