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American Political Polarization

By

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Political Science

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts In the HTC Honors College at Coastal Carolina University

Fall 2022

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The United States of America is in a period of extreme political polarization. Understanding what political polarization is and how it impacts all of us is essential. Understanding the polarization of the American electorate is important as it has substantial impacts on our government and our political institutions. Polarization can influence how elections are run, who votes, who is elected, and how our elected officials act once they are in office. Polarization and its impacts are broad and can be long lasting, which is important to understand for our political future. If we fail to understand how polarization is impacting our political lives now, we cannot ensure a sustainable political future. The American political parties are at a point of extreme polarization. Since the 1960s the political elites have become more polarized.

The political polarization of the United States elite is evident by their political behavior. “Since 1990, more than half of all congressional votes have featured a majority of one party opposing the majority of the other party. This level of party polarization represents a steady increase over the 47 percent of such votes in the 1980s and 39 percent in the 1970s” (Jones, 125). Congressional leaders consistently refuse to support the opposing major party. This level of polarization is unlike anything before.

The United States is politically polarized. First, I will discuss the political realignment that began in the 1960s. This realignment created strong party loyalty that promoted extreme elite polarization. Then I will examine how a push for further party differentiation impacted elite behavior and contributed to polarized policies. Then a discussion on some major polarizing issues provides insight into what our elite polarization looks like in our government today. Next, I examine how the television news phenomenon has impacted the polarizing messages political
Elites receive and distribute. Finally, a look at our election process demonstrates how elite polarization has been impacted by our two-party system.

Polarization is the concept of two separate and distinct opposites. Political polarization is often referred to as the movement of political positions away from the political center and towards ideological extremes. Political polarization is also characterized by political parties promoting their distinct differences in ideas from other parties. In the United States, our polarization is also characterized by our party loyalty. Voters have extremely high rates of party loyalty. This means our parties can promote extreme positions because they have loyal party supporters. This also means the political views of our voters are strongly opposed when they continue to follow their party.

Evidence shows that American politics has changed since the 1960s. Not only are Americans polarized, but “they have become significantly more so in recent decades” (Campbell, 222). The polarization of the United States is clear today. However, this polarization was not always so evident. Extreme polarization began to emerge following political changes in the 1960s.

Polarization has been impacting the United States since at least the 1960s. In the 1950s and early 1960s, “the differences between the presidential candidates and the two major parties on domestic and international issues were fairly small or nonexistent” (Abramowitz, 85). “In fact, some scholars during that era believed that the ‘end of ideology’ had arrived in American politics and that the major problems confronting the nation could be dealt with on a bipartisan basis through the application of scientific knowledge and technical expertise” (Abramowitz, 85). However, this bipartisan harmony in our political system would not last for much longer following some major changes in the 1960s.
The 1960s and 70s saw some major political events change the way our politics operated. “First the issue of civil rights and then the war in Vietnam produced deep divisions within the political establishment and the electorate” (Abramowitz, 85). These events were the catalysts for “a process of ideological realignment at both the elite and mass levels” (Abramowitz, 85). The most conservative parts of the Democratic Party were “uncomfortable in a party committed to civil rights for African Americans and an expanded welfare state” (Abramowitz, 85). Members of the Democratic party who held more conservative values could not get behind a party committing to more liberal policies.

Just as the Democratic Party was changing, so was the Republican party. The most liberal parts of the Republican Party were not happy in a party “committed to courting conservative white voters in the south and elsewhere by opposing civil rights legislation and any expansion of social welfare programs” (Abramowitz, 85). The Republican party began to differentiate their policies from Democrats in an effort to gain the support of the strong base of southern conservatives. This contributed to the drastic realignment of the parties.

The political realignment the United States experienced drew the parties further apart. “As a result of this ideological realignment, today the two major parties in the United States present voters with a stark choice between opposing political philosophies” (Abramowitz, 85-86). Party ideas were drawn so far apart that they became political opposites. This party realignment was a major change in the American political system and would go on to impact the makeup of our parties.

