

CHAPTER

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**What's standing  
in the way of our  
acting together?**

## **What's standing in the way of our acting together?**

The paradox of our time is paralysis: we know what the problems are, we have more tools than ever to address them, but we are failing to act.

Why? What is getting in the way?

This chapter points to polarization and how uncertainty and insecurity can exacerbate it. Trust is down; political extremism is up. Hyperinformation is sowing division. Spaces for public deliberation are shrinking right when they are needed most.

The unprecedented multilayered uncertainties—coming from the Anthropocene context, social and technological transformations and political polarization—test our social, economic and political institutions, as well as the patterns of behaviour that shape and are shaped by those institutions. The link between the two, as chapter 3 discusses, is the result of procedures of social choice, reflected in how societies craft collective responses.

Why has it proven so difficult to craft these collective responses, which demand changes in both behaviour and institutions, despite clear evidence of harm to come for people, societies and the planet? Chapter 3 argues that current configurations of behaviour and institutions are not responding effectively to a novel context of uncertainty. This mismatch increases the importance of processes of public deliberation and social choice in shaping the behavioural and institutional changes needed in an uncertain world. Processes of social choice that harness people’s diverse goals, motivations, beliefs and emotions can be a powerful driver of social change.

However, in many countries today, processes of public deliberation and social choice are coming under strain amid intensifying political polarization and divisiveness.<sup>1</sup> Political polarization can be understood as “the extent to which citizens become ideologically entrenched in their own values and political beliefs, thereby increasing the divide with citizens who hold different values and political beliefs.”<sup>2</sup> Polarization tends to make people close in on their in-groups and be reluctant to interact, exchange and communicate with out-groups. Affective polarization—the tendency to view out-group members negatively and in-group members positively<sup>3</sup>—antagonizes people across partisan lines.<sup>4</sup> This animosity is added to the other forms of issue-based and ideological polarization between groups that have long been studied in sociology and political science.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter explores how polarization can intensify because of two intertwined developments. First, the unsettling of people’s lives and experiences of human insecurity. Second, the massive economic, social and political shift driven by a rapidly changing (digital) information context. It discusses how political polarization might diminish the space for imaginative, effective and just actions needed today, before suggesting how we might break the hold of

uncertainty on collective responses, taking us from a confused reacting mode to a purposeful harnessing of uncertainty towards a hopeful future.

## Uncertain times, divided societies

The layers of uncertainty discussed in chapter 1 are interacting to produce new shocks and dislocations. But uncertainty is not only about shocks and dislocations; it is also about growing gaps in our collective ability to “make sense” of the world when deciding our actions. Progress in recent decades has been remarkable in many aspects of human development, particularly in wellbeing achievements, despite marked (and in some cases increasing) inequalities (see chapter 1).<sup>6</sup> But despite widespread progress in wellbeing achievements, around half the population does not see progress in their living standards relative to those of their parents. About 40 percent of those who have more education than their parents do not perceive intergenerational progress, vividly showing how expectations of higher future living standards are being dashed.<sup>7</sup>

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### Uncertainty and human insecurity parallel increases in polarization

When uncertainty translates into unsettled lives and human insecurity, it can increase polarization, impacting processes of social choice. Building on the analysis in chapter 3, the following discussion highlights the importance of considering beliefs, motivations and emotions as factors accounting for why it seems hard for people to act individually and collectively in the face of uncertainty. Together, these factors shape the issues people find important, people’s attitudes and behaviours towards others, and the actions people support or undertake themselves.<sup>8</sup>

“When uncertainty translates into unsettled lives and human insecurity, it can increase polarization, impacting the processes of social choice

What is the connection between uncertain times and a range of beliefs that matter for public deliberation? Here we use the World Values Survey, whose

representative sample covers around 80 percent of the global population, to check how people’s perceptions of insecurity appear connected with beliefs that worsen polarization. Perceived human insecurity is a partial measure of individual uncertainty that mirrors how people’s fundamental freedoms (from want, fear and indignity) are being affected today (box 4.1). We first show how perceived human insecurity is connected with people’s feelings of agency and control over their lives and with their trust in others. The evidence here suggests that greater human insecurity is linked to lower individual agency and trust. We then explore associations between perceived human insecurity and people’s political preferences, showing that greater human insecurity is linked to people holding extreme political preferences. The combination of high insecurity, lower interpersonal trust and high polarization is more prevalent in low Human Development Index (HDI) countries and among lower-income people.

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*Greater human insecurity is linked with lower individual agency and trust*

Human insecurity can directly restrict human agency. High human insecurity reduces people’s ability to make autonomous decisions because of lack of resources, because of fear or because of social discrimination. These effects often extend to the overall perception of agency to make choices over their own lives: people with greater human insecurity tend to perceive lower agency (figure 4.1).<sup>9</sup>

Trust in one another influences prospects for cooperation in a group. People tend to trust people closer to them (such as family) more than people whom they do not know or who have a different social background (as with different nationalities or religions). Lower trust in socially “distant” people influences social discrimination,<sup>10</sup> among other socioeconomic outcomes.<sup>11</sup> This pattern tends to be stronger across individuals with low incomes and with greater human insecurity (figure 4.2).<sup>12</sup> In other words people with high incomes and high human security have greater trust in people from more socially distant groups.

Addressing the common challenges that we confront today requires cooperation in contexts beyond those where intragroup cooperation tends to be high—in particular, addressing planetary challenges

### Box 4.1 The Index of Perceived Human Insecurity

To track human insecurity, we use the Index of Perceived Human Insecurity. It is based on wave 6 (2010–2014) and wave 7 (2015–2022) of the World Values Survey<sup>1</sup> and reflects mainly a pre-Covid-19 context. The index is computed for 77 countries and territories, covering around 80 percent of the global population. It combines 17 variables covering violent conflict and socioeconomic, personal and community-level insecurity. These insecurities reflect challenges to freedom from want, freedom from fear and freedom from indignity.

- For insecurity from violent conflict, the index uses variables reflecting worries about a war involving the country of residence, a civil war or a terrorist attack.
- For socioeconomic insecurity the index uses variables representing explicit worries (losing a job, not being able to give children education) and actual deprivations in health, food and economic security.
- For insecurity at the personal and community levels, the index uses variables of exposure to crime, change in habits because of security concerns, overall safety perception of the neighbourhood and assessment of specific risks (including robbery, alcohol and drugs on the streets, abuse by law enforcement and racism).

**Note**

1. See Haerpfer and others (2022).

**Source:** Human Development Report Office based on UNDP (2022b).

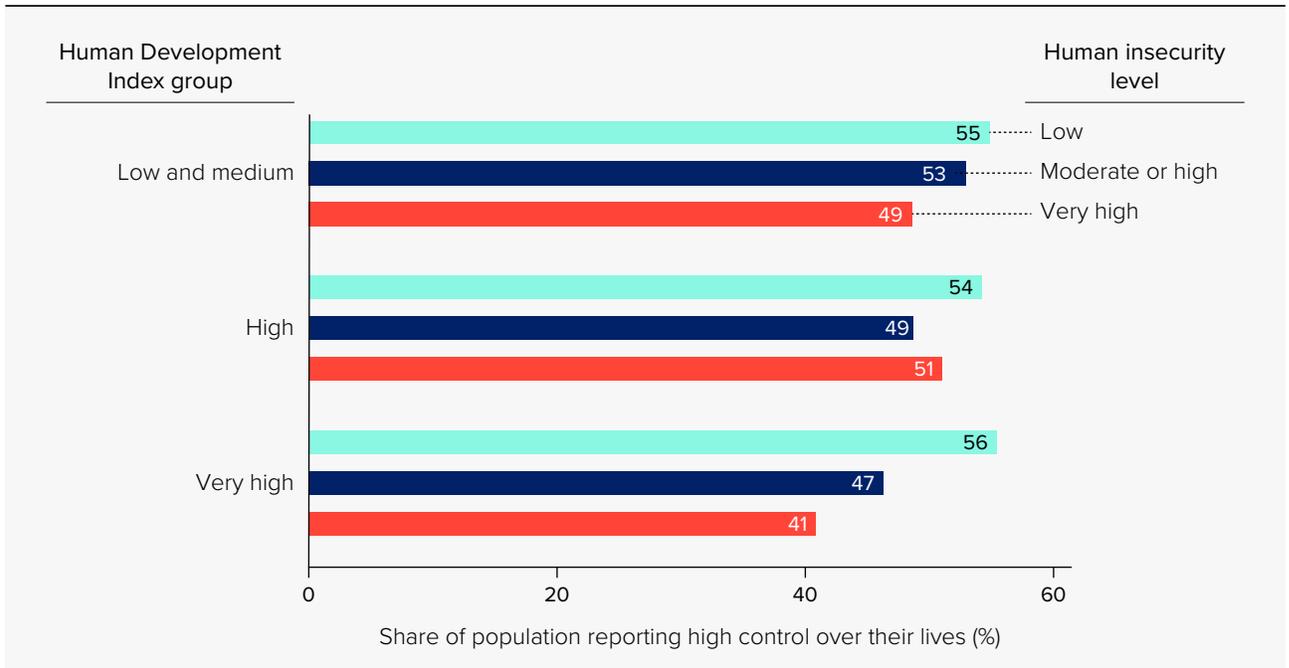
implies collaboration not only between governments but also across other institutions (chapter 6). Interpersonal trust (the most general trust, in essentially any human being) has been declining over time. Globally, fewer than 30 percent of people think that “most people can be trusted,” the lowest recorded value. There is a close association between interpersonal trust and human security.<sup>13</sup>

