

The Polarization of Political Parties and the American Republic

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Abstract

In the modern age of the 24-hour news cycle and social media, misinformation is rampant, and tensions are high. With a constant barrage of information coming from either direction, political opinions grow in number, and often in opposition to one another. This widens the fissure between the two major political parties in America, the conservative Republican, and liberal Democratic parties. Based on a study of 11 countries, including the United States, political polarization threatens democracies by creating political “tribes” that subscribe to groupthink, a harmful ideology that uplifts one school of thought while condemning others. In addition to having violent effects on the citizens, the polarization of political parties in the United States has led to more frequent and prolonged national and local government shutdowns, including the longest government shutdown in American history in 2019. Without agreement on key legislation and courses of action on issues, governments cannot efficiently serve the public. Recognizing the impacts of political polarization in the United States is the only way to begin formulating solutions to the material issues that Americans face today.

Political parties, while a mundane part of everyday American life today, were the antithesis to the Framers' vision for the United States. Political polarization, as a result, dominates the landscape, and citizens refuse to trust one another, in addition to their governing authorities.

When the Framers wrote the Constitution, they were under the assumption that the country would have political unity as one of its greatest strengths, while amplifying all voices equally. According to James Madison in Federalist 10, when factions gain political power, they "put personal interests above the common good"¹. In Federalist 10, Madison's vision of factions was a tyrannical majority whose opinions overpowered those of the minority. Instead, today's factions are a minority that shapes the minds of the majority to fit into one of the two dominant political parties, effectively deeming the others useless.

Unfortunately, political disunity is a reality that has plagued the American republic since its humble beginnings. During the Revolutionary War, the first major rift between political ideologies was the loyalist vs. patriot debate. In the early 1770's, the idea of revolution against the Crown split the colonies. While the patriots were citing reasons of tyranny and themes of Old Testament liberation of the Israelites for rebelling against the British Crown, loyalists cited the New Testament's inclusion of Jesus' command to accept governing authorities' directives and economic interests for remaining under rule of the Crown. The silent majority, however, were fence-sitters, whose opinions were crowded out by the two opposing factions. The animosity between the two camps were at an all-time high, with family members turning against one another and friendships being broken over allegiance to the new republic. One of the many examples includes George Washington and Jonathan Boucher. Boucher was a staunch Loyalist, as well as a clergyman at the Church of England, who also owned a school for children from aristocratic families². Washington's connection to Boucher began when enrolling his stepson into Boucher's school, but soon crumbled when the patriot movement began gaining traction in the late 1760's. After learning of Washington's involvement in the brewing Revolution, Boucher wrote a strongly worded letter to Washington, saying that he was "no longer worthy of [his] friendship", as he and fellow Patriots were "true enemies [their] country".

Despite losing a friend of his, George Washington remained strong in his convictions, and grew to be a major leader in the revolution effort. After winning the war, Washington became the first President of the United States. Toward the end of his second and last term, Washington was growing old and sick. Due to his fear of creating a precedent of lifelong terms, the President decided not to die in office to leave a legacy that prioritizes democracy rather than unequal power dynamics. He then tasked himself with crafting a speech that would explain his resignation, in addition to providing a message that would create a framework for how the country should function without his leadership.

George Washington's Farewell Address had three main themes, the first of which being an emphasis on the importance of unity. His words eerily predicted the conditions of the Civil

¹"James Madison's Timeless Advice for Congress", The Heritage Foundation, last modified October 2, 2019, <https://www.heritage.org/the-constitution/commentary/james-madisons-timeless-advice-congress>

²"A Loyalist Described George Washington", Washington Papers, last modified June 7, 2019, <https://washingtonpapers.org/a-loyalist-describes-george-washington/>.