The ideological realignment the United States was experiencing was reflected among our political elite. The realignment of elites, as well as voters, went on to make the political ideologies of the parties more homogeneous among themselves. “Since the 1970s, conservative
voters have been steadily moving away from the Democratic Party and toward the Republican Party while moderate-to-liberal voters have been moving steadily, although less dramatically, toward the Democratic Party and away from the Republican Party” (Abramowitz, 91). The ideological makeup of each party became more similar. This gave the party elite the opportunity to promote more extreme ideas. They no longer had to worry about losing support for promoting these ideas, as most party supporters now had solid ideological biases. This ideological realignment was also important as it changed the way elections were viewed.

The new way voters view our elections has been essential to understanding our state of polarization. Voters now had a stronger sense of party loyalty and were committed to helping their party succeed over the other. “Americans no longer vote primarily to satisfy a sense of civic duty; the primary motivation for voting today appears to be partisanship: Americans vote because they enjoy helping their party’s candidates to defeat the opposing party’s candidates” (Abramowitz, 86). This meant that our political elite were backed by party loyal voters. The more extreme party ideas they promoted, the greater potential for votes from party loyalists. This party realignment dramatically increased the rates of party loyalty seen in the United States.

Party loyalty has become an important factor in our elections, specifically since the major party realignment in the 1960s and 1970s. Voters who identify with a party, from weak identification to strong, make up a larger part of the electorate than independents do. According to ANES data, in 2004 individuals who either identify as or lean both Democrat and Republican each made up 47 percent of the electorate (Abramowitz, 90). This meant that independent voters made up only 4 percent of the electorate that year. This is a low number, showing that party identification is important for the majority of voters. The party elite were encouraged to maintain
extreme ideals as they would appeal to voter opinion. This also means that party identification is important in how these voters view potential candidates.

The ideological realignment the United States experienced has influenced the strength of voter opinion on candidates. In the 1960s, voters who identified as strongly partisan rated their preferred candidate only about 35 percent higher than the opposing candidate (Abramowitz, 88). However, by 2004, strong partisans rated their preferred candidate over 60 percent higher than the opposing candidate (Abramowitz, 88). This change in candidate preference further demonstrates how realignment was able to create more loyal partisans. Voters who identify themselves as strongly partisan became more loyal to their preferred party. This is an effect of the stronger and more identifiable party ideas that the political elite became encouraged to promote. Our strong party preferences have made it easier for polarization to grow in the United States.

Political polarization is present in the United States. America has a political system that is composed of two distinct political parties. They fall on opposite sides of the political spectrum. The ideals of these political parties and those who support them have moved away from the political center. Members of both parties have also tried to show the distinct differences in their ideas to prove that they are separate from one another. Attempts by the parties to differentiate themselves have become noticeable. “The parties offer increasingly dissimilar policy alternatives” (Dodson, 445). When one party proposes a new policy, the other will offer an alternative. However, these alternatives have become distinctly unalike, so as to not show any indication that the other party may have some good ideas.

One major case of party differentiation was the vote on the Affordable Care Act. The Affordable Care Act (ACA) was a 2010 bill introduced by then President Barack Obama. It
introduced major potential changes to the American healthcare industry. Most Americans see healthcare as an important political issue that needs changes. However, when it came time to vote on the ACA, Congress could not align.

The Congressional vote on the ACA was a clear party divide. “The ACA prevailed with no Republican votes in Congress” (Thompson, 168). The Republican party in Congress would not vote in favor of the ACA as it would show their supporters that the Democratic party had some ideas they may like. After the passage of the ACA, “Republican attorney generals raced to the federal courts in an effort to get the law declared unconstitutional” (Thompson, 168). The Republicans in Congress were so committed to their party that they wasted no time challenging the constitutionality of the law. In this instance, the party elite were extremely polarized on a piece of legislation. There was no instance in which they would support it jointly. Our polarization is also demonstrated in other political areas such as elections.

Our polarization is prevalent in recent elections. George W. Bush was elected, although not by popular vote, to the presidency in the election of 2000. When it came time for his reelection campaign in 2004, “the 2004 election almost reproduced the 2000 map” (Fiorina and Abrams, 564). Throughout Bush’s first four years in the presidency, he was unable to garner support from a new section of voters. Voters almost exclusively stuck to their party alliances in his reelection, demonstrating their polarizing commitment to their party. Voters showed their willingness to commit to a candidate based on their party alliances, not necessarily the candidate themselves.