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*Greater human insecurity is linked to political extremism*

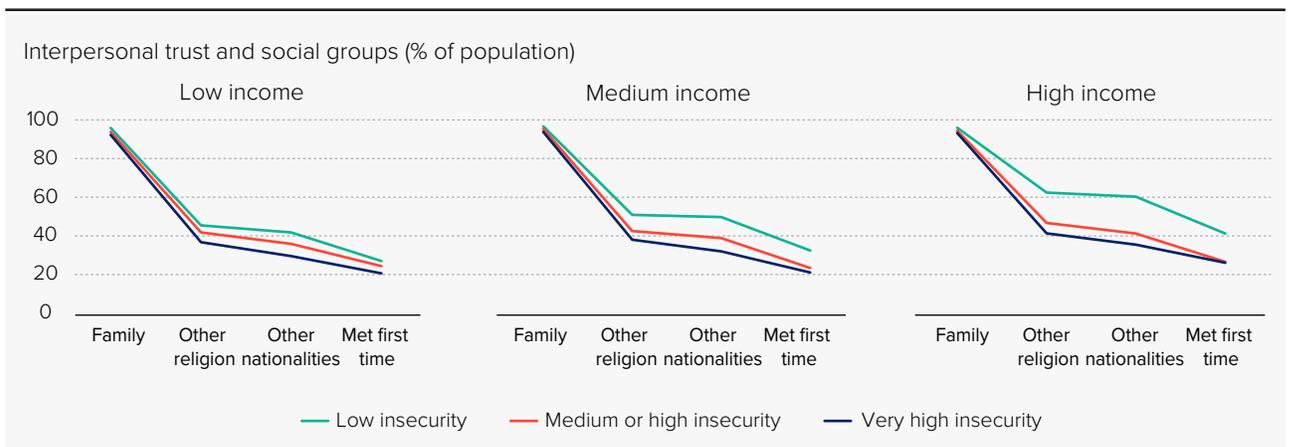
Greater human insecurity is also linked to political extremism, understood as attitudes and behaviours representing polar views or the single-minded pursuit of one goal over others.<sup>14</sup> We capture the first aspect using preferences along the left-right political spectrum. People experiencing greater human insecurity tend to have a stronger preference for the polar extremes of the political spectrum: the proportion of

**Figure 4.1 Greater insecurity is associated with lower personal agency**



Source: Human Development Report Office based on World Values Survey, waves 6 and 7. See Haerpfer and others (2022).

**Figure 4.2 Trust declines with social distance more steeply at lower incomes and higher insecurity**



Source: Human Development Report Office based on World Values Survey, waves 6 and 7. See Haerpfer and others (2022).

people with extreme political preferences is twice as large among those feeling very insecure as among those feeling relatively secure (figure 4.3).<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, people experiencing greater human insecurity tend to have preferences for extreme views about the government’s role in the economy (full government responsibility at one extreme and full individual responsibility at the other; figure 4.4).<sup>16</sup>

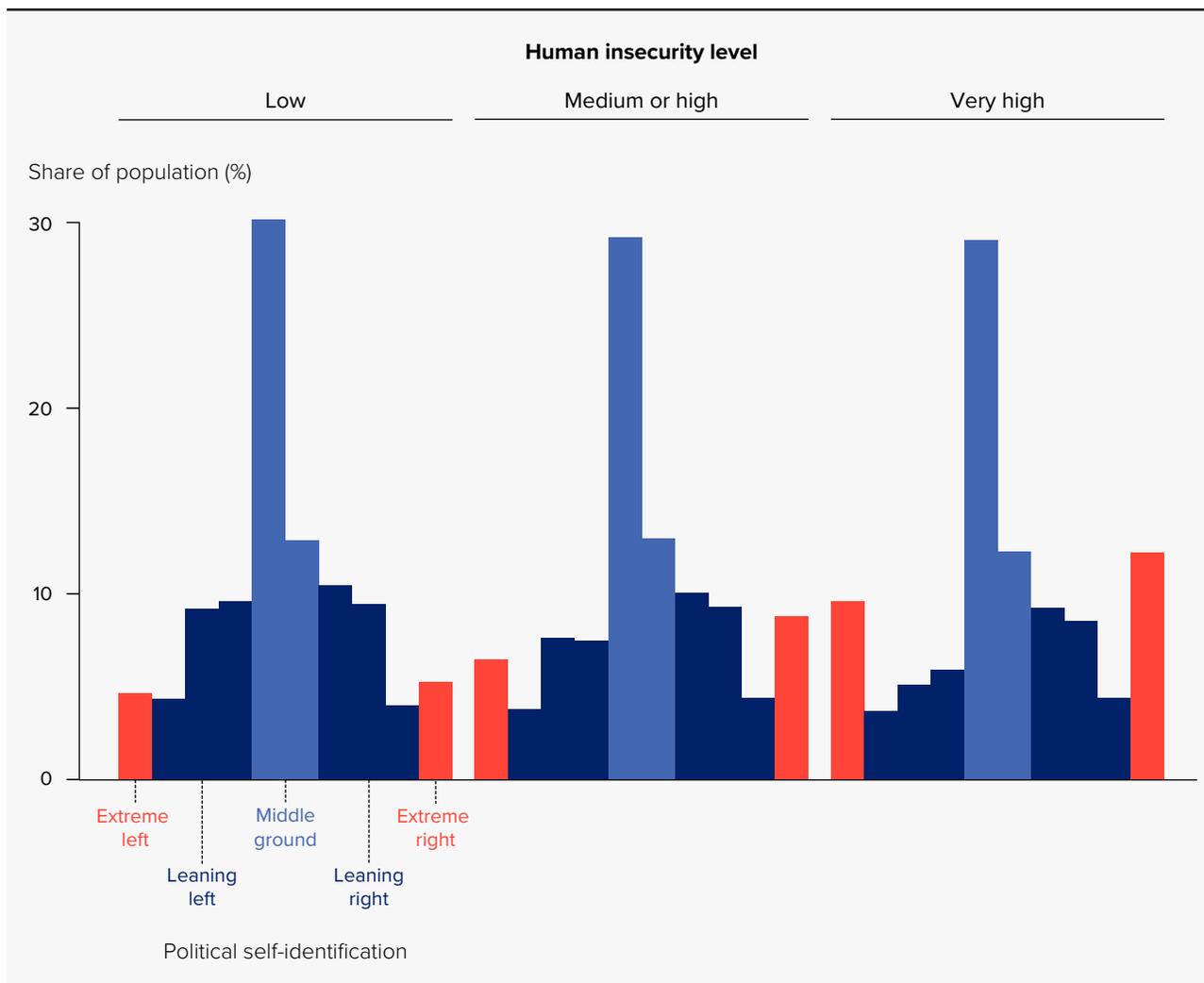
This is a barrier for public deliberation in uncertain times: where insecurity is higher, increased

polarization of views about the role of the government in the economy can lead to a vicious cycle that makes more difficult the search for social insurance mechanisms in the very societies that need them the most.<sup>17</sup>

*How does uncertainty affect polarization?*

Research on polarization points to several factors that might cause people to harden their beliefs about their

**Figure 4.3** Greater insecurity is linked to political extremism



**Source:** Human Development Report Office based on World Values Survey, waves 6 and 7. See Haerper and others (2022).

own in-groups and out-groups. Here, we consider evidence on some of the factors known to contribute to polarization:

- Behavioural drivers affected by a context of uncertainty can intensify people’s identification with their own social groups. Adding to this is that people in one group are also generally prone to forming incorrect beliefs about people in other groups, with implications for prospects of cooperation across groups.
- Institutional drivers, particularly those associated with inequalities and disruptive changes in our information systems.

