The Causes, Consequences, and Solutions for Political Polarization in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Following highly publicized recent events such as the controversial 2020 presidential campaign, and the ensuing January 6th attacks on the Capitol, the condition of U.S. politics has undoubtedly been called into question. A major underlying cause behind this political instability is the phenomenon known as political polarization. This paper examines political polarization through three lenses; its causes, consequences, and finally, potential solutions. Firstly, we examine key areas which include the flaws within our current political system, the media relation to politics, and inherent psychological factors. Subsequently, we look at various impacts that occur as a result of each cause, namely the effects it has on the productivity of government institutions, the spread of misinformation, and our social relationships. In turn, this allows us to put the aforementioned events, as well as numerous other instances into perspective in order to shed light on the extent of the problem. Lastly, we look at both existing and proposed solutions to address the respective causes, considering innovations in the political system, highlighting ways to oppose misinformation, and exploring the practice of deliberative democracy. In considering the importance of a strong political backbone on everyday life, it is imperative to look at what can be done to combat political polarization, and in the process, attempt to restore the state of American politics.

Introduction

Background

Over the years, America has grown aware of the existence of political polarization that has pervaded throughout the nation. In fact, 91% of the country believes that the country is divided over politics, with this attitude being shared across major political parties [1]. Furthermore, 60% believe that these differences are insurmountable when attempting to address the biggest issues facing the country [2]. Undoubtedly, this pessimism presents a troubling vision for the future of American politics and society. While awareness is a good first step in dealing with polarization, there is much more that needs to be done. Political polarization is a complex phenomenon with a wide range of causes and corresponding detrimental consequences. Nevertheless, action can be taken to prevent the worst from occurring. In order to take the first step in creating change, however, a thorough understanding of political polarization is essential.

Context

A modern-day definition of political polarization within the U.S. refers to an American's inclination to align with the views, candidates, and policies of either the Democratic or Republican party [3] and the subsequent partisan animosity that exists around such differing ideological views that in turn creates division between these groups [4]. This phenomenon manifests both within the American public and among politicians. Furthermore,
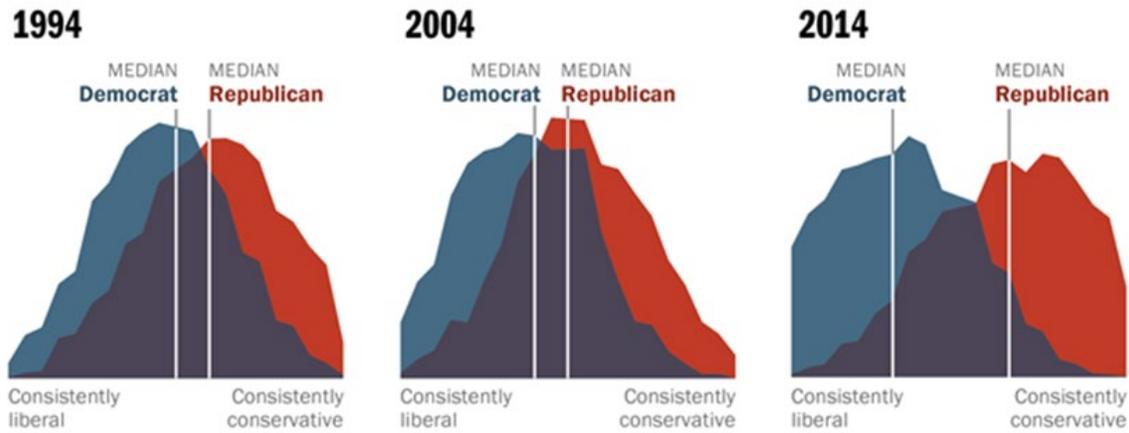
as mentioned in Figure 1, recent trends have resulted in a situation whereby more conservative values are associated with the Republican party, and more liberal with the Democratic party. In the current day, conservative values are defined as beliefs centered around limited government, less regulation, and personal liberty, while liberal values are based on stronger government responsibility and action in order to solve problems and provide equality for all [5]. As such, political polarization is best measured by an individual's ideological leaning towards the opposing values of conservatism or liberalism, which thus impacts their support for either the Democratic or Republican party. It is this conflict that serves as the bedrock for political polarization as we know it today.

Before exploring the various aspects of political polarization, it is important to understand the recent developments among the general public that have put us in this situation. Evidently, as shown in Figure 1, political polarization has increased sharply over the past few decades within the general American public. Since 1994, the overlap between Democratic and Republican values has decreased significantly. This is in response to the increase in the amount of people who have strayed away from moderate beliefs and instead now share either strictly liberal or conservative views, a number that has doubled from 10% to 21% in this time period [4]. These trends result in the medians between both groups increasingly moving further apart. As such, more Republicans are to the right of the Democratic median, and more Democrats to the left of the Republican median. In turn, common ground among those of differing parties has severely diminished.

Additionally, we see an almost identical pattern of polarization among American politicians. For instance, consider Congress, the branch of government in which polarization is extremely discernible. Figures 2 and 3 make use of a poll by Voteview where politicians indicated on a scale of -1 to 1 how liberal or conservative they were [6]. This allows us to represent the shifts in the strength of ideology over time in both Democrats and Republicans within both chambers of Congress. In order to remain consistent with the above, we will look at the scores of each party only within the Congresses that were in session during the years 1994, 2004, and 2014. In order from 1994 to 2004 to 2014, the ideology scores of the Republicans were 0.37, 0.40, and 0.48 respectively. Meanwhile, the scores for the Democrats were -0.32, -0.36, and -0.38 respectively. As a whole, it is clear that the country's lawmakers have striven further away from each other in order to align with the partisan views of their parties.

