

Polarization in American Politics: A Legislative Hindrance or a Precursor to Violence?

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### Abstract

Over the last quarter of a century, politics in the United States of America have taken a disproportionate turn for the extreme. Many causes are to blame for this trend, including electoral incentives for polarized political rhetoric from candidates and a highly efficient and newly diversified media environment. The result of the trend toward political polarization thus far is that legislatures in the United States have gone from semi-productive bodies in which legislators collaborated and conceded to unfruitful gatherings in which ideologues fail to accomplish much of anything for American citizens. However, this consequence is less dire than the fact that American citizens are now more divided on politics than ever before, and that many Americans tend to sort geographically based on these divisions and pursue media that validates their perspective on such divisions. This paper will argue that political polarization and its subsequent effects on American culture are potential precursors to increased political violence in the United States. This paper will substantiate this argument through critical analysis of political events and through a review of relevant research on both political polarization and political violence. This paper will also provide an overview of the issue of polarization in American politics and its root causes as a means of providing context to the argument that such polarization is an indicator of future political violence, and will conclude with possible solutions for mitigating or reversing the trend of polarization in American politics.

*Keywords:* American politics, polarization, political violence

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### **Introduction**

In a recent podcast interview, former MSNBC anchor and well-known progressive Keith Olbermann was extremely grim about the current state of American political discourse. He discussed violence at Donald Trump rallies, vitriolic rhetoric on political media, and the trend away from political cooperation with an almost mournful tone, like that of an old man in an armchair longing for his glory days. Olbermann's sentiment was exemplified when he said:

We have two or more groups of people in this country, and you can argue who's right and you can argue who's wrong, and you can argue how big each group is, but there are two groups and we all live in the same space, but we don't interact. We don't accept almost any facts between us. (2016)

Olbermann's take on political polarization in the United States is surprisingly accurate and relevant. Political polarization in the United States, particularly asymmetrical polarization from conservatives, is one of the most, if not the most notable trend in American politics in the last 50 years (Mann & Ornstein, 2012). Olbermann's sentiment is especially surprising as he was long a purveyor of such polarization, which he acknowledges in the interview, as a barking pundit that fiercely purported leftist views on a highly polarized news outlet. Olbermann owns his role in such polarization when he says, "I don't absolve myself from having contributed to this even if it was defensive on my part. I still contributed to it. But, we don't have a middle way at this point" (2016). Though Olbermann is particularly adept at recognizing the current polarized state of American politics and his role in it in this interview, he does minimalize another prominent trend

in American politics that plays an undeniable role in current political discord: the geographical self-sorting of Americans based on political ideology.

In 2008 Bill Bishop published *The Big Sort*, and brought the notion of political sorting in the United States to the forefront of the discussion of political polarization. Bishop argues that Americans unconsciously select new places to live that are often full of politically like-minded individuals. Bishop points to number of factors behind the sort, from cultural elements to the increasing mobility of the average American, and proves empirically that geographical political polarization is happening in the United States (Bishop, 2008). Bishop's findings make Olbermann's mischaracterization of geographical sorting all the more troubling. In the interview, Olbermann says, "Thank goodness that we do not have pure zones in which there are all the red states in one area and all the blue states in the other. I think we'd have been shooting by now" (2016). Unfortunately, we are starting to live in the "pure zones" Olbermann confesses being afraid of, though they are not necessarily manifested at the state level, rather at the district and county level, where contested elections are becoming less and less common and extremely polarized politicians are elected to represent politically homogenous districts (Bishop, 2008). If Olbermann's zones are in fact real, what about the shooting?

Today, more than ever, Americans that are politically active are politically polarized. Moreover they are living among people like them, and rarely interact with Americans that purport opposing views to their own. Circumstances like this have existed before in other countries. Places like Kenya and Honduras once saw political polarization along geographic, ethnic, and religious parameters manifested by extreme violence within their borders—a real example of the "shooting" Olbermann voiced concern over. These cases, as well as the growing amount of violence already taking place at political rallies in 2016 begs the question, is political

polarization in the United States a precursor to greater amounts of political violence? This paper will argue that American political polarization is in fact a precursor to and a cause of future political violence in the United States. This argument will be articulated through critical analysis of political media in the United States, an examination of international case studies that exhibited similar polarization, and a literature review of relevant research on this topic. This paper will also examine the root causes of political polarization in the United States as a means of understanding how these causes might lead to increased political violence. This paper will conclude with solutions to political polarization in the United States as a means of preventing future political violence. This paper will begin with an overview of how the asymmetrical political polarization in the United States began before discussing the root causes of such polarization.

### **The Beginning of American Political Polarization**

When reflecting on the roots of the current trend toward asymmetrical polarization, it is apparent that the catalyst for our current political environment came in the form of the 1978 midterm election when Newt Gingrich earned a seat in Congress. Gingrich, it could be argued, is the seminal architect of polarizing American politics, and he began to employ polarization as a tool early on in his career, as he pursued his overarching mission of attaining a Republican majority in the House of Representatives. As Mann and Ornstein put it in their outstanding overview of American political polarization, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks*, Gingrich's strategy was to employ a polarizing and anti-establishment tone to convince Americans that a Republican majority was necessary to retake the institution. As Mann and Ornstein put it:

He was both passionate about his goals and coldly analytical in his means. The core strategy was to destroy the institution in order to save it, to so intensify public hatred of

Congress that voters buy into the notion of the need for sweeping change and throw the majority bums out. His method? To unite his Republicans in refusing to cooperate with Democrats in committee and on the floor, while publicly attacking them as a permanent majority presiding over and benefitting from a thoroughly corrupt institution. (2012, p.33)

Gingrich's play worked, perhaps better than even he had accounted for, and fueled a drive toward increasingly partisan politics. Gingrich's plan was not the only factor that spurred increased polarization, but it certainly worsened existing factors. Before Gingrich enjoyed the fruits of his plan, the ideological gap between parties in both the House and Senate was on the rise, but it is undeniable that Gingrich influenced his party to cause asymmetrical polarization to the right in a profound way. Once again, Mann and Ornstein:

Relative ideological shifts between the two parties account for much, but not all of the asymmetric polarization. Part of their divergence stems from factors beyond ideology. As we discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the most important of these are side effects of the long and ultimately successful guerrilla war that Newt Gingrich fashioned and led to end the hegemonic Democratic control of the House and national policy making. (2012, p.58)

Moreover, Gingrich's cultural impact in Congress likely informed public opinion in a way that only spurred polarization among anyone politically engaged enough to receive his message, beginning a trend that continues to this day.