War, as he explicitly explains that regionalism over the good of the country will lead to the demise of the United States³. He states that since the citizens “fought in a common cause and triumphed”, they should all focus on their commonalities rather than their differences, regardless of what part of the country they hail from. Secondly, Washington explains that the “worst enemy” of government is loyalty to political parties over the nation. His reasoning is that when citizens vote according to party loyalty, the heads of those parties will coopt the cause and forward their personal interests, thus dividing the country further and robbing voters of the promises they were given when leaders campaigned for their votes. Washington calls the two-party system a catalyst for a “spirit of revenge” that would allow for the two parties to constantly be at odds with each other over what was or was not done during either administration. Meanwhile, the citizens would be caught in the crossfire. While poignant, Washington’s predictions were not based on pure speculation. Before Washington’s official delivery of the address, he was already witnessing the beginnings of political polarization in the United States. Federalists, who advocated for a strong central government, were accused of advocating for the same monarchy that the Revolution sought to disband on American soil by the Anti-Federalists, who advocated for the opposite. A major point of contention for both parties were the proposed economic policies by the Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton’s vision for the American economy included a Bank of the United States, which was modeled after the Bank of England, and support from a federal charter⁴. While the Federalists argued that a central bank would provide stability for the country, Anti-Federalists (later called Republicans) would argue that a national bank would steal fiscal power from state governments. Washington personally agreed with Hamilton’s economic plans, which made him the target of many bitter attacks from Republicans, despite his many warnings. Another hot-button issue between the two major factions was foreign policy, which Washington specifically covered in his address as well. Washington’s advice to the new nation was to “avoid foreign entanglements”, including long-term alliances. A nation built on neutrality toward international affairs was the vision Washington had for the United States, to the dismay of many Republicans.

James Madison also agrees with Washington’s sentiment that political factions amplify certain voices while relegating the outliers to the periphery. His argument is that factions are actualized through a “common impulse of passion” that places the interests of that majority over the voices of the minority whose opinions are not represented in those factions. The difference between the two views is the dynamic between the majority and the minority. Washington states that a select few will monopolize political thought, thus creating two factions for the majority to file themselves into. Madison, on the other hand, argues that the majority creates factions for their own political gain, and to silence the minority opinion. Of the two opinions, Washington’s prediction was the closest to what the current United States experiencing.

Today, the same questions of state sovereignty in the face of the national government’s expansion of emergency powers and economic debates from Washington’s day continue between the majority parties. These issues are now only complicated more by topics of race, gender, and economic inequality. In the United States, the Democratic and Republican parties are the dominant schools of thought. The defining difference between the two parties lies in their perceived role of government in society. For Republicans, questions of states’ rights and market self-regulation are central to their political beliefs—mirroring most the anti-Federalist party in

³ “George Washington Warned Against Political Infighting in His Farewell Address”, History, last modified February 18, 2020, <https://www.history.com/news/george-washington-farewell-address-warnings>.

⁴ “Hamilton’s Financial Plan”, U.S. History, accessed January 10, 2023, <https://www.ushistory.org/us/18b.asp>.

the Framers' day. For Democrats, the desire is for closer government regulation of different aspects of American life—examples include citizen welfare, market correction, and standardization of education⁵. Those whose ideologies do not fit neatly into one camp or the other often have their opinions mapped over by the louder minority who are easily categorized by the two parties. In recent years, the two parties have become more polarized. According to a variety of polls, the overall share of Americans who express consistently conservative or liberal opinions has doubled from 10% to 21% over the past two decades. This statistic has directly contributed to the overlap between the Democratic and Republican parties diminishing, with 92% of Republicans being to the right of the median Democrat, and 94% of Democrats being to the left of the median Republican. This question of federalism has been brought to many citizens' attention when having conversations about state and local government, particularly in the recent state elections.

