

Political Sectarianism Within America: The Rise of Political Division

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ABSTRACT

Political sectarianism is a concern for several countries, but it is especially prevalent within the United States. Concerns grow over political polarization due to how strongly Democrats and Republicans ideologically diverge on political values and policy goals. Due to the rise of polarizing issues like COVID-19 and new technologies that provide additional platforms for the spread of information, political divides in America have increased at unprecedented rates in the past few decades. Political divides have also caused problems within the social aspect of American society. The situation has become so severe that people purposefully isolate themselves from people of the opposing party, ruining families and friendships. Within this paper, various causes and effects of political sectarianism have been identified in order to determine why the rapid growth of political divides are occurring.

Introduction

In the past few decades, political divisiveness and the subsequent polarization of groups in America has plagued the nation. In fact, over 88% of Americans confer that there are either “strong” or “very strong” partisan tensions and disagreements between those that support different political parties (Silver, 2022). A comparison of global long-term trends by the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research indicates that political polarization is increasing faster in the United States than in several other developed countries such as Canada, New Zealand, and Switzerland; whereas Australia, Britain, and Germany saw a decrease in the same period (Boxell et al., 2022). The U.S.’ faster progression may be due to, in part, the alignment of political parties with certain ideologies in the 1970’s that has now become nearly synonymous with each party. Some of the controversial topics that now seemingly define political parties include: gun control, abortion rights, religious freedom, race, sexuality, immigration, and climate change. This ideological divide within American politics has resulted in the average partisan gap more than doubling in the past three decades from 15% in 1994, to 36% as of 2017 (*Pew Research Center*, 2017).

Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has further increased political divisiveness and exacerbated political divides in the United States by causing debates over the role of government in public health and personal responsibility. The response to the virus became a highly polarizing issue, with people taking sides over mandates such as mask wearing, vaccine requirements, and other government-imposed restrictions (Wood et al., 2021). Debates around the pandemic often followed party lines with Democrats being more likely to support government-imposed mandates as a means of protecting public health, while Republicans held distrust in medicine and opposed mandates at higher rates. The disparities within the healthcare system brought to light by the COVID-19 pandemic further expanded the divide between those who support a free market approach and those who believed in a robust public healthcare system. Since 2020, Republicans observed a stark increase from 20% to 70% in those who were “not very concerned” about the pandemic, while the amount that were “extremely concerned” fell from 20% to 10% (Lo et al., 2022). Meanwhile, 70% of Democrats reported being

“extremely concerned,” and under 10% of Democrats were considered to be “not concerned”. In short, the COVID-19 pandemic has further divided the country by exposing and amplifying long-standing political and cultural differences.

This review article will analyze the specific origins and effects of sectarianism within America. This analysis is centered off of the following questions: What are the main sources of political division in America? How have these political divisions evolved over time? What is the impact of political divides on American society? How do demographic, socioeconomic, and cultural factors shape political views and behavior?

The Origins of Sectarianism

Media

Social media poses as one of the greatest sources of increasing sectarianism within America. On average, adults spend about 1 hour and 15 minutes a day on social media (*US Time Spent with Social Media 2019*, n.d.). According to data from the Pew Research Center, 53% of Americans reportedly get their news from social media platforms at least “often” or “sometimes” (Shearer & Mitchel, 2021). Social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook observe that a majority of their users, 59% and 54% respectively, regularly get their news from these sites and are much more receptive to the information, false or true, that is presented (Shearer & Mitchel, 2021).

Algorithmically-generated “echo chambers” on social media platforms show the users exactly what they want to see which further contributes to rising sectarianism (Cinelli et al., 2021). Through echo chambers, the user experience becomes biased and modified to reduce contact with differing viewpoints and opposing voices. Considering a majority of Americans consume news through media, algorithms that reinforce their own opinions often lead to their own opinions becoming increasingly extreme the more it is viewed. One’s “filter bubble” isolates themselves from content other than what they prefer, and often facilitates the consumption of one-sided information that users are much more likely to be receptive to (Fujiwara, 2022). Sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, Youtube, and Tiktok utilize these tactics in order to provide the user with a much more “positive” experience instead of showing them several different perspectives and not just content containing information that they’d be the most receptive to. This phenomenon is very similar to the concept of group polarization within psychology where the more a group of like minded people affirm each other’s opinions, positive or negative, the more that they’re going to believe in whatever is being said. Due to these technologies, Democrats will become less receptive to Republican ideals, and vice versa leaving this country susceptible to larger political divides.