If we are to believe seminal public opinion scholar John Zaller, who posits that opinions are the marriage of political information and predispositions, we can accept the precepts that

those that are the most politically engaged are the most partisan. This is because those that take in political information in any volume are only taking in that information that does not interfere with their predispositions, and are therefore developing a storehouse of political considerations that reinforce their partisan views. Those that do not take in much political information (most Americans) are often not partisan as they are not engaged and have not taken in the information necessary to validate their predispositions with a multitude of considerations like their partisan counterparts (Zaller, 1992). Some popular political scientists have tried to use Zaller's RAS Model and subsequent theories to debunk the notion of a polarized American political climate, like Morris Fiorina did in his book *Culture War: The Myth of a Polarized America* (Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2005). While the fact that most Americans are not polarized or partisan might be endearing, Fiorina and others are wrong in their claim that America is not polarized for one simple reason: while the average American who is not engaged politically is not polarized, nearly every American that is engaged politically is polarized as engaging politically almost requires taking in information that serves one's partisan identity. This means that while the average American is not polarized, the Americans that are voting outside of presidential elections, making policy decisions, and taking in political knowledge are partisan, making the political climate both partisan and elite-dominated.

Zaller of course accounts for elite domination of the American political sphere, unlike Fiorina, and expounds on his model by asserting that elites—anyone that engages heavily in politics—dictate the political information available to any American on a particular issue or candidate. While this creates a grim picture of American political information, such practices are almost necessary, as prior theory holds that it would be irrational for most Americans to waste time and resources obtaining political information from which they see little tangible benefit

(Rosenstone & Hansen, 2003). As the result of this hierarchy of information gatherers, receivers, and non-engaged citizens, political elites like Gingrich are permitted to dictate the bulk of the political rhetoric, and subsequently how Americans will regard politics. This trend is called elite queuing and it is a driving force behind the trend toward polarization. This is because there is little incentive for elites, who Zaller rightly tells us are partisan, to send out political messages that do anything but promote their partisan agenda, even if they do so unconsciously. As Zaller puts it:

The political information carried in elite discourse is, as we have seen, never pure. It is, rather, an attempt by various types of elite actors to create a depiction of reality that is sufficiently simple and vivid that ordinary people can grasp it...But it is never “just information,” because it is unavoidably selective and unavoidably enmeshed in stereotypical frames of reference that highlight only a portion of what is going on. (1992, p.13)

Here Zaller points out exactly the type of discourse that Gingrich and his counterparts sent out as potential considerations for consumers of political information—elite discourse that fails to tell the whole story. Perhaps the most novel and notable example of Gingrich disseminating such discourse was when he and his colleagues realized that CSPAN cameras were on in the House chambers at all times, gavel to gavel. Armed with this knowledge, Gingrich and company berated Democratic Congressional members into the cameras during evening sessions when the representatives themselves were not even in the chambers (Mann & Ornstein, 2012). As Mann and Ornstein noted:

Although the CSPAN audiences were not enormous, it was still an opportunity to reach the most politically involved voters. Gingrich and his allies began a regular process of



reserving time in the evening, and a small group of lawmakers engaged in colloquies that attacked Democrats for opposing school prayer, being soft on communism and being corrupt. (Mann & Ornstein, 2012, p.35)

Here we see Mann and Ornstein pointing to anecdotal evidence of Zaller's theory. Gingrich reached out to the most engaged and therefore partisan voters with a polarized if laughably produced message in an effort to change the political climate fundamentally. Fortunately for Gingrich and unfortunately for future American legislative productivity, Gingrich succeeded. Today, Gingrich's efforts can be observed as the beginning of a trend toward asymmetrical polarization from conservatives in Washington and engaged conservatives nationwide. Gingrich was not necessarily knowledgeable about the impact his practices would have on American politics for years to come, but he understood the role scholars like Zaller have observed is ascribed to political elites and used to polarize conservatives until he achieved a legislative majority. Unfortunately for Gingrich, his tactics eventually cost him his job as Speaker of the House when his party demanded his resignation after a failed advertising campaign against President Clinton following the Monica Lewinsky affair, but his mark on American politics continues to be felt and employed by his conservative progeny who utilize obstructionism and polarization as a means of winning elections and dictating political messages on policies and candidates (Rosenstone & Hansen, 2003).

If Gingrich and his tactics were the spark that ignited polarization in American politics, than what continued to fuel the blaze that now characterizes our political landscape? There are a number of factors that continue to perpetuate and exacerbate the problem of political polarization in the United States. Among them are electoral incentives for polarizing candidates, the current media environment, and the current state of campaign finance. This paper will now transition

into a discussion of these factors as causes and enablers of political polarization in the United States. This will begin with an examination of the electoral incentives that motivate political actors in the United States to be polarizing.

