Wonks and War Rooms
S04 E04 - Political Polarization with Sean Speer

Episode Transcript

Elizabeth: [00:00:05] Welcome to Wonks and War Rooms, where political communication theory meets on-the-ground strategy. I'm your host Elizabeth Dubois. I'm an associate professor at the University of Ottawa, and my pronouns are she/her. Today, I'm recording from the traditional and unceded territory of the Algonquin people. In today's episode, I'm talking with Sean Speer about political polarization. Sean, can you introduce yourself, please?

Sean: [00:00:26] Well, my name is Sean Speer. Among other things, on the editor at large at The Hub, a new online media platform that I launched last year with a few other colleagues. I'm a senior fellow at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, where I also teach the capstone course in the master's of Public Policy Program. And before all of that, I served as senior adviser to Prime Minister Stephen Harper. So I come to issues of policy and politics, both as a former practitioner and now as someone observing and analyzing public policy from the outside.

Elizabeth: [00:01:07] Wonderful, thank you so much. I am really excited to talk to you about political polarization today. So as always, I'm going to start off with a quick kind of definition from academia and we're going to see whether or not that fits [with] your perspective. So political polarization, it's often referring to kind of this moving away from the center of the political spectrum towards extremes. Often we think of political polarization and we think of a left to right spectrum where the center is not considered extreme and either far left or far right are considered extreme. So political polarization is this idea of you're ending up on one of those two poles, right?

[00:01:48] When we talk about political polarization, there are a few different ways to think about it. So I'm going to go over just a couple of them quickly and then we can dig more into it as we chat. So there is the idea of elite polarization, which is looking at polarization of political figures. Party elites specifically are often talked about there. On the other hand, there's this idea of mass polarization, which is like the general public when it's more or less divided. And I think most of the time when we're talking about political polarization in public discourse, we're kind of referring to that second one, that mass polarization idea.

[00:02:26] The other kind of divide within polarization literature is between the idea of ideological polarization and affective polarization. So ideological polarization is this idea of becoming more and more ideologically ingrained or connected to a particular party or ideology. Whereas affective polarization talks more about kind of in-group versus out-group relationships and the idea of as affective polarization increases, you become less and less trusting or accepting of people who are not within your own in-group. There's a bunch more to dig into, but let's start there. Does this jive with your understanding anything you'd like to add or change?

Sean: [00:03:12] No, I think those definitions and in particular, the nuance that you apply with respect to the difference between an ideological polarization, which reflects a multiplicity of perspectives and values within a pluralistic society, which is, I think as we'll discuss today, I'm less concerned about. I think there is something inevitable as our country or western societies become more diverse that we're bound to see kind of growing multiplicity of point of view, some of which will necessarily come into conflict and affective polarization in which people are defining themselves not by their values, but by their opposition to alternative political actors or alternative political voices. And I think the latter is much more corrosive and ought to be a much better subject of concern than just polarization in general. So I think in short, you've set up the conversation very well.

Elizabeth: [00:04:15] Great. Awesome. Yeah, I'm excited to dig into like ideas of when this idea of polarization might actually be beneficial and helpful and when it's potentially problematic. But before we get there, I want to spend a little more time digging into the idea of political polarization. And let's start with ideological because it kind of relies on this assumption of a left to right spectrum, which in the American context is great: Republican/Democrat. There isn't really much substantial in terms of like political structures in the center. And so a lot of the ideas around political polarization that rely on that Left-Right spectrum, getting farther from the center make a bunch of sense there.

[00:04:58] But I don't know if they make as much sense in the Canadian context, right? Like, we've got a bunch of different parties. Yes, we can kind of align them left to right, but you can look at any Canadian political party at the federal level and point to things where they are, you know, not as left on this issue, but more left on that one. They're a little right on this one, a little center on the other. So I wanted to put that to you. Do you think that political polarization needs to be thought of differently, talked about differently, depending on the political structure and system?