Voters have demonstrated their commitment to their party and their reluctance to change their voting patterns even in sometimes extreme circumstances. This was heavily demonstrated by the election of Donald Trump in 2016. “The election of Donald Trump to the US presidency
in November 2016 vividly demonstrated and increased the severity of polarization. Many voters and political elites showed that they were willing to support a candidate who has displayed a series of personal characteristics that normally would have derailed a presidential campaign...for the sake of their partisan agenda” (Carothers, 76). Trump was picked to represent a party whose supporters did not necessarily see as a positive representation.

While Trump was a candidate many Republican voters did not originally support, the advantage of having him as their presidential nominee became clear. Republican party elite learned that Trump was their best chance at putting a Republican in the White House. Due to party loyalty strength, the elite supported their party candidate. His election demonstrated the extreme party loyalty that polarization has created.

The polarization demonstrated by our elections helps to explain why our elite polarization has developed to where it is now. Since voters are committed to their party alliances, the elite are incentivized to maintain strong partisan views. A candidate with committed party views will be more likely to receive backing from party supporters. This encourages the party elite to promote more extreme views, to show the electorate that they will carry out the will of the party beliefs.

This evidence shows that the United States is characterized by a polarized political system. Our political parties strive to differentiate themselves from each other and ensure their ideas are dissimilar. The electorate has developed such strong policy opinions and party loyalty that they will vote for their preferred political party no matter the circumstances. A major contributing factor to our polarization has been a push for party differentiation.

The overall polarization of American politics has been influenced by the push for party differentiation. Not only have the political elite become polarized, but this polarization has been spread into the American electorate. The political elite are influential individuals who can
promote their extreme ideas to voters and work to push the parties further from each other. The political elite must prove they are distinct from one another and do this by promoting ideas away from the center.

The polarization of our parties has become evident in recent history. The polarization of our members of Congress is clear. “The percentage of roll-call votes in which a majority of one party opposes a majority of the other party has risen” over time (Prior, 102). Interest groups are also rating members of Congress as more ideologically split in recent years (Prior, 103). While our political parties have never been at the center of the political spectrum, they are now distinctly split along ideological lines. There is little to no crossover between party ideas. Congressional votes are often party-line votes. Our political elite’s strong commitment to party identification has pushed their ideas further from the opposing sides.

Our political elite have also become committed to party loyalty. They are committed to differentiation from the other side. “Over the last quarter century, elected representatives and activists from the major parties have become more ideologically distinct from one another and more internally homogenous” (Druckman et al., 57). As party leaders, our political elite want to maintain and grow the strength of their party. They do this not only by promoting their ideals but also by working against those of the other side.

A simple way for the elite to differentiate themselves from the opposition is to promote ideas far away from each other. To show this differentiation, they begin to promote more extreme ideas. Both sides want to be distinct from each other. They attempt to do so by going to the extreme. The furthest from the other side. Over time, this elite polarization has brought their supporters with them.
The influence of the polarized parties does not stop with the elite. The influence extends to party supporters, pushing the ideas of the electorate to extremes as well. “Abundant evidence has emerged that Americans' vote choices are more strongly related to partisan considerations” (Prior, 105). Evidence “shows that party identification has become a better predictor of vote decisions since the mid-1970s, and voters today are less likely to split their ticket” (Prior, 105). The loyalty that our electorate has to their preferred party is strong. This means the party elite are more incentivized to promote extreme ideas. They use extreme party ideals to attract the increasingly polarized electorate. This party loyalty has allowed the political elite to promote more polarizing ideas to the general electorate.

Strong party loyalty from voters incentivizes elite polarization. Elite polarization has been able to influence electorate polarization because it “changes the manner in which citizens make decisions” (Druckman, 74). Voters are most often committed to ensuring the success of their party. Voters will be drawn to the elite who clearly represent their party alliance. The most distinguishable party messages will be extremes. The elite will promote extreme policies to ensure the support of their electorate. This polarization is evidence of increasing party differentiation and elite extremes.