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. Democrats and republicans more ideologically divided than in the past. Reprinted from "Political Polarization in the American Public", by Dimock et al., 2014. Copyright 2022 Pew Research Center.
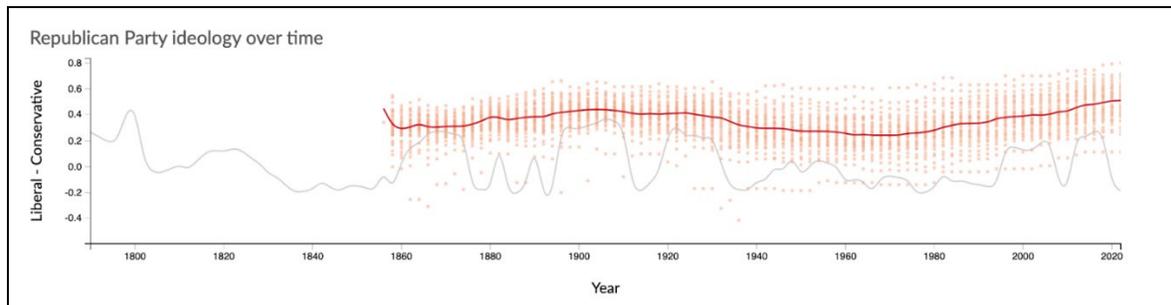

Figure 2. Republican party ideology over time. Reprinted from "UCLA Presents voteview.com beta".
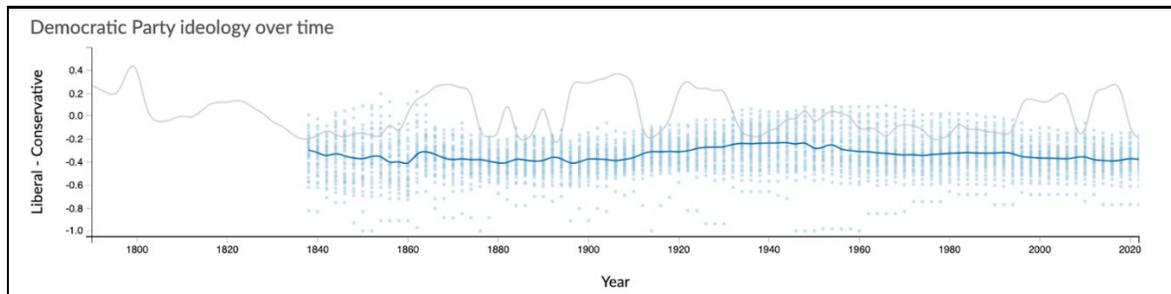

Figure 3. Republican party ideology over time. Reprinted from "UCLA Presents voteview.com beta".
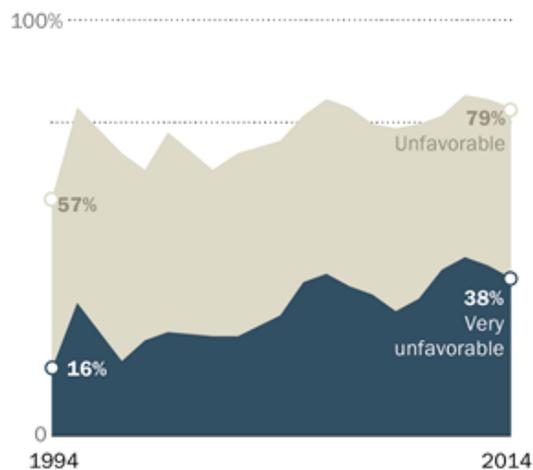
Problem Statement & Thesis

A major aspect of polarization is the resulting political animosity that occurs between people of opposing viewpoints. Figure 4 points out the stark increase in hostility amongst these groups of individuals in the past decades. Certainly, this presents a concerning image of American politics and the impact it has on society as a whole. The impacts of this growing divide are already apparent when we consider the lack of cooperation both within the public and among lawmakers on numerous pervasive issues, including the environment, gun control, abortion rights, and more. As the country continues to grapple with these challenges, and will undoubtedly be faced with many more in the future, it is essential to find ways to tackle polarization and its ramifications on American society. Further, America is polarizing far more rapidly than other democracies around the world, such as Canada, Australia, Germany, and the United Kingdom [7]. As a consequence of this heightened polarization, America is losing its credibility. For instance, the January 6th Capitol attacks have suggested this to be the case, as the events negatively affected America's reputation in the eyes of other countries [8]. If the U.S. hopes to retain its geopolitical standing amongst other nations, addressing our political stability is of utmost importance. Therefore, addressing polarization is not only of domestic concern, but also international.
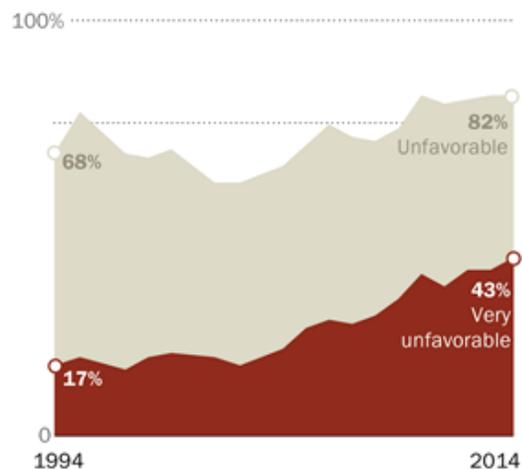
After presenting this worrying representation surrounding political polarization, it is unquestionable the potential dangers posed by it. Thus, by examining its causes, consequences, and solutions, it is necessary and possible to truly comprehend the issue and take aim in addressing it. In this paper, I argue that political polarization is mainly caused as a result of three factors: a flawed political system, the media's relation to politics, and inherent psychological traits. Of the many consequences that occur due to polarization, the adverse effects it has on the productivity of government institutions, the spread of misinformation, and social relationships are the most paramount. In the aim of addressing these causes, solutions include steps to reform our current political system, opposing misinformation and propaganda, and participating in the practice of deliberative democracy.

A Rising Tide of Mutual Antipathy

Democratic *attitudes about the* **Republican Party**

Republican *attitudes about the* **Democratic Party**

Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public
Note: Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents.

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Figure 4. A rising tide of mutual antipathy. Reprinted from "Political Polarization in the American Public", by Dimock et al., 2014. Copyright 2022 Pew Research Center.

Causes

Political System

In his farewell address, Founding Father George Washington warned us against the dangers posed by the formation of opposing political parties [9]. It seems as if the country's current two-party electoral system is a direct representation of his worries. Today this system is represented through the consistent dominance of the Democratic and Republican party in the political landscape. In addition to basic opposition, these parties view each other as legitimate threats to the nation as a whole, resulting in the notion that winning is everything [10]. As a result, this has created an environment of zero-sum politics, or the belief that one party's victory can only come at the expense of the other's defeat. As shown in Figure 5, researchers have provided evidence of an association between two-party systems and political animosity across different nations. On the flipside, the opposite is true when looking at countries that have multiple political parties. Intuitively, this makes sense because having multiple parties reduces the presence of zero-sum thinking. With more parties comes more than two perspectives and policies on an issue. Individuals are therefore more likely to align with the views of multiple parties, even while maintaining support for one. Additionally, with more than two parties. people are less likely to view every policy issue as an "us vs. them" decision. In sum, a more extensive and less limited political landscape is key to reducing animosity and division.