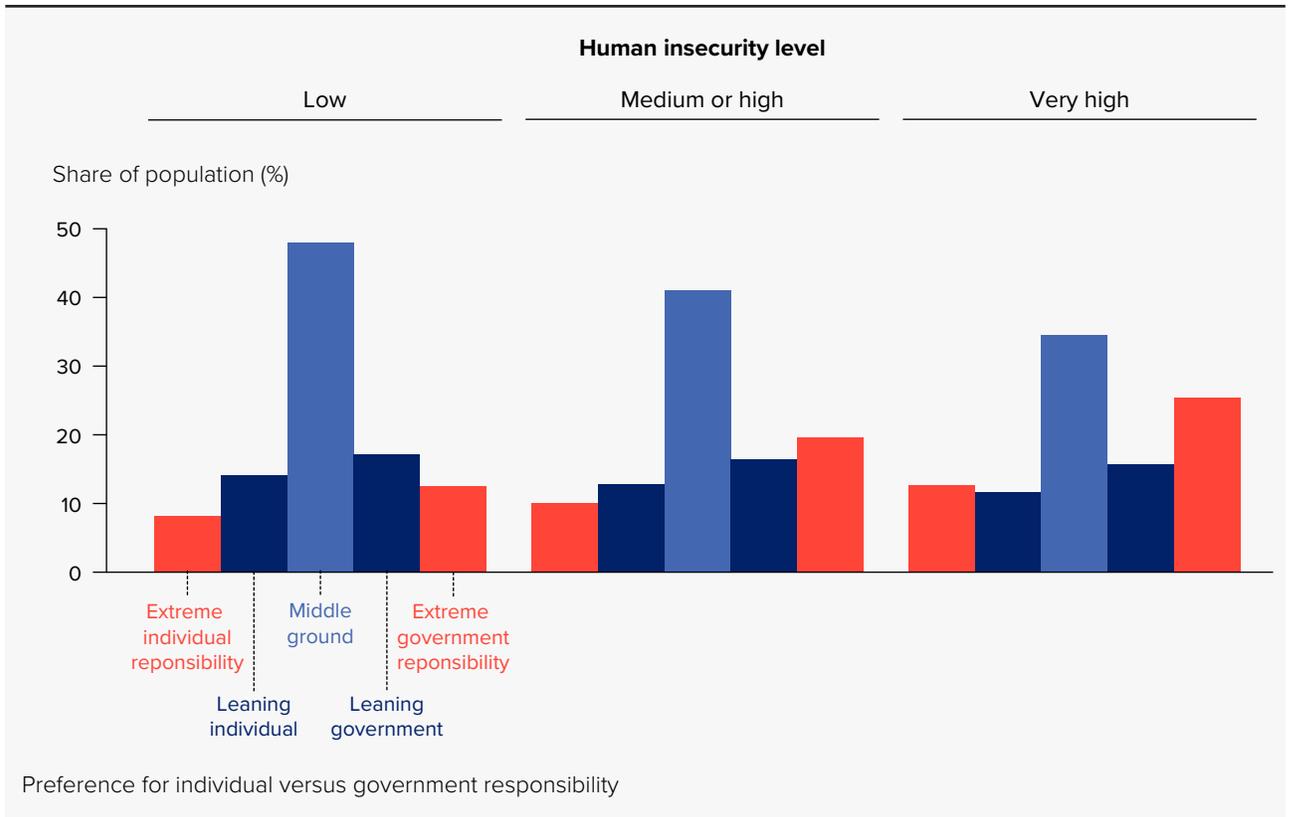
The empirical evidence presented above suggests that individual uncertainty (proxied by perceived human insecurity) is associated with a particular set

of beliefs: diminished agency, lack of trust in others and more extreme political beliefs. The next section expands this discussion to additional behavioural factors that can contribute to polarization, as well as institutional conditions that drive polarization.

#### *Behavioural factors*

There is some evidence of a causal link between multiple manifestations of uncertainty and political polarization.<sup>18</sup> It comes from different disciplines, with several noting the need for humans to reduce or “resolve” uncertainty.<sup>19</sup> For instance, the “need for closure” or the “desire for a definite answer on some topic, any answer as opposed to confusion and ambiguity...”<sup>20</sup> appears as a key motivation for human behaviour.

**Figure 4.4** Insecurity is associated with polarization on preferences over government versus individual responsibility



**Source:** Human Development Report Office based on World Values Survey, waves 6 and 7. See Haerpfer and others (2022).

According to the significance quest theory, people need social worth and significance.<sup>21</sup> This need is activated by deprivation (rooted in failure, humiliation or rejection) or incentivization (the opportunity to boost one’s significance), which are linked to manifestations of human insecurity and uncertainty in general. When activated, the quest for significance enhances ideological narratives that support the values of people’s group or culture that give meaning to their lives. As a result, people can be attracted to affiliating with social identities that become an “antidote” to uncertainty, social identities that are in part affirmed as being different—at the limit, completely opposite—from others, which can lead to polarization.<sup>22</sup>

Another form of adjustment could be through group identification, as in the uncertainty identity theory: feelings of uncertainty (particularly related to self) motivate people to identify with, switch to or reform social groups in order to cope with those feelings.<sup>23</sup> Self-uncertainty strengthens group identification, favouring groups with greater distinctiveness

and clear leadership. Through this process self-uncertainty facilitates radicalization (self-identification with more extreme groups and well-delimited identities), potentially culminating in the support of more authoritarian leaders.<sup>24</sup> More generally, experimental analysis of brain activity through magnetic resonance imaging indicates that people with greater intolerance of uncertainty are more likely to show more neural synchrony with politically like-minded peers and less with opponents, fuelling the formation of polarized beliefs.<sup>25</sup>

These mechanisms can be exploited by political entities and leaders, targeting individuals struggling with high personal uncertainty through compelling narratives that are embraced even if they include the justification of extreme behaviours, such as political violence.<sup>26</sup> Attractive extreme political ideologies often connect to people’s distress, cognitive simplicity (such as a black-and-white perception of the social world), overconfidence in judgment and intolerance towards alternative views because of perceived moral superiority.<sup>27</sup> Elites are often politically incentivized

to fuel polarization, with direct negative campaigns, uncivil discourse and vitriol against political opponents<sup>28</sup> or to leverage divisions over contentious social issues, such as immigration and race in some settings.<sup>29</sup> Elite polarization has been found to result in greater affective polarization in the electorate—when elite positions are polarized, people express more negative sentiment towards opposing parties<sup>30</sup> and become more tolerant of undemocratic behaviour.<sup>31</sup>

“The confluence of heightened uncertainty with high inequality often seems to favour support for authoritarian leaders, who are less likely to foster intragroup and intergroup cooperation

The style of leadership supported in uncertain times may also favour support for authoritarian leaders. Anthropology and social psychology have identified two routes through which leaders emerge.<sup>32</sup> One is by acquiring prestige, respect and admiration and being recognized as possessing superior skills, achievements or knowledge. The other is by becoming dominant, assertive, controlling, decisive and confident, often coercing or inducing fear. In contexts of economic uncertainty dominant leaders often appear to have greater appeal than prestige leaders.<sup>33</sup> And higher economic inequality also attracts and often favours support for dominance-oriented leaders, with inequality also providing incentives for leaders to pursue their own self-interest over the interests of the groups they lead.<sup>34</sup> The confluence of heightened uncertainty with high inequality thus often seems to favour support for authoritarian leaders, who are less likely to foster intragroup and intergroup cooperation.

Polarization has to do with a group forming negative beliefs about other out-groups, and people are generally prone to forming such beliefs in an incorrect way. A substantial body of evidence shows that people’s perceptions about others are generally biased.<sup>35</sup> People can misjudge what other individuals in society think, feel and do.<sup>36</sup> Not only is misperception of others widespread, it also tends to be asymmetric: far more people hold beliefs about others that fall on one side of the truth over the other.<sup>37</sup> In particular, people harbour greater misperceptions when considering those outside their own social groups

than those closer to them. Inaccurate perceptions about out-groups are widespread, with evidence to this effect over localized points of disagreement in 26 countries.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, people’s perception that others hold more extreme positions than they actually do itself contributes to polarization. People’s perception that those from opposing parties hold extreme positions has been found to be more strongly associated with animus towards out-party members than with actual differences in policy preferences.<sup>39</sup> People who identify with a specific group underestimate the extent to which they agree with the views of other groups’ opponents.<sup>40</sup> People also tend to misperceive how others view them. These perceptions are uniquely associated with hostility, aggression and in some settings a willingness to violate democratic norms.<sup>41</sup>

What might explain people’s tendencies to routinely misperceive others? One candidate is stereotyping, where people tend to adopt overgeneralized mental models of out-group members. Another is motivated reasoning: people are biased towards interpreting information in ways that affirm their beliefs. So, affective factors could be contributing to misperception (rather than the other way around—misperceptions causing people to have negative attitudes towards others).<sup>42</sup>

#### *Institutional factors*

The rise in polarization today comes alongside progress in other dimensions of human wellbeing—greater economic prosperity, uptake of new technologies, and improvements in health, education and gender equality—and despite the formal strengthening of socioeconomic institutions (box 4.2). Increasing polarization amid greater progress signals that what is often called “development” may not always deliver for people as expected.

