

The Disappearing Middle Ground

Understanding and Addressing
Political Polarization

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SFU

Image: Illustration of Polarized Society
(n.d) <https://www.populismstudies.org/>



Outline

- ❑ What is polarization?
 - polarization among elites vs among the public
- ❑ Documenting and understanding the causes of polarization
- ❑ Consequences of political polarization
- ❑ Discussion: can polarization be halted/reversed?

Understanding Polarization

- political polarization happens when a conflict exists or forms in a political system or between major groups in a society
- generally characterized by a “clustering” and/or radicalization of views and beliefs
- distinguish between
 - **elite** polarization among political elites such as party organizers or elected officials
 - **mass** polarization among electorate or the public
ideological/partisan or affective

Elite Polarization



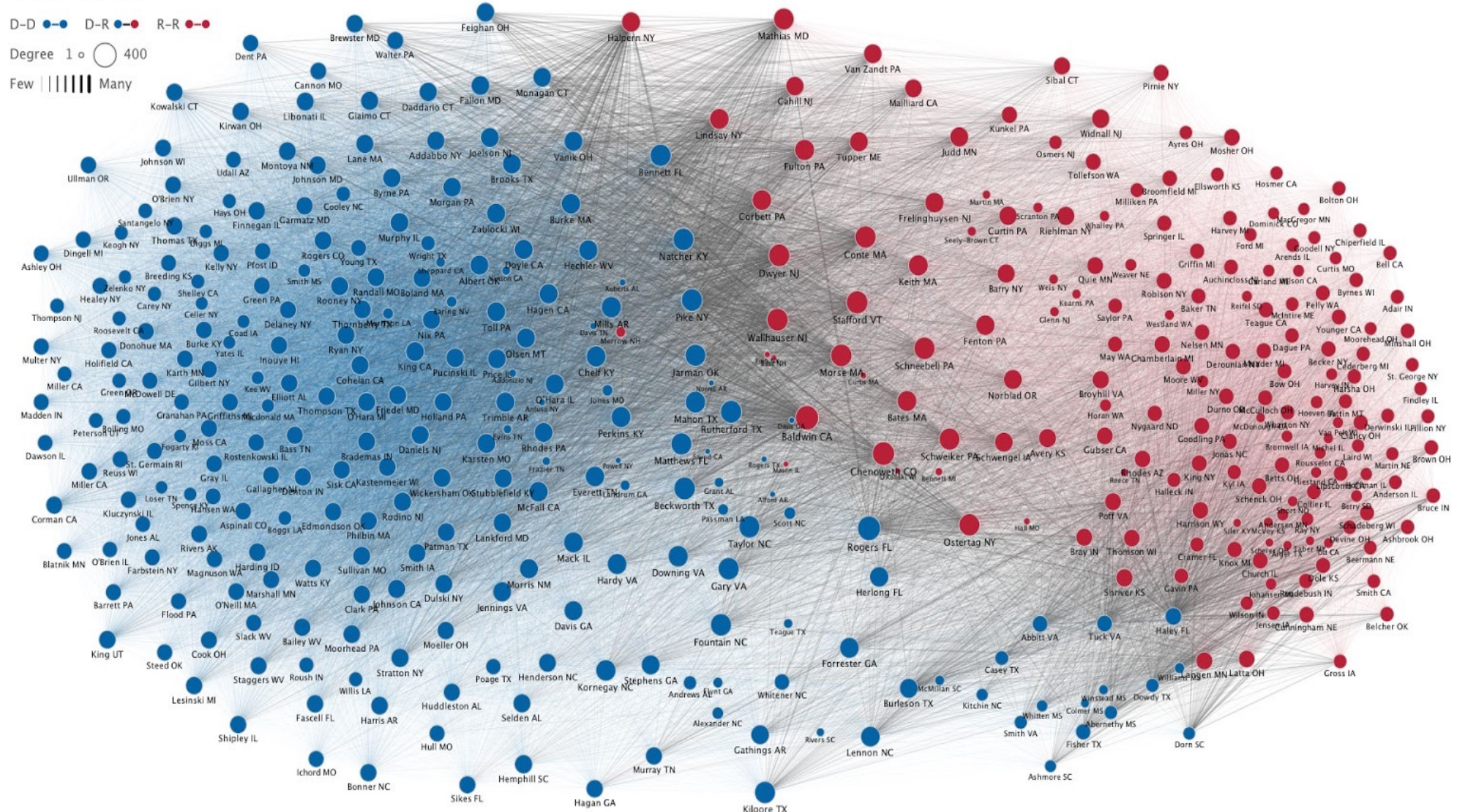
Cross-Party Votes in the US Congress

Year: 1961

D-D ●—● D-R ●—● R-R ●—●

Degree 1 ○ 400

Few ||||| Many

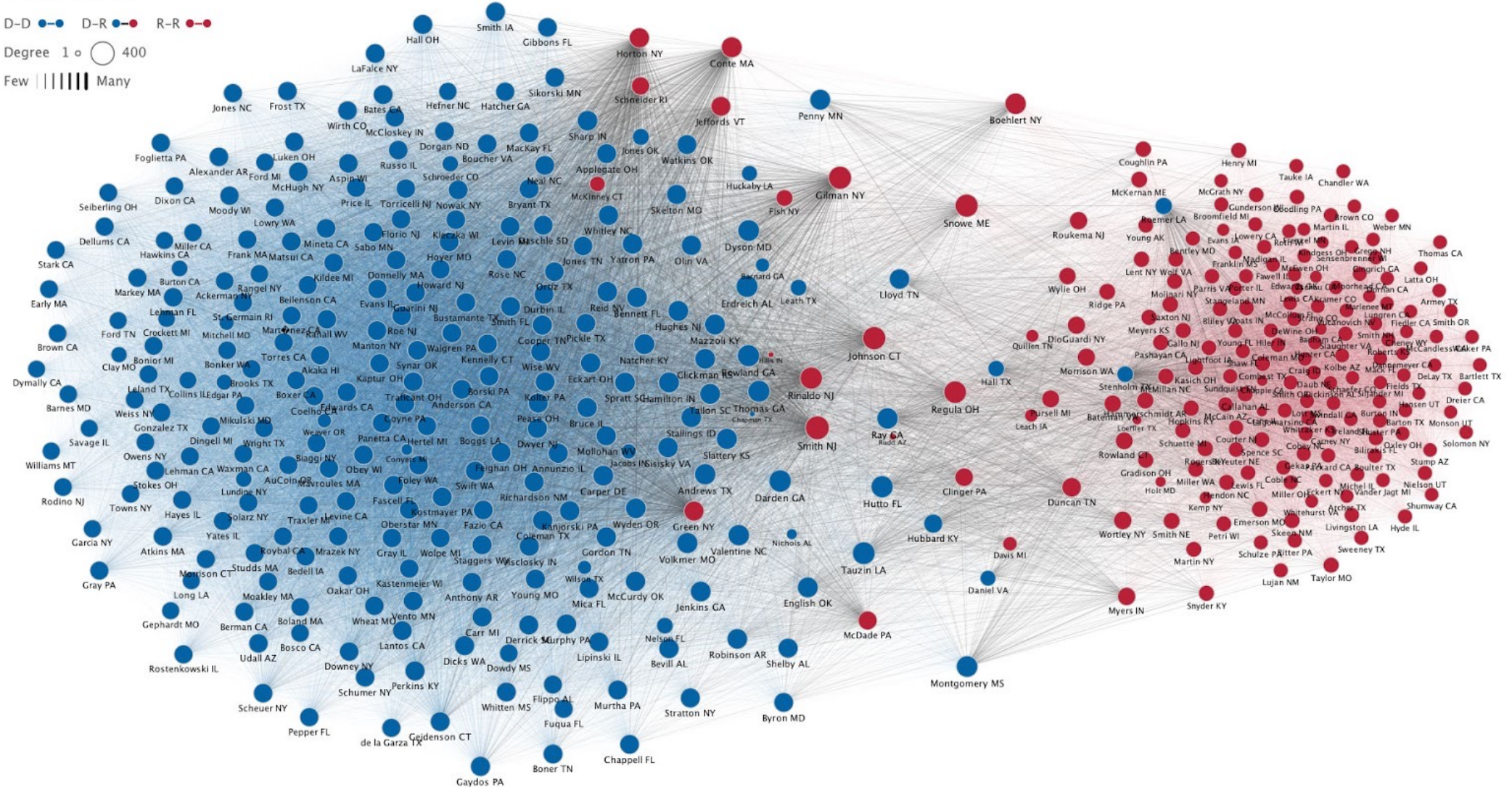


Graph from
From "The Rise of
Partisanship and Super-
Cooperators in the U.S.
House of
Representatives" by
Andris et al (2015, PLOS
ONE)

Cross-Party Votes in the US Congress

Year: 1985

D-D ●—● D-R ●—● R-R ●—●
Degree 1 ○ 400
Few ||||| Many

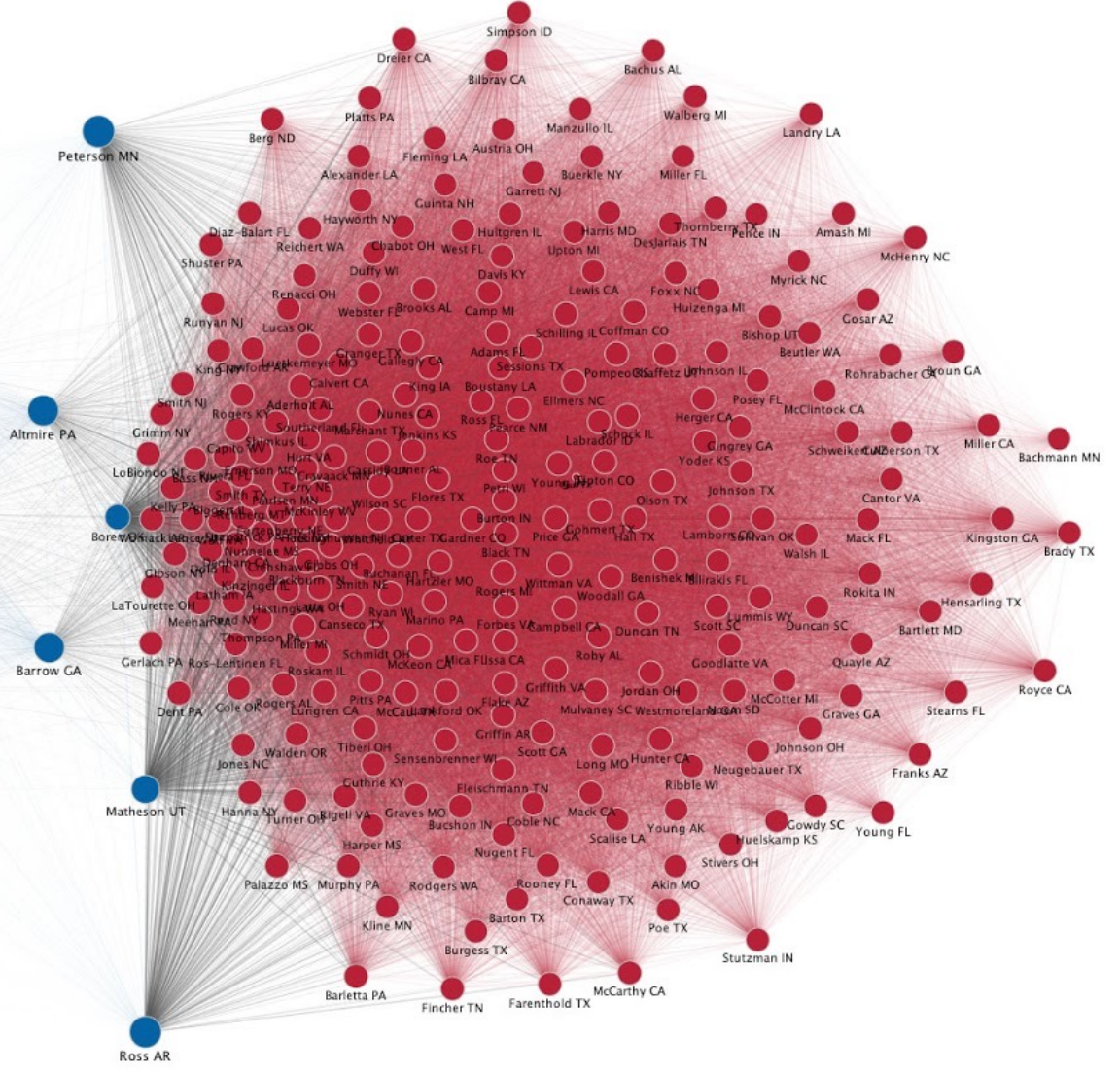
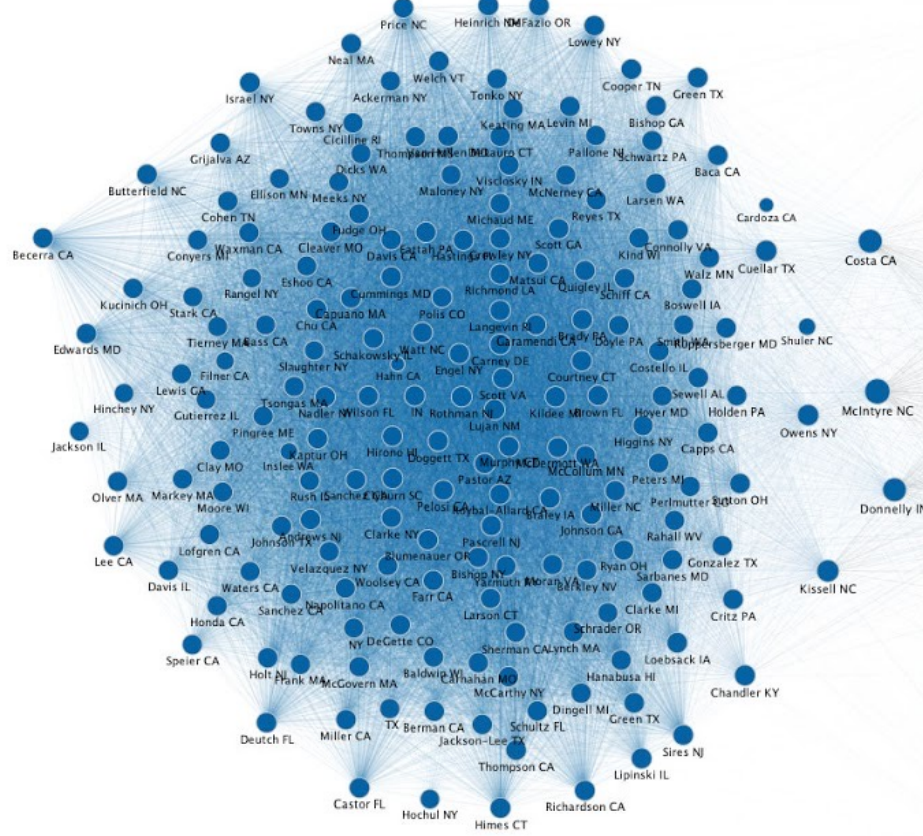


Graph from
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Andris et al (2015, PLOS
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Cross-Party Votes in the US Congress

Year: 2011

D-D ●—● D-R ●—● R-R ●—●
Degree 1 ○ 400
Few ||||| Many

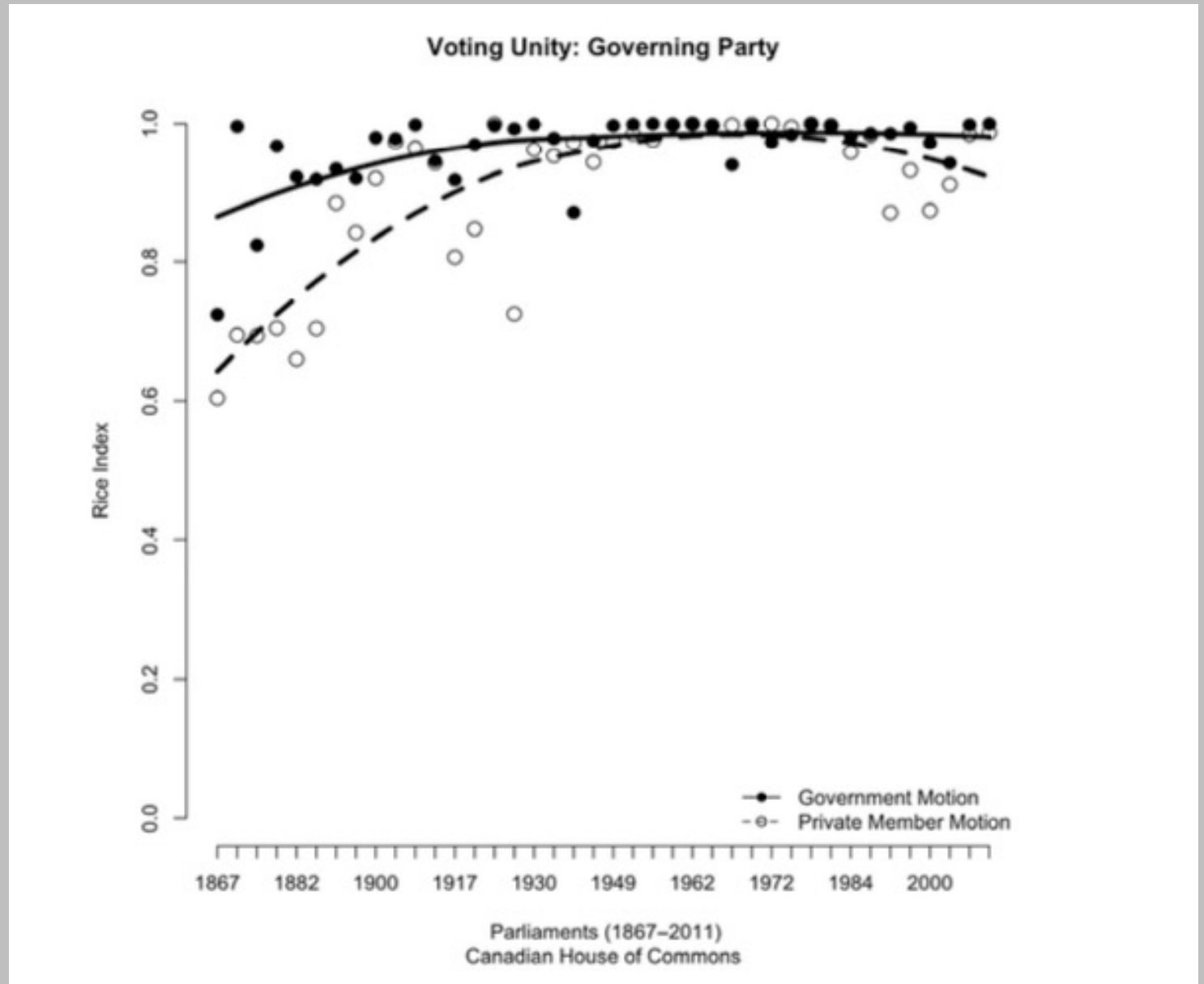


Graph from
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Cross-Party Votes in Canadian Parliament

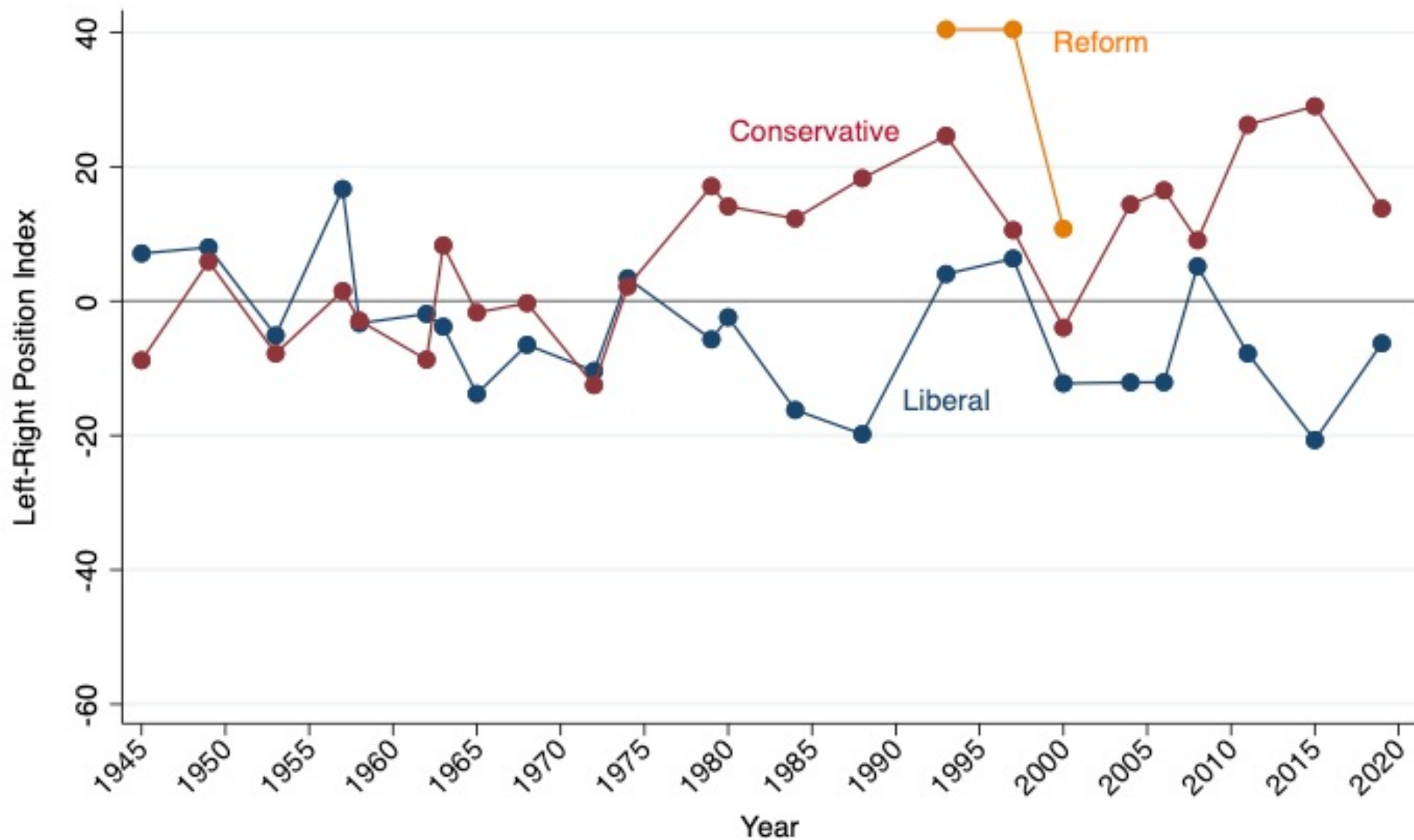
House of Commons RICE Index,
legislative votes 1967 to 2011
(1= perfect unity)

Graph from
From Lost on Division:
Party Unity in the
Canadian Parliament,
Jean-François Godbout,
University of Toronto
Press 2020 (Ch 4, p 88)



Did Canadian Parties Polarize?