The controversy surrounding the Virginia elections had reflected the amount of animosity that surrounds political parties, as well as the radical differences in the ways that elections and campaigns are reported by different media outlets. In the 2021 Virginia election, Republican Glenn Youngkin had implemented strategies that his Democratic counterpart Terry McAuliffe had not—mainly, appealing to the electorate through key issues. While Youngkin, a 54-year-old former co-CEO of an investment firm, had focused on the importance of keeping parents involved in their children's public education, McAuliffe's plans were vastly different⁶. While Youngkin pledged to ban critical race theory in schools, giving the power of what is taught in schools in part to parents, McAuliffe fired back by saying that he does not “think parents should be telling schools what to teach”, which had been a pivotal moment in his campaign because it demonstrated that McAuliffe had less of an interest in empowering the localities through education, which Youngkin championed. In addition, McAuliffe's lack of focus led to the eventual downfall of his campaign. For example, while Youngkin was known for appealing toward the more common and relatable voters, McAuliffe spent advertisements through various mediums calling Youngkin “another Donald Trump”⁷. These personal, character-based attacks, coupled with the lack of direct response from the Youngkin campaign, made it easier for many voters to recognize that, regardless of party affiliation, the candidates who spend more time campaigning to the localities they seek to represent have the most success. However, despite Youngkin's victory, the attacks grew to be more violent, even resulting in many news networks calling the win a result of “racist dog whistling”⁸. The argument was that because Youngkin promises to veto Black American author Toni Morrison's book, *Beloved*, a book which includes sexually explicit content, it was an effort to silence Black art and history, effectively erasing it from Virginian classrooms. While it is crucial to include Black history in public schools, it is largely inappropriate and potentially traumatizing to expose young students to sexual content, especially when parents are unable to pre-empt those discussions at home. This is particularly true when every aspect of modern American society is increasingly sexualized. On Youngkin's

⁵ “Political Polarization in the American Public”, Pew Research Center, last modified June 12, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>.

⁶ “Who is Glenn Youngkin, the Republican who will be the next governor of Virginia?”, CBS News, last modified November 3, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/who-is-glenn-youngkin-virginia-governor-republican/>.

⁷ “Terry McAuliffe for Virginia”, Common Good, accessed January 10, 2023, <https://terrymcauliffe.com/>. Site been changed after McAuliffe's loss.

⁸ “Terry McAuliffe Accuses Glenn Youngkin of Ending Campaign on ‘Racist Dog Whistle’”, Newsweek, last modified November 1, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/terry-mcauliffe-glenn-youngkin-campaign-racist-dog-whistle-virginia-election-1644439#>.

website, there was a statement in response to these claims, stating that the proposed bills which would ban Critical Race Theory were “supported by many members of the Black Caucus” and that McAuliffe is “calling those Black Democrats racist”⁹. This political tug-of-war is what demonstrated an even deeper in American party politics on the state level, as those who are left of center would tend to group Youngkin with Trump (despite not proclaiming his direct support and alliance with him during the campaign), while those who are right of center or even moderate Republicans would group McAuliffe with the ‘radical left’ who would rather take away the parents’ rights to their children’s education.

In the future, it would behoove both parties to run on specific issues that would benefit the populations of the states that they represent rather than attack the opposing candidate or use buzzwords because it would force the populace to use their critical thinking skills and choose the best possible candidate for their state. Otherwise, it leads to political apathy due to the convenience and comfort that comes with party affiliations, instead of the active citizenship that the Framers had originally intended for Americans to engage in when the United States was founded. Furthermore, this would benefit the functions of state government as well as on the federal level because it would allow for more pin-pointed legislative work, effectively halving the bureaucratic work that otherwise would have accumulated due to a lack of focus.