In-group-out-group polarization can be framed in the context of the potential mismatch discussed in chapter 3. A rapid transformation with new layers of uncertainty can shake norms and values that are ill matched to current realities. This triggers advocates of new responses, risking polarization between advocates for change and those rejecting or alienated by change.<sup>43</sup> Intragroup cohesiveness can increase when people are confronted with threats but often at the expense of intergroup cooperation.

## Box 4.2 Progress with polarization in the global Positive Peace Index

The Positive Peace Index measures the positive peace of 163 countries, covering 99.6 percent of the world population. Positive peace is defined as the attitudes, institutions and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies. It is based on more than 45,700 data series, indices and attitudinal survey variables in conjunction with current thinking about the drivers of violent conflict, resilience and peacefulness. The index covers eight pillars, using three indicators for each. The pillars are:

- Well-functioning government.
- Equitable distribution of resources.
- Free flow of information.
- Good relations with neighbours.
- High human capital.
- Acceptance of the rights of others.
- Low corruption.
- Sound business environment.

The 24 indicators fall into three domains:

- Attitudes, which measure social views, tensions or perceptions.
- Institutions, which are associated with the functioning of the formal and informal organizations that manage and influence the socioeconomic system.
- Structures, which are embedded in the framework of society, such as poverty and equality, or are the result of aggregate activity, such as GDP.

The six indicators in the attitudes domain are factionalized elites, group grievance, quality of information, exclusion by socioeconomic condition, hostility to foreigners and freedom of the press. These indicators were used as proxies for social attitudes—that is, the way individuals and groups perceive and interact within their society.

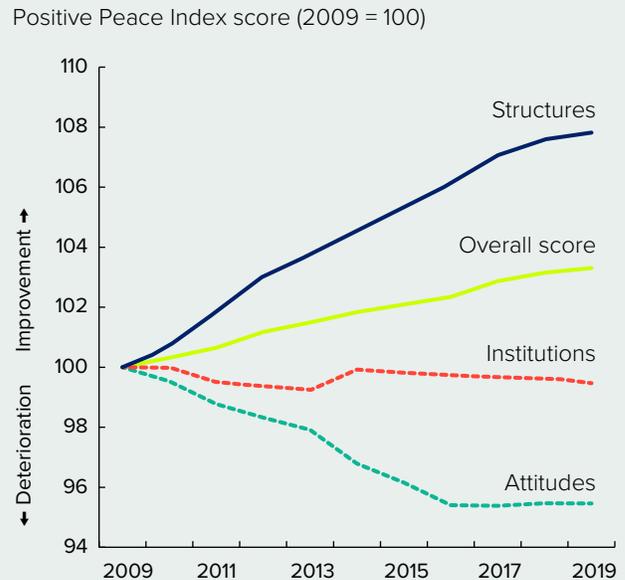
- Deteriorations in attitudes are changes in social perceptions and patterns of interactions among individuals and groups that lead to more social disharmony, more violence or fear thereof, deeper political instability or more disruptive economic inefficiencies.
- Improvements in attitudes are changes in social perceptions and patterns of interaction among individuals and groups that lead to enhanced social cohesion, less violence, more political cooperation, greater institutional transparency and economic efficiencies.

Using this classification framework, the data suggest a steep divergence in development patterns over the past 10 years (box figure 1). The global average of the structures domain suggests uninterrupted progress, as gauges of aggregate economic performance, scientific and technological development, and business indicators have continually improved since 2009. By contrast, the global averages of the attitudes domain have deteriorated markedly—a proxy for polarization. The institutions domain has also deteriorated, though modestly.

This is the paradox of economic and business progress with increasing social polarization. Despite improvements in aggregate economic performance, technological advancement and business opportunities, societies appear to have become less harmonious, and political preferences appear to have become more factionalized and intolerant.

Source: Pinto and others 2022.

**Box figure 1 Improvements on the Positive Peace Index over the past decade have been driven by progress in the structures domain rather than in the attitudes domain**



Source: Pinto and others 2022.

For instance, after violent conflict, trust and cooperation increase within groups but not between them.<sup>44</sup> War also seems to increase religiosity, another form

of affiliating with a social group based on shared beliefs.<sup>45</sup> People seek to reduce ambivalence in their perception of others by creating clear “us” and “them”

boundaries.<sup>46</sup> The tightening<sup>47</sup> of social norms and their heightened enforcement or sanctioning are also a collective response to cope with threats and uncertainty<sup>48</sup>—perhaps an evolved cultural adaptation to deal collectively with uncertainty.<sup>49</sup> But mismatches can occur when some societies overtighten norms in the face of perceived tangible threats and loosen them in the face of real threats.<sup>50</sup>

Economic hardship and income inequality might parallel trends in polarization.<sup>51</sup> Beliefs and behaviours prioritizing in-group affiliation can emerge as coping mechanisms in times of economic volatility and rising inequality, possibly leading to group polarization.<sup>52</sup> This acquires different manifestations in different geographic contexts, but large numbers of people around the world are already feeling the dislocations associated with the implications of trade, technology or both. In nearly all high-income and upper middle-income countries, wage income to workers is shrinking as a share of GDP.<sup>53</sup> Prospects will improve for some people—those with the enhanced capabilities to seize on the opportunities of the 21st century.<sup>54</sup> But other groups will feel less secure—those seeing their livelihoods or social status threatened. In times of hardship or in places where dislocations cause economic hardship, polarization intensifies, and support can increase for leaders who reject pluralism, including those hostile to foreigners and migrants.<sup>55</sup>

Inequalities, and perceptions of inequality,<sup>56</sup> may undermine the basic promise of fundamental political equality.<sup>57</sup> It is argued that we are witnessing the secession from political life<sup>58</sup> of those at the very top, isolated and disconnected through their privilege, and those at the very bottom, disaffected and disenfranchised in their agency and voice. These inequalities—especially income and wealth inequality—have an impact on political engagement,<sup>59</sup> which often translates into low political participation among the most disadvantaged.<sup>60</sup> Institutions have sometimes struggled to safeguard the integrity of the rituals of choice whereby societies can collectively and iteratively design their fate and determine the winning and losing political positions without undermining formal systems and without disagreement turning into disrespect of others and of institutions.<sup>61</sup> In recent decades inequalities have been accompanied by rising nationalism and identity-based

politics in many countries. There is substantial variation across countries in how class-based inequalities interact with other social divides, leading to diverse patterns in political cleavages; how political institutions manage these cleavages also influences dynamics between groups (spotlight 4.1).

“Inequalities, and perceptions of inequality, may undermine the basic promise of fundamental political equality

Widening inequalities and worsening prospects for many workers around the world are connected to the global rise of market power of some firms: as the winner-takes-all structure of new technologies paired with challenged antitrust policies allows some companies to thrive with high profits, while lower shares of income accrue to workers.<sup>62</sup> The rise in market power can lead to monopolistic competition, raising company profits while keeping worker wages low.<sup>63</sup> Firms that were able to innovate in new information platforms are now giants of technology. These “superstar” firms, with a high capacity to innovate and very high profits, have seen rising market power. Their markups (the difference between sales prices and production costs) are high, contributing to the decline in the labour’s share of income.<sup>64</sup>

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### Hyper-information is powering social division and polarization

As chapter 3 argues, we may be confronting a mismatch between behaviour and the institutions that exist now and those required to navigate through a new context of multilayered uncertainties.<sup>65</sup> In addition, the world faces another mismatch between the availability of information (about people’s actions, interactions and perceptions, captured through multiple platforms and social media) and our ability to effectively harness it in processes of social choice.<sup>66</sup> Changes to how we produce and share information are part of a broader social and cultural change. The ubiquity of information and communications technology today signifies a substantially different world from just a few decades ago. Technological advances are dramatically altering how people form their beliefs and values and how these are transmitted

through social connections and networks. People interacting with one another on digital networks are engaging in new cultural practices.<sup>67</sup> New social groups and networks can emerge online that are widely distributed and decentralized, involving only loosely connected individuals. As this section discusses, the social changes generated by the rapidly evolving (digital) information ecosystem are introducing new vulnerabilities to processes of public deliberation, even as they support collective action in other ways.

