Polarization in American Politics

Political polarization is defined as the distance one stands from the middle on certain political concepts and ideas (Klein). Political polarization has become a growing problem in recent years that has negatively impacted, and will continue to impact, American culture and society. In American government polarization is becoming a larger and larger issue as the nation becomes more divided and less compromising. One of the most well-known cases of polarization is during the creation of the “Three-Fifths Compromise” at the Constitutional Convention. During this time the South and North were divided on if a slave should count toward the population count of a state. The population of a state was important as this statistic decided how much representation a state had in the House of Representatives. The two regions of America then decided that a slave would count as three-fifths of a person in the population count. The entire American government was created on compromises, like the “Three-Fifths Compromise,” between the Founding Fathers. Without the compromise of these men in the early days of America, the government would be nothing
like it is today. With the growing polarization in American government the people cannot expect to keep the integrity of the government created centuries ago. Former Senator and Governor of Indiana Evan Bayh said the following in his retirement speech:

“For some time, I’ve had a growing conviction that Congress is not operating as it should. There is much too much partisanship and not enough progress; too much narrow ideology and not enough practical problem-solving Even at a time of enormous national challenge, the people’s business is not getting done...I love working for the people of Indiana. I love helping our citizens make the most of their lives. But I do not love Congress” (Hopkins).

This “narrow ideology” that Bayh is talking about started its growth in the late 1950’s but then started to grow exponentially during the 1970’s. As the graphs in Figure 1 illustrate, the Republican and Democratic parties have grown apart in recent years and decades. The Republican party has accounted for a larger degree of change in the distance between the two parties. One of the first presidents to see a large degree of polarization like the people see today was George W. Bush. “Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton each had some polarization in their second terms, but it wasn’t
nearly as wide a gap” (Bump). Polarization does not tend to exist until the issue is challenged and talked about on a larger level. This statement is reinforced by the people’s opinion on abortion shown in Figure 2. The majority of the people had the same view on abortion until the early 1990’s when the issue was challenged. Polarization in the early days of America was much less because only one issue, like abortion, was challenged at a time. In current, contemporary politics, hundreds of ideas are challenged at a time, which then causes many people to form just “yes” or “no” thoughts on issues. Political issues are not just yes or no: they are complex spider webs that people need time to explore, and this time is no longer given to the people. Many Americans are expected to form hardline opinions with little to no time to learn about the subject. This lack of time is not the only reason political polarization is on the rise.

Many people in America surround themselves in political worlds called “echo-chambers.” These rooms are used by many Americans to reinforce their political views and prove their side of the argument. These echo-chambers are created by surrounding oneself with people that share the same views. For example, a far right leaning republican might create his or her echo-chamber by watching Fox News all of the time, only
following republican candidates on social media, only attending social events with like minded people, or even going so far as to move from states like California to Indiana, a more conservative state. With so many options, it has become easy to block out the other side of the argument. It has become so easy in fact, that it is entirely possible to only see the government from one side.

One of the most contemporary locations to isolate oneself on is social media and the internet. The internet did not become a household item until the 1990’s. During this time computers started to become a more prevalent item in homes across the nation. Once the computer was created and optimized, the need for personalization arose in society, and it became necessary to make one’s computer unique. This started with just changing a desktop wallpaper, but then social media was created a few short years later. With the creation of social media, one could follow whomever he or she likes and only see what he or she wants to see. Twitter, for instance, allows a user to follow other users to see what they say. Twitter has become a new platform for modern political candidates to use because of it’s large audience. Many right_leaning users will naturally tend to follow members of the Republican Party, while left-leaning users tend to look at
members of the Democratic Party. The internet, by allowing users to block out the opposing side, creates polarization. This statement is proven in Figure 1. Examining the graphs around the year 1991, one can see large diversions from the middle, and this diversion continues to grow today as the internet gets larger and larger. Social media is not the only venue on the internet anymore, as more and more users go to the internet, users also look for news online.

In modern society, hundreds, if not thousands of news outlets exist. Major news stations like Fox News and CNN seem to dominate the industry both in the televised and online world. The large number of news stations makes it easier for one to find a station that agrees with one’s side. Partisan outlets like Fox News and CNN only add more space between the two parties. These news providers do not seem to impact the middle ground as much as the far left and right. These stations seem to drive the far left and right apart, rather than splitting the middle in half. In the 1950’s and 60’s, however, partisan outlets did not exist. During this time, one only had a few choices for news; ABC, CBS, or NBC. With so few options for news, one was exposed to both sides of the argument whether he or she liked it or not. Being shown both sides generally made people more
understanding, which then caused a larger group of people to have mixed views. Figure 3 shows the movement of both sides toward the left and right since the 93rd Congress. With the creation of cable news stations like Fox and CNN in the 1980’s and 1990’s, keeping in mind the internet was also growing then, both sides have driven apart from each other. There has not only been a separation of parties in the political realm, but also on the homefront.