While the media had played a major role in the explosive Virginia governor election, the effects have been, and continue to be felt nationwide. Political polarization has been exacerbated because of the 24-hour-news cycle. With eye-catching stories and heated political debates between reporters on TV during all the hours of the day, it is obvious that, in addition to vastly opposed political opinions, viewers will become increasingly intolerant of other opinions. News stories have the power to shape and assess public opinion. Typically, when titles are formulated, they are written in short, direct ways to catch the attention of the viewers or readers. News stories also are selective in the images that they include in newscasts and papers, as they “effectively communicate normative public opinion”¹⁰. For example, if there is coverage of a protest over a Black person’s life being lost to police brutality, then it implies to the viewer that racialized police violence is a moral issue and an injustice to be condemned. The coverage of that event, then, communicates that the sanctity of human life is something to be protected, regardless of that person’s skin color. Those who watch that coverage, as a result, are more likely to agree with the cause of ending police violence. Viewers of certain news channels or readers of certain newspapers automatically subscribe to the biases of that network, thus calcifying the effect of partisan politics and over-identification with political parties. As a result, “those who closely identified with a particular group and exhibited extreme attitudes toward others” were more “inclined to perceive news coverage as hostile to personal views”. These high political tensions and personal hostility between citizens are now popularized in American politics. Often, when students go away to college, they return with vastly differing political views than their parents; typically, they return with more liberal views in contrast to their conservative parents. This liberalization tends to create rifts in the family, due to how personally those political perspectives are held. Another dynamic that will be explored in this paper is the fierce rivalry that happens in the anonymous world of social media. In both situations, typically fueled by the desire to have people to agree with one’s opinions, they encounter opposing opinions while

⁹ “Youngkin for Governor”, Youngkin for Governor, accessed January 10, 2023, <https://glennyoungkin.org/>.

¹⁰ Cindy T. Christen and Kelli E. Huberty, “Media Reach, Media Influence? The Effects of Local, National, and Internet News on Public Opinion Inferences”, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 84, no.2 (June 2016): <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900708400208>.

considering them personal attacks. Because of the proliferation of individual-focused news on smartphones, and personalized television, American citizens, regardless of party affiliation, tend to navigate their political worlds as if their opinions are the standard.

COVID-19 has shown the adverse effects of the 24-hour-news cycle on political polarization as well as mental health in individuals. Since the pandemic had upended most of social life, Americans turned to the news to regain a sense of normalcy and understanding of the world around them. News had served to be a major source of grounding for quarantined, scared individuals who desired to see what the future could potentially hold. In a world of fear and no cure to the virus, individuals had tuned in to increased coverage of the pandemic. Figures that showcased deaths, hospitalizations, and calculate the risks of contracting the virus were flashed constantly on news networks, effectively decreasing the morale of American citizens. This broken morale, then, made them more vulnerable to political agendas to ally themselves with to find comfort in the dire situation that the pandemic brought—a reality of economic decline, death, and hopelessness¹¹. That overidentification which is a result of finding refuge from the uncertain world of COVID makes it so that political conversations, especially with those on the other side of the aisle, hostile and difficult to have. According to a research study that inspected the impact of Internet news on public opinion, Internet users tend to “choose news sources that share their preexisting views”, which had deepened the division that already had existed before the global pandemic. This is especially true with the ways that certain political parties viewed COVID-19’s effect on their daily lives. According to a Gallup poll conducted in mid-2020, only 22% of Democrats believed that the pandemic was getting better, compared to a whopping 79% of Republicans¹². This statistic had a direct impact on how they each viewed economic policies. While Democrats, who had welcomed government intervention through Biden’s future infrastructure bill and stimulus checks, had preferred that the United States stayed on lockdown until cases had significantly decreased, Republicans typically wanted the opposite. Since the free market is central to the Republican view of how the American economy should function, citizens who identified as Republican were more likely to advocate for breaking quarantine and allowing for workers to go back to their jobs. The justification on the Republican side is that the economic health of the country predetermines the future trajectory of American federalism. If citizens are unable to go back to work, then it creates a higher dependency on stimulus checks, food pantries, and other State-funded needs. Many Republican commentators would even analogize those conditions to Communist China or North Korea. Regardless of how realistic that sounds, the core of the argument is that economic growth should be protected and even increased during an emergency, otherwise future generations will have to suffer more economically, and experience greater federal overreach. The Democratic side of the argument is that since COVID-19 is a public health crisis, it should be handled with care, meaning that the country should be shut down until further notice, and all citizens should be recompensed with checks in place of working to limit the spread of the virus. While those are valid concerns, the long-term effect of the ongoing federal aid to citizens will be inflation, as the purchasing power of Americans diminishes the more that they are given. However, the argument maintains that with a healthier and safer working class, the economy will continue to correct itself over time, and this reality

¹¹ Kevin Stainback, Brittany N. Hearne, and Monica M. Trieu, “COVID-19 and the 24/7 News Cycle: Does COVID-19 News exposure Affect Mental Health?”, *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* Vol: 6, November 2, 2020: <https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231209693>.