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*Advances in digital technology are disrupting social networks*

In many respects digital social media can support processes of public deliberation. The free flow of information is fundamental to democratic processes. Accurate information allows people to develop well-informed policy preferences, hold those in power accountable and participate meaningfully in democratic debate. Information is an important part of any strategy to address the complex challenges before us. For instance, information about the extent and scale of climate change is important for spurring actions to minimize human-induced pressures on the planet. And technologies for sharing information, such as social media, play an important role in supporting collective action. Digital social media provide new ways for groups to interact, find common ground and even organize into movements. There are several such examples of digital media supporting collective action, from protesting racial or ethnic violence to advocating for workers' rights and the rights of gender-diverse groups and indigenous peoples. Communications technology promises a means for marginalized, minoritized or threatened groups to organize and effect change.

However, recent advances in digital communications technology have also been disruptive to our social networks, more so than communications advances in the past (box 4.3). There are at least four key changes in our social systems as a result of rapid advances in information and communications technology.<sup>68</sup> They have dramatically altered the stability and functionality of social networks.

- *Changes in scale.* Social networks have expanded massively in scale, to nearly 7.8 billion people.<sup>69</sup> The sheer number of people involved complicates

decisionmaking, cooperation and coordination.<sup>70</sup> Mechanisms for cooperation or coordination may be scale-dependent, and new institutions may be required to meet these functions as social networks grow so large.<sup>71</sup> Changes in scale can undermine cooperation and impede consensus.<sup>72</sup>

“Digital social media provide new ways for groups to interact, find common ground and even organize into movements, but recent advances in digital communications technology have also been disruptive to our social networks, more so than communications advances in the past

- *Changes in structure.* The structure of human social networks has changed. A large population combined with technology that connects otherwise disparate groups allows for network structures that were not previously possible. Where humans had social connections with at most a few hundred others in the past, online media platforms now connect much larger networks of people to one another, as do traditional media sources. Positive aspects of these networks include the greater possibility of collaboration across borders, the diffusion of scientific ideas and expansion of the networks of those who may otherwise be isolated. However, some features of these networks, such as long ties and inequality of influence, can facilitate harm.<sup>73</sup> For instance, these networks can foster echo chambers and spread misleading or inaccurate information.
- *Information fidelity.* New communications technology allows for information to be transmitted without decay or noise across several degrees of separation.<sup>74</sup> This makes it easy for false and misleading information to spread fast and widely. Rapid information flows may overwhelm cognitive processes and lead to less accurate decisions.<sup>75</sup> Because information is cheaper to produce and distribute, low quality information can spread more easily.
- *Algorithmic decisionmaking.* Algorithms are widely used to filter, curate and display information online. When designed to share information based on user preferences and usage patterns, they work as feedback loops and drive new content exposures

### Box 4.3 Advances in digital communications risk destabilizing societies

Our species has enjoyed a comparatively stable existence for more than 100,000 years. Humans lived and spread in loosely connected hunter-gatherer groups numbering in the tens or low hundreds. Our biology at that time was not fundamentally different from what it is today, exhibiting rich cultural features such as tool use, social bonds, language, intergroup conflict, art and knowledge sharing.

The stability of our species, by almost any measure, changed dramatically with the first agricultural revolution 12,000 years ago. Growing crops and raising animals led many hunter-gather groups to abandon a mobile lifestyle to form settlements. Organized labour distribution allowed larger groups to coexist in a given geographic area. Converting land for agricultural use provided nutrition to support rapid population growth. Further technological advances fundamentally altered how most humans interact. Writing, for instance, opened the potential for ledgers, economies, codified laws and sequestering of wealth. The printing press enabled large-scale distribution of information by those able to afford the upfront production costs.

The Industrial Revolution enabled us to extract and convert natural resources at a dramatically faster pace. Photography, radio, telephony, powered transit and television fostered communication across vast spaces at high speed. These advances caused subsequent generations to bear less and less similarity to previous ones. Although technology has brought us many things, stability is not among them.

Discussions of digital communications technology, from social media and search engines to artificial intelligence and cryptocurrency, often occur against this backdrop. Scholars, technologists, politicians and lay people often argue that the internet is simply our generation's printing press. Harms are seen as mere growing pains and a far cry from existential. Our continuing existence is held up as evidence of a collective behavioural invisible hand that will guide us forward much as it brought us here.

However, there are reasons to believe that digital communication technologies today are both quantitatively and qualitatively distinct from past advances. Engineering decisions that reshape our society can now be deployed instantaneously and without oversight to billions of users, dramatically outpacing historical adoption timelines and creating novel challenges for evidence-based regulation. Further differentiating current advances from past ones, modern communication technology leverages vast datasets and complex algorithms to couple social systems to technological ones.

Most important, past technological advances have not produced stable social dynamics, particularly in our interactions with the natural world. Digital communications technology, while nascent, has more potential than any past advance to alter social dynamics. Given the precarious state of our natural world and global inequalities, disruptions that bring about further instability are existential threats for many.

**Source:** Bak-Coleman 2022.

that become more extreme over time.<sup>76</sup> Given people's tendency to seek friendly social environments, algorithmic feedback may narrow the information and networks that users are exposed to: so they can induce biases in perceived reality and contribute to polarization.<sup>77</sup> The algorithms that online media platforms use are typically proprietary, and there is limited transparency in how algorithmic decisions for information flows might be altering human collective behaviour.<sup>78</sup>

#### *Disruptive changes in information systems can compromise public deliberation*

The changes described above are altering processes of public deliberation. More information and larger

networks are not unequivocally empowering. Alongside benign or socially beneficial information flows, unreliable and unverified information can also be transmitted with ease through today's social networks. One area of concern is the proliferation of misinformation.<sup>79</sup> Online spaces have become hotbeds of politically motivated misinformation, with negative effects on social dynamics and processes, such as elections<sup>80</sup> and treatment of minorities.<sup>81</sup> While misinformation itself is not a new phenomenon, online media have increased the reach, influence and impact of inaccurate information.<sup>82</sup> Misinformation can emerge from a range of actors, including governments, groups and bots designed to convince people that they are authentic users.<sup>83</sup> The spread of false information can be especially harmful in times of

crisis, as clearly demonstrated during the Covid-19 pandemic. In many parts of the world, waves of unreliable information preceded increases in Covid-19 infections.<sup>84</sup>

“Social media might lead people to perceive political divisions to be more extreme, to become more affectively polarized and enclosed in their own views and to have hostile or negative discourse about others be rewarded or reinforced through increased engagement in social media

Human cognition can facilitate the spread and influence of misinformation. In contrast to models of rational choice, people routinely rely on mental shortcuts to bypass some of the information they encounter when making decisions (see chapter 3).<sup>85</sup> Heuristics allow people to reduce the complexity of these judgments to a more manageable scale. It is in conjunction with people’s cognitive and behavioural tendencies that today’s advanced communications technologies can strain how societies process information and form beliefs. For instance, that fake posts spread wider and faster than truthful news online has been attributed to humans being more likely to spread fake information rather than to those outcomes being an artefact of algorithmic choices.<sup>86</sup> People tend to turn towards information that reinforces their existing beliefs—a manifestation of confirmation bias. “Repulsion” away from opposing viewpoints is also a powerful motivator.<sup>87</sup>

Algorithmic decisionmaking and feedback in online spaces can influence the flow of information in unpredictable, and often opaque, ways. Some design characteristics of online media platforms can facilitate polarization. Recommendation algorithms can shape how information spreads on social networks, encouraging people to vote against their interests.<sup>88</sup> Research from Twitter’s Machine Learning, Ethics, Transparency and Accountability Team indicated that their content recommendation algorithms appear to amplify right-leaning politicians across the majority of countries surveyed.<sup>89</sup> Although they could not identify why the algorithm exhibited this behaviour, it is conceivable that such unexpected algorithmic behaviour could affect democratic outcomes in ways that external observers cannot evaluate.