Sean: [00:05:30] Hmm. That's a good question, Elizabeth. I would say even in the American context, there are probably limits to understanding the political moment through the lens of polarization. It seeks to attribute a kind of framework to the political preferences and values of the general public that is probably overly simplistic as you know, through your academic work and elsewhere, the truth is messier - that most people don't align themselves in a kind of overly coherent political ideology. And so a lot of polarization as we think about it in ideological terms, is actually a form of elite polarization. And I think one of the interesting aspects, for instance, of the rise of populism is it really shone a light on this kind of the messiness of people's political worldviews.

[00:06:38] But I would say that still, for the purposes of organizing our politics in a representative democracy, having big tent parties that, you know, broadly speaking, adhere around certain ideas or values or preferences is useful for voters who you know, have limits on their time or on their ability to consume the issues of the day or the big public policy differences between parties to be able to, within reason, make a judgment about which party or which political figure or best represents their values or or priorities. It's an imperfect system, but I think, broadly speaking, it works.

Elizabeth: [00:07:29] Mm hmm.

Sean: [00:07:29] But you know, just to put a fine point on it, I do think one of the things that struck me in politics in recent years is the increasing limits of a Left-Right framework and the introduction of of new and different frameworks, including an up up-down one where increasingly politics is defined by a kind of elites versus not elites, which is less of an ideological framework and more of a kind of sociological one.

Elizabeth: [00:08:02] Yeah, I think that's a really good point, and I would say there's also to kind of like add to that mix, there's been this shift away from party affiliation as being the necessary identifier for you, like if you're wishing to express your ideological views and have some sort of political identity. Political parties are not the only option, right? There's particularly among younger people tendencies towards being issue based or being connected to particular advocacy groups or campaigns, or even loose movements and ideas, rather than formal party affiliation. Is that something that you've kind of experienced?

Sean: [00:08:46] Yeah, I think that's right and, you know, I think there are different explanations for that development. One is, you know, a failure on the part of a lot of the mainstream political parties to be more responsive to the political interests and issues concerning younger people. We still have a politics that's mostly dominated by baby boomers -

Elizabeth: [00:09:10] Mm hmm.

Sean: [00:09:11] - And which is a logical outcome of older voters disproportionately casting ballots. And so it's logical for parties to orient themselves more to the interests of older, more politically active voters. The one thing I would say, though, is I get the sense - Elizabeth I don't know what you think about this - but that we're starting to see a generational change in our politics that, you know, I mentioned that I previously worked for Stephen Harper, so listeners won't be surprised to hear that I'm more attuned to what's going on within Big C conservative politics than maybe some of the other parties. But just if you look at the last two election cycles, the Conservative Party caucus in Ottawa has an increasing number of members of Parliament who were born in the 80s and even 90s.

Elizabeth: [00:10:03] Mm hmm.

Sean: [00:10:03] And so I'm curious to see if that cohort starts to have something of a of a self-image as a kind of millennial caucus and as such starts to sort of shift, try to shift the party's orientation to sets of issues that may be of greater interest to younger voters. That may be a way to bring some of the voters that you're talking about that are engaging in politics, not through traditional parties, but through other means to start to find themselves in mainstream parties as our politics goes through this generational change.

Elizabeth: [00:10:44] Yeah, I think that's a really interesting observation, and I can see a lot of potential for those kinds of shifts, obviously, you know, time will tell, but it's not just the Conservative Party, definitely the other major parties at the federal level in Canada. And when we look at other democracies around the world, there's increasingly young people who are becoming involved, and I think we should expect some, some shifts, some changes.

[00:11:12] You know, it makes me think of, you know, I mentioned the idea of elite polarization, which kind of asks whether or not party leaders and other people who are, you know, visible as representatives of parties, are they becoming themselves more polarized or are their views more, you know, ingrained in a very specific idea, whatever it is that they are kind of pushing, promoting, advocating for? And and then the next question is like, and does that then trickle down to the mass public? Is that something that we expect? Is that something that we've really seen before? The literature on this, I'll preface and say, is a little undecided. Definitely. There's a sense that world leaders are becoming more ideologically polarized. But whether or not that actually has any sort of trickle down effect is unclear. And I asked that because if people don't pay attention to who the leaders are anyway, does it matter that they're younger?