Many American teens, children, and adults inherit their political views from their parents. There are very few ways to avoid this simple aspect as many American children stay with their parents for well over fifteen years. In recent decades, however, more than just spending time with family drives polarization. As shown in Figure 4, many parents would strongly disagree if their child married into the opposing party. “As of 1960, few people of either party indicated that they would be displeased. By 2008, more than a fifth of both parties said they would be displeased” (Gentzhow). This large growth of disapproval does not have as large of an impact as the aforementioned causes, but it still causes polarization. Family status goes farther and deeper than marriage. The way a family lives plays a crucial role on how that family votes. One of the most heated and largest
debates in modern politics in how much the government should help its people and who should pay for it. Many of the poor who feel they need more government aid will tend to vote for the left while the rich will tend to vote for the right. A family’s religion even plays a crucial role in the way a family votes a feels about certain issues. There even exists a large divide between the observant and non-observant voters. In the 2012 election between Mitt Romney and Barack Obama, seventy-five percent of the people who observe a religion voted for Romney, while only forty-six percent of the non-observant voted for him (Hopkins). While family status is considered a fairly weak cause of polarization, nothing causes more partisanship than politics themselves.

Competition in the political world seems to get worse after each election. Every candidate seeks to differentiate him/herself from the pool to attain more votes. As more and more candidates enter the ring, the cost of a seat in government also grows. As shown in Figure 5, the Sunlight Foundation has found that the majority of political donations went to either one party or the other. With such large partisanship in the donor pool, the divide in politics only grows more and more. The entire political world is fueled by money and how often a candidate can get his or her name
mentioned on some form of news. Most of the people who can get their name mentioned on the news are those that have strong left or right views. These people tend to also receive most of the donor money because of all the publicity they tend to get, which in turn means more votes. Generally speaking, the far left and right candidates tend to be less experienced than many of the other members of the party. Even with the lack of experience, many of them tend to become elected officials because of these strong views. Being in the middle does not earn votes because voters that champion a political party, want their way or no way at all. This lack of compromise is growing and can be seen in the government shutdown of 2013 which was caused by a lack of compromise during the creation of the funding bracket. This lack of compromise between officials could easily be the result of gerrymandering. Gerrymandering is used to ensure that a certain district goes to a certain party. This then polarizes the House of Representatives and does not guarantee that the people get the candidate they want. These actions and tend to have lasting consequences on the entire nation.

In recent years polarization has taken its toll on Congress and American society. Delays and slow progression in Congress in nothing new
in this culture. As the debates in Congress get more and more stressful, the people become more and more divided. As this division continues the hate for the other side grows as well and the desire to prove one side creates an endless cycle. This division is further exemplified by Americans’ stance on a variety of political issues. If one was to take a survey to see how American citizens view themselves and how they view certain issues, the data would show that many Americans classify themselves as moderate voters, but in actuality, many of the survey takers would sway to one side or another. The division is so bad, in fact, that many compare the modern political division to the Civil War era (Berman). In a recent interview on PBS Newshour, an increasing number of voters consistently vote for only one party. The statistics show a drastic increase in division over the past decade, nearly doubling. In 1994 only ten percent of voters said they consistently voted for one party, then in 2004, only eleven percent, while in the most recent survey in 2014, over twenty-one percent of voters only vote for one party ("PEW"). This alarming growth rate could lead to a further lack of progress and unity in the nation. Figure 6 illustrates how each party feels about the other. The number of those who feel the other party is generally unfavorable has stayed relatively the same, while the percentage of people
that feel the party is very unfavorable, however, is on the rise at an extreme rate. More than one third of republicans believe that democrats are a threat to the nation, and more than a quarter of democrats feel the same about the republicans. The trend here is that people tend to view their co-partisans as intelligent intellectual people, while holding the opposite party to very low, unintelligent standards. As you go farther left or right, the feelings of antipathy toward the other party get stronger. The growing trend of polarization is causing candidates and voters to vote with the hopes of getting their party in office, rather than trying to benefit the nation as a whole with beneficial legislation. The large amount of “serve-thy-party” has caused more shouting matches in debates, rather than compromise and it is hurting the nation. These types of partisanship stretch beyond national levels into the international level, and the belief that partisanship should stop at waters edge is being thrown out the window.