Interactions on social media can increase perceptions of difference.<sup>90</sup> Selective exposure to like-minded attitudinal content increases polarization by reinforcing existing attitudes.<sup>91</sup> There is evidence of political sorting on social networks: people adjust their online social ties to avoid encountering news from nonpreferred sources, leading to homogenized online networks.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, negative discourse about the out-group can get positive reinforcements through increased engagement on social media in comparison to language about the in-group.<sup>93</sup>

Put plainly, social media might lead people to perceive political divisions to be more extreme, to become more affectively polarized and enclosed in their own views and to have hostile or negative discourse about others be rewarded or reinforced through increased engagement in social media. Although social media are certainly not responsible for all polarization, they have provided a space for new tactics and paths towards misinformation and polarization.<sup>94</sup>

## **Polarization harms public deliberation in uncertain times**

As the analysis here shows, uncertainty creates fertile ground for political polarization, with worrying consequences for public deliberation, precisely when societies must come together to tackle emerging threats. Polarization is much more than simple differences in preferences or beliefs. After all, differences between groups of people need not impede our ability to work together and generate sound policy. Some differences between people are often beneficial.<sup>95</sup> And holding many different interests, identities and social connections can constrain social fragmentation. Even where people disagree on ideological grounds or policy issues, they are less likely to experience political isolation by virtue of their rich social interactions and overlapping identities.<sup>96</sup> When people share beliefs across groups, the space for healthy interaction and deliberation increases.

Rather than a matter of differing preferences or beliefs, the polarization documented in many societies today is more pernicious: “the normal multiplicity of differences in the society increasingly align along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of ‘us’ versus

‘them.’”<sup>97</sup> In other words polarization has to do with deepening social divisions between groups, where intergroup relationships become hostile and disharmonious, distrust between groups intensifies, opposing groups tend towards more extreme positions and the scope for cooperation diminishes.

In many settings polarization is spilling over into spaces that would otherwise have been ones of coexistence, such as families and neighbourhoods.<sup>98</sup> When social networks become segregated, groups have limited information about others’ preferences, diminishing impulses towards cooperation and coordination. Rather than any differences over values, it is the breakdown in communication between groups that impedes public deliberation.<sup>99</sup> Coming to consensus on issues takes longer when opposing groups are homogenized, and deliberation within homogeneous groups tends to lead people to adopt more extreme positions that they otherwise would on their own.<sup>100</sup> Polarization contributes to discontent with democratic systems. In a polarized society one group (“us”) may see the actions of other opposing groups (“them”) as impeding its efforts to shape policy within democratic systems.

“Severe polarization can make people blind to the fact that there are strategies where all sides can gain

Frustration with democratic processes can be the result, especially where impulses for collaboration have already been weakened by processes of group homogenization.<sup>101</sup> Democratic institutions themselves can struggle to accommodate the priorities of deeply polarized groups, resulting in deadlocks and public disaffection.<sup>102</sup> In-group-out-group polarization can become a driving factor in supporting authoritarian leaders,<sup>103</sup> thus putting democratic processes under strain.<sup>104</sup> Accounting for the rise of radical and populist parties, scholars have shown that declining trust in institutions is associated with diminishing support for traditional insider parties.<sup>105</sup> People’s tolerance for undemocratic actions increases, creating conditions for democratic decline or even reversal. There is evidence of the erosion of attitudes towards democracy and peaceful deliberation in high HDI countries associated with human insecurity (spotlight 4.2).<sup>106</sup> In national politics polarization advantages leaders that shun negotiation and compromise

and does lasting damage to the norms that underpin democracy, such as tolerance for differing views.<sup>107</sup>

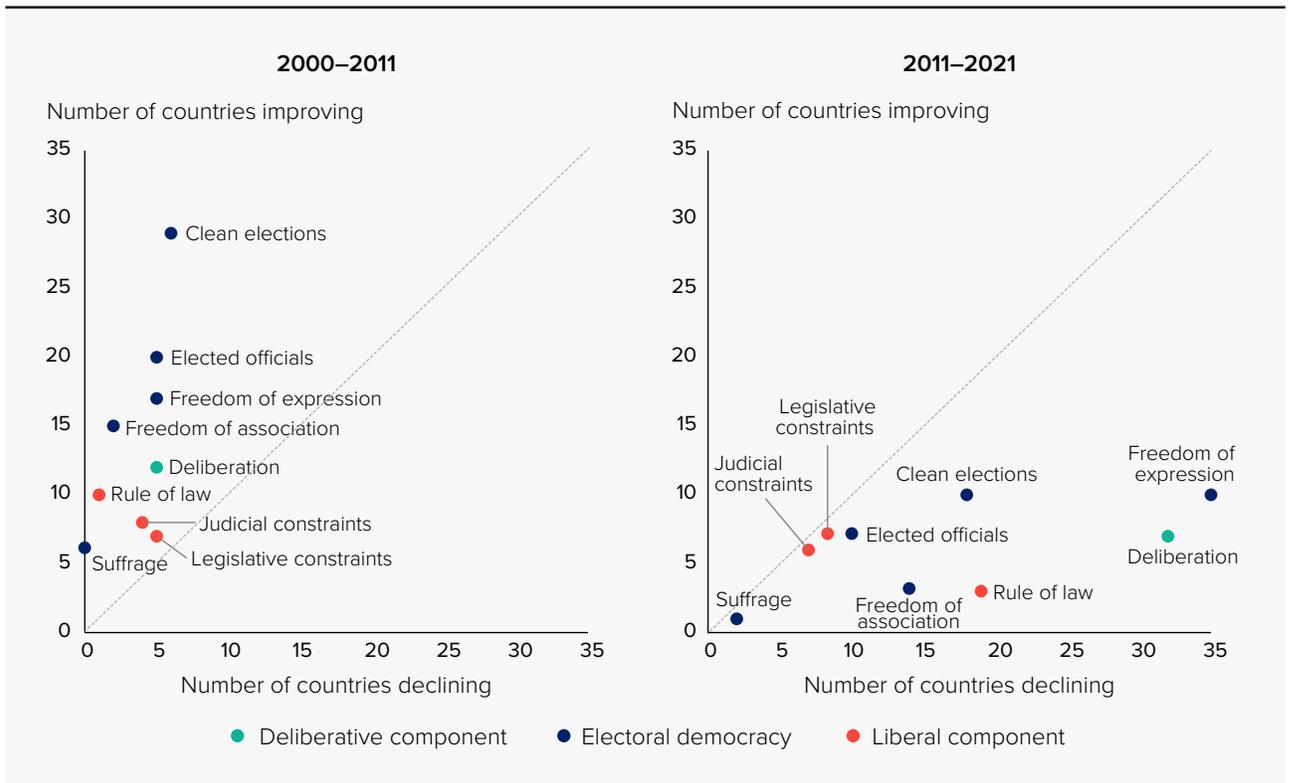
The rise in political polarization is occurring in the context of a long-term, global disaffection with democratic practices.<sup>108</sup> The Varieties of Democracy approach makes an effort to capture this process and argues that there has been a deterioration of critical ingredients of democracy (figure 4.5). Freedom of expression is declining in around 35 countries, more than three times the number where it is increasing. Similarly, deliberation is in decline in more than four times the number of countries where it is improving. Clean elections, rule of law and freedom of association are also in decline in more countries than where they are improving.

Severe polarization can make people blind to the fact that there are strategies where all sides can gain. Instead, they may end up behaving as though life is a zero-sum game. This dynamic can be self-reinforcing: “the less they [*people*] undertake joint collective actions, the more their perceptions of difference, and the more likely it is that they will perceive their interests to be zero-sum.”<sup>109</sup> Dynamics of polarization affect not just how people feel about others who think differently but also how people act. For example, in the United States social distancing behaviours, using masks, getting vaccinated and beliefs about risk during the Covid-19 pandemic correlate with partisan divisions.<sup>110</sup> Polarization also makes international cooperation harder. For example, party polarization has negative consequences for national commitments to international environmental agreements.<sup>111</sup> We risk losing some of the benefits of living in plural societies—a diversity of knowledge and ideas as well as decisionmaking that is responsive to as many people and groups as possible.<sup>112</sup>

Worryingly, polarization is difficult to reverse when it involves a positive feedback mechanism. When positive feedback increases (such as political parties adopting more extreme positions), polarization can ascend to a tipping point, after which it becomes a self-reinforcing, runaway process.<sup>113</sup> And once it has set in, polarization is hard to reverse, even in the face of external shocks.<sup>114</sup>

The discussion in this chapter explains how polarization may emerge and persist in a context of uncertainty and how the appeal of authoritarian leaders may increase. But these are not mechanistic and pre-determined outcomes. Greater uncertainty does not

**Figure 4.5** Ten years ago there were more countries where critical elements for democratic governance were improving than declining—today, the situation is reversed



**Note:** Figure shows the number of countries improving and declining significantly and substantially for different components of democracy.  
**Source:** Boese and others 2022.

have to lead to polarization. There are multiple examples in history where uncertainty was faced through broad collaboration. With uncertainty people can turn to values that go beyond strategic thinking about seeking the pursuit of self-interest alone. If there is trust, that value can be solidarity.

