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## Polarization in the U.S.: Trump's First-Term Policies and Democratic Responses: Lessons for a Trump 2.0 Era

Polaryzacja w Stanach Zjednoczonych. Polityka Trumpa w pierwszej kadencji i reakcje Demokratów: wnioski na okres drugiej kadencji Trumpa

### • Abstract •

The main goal of this study is to examine President Trump's first-term policies and Democratic responses to them, to assess whether polarization in the U.S. was driven more by one party or whether both parties contributed to the escalation. To do so, the author is going to apply Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer's theory of pernicious polarization which argues that democracy can be most threatened when political leaders intensify divisions instead of constructively resolving underlying grievances. The theory focuses on what actions opposing political actors take, in this case, Democrats. Do they also employ divisive tactics or not? This analysis serves as a basis for evaluating how Republicans and Democrats might behave during the second-term presidency of Donald Trump, whether they will learn from the past lessons and seek to de-escalate tensions or continue partisan fights.

**Keywords:** polarization; the U.S.; democracy; Donald Trump; Democratic Party

### • Abstrakt •

Głównym celem niniejszego opracowania jest analiza polityki prezydenta Trumpa w czasie pierwszej kadencji oraz reakcji na nią Demokratów. Analiza ta ma posłużyć ocenie, czy polaryzacja w Stanach Zjednoczonych była spowodowana w większym stopniu przez jedną partię, czy też obie partie przyczyniły się do jej eskalacji. W tym celu autor sięgnął po teorię zgubnej polaryzacji Jennifer McCoy i Murata Somera, zgodnie z którą demokracja może być najbardziej zagrożona, gdy przywódcy polityczni pogłębiają podziały, zamiast konstruktywnie rozwiązywać leżące u ich podstaw problemy. Teoria ta koncentruje się na działaniach podejmowanych przez konkurujących ze sobą aktorów politycznych, w omawianym przypadku – Demokratów. Czy oni również stosują taktykę podziałów, czy też nie? Przeprowadzona analiza służy jako podstawa do oceny, jak Republikanie i Demokraci mogą zachowywać się podczas drugiej kadencji prezydenta Donalda Trumpa: czy wyciągną wnioski z przeszłości i będą dążyć do złagodzenia napięć, czy też będą kontynuować walkę partyjną.

**Słowa kluczowe:** polaryzacja; USA; demokracja; Donald Trump; Partia Demokratyczna

## Introduction

Democracy can in some ways be compared to a relationship between people, which among other qualities requires trust, respect and cooperation, and realizes that both sides will not always agree with each other. “Democracy requires conflict – but not too much” (Diamond, 1990, p. 49), which means that democracy demands the presence of two opposing features: conflict and cooperation, but in the right proportions. So does the relationship between people who can cooperate with each other without always agreeing with each other. Scholars emphasize that “[a] certain degree of polarization in a democratic system is not only normal, but also desirable, because it offers voters clear programmatic alternatives, which increases their interest in political processes, thus stabilizing the democratic system” (Milačić, 2021, p. 2). Cooperation has always been a main characteristic of democracy. Political actors must collaborate to compete. They must be capable of working cooperatively through parties to influence policies (Schmitter & Karl, 1991, p. 79). Democracy ought to boost citizens to discuss among themselves differences and find solutions. Therefore, polarization and democracy need each other, but in the right proportions that do not weaken democracy but strengthen it and do not cause internal, destructive conflict in society. What does damage to both democracy and society is the snowballing political polarization which occurs when a large ideological gap between contrasting political camps begins to form in society.