Additionally, social media adds to the spread of misinformation and propaganda, which has a significant influence on the growing political division. According to a recent study that was directed by MIT researchers, Twitter users hold a 70% chance of retweeting tweets that stored false information within it (Vosoughi, 2018). The real-world repercussions of amplifying inaccurate news items include undermining public confidence in media and journalism, and influencing political views and actions. As a result, 80% of the adult population in the United States has been exposed to false information on social media platforms, and approximately 40% has been deceived by the news they have been exposed to (Barthel et al., 2016). When the misinformation that is presented aligns with their own political beliefs, it further increases the chance of the spread. This has created widespread confusion and distrust resulting in more than three-fourths of Americans not trusting social media sites to properly moderate content.

Social media has also enabled the rise of political extremism and hate speech. In fact, over 91% of political extremists are reported to passively consume content appealing to their extremist ideals through social media (*The Use of Social Media by United States Extremists*, n.d.). Far-right extremists are 13% more likely to engage in the extremist content they view over far-left extremists, and have a greater chance (31%) of creating

content over far-left extremists (18%) (*The Use of Social Media by United States Extremists*, n.d.). The anonymity on social media platforms allows for extremist ideals to thrive with minimal repercussions. Extremist's are also able to reach a much larger amount of people on social media than any other platform. In regards to hate speech, social media sites have announced their commitment to combating hate speech, however, national trends for online hate and harassment have stayed consistent in the past few years (*Online Hate and Harassment: The American Experience 2021, 2022*). Hate speech furthers political sectarianism within America because it furthers divides between those who have different political beliefs.

Party Polarization

Party polarization has a great effect on increasing political divides as well, contributing to an increased toxic political climate within America. The ideological divide between Democrats and Republicans has grown rapidly with both parties significantly moving away from the median ideological consistency, in reference to a distribution of political values. In 1994, the median Republican was estimated to be to the right of 70% of Democrats, and the median Democrat was estimated to be to the left of 64% of Republicans (NW et al., 2014). The overlap between the two parties' values were still substantial, with 23% of Republicans remaining more liberal than the median Democrat and 17% of Democrats remaining more conservative than the median Republican (NW et al., 2014). As of 2014 however, that value has dwindled down to approximately 4% (NW et al., 2014).

Additionally, policy positions between Democrats and Republicans also observe stark differences and increase partisan gaps. For instance, Democrats tend to value economic policies that focus on the expansion of government-provided health care programs, as well as an increased minimum wage (*Political Polarization in the United States*, 2019). Whereas Republicans focus on lowering taxes for the wealthy and limiting government involvement and regulation of the economy, which dates back to the Gilded Age (1877-1896) where laissez faire economic policies were practiced (*Constitutional Rights Foundation*, n.d.). Social policies also continue to serve as controversial topics that widen political divides. The gun policy, and race in particular have the greatest average party difference at 57% and 55% respectively which means that those who identify with the two predominant political parties, foster very different opinions on these topics (*Pew Research Center*, 2019). Not to say that there aren't ideological differences within each party themselves, however, they are not substantial enough for partisan divides to diminish.

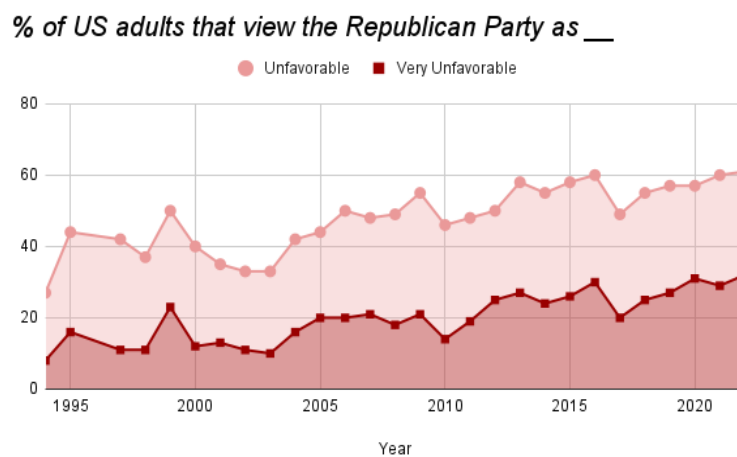


Figure 1. Percentage of US Adults that view the Republican Party as “Unfavorable” or “Very Unfavorable.” Author’s computation based on survey data from the Pew Research Center American Trends Panel (2020-2022) and Pew Research Center phone surveys (1994-2019).