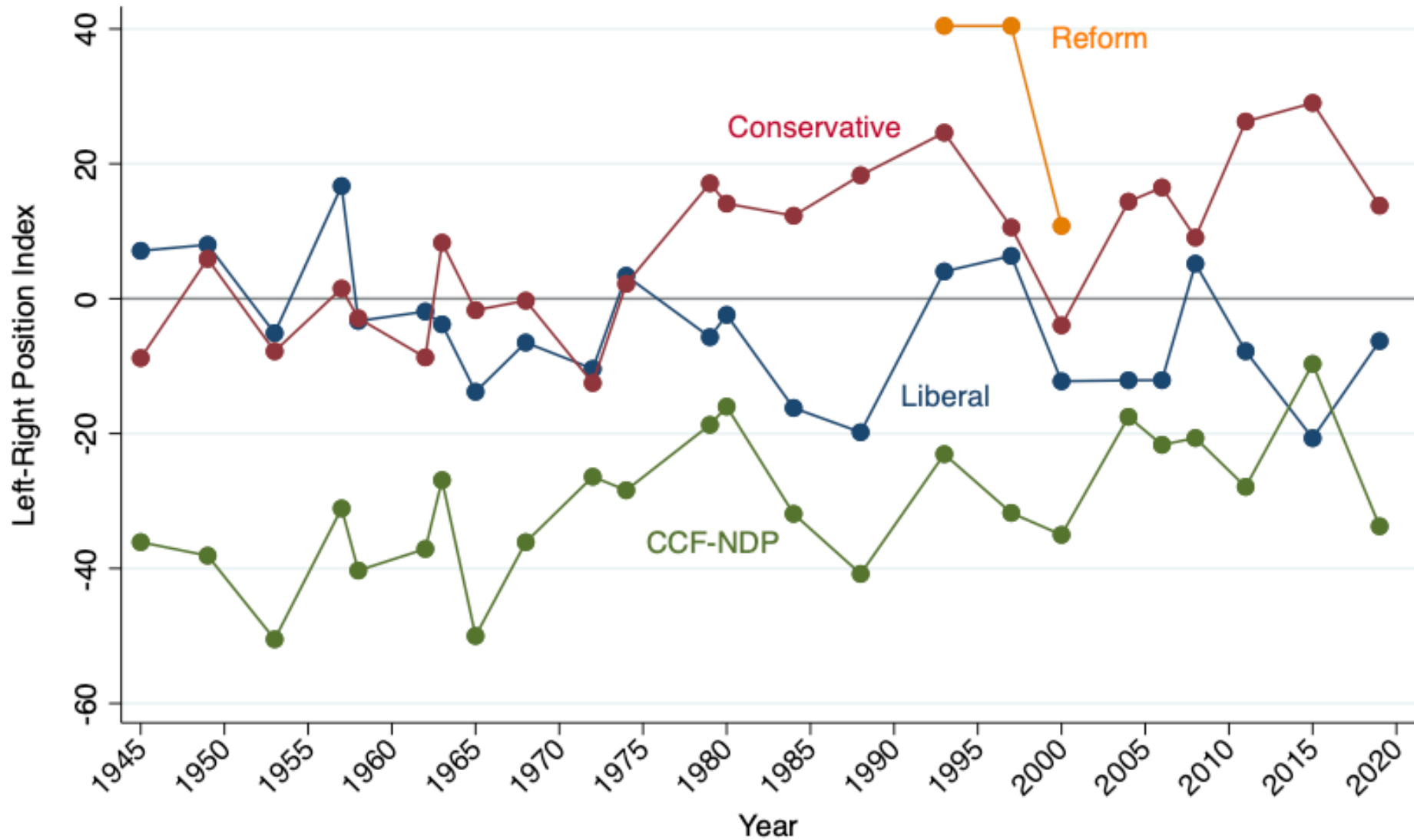
Left-right positioning of Canadian major parties 1945–2019



Parties Left-Right Position using data from the Manifesto Project. The measure is a summary left-right scale (RILE), which aggregates party platform commitments across the broad range of cultural and economic policies.

Did Canadian Parties Polarize?

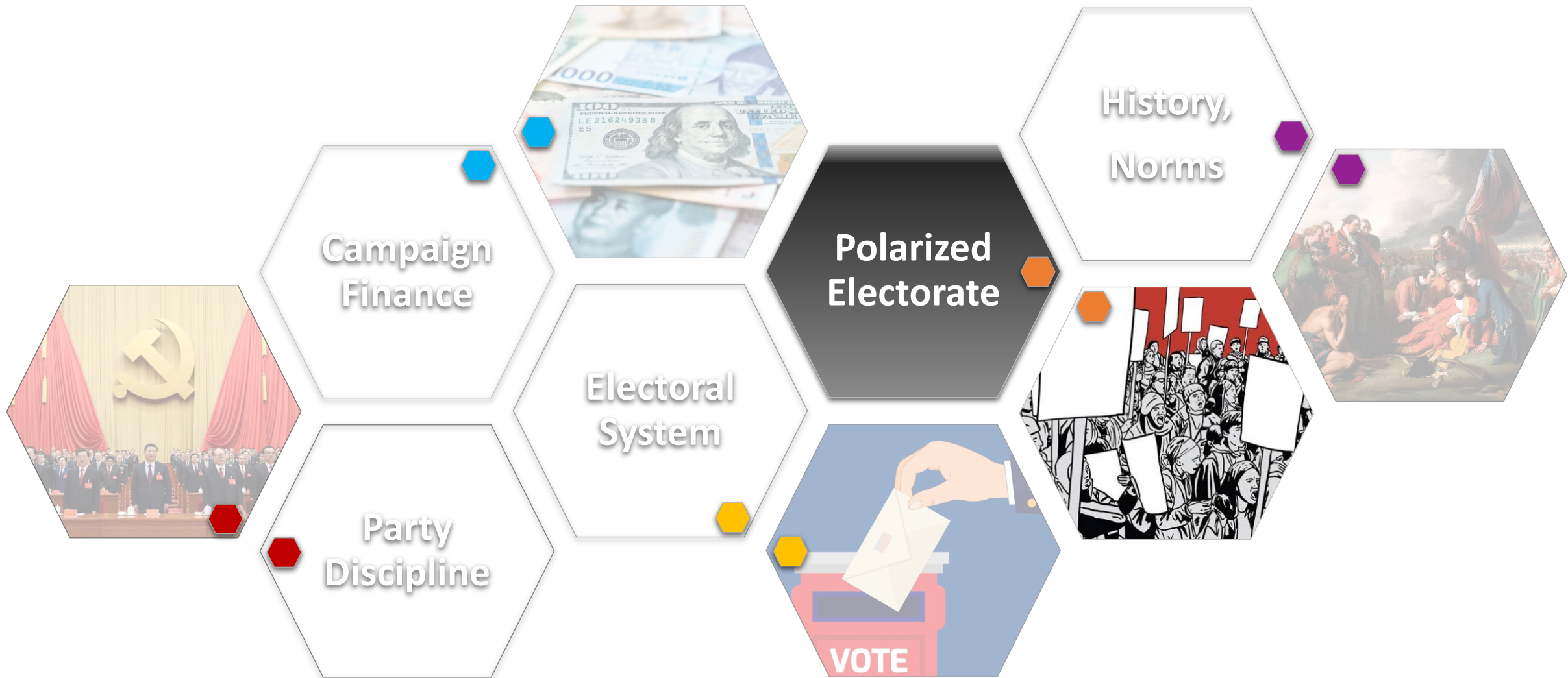
Left-right positioning of Canadian major parties 1945–2019



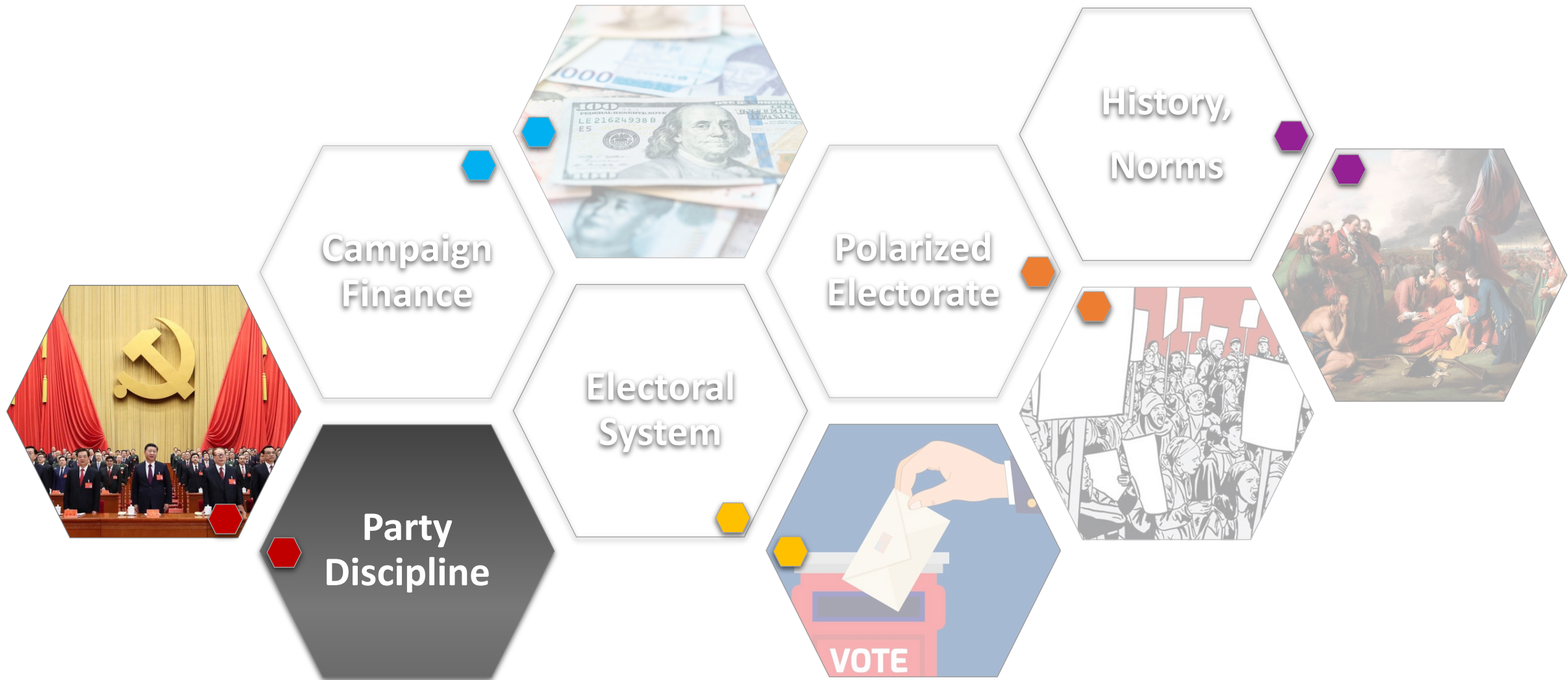
Parties Left-Right Position using data from the Manifesto Project. The measure is a summary left-right scale (RILE), which aggregates party platform commitments across the broad range of cultural and economic policies.

Determinants of Elite Polarization

What Causes Elite Polarization?



What Causes Elite Polarization?



Unhealthy Trends...

MPs' evaluation of how the 42nd Parliament changed

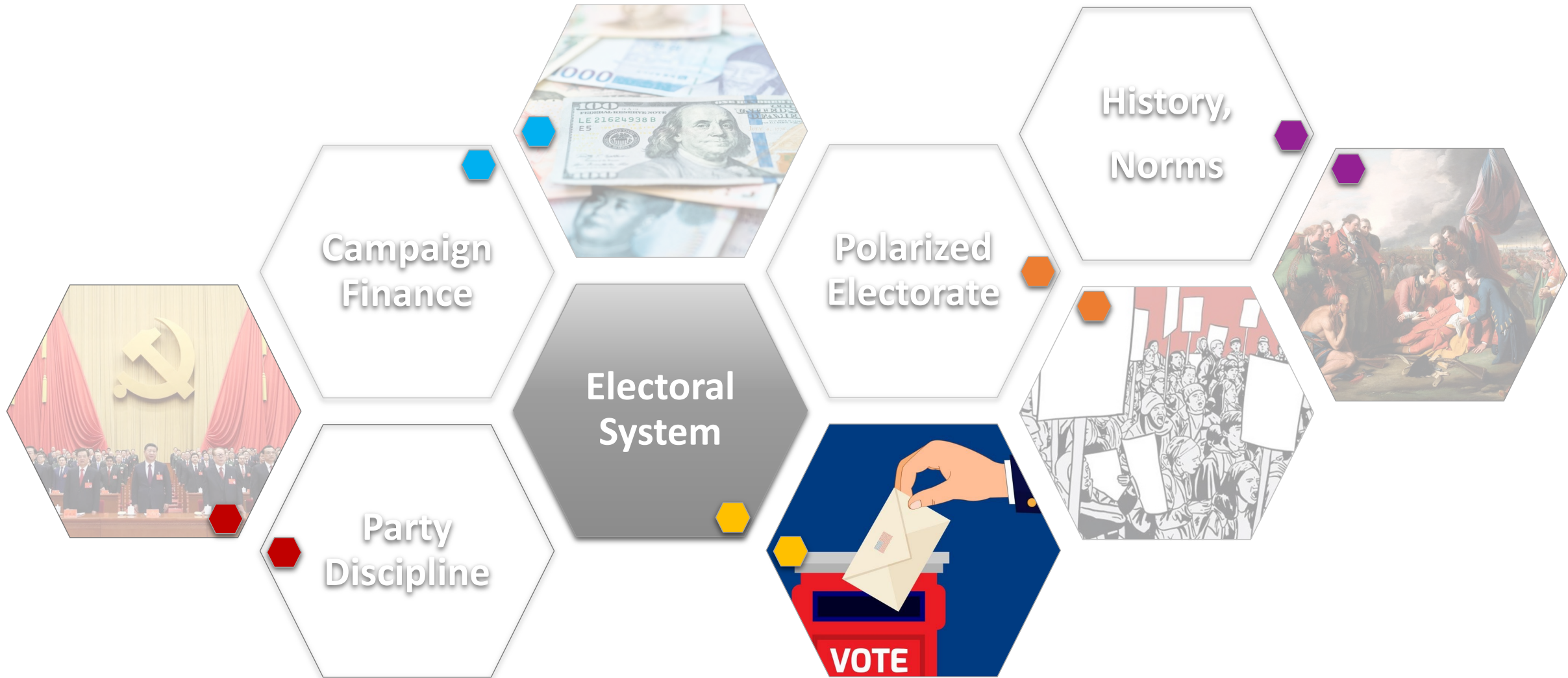
	Became less or much less prevalent	Stayed about the same	Became more or much more prevalent	Don't know
Cross-party collaboration	45%	35%	12%	8%
Incivility	5%	33%	55%	8%
Unhealthy partisanship	9%	29%	55%	8%
Use of populist rhetoric by MPs	5%	28%	57%	11%

Source:
Survey of Canadian MPs,
asked to compare
Parliamentary conduct in
2019 to 2015.