Numerous reports show that the U.S. is experiencing an increase of political and affective polarization (Vanderbilt University, 2024). The two concepts are closely related. While political polarization is the growing gap between groups based on ideological beliefs, affective polarization is the rising emotional aggression toward members of opposing groups. The two concepts are interconnected because ideological divisions worsen emotional hostility, which in turn reduces the willingness to collaborate. The recent data conducted by the Vanderbilt University shows that the number of Americans who classify as either extremely liberal or extremely conservative has increased (Vanderbilt University, 2024). It needs to be emphasized that the current division of society in the U.S. into two mutually distrustful groups in which political identity becomes social identity weakens democracy and nurtures autocracy. Various scholars indicate that such a division encourages both citizens and political actors to support non-democratic actions (Somer, McCoy, & Luke, 2023), because it “makes people more willing to trade off basic democratic principles for their partisan interests, thus creating a structural opportunity for anti-democratic leaders” (Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2021, p. 287). It is disturbing to note that “[a]verage levels of democracy, as measured by Freedom House, V-Dem, and the Economist

Intelligence Unit, have dropped in every region of the world since 2006” (Diamond, 2024).

It is worth asking why numerous countries, including the United States, experience the decline of democracy, and an increase of polarization. One of the reasons is the human factor – political leadership. “Democratic leadership needs to be supervised at all the time because a democratic leader, even when he spent a large part of his life fighting for democracy, can change his style and become autocratic” (Pinto, 2024, p. 505). This study is going to focus on President Donald Trump’s first term policies, which some believe were driven by a highly polarizing leadership style (Baptist & Clark, 2024), and democratic responses to evaluate whether polarization in the U.S. was driven more by one party or whether both parties contributed to the escalation.

## Methodology

There are two levels of polarization: “elite polarization, which refers to polarization among formal political actors – political parties and politicians – or institutions populated by these actors, and mass polarization, which refers to society as a whole” (Carothers & O’Donohue 2019). Milačić, 2021, p. 2. Elite polarization can be described as a process in which “political elites have become more ideologically distant from one another” (DiMaggio et al., 1996). While some scholars indicate that it poses a threat to citizens’ satisfaction with democratic governance, others see some potential benefits of higher elite polarization, indicating that “citizens in more polarized countries tend to be more engaged in the democratic process” (Seimel, 2024). Mass polarization occurs when citizens disagree strongly with each other, and these differences grow over time, posing a threat to democracy (Leeper, 2014, p. 27).

The main goal of this study is to examine President Donald Trump’s first term policies and democratic responses. To do that, the author is going to apply Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer’s theory of pernicious polarization (McCoy & Somer, 2019). According to the scholars, both political leaders and public grievances contribute to harmful polarization in democracies. When social discontent or elite conflicts create divisive conditions, political leaders, instead of not reinforcing these divisions but trying to bridge them, often fuel an “us versus them” narrative. Consequently, such action reduces the ground for agreement between the parties and further deepens polarization. The outcome depends on what actions opposing political actors take, whether they also adopt divisive tactics or not. If they prioritize democratic reform and civic engagement, democracy will survive, but if they do

not, it could become unstable and shift toward one-party domination with authoritarian tendencies. It should be observed that the theory of pernicious polarization argues that democracy can be most threatened when political leaders intensify divisions instead of constructively resolving underlying grievances. Importantly, the researchers point out that polarization is often a deliberate strategy used by political elites to mobilize support by portraying politics as a struggle between “us” and “them” (McCoy & Somer, 2019). This approach leads to democratic weakening, especially when opposition forces respond with similar polarization tactics rather than democratic reforms.

Accordingly, to apply the theory to this study, the first term presidency of Donald Trump will be analyzed in terms of two key factors. First, has the president contributed to deepening polarization through his policies, executive actions, or communication strategies? Did he exploit existing social or political divisions to strengthen his base? Second, how did the opposition – Democrats – respond? Did the opposition work to stabilize democracy through reform and engagement, or did they escalate polarization with own strategies? Consequently, President Trump’s first term (2017–2021) will be analyzed to determine whether his actions fueled polarization through rhetoric and policy. Then, the Democrats’ response will be examined, whether they sought democratic accountability or engaged in their own form of polarizing politics.

It is believed that by comparing the Trump’s first term presidency through the lens of theory of pernicious polarization it is possible to assess whether polarization was driven more by one party or whether both parties contributed to the escalation. Moreover, the analysis of Trump’s first term in office can help determine whether the United States was moving toward democratic instability or toward one-party dominance with authoritarian tendencies. Finally, Donald Trump has just become President of the USA again, the work *Polarization in the U.S.: Trump’s First-Term Policies and Democratic Responses: Lessons for a Trump 2.0 Era* may shed new light on his second term, helping to anticipate potential challenges in the context of the currently deeply polarized American society and political parties.