   More than just the system itself, certain policies also play a role in increasing polarization. A prime example of such is that of gerrymandering. Properly defined, gerrymandering is the practice of manipulating electoral boundaries in a way that unfairly favors one political party over another [11]. Specific to congressional elections, gerrymandering means that incumbents have the safety to appeal to the extremes of their own party instead of trying to branch out and take a more moderate approach due to the fact that victory is ensured regardless [12]. In the context of the upcoming 2022 midterms, gerrymandering has resulted in a mere 8% of commission-drawn districts being competitive [13]. This suggests that the remaining 92% of election districts are virtually a foregone conclusion, reducing chances of politicians meeting halfway when running. The resulting impacts are twofold: each party's respective extremes gain strength when more lawmakers appeal to them and the lawmakers themselves are likely to hold onto such views when considering legislation, reducing chances of compromise.

People get along better in multiparty, proportional democracies

Average dislike of the opposition and average appreciation of one's own party among citizens in 20 global democracies by each government's level of proportional representation
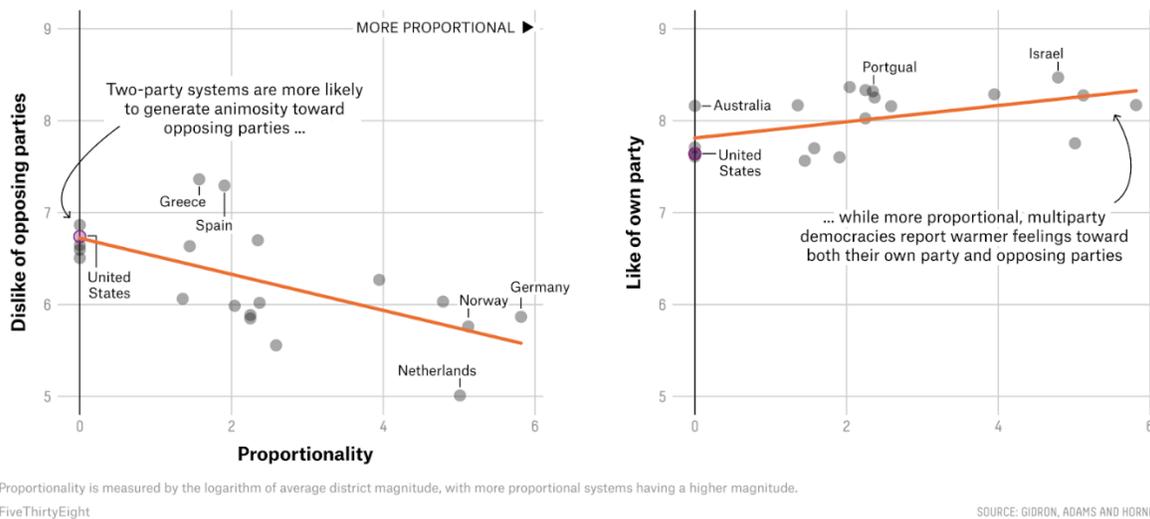
Proportionality is measured by the logarithm of average district magnitude, with more proportional systems having a higher magnitude.
FiveThirtyEight

SOURCE: GIDRON, ADAMS AND HORNE

Figure 5. People get along better in multiparty, proportional democracies. Reprinted from "Why The Two-Party System Is Effing Up U.S. Democracy", by Drutman et al., 2021. Copyright 2022 ABC News Internet Ventures.

Media

A second cause of political polarization is the media's role in politics. One major area where this relationship is most pronounced is that of the mainstream media. Americans look to the news in order to stay up to date on many pressing issues ranging from the economy, the environment, foreign policy, and more. Yet, the sources from which different groups of people get their news vastly differ [14]. Figure 7 examines the credibility of various news sources in the eyes of Democrats and Republicans. Evidently, there is a large divide between the sources that each group finds trustworthy or not. When individuals are heavily reliant on one source of news, it ensures that their opinions on important issues are formed from one-sided and biased perspectives. People are less likely to view information from opposing sources as credible, and this disregard it completely. As such, alternative viewpoints are unlikely to be considered if people purposefully choose to be shielded from them.

Another aspect of the media that ties into our politics is social media. Figure 6 depicts the results of a study published by the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. The study deals with the idea of echo chambers, the belief that social media creates an environment in which people encounter information that aligns with and reinforces their preexisting beliefs [15]. The study examined the implications of using social media in the opposite manner, that is, if people were exposed to opposing information instead. To test this, the researchers instructed both self-identified Democrats and Republicans to follow Twitter bots that retweeted information from officials, organizations, and leaders of the opposing party. The results show that in both groups, participants became more polarized (either more liberal or conservative) towards their own party after viewing information relating to the opposing party. In addition, this effect was most pronounced in participants that were most attentive to the social media information they were exposed to. Overall, the study demonstrates that regardless of the way it is used, social media fosters polarization. Whether people see content that aligns or differs with their views, both cases result in the fostering of more political division. In this way, both the mainstream

and social media create a heavily polarized environment that only worsens as people continue to rely upon these sources.

Ideology adds another layer to party-line divides of most trusted and distrusted news sources

% who <u>trust</u> each source for political and election news (first five shown)

Democrat/Lean Dem				Republican/Lean Rep			
LIBERAL		MODERATE/ CONSERVATIVE		MODERATE/ LIBERAL		**CONSERVATIVE**	
CNN	70%	CNN	65%	Fox News	51%	Fox News	75%
New York Times	66	ABC News	63	ABC News	47	Hannity (radio)	43
PBS	66	NBC News	61	CBS News	42	Limbaugh (radio)	38
NPR	63	CBS News	60	NBC News	41	ABC News	24
NBC News	61	PBS	48	CNN	36	CBS News	23

% who <u>distrust</u> each source for political and election news (first five shown)