Sean: [00:12:14] Well, that's the question of a feedback loop between voters, particularly base voters and party leadership, I think is a fascinating one. Let's just dwell on that for a second in the Canadian context. I think one issue that is probably underestimated in the context of Canadian politics is the pros and cons of our campaign finance regime. It is broadly accepted that the exclusion of corporate donations or union donations is inherently good in Canada, that we've taken big money out of politics and we've made our parties mostly dependent on relatively small donations from individuals in order to support their operations. And I do think there are some upsides to that regime.

[00:13:11] But one downside that I think doesn't get enough attention is that the best means to get donations from party members, of course, is to galvanize them. And I think that it causes parties to overstate differences. It causes them to sort of accentuate issues that they know may not be of interest to the broad general public, but that have the ability to really stoke and galvanize core supporters in the name of eliciting donations. And so I think one of the things that we need to sort of think about in terms of our overall political architecture and ecosystem is the extent to which one of the

downsides of having a relatively kind of parsimonious campaign finance regime is it probably does inadvertently contribute to greater polarization and in particular, this feedback loop between the parties themselves and their their core supporters.

Elizabeth: [00:14:21] Yeah, that's fascinating, I really hadn't been thinking about the financial incentive as part of that process before, but it makes perfect sense. And when you pair that with things that we know about, about how people form identity and their sense of belonging and how much humans as social beings really need connection to each other. And we use being part of a group and knowing who is not part of our group as a way of interacting with the world. And like, there are lots of for better/for worse kind of scenarios that we could talk through there. But the kind of baseline here is like, well, people are going to form groups because we're social humans, right? And so that is really interesting to see when we've got these financial structures and legal structures that will either bolster or not those kinds of attempts. I wonder whether or not changing that financial incentive would be enough to remove this kind of value, I guess, of having tightly knit groups that parties see.

Sean: [00:15:26] Well, probably not, and as I say, I don't want to misrepresent my position, I think on balance there may indeed be a case that the trade offs still tilt in favour of our current regime. But you know, I can conceptually, one can see a scenario where the major parties are dependent on a small number of large corporations for funding their operations would probably push our politics more to the center.

Elizabeth: [00:15:53] Hmm.

Sean: [00:15:54] Whereas if you are depending on small donations from your most kind of galvanized, agitated supporters, you're probably going to have to adopt positions or at least accentuate certain positions that create the perception of greater differentiation and polarization than there is. You know, just to be concrete about this again, coming from my own background issues around Israel, for instance, are kind of hot button ones

that when conservatives kind of put their thumb on that issue, is bound to galvanize their core supporters. Issues around criminal justice, for instance, would also be part of that and no doubt for center left or left wing parties, they would have their own sets of issues that they over time have come to see as useful for the purposes of galvanizing their core supporters and in turn, raising the funds that they need to manage their political operations.

Elizabeth: [00:16:54] Yeah, totally. We, in a past season, had an episode on the idea of issue ownership, and I think it connects there. This idea that parties will have particular issues that they are known for and then that being known for an issue can kind of become a tool in your toolbox.

Sean: [00:17:13] Yeah, exactly, and as I say, one of the consequences is that it creates the perception of greater polarization and greater differentiation than is really the case. You know, at a fundamental level, Elizabeth, our politics are still fought within the 40 yard line, 40 yard lines of debate. Think of recent election campaigns where, you know, take 2021, for instance, where you know, on the matter of the federal deficit, know the Conservatives and the Liberals had different rhetoric. But fundamentally their position on how quickly and how ambitiously to eliminate the deficit was within a kind of margin of error, but if you look at the rhetoric and the positioning and the way the different leaders talked about these issues, one would be left with the impression that there's far greater differentiation and polarization than there really is.

Elizabeth: [00:18:06] Yeah, it's like this, this performance of difference, which is a useful performance if you're trying to help people decide who to vote for. But the risk is, does it make people believe that they themselves also need to be so different from, you know, if they identify like, "I am a conservative voter, this person is a liberal voter like we're too different. We can't possibly have productive conversations, right?" Like that. That's, I guess, one of the fears of increased polarization. And if there's performance of

polarization, whether or not it actually exists, is there a risk of it? It becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy kind of thing.