## **Polarization during Trump’s presidency (2017–2021)**

Donald Trump’s first term presidency was characterized by a highly polarizing leadership style. “The term ‘mobster-style president’ encapsulates Trump’s approach to governance and communication, exceeding conventional boundaries and norms and setting him apart from his predecessors” (Baptist & Clark, 2024, p. 3). The

president showed this, among other things, through his very aggressive rhetoric style towards media and opposition leaders. Trump has frequently attacked journalists and called the press the “enemy of the American people” (Trump, 2017). For example, the president suspended the press pass of CNN correspondent Jim Acosta after he and the journalist had a heated argument over Latin migrants heading to the U.S. during a news conference at the White House. Trump also suspended the credentials of Brian Karem, a *Playboy* White House correspondent and CNN analyst, after a heated argument with former Trump adviser Sebastian Gorka in the White House Rose Garden (Savage, 2020). However, in both cases the licenses were restored by the court.

During the COVID pandemic, Trump frequently attacked reporters who questioned his administration’s response. For example, Trump suddenly ended a press conference after heated exchange in which the president asked an Asian American journalist Weijia Jiang, a White House correspondent for CBS News, to “ask China” about her question and then refused to take a question from another White House journalist (Shear, Haberman, & Qiu, 2020). An analysis of the number of White House press briefings during Trump’s administration shows a significant decline. At the beginning of 2017, the number of briefings was at a level of about 35 per month, reflecting the White House’s relatively open communications strategy. However, over time, the frequency of briefings dropped to about 15 per month in 2018. In 2019 and 2020, briefings became rare, with only a few or none in some months. The decline in briefings was a consequence of tensions between the Trump administration and the press (Yourish & Lee, 2019).

Trump often used Twitter to insult journalists and his political rivals. The list of the president’s Twitter Insults between 2015 and 2021 is very long. For example, the president called NBC’s Chuck Todd “sleepy eyes”, MSNBC’s Mika Brzezinski “low IQ crazy Mika”, and CNN’s Don Lemon “the dumbest man on television” (Quealy, 2021). The president often has also used Twitter to attack certain media channels like CNN while praising others, such as Fox News. For instance, Trump tweeted: “Congratulations to @FOX NEWS for being number one in inauguration ratings. They were many times higher than FAKE NEWS @CNN – public is smart!” (Firozi, 2017). The example shows that Trump uses capitalized words and insults. He praises his supporters and attacks his opponents. The language he uses does not encourage discussion but creates divide. Scholars indicate that “[h]is tweets perpetuate division, misinformation, and lies and lack any semblance of deliberative discourse. He does not use evidence to support points, which could further his deliberative reach, and instead, he attacks in a manner that leads to greater divisiveness and rancor” (Pain & Masullo Chen, 2019).

Trump's 2017–2021 immigration bans and executive orders significantly fueled political polarization during his first term. Scholars indicate that “there was a significant rise of hate crimes, racial bullying, and violence against the LGBTQ+ community which can be explained by political polarization. Both major political parties were pushed to the far ends of the spectrum to counteract the influence of the other side” (Padala & Conrad, 2021, p. 1). Trump's immigration policies led to frequent protests and various legal challenges that consequently increased divisions between Republicans and Democrats. For example, on January 27, 2017, one week after taking the oath of office, the president signed Executive Order 13769, titled “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States”. The order was received as cruel, illegal, and one that consisted xenophobic language. Trump's decision led to mass protests at airports across the U.S. and around the world. Thousands of people attended the demonstrations and expressed their opposition to the executive order.