Democrat/Lean Dem				Republican/Lean Rep			
LIBERAL		MODERATE/ CONSERVATIVE		MODERATE/ LIBERAL		**CONSERVATIVE**	
Fox News	77%	Fox News	48%	CNN	43%	CNN	67%
Limbaugh (radio)	55	Limbaugh (radio)	34	MSNBC	32	MSNBC	57
Breitbart	53	Hannity (radio)	28	HuffPost	30	New York Times	50
Hannity (radio)	50	Breitbart	22	BuzzFeed	29	NBC News	50
NY Post	27	BuzzFeed	20	Fox News	29	CBS News	48

Note: Order of outlets does not necessarily indicate statistically significant differences.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019.
"U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election: A Nation Divided"

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Figure 6. Ideology adds another layer to the party-line divides of most trusted and distrusted news sources. Reprinted from "U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election: A Nation Divided" by Jurkowitz et al., 2020. Copyright 2022 Pew Research Center
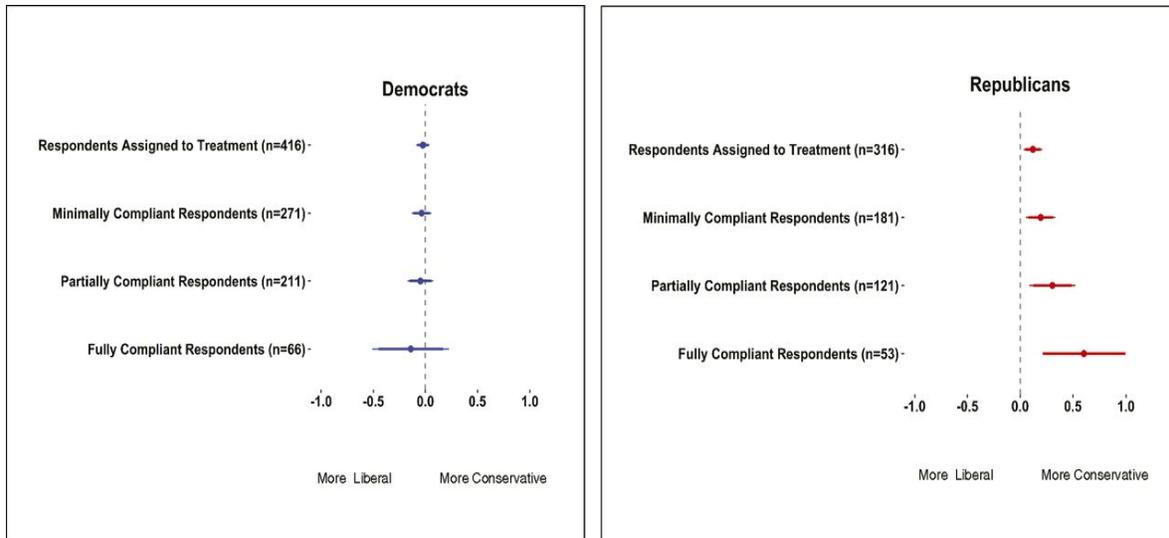
Figure 7. Effect of Following Twitter Bot That Retweets Opposing Political Ideology. Reprinted from "Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization", by Bail et al., 2018. Copyright © 2022 National Academy of Science.

Psychological Factors

While there are certainly structural causes for rising political polarization, another explanation may lie in our inherent psychological traits. In psychology, one area of research that is pertinent to our research is the minimal group paradigm. This practice is targeted at explaining the conditions that lead to group biases, specifically favoritism towards one's own group, and discrimination against another [16]. A previous experiment by social psychologist Henri Tajfel relates strongly to the current state of politics today. In this experiment, two groups with no interpersonal conflict were created, with the two groups having no information on one another. Individuals in one group were then faced with a choice regarding a sum of money: either allocate the money equally between their ingroup and the outgroup, or take less money for the subject's ingroup while the outgroup got even less money. The results showed that on average, participants chose the option that benefited their group more than the other. Tajfel's experiment has provided evidence to support the suggestion that ingroup bias may be rooted into human psychological function, and that we have instinctive adverse associations with groups other than our own [17].

This draws stark parallels to the current polarized political state America's two-party system. It is important to consider how, regardless of why or how, most people sort themselves into either the Democratic or Republican party. Applying the findings from philosophy, it is clear that once this sorting occurs, human nature ensures that they are biased towards that group to the point where seeking the other side's perspectives is extremely difficult. This is separate from other structural causes of polarization, and can therefore exist in a vacuum. However, it can certainly be exacerbated by other causes such as those mentioned previously. As such, political polarization is brought about due to a combination of both structural and impalpable causes.

Consequences

Productivity of Government Institutions

As mentioned earlier, Congress has gradually become more polarized as the years have gone by. In fact, relative to other branches of government, the diminishment of Congressional power is especially significant. The most effective way through which this trend can be portrayed is legislative productivity, measured by both the number of laws passed by Congress and the amount of issues addressed by those laws [18]. Figure 8 presents the steady decline in the number of laws each Congress has passed over the past decades, with the lowest point being the most recent. When coupled with the rising polarization between Democrats and Republicans in Congress mentioned beforehand, these figures delineate a clear inverse relationship between polarization and legislative productivity. As polarization increases, the less Congress gets done. A notable explanation for these occurrences lies within the filibuster, the practice in the Senate of purposely delaying or blocking a vote on a piece of legislation by extending debate [19]. As shown in figure 9, filibuster use has skyrocketed in the 20th and 21st century [20]. It is no surprise that this coincides with a decrease in legislative productivity. For instance, the recent Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act only became law after senate Republicans used the threat of the filibuster to whittle down the provisions and funding to fit with their party agenda [21]. Seeing as how the bill included actions on important problems such as humans' negative impacts on the environment and America's crumbling infrastructure, this definitely presents a worrying image. It highlights the complications associated with partisan tactics that make progress on pervasive issues surrounding the country difficult to achieve. Consequently, the public's perception of Congress continues to worsen as a result of the gridlock that prevents the country's progress. The purpose of Congress is to pass legislation that is in the interest of the American public, and the failure to accomplish this task is resulting in unfortunate outcomes. To illustrate, Congressional approval rating fell to 18%, the lowest point in more than a year, as efforts to pass spending and voting legislation have failed [22]. The public's faith in government institutions, along with overall productivity have clearly been affected as a direct result of increased partisan politics.