Sean: [00:18:46] I think there's something to that. The other thing I would say, which may be a bit counterintuitive, but I think it's important is sort of artificial or manufactured differentiation. On certain issues oftentimes conceals real differences that the parties don't want to talk about -

Elizabeth: [00:19:06] Hmm.

Sean: [00:19:06] - And so we're left with, you know, from an outsider perspective, a politics that looks like there's this significant polarization and differentiation, but on the issues that the political parties are talking about, that differentiation is relatively minimal. But within the party, among party supporters, there may actually be greater differentiation on certain issues that political leaders aren't bringing expression to. You know, I think of, you know, hot-button issues like immigration or abortion or any number of issues where there actually is fairly significant difference within the Canadian public.

[00:19:50] And yet oftentimes, those types of issues don't find expression in our mainstream politics. So I guess that's a long way of saying, I think when our political leaders are creating these manufactured or artificial differentiation and they're doing it in part precisely because they want to try to suppress real points of difference and divergence because they're worried that those represent risks or threats to their to their political chances. But I would argue that that risks doing more harm to our discourse than being honest and upfront about where there are legitimate differences in a pluralistic society.

Elizabeth: [00:20:35] What do you think those risks are?

Sean: [00:20:37] Well, there's two types of risks. The first is more self-interested on the part of political parties that bring expression to some of these hot-button issues will cause them to be criticized and for being, you know, racist or whatever the case may be. The second is, I think there is a sensitivity within Canada's kind of opinion elite and political elite about trying to avoid the sort of polarization that we witness in the country next to us.

Elizabeth: [00:21:13] Right.

Sean: [00:21:13] And so there's a tendency to want to try to put some kind of parameters around the types of issues and positions that are part of mainstream debate. And I would say, Elizabeth, if I can be introspective for a moment, I probably wouldn't subscribe to that view before 2016.

Elizabeth: [00:21:37] Mm hmm.

Sean: [00:21:38] You know that I wouldn't have described myself necessarily as much from a small-d democrat that I thought that there was an onus on our political parties and elite voices to, in effect, kind of create a particular kind of climate of debate and ideas, and to put pretty strict parameters around what ideas and perspectives and even voices might be part of that. And I would say that my perspective has changed for two reasons one, my spouse who for different reasons, partly maybe upbringing, partly just intellectual influences, is more of a small-d Democrat, and that's, I think, had an impact on me.

Elizabeth: [00:22:21] Mm hmm.

Sean: [00:22:22] The second, of course, is the rise of populism. You know, it seems to me that where? Populists have some legitimate claims that there were too many ideas and perspectives and voices that were shut out of mainstream politics, and Donald

Trump and other populists might have been blunt force instruments, but they were instruments for kind of blowing open those guardrails of debate. And it seems to me opening up our mainstream political environment and enabling those different voices and ideas and perspectives to be part of the discussion, even if you disagree with them, is a kind of safety valve to avoid the kind of explosion that we've witnessed in the United States and other countries. So it's a bit counterintuitive because I think in some ways the best means of avoiding populism is enabling a kind of degree of populism for lack of a better term into our mainstream discourse.

Elizabeth: [00:23:33] Right. Have a discussion about it, shine a light on the fact that there are people who are feeling like their voices aren't being heard or that not even that they're not being heard that like it's going to be a problem if they even express it right? And so I totally get that. The way that that kind of plays out in our media environment, I think is interesting and worth maybe digging into a little here. I spend a lot of time thinking about our media environment as a high choice media environment. So there's a previous episode on that. I'll add it in the show notes, but is this idea that like we have so many different options for where to get political information? This includes the news, but also where, where and when you can have political conversations with friends, you know, social media being one part of a wide range of options. And we have all these choices, but we also have limited time. And so on the one hand, there are people who are like, "Yeah, we're going to pick stuff that we already agree with. Obviously, that's comfortable and nice." And then there are others who point to, well, actually, there are a lot of like real politicos who want to know all of the different perspectives. So if you're opting into politics, you're going to use this to get a wider variety.