### **Cause Number One: Electoral Incentives**

It is unlikely that Gingrich or his posse of ideologues would have ever employed polarization as a political tactic if it did not carry electoral benefits. Simply put, sending a polarizing message as part of one's bid for reelection is extremely effective. The reasoning behind why this tactic is effective is less simple. Perhaps the most obvious reason that polarization is an effective electoral tool is geographical. As Bishop points out in *The Big Sort* Americans today live in ideological clusters, meaning that districts are often extremely polarized without the influence of other factors—of which there are many (Bishop, 2008). Gerrymandering also creates geographically polarized electoral districts nationwide, and while this trend is unsettling, Mann and Ornstein contend that gerrymandering's role in the creation and continued perpetuation of polarization is minimal (Mann & Ornstein, 2012). This does not mean that geographical polarization is not a factor, though. It certainly is. Whether it's from gerrymandering (unlikely) or self-sorting (probable), electoral districts in the U.S. have become less competitive on a bipartisan level, and more ideological in who they elect. Bishop best exposes the trend of geographical self-sorting on American elections when he points out that in the 1976 presidential election only around 26 percent of Americans lived in landslide counties—or counties where one party one by 20 percent or more—and that by 2004 that number had almost doubled with 48.3 percent of all Americans residing in landslide counties (Bishop, 2008, p.9-10). While this has little impact on national races, like the presidency, in which polarized districts cancel each other out, it has tremendous implications for elections at the state and local

level. When districts are more polarized that means only extreme partisan candidates can succeed or even think to run for office in those districts. Bishop documented this trend in an interview with the chair of Colby College's Government Department, Sandy Maisel, who conducted 1,500 interviews with prominent community members in various congressional districts about the prospect of running for the House of Representatives. During those interviews, Maisel found:

Single-minded districts deterred those in the minority party, which made sense. Those potential candidates had a slim chance of winning. But one-sided districts put off people in the majority party, too. They simply 'didn't like the kind of campaigns they would have to run to get the nomination (Bishop, 2008, p.236).

Bishop goes on to expound that the kind of campaigns Maisel referred to were aggressively partisan campaigns that sought to attack establishment candidates of the prominent party (Bishop, 2008). Maisel's findings are hardly surprising. As districts become more polarized geographically, the only path to electoral victory is a highly polarizing one. Instead of competing to be the best representative, candidate instead fight to prove they are the most conservative or liberal for the duration of the election. This means spouting endless partisan bickering is the only way to win elected office in nearly half of America's electoral districts, which in turn means that our spectrum of elected officials is now dominated by polarized officials that must appease a partisan electorate to remain in office. This is not the only electoral incentive for partisan practices, though. Politicians and aspiring politicians must also pursue polarization as a means of utilizing the elite queuing created by Gingrich and his ilk toward anti-establishment candidates.

In many polarized parts of the country, regardless of the skew of the polarization, being an outsider is a must. This is because the trend of polarization as an electoral tactic in the last thirty years has created a heuristic among politically engaged voters that electing outsiders and

anti-establishment candidates is the only way to achieve meaningful change. This means that, in order for candidates to survive the elite-queued electorate's demands they must present themselves as more ideologically pure than the incumbent or their opponent. Perhaps the most startling example of this kind of elite queuing manifesting itself in elections was the 2014 primary loss of former House Majority Leader Eric Cantor to Tea Party upstart Dave Brat. The CNN story from the night of the primary began, "In what's being described as a political 'earthquake,' a tea party neophyte booted the No. 2 House Republican, Eric Cantor, from office" (Walsh, 2014). While this lead certainly captures the shock of Cantor's loss to the media and others, it is a tad hyperbolic. Those that understood Cantor's district and the current state of electoral politics knew he was endangered. He lived in a very conservative district, which Mitt Romney won by 15 points in 2012 and turnout was extremely low as it was a midterm, which according to Zaller's model means only the most conservative came out to vote (Zaller, 1992) (Cohn, 2014). Cantor's candidate was emblematic of the exact type of candidate that benefits from the anti-insider elite queuing created over the last 30 years. Brat, a Tea Party candidate, focused on proving himself to be more ideologically polarized (pure) than Cantor, who he successfully portrayed as an establishment politician that had spent too much time in Washington. The irony of it all is that Cantor benefitted from the same tactic when he won the district initially. As polarization progresses in American politics, state campaigns are no longer the only beneficiaries of elite queuing in favor outsiders. In 2016, it is apparent that presidential campaigns are benefitting as well.

One look at the ongoing 2016 presidential election and it is apparent that the American people are still infatuated with the outsider mentality Gingrich brought to the fore years ago. Today, Donald Trump, perhaps the definition of an outsider, holds a commanding lead over for

the Republican Party's presidential nomination, and will likely be the nominee. Trump, though not necessarily the most consistent or ideologically polarizing conservative, has largely benefited from the notion that he is an outsider—the same notion Gingrich put forth for House Republicans back in the '80s and '90s. This is very likely the product of elite queuing and a manifestation of polarization. Trump's success also benefits from the fact that he can appeal to presidential election voters, who are typically less informed and therefore less ideological than midterm voters. As a result, he does not have to pass the same ideological purity tests that Cantor failed, and can instead rely on the electoral incentive brought on by elite queuing among a much more malleable electorate.

The greater-than-anticipated success of the Bernie Sanders campaign can also be attributed to the same call for outsiders that elites have been espousing for years. However, this message has not been nearly as prevalent among liberals as the trend has long been toward asymmetrical polarization skewed to the right, which is likely one plausible explanation for why Sanders' attempt at such a narrative has been less successful than Trump's. Either way, the Sanders campaign has exceeded expectations in a way that might have been unheard of before polarization, given his extremely leftist views. Now, his campaign and the response it has garnered makes the idea that a Democratic reaction to polarization on the right is not only possible, but seemingly inevitable, particularly among younger generations that have spent most of their lives in a polarized political climate. Both the Sanders and Trump campaigns show that polarizing electoral bids, even at the national level come with incentives. The fact that polarization brings incentives at the state and local level is foregone conclusion.

Now that this paper has established that politicians and candidates alike benefit from polarizing campaigns, it should be apparent that the current electoral incentive structure leaves

no reason for politicians to try to combat polarization, or even avoid it. Unfortunately, as this paper will discuss later, proactive policies from such politicians may be one of the only remaining mechanisms for stopping polarization and its subsequent consequences. This paper will now transition to another enabler of polarization: the current media environment.

