



PUBLIC GOODS, SOCIAL EXTERNALITIES, AND POLITICAL POLARIZATION

Date: November 19, 2024

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KEY EVENTS

On November 19, 2024, Dr. Simon Levin presented *Public Goods, Social Externalities, and Political Polarization* for this year's West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed included erosion of public goods, complex adaptive systems, and political polarization and its impact.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Dr. Levin examined the critical challenges posed by the erosion of public goods, including sustainability and democratic governance, and explored how political polarization exacerbates these issues by hindering collective action. He discussed the significance of viewing societies as complex adaptive systems, where local interactions have far-reaching implications for global outcomes, such as climate change mitigation and economic stability. Dr. Levin explained how polarization, particularly in the U.S., disrupts the trust and cooperation necessary to manage these systemic risks effectively, impeding both domestic and international problem-solving efforts. This issue is significant because the erosion of public goods not only threatens immediate security but also undermines long-term resilience in addressing global challenges. Dr. Levin emphasized the importance of fostering cooperation across ideological divides, developing adaptive governance strategies, and aligning local actions with global sustainability goals to mitigate these risks.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Dr. Levin examined the erosion of public goods as a critical challenge to societal and ecological stability, highlighting the collective inaction and free-rider

behaviors that exacerbate this issue. He emphasized how resources like clean air, water, and social trust are increasingly under threat, with the lack of alignment between individual incentives and collective welfare at the core of the problem. Dr. Levin illustrated the global consequences of this degradation, such as worsening inequity and environmental crises, underscoring the urgency of fostering cooperative behaviors. He proposed that effective governance, incentives for collective action, and policy reforms are essential to preserving public goods and ensuring long-term sustainability.

Dr. Levin discussed the principles of complex adaptive systems, framing them as essential tools for understanding resilience and adaptability in both ecological and social contexts. He explained that these systems, characterized by interconnected components and emergent behaviors, are constantly changing as those components adapt to changing conditions, and hence the systems as a whole are vulnerable to disruptions. By applying this lens, Dr. Levin demonstrated how societies and ecosystems can better manage crises and enhance resilience. He stressed the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration to develop innovative strategies that address systemic vulnerabilities, offering insights into designing adaptive policies and interventions to stabilize these dynamic systems.

Dr. Levin explored how political polarization undermines collective decision-making and complicates efforts to address shared challenges like climate change and public health. He argued that polarization amplifies divisions, making cooperation and effective policy making increasingly difficult. Dr. Levin connected this issue to the broader weakening of societal cohesion, which further erodes trust and accelerates the degradation of public goods. To counteract these effects, Dr. Levin advocated for strategies to reduce polarization, foster dialogue across divides, and align diverse perspectives toward shared goals. He concluded by emphasizing the importance of integrating social science insights with actionable governance approaches to strengthen societal resilience and unity.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Dr. Levin emphasized the growing degradation of public goods, such as clean air, water, and social trust, driven by collective inaction and free-rider behaviors. He called for governance reforms and incentives to align individual and collective welfare.
- Dr. Levin explored the principles of complex adaptive systems, highlighting their role in understanding resilience and adaptability in

ecosystems and societies. He stressed the need for interdisciplinary collaboration to address systemic vulnerabilities and enhance stability.

- Dr. Levin discussed how political polarization undermines collective decision-making and exacerbates challenges like climate change and public health crises. He advocated for dialogue, reducing divisions, and aligning diverse perspectives toward shared goals.
- Dr. Levin highlighted the critical role of biodiversity in maintaining ecosystem functions and the direct benefits these provide to humanity, emphasizing the urgency of protecting natural habitats.
- Dr. Levin examined the reciprocal impacts between human activities and ecosystems, emphasizing the urgent need to address climate change through sustainable practices and adaptive policies.

FURTHER READING

Levin, S. A., et al. (2023). Challenges in Cybersecurity: Lessons From Biological Defense Systems. *Mathematical Biosciences*, 362(109024). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mbs.2023.1090204>

Leonard, N. E., & Levin, S. A. (2022). Collective intelligence as a public good. *Collective Intelligence*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/26339137221083293>

Levin, S. A., et al. (2021). The dynamics of political polarization. *PNAS*, 118(50). <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2116950118>

Levin, S. A., & Weber, E. U. (2024). Polarization and the Psychology of Collectives. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 19(2), 335-343. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916231186614>

Thompson, S. K. (2024). POLARIZATION AND INTERVENTION-BASED P/CVE PROGRAMS IN CANADA. *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare*, 6(3), 105–109.



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