Another example of Trump's polarizing immigration policies was his attempt to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which protected undocumented immigrants brought to the U.S. as children (Dreamers). Under President Barack Obama's program, qualified individuals brought to the U.S. as children were given temporary legal status if they met certain requirements, such as graduating from high school. Trump sought to revoke the program once he became president in 2017. Thousands of students and immigration activists took to the streets in several US cities to protest the Trump administration's decision to end the program. In 2020, the Supreme Court rejected President Donald Trump's attempt to end the DACA program. In response to the court's decision, Trump wrote: “These horrible & politically charged decisions coming out of the Supreme Court are shotgun blasts into the face of people that are proud to call themselves Republicans or Conservatives. We need more Justices or we will lose our 2<sup>nd</sup>. Amendment & everything else. Vote Trump 2020!” (Gerstein & Rainey, 2020).

In 2018, cruel Trump's immigration policies continued. In April and May, the president has implemented “Zero Tolerance” policy that eventually led to the separation of thousands of migrant children from their parents. Studies indicate that Trump's policy split around 5,600 children (González, 2018). “Of all the measures implemented by the Trump administration during its first 18 months in office, none has provoked more public outrage than its ‘zero tolerance’ immigration policy” (González, 2018, p. 3). Thousands of Americans have been shocked by the policy and protested on the streets of cities and towns throughout the country. A 2018 poll on immigration showed that 76% of Americans support allowing undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as children to remain in the

country and eventually apply for citizenship, and thus strongly oppose Trump's Zero Tolerance policy (Galston, 2018). The survey shows that Republicans' vision for the country's immigration policy was at that time increasingly distant from the vision largely shared by most Americans.

In 2019, the Trump administration began implementing perhaps its most controversial policy – the construction of a wall along the US-Mexico border to keep illegal immigrants from entering the United States. At the time, polls showed that more than 64% of Americans opposed Trump's idea (Pew Research Center, 2019) believing the wall would be too expensive, harm the environment and be a symbol of hatred. The crisis deepened party divisions. “Republican support for expanding the border wall has increased 10 percentage points (from 72% to 82%). Over the same period [2016–2019], the share of Democrats who favor expanding the U.S.-Mexico border wall has declined from 13% to 6%” (Pew Research Center, 2019). The discussion over funding for the wall led to the longest government shutdown in the history of the United States (35 days). Trump demanded \$5.7 billion for the wall, but Democrats declined. In the end, the president announced a state of emergency, avoiding Congress to divert military funds for construction, further escalating political tensions. Next section of the article will analyze the responses of the Democrats in relation to President Trump's policies, to determine whether they have tried to lower or increase the progressive polarization in the U.S.

### **Democratic responses to Trump's attacks on media and immigration policies (2017–2021)**

As already noted, Trump frequently attacked the press during his first presidential term. His attacks were met with harsh condemnation from Democrats as well as from some of the networks which defended a free press. For example, on August 16, 2018, in joint action more than 300 different media outlets, led by *The Boston Globe* newspaper, published coordinated editorials defending press freedom and criticizing President Trump's attacks on the media. The act took place after a clunker of a resolution drafted by Democrat Brian Schatz which was supported by other politicians such as at that time Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, and Sen. Richard Blumenthal, that condemned the attacks on the free press. “We can't let statements by the president declaring the press is the enemy of the people go unchallenged”, said Senator Schatz (Gaudio, 2018). As a result, on the same day, the US Senate unanimously adopted a resolution that condemned attacks on the free press and affirmed that “the press is not the enemy of the people”. For example, in

2018, one of the major US TV stations – CNN – sued the Trump administration “to reinstate the press credentials of its chief White House correspondent, Jim Acosta, escalating a dispute that has highlighted the increasingly tense dynamic between President Trump and the news media” (Grynbaum, 2018).

During Trump’s first term, Democrats opposed the president’s immigration policies, often using various legal mechanisms to resist their implementation. For example, several Democratic attorneys general, such as Bob Ferguson of Washington state, Doug Chin of Hawaii and Lori Swanson of Minnesota, have sued Trump. The lawsuits brought by them not only played an important role in shaping opposition to the ban on Muslims, but more importantly directly influenced in 2019 the formation of the NO BAN Act which placed limits on the president’s authority to restrict the entry of foreigners into the United States. The NO BAN Act was created to primarily prevent future US presidents from imposing similar travel bans like the Muslim Ban without Congressional oversight. “This bill imposes limitations on the President’s authority to suspend or restrict aliens from entering the United States. It also prohibits religious discrimination in various immigration-related decisions, such as whether to issue an immigrant or nonimmigrant visa, unless there is a statutory basis for such discrimination” (Chu, 2021).