Experimental evidence indicates that uncertainty can affect the morality of individuals. Participants in experiments appeared less likely to lie and more likely to share resources under uncertainty, reducing the scope for purely strategic self-interested behaviour.<sup>115</sup> More important, the power of reasoning and public deliberation is not diminished in uncertain times, particularly when the broad notion of capabilities, emphasizing agency and freedoms, is considered.

### Breaking the hold of uncertainty on collective action

Political polarization associated with human insecurity, and the inadequacy of our institutions in times of

change is standing in the way of more decisive joint action to face common challenges. Despite clear progress on many fronts, human insecurity is putting people under stress and pulling people apart. Human insecurity is associated with lower interpersonal trust and tendencies towards political extremism.

Meanwhile, rapid changes in information systems are a source of added instability in our social systems. Many of the challenges of sustaining information systems that support democratic deliberation are not new. After all, the spread of misleading information, censorship and other impediments to democratic debate existed long before the advent of digital communications technologies. The difference today is that our information systems now operate at such a broad scale that they pose a systemic challenge to public deliberation, just when our ability to act together to deal with large-scale societal challenges is so critical.

Development progress—with achievements in different dimensions of human development—has gone

along with institutions that have structured human interactions<sup>116</sup> and made that very progress possible. But as chapter 3 argues, we may be reaching a point of mismatch between the institutions and social configurations that have enabled progress up to now and those required to face new challenges exemplified by the uncertainty complex.<sup>117</sup> The two processes contributing to polarization today may reflect this mismatch—of institutions inadequately responding to people’s unsettledness and insecurity and to a rapidly changing (digital) information context. How do we break the vicious cycle of increased polarization, the reduced space for collaboration, the multilayered uncertainties? Advancing human development (in terms of wellbeing and agency, achievements and freedoms) remains the foundation for shaping the behavioural and institutional changes needed to navigate our uncertain times. Expanding capabilities provides a way to enhance the diversity of voices involved in public deliberation to this end, to the extent that processes of deliberation allow for the full range people’s beliefs and motivations to be scrutinized and reasoned.

“Polarization impedes public deliberation, thereby working against the cooperation needed to address novel, multilayered uncertainties

Polarization impedes public deliberation, thereby working against the cooperation needed to address novel, multilayered uncertainties. Two critical elements are deeply interconnected in breaking the hold of uncertainty on collective action.

First, tackling people’s unsettledness and human insecurity. Thriving under uncertainty requires human security, overcoming the mismatch between aspiration and achievements.<sup>118</sup> Our ability to implement the many transformations needed today—local, national and global—depends on our ability to agree on what needs to be done, to generate broad social support and then to implement creative policy change amid uncertainty. Addressing the basic drivers of unsettledness and insecurity in people’s lives is essential.

Existing strategies for human security need to be upgraded. An expanded concept of human security for the Anthropocene combines strategies of protection, empowerment and solidarity (where solidarity recognizes the interdependence among people and between people and the planet).<sup>119</sup> This agenda depends on several actions, and there are some practical examples, such as strengthening social protection systems with built-in adaptive capabilities. Robust social protection not only allows people to better weather shocks but also helps sustain people’s wellbeing and broad participation in decisionmaking. In other words effective social protection systems can support agency. To directly address the spread of polarization, policies that seek to counter the feedback cycle between inequality and polarization are also crucial.<sup>120</sup>

Second, steering the expansion of social networks to advance human development. It is imperative to acknowledge that the digital world occupies a central role in our social interactions and to set principles and norms to guide its expansion, so it favours human flourishing and an equitable and effective collective deliberation. A hands-off approach is not enough—there is little to suggest that an information ecosystem organized for narrow private interests (including boosting engagement, ad sales or short-term profit) might organically evolve into a space for free, open and informed collective deliberation.<sup>121</sup> Principles of stewardship, comparable to managing complex ecosystems, have relevance for strengthening our information systems.<sup>122</sup> Within this framework three steps can be considered:

- Increasing transparency over how companies opt to sort, filter and display information to users.
- Improving access and equity in leveraging information and communications technology.
- Enhancing our understanding more broadly of how new technologies are shaping public discourse and deliberation.<sup>123</sup>

As detailed in the following chapter, new opportunities for transformation are emerging against a backdrop of rapid technological change and the recent Covid-19 crisis. Chapter 6 suggests a way forward, with a framework for action in uncertain times.

## Inequality and the structure of political conflict in democracies: A global and historical perspective

**Amory Gethin** (Paris School of Economics—École des hautes études en sciences sociales and World Inequality Lab), **Clara Martínez-Toledano** (Imperial College London and World Inequality Lab), **Thomas Piketty** (Paris School of Economics—École des hautes études en sciences sociales and World Inequality Lab)

In our new book, *Political Cleavages and Social Inequalities*,<sup>1</sup> we investigate where and how class divides emerge and how they interact with other social conflicts (ethnic, regional, generational, gender and the like). In what contexts do we see inequality become politically salient and why? What determines the strength of identity-based divides, and how do these conflicts interact with the structure of social inequalities? Drawing on a unique set of surveys conducted between 1948 and 2020 in 50 countries on five continents, our volume sheds new light on these questions and provides a new data source to investigate voting behaviours in a global and historical perspective: the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database (<http://wpid.world>).

Among the many findings of the book, three interesting facts emerge from the analysis of this new dataset.

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### The intensity of class divisions varies widely in contemporary democracies

We document a gradual decoupling of two complementary measures of social class in many European and North American democracies: income and education. In the early post-World War II decades the party systems of these democracies were class-based: social democratic and affiliated parties represented both the low-education and the low-income electorates, whereas conservative and affiliated parties represented both high-education and high-income voters (figure S4.1.1). These party systems have gradually evolved towards what we can call multi-elite party systems: social democratic and affiliated parties have become the parties of higher-educated elites, while conservative and affiliated parties remain the parties of high-income elites.

In contrast to the gradual decoupling between income and education that we find in many European

and North American democracies, in other regions there are large variations in the configuration and intensity of class divides. These variations can often be explained by the relative importance of other dimensions of political conflict. The interaction among class, regional, ethnic, religious, generational, gender and other forms of divides thus plays a key role in determining the ways through which inequalities are politically represented in democracies around the world today.

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### Ethnic diversity is not synonymous with ethnic conflict

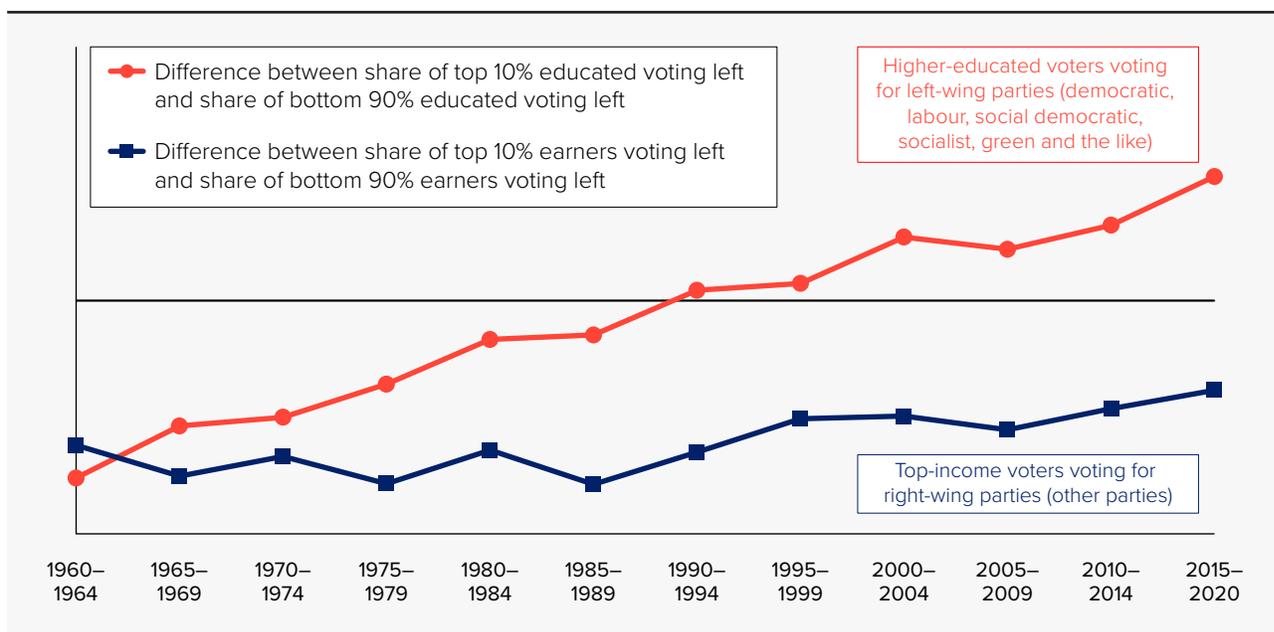
Another major finding of our global perspective on political divides is that ethnic and religious conflicts vary widely across countries and over time. In particular, more diverse countries are not necessarily those where ethnic or religious conflicts are more intense. Instead, varieties of political cleavage structures can be accounted for in part by history, such as the ability of national liberation movements to bring together voters from different origins. They also have an important socioeconomic component: in democracies where ethnoreligious groups tend to cluster across regions and differ markedly in their standards of living, political parties also tend to reflect ethnic affiliations to a greater extent.