N=66

Source: Samara Centre 2019 MP Survey

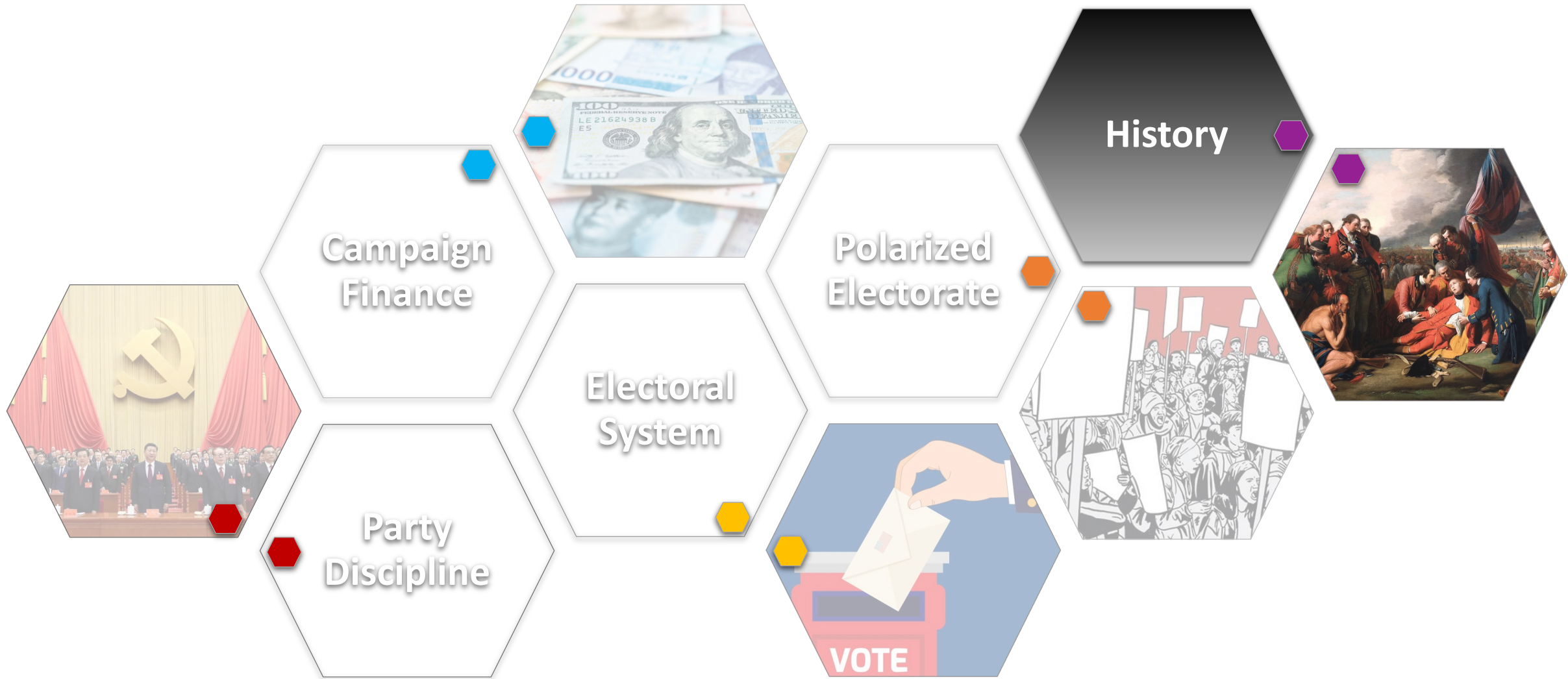
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Mass Polarization

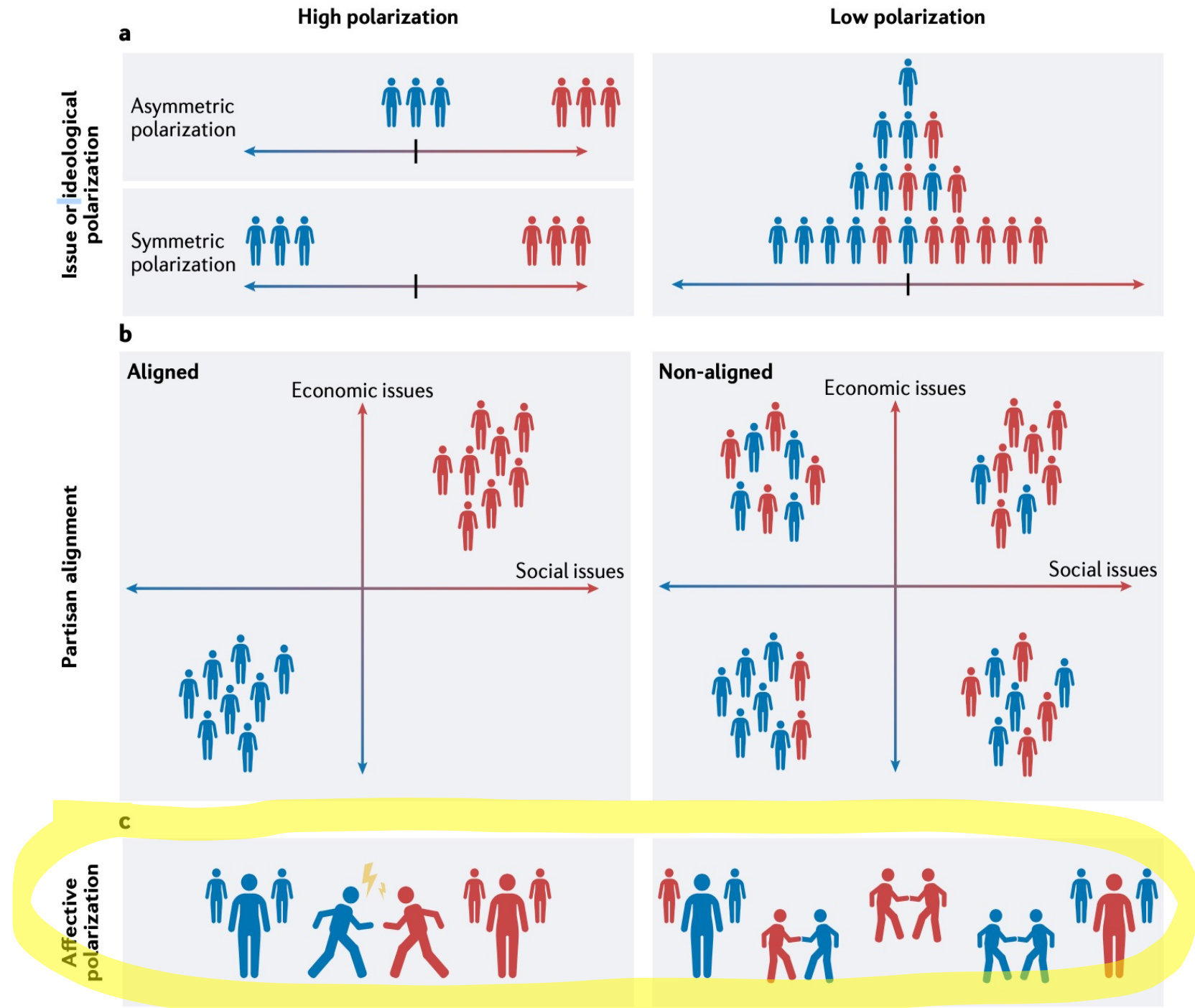


A pipeline supporter confronts an anti-pipeline protestor, during a rally in Edmonton Alta., on April 12, 2018. (Jason Franson/CP)

Types of Mass Polarization



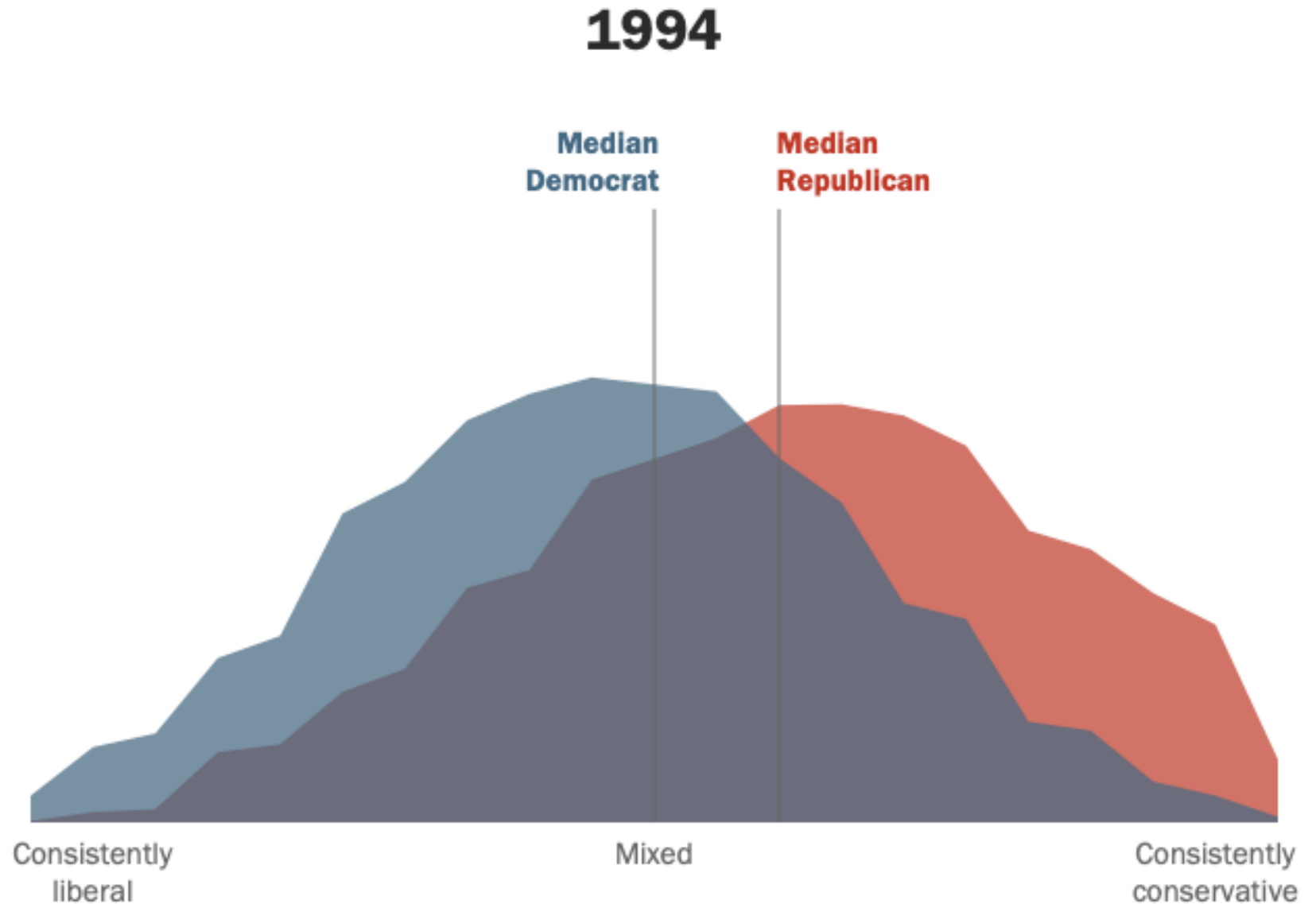
Types of Mass Polarization



source: Jost et al (2020, Nature Reviews)

Trends of Partisan Sorting in the US

L-R Scale for 10 questions in Pew Research Centre Surveys since 1994



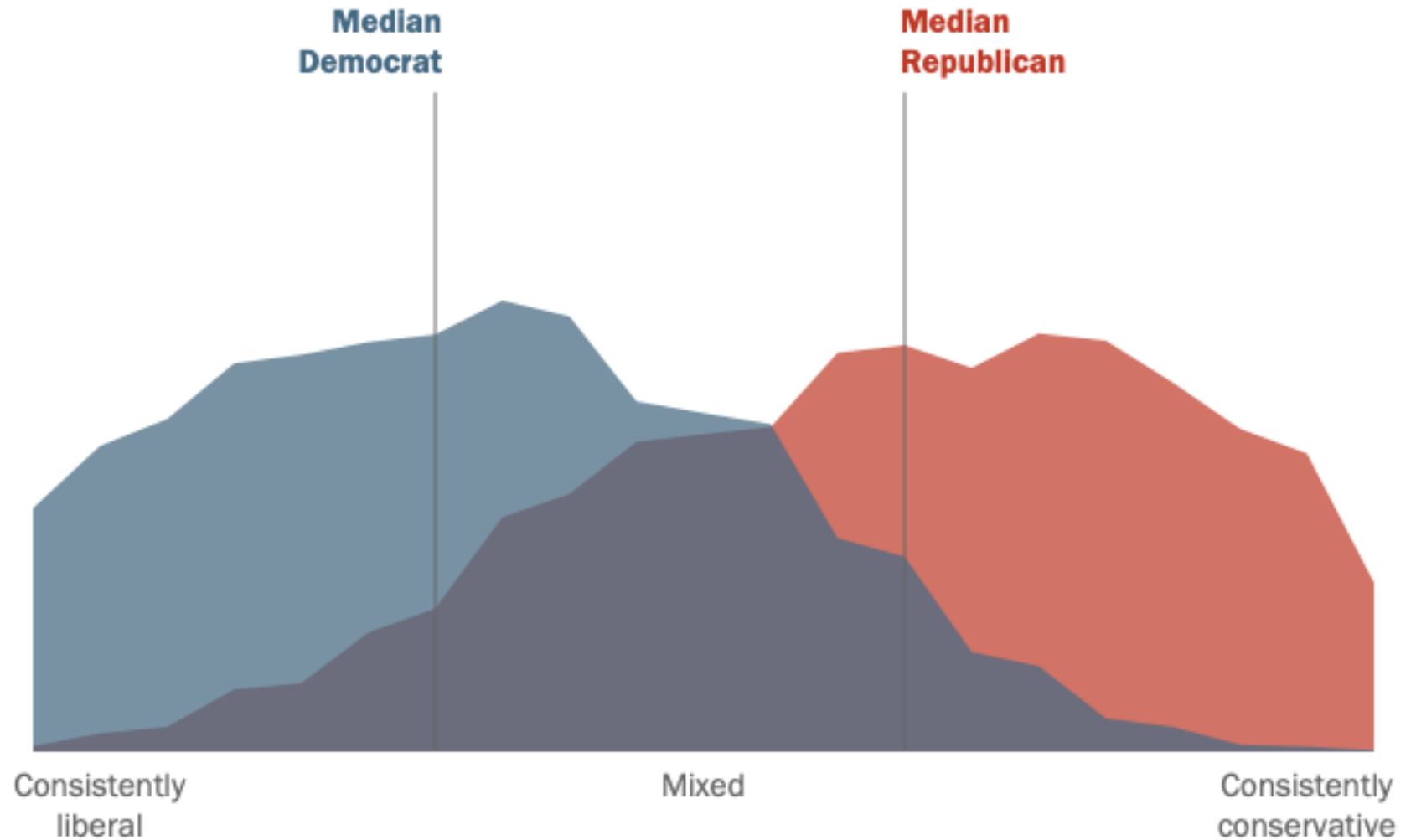
Graph: Pew Research Centre Oct 20, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/feature/political-polarization-1994-2017/>

Source: Surveys conducted in 1994, 1999, 2004, 2011, 2015 and 2017.

Trends of Partisan Sorting in the US

2014

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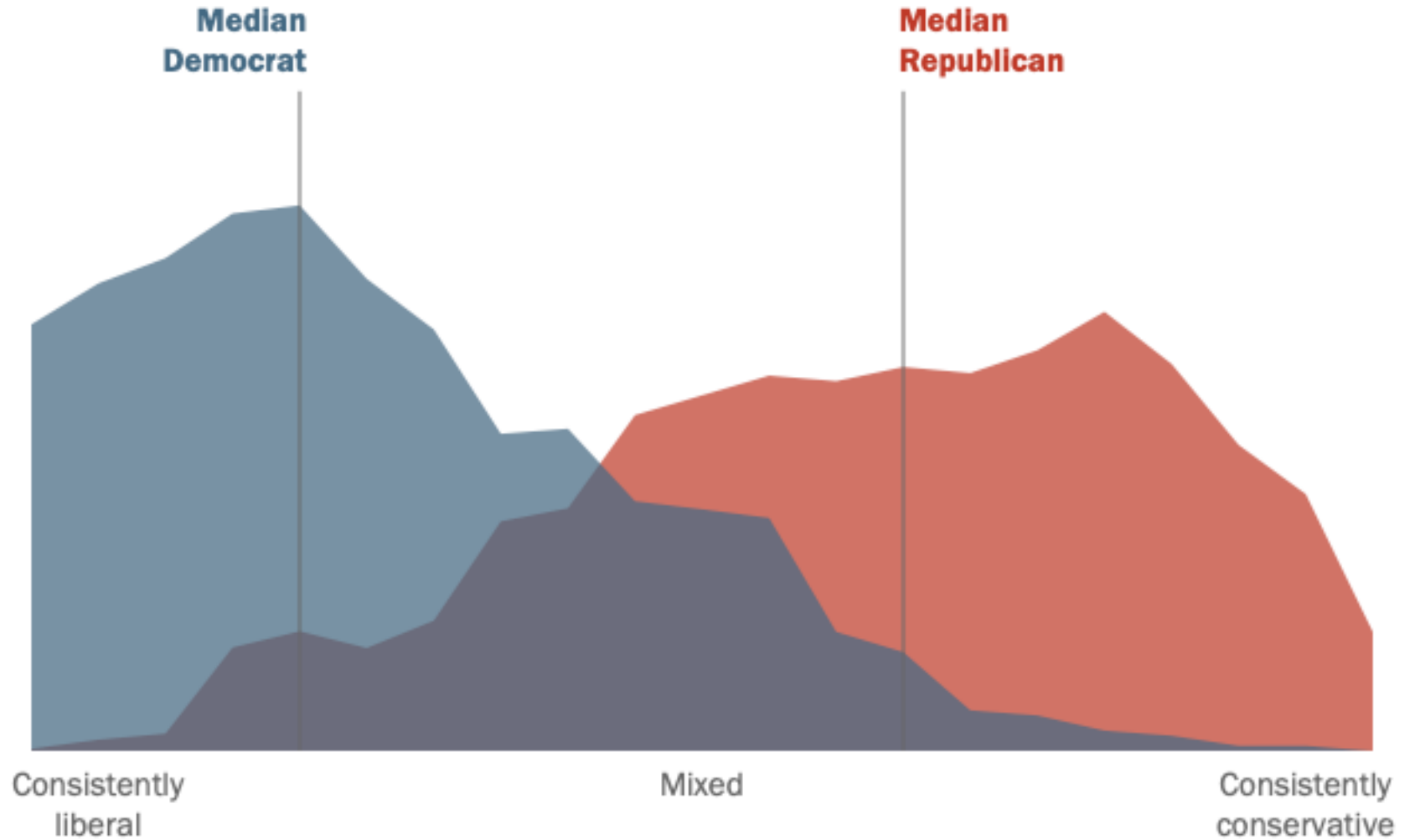
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2017



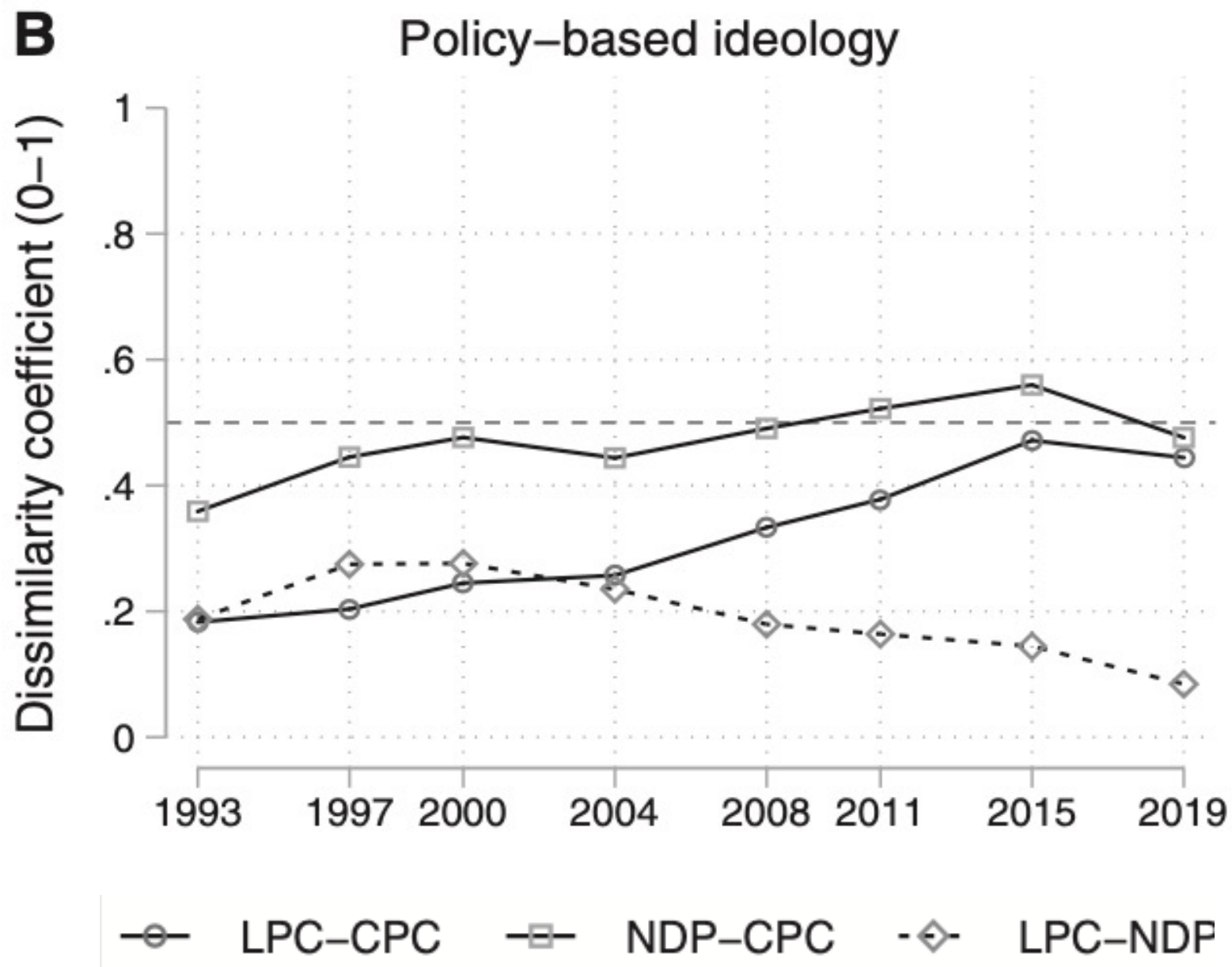
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Trends of Partisan Sorting in Canada

How similar are the distributions in answers to social/econ policy questions on the CES for Canadians supporting different parties?