Webpage Screenshot

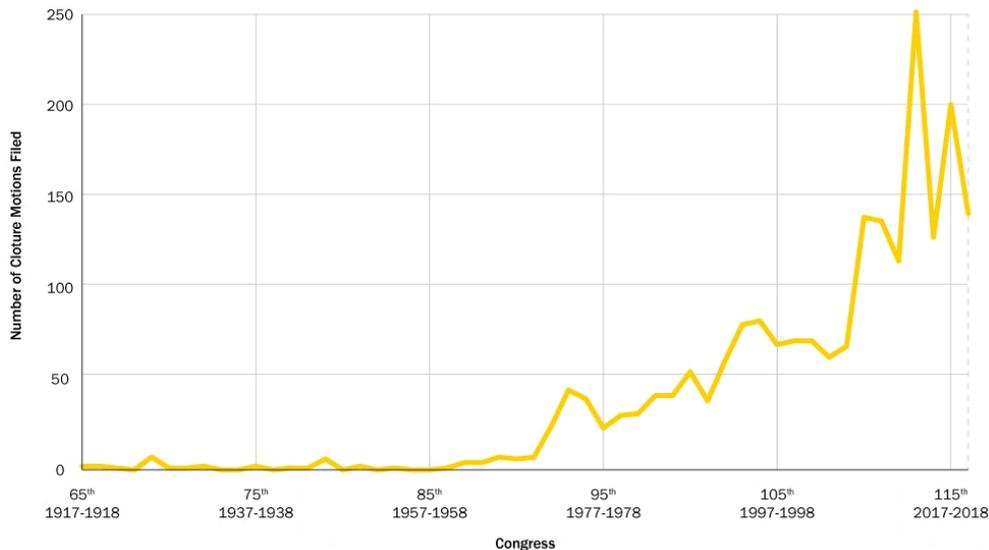## Public laws passed per session of Congress, 1948-2012

Created with Datawrapper   Source: Congress
http://cf.datawrapper.de/962eH/2/ Sat Apr 05 2014 15:59:39 GMT-0400 (EDT)

Figure 8. Public laws passed per session of Congress, 1948-2012. Reprinted from "Congressional dysfunction" by Exra Klein, 2015. Copyright 2022 Vox Media, LLC.

Cloture Motions Filed
65th Congress – 116th Congress

Figure 9. Cloture motions filed. Reprinted from "What is the Senate filibuster, and what would it take to eliminate it?" by Molly E. Reynolds, 2020. Copyright 2020 Brookings.

Misinformation

Another noteworthy consequence of increased polarization is the resulting spread of misinformation across the media. Figure 10 depicts how the sharing of fake news is a bipartisan occurrence, with both Democrats and Republicans participating in the act. Most importantly however, Figure 11 illustrates how amongst other factors, the strongest predictor by far for the sharing of fake news was polarization [23]. Further analysis also showed that both Democrats and Republicans are equally willing to share such news [24]. This entails that the primary reasoning individuals hold for spreading fake news is to advance their respective political agendas. However, if this is true, questions arise as to why Republicans are much more likely to share fake news than Democrats. The explanation behind this has to do with the supply of news. To depict, the majority of mainstream media news situates with democratic viewpoints [24]. Thus, Republicans have to look further from the mainstream to further their political agenda, whereas Democrats can accomplish the same goal by using mainstream information. Yet and still, the fact remains that misinformation is certainly present across the media, and the biggest reason why is because of a heavily polarized environment. Even so, a larger finding from the evidence is the notion that Democrat and Republicans both purposefully use the media to belittle the opposing side, furthering the spread of polarization amongst the public. Earlier, we mentioned how social media and the news creates "echo chambers" that prevent a common ground from being achieved. Now we can see how the media is not only a cause of polarization, but also a consequence in the sense that it provides a platform for the spread of misinformation and negative attitudes between political parties to take form. In this way, a negative feedback loop is created as the media causes polarization, which in turn fuels factors such as misinformation that affect the scope and legitimacy of the media even further. As a whole, this cycle plays a huge role in perpetuating the effects of polarization amongst citizens, further alienating one side from the other.
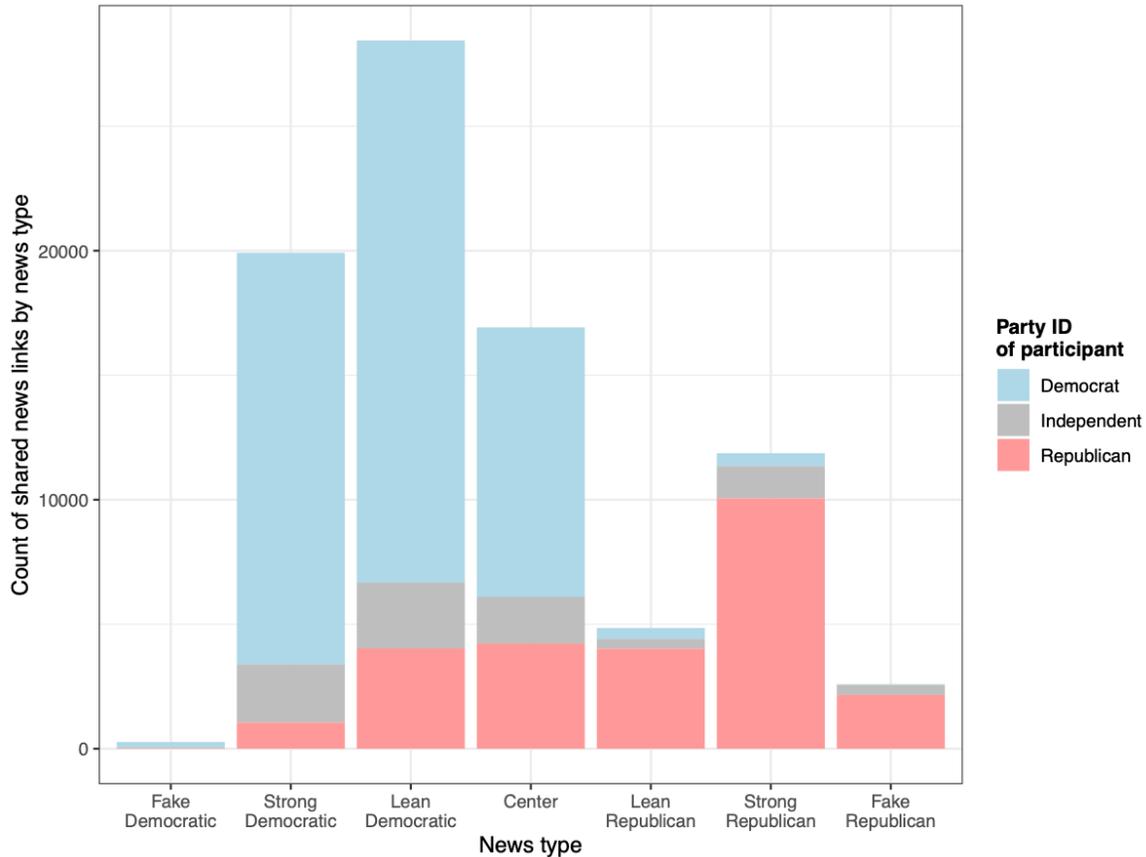
Figure 10. Extent of Fake News Sharing. Reprinted from "How partisan polarization drives the spread of fake news" by Osmundsen et al., 2021. Copyright 2022 The Brookings Institution.
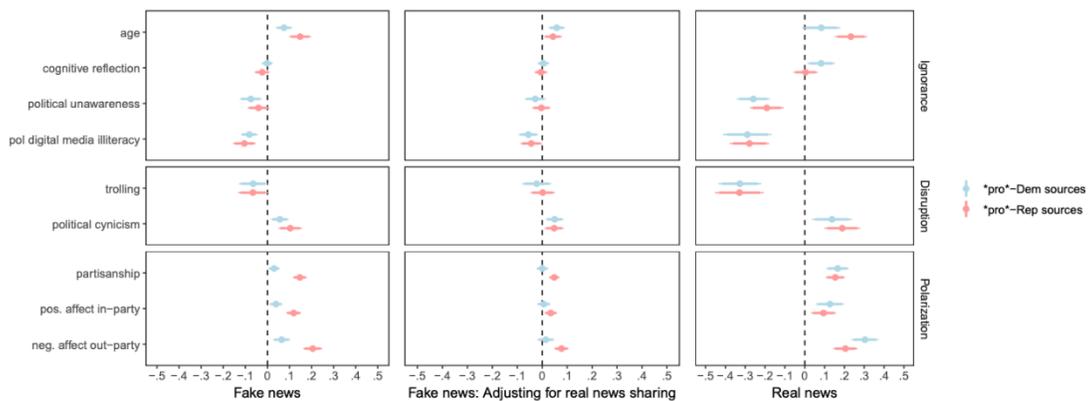

