

Decisively Polarized: An Examination of Polarization in Contemporary American Politics

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Abstract

Today's political climate in the United States is decisively polarized. This polarization is dividing the United States in numerous ways, including - though not limited to - along partisan lines, socioeconomically, and racially. These aforementioned divides are resulting in issues from legislative stalemates to mass social unrest. One must beg the questions of how the United States became so decisively polarized, and if it is possible to reduce this polarization and unite the nation. This poster explores the historical context surrounding the current levels of polarization, the impacts of it on society as well as in government, and possible policy proposals to reduce this polarization and unite the nation.

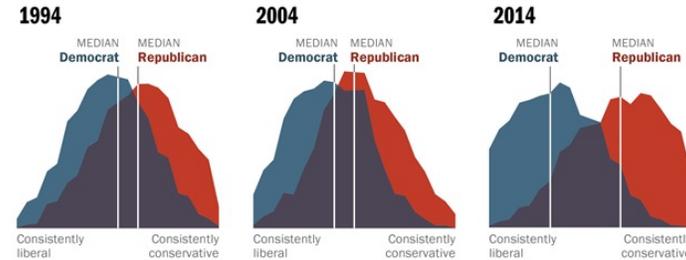
History

Two momentous changes to the American polity define the levels of polarization found in contemporary American politics. The first of these changes is partisan polarization. Partisan polarization has been ever omnipresent in American politics, particularly among political elites. Data going back to 1877 demonstrates that party voting rates were high in the late nineteenth century, fell during much of the twentieth century, and began steeply rising in the mid 1970s (McCarty). With the rises in party voting rates came intense ideological and partisan struggles among the political elite, resulting in legislative stalemates, decisive partisan divisions, abandonment of centrist policies, gridlock, et cetera.

The second change came from the transformation of the southern United States. The 1960s brought about a transformation of party orientation in the southern states, with most members of the political elite and the mass public identifying as what can be referred to as southern Democrat to what one can now view as staunchly Republican. This southern realignment is thought to be the result of the battle over civil rights in the 1960s. Democratic Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson affirmed the position of the Democratic Party's support for the civil rights movement and against segregation, thus leading to the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Hill, Tausanovitch). These acts prompted the shift of many public elites leaving the Democratic Party for the Republican Party. It should be noted that "In 1950, 95% of members of Congress from the South were Democrats. By 1970, this figure was 72% and by 2015, only 28% of Southern members of Congress were Democrats" (Hill, Tausanovitch).

Democrats and Republicans More Ideologically Divided than in the Past

Distribution of Democrats and Republicans on a 10-item scale of political values



Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public
Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A). The blue area in this chart represents the ideological distribution of Democrats; the red area of Republicans. The overlap of these two distributions is shaded purple. Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents (see Appendix B).
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Figure 1. [Graph illustrates growth of ideological divisions between the Democrats and the Republicans]. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/#polarizations-consequences>

Impacts on Society and Government

Polarization has immense impacts in contemporary American politics. Of note is the distinction between polarization in the mass public and polarization among the political elites. It has been proposed that polarization within the mass public - which is not as great as polarization among the political elite - is primarily driven in response to the polarized parties (McCarty). Therefore, as the political elites and thus the parties become increasingly polarized, the voters adjust their issue positions to better fit that of their given party. As such, one can see a distinct and increasing divide between members of the Democratic Party and members of the Republican Party (Figure 1, Pew Research Center). With increasing divides also comes mass social unrest. Partisan polarization has led to the formation of both extremist thoughts and groups. Extremist thoughts and groups have produced violence, misinformation, demonization of the other side, and in cases have even attempted to overturn a democratic election.

Impacts on Society and Government, cont.

Polarization has also had immense impacts on government. One branch of the government that is most afflicted by contemporary polarization is the legislative branch. The rise in party voting rates that came about in the 1970s brought about intense ideological and partisan struggles among the political elite, resulting in legislative stalemates, decisive partisan divisions, abandonment of centrist policies, gridlock, et cetera. These actions that have been brought about because of the partisan divide between the Democratic and Republican parties has ultimately resulted in what political scientist Nolan McCarty has referred to as "ineffectual and counterproductive policies" (McCarty). Additionally, the judicial branch shows evidence of being afflicted by polarization. Polarization within the legislative branch has resulted in an increase in ideological conflict over Supreme Court nominations, which in turn results in the appointment of more ideologically consistent justices. The increase in more ideologically consistent justices has thus resulted in an adherence to ideological dispositions rather than the splitting of votes (McCarty).

Policy Proposals

Solving the issue of polarization in contemporary American politics is not an easy task. There are multiple paths that can be explored in order to diminish the polarized state the United States is in, from social theories such as encouraging cross-cutting cleavages - thus encouraging attitudes and identities that may not be commonly found in a partisan's party, therefore mitigating social conflict - to implementing policy proposals such as proportional representation which would eliminate the two-party system found in the United States. It is debated among political scientists whether the levels of polarization being seen are even dangerous to society and to democracy. However, given the decisively polarized state of the political elites and members of the mass public, and given recent events such as the storming of the United States Capitol building on January 6th, 2021, one must at the very least argue that the levels of polarization are not ideal and as such steps should be made to reduce it.

Bibliography

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