This evidence relates to increased political polarization as it shows how our major political parties have been able to move away from the center. The party elite are trying to differentiate themselves from the other party, and the easiest way to do this is by promoting ideas further away from the center than they already have. This is furthering the polarization of the elite. The connection between the party electorate and voters has also promoted elite polarization.
Not only do voters have party loyalty, but they also do not want to give power to the opposing party. Voters are committed to the success of their preferred party. In order for the political elite to obtain and maintain voter support, they will promote polarizing ideas. This shows voters strong party commitment. The elite maintain these polarized positions in order to keep support from the electorate. Connected with elite polarization, elite political behavior towards extreme political issues demonstrates their polarization.

Polarization in American politics can also be evidenced by political behavior concerning polarizing issues. Polarizing issues are characterized by extreme thoughts, ideas, opinions, and discussions around them. Polarizing issues tend to see Republicans and Democrats develop extreme opinions and policy goals related to the issues. These are issues where party politics are clearly divided. These are also issues that many party elites, as well as much of the general electorate, tend to view as the most important issues facing us today. Some political campaigns are developed and focused on just polarizing issues. Polarizing issues are a good demonstration of the polarization we are currently experiencing.

One major polarizing issue in the United States is abortion. Abortion is the medical process of terminating a pregnancy. Abortion was made legal in the United States by the 1973 Supreme Court case Roe v. Wade. While this case gave constitutional protection to abortion, it also created controversy. Roe v. Wade left some abortion restrictions up to state statute and opened the door for further debate on in what circumstances abortions should be allowed and when there should be restrictions placed.

Roe v. Wade opened the door for the party elite to define their platforms on abortion. The 1992 Republican platform stated their “support for a human life amendment to the Constitution” and an endorsement of “legislation to make clear that the 14th amendments protections apply to
unborn children” (Highton, 183). The Democratic platform that year stated their belief in the “right of every woman to choose, consistent with Roe v. Wade, regardless of ability to pay” and their support of “a national law to protect that right” (Highton, 183). The party elite used the polarizing issue of abortion to further party distinction. They promoted opposing policies. Elite discussion of abortion policies has been a major component of party politics post Roe v. Wade.

Party elite opinions on abortion changed significantly in the decades following the Roe v. Wade decision. In 1976, Congress passed the Hyde amendment, which banned the use of federal funds to pay for abortions (Jaenicke, 8). On this initial vote, about two-thirds of Republican senators voted to pass the bill along with about 50 percent of Democratic senators (Jaenicke, 8). While there was a party divide on abortion, it would go on to reach a bigger divide.

By 1997, partisan differentiation on the Hyde bill increased tremendously. In a vote to expand the Hyde amendment’s restrictions, 91 percent of Republican senators voted to expand, while only 24 percent of Democrats did (Jaenicke, 12). In the over three decades since Roe v. Wade, elite preferences on abortion changed dramatically. The issue gained more party distinction. The Republican party stuck to its conservative values, aiming to restrict abortion access. The Democratic party also stuck to their liberal values. They were voting against increased abortion restrictions. Abortion became an issue that drew the party elite to extreme party divides.

The issue of polarized abortion opinions has persisted until our modern day. In 2022, the Supreme Court overruled Roe v. Wade in the case of Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization. So not only has abortion remained a polarized issue, but it is something that is actively being debated on by our political elite. New policies are being discussed. Abortion is just one major instance of polarization.
Another major polarizing issue in American politics is climate change. Climate change is the scientific phenomenon of changing weather patterns and temperatures. Climate change has become a polarizing issue with the debate over its potential negative impacts on our ecosystems. There is also debate on human responsibility to combat climate change. Climate change could have impacts that go beyond weather changes such as threatening food supplies and production as well as “increasing the spread of disease” (Egan and Mullin, 210). Climate change is a divisive issue and provides insight into the polarization of our political elite.