¹² “In U.S. More Optimism About Pandemic, Less About Duration”, Gallup, last modified June 3, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/312014/optimism-pandemic-less-duration.aspx>.

would only happen with the formulation and dissemination of a vaccine. This vaccine would also become a growing source of division in American politics, since it called into question already-existing issues of personal sovereignty and citizens' obligations for the greater good. While most Democrats were choosing to get the vaccine to protect against the virus, many Republicans were suspicious of and even opposed to receiving the vaccine for many reasons.

The first reason was that opposers claimed that the vaccine was being administered against the will of the people. The federal vaccine mandate, championed by mainly Democrats to ensure a safe reopening, was viewed as sudden and 'too quick' for some rural Republican voters to trust it¹³. This is additionally supercharged by the mandate to have vaccination cards to travel, enter restaurants, concerts, and other social gatherings with large groups of people. These closely monitored conditions are, admittedly, unlike anything that this generation of Americans had experienced before, which is what provided the basis for the proliferation of anti-vaccination conspiracy groups, particularly online. These added restrictions had made many Americans, particularly Republicans, uncomfortable since they are used to moving freely without a mask or need for a vaccination card. Many Republicans even referred to the Lockean view of self-ownership and used that concept to refuse the vaccine by stating that the mandate for a vaccination is a form of federal overreach, which not only undermines federalism for the states, but the God-given right to self for the individual. While some individuals cite sensible reasons for not taking the vaccine, like pre-existing health concerns or religious exemptions, others took the more extreme route—claiming that the shot is the Mark of the Beast as cited in the book of Revelation being among the most popular.

Another major reason for not taking the vaccine also reflects some of America's dark past in medicine and public health. Black Americans often look to the Tuskegee Experiment, which was a study of syphilis' spread and effects on Black men when left untreated. In 1947, doctors from the U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) gathered a group of 600 sharecroppers—399 infected and 201 not, and provided them with aspirin and placebos, despite penicillin being recommended to treat it in the same year¹⁴ (Nix 2019). Despite being monitored by health workers, the men had never been advised nor treated for their ailments, despite the PHS's knowledge of the sickness—each of the share croppers had been told they instead were being treated for having "bad blood, a term commonly used in the area at the time to refer to a variety of ailments" (Nix 2019). As the men died, many had gone blind or insane either because of the sickness or the belief that they had syphilis, as per the placebo effect. Many others experienced adverse health defects, such as trouble breathing and partial deafness (Nix 2019). When this information had been exposed to the public, Black Americans had grown increasingly suspicious of public health officials, especially since Black women are four times more likely to die in childbirth than white women because of "denial of pain due to racial stereotypes", cardiac arrest, and epilepsy¹⁵. Adding additional mistrust to Black Americans' view of American public health, the cancer cells belonging to the late Henrietta Lacks had been preserved and tested on to create breakthroughs in medicine, including the COVID-19 vaccine, despite her family never giving their consent and

¹³ Jagdish Khubchandani et. al., "COVID-19 Vaccination Hesitancy in the United States: A Rapid National Assessment", *Journal of Community Health* 46, January 3, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10900-020-00958-x>.

¹⁴ "Tuskegee Experiment: The Infamous Syphilis Study", History, last modified December 15, 2020, <https://www.history.com/news/the-infamous-40-year-tuskegee-study>.