[00:24:49] And so I guess that kind of question comes into play here, right when you were thinking about, well, if we have that safety valve, we let some populist expression happen and don't just shut it down the way it has been happening recently in our public discourse. Does that risk creating more opportunities for people to just become more and more embedded in their particular populist view? And we're using populism as one

example, because obviously it's the most salient example, but you can think about that in any sort of area of special interest where people kind of deep dive. And then once they're getting a little bit of positive reinforcement, they're like, great going down even further into this rabbit hole.

Sean: [00:25:37] The short answer is yes. You know, the excesses of this kind of populism was present at the US Capitol on January 6th. So, you know, it seems to me, we live in a world of trade offs and the trade off that we made for a long time was that our mainstream institutions, including our political parties, would in effect kind of act as gatekeepers around political discourse. And that had some upsides. But one of the downsides was it created this kind of growing agitation that ultimately kind of exploded. And I think in the aftermath, I think on balance, we need to kind of open those gates even to ideas that we disagree with, that it's ultimately healthier to try to channel those voices and those perspectives in mainstream politics. It's going to make our politics a bit messier. It may make it less edifying. It may make it more polarized.

Elizabeth: [00:26:35] Mm hmm.

Sean: [00:26:35] But I think on balance, that's a kind of healthier outcome than letting these ideas fester and then explode in the form of a demagog like Donald Trump. And so I think if you think about these issues as fundamentally rooted in tradeoffs, then reasonable people can agree or disagree. And you can even agree or disagree on where the lines ought to be.

Elizabeth: [00:26:59] Mm hmm.

Sean: [00:27:00] But just from my own perspective, after having kind of thought about these issues a lot in recent years, I've come to accept that our politics may be more efficient. It may be safer. It may be less kind of controversial or polarized than in the United States. And I'm not saying that the United States ought to be a model that we

aspire to, but I think on balance, it would probably be healthier if our politics was a bit more open, a bit more comfortable with weirdness and variation, and that is only going to become more important, Elizabeth, as our society becomes more pluralistic. And I think that's probably something that we don't spend enough time thinking and talking about and why. This podcast, of course, is so important.

Elizabeth: [00:27:56] Yeah, I think I think you're right, I think that there is always that trade off, series of trade offs, really, that needs to be thought about and the idea of needing to embrace a pluralistic system because that's what we have. You know, like, I think that makes a lot of sense. There's another podcast where we could talk about how all of this compares to like European models, where there are more coalition governments and that sort of thing. We don't have time today, unfortunately, but you've got me thinking and hopefully lots of the listeners are thinking too. So that's excellent. Before we wrap up, we've been dancing around some of the pros and cons really of political polarization. And so I'd like to just take a couple of minutes here to hone in on what are those positives that can come from political polarization and maybe the potential risks or things we should have on our radar to be worried about? What do you think are on the positives list?

Sean: [00:29:01] Think that in modern society, conceptions of what amounts to the best means of organizing ourselves, what represents the good life?

Elizabeth: [00:29:15] Mm hmm.

Sean: [00:29:15] These are necessarily the subject of tensions. Equality and freedom, liberty and order: these are big picture ideas that don't necessarily always answer our political discourse. But oftentimes when we're debating matters of public policy at their core, are these kinds of fundamental normative values. And you know, at its best, politics is a means by which we find accommodation and settlement between these kinds of competing conceptions of how to organize ourselves and when we short circuit

polarization by which I mean, we preclude a kind of genuine tension between these deeply normative views.

[00:29:59] I think we risk pushing those conflicts into other aspects of our lives, whether it's the family dinner table or the workplace or whatever. In a pluralistic society, our politics are the means by which we ought to solve those, or at least find accommodation or settlement for those tensions. And in that sense, polarization is a kind of necessary input. So, you know, I start from the premise that polarization in itself is not inherently bad. But as I said at the beginning, where it becomes inherently bad is when it doesn't manifest itself in competing, normative views it defines itself in opposition to the other.

[00:30:49] You know, I go back to the 2016 U.S. presidential election. If you think about it, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump were the two least popular American presidential candidates in the history of the country. I mean, people were voting affirmatively for anything. They were voting in rejection of something. And I think that's unhealthy. You know, at some level, our politics can't handle a context of affective polarization because there's at that level, it's not something that can be solved through legislation or policy. It's something deeper within us. And so, you know, it seems to me there is a role for political leaders, for political parties to push back against that type of affective polarization by channeling these impulses and these expressions that you may pick up from ordinary citizens and give them expression in the form of a policy agenda or at minimum, you know, political ideas and political arguments that then our political system can step in and do what it's supposed to do.