One of the largest examples of polarization involving foreign affairs was President George W. Bush’s war on Iraq. After 9/11 occurred the President decided a war to stop terrorism was needed. After a large approval in Congress a declaration of war was made. Just a few short years into the war and no end in sight, approval ratings for the war
plummeted. The loss of approval for the war is perfectly illustrated in Figure 7. After the end of the Iraqi War in 2011, Syria was the United States’ next concern. The initial approval ratings for U.S. involvement in Syria were completely different than the Iraqi War. Now that Obama was in office the approval from the Republican Party was strikingly low, while the Democratic Party remained split in half. In both of these wars, after a year or two, the opinion on the wars became more and more polarized depending on who the president was at the time. During Bush’s time, the Republicans were happier with the war, and during Obama’s time the Democrats were happier with his respective war. The impacts that polarization has had in all aspects of government could continue to get worse if the trend of polarization continues.

The slowing of Congress and the creation of one-sided bills is already a reality, but it could get worse as time moves on, and as partisanship gets worse. California, expectedly, is controlled in majority by the Democratic Party. In fact, California is so heavily democratic at the state level that the party itself has little to no issue passing bills in its favor. In the earlier days of politics existed a system called “conflict displacement.” In this system a party would focus on one major issue for its platform and would not move
on to a different issue until the party deemed that the former one was resolved or would not get resolved. In contemporary politics the parties have adapted a system called, “conflict extension.” In this system the parties will have a larger issue, but also many smaller issues and conflicts. This type of system slows Congress as it has to focus on multiple issues at once rather than moving one issue at a time. When a large issue does hit the floor, however, a few members of Congress feel the need to stall the bill or discussion. One of the most recent uses of the filibuster was by Ted Cruz in 2013. Ted Cruz talked for twenty-one hours straight about why Congress should defund the ACA or Obamacare. A few short days after even more debate, the government shut down as it did not meet the deadline to apportion the funds for the 2014 fiscal year. The twenty-one hours Cruz used could possibly have stopped this shutdown. As America moves toward either end of the political spectrum, the incorporation of the filibuster could become more commonplace. The use of the filibuster stops Congress from making any progress toward a potential compromise or agreement. In a time with so much pressing legislature, every minute is worth something in both the House and Senate. Ted Cruz’s filibuster, while
perhaps doing the Republican Party a favor then, could have negative consequences in the future.

With the large growth of minorities in recent years, the Republican voter pool is getting smaller in comparison. The typically white, christian, family voter group is getting smaller as the years go on and this could mean the demise of the Republican Party. Generally speaking, minorities tend to sway toward the left side of the political scale because of the party’s stance on issues like immigration. As more people immigrate to America, the population of the minority keeps getting higher. As the minority gets larger, the Democrats naturally get more votes. Soon, the number of votes for the Democratic Party could easily outnumber those for the Republican Party. As this continues, the Democratic Party could take over for a series of presidencies, which could mean large changes in the daily lives of Americans.

As shown in Figure 9, the more conservative one is, the more he/she wants to live in a larger house in the country, while the more liberal people prefer to live in a city where they can walk to their destination. Depending on what party controls the majority of the government, the United States could see periods of rapid urban development, and times of little to no
development in the cities. While the economy mainly drives the development of cities and towns, the government plays a role in passing bills that stimulate and stagnate growth. Every election every candidate has his/her own take on how the tax bracket should be made. In general, each party holds a certain belief on the general outline of a tax bracket. If one party holds office for consecutive presidencies, it could mean a long lasting change in the way the tax bracket is structured. These changes in income for families could cause major changes in the way of life for Americans. There do exist ways to prevent polarization and unfavorable outcomes.

One of the easiest ways to decrease polarization in the government is to get more of the middle ground voting. Presently, a large group of the populus remains in the center of the political scale because they are less politically engaged. They hold a few convictions on certain large issues, but generally split the ticket when they do vote. Oftentimes, however, the middle ground feels no need to vote because it lacks motivation. The voters stuck in this no-man's-land lack political efficacy, especially in primary elections. “Yet many of those in the center remain on the edges of the political playing field, relatively distant and disengaged, while the most ideologically oriented and politically rancorous Americans make their voices
heard through greater participation in every stage of the political process” (Suh). The “politically rancorous” are generally those on the far left and right who know every vote counts especially the votes against the opposing party. If the middle ground felt a need to vote, not out of hate, but the feeling that every vote counted, the elections would be much more balanced. Many of the middle who do not vote also do not vote because they are lazy. In most states one must register him/herself to vote. The states of Oregon, California, and many others, have enacted plans that automatically register those who hold drivers licenses when he/she becomes of eligible age. Doing this increases the likelihood that one is to vote because of the ease. While making voting easier is a valid option, so is giving the people more options.