¹⁵ "Black women four times more likely to die in childbirth", BBC, last modified November 11, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-59248345>.

the lack of monetary remuneration¹⁶. All these examples plus the numerous others that had been inhumane toward Black people in America had created a deep, understandable distrust of the American medical system. Many African Americans who have roots in the United States and recognized these incidents had been suspicious when the vaccine was made available to the public, leading to them being the socioeconomic group with the “highest prevalence of COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy”. While this is the most sensible explanation for why African Americans are under vaccinated, some will argue that racial disparities play a role in the dissemination of vaccines. However, despite the existence of free vaccinations in Walmart, CVS, and even corner stores in low-income neighborhoods, Black Americans simply are hesitant to take to vaccine because of the history between them and the American public health sector.

Both arguments for and against taking the vaccine, while mostly valid, have been used to justify individuals’ personal rampages on social media. Social media platforms, fraught with information from a variety of sources, are the perfect place to express one’s political opinions, especially in a pandemic world which always requires social distancing. However, platforms like YouTube and Twitter “may amplify rumors and questionable information” due to the sheer density of information available to the public¹⁷. Social media’s algorithms are also partially to blame for political polarization because of its focus on the user’s preferences. In contrast to traditional news networks, social media only exposes the user to the types of content they respond the most to, further constructing the political echo chamber of the user’s newsfeed. Because of how these apps are constructed, online users tend to “acquire information adhering to their worldviews”, “ignore dissenting information”, and “form polarized groups around shared narratives”. While it is beneficial to have statistics and research to buttress one’s beliefs, choosing to view information that does not challenge one’s beliefs makes them an apathetic citizen, as there will be no incentive to refine their political opinions, as they will only be equipped to speak to those who agree with those opinions. With the increase in political polarization, misinformation also becomes rampant. While former President Donald Trump has popularized the term “Fake News”, it also is a fitting term for the rapid spread of misinformation, which tends to circulate on the Internet more easily than real news due to the shock value that it typically holds. The existence of bots and hacking of automated accounts from Russia and China also heightens the risk of spreading misinformation, all of which have played a major role in the political polarization that has occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conspiracy theories and their spread are not unique to COVID-19. In fact, there are various conspiracies about all recorded major events, including 9/11, the Boston Marathon bombing, and even Hurricane Katrina¹⁸. These stories are often fabricated out of the human desire to rationalize and understand one’s surroundings. This explains, then, the outlandish nature of many of the theories that have come to exist because of the pandemic. A major COVID conspiracy is that Bill Gates is using the virus to “create a global governance state” while enforcing a “worldwide vaccination program”. While there are many variations of this theory, the crux of most of them are the same—that there is a ‘villain’ of sorts which seeks to take away the lives and freedoms of the human population, while pursuing their own agenda. With the

¹⁶ “Henrietta Lacks: science must right a historical wrong”, *Nature*, last modified September 1, 2020, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02494-z>.

¹⁷ Matteo Cinelli et. al., “The COVID-19 social media infodemic”, *Scientific Reports*, October 6, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-73510-5>.

¹⁸ Shadi Shahsavari, et al., “Conspiracy in the time of corona: automatic detection of emerging COVID-19 conspiracy theories in social media and the news”, *Journal of Computational Social Science*, September 10, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42001-020-00086-5>.

proliferation of these theories on closely monitored sites like Twitter and Facebook, as well as less monitored sites like Gab and QAnon, misinformation breeds a distrust of those who disagree with one's worldview. For example, if a QAnon user who subscribes to the conspiracies were to find out that their next-door neighbor was getting vaccinated, they then would be more apt to attack that person for their beliefs simply because they chose differently. Conversely, if an extreme leftist were to see that their neighbor identified as an anti-vax individual, regardless of their actual beliefs, the leftist may simply group that neighbor in with what they consider a conservative 'tin-foil hat' conspiracy theorist and refuse to engage in any meaningful dialogue with them. Both scenarios happen often on social media, leading to arguments in comment sections and the constant erasure of opposing viewpoints when the algorithm recognizes that the user is uninterested in them.