### **Cause Number Two: The Media Environment**

Perhaps the most important overview of the current media environment and the role it plays in polarization comes from Markus Prior's book *Post-Broadcast Democracy*. In the book, Prior outlines the fact that today's media environment is highly efficient, in that media consumers are able to select the exact type of content they wish to interact with without having to interact with any other content, particularly news content and subsequent political information. As a result, most Americans do not routinely take in political information as it is irrational for them to do so when they can easily consume more entertaining media. This means that only the most politically engaged and therefore polarized Americans are taking in political information at all (Prior, 2007). In the past, when the media environment was less efficient, the average American took in political information through by-product learning when they were watching one of just a few media options. Because of this, many less educated Americans were able to become politically informed and subsequently politically active. Prior showcases his argument by writing:

Both VHF and UHF stations increased political interest significantly, and this effect—just as the effect on political knowledge—declines among more educated respondents. Television thus increased political knowledge among Americans of low education directly and indirectly—directly by exposing them to more political information than

before, and indirectly by motivating them to seek out more political information (Prior, 2007, p.80)

However the trend articulated in this passage is a relic. Today, such byproduct learning is gone, meaning that only polarized voters engage. This has tremendous consequences in terms of who eventually participates electorally. As Prior articulates with the passage, “Changes in the set of available media thus affect who follows the news, who learns about politics, and who votes—in short, they affect ‘the distribution of political power in a democracy’” (Prior, 2007, p.6) In Prior’s accurate vision of the media environment, the distribution of power has certainly shifted, and its shifted to polarized political elites. As average Americans no longer participate in the by-product learning they previously engaged in when there were only three channels all of which showed the news, the electorate is dominated by partisan and polarized voters that have sought only political content that agrees with their predispositions, as Zaller’s model suggests (Zaller, 1992) (Prior, 2007). Through the sheer number of media options available to Americans, the media environment serves as a cause of increased political polarization. However, this is not the only way the media environment spurns the bifurcation of American politics. It also does so by incentivizing outlets to provide partisan content.

As media options have become more prolific, the model for media profitability has been forced to adapt. In the first broadcast-centered and inefficient media environment, a media outlet could guarantee a third or a fourth of the market share by simply presenting basic entertainment and basic news content. Today, commanding any significant viewership or readership means tailoring content to a more precise audience, as the audience must be willing to select your content in a highly efficient media environment. This means, media outlets, particularly news outlets, are incentivized to provide content that people’s predispositions will lead them to and

agree with (Prior, 2007) (Zaller, 1992). Moreover, by providing content that is particularly appealing to certain psychographics of the population, outlets can make greater profits on advertising simply because the advertising can be much more targeted. This means that news outlets are incentivized to provide biased content that appeals to the only group that still engages with news content: polarized political elites (Zaller, 1992). Not only are they incentivized to do so, it is the best model for survival and profitability in an ever expanding media environment. It is this media environment that created the polarized behemoths known as Fox News and MSNBC, which are routinely railed against for their biased coverage while still maintaining profitability and influence over the political information being disseminated to many Americans. It is this media environment that permits polarization from political officials to flourish. When Gingrich began employing polarization as a political tool, he had to resort to shouting about politics into CSPAN cameras in the House chambers. Today, he can do so with relish on a prime time show that regularly features vitriolic, partisan political rhetoric or in a column for one of the myriad partisan blogs or publications. However, the efficiency of the media market expands beyond broadcast and print media. Though Prior did not get the chance to note social media as a component of the trend toward a more efficient media environment, its influence in such trends is undeniable.

If broadcast as a medium has become too efficient to facilitate political learning for the average unengaged American, then what of social media which acts as a relatively inefficient medium in which users are subjected to the content in their feed? This is a near approximation of the research question asked by Leticia Bode, who sought insight into how political information on social media effected both relatively informed and uninformed citizens' abilities to gain new political information. As Bode put it:



Social media is fundamentally different from other media in that it consists of information shared by known others, much of which is user generated, rather than generated from an institution like the American media. Moreover, people often seek out information in other media (e.g., tuning into a nightly newscast), whereas social media use is primarily driven by maintaining social ties, with information obtained only incidentally (Bode, 2016, p.26)

Here, Bode presents the idea that social media acts as an inefficient media environment, pulling users into at least a marginal amount of by-product learning. However, her study concluded that such learning did not seem to take place on social media, and that such learning was particularly absent among participants in the study that were already politically disengaged (Bode, 2016).

This means that social media, like broadcast and print media, is doing little to serve the unengaged voter and is therefore not hindering polarization in anyway. Moreover, we can conclude based on theories in place that partisan users of social media are likely seeking information that validates their predispositions, as they would in other efficient environments.

Therefore, we can conclude that social media, like other media, is doing little to get less polarized voters into the electorate and it is likely perpetuating polarization among already partisan users (Bode, 2016) (Zaller, 1992). While these conclusions are not as assured as Prior's on broadcast media, they flow in a similar vein, which is makes it fairly safe to assume that while social media may not yet be contributing to polarization in the same way other media does, it is certainly not mitigating the problem by engaging non-polarized citizens in by-product learning.

Through an examination of the current media environment, it is obvious that polarizing political elites have a media foundation to work from that is supportive of partisanship as both a means of economic survival and distinguishability in a diverse media environment. Moreover,

less polarized Americans no longer have any incentive to engage in the consumption and learning of political information as they once did, even when it is thrust upon them on social media (Bode, 2016) (Prior, 2007). For these reasons, it is safe to assert that the current media environment enables and exacerbates the issue of political polarization in America. While it is a major force behind such polarization, it is not the only cause. This paper will now shift focus to another cause, the current state of campaign finance in the United States.

### **Cause Number Three: Campaign Finance**

Though campaign finance reform is an often-discussed topic at the national level, it is often regarded hyperbolically as a hindrance to democracy and not as a perpetuator of political polarization. Thomas Mann, however, has taken up the stance in multiple publications that such reforms are absolutely necessary if polarization is to be hindered. Mann most notably asserted this as a component of *It's Even Worse Than It Looks*, but he also brought it to the fore of the polarization discussion in his paper *Party Polarization and Campaign Finance*. Mann's assertion is that:

the increasing involvement in presidential and congressional campaigns of large donors - especially through Super PACs and politically-active nonprofit organizations - has raised serious concerns about whether the super-wealthy are buying American democracy.