The involvement of a major third party has been the subject of debate for many years. Currently this is hard to do because a third party oftentimes struggles to get a voting group because it is hard to make the third party unique from the other parties. Third parties will generally champion a major policy change but usually will lack traction and only cause minor ripples. A modern example is candidate Ross Perot. Perot called for change in the budget deficit. After Perot started gaining a following, President Clinton
took charge and balanced the budget deficit. After Clinton reduced the deficit, Perot lost most of his voters because he no longer had a strong platform for his campaign. The involvement of a third party could change polarization because it could cause more of the middle ground to vote which would then get more of the populus involved. As more of the populus gets involved, the voter diversity would increase drastically. The voter diversity could pull both ends of the political scale inward, driving compromise up in Congress as both ends would need to acquire the middle vote to get the resolution either party desired. Pulling the middle into bills created by either side will moderate the bill and make it more favorable for both sides. While a major third party influence is lacking currently, a new voting system is being implemented in a few states that champions reducing polarization.

The states of Nebraska and California employ a “Top-Two” system for their general elections. In this system all of the candidates are put on a single ballot and the two candidates that receive the most votes, move onto the general election. This could result in two members from the same party facing each other, and it also gives the third party candidates more of a chance. In the case of two members of the same party running against
each other, it divides the party into more far right or left members and the more moderate members. If two Republicans are moving into the primary, the far right republicans will vote for the far right candidate, while the more moderate republicans and the left will vote for the more moderate candidate. In this system the more moderate candidate will generally win. Having more moderate candidates will drive the need for compromise between all of the elected officials up. Nebraska has already seen an increase in productivity and compromise on the state level since the implementation of this voting system. Both parties are relatively satisfied even though Nebraska is generally a red state. A system like this for the federal government could make the American political realm a much more productive, friendly, and compromising environment.

Political polarization is a growing trend in American society that is impacting America in many negative ways. While ways to counteract polarization exist, they are difficult and slow to implement. The sooner America implements countermeasures for polarization, the sooner they impact America. The issue with fixing polarization in politics is that the only people that can implement these changes are those that do not want polarization to go away. Many of the members in Congress were elected
because of polarization in American society. The men and women elected see no reason to change the system, so the fate of polarization lies in the hands of the people. Without the voice of the people, nothing will change and polarization will continue to get worse.
Figures

House 1879-2015
Party Means on Liberal-Conservative Dimension

Senate 1879-2015
Party Means on Liberal-Conservative Dimension

(1) (Poole)
1975-2009 Trends in U.S. Views on Abortion, by Party ID

% Legal under any circumstances

- **Republican**
- **Independent**
- **Democrat**

Figures based on average of all polls conducted in each calendar year

GALLUP

(2)
In Congress as Well as Public, the Center Increasingly Cannot Hold

Ideological scores of senators and representatives based on roll-call votes. Negative numbers represent liberal views and positive numbers conservative views.

Number of Senators
93rd Congress, 1973-74

Number of Representatives
93rd Congress, 1973-74

103rd Congress, 1993-94

112th Congress, 2011-12

Sources: Royce Carroll, Jeff Lewis, James Lo, Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal, Voteview.com

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

(3) (Suh)
Notes: Plot shows the proportion of Republican (Democrat) survey respondents who would be displeased if their child married a Democrat (Republican). The data for 1960 comes from Almond and Verba (1960), while the data for 2008 comes from YouGov (2008).

(4) (Gentzkow)

(5) (Klein)
A Rising Tide of Mutual Antipathy

Democrat attitudes about the Republican Party

Republican attitudes about the Democratic Party

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

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

(6) (Suh)

Decision to Use Military Force in Iraq?

Right Decision
Wrong Decision

(7) (Suh)
**Liberals Want Walkable Communities, Conservatives Prefer More Room**

Would you prefer to live in a community where ... 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consistently liberal</th>
<th>Mostly liberal</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Mostly conservative</th>
<th>Consistently conservative</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image.png" alt="House icon" /> 21%</td>
<td><img src="image.png" alt="House icon" /> 40</td>
<td><img src="image.png" alt="House icon" /> 51</td>
<td><img src="image.png" alt="House icon" /> 65</td>
<td><img src="image.png" alt="House icon" /> 75</td>
<td><img src="image.png" alt="House icon" /> 49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The houses are larger and farther apart, but schools, stores and restaurants are several miles away.

The houses are smaller and closer to each other, but schools, stores and restaurants are within walking distance.

Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public

Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A). “Don’t know” responses not shown.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

(8) (Suh)
Works Cited

Berman, Russell. "What's the Answer to Political Polarization in the U.S.?" *The Atlantic.*


n.d. Print.

Hopkins, Daniel J., and John Sides. *Political Polarization in American Politics.* London:

2017.

*Pew Study Finds Americans More Polarized than Ever.* Perf. Michael Dimock, Amy
2017.

Poole, Keith. "The Polarization of Congressional Parties." *Political Polarization.*
VoteView,

Suh, Michael. "Political Polarization in the American Public." *Pew Research Center for the*