Study by E.Merkley (2023)

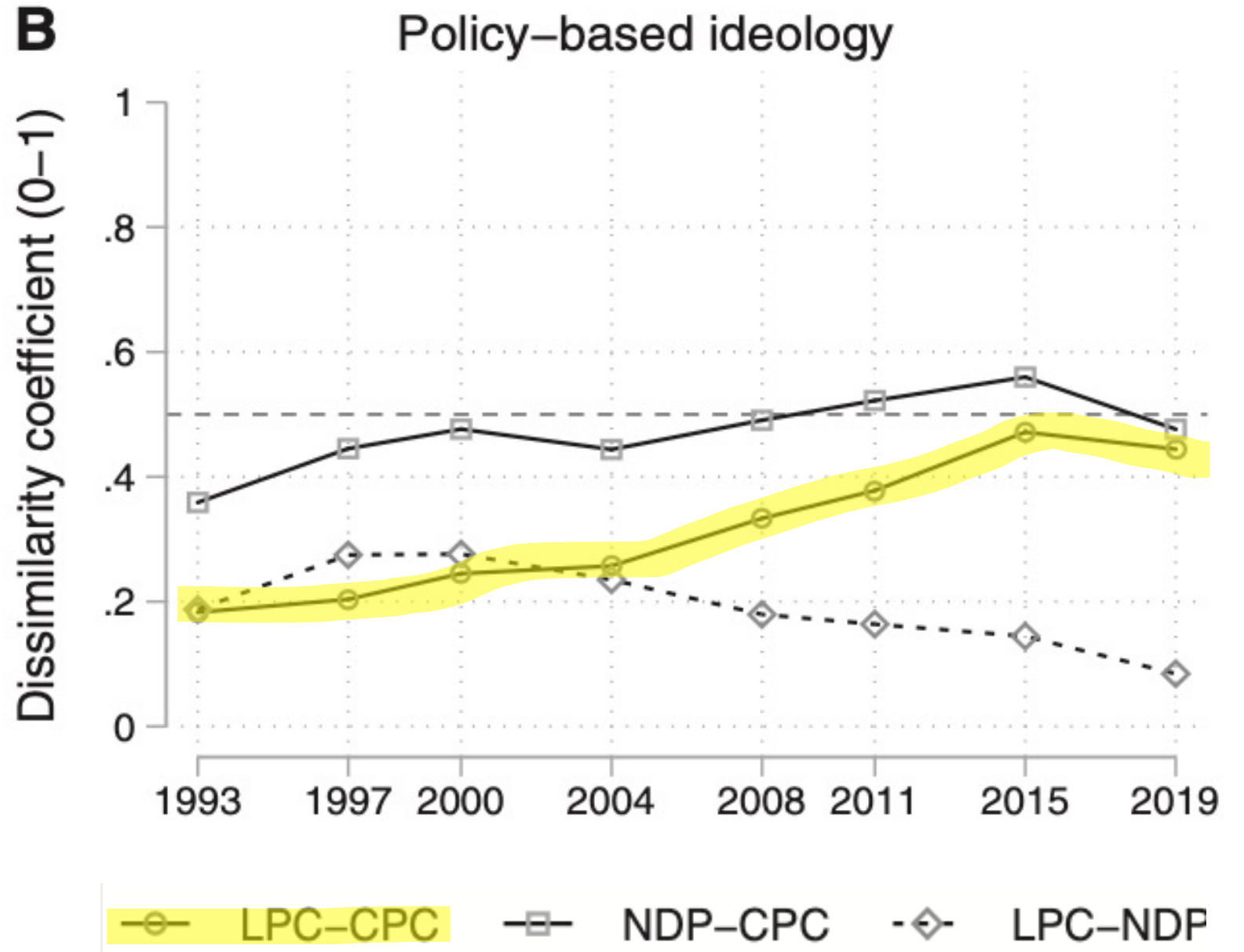


Graph: dissimilarity index (difference) using data from Canadian Election Survey, Merkley (2023, Public Opinion Quarterly)

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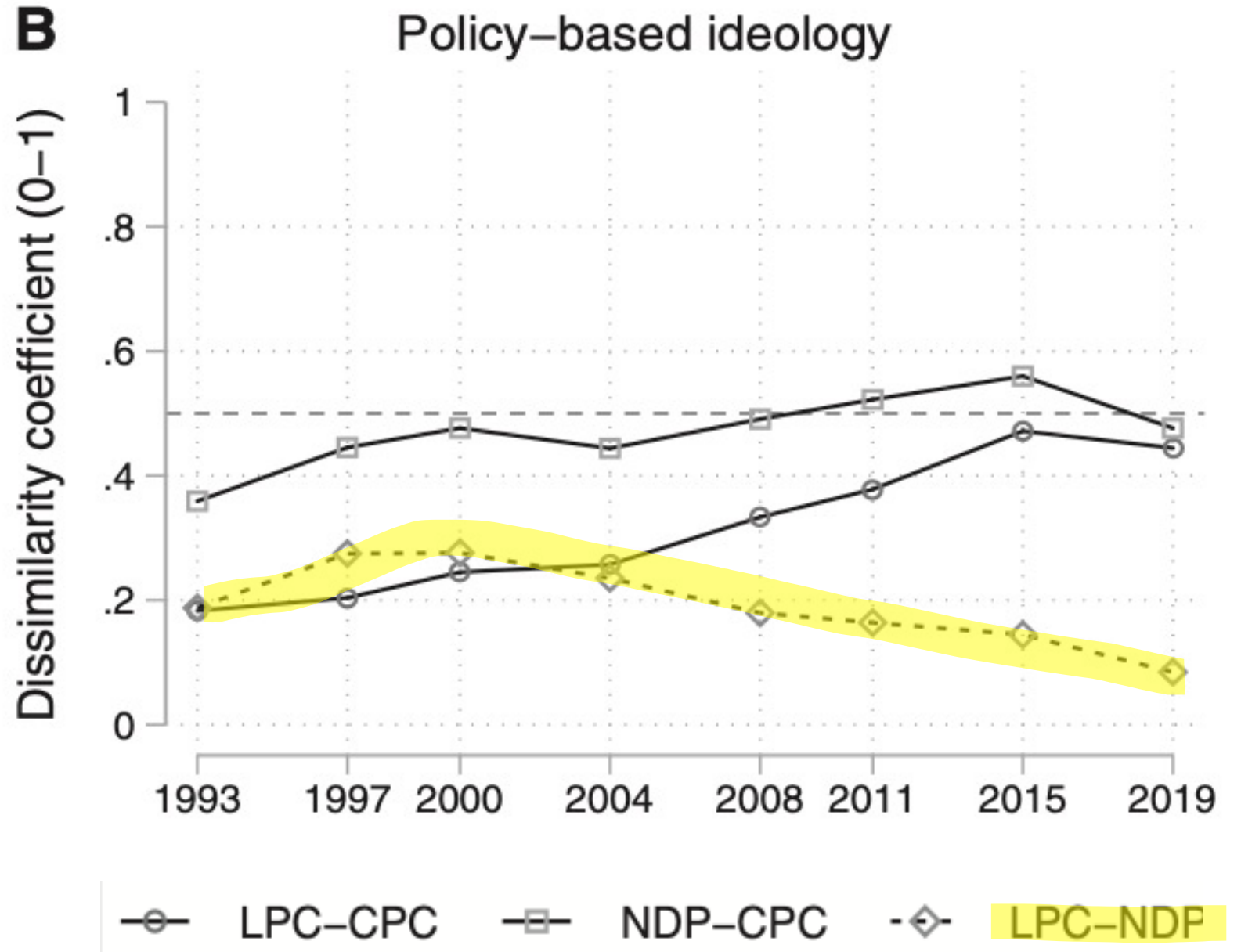


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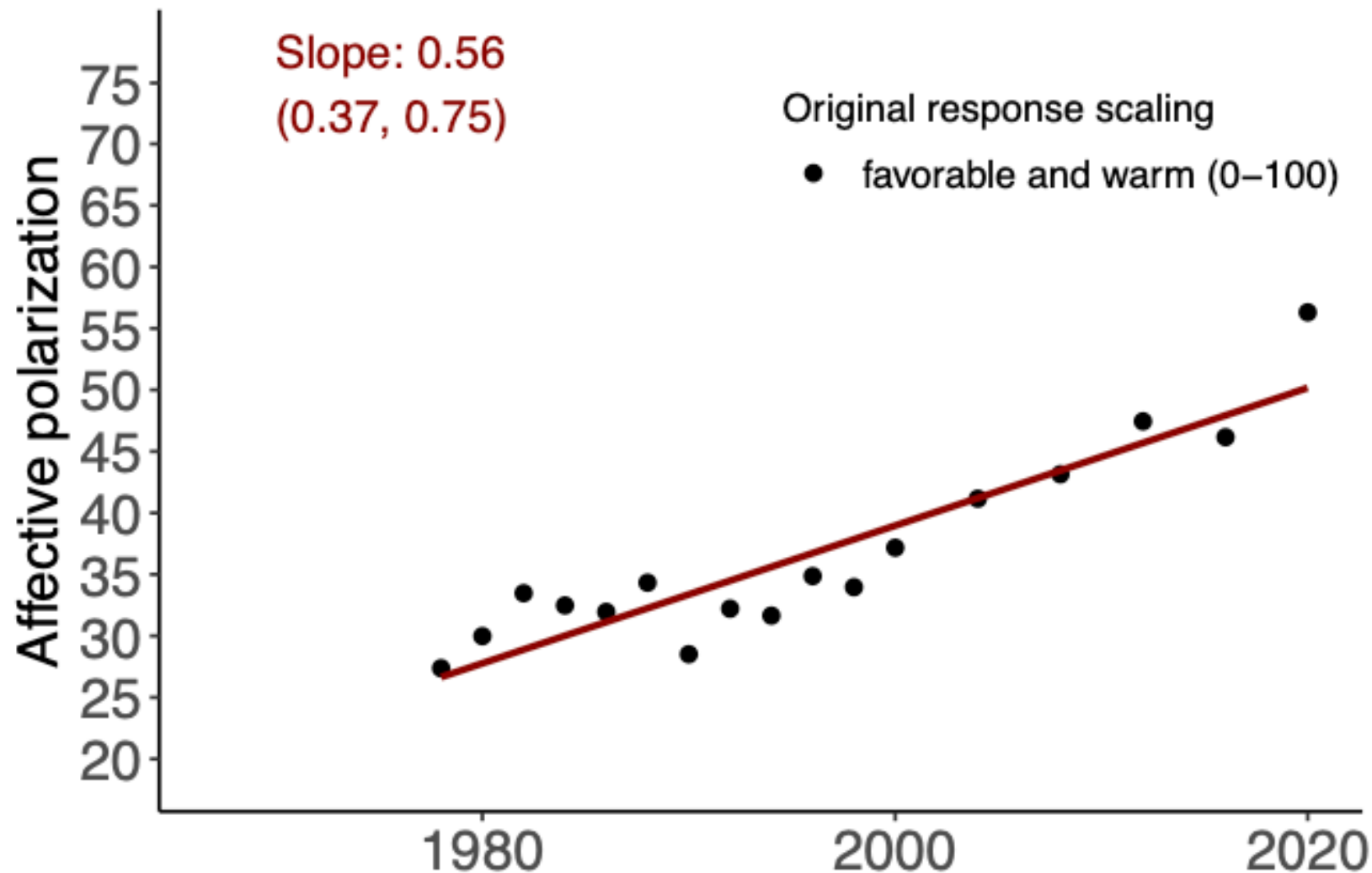
Graph: dissimilarity index (difference) using data from Canadian Election Survey, Merkley (2023, Public Opinion Quarterly)

Trends in Affective Polarization in US

To what extent do citizens feel more favorable toward their own party than toward other parties?

Measured is the difference in feeling (0-100) towards party respondents plan to vote relative to average feeling toward other parties

US

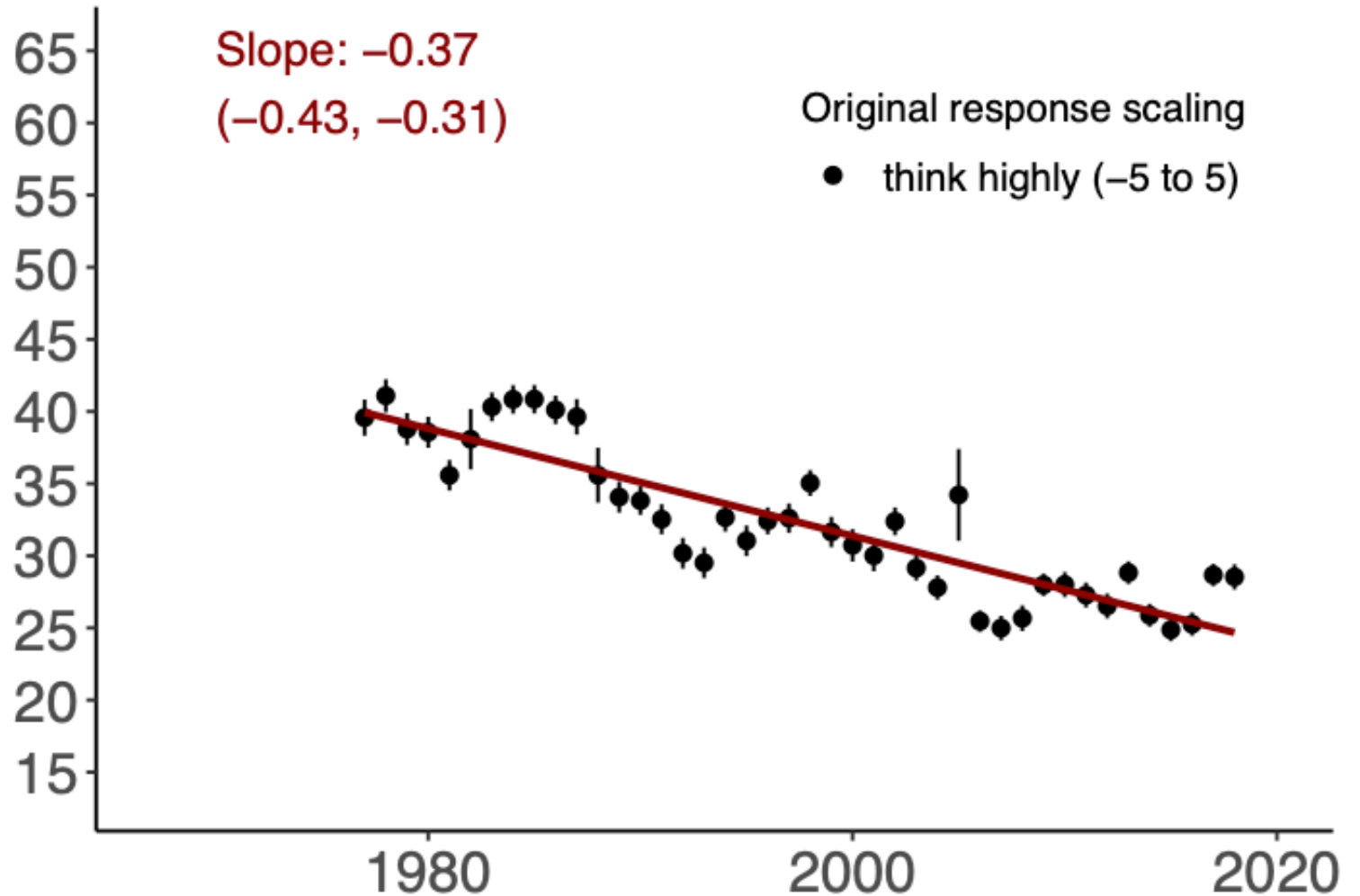


Trends in Affective Polarization in Germany

To what extent do citizens feel more negatively toward other political parties other than their own?

Measured is the difference in feeling (0-100) towards party respondents plan to vote relative to average feeling toward other parties

Germany



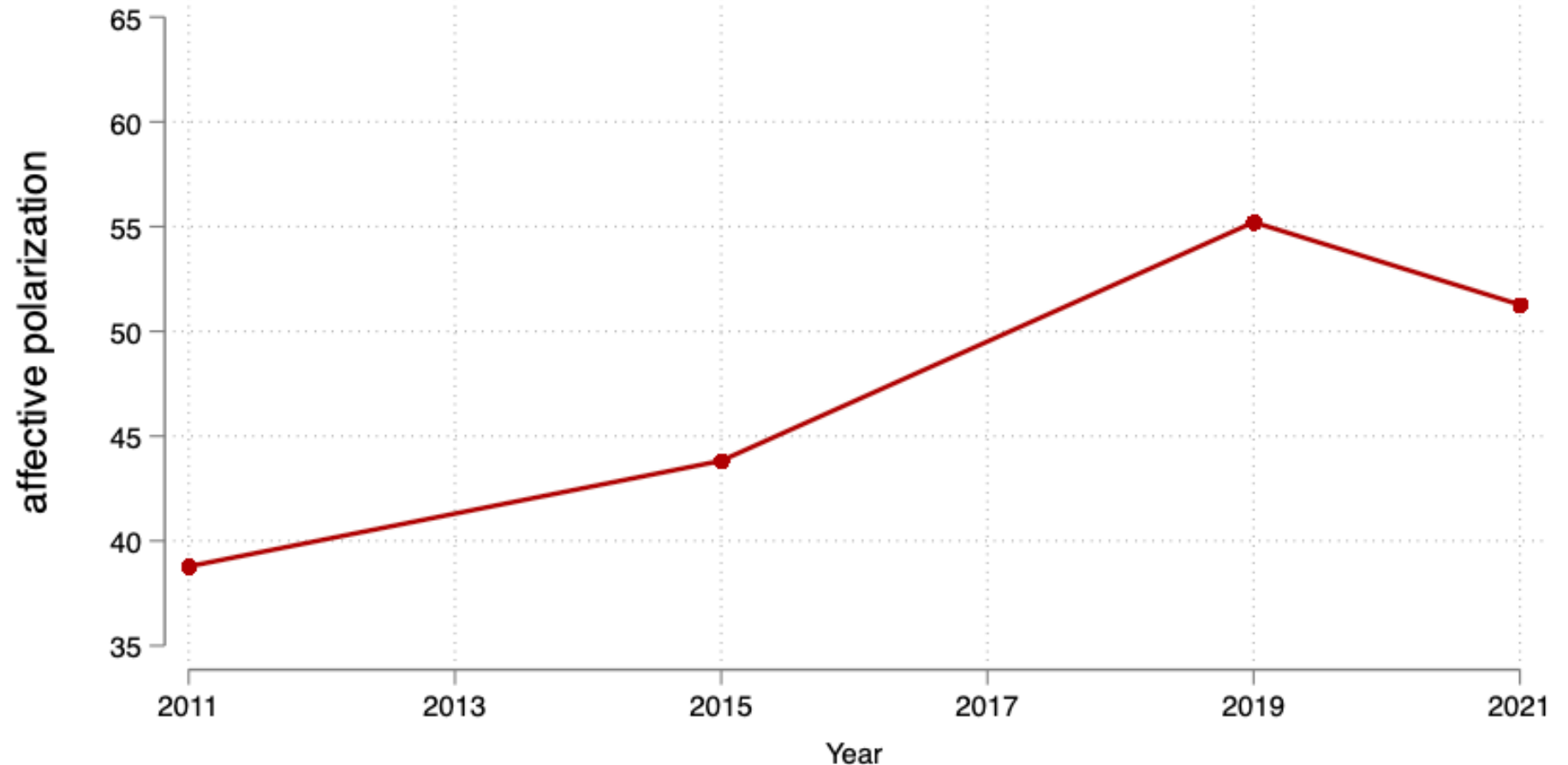
Graph: Sharpiro et al (2021, NBER)

Trends in Affective Polarization in Canada

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Mass Polarization Trends Canada, 2011-2021