Ideologically-based outside groups financed by wealthy donors appear to be sharpening partisan differences and resisting efforts to forge agreement across parties. (Mann & Corrado, 2014, p.1)

Mann's assertion is not an illogical one, if Zaller's model of public opinion is to be believed as it should be. In Zaller's model only the most partisan are politically engaged (Zaller, 1992). If we

accept this precept, that means that only the most partisan make regular large contributions to political campaigns, as doing so without being politically engaged is nonsensical. This means, as Mann asserts, that the lack of campaign finance regulations created by *Citizens United v. FEC* has allowed the most polarized Americans to dictate how money flows in electoral politics, exacerbating the electoral incentives already in place for polarizing political candidates (Mann & Corrado, 2014) (Mann & Ornstein, 2012) (Zaller, 1992). This means, as Mann asserts across publications, that comprehensive efforts to combat political polarization in the United States must include campaign finance reform as a focal point.

Though campaign finance is perhaps the most insidious and unsettling perpetrators of political polarization, it is not alone. As this paper has already showcased electoral incentives, the current efficiency of the media environment, and campaign finance are all components of the polarization trend. However, these are not the only causes either. Political parties often play a tremendous role in perpetuating polarization at the individual, electoral, and legislative level. For the purposes of future solutions to polarization that this paper will propose, parties and other causes of polarization have been omitted. This paper will now transition to a discussion of the consequences of political polarization in the United States. The discussion of such consequences will begin by examining the least dire, the current issues of legislative productivity spurned by political polarization, to the most dire, a decline in bipartisan discussion at an individual and cultural level and the potential for increased political violence in the United States as the result of heightened polarization. While these discussions may be bleak, they are not without solutions.

### **Consequence Number One: Decreased Legislative Productivity**

Lawmakers no longer have any reason to pass laws. On its face that statement is undeniably farcical, but it is certainly the current state of legislative politics in the United States.

As previously discussed, elected officials in the United States are increasingly being voted into office in highly partisan districts, by a highly polarized electorate. Winning these elections is not as dependent on passing positive or proactive legislation for constituents as it is on putting forth partisan bickering and obstructionism on a regular basis. Today, campaign messages routinely consist of a candidate's record against a particular party or politician. Take for example, an article on Wyoming Congresswoman Cynthia Lummis' first 100 days in office. In the article, Lummis' accomplishments are outlined as follows:

Lummis has voted with the GOP more than 90 percent of the time since entering Congress...She has also voted against nearly every major piece of Democratic legislation, taking an especially hard line against President Barack Obama's efforts to jump-start the national economy...She voted against the Democrat-supported Lilly Ledbetter pay discrimination bill...And she voted not to expand coverage of the federal Children's Health Insurance Program, or CHIP, which had the backing of nearly all Democrats (Miller, 2009).

The article, designed to highlight the start to her career as a congresswoman, has not one legislative achievement or even attempted legislative achievement. Lummis' first 100 days showcase nothing but obstructionism. Moreover, this is what her constituents wanted, as she won reelection. She even touts this obstructionism as the will of the people with the quote, "My job is to represent the people of Wyoming, and I am hearing loud and clear from the people of Wyoming that taxing too much, spending too much, borrowing too much is not in line with their thinking'" (Miller, 2009). Unfortunately for legislative productivity, Lummis was probably right. Her electorate probably did want obstructionism and not much else, as they still likely do, which is indicative of where polarization has put the legislative process. No longer are lawmakers

commended for passing bills, instead they are celebrated for stopping passages. Perhaps the most striking symbol of this trend is routine legislative crisis brought on by the debt ceiling.

In 2011, the debt limit crisis became a new legislative norm when Republican members of Congress refused to pass any kind of increase to the limit unless a series of demands were met. Prior to 2011, the debt limit had rarely been a contentious topic in Congress, but, in an environment of increased polarization, it became an opportune instance for hostage taking politics. Mann and Ornstein integrate the debt limit fiasco into the larger discussion of polarization quite nicely with the passage:

As bad as the atmospherics were, the new and enhanced politics of hostage taking, of putting political expedience above the national interest and tribal hubris above cooperative problem solving, suggested something more dangerous, especially at a time of profound economic peril (2012, p.4).

Unfortunately, as Mann and Ornstein predicted with the passage, “The final deal to raise the ceiling left a clear impression that the next time might well be worse,” the debt limit blowout of 2011 was indicative of legislative practices to come. Today such legislative inaction persists, as the current status of President Obama’s Supreme Court nominee Merrick Garland indicates.

Since the nomination of Garland to the Supreme Court by President Obama, Republican lawmakers have employed every political tactic in the book to avoid confirming the nominee until a new president is decided. Politically, it makes sense. Why affirm a nominee of a differing ideology when you might get a more agreeable one in a year’s time? Yet, when viewed as part of the larger polarization portrait, it is apparent that the obstruction of Garland’s affirmation is yet another example of legislative productivity taking a back seat to partisan pursuits. Vice President

Joe Biden, cognizant of the role polarization is playing in halting Garland's affirmation (he should understand it, he pulled similar antics during the Bush administration), addressed the problem during a speech at Georgetown University. During the speech, Biden gave a surprisingly honest and fair assessment of the situation, which was exemplified with the statement:

The American people deserve a fully staffed Supreme Court of nine. Not one disabled and divided, but one that is able to rule on the great issues of the day...Dysfunction and partisanship are bad enough on Capitol Hill. But we can't let the Senate spread that dysfunction to another branch of the government, to the Supreme Court of the United States. We must not let it fester until the vital organs of our body politic are too crippled to perform their basic functions as they're designed to perform (Pachter, 2016, p.1).