Attitudes towards climate change are drastically different between the Democratic and Republican parties. Climate change became a serious policy issue in the 1980s and has been a politicized issue ever since. The Democratic party has been in support of combating the negative impacts of climate change. In more recent elections, some candidates have made combating climate change a major component of their election campaigns. However, the Republican party elite have shown their opposition to promoting climate change as a threat the government should be concerned about.

The Republican party has demonstrated its skepticism of climate change. In 2012, “65 percent of Republican Senators and 55% of Republican Representatives” denied that climate change was a real phenomenon (McCright et al., 195). Republican party leaders have stated that climate change is not a concerning political threat. Instead, they are concerned that the fight against climate change will hurt the economy. The difference in climate change policy between the parties is clear and has been characterized by polarizing ideas.

The polarization of climate change can also be evidenced by the recent behavior of former President Donald Trump during his term. Following the steps towards combating climate change made by the Democratic administration of former President Barack Obama, Trump
showcased the Republican polarized positions on climate change. The Trump administration claimed that climate scientists had “political agendas” and framed the issue as something to be skeptical of (Cann and Jett, 227). The Obama administration treated climate change as an important policy issue, showcased by joining the 2015 Paris Climate change agreement and his Clean Power Plan. However, Trump announced the intention to “withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord” and to cut back on the Clean Power Plan (Cann and Jett, 228). These polarized policies towards climate change are a demonstration of the polarized elite.

The most visible political issues such as abortion and climate change, are also some of the most polarizing issues in American politics. These issues have created further polarization among our political elite and contributed to more internally homogeneous political parties. Members of the political elite have created strong party values on these issues, and they are distinct from one another. These polarizing issues demonstrate elite differences in policy opinions. Another major factor in elite polarization has been television news.

Television news has been a major factor in the political polarization of the United States. Broadcast news has been specifically designed to promote specific political ideas and agendas. News channels align themselves with a political party. They promote the ideas and agendas of a particular party and attempt to discredit others. News channels place their views in echo chambers. This consistent promotion of some ideas over others leads viewers to push for the implementation of the ideas they see. They also push the elite for further distinction of their favored ideas from the ones they are consistently being shown to be wrong. It is important to note who is watching broadcast news and its potential scope of influence.

Television news is not watched by all Americans or even all of the voting population. However, it is important to understand who is watching broadcast news and what types they are
watching. It is estimated that only about “10-15% of the voting age population” consistently watches cable news every day (Prior, 113). Although more people do watch television news, just for shorter periods of time. The number rises to around 50 million viewers when discussing who watches at least some cable news over the course of one month (Prior, 112). Not everyone watches cable news consistently. However, a lot of people receive at least some information from the news which can have a strong impact on their views.

While television news viewing numbers are not consistently high, they are considerably greater during election season. During presidential elections, primetime cable news viewership almost doubles, and individuals watch the news for longer periods of time (Prior, 113). During election periods is when viewers and voters become the most politically engaged. So, while the majority of American voters are not consistently watching broadcast news, it is influencing voters and elites.

The influence of television news is not specific to one party. Both Fox News, a conservative news source, and CNN, a liberal news source, receive substantial viewership. Since voters often engage more with news supporting their beliefs, both the Republican and Democratic parties are impacted by news viewership. For example, Fox News has the highest viewership ratings of all cable news networks (Prior, 112). CNN receives the largest number of unique viewers, while Fox News has the highest average audience who watch for the greatest periods of time (Prior, 112). Both conservative and liberal voters are viewers of television news. This means that the impact of broadcast news viewership affects both parties. It is also important to note that broadcast news is an important source for political knowledge.

Television news is a major source of political information. It is most often presented with partisan views and politically motivated messages. One way television news promotes
polarization is through the way “media slant influences attitudes and vote choice” (Levendusky, 612). Viewers and voters take in politically slanted information. This is impacting the way they learn about political topics. This shapes their views on political issues in favor of the political slant of the source they are receiving it from. The political slant of television news has also impacted the way voters seek out news.