% of US adults that view the Democratic Party as ___

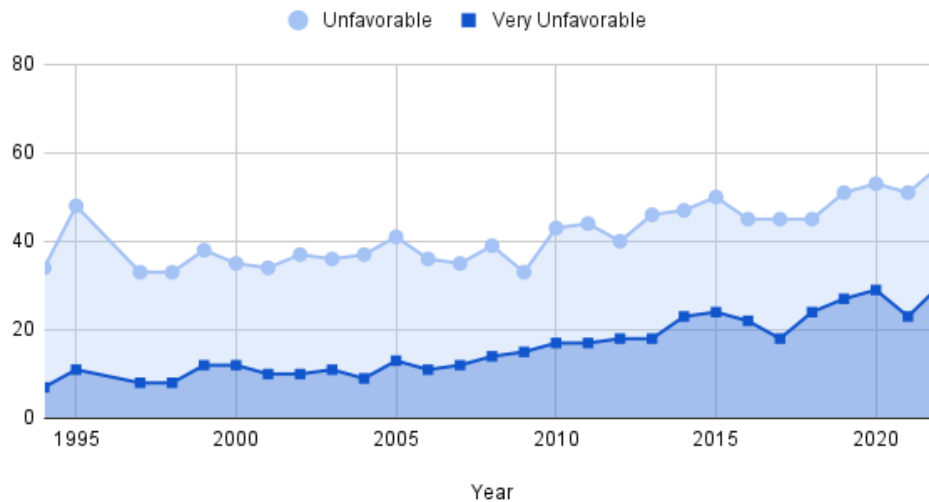


Figure 2. Percentage of US Adults that view the Democratic Party as “Unfavorable” or “Very Unfavorable.” Author’s computation based on survey data from the Pew Research Center American Trends Panel (2020-2022) and Pew Research Center phone surveys (1994-2019).

The figures above depict the harmful trends and subsequent outcomes of party polarization on American views of each political party. It clearly demonstrates that in recent times, US adults have been harboring greater feelings of negativity towards the opposing political party. For instance, 24% of US adults viewed the Republican Party as “unfavorable” and 8% viewed them as “very unfavorable” in 1994. However, those that view the Republican Party as “unfavorable” and “very unfavorable” grew to 61% and 31% respectively in 2022. Democrats also saw a large increase in the same time, observing a growth of 23% for “unfavorable” and 23% of “very unfavorable.” Based on this evidence, I conclude that due to growing ideological differences that have occurred, Americans have also gone their separate ways contributing to growing political divides that can be clearly distinguished from the figures above.

Effects of Sectarianism

Rise in Violence

Political based violence is surging at unprecedented rates with public officials and their families being the targets of violent threats, attacks, and harassment. From local to federal officials, this issue is not isolated in a certain state or region, but this politically driven violence is being observed throughout the whole United States. A recent report published by the National League of Cities claims that more than 8 in 10 surveyed local officials reported experiencing some type of politically motivated violence while 87% recognized an increase since the time that they’ve taken office (*ON THE FRONTLINES OF TODAY’S CITIES: TRAUMA, CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS About the National League of Cities, 2021*). Due to the First Amendment, public officials are limited in their response against these actions because it would be cited as the government’s attempt to regulate the public’s expressive activity. The First Amendment protects the right of citizens to be openly critical of the government, however, it doesn’t mean that there is no response to these actions. For instance, defamatory speech

and true threats may be subject to criminal prosecution as they are not considered to be a constitutionally protected category of expression. Mean spirited personal attacks and criticism (harassing speech) is treated differently in the courts (Nickodem, 2022).