Figure 11. Predictors of news sharing. Reprinted from "Partisan Polarization Is the Primary Psychological Motivation behind Political Fake News Sharing on Twitter" by Osmundsen et al., 2021. Copyright Cambridge University Press 2022.

Social Relationships

As America continues to polarize, people are more likely to segregate within their communities based on political ideology. As this sorting occurs, Democrats and Republicans increasingly live in isolated bubbles. For instance, according to a recent study, Democrats, on average, have almost no interaction with Republicans in their local community [23]. Figure 12 shows the existence of partisan segregation between the two major political parties based on 180 million voters throughout the United States. For instance, in Manhattan, most residents in the community have very little exposure to members of the opposing community. To put this into perspective, the authors of the study further analyzed U.S. Census data to show that 98%-99% of Americans live within these types of segregated areas. Undoubtedly, partisan identities are playing a significant role in the shape of our local communities. This results in the occurrence of people repeatedly being exposed to similar political views, which may further exacerbate the effects of polarization. Referring to Figure 13, the extremes in both political ideologies are heavily in favor of this partisan segregation. Looking back to the psychological inclinations that cause polarization, this seclusion seems like a direct manifestation of those factors existing within society.

Consequently, this joint isolation presents problems for creating a common ground. As people continue to surround themselves with singular perspectives, the "echo chambers" we see on social media are recreated in the real world. On the other hand, being exposed to various socio-political worldviews is correlated with fostering cooperation rather than prejudice [25]. Yet, this seems difficult to imagine occurring on a widespread scale if the country continues down its current path of divisiveness. In fact, it is certainly plausible that the trends shown in Figure 13 will only increase along with more partisan segregation. As such, determining ways to bridge the gap is necessary in order to effectively tackle polarization.
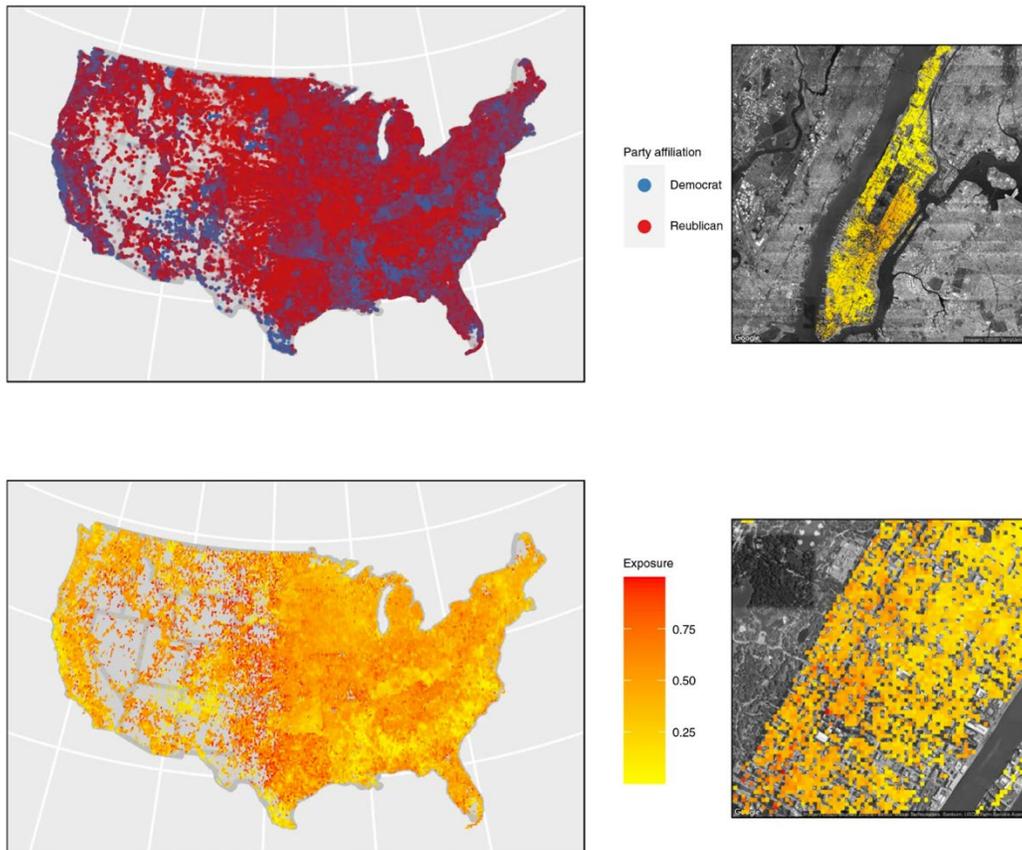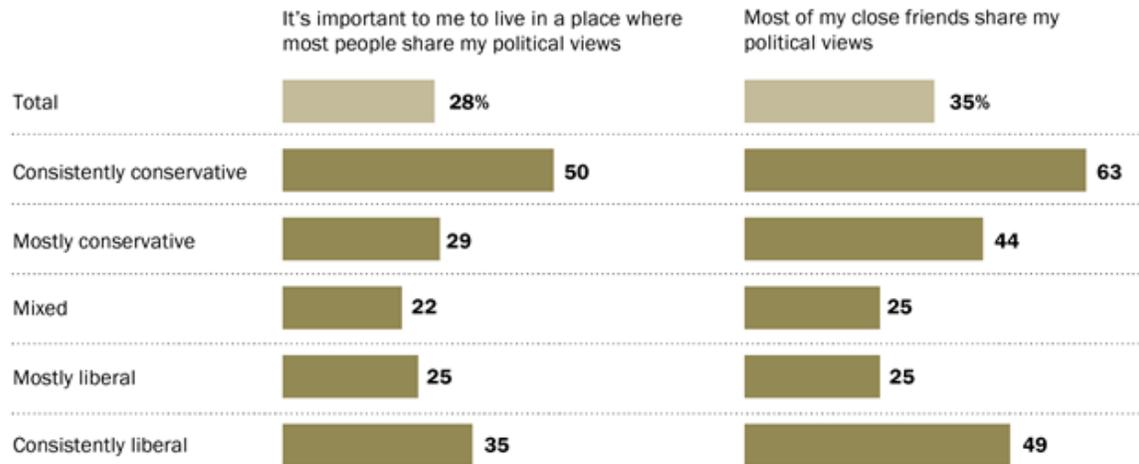
Figure 12. Residential Locations of Democrats and Republicans. Reprinted from "Democrats and Republicans do live in different worlds" by Christina Pazzanese, 2021.