Naturally Biden's comment must be taken with some incredulity, as he is clearly making an appeal against polarization when it is politically advantageous and he has done little in the past to fight the trend (he has even perpetuated it). Biden, however, is very right about one thing. The American people do deserve better. Even if we have forced a polarized Congress onto ourselves by buying into the polarization sold to us by elites like Gingrich, it is still primarily the fault of those elites that we are immersed in a political climate in which legislative production is a rarity. While right on this count, Biden, unfortunately, might be wrong on the next. It may be too late to prevent the festering of polarization within the "vital organs of our body politic."

As the examples of Cynthia Lummis' first 100 days in office, the 2011 debt ceiling fiasco, and the current status of President Obama's Supreme Court nominee showcase, we live in a political age in which bipartisan production in Congress is a rare feat. An age in which constituents celebrate obstructionism. This, while perhaps the most pressing and ostensibly

dysfunctional consequence of political polarization in the United States, is not the only major consequence or possibly even the direst. This paper will now transition to a discussion of the decline in bipartisan conversation and mutual respect taking place at the individual level, and how this in and of itself might be evidence that the United States will experience increased rates of political violence in the coming years as the result of polarization. This section will also employ analysis of social media comments as a means of substantiating the arguments related to American political discourse before the next section delves into the possibility of increased political violence.

### **Consequence Number Two: Decreased Communication**

Today, Americans have a difficult time addressing someone of a differing political affiliation than themselves on issues that are facing the country. Bill Bishop chronicles this anecdotally by describing an email exchange between his predominantly liberal neighbors and the one conservative in the neighborhood. The event occurred after the conservative neighbor recommended a Republican candidate for local election in an email to the neighborhood. In reply, the neighbor received messages like, “Stephen, you’re in the minority on this list and in this neighborhood, and while your opinions are your own to have, this list isn’t the place for them” and “I’m really not interested [in] being surprised by right-wing e-mail in my in box, no matter what its guise. It makes me feel bad, and I don’t like it” (Bishop, 2008, p.4). While this exchange is certainly not a positive take on the present level of political discourse between opposite-minded Americans, it is mild compared to the kind of rhetoric that takes place online via social media platforms. For the purposes of critical analysis for this project, I went to two of the darkest corners of the internet: the comments sections on both Fox News and MSNBC stories to see how Americans that are actually politically engaged are able to talk about politics.

The first story I encountered on the Fox News page was titled, “Philadelphia Hospital Giving Out ‘Baby Boxes’ to Promote Safe Newborn Sleep.” Seemingly innocuous and non-political content, right? Wrong. The first comment on the post (and the comment with the most likes) read, “They’ll be living as adults in cardboard boxes if dems [sic] win the whitehouse [sic] again” (Kwan, 2016). Clearly, this commenter’s message is the product of elite queuing that all issues come back to stopping Democrats, which is in and of itself indicative that polarization is very real. Moreover, this comment came completely out of left field and was still met with relative positivity from other commenters on the thread, showcasing the fact that Americans that do communicate about politics do so in a partisan manner with people of their same ideology. The next story I found was called, “These College Students Don’t Think America Is Exceptional.” While the article alone was undoubtedly rife with content worthy of analysis, I focused on the comments. Once again the top comment attacked Democrats and exhibited signs of extreme partisanship. The comment read, “They grew up in Obama’s America, they’re not exactly wrong” (Fox News, 2016). Once again, the comment took an issue that was seemingly not polarizing, and incorporated a polarized framework to blame the other side. The MSNBC page was not much better.

The first story I found on the MSNBC page was titled, “Grayson blows up at Harry Reid: ‘Say my name’” and it seemingly chronicled a harsh encounter between Alan Grayson and Harry Reid. The first comment was, once again, a polarized example of elite queuing running amok. The comment read:

Reid is part of the establishment Democrats and this is what is wrong with my party. If you don't fit into their mold you don't get help running for Congress. This is why we have



lost in Congress in the past. Sanders is another that they want to stop. You lose these progressive you lose the Congress again (Seitz-Wald, 2016).

Here we see an American that has clearly bought into the notion Gingrich popularized: the American politics need outsiders in perpetuity. Once again, this comment showcased polarization in action while showcasing just how susceptible Americans are to elite message environments. The next story on MSNBC that I examined was called, “Brazilian researchers find evidence Zika is getting worse.” The first comment on this post was, surprisingly, not from a liberal but a conservative. It read:

climate change, zika virus, ebola, for christ sake you got a better chance of getting killed visiting Chicago than this trumped bullsh\*t the liberal puke dumacrats have you running from....but nothing on msnbc about the mayhem in that town cuz rahm the dumacrat has it under control.....HAHAHAHAHAHAHA.....[sic] (Fox, 2016).

This comment clearly shows polarization at work. This person sought out a post about a different topic on a page they disagree with to leave a comment about “dumacrats” and how they are inherently wrong. Sadly this person is an example of the state of political discourse in America today, and it is clearly indicative of polarization’s grip on American political culture. Naturally, internet comments should be taken as the most extreme examples of polarized political rhetoric, but they still must be acknowledged as indicative of a larger trend. Why? Because there is a case to be made that this is the only discourse happening. If we accept Zaller’s model, we accept that less partisan Americans are not engaged enough to leave polarizes comments on news content, meaning that this discourse is the only discourse happening. This means that Americans only communicate politically when that communication is polarized, if they do at all, which also means productive conversations between opposite-minded individuals are rare.

If we recognize that Americans no longer communicate in an articulate or productive way with opposite-minded individuals, then we must next address how backlash against opposing parties is to be expressed in the new polarized America. This paper will now transition to a discussion of the third potential consequence of polarization, increased political violence in the United States, as a way of exploring just how a modern American might express political dissatisfaction with opposing parties now that political rhetoric is becoming a relic.