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### Identity politics take different forms

The large variations in class and sociocultural divides in contemporary democracies point to a more general pattern. Political cleavages can take multiple forms, depending on the nature of underlying social conflicts and on the ability of political parties to embody these conflicts in the democratic arena.

**Figure S4.1.1** The emergence of multi-elite party systems in Australia, Europe and North America



**Note:** In the 1960s both higher-educated and high-income voters were less likely to vote for left-wing (democratic, labour, social democratic, socialist, green) parties than lower-educated and low-income voters by more than 10 percentage points. The left vote has gradually become associated with higher-education voters, giving rise to a multi-elite party system. Data are five-year averages for Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States. Estimates control for income, education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural or urban location, region, race, ethnicity, employment status and marital status (in country-years for which data are available).

**Source:** Authors' calculations based on data from the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database (<http://wpid.world>).

In European and North American democracies, for instance, the rise of conflicts over immigration and the environment have come together with the decline of class divides and of traditional left-wing parties, perhaps because they are perceived as unable to propose convincing redistributive platforms. It has also coincided with a decline in turnout among low-income and

lower-educated voters, pointing to a more general dissatisfaction among these voters with the functioning of democracy. Nonetheless, the shift to identity politics observed in many democracies today is neither inevitable nor generalized. In several countries outside Europe and North America the class-based dimension of political conflicts has intensified in recent decades.

**NOTE**

1 Gethin, Martínez-Toledano and Piketty 2021.

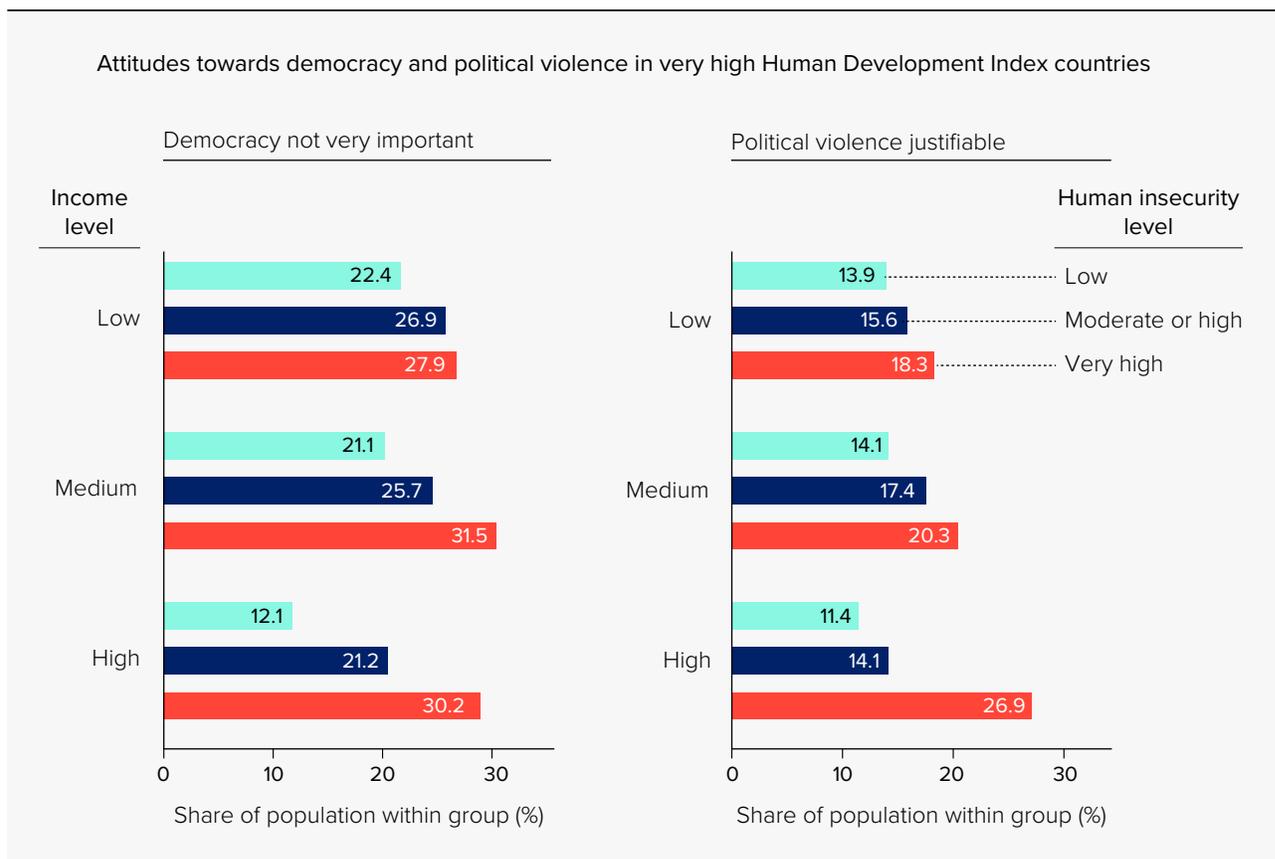
## Support for democracy under strain: Evidence from very high Human Development Index countries

Democratic institutions are means to deliver on collective choices. Uncertainty can affect this role, through polarization, which in turn can affect beliefs about democratic institutions. Overall, support for democracy is high globally. But the share of people considering democracy very important is sensitive to the perceptions of human insecurity, particularly in very high Human Development Index (HDI) countries and among high-income groups (figure S4.2.1, left panel). Moreover, people's justification of violence as a political tool also appears highly connected with human insecurity, in particular among high-income

segments (figure S4.2.1, right panel).<sup>1</sup> Among high-income groups, an insecure person is more than twice as likely to justify violence or not consider democracy very important than a secure person. These results indicate a potentially destabilizing dynamic of negative attitudes towards cooperation at the top. This trend should be of concern, considering that people affected by high insecurity account for more than 40 percent of the population in very high HDI countries (even before the Covid-19 pandemic).

Why are people in higher HDI countries more sensitive to human insecurity (measured by attitudes and

**Figure S4.2.1** Support for democracy drops with insecurity in wealthier groups



**Note:** Values are pooled individual-based data with equal weights across countries. Left panel refers to responses of 1–7 on a scale of 1–10; right panel refers to responses of 4–10 on a scale of 1–10.

**Source:** Human Development Report Office based on World Values Survey, waves 6 and 7. See Haerpfer and others (2022).

perceptions)?<sup>2</sup> People near the top of the HDI generally enjoy greater human security than those living in lower HDI settings. And because people near the top of the HDI have known greater human security, they are likely to feel “entitled” to it and therefore perceive insecurity as a loss. This may be a reason why people in higher HDI countries derive more distress from human insecurity.<sup>3</sup>

The feeling of uncertainty across HDI categories can also be affected by the mismatch between expectations and reality: people suffering insecurity in very high HDI countries and high-income countries are

more likely to experience the cognitive dissonance of development-with-insecurity: income, a measure of worth and success that often guides people’s behaviour and incentives, cannot in these extreme cases protect against threats, as could be typically expected. As market-based mechanisms of security and regular state-based policies struggle to deliver, authoritarian approaches might become attractive, consistent with the earlier discussion on the appeal of dominant-type leaders.

**Source:** Human Development Report Office.

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## NOTES

- 1 All differences between people perceiving very high human insecurity and people perceiving low human insecurity are statistically significant at the 1 percent level.
- 2 The index of perceived insecurity is built using a linear aggregation of insecurity threats and cannot account for their subjective impact on people. See UNDP (2022b).

- 3 The higher sensitivity of wealthier groups to human insecurity is consistent with the existence of endowment effects (Thaler 1980)—people living in a context of high human security (both on an objective and subjective basis) will tend to value more the benefits of a high human security environment—and with loss aversion (Tversky and Kahneman 1991, p. 1047)—“losses (outcomes below the reference status) loom larger than corresponding gains (outcomes above the reference state).” In line with the idea that the loss aversion theory can be context specific (Gal and Rucker 2018), the text elaborates further about the meaning of loss in a context of a very high HDI country.