The rise of misinformation during the last two years and the polarization that it had caused in the United States have proven that fact-checking and research for credible sources is crucial for the well-being of civil society. When individuals are driven solely by emotion and their biases, compromise on the interpersonal level and even more comprehensive solutions on a policy-making level become nearly impossible because one side is unwilling to actively listen to the other. This makes it crucial for well-read individuals to research their positions and know *why* they believe what they do so that they can engage more meaningfully with their elected officials and effectively communicate what their needs are as a community so that those needs are met.

Political polarization also makes governing on the local and state level more challenging. When misinformation about one's opposing party is plastered across one's social media and newsfeed, their trust in government ultimately decreases when a representative from that party is in power, particularly when they are President. Suddenly, because of that high office position, citizens become less open to policy decisions they may make because they view them as the caricatures that the media creates them to be. For example, news networks like CNN were adamant when describing Donald Trump as an anti-immigrant fascist during the 2016 election, which led to the vocal outrage that came from the Democratic Party when he won the election. These same sentiments bled into his term as well since every policy decision that the Trump administration had made was tainted by his perceived personality and mistakes. Toward the end of Trump's term, he was under fire for the way that his administration had mishandled the pandemic, but the dislike that his opposition felt for him as an individual certainly had strengthened those critical feelings. When Joseph Biden was elected in 2020, many of those on the Republican side would often call him "Sleepy Joe" and thus perceived his every misspeak, policy decision, and appearance through that lens. Both situations, while on opposing sides of the aisle, represent how political polarization shapes one's perception of the American President, thus making them trustworthy enough to govern or not based on biased media coverage.

Because of increasingly high political tensions in the United States as of lately, governing on both the federal and local levels have been difficult. In particular, the pandemic had made budgeting on the local and federal level the most challenging it had been since the 2008 recession. As a result of the concentration of job losses among low-wage workers and the unprecedented expansion of unemployment benefits, local economies have uniquely suffered and thus made it difficult for localities to function¹⁹. Differing greatly from federal budgets, state and local governments must balance their budgets each year, which largely constrains their

¹⁹ Alan J. Auerbach et al., "Effects of COVID-19 on Federal, State, and Local Government Budgets", *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, November 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1353/eca.2020.0028>.

behaviors. When a major economic downturn occurs, it reduces profit and revenue flows to the locality, which forces them to have to increase taxes or cut overall spending to close the gap. This creates unfavorable conditions for taxpayers, who may depend on public services or take away from their income. When most states and localities entered the pandemic, they were in mostly strong economic positions. Total state rainy day funds were at \$122 billion in fiscal year 2019, “equal to 14 percent of general fund expenditures”, the highest in United States history. However, the economic downturn had caused different forms of aid legislation, one of which being the CARES Act, resulting in over \$200 billion in federal aid to states and localities. The CARES Act, which served to provide money to nonessential employees who were unable to work, had brewed plenty of controversy. While many of the left argued that the initial amount was not enough, just as many on the right argued that the government was wasting precious funds on the localities when, according to the Constitution, the responsibility to provide for the citizens should be reserved for the states. This major difference in belief had created various protests from the Republican side in many different states—in New York, Tennessee, and North Carolina, where a school board was “overthrown” for wanting to continue the mask mandate for the safety of students²⁰.

Parents, furious with state mask mandates, told the Michigan Department of Education that they “need to be the boss of what’s best for their children”, as they were in direct opposition to the mandate. On the opposite side of the aisle, Democratic congressional candidate Mike Siegel argues that “this is a matter of life and death”, placing the focus on the public good, rather than the parents’ rights to their children’s education. In terms of COVID-19, misinformation about mask-wearing via conspiracy theories and other bizarre claims, such as comparing vaccination cards to gold stars which marked Jews during the Holocaust, had significantly set back the United States’ rebuilding after the initial 2020 spread.

Arguments concerning public education from mask mandates to curricula have created deeper divisions along political lines, as well as creating conflict within the local school system. Decisions about what is taught and how children are managed in school are made significantly more difficult for localities.