Television news has impacted the news sources that voters choose to engage with. Seeing as television news sources are unmistakably politically slanted, viewers are more likely to engage with and seek out media that aligns with their views. Republicans are twenty five percent more likely to engage with Fox News than other sources (Prior, 109). Television news viewers are consciously seeking out news that appeals to their views. Since viewers seek out this information, our party elite become encouraged to promote extreme ideas. Their party supporters will receive these messages. Voters may increase their party support by seeing elite leaders support their views. By seeking out this media, some viewers may enter echo chambers that restrict the messages they are receiving.

The tendency of viewers to engage in echo chambers controls the political messages they view and the ideology of those messages. The majority of television news networks promote a biased political message. “These programs broadcast one-sided, pro attitudinal messages to viewers which they will uncritically accept” (Levendusky, 613). The one-sided messages that voters view are already persuasive on their own. When combined with being in an echo chamber, the messages become even stronger.

Echo chambers make political messages that voters are receiving more impactful on their views. The tendency of viewers to accept these messages becomes stronger because of the lack of “any competing message” (Levendusky,, 613). These programs highlight partisan ideas and
convince viewers that the other side is responsible for the current issues. When viewers are exposed to almost exclusively biased messages, those messages shape the way they see those issues. Viewers become deeply aligned with a political side.

The exposure to echo chambers enforces the idea that the other competing message is wrong. Individuals engaged in these spaces do not see any messages that may show the other side in a positive light. This makes the messages “seem stronger and even more persuasive” which then sees the viewers “move in the direction of the evidence and become more extreme” (Levendusky, 613). It is unsurprising that this would be the case. They are not being exposed to the potential positives of another ideological viewpoint. This pushes viewers to become more extreme. They want to promote the ideas they have been conditioned to believe in and promote the growth and influence of those ideas.

The tendency of viewers to receive political messages in echo chambers influences elite participation. Since viewers are receiving political news aligning with their views, they believe their ideas to be right. When voters become increasingly polarized the elite are pressured to move their views along with the viewers. The political elite need to garner the support of voters. Promoting more extreme views can help them attract more support.

The political elite also use television news to promote their own extreme ideas. Knowing that television news influences voters, the political elite can use the news to promote themselves. They know viewers are willing to accept the messages they receive. The elite promote polarizing ideas to the news in order to garner strong party support from viewers.

This evidence shows that television news broadcasting is an important factor in creating political polarization. Television news is one of the largest institutions voters use to stay updated on political issues. The bias in television news has been strategically used to promote certain
ideals to voters which has since contributed to our polarization. Just as television news has contributed to American political polarization, our two-party political system has as well.

The two-party system has also contributed to our extreme polarization. The American political system and our institutions promote a two-party system where voters are forced to pick between our major political parties. Voters choose between two political parties. One of these choices is the Democratic party, which is the major liberal party in the United States. The other choice is the Republican party, which is the major conservative party in the country. This system forces the parties to provide divided platforms.

The parties are forced to move their platforms away from the center. Voters are posed with only two choices. To promote clear ideological policies, the party elite promote extreme ideas. This is in order to differentiate themselves and keep their voters attracted and engaged. This forces voters to support and believe in their extreme positions.

In the United States, our elections have been designed in a way that promotes a two-party system. We use a winner take all election system. This means the candidate who receives the most votes will win. “The electoral rules that include a first-past-the-post or single member district system” forces voters to choose between the parties (Dulio, 771). This system of elections promotes a two-party system as it discourages voters from supporting a third-party candidate.

Our election system has created such a strong two-party system that third-party candidates are not a viable vote choice. Third-party candidates are unable to garner enough votes to be elected. The lack of third-party options also impacts how moderate voters act. Moderate voters must choose between our two major parties. If they want to support a candidate with a chance of winning, they pick a party to support.
This electoral system has made it difficult for more moderate voters to support third-party candidates who may have a realistic possibility of winning an election. This forces some moderate voters to consistently vote for one of our two major political parties. Due to this consistent nature of our political system, some voters who may have considered themselves moderates begin to actually identify with a party. Polarization has converted “voters who lack clear party attachments into stable supporters by clarifying each party’s association and agreement with other social identities and group attachments” (Smidt, 367). This increase in the number of party loyalists gives the parties a stronger base of support.