Ideological Echo Chambers

% who say ...

	It's important to me to live in a place where most people share my political views	Most of my close friends share my political views
Total	28%	35%
Consistently conservative	50	63
Mostly conservative	29	44
Mixed	22	25
Mostly liberal	25	25
Consistently liberal	35	49

Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public
Note: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A).

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Figure 13. Ideological echo chambers. Reprinted from "Political Polarization in the American Public", by Dimock et al., 2014. Copyright 2022 Pew Research Center.

Solutions

Reforming the Political System

One way of addressing the zero-sum thinking that describes the current political landscape in the U.S. is to move towards a multiparty system which promotes the existence of multiple political parties rather than just two. In order for this change to occur, the system of voting in both congressional and presidential elections must be reformed.

Currently, congressional elections are marked by a system of plurality where a candidate who polls more than their opponents is declared the winner, even if they do not gain a majority of the vote. In certain cases, this could result in a candidate being elected despite the majority of the population not choosing them. For example, in a race with three candidates, the votes could be split 30%, 30%, and 40%. In this case, the candidate with 40% of the votes would win despite the fact that 60% of the country did not choose them. However, this system is not required in the Constitution, meaning change is certainly possible [26]. An alternative to the plurality system is proportional voting. In this system, the number of seats a party holds is directly proportional to the number of votes obtained, effectively getting rid of the winner-takes-all aspect. In such a system, congressional districts would be broken up into fewer but larger districts that include multiple candidates from varying political parties [27]. In this way, third parties will have an opportunity to grow and expand, as they will get some representation in the government rather than the current reality that leaves virtually no chance of this. Along with this, a broader selection of Democrats and Republicans would emerge, as candidates

would not have to play to the extremes of their parties. In turn, the problems associated with gerrymandering would also be negated. Referring back to Figure 5, multiparty, proportional democracies have empirically been associated with a reduction in political animosity. The U.S. can look to the example of these other countries to adopt a better system of representation. It could plausibly reduce animosity amongst the public while at the same time allowing for better chances of compromise and legislative productivity through getting rid of the zero-sum environment that has dominated for so long.

In terms of presidential elections, another solution lies in the prospect of ranked-choice voting (RCV). In such a system, party-only primary elections are replaced with every candidate being placed on a ballot. We can take the model of Alaska, one of the many states who have implemented RCV to see how it functions on a larger scale [26]. In Alaska's case, the four who receive the most votes will end up moving to the general election. At this point, voters would rank their preference for candidates from 1-4, a change from the current practice of only choosing one candidate. If one of the four candidates wins a majority (more than 50%) of the votes, they are declared the winner. However, if no one gets the majority, the candidate with the least number of votes gets eliminated. More importantly, the people who voted for the last place candidate still retain their voting power. Instead, their votes are given to each person's second choice candidate on the ballot. After the votes are recalculated, the same process repeats. If there comes a point where there are only two remaining candidates, a majority win is inevitable.

The voting system of RCV presents many benefits. Firstly, it gets rid of a major issue with the current plurality system known as a "wasted vote", the belief that a vote for a third-party candidate is useless because that candidate can realistically never win. On the flipside, RCV would incentivize more third parties to run and give them an opportunity to have a fair chance of winning, while also increasing voter turnout. Second, RCV also reduces negative political campaigning, such as smear campaigns [28]. Candidates would have to appeal to supporters of other candidates in order to convince them of being a good second-choice option, as this is the only way to increase their chances of remaining in the election. As such, the hostile tactics that are common in plurality elections may be replaced with more benevolent and respectful debates and competition. To provide an example of RCV being associated with a reduction in polarization, we can look towards Australia. This past May, ten independent candidates were able to achieve victory in a federal election, and this has been attributed to Australia's use of RCV [29]. Moreover, it is no surprise that Australia is one the countries presented on Figure 5 that has a less polarized democracy, as they are not only multiparty, but also employ RCV. Australia was effectively able to revive the political middle and reduce political animosity through the use of innovative and more democratic practices, something the U.S. should take example of and apply themselves.