However, they also engaged in harsh polarizing rhetoric that further deepened party divisions. For example, high-profile democratic leaders strongly opposed the Muslim Ban when it was introduced by the Trump administration in 2017. Nancy Pelosi stated: “The President claims his ban is for security. But national security experts are urgently raising the alarm that the President’s cruel and reckless ban makes America less safe, not more. More than 1,000 American diplomats have risked their careers to send the message that the President’s ban weakens our fight against terror and hands our enemies a powerful new recruiting tool” (Pelosi, 2017). Another prominent figure, Chuck Schumer, declared: “I, as your senator from New York, will claw, scrap and fight with every fiber of my being until these orders are overturned. [...] If we get a few more Republicans, I think we might be able to pass legislation to overturn it. [...] It’ll be up to getting more Republicans” (Kim & Romm, 2017). The 2020 presidential candidate Bernie Sanders also opposed the ban. “The Trump administration’s travel ban was never about keeping America safe. We need only look at Trump’s own words to understand that this has always been a racist and anti-Islamic attempt to ban Muslims from entering this country. America loses when we become divided by religion, race, national origin or sexual orientation. [...]” (Sanders, 2018).

Furthermore, there is evidence that some Democratic leaders have explicitly characterized Trump’s Muslim ban as a racist attack, rather than a legitimate immigration

policy designed to protect American citizens, leading to a deepening of partisan divisions. For example, Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib, the first two Muslim women in Congress, several times personally attacked President Trump emphasizing that Muslim ban is a discriminatory policy targeting people based on their religion. To illustrate the point, Omar said: “The White House has tried to wrap their hateful policy up in a false story about national security. But we know the truth” (Fredericks, 2020). Tlaib wrote on her Twitter account: “No more waiting. Too many Muslims have been intentionally targeted, discriminated against, separated from their families and denied opportunities solely based on their faith. Straight up racism!” (Tlaib, 2020). When politicians like Tlaib and Omar use emotional statements such as “Straight up racism”, or “The fight doesn’t stop here”, it can reinforce existing divisions, making people feel personally attacked. Research conducted by several scholars reveal that the use of generic language “may encourage inferential errors that exacerbate perceived polarization” (Novoa et al., 2023). It should also be noted that Omar has made other controversial statements, such as those regarding Israel, when she publicly supported the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, which some critics considered divisive. Her statements caused Israel to ban her, and a dozen Democrats in the House of Representatives publicly criticized her.

Regarding the Zero Tolerance policy, which has led to the separation of thousands of immigrant children from their parents at the US-Mexico border, Democrats have strongly opposed the policy. However, as in the case of the Muslim Ban, they pursued increased judicial, legislative investigations on the one hand, and used rhetoric that fueled polarization on the other. For example, Democrats in the House of Representatives have launched a congressional investigation into how the Trump administration handled the implementation of the Zero Tolerance policy. The investigation found, among other things, that there was no plan to reunite separated parents with children before the policy was implemented and that no database had been created to track separated families.

High-profile Democrats such as Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer have visited detention centers. Pelosi traveled to a San Diego detention center at the US-Mexico border, and after what she saw her message for Trump was: “Stop this inhumane, barbaric policy [...]. This is not about immigration. This is about humanity. It’s about family. It’s about who we are as a country”, Pelosi said (ABC7, 2018). Chuck Schumer went to facilities in Texas, where reports indicated that the detention centers were overcrowded. Schumer said: “To see these people, particularly the children treated in such inhumane conditions, just tears at your heart strings and really makes you feel awful”, said Schumer (CBS New York, 2019). Another Democrat, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, went much further and called the detention centers

“concentration camps”. She wrote on her social media: “This administration has established concentration camps on the southern border of the United States for immigrants, where they are being brutalized with dehumanizing conditions and dying” (Stolberg, 2019). Ocasio-Cortez’s remarks were heavily criticized by some of her colleagues from the Democratic Party. For example, Josh Gottheimer stated: “the comparison is cruel and disrespectful to the six million who were murdered in the Holocaust, including members of my own family” (Stolberg, 2019). Even though the detention centers were overcrowded and without a doubt presented poor living conditions, some of the statements made by Democratic politicians such as Ocasio-Cortez intensified rhetoric in a way that contributed to political polarization.