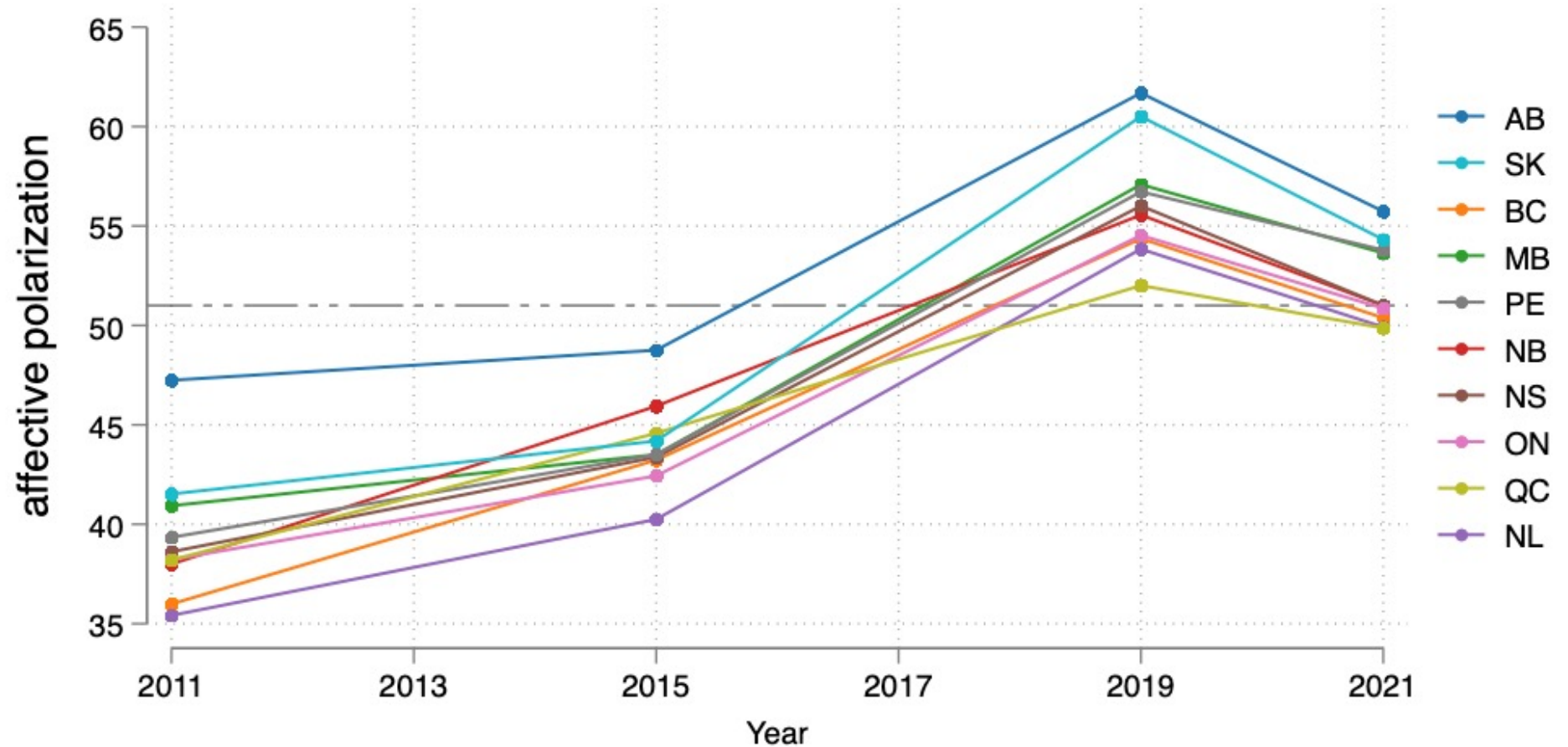
Graph: own calculations using data from the Canadian Election Survey, years 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2021

Trends of Affective Polarization in Canada

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Mass Polarization Trends by Province 2011-2021



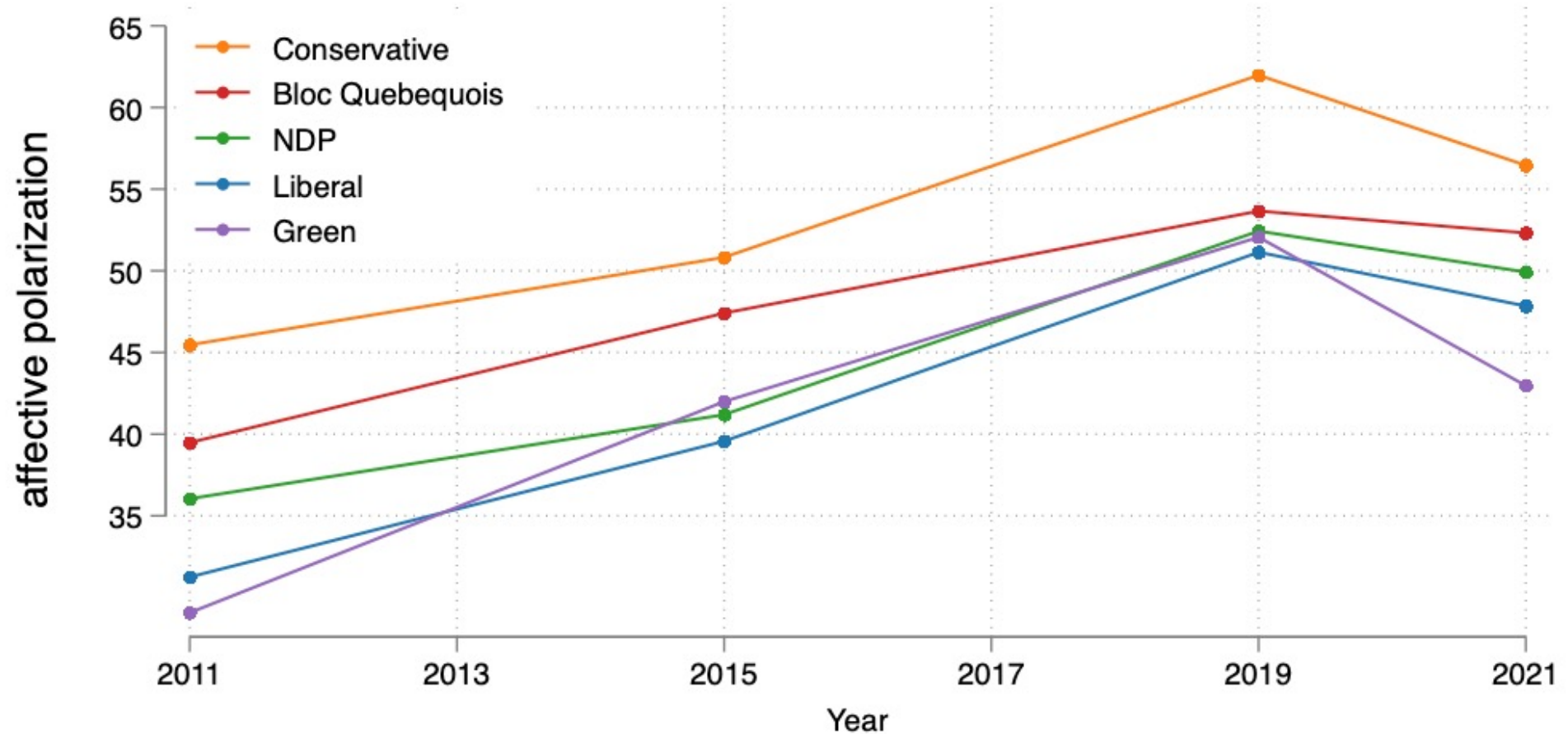
Graph: own calculations using data from the Canadian Election Survey, years 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2021

74,286 observations

Trends of Affective Polarization in Canada

To what extent do citizens feel more negatively toward other political parties other than their own?

Mass Polarization Trends by Political Affiliation

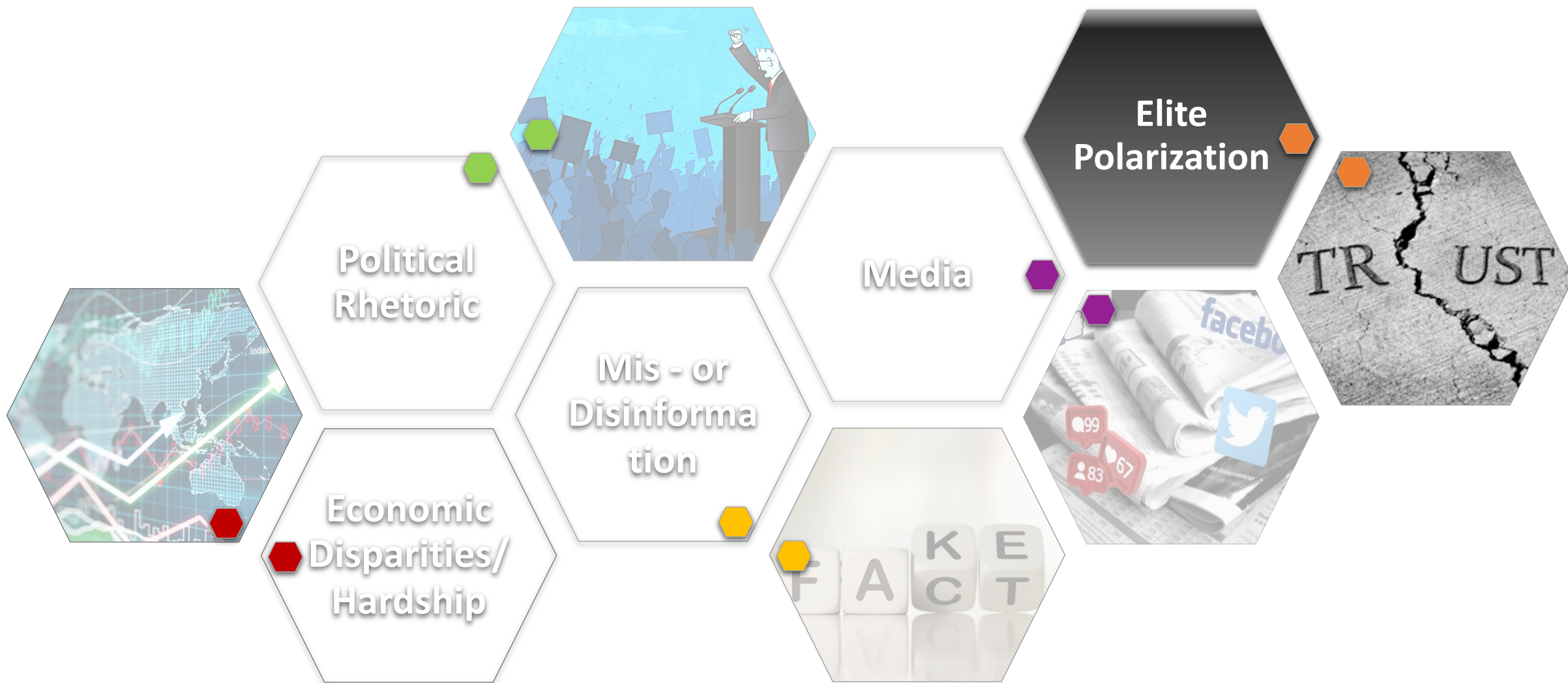


Graph: own calculations using data from the Canadian Election Survey, years 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2021

48,661 observations

Determinants of Mass Polarization

What Causes Mass Polarization?



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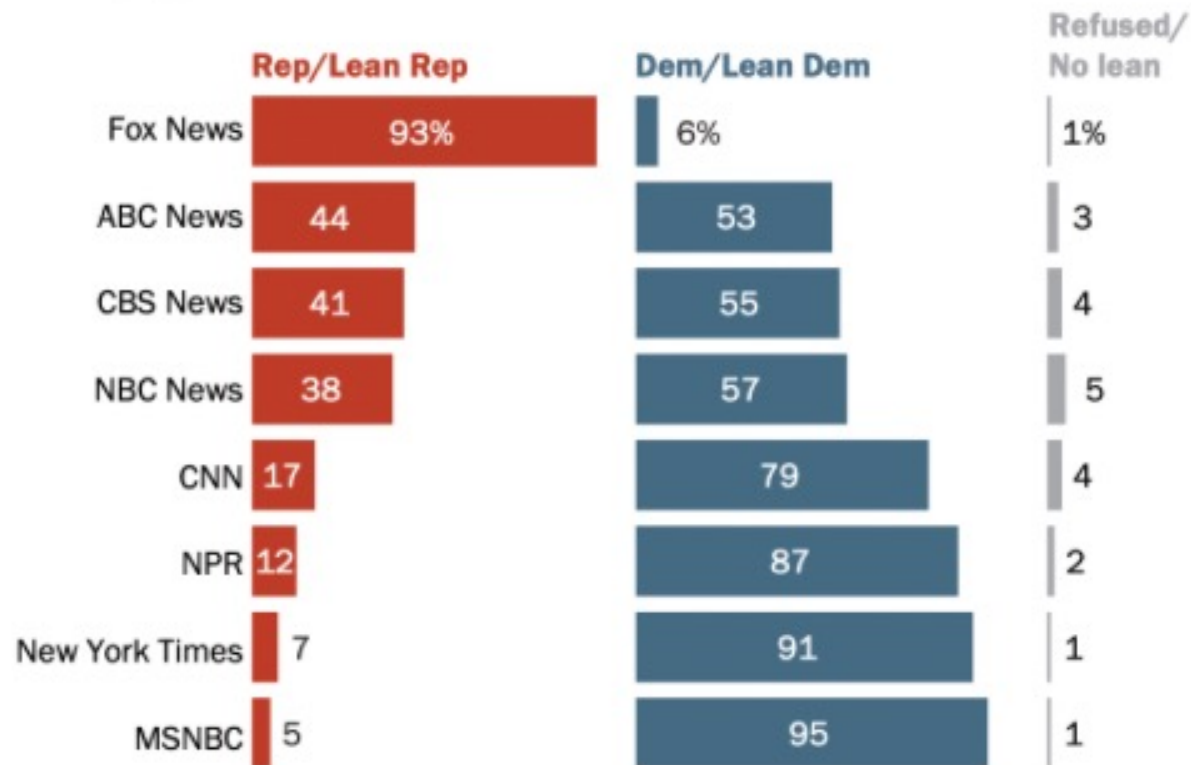
What Causes Mass Polarization?



Partisan Sorting Across Sources

U.S. adults who name Fox News or MSNBC as their main political news source are equally partisan

% who say they identify as ___ among those who name each as their main source for political and election news



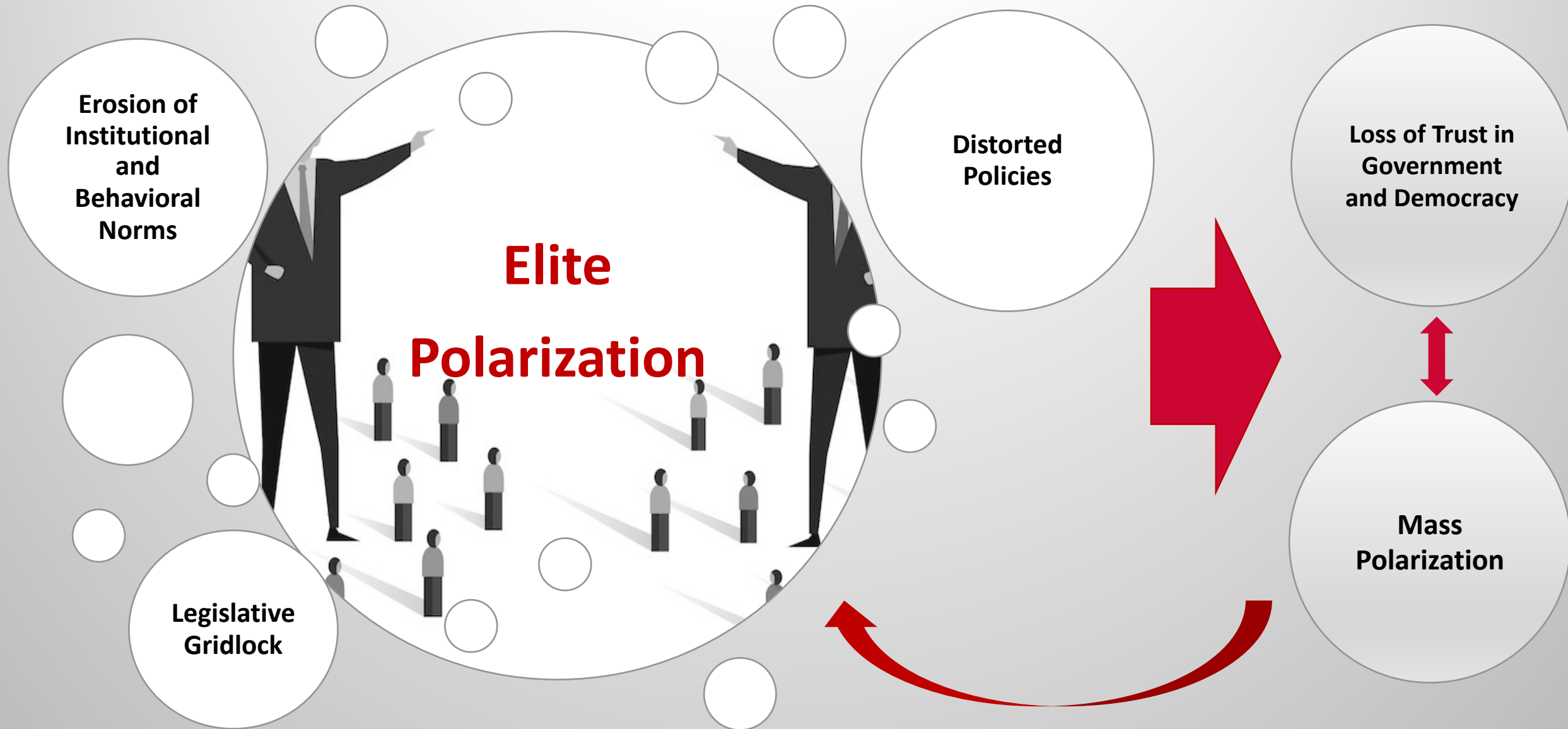
Note: Main source asked as an open-ended question. Outlets mentioned by less than 2% as main source not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019.

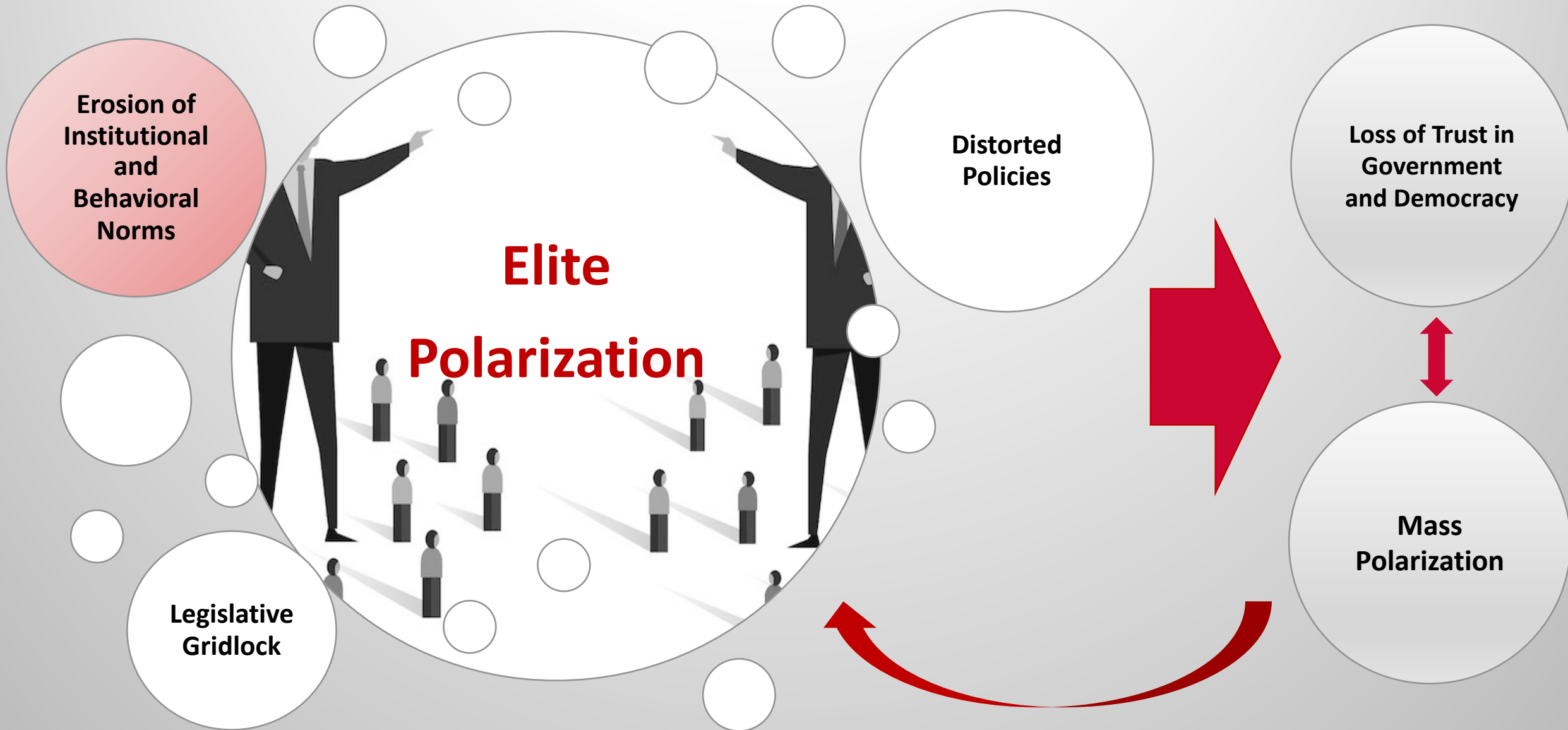
Graph: Pew Research Centre, 2020, in "Americans' main sources for political news vary by party and age"