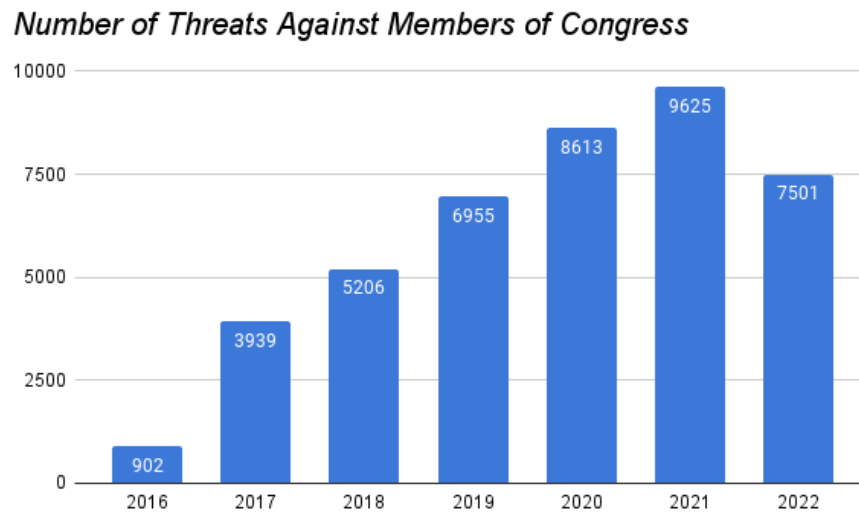


Figure 3. Number of Threats Against Members of Congress. Author’s computation based on data from the United States Capitol Police (USCP) and the USCP Threat Assessment Section.

The figure above shows just how much political violence has increased against members of congress. 2022 serves as the first year in 7 years that the number of cases has decreased. Yet, we are able to observe that the overall trend continues to increase. From 2016-2021, the reported threats had increased tenfold demonstrating the real life implications of the media, party polarization, etc. In order to keep up with the increased number of threats, USCP has reportedly increased investigative capabilities and expanded existing security measures as well (*USCP Threat Assessment Cases for 2022*, 2023).

In June of 2022, a man upset over one of Brett Kavanaugh’s supreme court votes was arrested for attempted murder of the justice while in possession of a gun, knife, zip ties, pepper spray, and duct tape (Sherman, 2022). A month later, Pramila Jayapal was threatened by a man yelling racial slurs and shouting death threats, who was then arrested for committing a hate crime (*Man accused in threats to kill Rep. Pramila Jayapal charged*, 2022). The most severe of the recent attacks was the politically motivated attack on Paul Pelosi, then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s husband, where the attacker was intending to kidnap Nancy Pelosi herself for “lying on a consistent basis” and serving as “the leader of the pack” (White, 2023). He also planned to break her kneecaps if she did not tell the truth (White, 2023).

Most prominently, the 2021 Capitol Riot serves as the most extreme case of political violence in recent history. Thousands of President Donald Trump supporters entered the U.S. Capitol, attempting to stop the certification of electoral votes from the 2020 presidential election. The rioters broke through police barricades, smashed windows, and attacked police in order to enter the Capitol building. Members of Congress were evacuated immediately from the Senate chambers and others were taken to underground bunkers or locked themselves in offices to barricade themselves. Rioters were targeting former Vice President Mike Pence while chanting negative comments like “Hang Mike Pence” as they searched the building for lawmakers (History.com Editors, 2022).

Conclusion

Overall, political sectarianism within America continues to exhaust political tensions and further divide an already divided country. It's been observed that hateful and incorrect rhetoric is more likely to spread on media sites, contributing to the false notions that people are more likely to buy into. The problem is not only that it is occurring, but also the fact that overall trends signal that it will continue to grow in the future as well. Party politics further exacerbates the issue by pouring additional fuel to the fire. Democrats veer further "left" and Republicans move further "right" by opposing taking opposing sides on topics. Shows of bipartisanship in American government are also limited which conveys to the American people that if the elected officials will not work together, then there is no reason for the American people to come together either. Furthermore, now that political sectarianism has escalated to frequent politically motivated violence and rhetoric, it's now more than ever that change must occur. Whether it be regulations on media sites to mitigate the spread of false information, or increased bipartisan efforts within our local, state, and federal governments, something must occur for political sectarianism within America to decrease.

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