Our two-party system has contributed to the decline of moderate voters. Since the two-party system has made third-party support impractical, moderate voters begin to align with a major party. By viewing distinct messages from party elites, moderate “uncertainty over which party or candidate is the lesser of two perceived evils” has decreased (Smidt, 367). These voters have learned what the parties stand for and choose which one best aligns with their values. This has reduced the number of moderate voters and allows for the elite to push polarized ideas.

The presence of more party loyalty that the two-party system has contributed to encourages the parties to promote extreme policies. “Party elites can ignore the moderating specter of floating voters because polarization has changed many of them into loyal supporters” (Smidt, 366). The decline in moderate voters has created more party loyalists. This means the parties can push their ideas to further extremes without worrying about losing a major part of their base. This does not mean that all party supporters will develop more extreme political opinions. However, it does mean that many supporters will as they will be consistently exposed to more polarizing policy ideas. Their party commitment will lead them to support and believe in these extremes.
The two-party system’s impact on elite polarization has reached a peak in recent years. The strong decline of moderate voters began in the 1980s. By 2008, “only 8.1% of Americans” voted for “a different party's nominee than they had in 2004” (Smidt, 367). This decline of moderate voters has encouraged the party elite to promote distinct messages. They know voters are looking for a party identification. Once a moderate has created a solid party alignment, the political elite promote extreme ideas to solidify party policies. They try to show the more moderate supporters why their party ideas are better than the opposition.

Prior to the moderate decline of the 1980s, our two-party system did not have the impact on elite polarization that it does now. Their moderate base was strong enough that polarized views would drive moderates away. Now with a moderate decline, elite polarization can be helpful. Moderate voters can be turned into loyal supporters. The elite must solidify this support. They must show how they are better for the more moderate voters than the opposing party.

The two-party system has contributed to our elite polarization. Voters are essentially given only two choices in elections. Our system gives third parties little to no power in politics which encourages voters to choose between our two major parties. This leads to voters having stronger party preferences. This has also contributed to a decline in moderate voters. Our elite now have the opportunity to strengthen the support of their base.

While our current state of polarization has only emerged in a little over the last half-century, this does not mean the potential for polarization was previously invisible. In his study of the United States which he documented in Democracy in America, Alexis de Tocqueville described what he saw as the pillars of a successful American democracy. Tocqueville saw America in a positive light. However, he observed some aspects which can explain the divide we see now.
Something Tocqueville noted in his tour of the United States was the citizen’s commitment to democracy and politics. The citizens of the United States were living in connected communities and using associations for change. When issues occurred, groups would “at once form a deliberative body” and produce authority to create change and remedy issues (Tocqueville, 198). Due to the connectedness of American society, citizens also only viewed themselves as “little different” from each other and could not “understand why a rule applicable to one man should not be applied to all the rest” (Tocqueville, 668). This helps to inform why the United States has become so polarized. Our citizens have viewed themselves as similar to one another. Each political party is fighting for what they believe to be right for everyone. Our elite, and their electorate, will not give up their wants.

The United States has become politically polarized. Our political ideas have moved away from the political center and trend towards ends. Our high levels of party loyalty have opened the doors for extreme polarization. The push for party differentiation has seen the political elite widen the gap between their party ideas. The polarization of the elite has moved the parties and their voters further from the center. Television news promotes our political issues as partisan problems that villainize the other party. This leads viewers to push for further extreme ideas and to move away from the other side. The two-party system sees voters being forced to align with one of our two major parties, and these voters want to have a clear representation of their views. Understanding political polarization is important because of its impact on our government and political life. Polarization can have long-lasting impacts that shape important aspects of our lives. Our government impacts the entirety of our lives. It impacts aspects of our lives we may not even realize. If we fail to understand the scope of political polarization, we may fail to operate an effective democracy. We cannot allow for extreme polarization to continue for much longer
without addressing its concerns. If we allow for polarization to continue in the way it has been increasing since the 1960s, we may reach a point of no return. The impacts of polarization could become so ingrained in our political sphere that they become irreversible. It is up to us to be aware of how we let polarization continue.
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