Consequences of Polarization

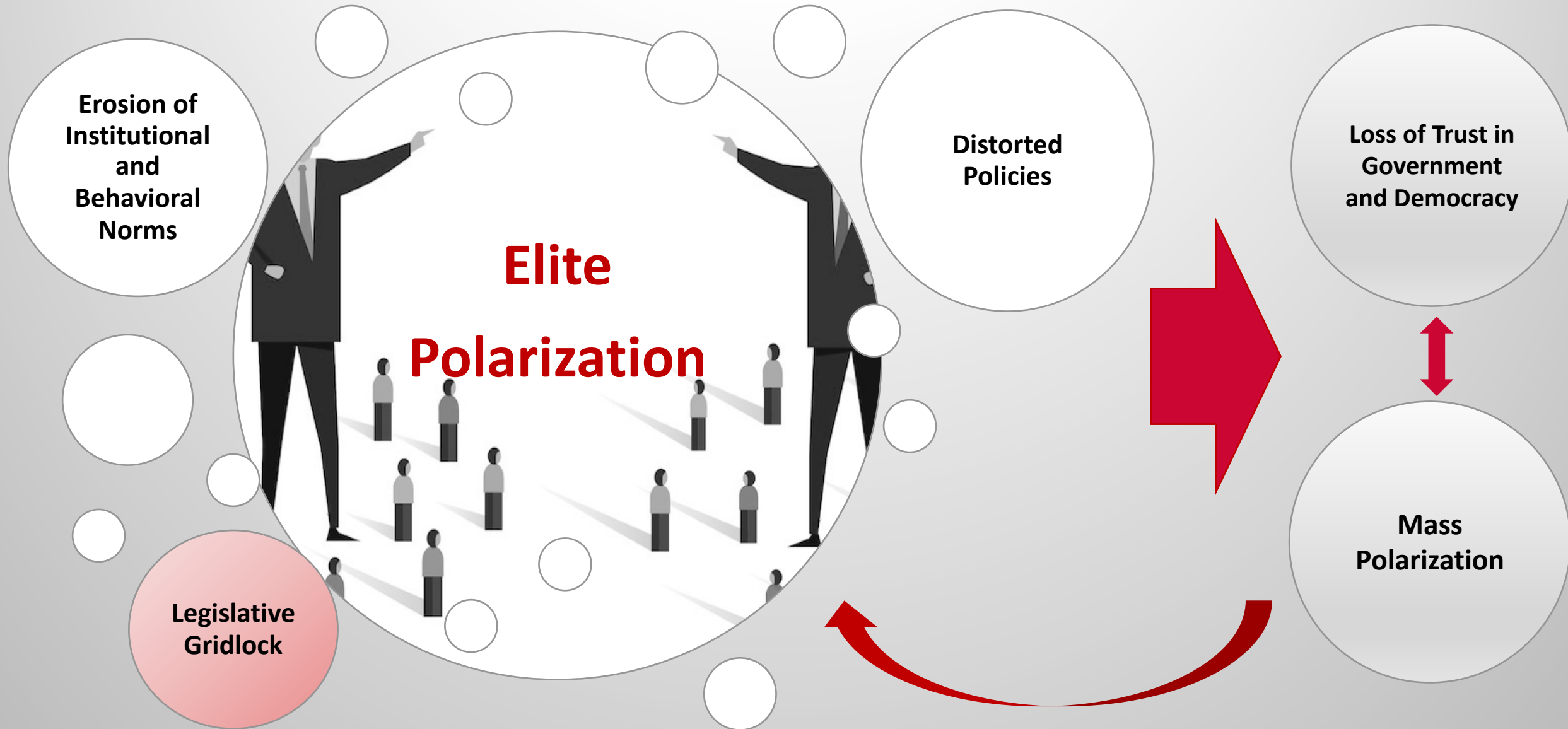
Negative Effects of Elite Polarization



Negative Effects of Elite Polarization



Negative Effects of Elite Polarization



**Erosion of
Institutional
and
Behavioral
Norms**

**Elite
Polarization**

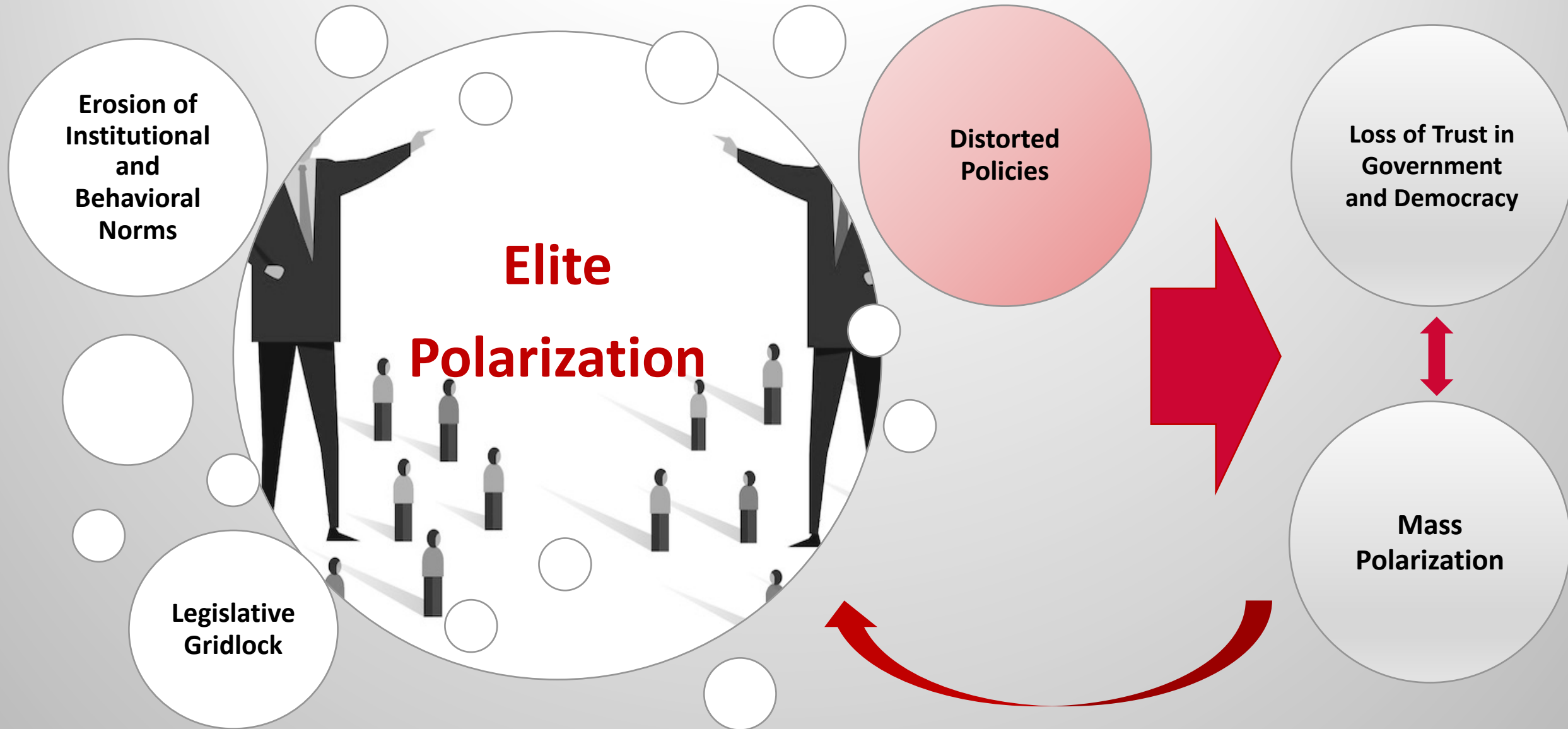
**Distorted
Policies**

**Loss of Trust in
Government
and Democracy**

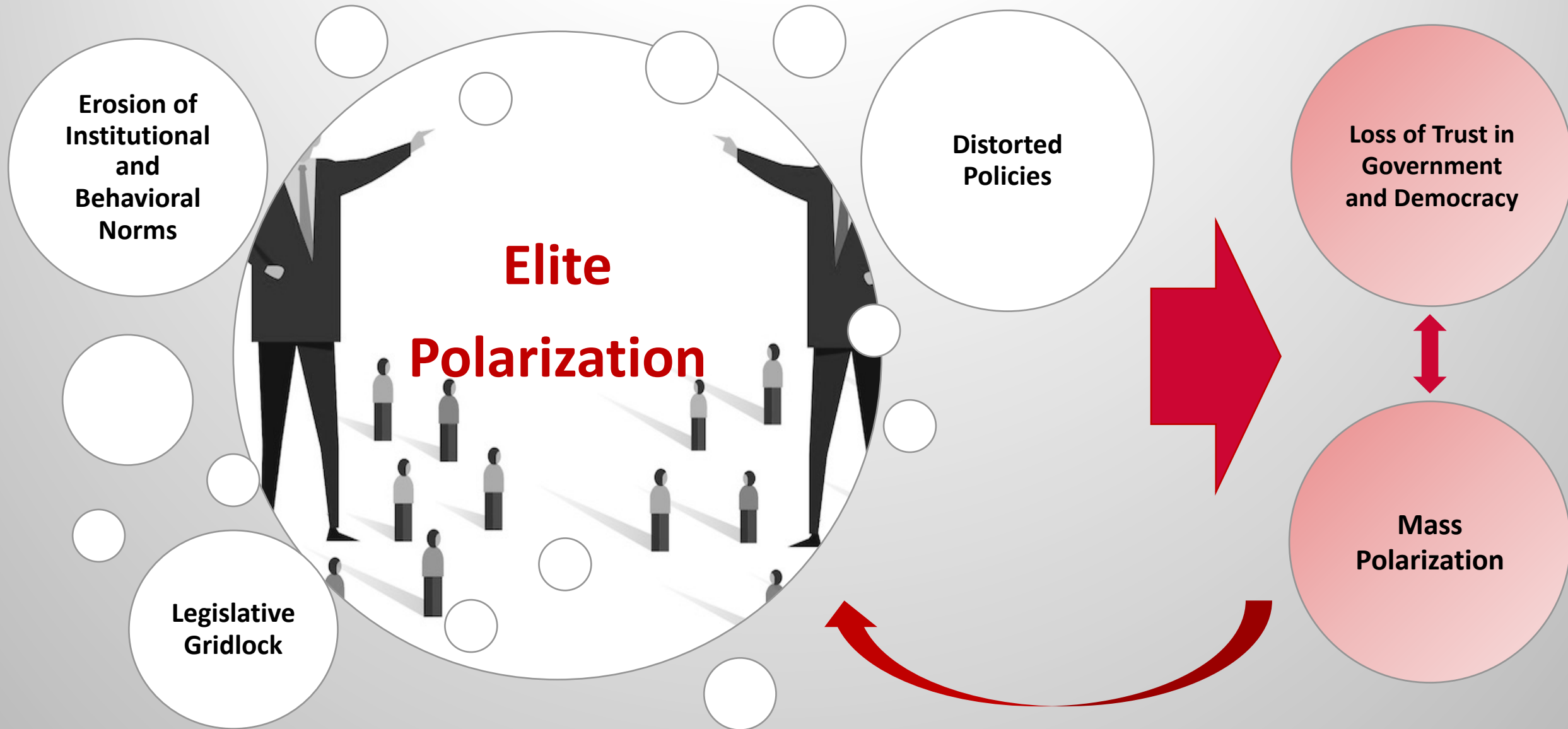
**Legislative
Gridlock**

**Mass
Polarization**

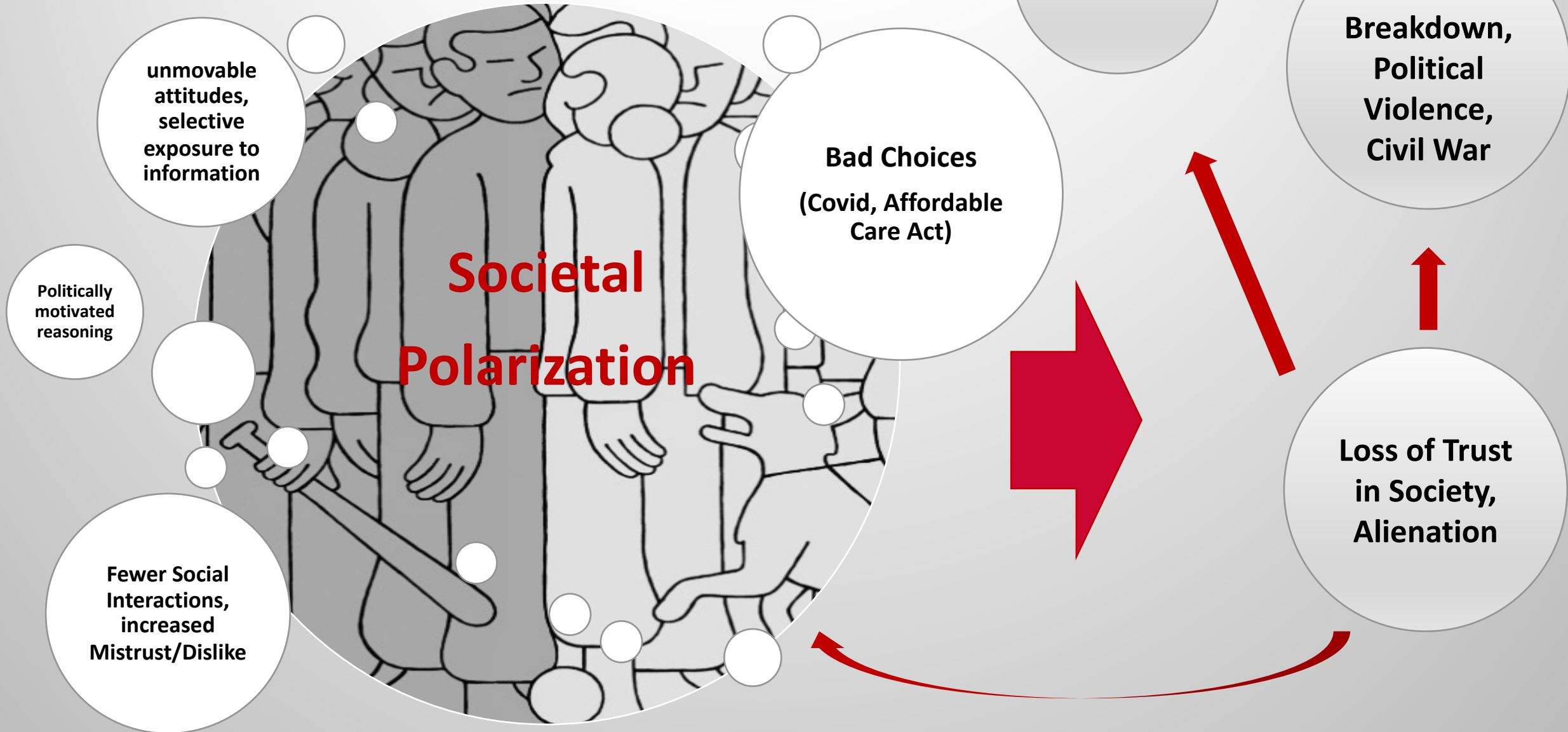
Negative Effects of Elite Polarization



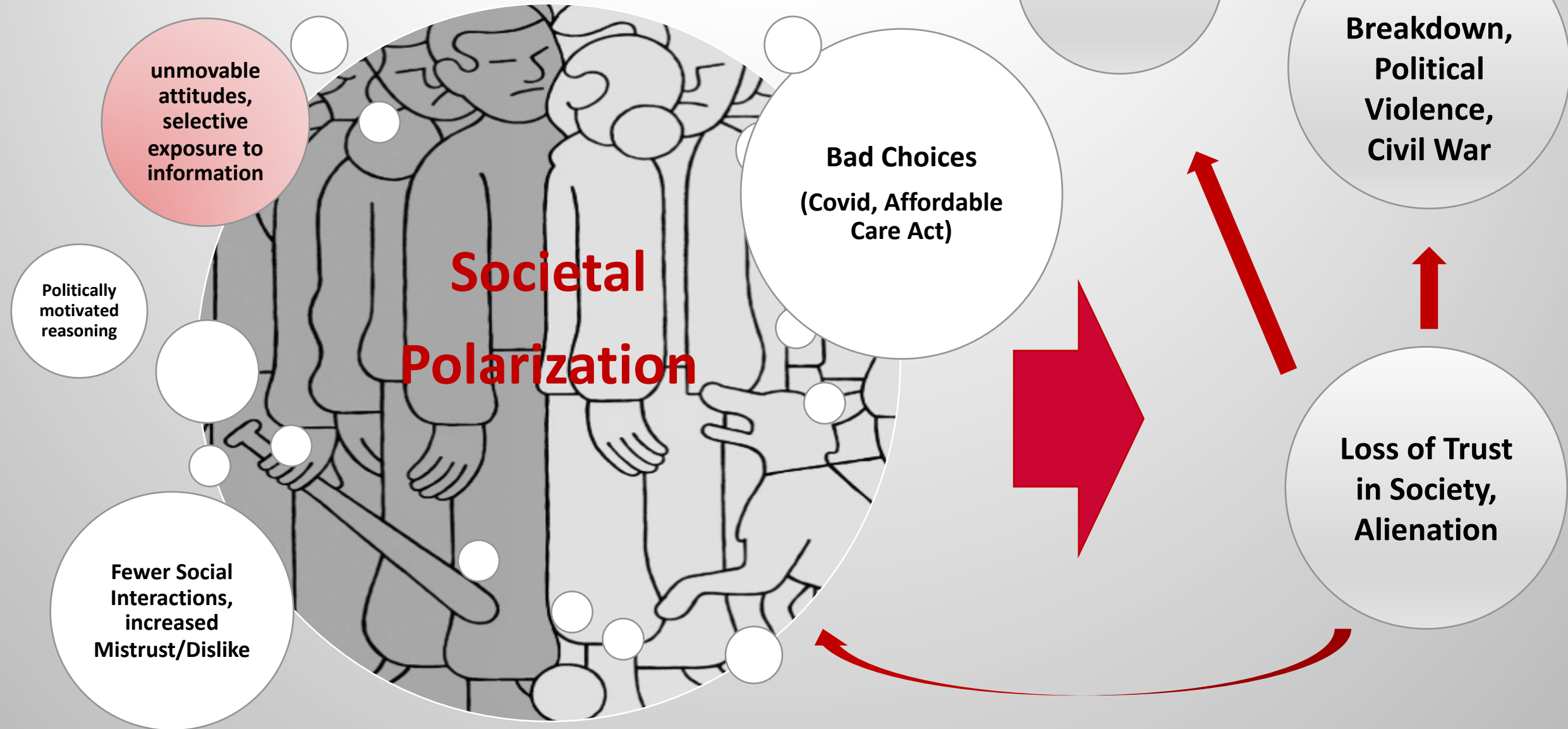
Negative Effects of Elite Polarization



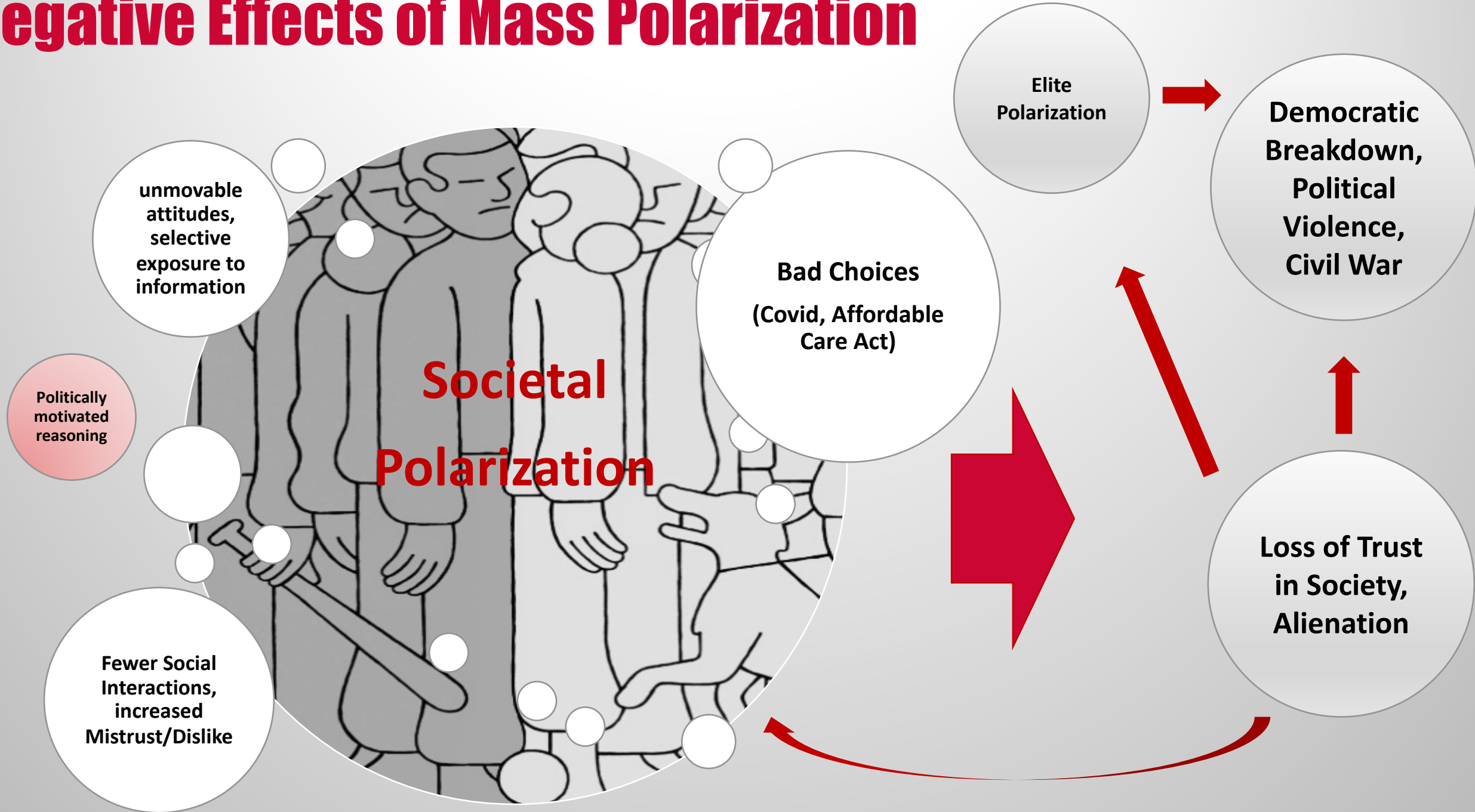
Negative Effects of Mass Polarization

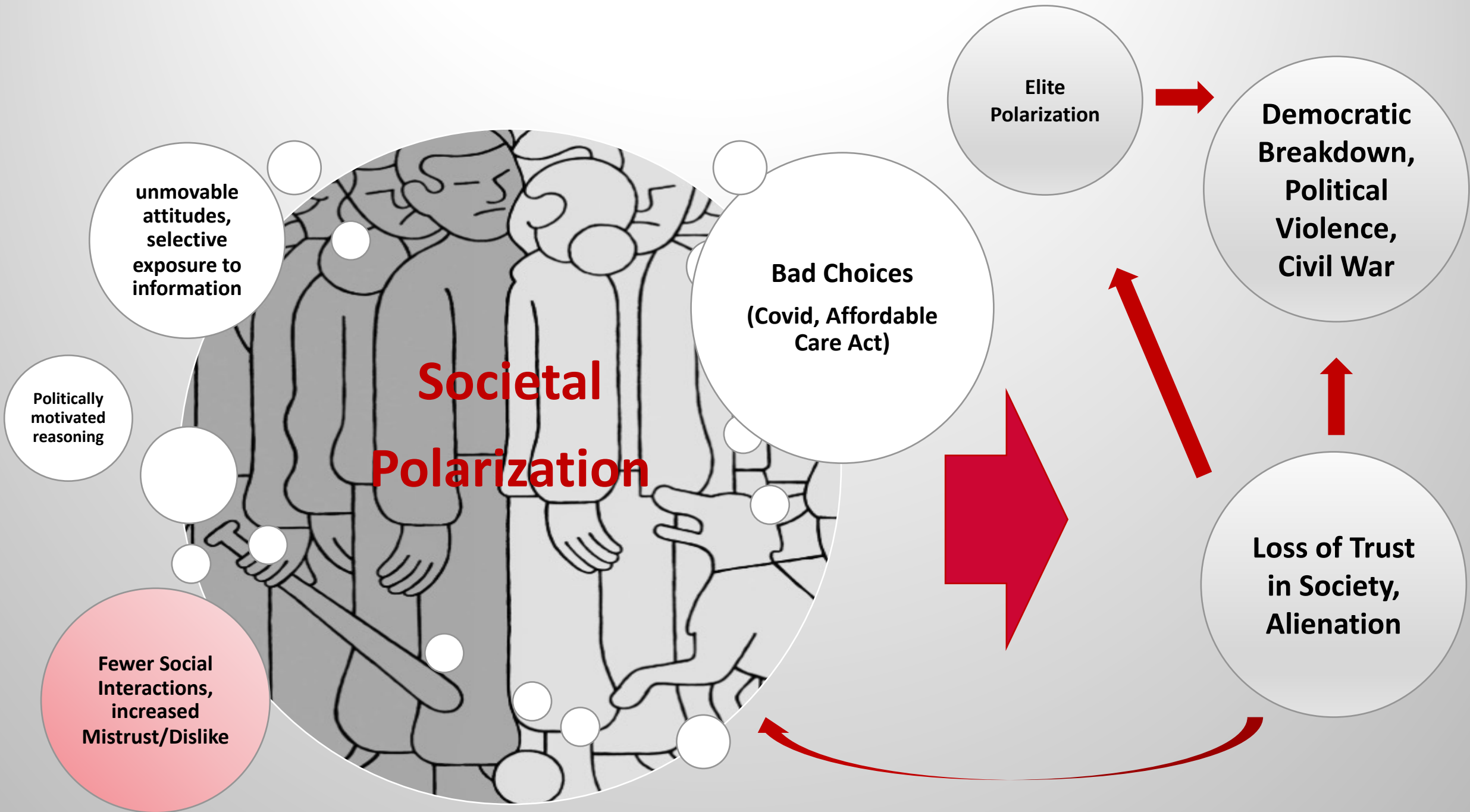


Negative Effects of Mass Polarization

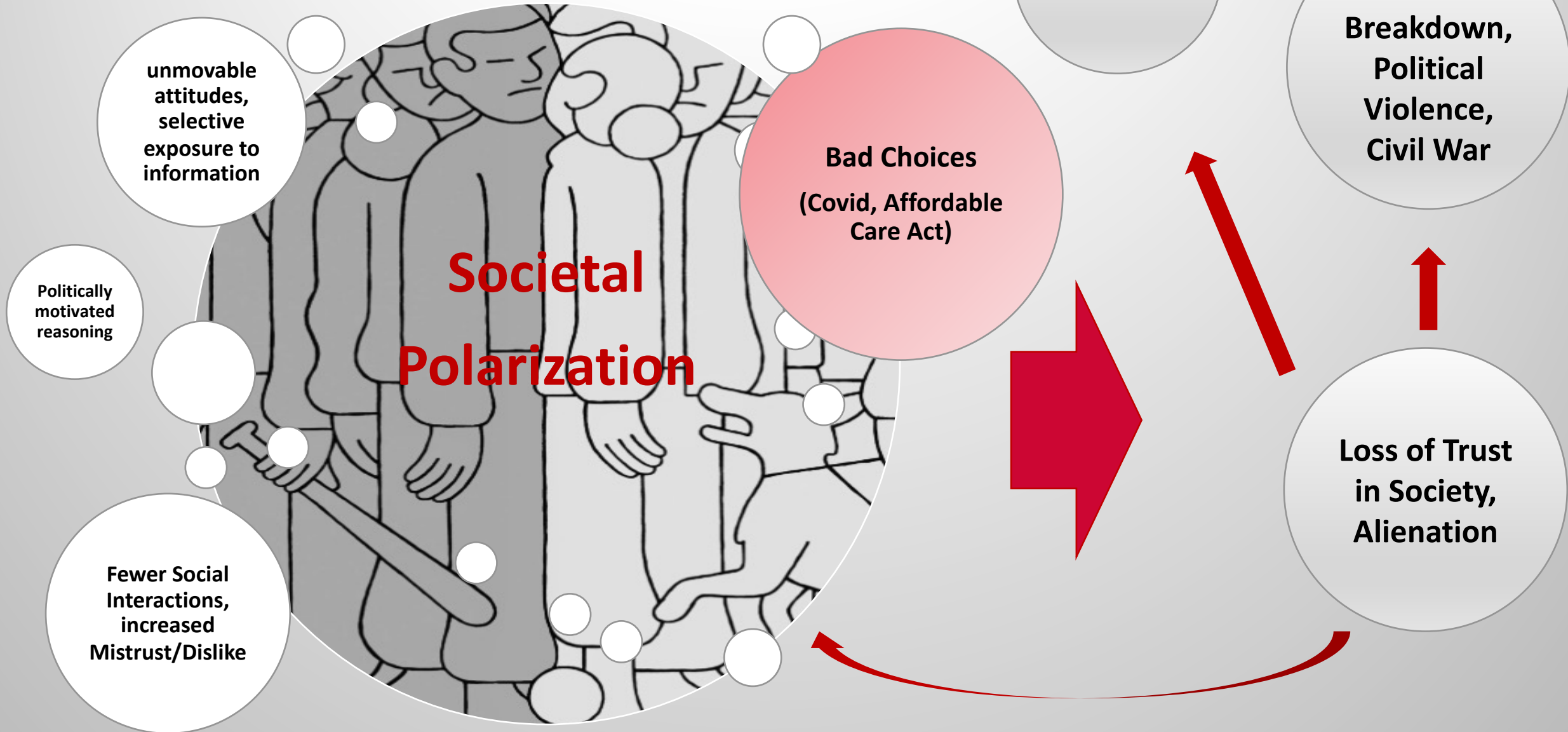


Negative Effects of Mass Polarization

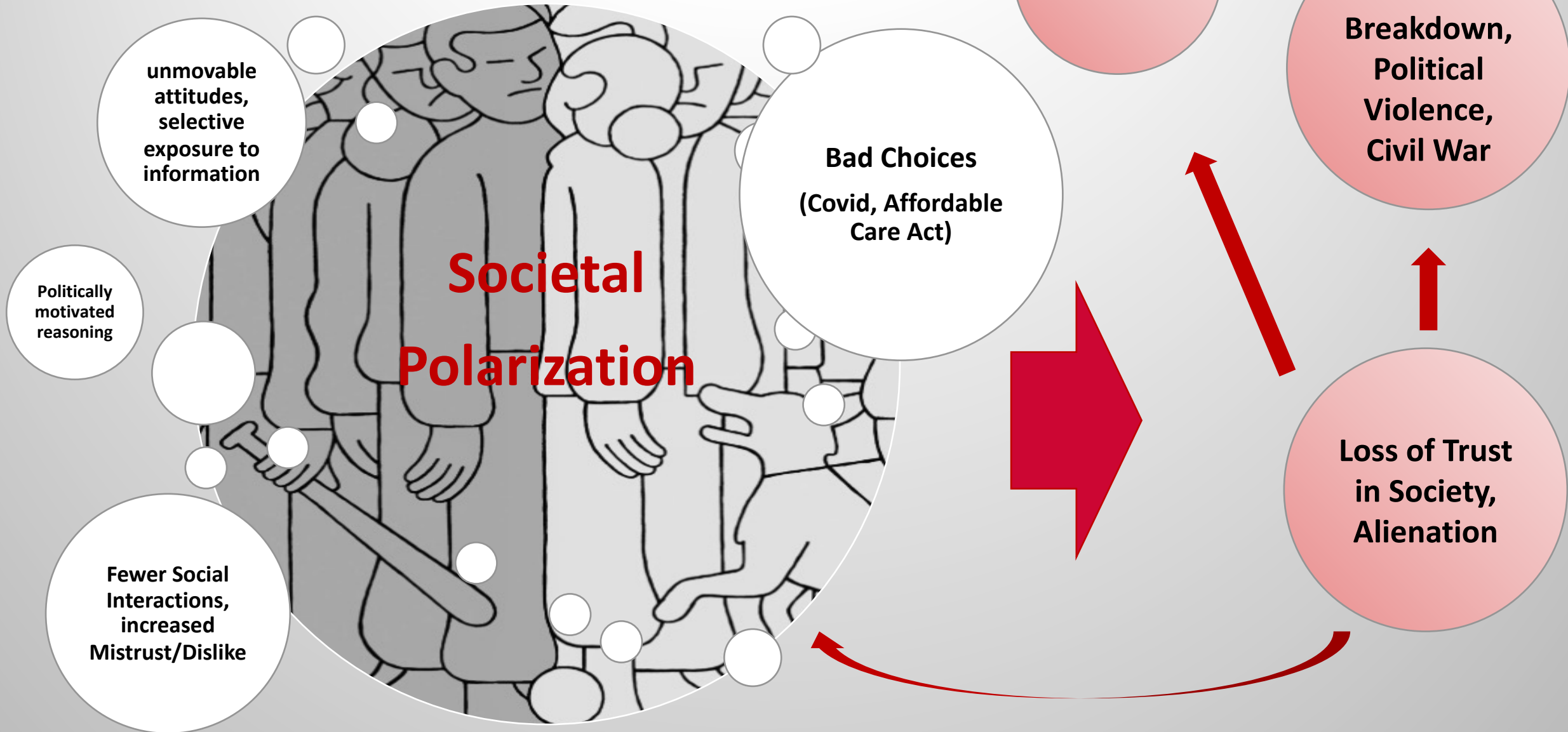




Negative Effects of Mass Polarization



Negative Effects of Mass Polarization



Discussion: how can we reduce Polarization?

3 proposals:

- reform electoral system
- strong, publicly funded media (CBC)
- socialize more!

Reform of Electoral System



Women Voting
Credit: Edmond
Dantes (Creative
Commons)

Electoral Reform?

→ characteristics of winner-takes-all system become more undesirable in an era of polarization