### **Consequence Number Three: Potential for Increased Political Violence**

Before delving into the case for polarization as an agent of violence in America, this paper will examine two case studies, Kenya and Honduras, which showcase the role political polarization can play in prompting violence between opposing factions. This paper will first examine the Kenyan case study. In 2007, Kenya, a country already dealt a historically bad hand in the form of harsh colonialism, experienced political riots that quickly transformed into ethnic violence. The riots came after the declaration that incumbent President Mwai Kibaki had won the presidency again, prompting outrage from the opposition party. As Axel Harneit-Sievers and Ralph-Michael Peters put it in their overview of the 2007 election:

Large-scale violence erupted after the official declaration of Kibaki's victory on the evening of December 30th. Much of the unrest took the shape of an ethnic conflict between communities that had voted overwhelmingly for Odinga (the Luo, Kalenjin) and those that had voted for Kibaki (the Kikuyu, Embu, Meru). Long-standing conflicts over land and social injustice fueled the violence. According to different estimates, at least 1,000, but perhaps more than 1,500 people were killed altogether, mainly in the Rift Valley, Nyanza Province and Nairobi (Harneit-Sievers & Peters, 2008, p.133)

As the authors begin to assert here, the violence, while sudden, was not without longstanding root causes. For years, Kenyan politics had been characterized by deep polarization primarily along ethnic and geographic lines, as one party, KADU was made up of the Kalenjin, Maasai, Turkana, and Samburu tribes from largely rural agrarian areas and the party, KANU, was made up of the larger and hegemonic tribes from urban areas, the Luo and Kikuyu (Harneit-Sievers & Peters, 2008). While the United States lacks both the ethnic polarization that prompted the '07-'08 electoral violence and Kenya, as well as the problems posed by prior colonization, there is still a case to be made that there are parallels between the two. In both the U.S. and 2007's Kenya, geographical sorting along political affiliations is prevalent. Moreover, violence around Kenya's elections began as a protest from Kenyans that wanted an outsider candidate to win, and that viewed the political system as flawed when he did not. Today in America, we already have violence at political rallies in favor of an outsider candidate, Donald Trump. Now, if we imagine that the Republican Party had denied Trump the nomination at their convention, is it not plausible that some Trump supporters, disheartened by the results and filled with the ire introduced by elite queuing in favor of an outsider, might take to the streets? I would contend that it is not implausible. Polarization brought on by elite queuing no doubt took place in Kenya and it would no doubt spurn violence in the U.S. if our electoral system continuously failed to validate polarized demands from its electorate, as it might one day. Therefore, we as Americans must abandon ethnocentrism when regarding events like those that took place in Kenya in 2007 and 2008, and recognize that we too are susceptible to such violence as the result of polarization. Kenya is not the only case study from which parallels to American polarization can be drawn. Honduras also offers an interesting opportunity for such analysis.

Today, Honduras faces a heavily polarized political system split between the conservative National Party of Honduras and the progressive Liberal Party of Honduras. Polarization between the two parties, prompted bouts of political violence at rallies and riots during the 2013 elections (Romero, 2013). Interestingly enough, the elections featured an outsider candidate running against establishment candidates from both parties that led early on in the polls named Salvador Nasralla who worked as a TV personality before the election. Nasralla used his fame to command media attention in Honduras and parlayed that attention into early campaign success, and to excite a highly polarized electorate looking for an outsider (Caceres, 2013). The resemblance to the 2016 U.S. Presidential election is uncanny. We too have a polarized electorate, hungry for an outsider after years of elite queuing, creating the perfect climate for a celebrity with a novel personality to slip in. In Honduras, the result of such a climate was increased rates of political violence, and while corruption in Honduras is much worse than in the United States, it would be ethnocentric and short sighted not to acknowledge the parallels and recognize that increased violence, particularly around elections, may be the most dire consequence of increasing polarization in the United States as it has been elsewhere.

Even if international case studies are irrelevant, which they should not be, increased political violence around elections is already happening. Recent violence at Donald Trump rallies nationwide has been well documented, and pundits and politicians alike have attempted to explain the violence with a myriad of ideas ranging from Trump's message to the nature of Trump's supporters. However, the real explanation for this increase in political violence might simply be that polarization in the United States is beginning to reach a tipping point, and Americans are now so intolerant of other ideas and those that hold those ideas, that violence is becoming a more plausible reaction than discourse. As we saw earlier, Americans are seemingly

incapable of productive discourse in today's highly efficient media environment and highly partisan political landscape. Maybe violence when interactions are forced is the only way Americans can cope with disagreement. Either way, Americans are not to blame. No, instead blame must be placed on political elites that exploited polarizing tactics for political gain while spurning Americans on to the path of violence.

While this portrait of the current state of American politics may be particularly grim, it is not without solutions. There are numerous ways to mitigate and even reverse the trend of political polarization in America, and these solutions will be the focal point of the next section of this paper. Though scholars and politicians alike have posited numerous solutions to polarization, this essay will focus on two prominent and highly pragmatic approaches to reversing the trend toward polarization: increasing electoral turnout and campaign finance reform.

### **Solution Number One: Increasing Electoral Turnout**

This paper has employed Zaller's RAS Model as the bedrock principle from which all assumptions about American political behavior must stem. If we, once again, apply this theory to the electorate, we can recognize that most Americans are in fact not polarized, or even engaged in politics at all. This makes these Americans moderates—precisely what the American electorate needs more of if polarization is to be reversed. Therefore the first step in combatting polarization ought to be finding ways to increase electoral turnout nationwide, particularly among low information voters that rarely if ever participate. Achieving this would be no small feat, but there are a number of promising policy options that could flood the electorate with the uninformed moderates it needs. The first of these options is to make Election Day a national holiday or moving Election Day from Tuesday.

In order to get people to participate politically, the cost of participation must not outweigh the gain of that participation (Rosenstone & Hansen, 2003). For many Americans, and most moderates, that equation does not yet balance as Election Day is on an arbitrary Tuesday in November, when the average American has work not to mention kids to pick up from school, dinner to cook, and dishes to wash. Moving Election Day to a more convenient day or making it a holiday, so that everyone can vote without fear of reproach for missing work, would likely fill the electorate with moderate voters and force once partisan politicians to cater to the middle.