Elizabeth: [00:32:06] Totally, that makes a lot of sense. And to build off of that, I would add, you know, it's really, really difficult to have tolerance when you are affectively polarized and deeply affectively polarized. It's really, really hard to understand where somebody else is coming from and why, and to have empathy for other's ideas. You don't have to agree with them, but you have to be able to understand where people are coming from in order to create democratic systems that can thrive. And so it really

resonates with me, what you're saying about affective polarization can be problematic, but polarization generally doesn't have to be. And when we think about how progress, social and political progress comes about, you can't have any of that social or political progress without some level of group identity, some level of polarization, really. But you also can't have progress that doesn't result in massive fights all of the time if you don't have that ability to understand and accept and tolerate views that are not your own.

Sean: [00:33:20] Yeah, if I can just say two things, because there's so much insight there, I mean, just on the first point about affective polarization, as you say, it creates the conditions for a kind of zero sum politics. And the problem with zero sum politics is that most issues aren't zero-sum. You know -

Elizabeth: [00:33:37] Mm hmm.

Sean: [00:33:37] - How much should we reasonably expect high income earners to pay as a share of their income and taxes? Well, that's not a zero sum question. You know, some people think it ought to be north of 50 percent. Some people think it ought to be less than 50 percent. We can bring some empirical economic analysis to bear on these questions, and that may provide some value. But fundamentally, it's a normative question and it's a normative question that's going to have to be resolved through some degree of a combination and settlement. We'll, in effect, pick some number in the middle that won't be satisfactory to everybody or perhaps anyone, but at least it's a way in which we can live together without violence or conflict. On your point about how polarization oftentimes, you know, at its best represents the seedlings of progress, I think is such a critical point. You know, if you think about human progress even in the 20th century, had we shut out weird or polarized positions on race relations, on gender, on so many number of issues where the prevailing political class and prevailing kind of elite consensus viewed these positions as radical or demagogic or whatever. You know, it would have stood in the way of meaningful progress. And so it comes back to what

has become a kind of core part of my personal political identity in recent years, which is I recognize it comes with risks.

[00:35:13] I don't want to diminish the risks, but I've come to believe, on balance, we ought to be erring on the side of more debate, more ideas and in turn more tension and perhaps more polarization in the name of a more inclusive representative and responsive politics. And you know, I think some people having watched politics in the United States in recent years would think that I'm being crazy, but I would make the case that what I'm arguing for is the best means to avoid the kind of politics that we've seen take shape in the United States. But I don't diminish that it. It comes with some risks where we will be confronted with Maxime Bernier and others who we may fundamentally disagree with. But telling the 5 percent or 10 percent of the population that he represents, that they don't deserve or ought not to have a voice in our politics strikes me as riskier over the long term to political stability than giving them that voice and having it be rejected at the ballot box.

Elizabeth: [00:36:26] Yeah, I have so many things I'd love to chat about in terms of like what that view for the future would mean for participation and people's motivation to engage in their systems. I'm really fascinated by these ideas. Unfortunately, we don't have time. So instead, I'm going to go with the final question, which in Wonks and War Rooms is always the little pop quiz. And so can you define for me, just briefly short answer what political polarization is?

Sean: [00:36:56] Political polarization is when our politics is marked by big fundamental differences.

Elizabeth: [00:37:03] That's perfect, that's very concise, thank you.

Sean: [00:37:06] My pleasure.

Elizabeth: [00:37:11] All right, thanks so much for listening. That was our episode on political polarization. I hope you enjoyed it. We didn't talk too much about what causes political polarization from the choices we make as individuals to the way social media platforms are designed to the wider media system that we exist in. But there are lots of other episodes of Wonks and War Rooms that you can check out. We've added links to them in the show notes and over on Polcommtech.ca. You can find full transcripts of this episode in French and English, as well as a detailed list of further reading and additional resources. This special season on mis- and disinformation is brought to you, in part by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Digital Citizen Initiative.