Democrats also took decisive actions to oppose the termination by the Trump administration of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. Their efforts among others included legislative initiatives and were aimed to protect DACA recipients. For example, Xavier Becerra, the California attorney general, filed the lawsuit seeking to block the Trump administration from ending the program. Dick Durbin, Jeff Flake, and Chuck Schumer with some republicans introduced the Dream Act of 2017 – a bipartisan bill that help acquire a US citizenship for people “who are either undocumented, have DACA or temporary protected status (TPS), and who graduate from U.S. high schools and attend college, enter the workforce, or enlist in the military” (NILC, 2017). Despite strong support, the proposal did not get implemented due to lack of Senate Republican support. In January 2018, Democrats in the Senate, led again by Chuck Schumer, went further and refused to approve a government spending bill unless Dreamer’s protections were included, which consequently led to a three-day government shutdown.

Various legislative efforts by Democrats have shown their full commitment to protecting Dreamers, but Republicans have largely resisted these efforts, arguing that Dreamer protection should be coupled with stricter enforcement of immigration laws. In arguing this, they were primarily concerned with building a wall on the border with Mexico. The several-day government shutdown of 2018 led to another dispute between Democrats and Republicans and increased polarization. Republicans accused Democrats of prioritizing undocumented immigrants over US citizens.

## **Lessons for Republicans and Democrats**

Based on the analysis, one can claim that polarization during President Trump’s first term was driven by both Trump’s various aggressive actions and Democratic opposition’s strong reactions. Some key assumptions arise. First, Trump’s unpresidential

leadership style increased division, and this has been particularly seen in the direction of media and some democratic leaders. Trump often used provocative language and name-calling. In response to the president's attacks, Democrats' responses also impacted polarization because they frequently used words such as "racist" and filed lawsuits. Second, Trump's immigration policies such as the Muslim Ban and the Zero Tolerance policy caused many nationwide protests, which deepened the divisions, because Democrats accused Republicans of being immoral and illegal in their actions towards the immigrants. Third, Trump's use of social media, especially Twitter, to attack his opponents formed a new digital environment where political dialogue was not driven by a serious and respectable discussion, but by Trump's personal assaults. He was the first US president to use social media as a direct weapon. In result, his actions contributed to divisions and made Democratic leaders also engaged in similar rhetoric.

Democrats and Republicans could learn important lessons from Trump's first term to deal with political polarization more effectively. As far as the Republicans are concerned, during Trump's first term, many key policies faced legal challenges because they were largely based on executive orders. With a Republican majority in Congress, Trump's second term should focus more on getting permanent legislation passed by Congress to avoid repeated court battles that polarize Congress and the country. In addition, Trump and the Republicans ought not to attack the press and concentrate on indorsing a clear message to the public. They must avoid "us" vs. "them" framing in every matter. Furthermore, relying mostly on outlets associated with their electorate such as the Fox News channel will not allow them to reach moderates.

Democrats know that Trump 2.0 has better prepared to govern than Trump 1.0. He had more time and in 2025 could surround himself with the Cabinet members who will follow his orders – the loyalists. That means that Democrats should better prepare for Trump's second term. They ought to foresee policy changes early and have their own propositions ready in place. Instead of simply resisting Trump 2.0 policies, Democrats should have clear alternatives. Moreover, they need to concentrate on strengthening democratic institutions so that future administrations have no choice but to abide by constitutional constraints. In addition, Democrats cannot emotionally react to every statement of the Trump 2.0 administration, just as it has been a case between 2017–2021. Yes, on one hand Donald Trump likes provocations, but on the other, he respects strong opposition leaders who can stand up and present arguments in support of their views.