- direct political conflict and competition over “marginal” vote → incentives to be more confrontational, outspend opponent, and look toward extremes of the political spectrum in search of one more voter to mobilize
- manufactured majority → 100% of power with <40% of votes, policy reversals
- majority of voters not represented by local MP and not represented by the party who holds 100% of the power in parliament → low turnout, disappointment with politics, and alienation

→ well-designed proportional representation (or Hybrid) System would

- reduce direct political conflict and competition over marginal vote → incentives to be more appealing to larger public
- Coalition governments require seeking compromise/consensus
- increase representation and accountability btw elections → reduce voter alienation and increase turnout

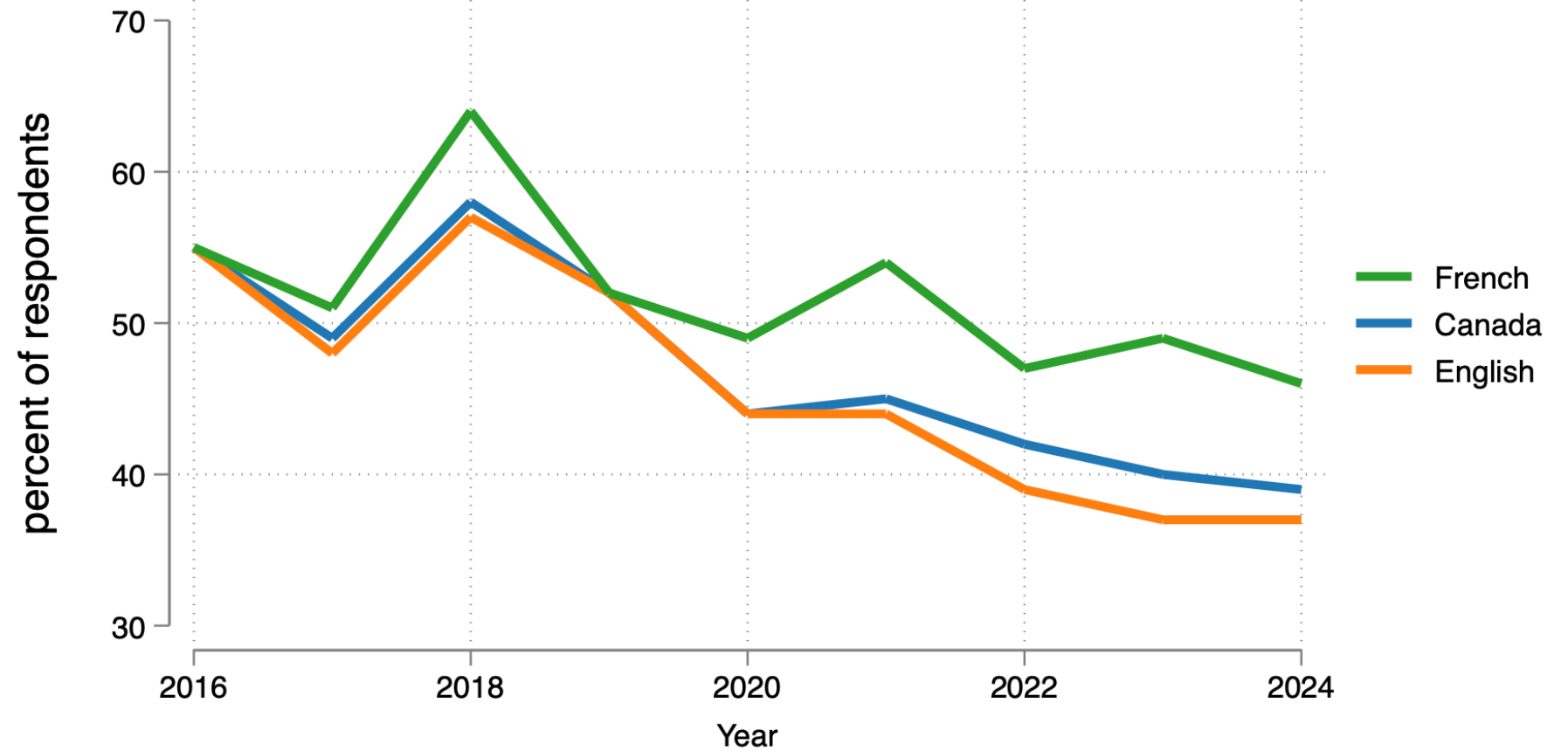
Evidence: “consensus” democracies associated with lower level of elite polarization and lower affective polarization (Bernaerts et al., 2023)

High Quality Unbiased Media



Trust in News - Time Trend

Canadians' Trust in News 2016 - 2024

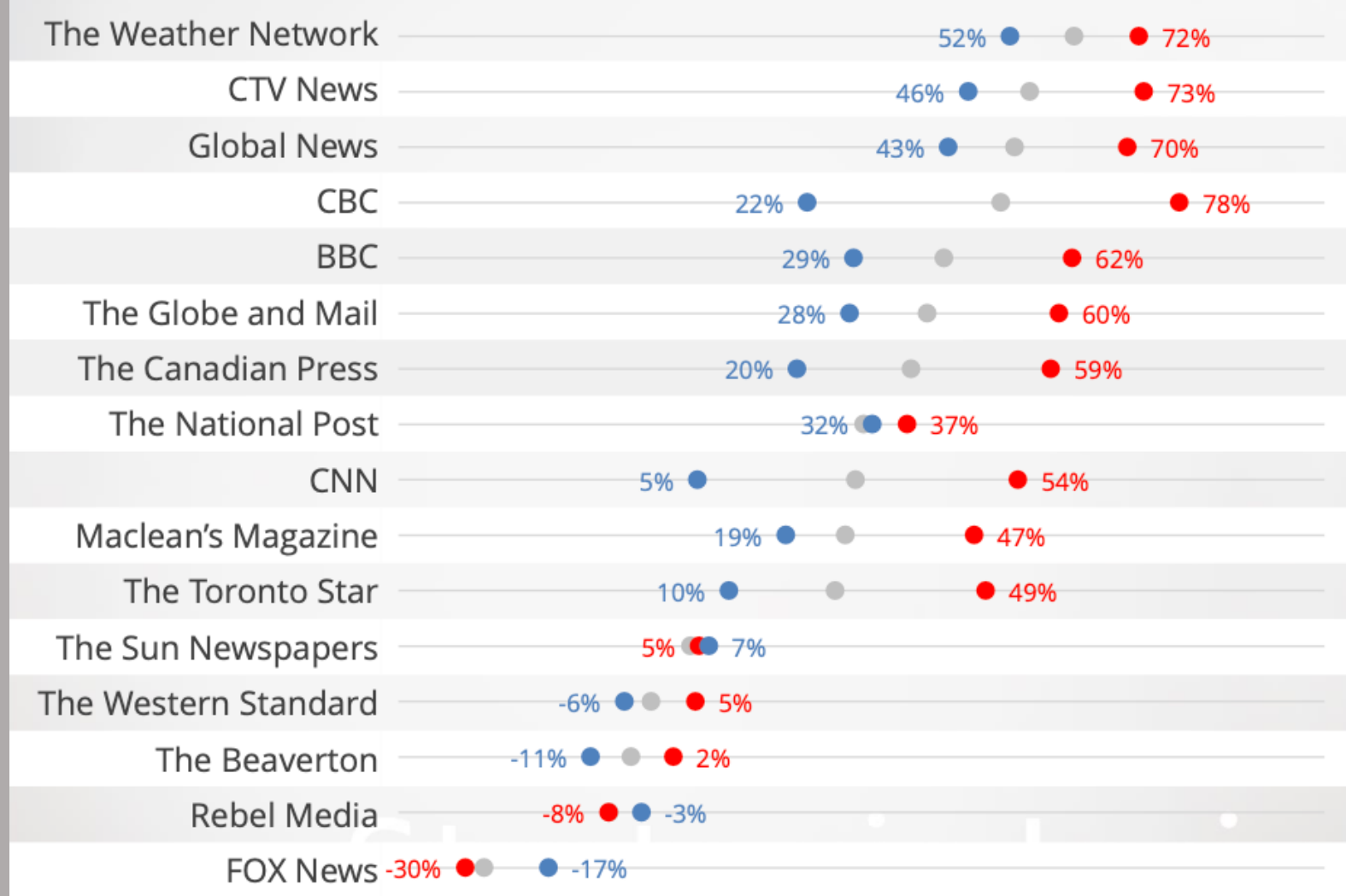


Graph drawn from data available through "Digital News Report" Reuters Institute and University of Oxford, 2024. Yearly online survey waves of 2000-2500 Canadians.