Combatting the Media

The problem with attempting to counteract misinformation and the polarized nature of media is how to do so without infringing upon the freedom of press and speech. However, there are ways to reform the media, while still maintaining fundamental rights. The responsibility and ability to create changes in a sufficient and safe manner falls upon the government, news industries, technology companies, and educational institutions [30].

The government should actually take a backseat when it comes to dealing with the media. It should avoid crackdowns and censorship of the media [30]. In 2018 for instance, Germany tried to walk the fine line of regulation and freedom through passing legislation requiring the deleting of hate speech and false news. However, this was met with vast criticism, with opponents likening the act to censorship. The U.S., as one of the leaders of the world, should avoid making the same mistakes as Germany. It would set a dangerous precedent that could embolden already existing authoritarian regimes to expand their censorship, and invite other countries to do the same. America's influence is far-reaching, and it is essential to send the right signals to other nations - government suppression is not one of them. Instead, the government should continue to promote independent journalism and leave the task of regulation to other actors.

Firstly, change must begin with the news industry itself. It should continue to focus on trustworthy and independent journalism, while also addressing misinformation through the use of in-house professionals and fact-checkers [30]. Research has shown that labeling incorrect information reduces the percentage of people who believe in false news [31]. Another effective practice is that of crowdsourcing, the use of readers or viewers to perceive potential problems in news coverage, including misinformation [30]. News outlets can take what they learn from these individuals and implement it to create a better form of presenting information.

Next, in relation to social media, technology firms should also take action. A significant way to do so is through investing in technology to find and identify misinformation through the use of algorithms as well as crowdsourcing [30]. Algorithms are already commonly used in the digital era by social media companies, and they can be targeted at false news as well. In fact, researcher Eugenio Tacchini tested the possibility of identifying hoaxes through algorithms and found a 99% chance of accuracy [32]. These results have been used to advocate technology companies to develop automatic hoax detection tools. Another measure that can be taken is stronger online accountability. Technology firms can increase enforcement through practices such as "real-name registration", requiring users to provide their true identity [30]. In doing so, it would be more feasible to hold individuals accountable for the information they release. This is especially true in the case of spreading false news, as people are more likely to engage in this type of behavior under the guise of anonymity.

Lastly, educating the public about the media is key to making a systemic change. While the government should avoid taking direct action, it could fund efforts to promote news literacy [30]. Indeed, individuals should learn to evaluate the news and distinguish between real and fake news given increased social media use. As the digital era continues to expand, increasing digital information literacy is crucial. In specific, journalists, the news industry, and educational organizations should be allocated funding to develop partnerships to advance these efforts. All in all, a cohesive effort between both mainstream and social media outlets, as well as educational initiatives is imperative to address the volatile environment that polarization creates in the media.

Deliberative Democracy

In order to counteract the negative societal impacts of polarization and ideas such as the minimal group paradigm, we can leverage a theory in psychology known as the contact hypothesis, developed by Gordon Allport. This concept suggests that intergroup interaction, under the correct conditions, can reduce prejudice between different groups [33]. These conditions include the interaction being sustained, with multiple individuals, and an authentic sharing of ideas between each other. If done effectively, this can be a potent way to reduce the division that exists between members of opposing political parties and viewpoints.

One method that incorporates the "contact hypothesis" is known as deliberative democracy. This approach occurs through bringing together people from a variety of backgrounds to engage in an informed and moderated discussion about important issues that matter to the public [34]. This platform allows for political and social deliberation which in turn leads to the formation of a common ground that can be utilized in dealing with challenging issues. Researchers such as Stanford scholars James Fishkin and Larry Diamond believe that this practice can lead to a depolarized and more democratic society. To depict, these researchers designed an experiment which to date included the largest representative sample of the country's electorate. The experiment, known as America in One Room, brought together 500 citizens to engage in the deliberation process over pervasive issues such as the 2020 election, immigration, healthcare, and more. The participants being given background information on various policy proposals that included balanced arguments and the discussions being moderated ensured that the process was done in an effective manner. Before the deliberation took place, participants ranked their support on policy proposals, and researchers found heavily polarized views between both Democrats and Republicans. However, after the deliberation took place, the participants' viewpoints moved much closer to each other, specifically on 22 out of 26 proposals. This attitude shifts also took place between both political groups. For instance, on the issue of the deportation of undocumented immigrants, the

number of Republicans who supported the measure nearly halved from an initial 79% to 40% after the deliberation. In addition, the number of Democrats who supported more generous Medicare fell from 70% to 56%. These results point to the notion that being exposed to different socio-political viewpoints and perspective sharing can result in depolarization amongst society. As further evidence, dislike between Democrats and Republicans also decreased, with the feeling ratings of both groups increasing after partaking in the deliberation. Evidently, deliberative democracy provides a significant opportunity to rethink our approach to politics. Yet, as Fishkin concedes, in order for this to become widespread, more efforts will be needed. However, those efforts are already undertaken with organizations such as Stanford's Center for Deliberative Democracy. For example, initiatives such as a digital platform to facilitate deliberation and incorporating deliberation into schools are currently being developed [34]. As such, organizations should continue with these enterprises and help practices such as deliberative democracy eventually become widespread and incorporated into our politics. In this way, it would allow people to overcome the barriers that polarization has placed within society, creating a more cooperative and open-minded environment.

Conclusion

Summary

In this paper, we explored three interconnected causes, consequences, and solutions regarding polarization in America. The country's current political system, the media, and psychological factors are all significant components that lead to the rise of polarization amongst the public and politicians. Accordingly, a less productive government, the spread of misinformation, and weakened social relationships are byproducts that are created by this rise. Nevertheless, measures can be taken to avert these effects of polarization, including reforming the political system, rectifying the media, and engaging in practices such as deliberative democracy to repair our broken relationships. Overall, political polarization is a multi-faceted and complex situation that warrants substantial attention.

Why It Matters

A repeating theme throughout this paper is the fact that people are very divided in their beliefs and attitudes. In a seemingly paradoxical way, however, political polarization is an exception to this case. When the overwhelming majority of Americans believe in the threat of polarization, the answer is not to simply accept its existence. Instead, it is essential to capitalize on this rare common agreement, and work towards building a better political and social framework. Indeed, if the country is to be successful in dealing with the various pressing challenges that it will soon be faced with, nothing else will suffice. Ultimately, we must move away from a past that has been blemished by polarization, and work towards a future without it.

Acknowledgments

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