As of April 2025, President Donald Trump is not only attacking but taking revenge. There is an opinion that "[not] only has he found new ways to use his

power to target those he has demonized, but his actions or just the prospect of them have led some of those he has gone after to change their behavior and fall into line” (Schmidt, 2025). Trump has used tactics including “lawsuits, executive orders, regulations, dismissals from government jobs, withdrawal of security details and public intimidation to take on a wide range of individuals and institutions he views as having unfairly pursued him or sought to block his agenda” (Schmidt, 2025). For example, President Trump revoked security clearances many of his perceived political enemies, including former Vice President Kamala Harris, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, former Wyoming Rep. Liz Cheney, former Illinois Rep. Adam Kinzinger, and former Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

So far, it is difficult to speak of any responses from the Democrats to the various actions taken by Trump and the Republicans. On the one hand, this should not come as a surprise since, after the devastating defeat of Kamala Harris, a certain leadership crisis in the Democratic Party could have been expected. On the other hand, the very high tempo and broad scale of the Trump administration’s actions would seemingly have been expected to meet harsh criticism from the opposition. Some indicate that “Democrats have grown increasingly frustrated with their party’s leadership, which is struggling to oppose President Trump’s agenda” (Montanaro, 2025). Having said that, it is important to indicate the results of recent surveys which show that the Democratic Party has reached its lowest level of popularity ever. In March 2025, national NBC News poll indicated that around 27% of registered voters say they have a positive view of the party, which is the lowest positive rating of the party in polls since 1990 (Bowman, Kamisar, & Marquez, 2025).

## Conclusion

To recapitulate, the main goal of this study was to examine President Donald Trump’s first-term policies and democratic responses. To do that, the author applied Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer’s theory of pernicious polarization which indicates that both political leaders and public grievances contribute to harmful polarization in democracies. The concept argues that democracy can be most endangered when political leaders intensify divisions instead of constructively resolving underlying grievances. The approach “us” vs. “them” leads to democratic weakening, especially when opposition responds with similar polarization tactics. Accordingly, the author stated two main research questions. First, has President Trump and the Republicans contributed to deepening polarization through their actions? And second, did the

Democrats try to stabilize democracy or did they escalate polarization with own strategies?

The analysis of Trump's first-term presidency has showed that it was characterized by both, the president's highly polarizing leadership style, and the Democrats who opposed the president's policies, but often engaged in harsh polarizing rhetoric that further deepened party divisions. Trump exposed the 'dividing style' through many various actions such as his very aggressive rhetoric style towards the opponents, especially the press as well as the democratic leaders, and some very controversial immigration policies that were not shared by most of the Americans. Democrats opposed many of Trump's policies using various legal mechanisms, but at the same time they often reacted very emotionally to the president's actions and statements leading to a deepening of partisan divisions.

The two parties should learn significant lessons from Trump's first term to deal with political polarization more effectively during Trump's second term. Most importantly, President Trump and his Republican Party should concentrate more on getting the legislation passed by Congress to prevent fights that polarize the American people. In addition, the President ought not to attack the press and should not use solely the Fox News channel to get his message across. The Democratic Party, on the other hand, must focus on its political leadership which needs to be found and exposed to the public. Simultaneously, the party ought to be prepared and foresee policy changes early. Democrats cannot just resist Trump 2.0 policies – they must have clear alternatives. To do that, the party, which is in deep identity and strategy crisis with its lowest level of popularity ever, must most importantly win hearts, not just arguments of the American people. And this means setting a good example by living democratic values such as respect, justice, and solidarity, as well as acting in a way that others want to follow. Leading by example is key to restoring trust, which is crucial in lowering the polarization. Right now, Republicans trust only their party and hate the other one, the same applies to Democrats. If this trend continues, polarization will become even greater and consequently weaken democracy, because in a democracy parties see each other as political rivals and not as enemies who are a threat to the nation.

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