Survey Question: Do you trust news most of the time?

Trust in Canadian News Media

Liberals more trusting than Conservatives of most media



How trustworthy do you find the news reported by the following media organizations? Base: All respondents (n=3,000)

- LPC
- CPC
- OVERALL

Source: Canadian survey on Trust in Media, Pollara Insights 2022, net trust score

Trust in German News Media

% of adults in each ideological group who generally trust each news outlet

Partisan Gap is narrow for major national broadcaster (ARD)



Data source: Pew Research Survey 2017, Graph from Fact Sheets: News Media and Political Attitudes in Europe.

Reduce Partisan Slant/Information

- Need strong (nationally funded) media that are unbiased and universally trusted
 - provide evidence-based, neutral information that facilitates a common understanding of issues and challenges facing society
 - serve as a standard/benchmark against which all other media sources can be compared
 - investigative high-quality journalism critical for accountability
 - can call out fake news and sophisticated dis/misinformation
- What can I do?
 - support high quality journalism and news-outlets (donate, subscribe)
 - diversify your news sources
 - fact check and evaluate before sharing online

Talk to Each Other More



Family Celebrating
Christmas Dinner
While Taking Selfie
(Creative Commons)

The “Thanksgiving” Effect

→ increased intergroup contact and discussions reduced distrust and moves opinions - at least temporarily

(Levendusky & Steccular 2021, Santoro & Brockman 2022, Cornelson 2022)

→ What can I do?

- keep your out-partisan friends and engage with them
- promote civil discourse at home
- call out incivility/name-calling and fearmongering in politics

Want to know more?

- ❑ *Whipped: Party Discipline in Canada*, by Alex Marchand (UBC Press, 2020)
- ❑ *Lost on Division: Party Unity in the Canadian Parliament*, by Jean Francois Godbout (University of Toronto Press, 2020)
- ❑ Public Policy Forum's Democracy Project: <https://ppforum.ca/project/polarization-in-canada/>
- ❑ *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know*, by Nolan McCarthy (University of Oxford Press, 2019)
- ❑ *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization*, by Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue (Brookings Institutions Press, 2019)
- ❑ The Perception Gap <https://perceptiongap.us>

Thank You!

The “Fox News Effect”

Martin and Ali Yurukoglu (2017) estimate the change in vote share of the Republican Party for 3 different elections

In Scenario 1: Fox News is eliminated from cable lineups.

In Scenario 2. In the second, MSNBC’s ideological positioning matches that of CNN throughout the 2000–2008 period.

Estimated Effects of Two Counterfactual Scenarios on Republican Vote Share		
Election	No Fox News	MSNBC tracks CNN
2000	- 0.46	0.06
2004	- 3.59	-1.24
2008	- 6.43	-0.9

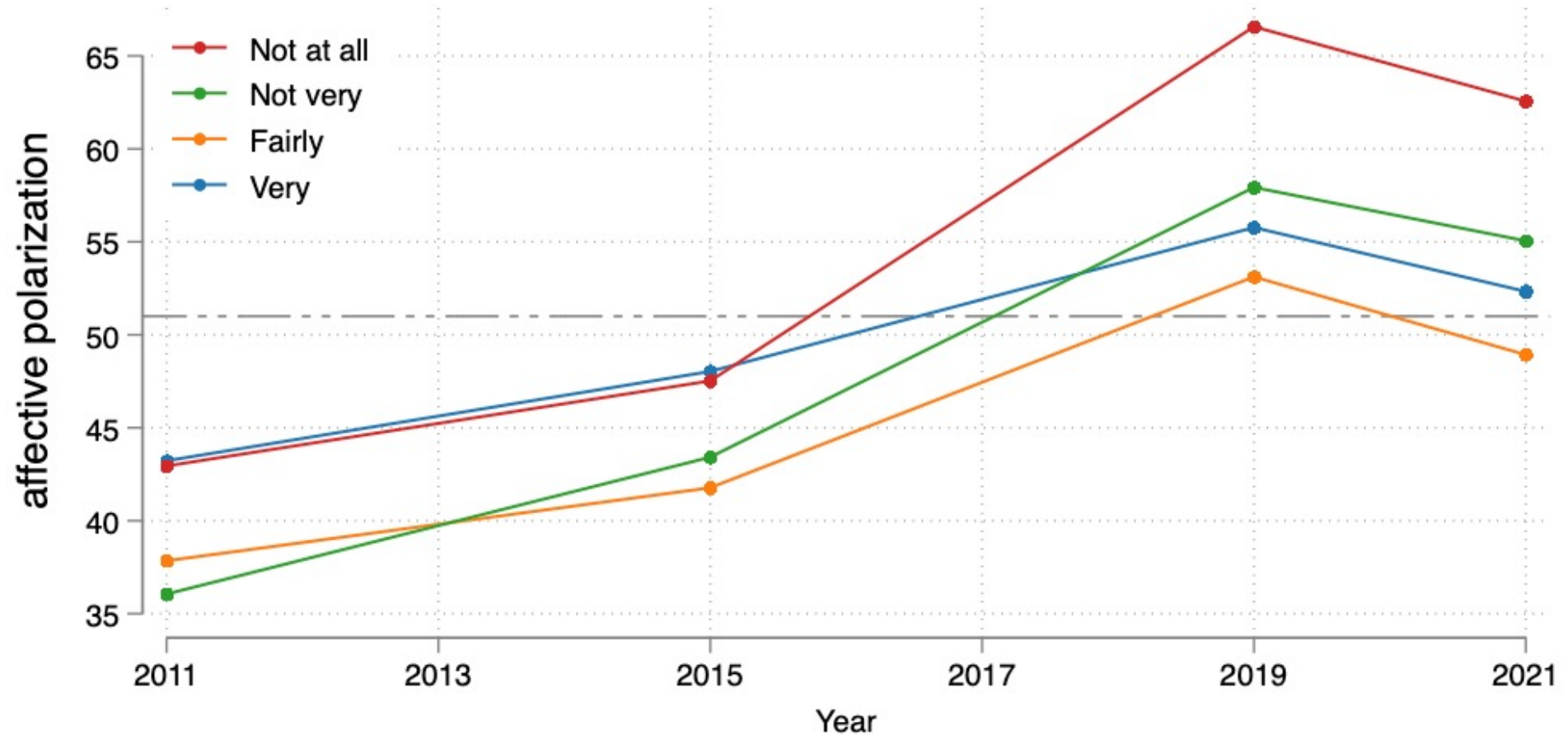
Simulations show estimated partisan slant significantly increases mass polarization (through partisan sorting) due to **feedback loop**: partisan slant attracts partisan viewers, who become more ideologically fixed or extreme, which further cements viewership.

Study shows partisan slant in cable news-networks can explain 2/3rds of partisan sorting over period 2000-2008.

What About Canada...?

To what extent do citizens feel more negatively toward other political parties other than their own?

Mass Polarization Trends by Satisfaction with Democracy



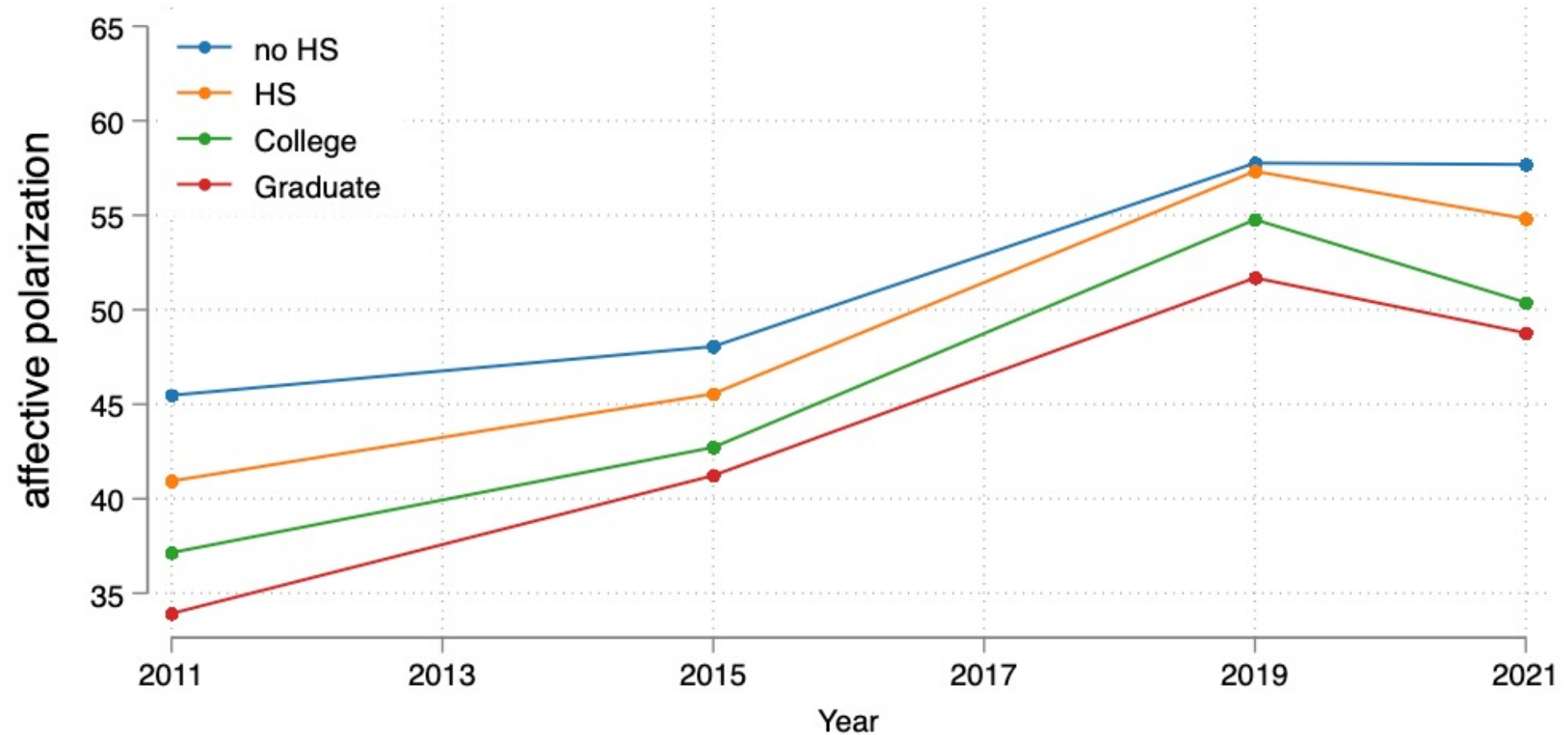
Graph: own calculations using data from the Canadian Election Survey, years 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2021

71,939 observations

Trends of Affective Polarization in Canada

To what extent do citizens feel more negatively toward other political parties other than their own?

Mass Polarization Trends by Highest Degree 2011-2021



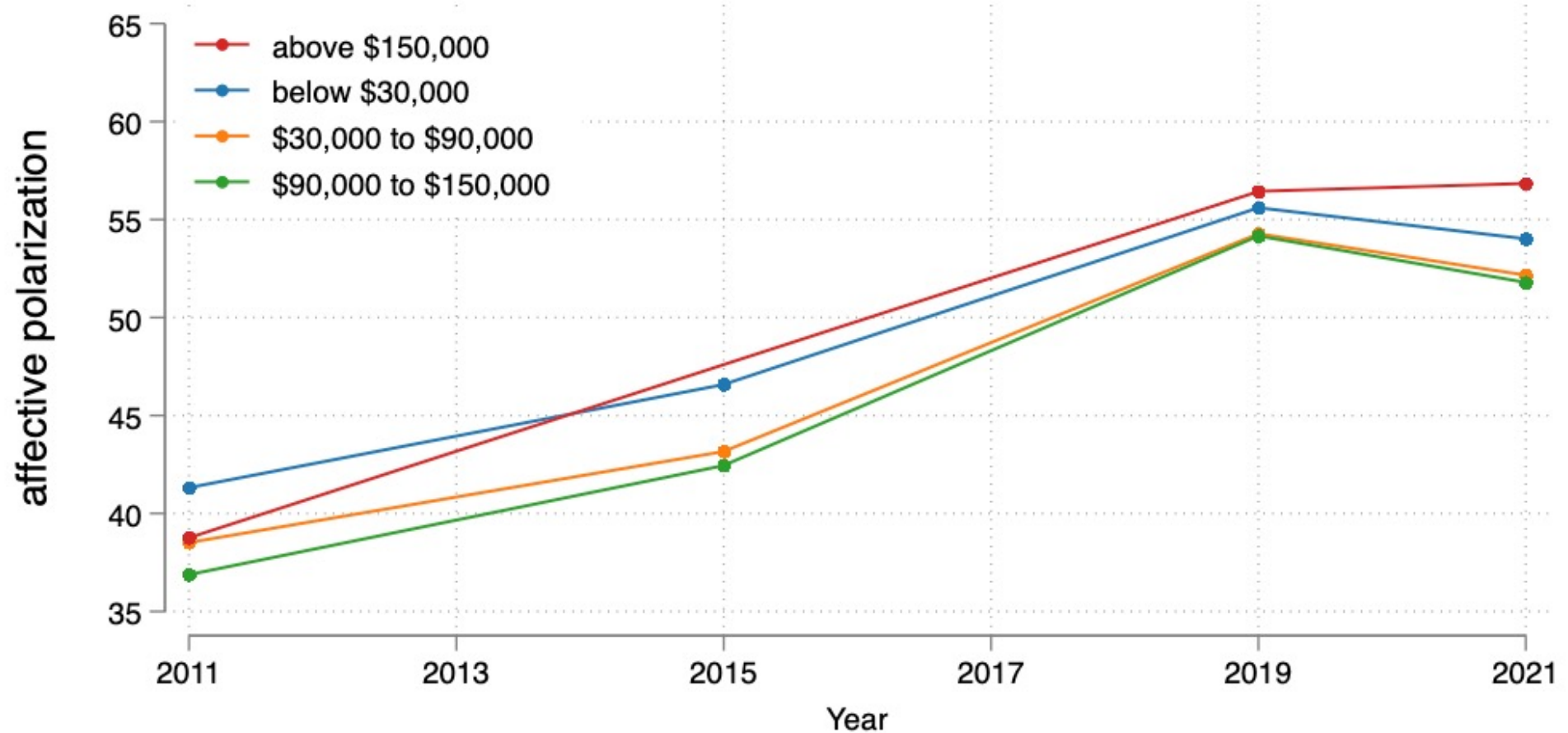
Graph: own calculations using data from the Canadian Election Survey, years 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2021

73,579 observations

What About Canada...?

To what extent do citizens feel more negatively toward other political parties other than their own?

Mass Polarization Trends by Income



Graph: own calculations using data from the Canadian Election Survey, years 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2021

14,979 observations

Perceived vs Actual Polarization

The public tends to misperceive the extent of partisanship

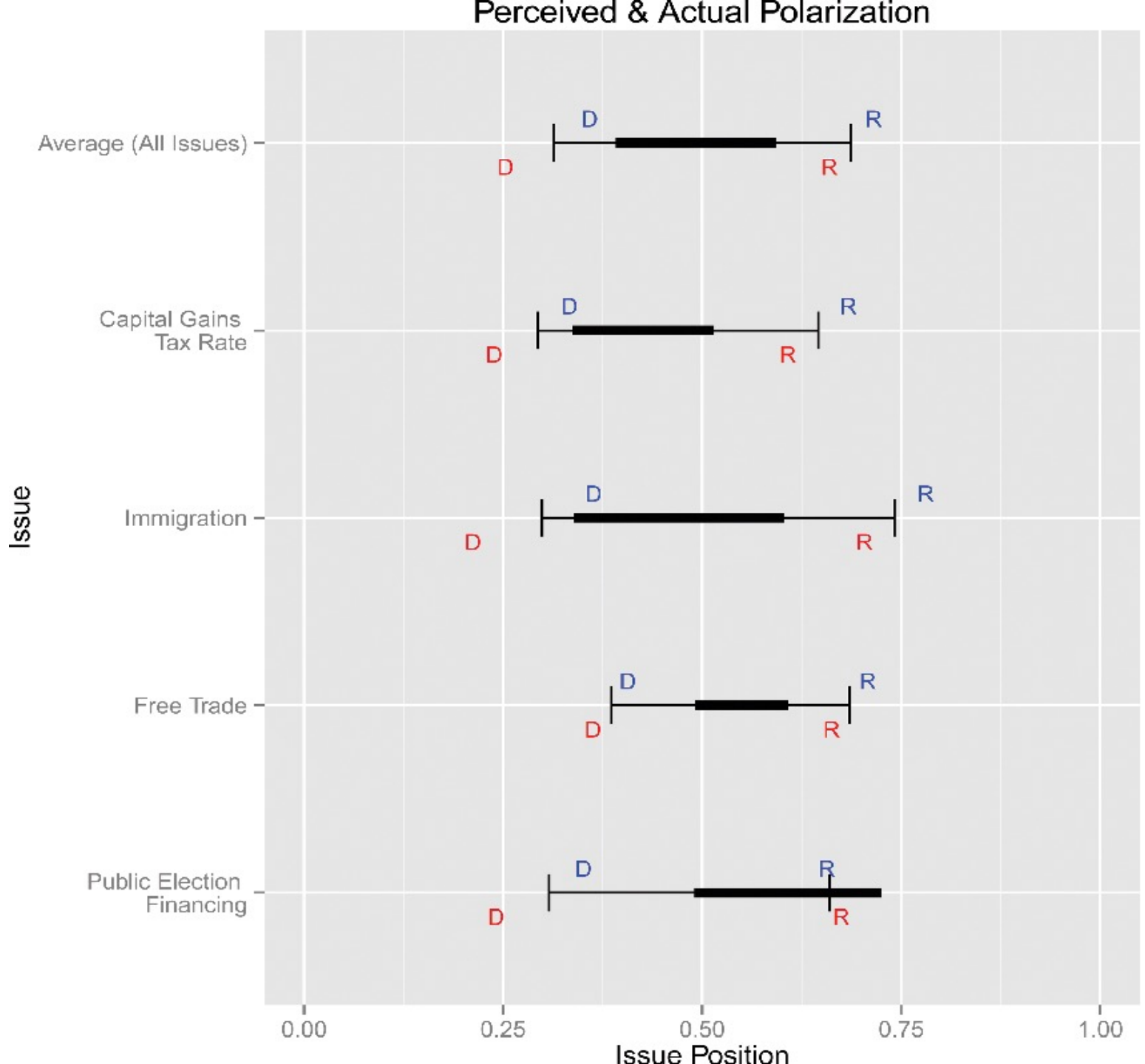


Figure reproduced from Levendusky and Malhotra (2016) Public Opinion Quarterly.