Mann and Ornstein pointed out the ridiculousness of a Tuesday Election Day with the passage:

In fact, Tuesday voting stems from an 1845 law, enacted because of market day. In early agrarian American society, Saturday was for farming, Sunday was the Lord's Day, Monday was for travel to the polling places at the county seat, Tuesday for voting and return home, Wednesday for market day, and Thursday for work. (2012, p.140)

Here we see the antiquity and absurdity of keeping Election Day where it is, especially given the fact that such practices actively keep casual moderates from participating in most elections, particularly midterms and primaries. This prompts discussion of another way to increase turnout: open primaries held on a national primary date.

For too long, closed primaries have served as bastions of polarization, where often only the most partisan even know how to participate in the primary at all. Opening primaries to everyone and setting a national date during each election when primaries will take place would make the selection of party nominees more salient to average moderates in America, making candidates beholden to a more bipartisan electorate from the early stages, and thus less likely to spew vitriolic and polarizing rhetoric to win the nomination. Moreover, reducing confusion about when and how to participate in primaries would also reduce the cost of participation for the

average American, meaning increased turnout in primaries. However, even with open national primaries and a changed date for Election Day, the electoral process is still a tad antiquated and participation suffers as a result.

Another solution to the participation problem would be to allow any American to vote online if they would like. Today, many Americans, particularly younger Americans are confused by the electoral process and being able to navigate that process online in the comfort of one's home without having to find a polling place, would undoubtedly increase turnout and make the electorate more moderate as less informed voters cast their ballots online. Mail-in ballot programs have already generated turnout increases in Colorado (Bunch, 2012), so why not extend this model online.

Changing the date of Election Day or making it a national holiday, opening up primaries, and making online voting available are all simple fixes to the United States' problem of getting moderates to turn out. If these policies were adopted, it is likely that elected officials, newly beholden to moderate voters, would abandon many of their polarizing tactics in favor of more productive and middling political strategies. This effort could also reverse some of the drastic consequences of current political polarization in the United States, and serve as a means of fostering a political culture in which all Americans have the opportunity to participate and can add to a diverse electorate that would be less polarized than its predecessor. These electoral solutions are not the only route toward a less polarized political climate, nor should they be taken as such. Either way, any solution to polarization must hinge upon expanding the electorate because, as Mann and Ornstein put it:

A political system that restrains its citizens' voting is vulnerable to two corrosive phenomena: turnout in which the most motivated voters, usually ideological activists,

have much greater leverage than their numbers would indicate, and a temptation by partisan political operatives to manipulate turnout to their own advantage, often by suppressing votes of those favoring the other side (2012, p.133)

This paper will now discuss another relatively pragmatic solution to political polarization in the United States: campaign finance reform.

### **Solution Number Two: Campaign Finance Reform**

As this paper posited earlier, polarization will always persist as long as those that are extreme ideologues are dictating the bulk of the financial resources available to campaigns and politicians. This is clearly one of the more egregious components of the polarization picture, and unfortunately it is a difficult one to repair, as current campaign finance laws are products of the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* ruling. However, there are some reforms that are still achievable outside of the framework of *Citizens United*. One such approach would be to make it impossible for lobbyists to contribute to campaign funds, as Mann and Ornstein noted:

A law banning certain American citizens from contributing to campaigns will quickly run afoul of the First Amendment. But a congressional rule that says lawmakers may not accept a contribution from themselves or for their parties from anyone lobbying Congress or participating in a federal contract is another matter. Admittedly, this is unlikely to happen. But it is a goal for lawmakers. (2012, p.160)

Another proposed solution to the current plight of campaign finance would be to incentivize small contribution collection with four-to-one match from public funds for candidates that devote time to seeking small donations over large ones, though developing the criteria for such a program is a dubious undertaking at best. Either way it is apparent that campaign finance reform



in some capacity must be a component of a larger plan to fight political polarization in the United States. This paper will now conclude with a speculative discussion of the future of America if polarization remains prevalent as it does today. This discussion will focus on polarization as a hindrance in solving future collective action problems.

### **Conclusion: America's Future as a Polarized Nation**

It is quite possible that some of the United States' greatest challenges still lie ahead in the form of the collective action problems posed by increasing global resource scarcity and climate change. In studying American political polarization throughout the course of this project, it became apparent to me that the key problem is that Americans on any level, no longer seek cooperation as a means of solving the problems we face today. While this trend has yet to manifest itself in the form of any truly horrific events, there is a chance that it will as the dire problems of the future interact with our stagnated and polarized politic. In the prolific historian Timothy Snyder's most recent book *Black Earth: the Holocaust as History and Warning*, Snyder posits that the true warning of the Holocaust is to avoid seeking victims in times of collective crisis, and should instead focus on building proactive institutions that address such collective crises so that victimization is not necessary (Snyder, 2015) . As Snyder puts it:

There is little reason to think we are ethically superior to the Europeans of the 1930s and 1940s, or for that matter less vulnerable to the kind of ideas that Hitler so successfully promulgated and realized. If we are serious about emulating rescuers, we should build in advance the structures that make it more likely that we would do so (2015, p.320).

Unfortunately, the United States is in no position to heed Snyder's warning. We are too busy making ideological statements to make the kind of proactive institutions necessary to circumvent future collective action problems without victimization of others. In fact, we are more trained at the latter practice than the former in our current cultural climate. If the United States is to adapt to the coming challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we must first abandon polarizing political practices or our institutions will fail us when we need them most. The time is now for reforms related to increasing political polarization. We are a country divided and it's only a matter of time before the shooting Olbermann worried about in his interview becomes a reality after we are confronted with harsh collective problems and no proactive political tools to solve them. Thankfully there are ways the problem of polarization could be mitigated or even reversed, but solutions must be implemented soon before we are confronted with a problem too big for petty partisan bickering to solve.

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