One specific example of curricular contention in public school is critical race theory (CRT). Aside from being a major campaign point for Virginia governor Glenn Youngkin, it is also considered a sort of evil in public schools by Republican, rural parents²¹. Parents refuse to have their children learn about critical race theory due to the belief that the curriculum would place “blame” on white children for past events, thus forwarding an agenda that prioritizes black supremacy rather than racial equality. However, supporters of the curriculum being taught in schools argue that CRT would not blame white children, but rather teach that U.S. social institutions like the labor market, housing market, and criminal justice system are “laced with racism”, which ensures different outcomes based on the race of the individual. Regardless of the explanations given by either side, the states are currently in a crisis, as leaders are scrambling to find ways to appease their citizens to secure their seats in office for the next election year while prioritizing the education of current students. States such as Montana and South Dakota have denounced teaching concepts even remotely related to CRT in content, with about 20 other states

²⁰ “Name-calling, canceled meetings, pleas from students: A week of school mask mandate chaos”, USA Today, last modified August 15, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/08/15/school-mask-mandates-spark-protests-parents-covid-cases-rise/8124375002/>.

²¹ “Why are states banning critical race theory?”, Brookings, last modified November 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/07/02/why-are-states-banning-critical-race-theory/>.

in the South following their lead. On the opposite side of the spectrum, traditionally Democrat-majority northeastern states like New York, Massachusetts, and New Jersey are dedicating entire courses to CRT, and choosing to integrate those concepts into English and Social Studies classes.

The difficulty that the federal level must govern is simply an outgrowth of individual state issues. With about 50 million COVID cases in total and roughly 700,000 deaths, the closure of many key small businesses, and increased racial tension, the United States seems to be behind its other developed counterparts in the global north in terms of maintaining a sense of normalcy²². President Joe Biden currently has some of the lowest approval ratings seen in American President history, which further divides the country due to the lack of agreement between the majority parties—both seem to disagree with his courses of action, yet for completely different reasons. While Republicans dislike the \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill because of the sharp increase in taxes and prices for the everyday citizen, Progressives also disagree with the bill because they believe it simply is not enough to support those who were impacted economically by the pandemic the most. This consistent infighting within government and, by extension, across the general population creates even *more* bureaucratic red tape, which makes moving forward as a nation in the post-COVID world impossible at worst, and extremely difficult at best.

Aside from COVID-19's impact on political polarization in the United States, there are many different case studies which prove the less-than-ideal material influence that each had on the populace. One incident which had taken place on January 6, 2021, had further deepened the fissure between Democrats and Republicans in the United States. When a group of self-proclaimed Trump supporters stormed the Capitol in Washington DC stormed the Capitol, they were under the impression that they were staging a revolution of sorts. Most of the rationale from the rioters was that they were overturning Donald Trump's loss to Joseph Biden in the 2020 election. During the attack, many members of public service were crouched under desks, running for their lives, and *fearing* for their lives. Many of those who heard of the attack on the news were perplexed, as the Capitol is a building that should have high security, which obviously had been breached when the rioters broke through the Capitol doors. While those inside were safe, the country's political foundation had been shaken to the core. The question that was then circulating throughout the populace was what would happen to the rioters? While Democrats were willing to prosecute them, Republicans were mostly split on the question. According to a Pew Research study, 71% of Democrats say that criminal penalties are not severe enough, and that further action should be taken against the rioters, while only 19% of Republicans say that further action should be taken²³. Within the Republican camp, there is even more division: 38% believe that a prosecution and prison sentence is too severe, while a close 39% says that a prison sentence is sufficient. This internal squabbling over the fates of the rioters had led to a mishandling of the case—with only 15 out of the 97 guilty pleas were prosecuted. This indeterminate result had both angered Democrats because of the lack of justice rendered onto the individuals who had undermined America's security, while some Republicans grew to be angrier with Democrats' distaste for the outcome of the situation. While this case had generally faded

²² "COVID DATA TRACKER WEEKLY REVIEW", Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last modified January 6, 2023, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/covidview/index.html>.

²³ "Declining Share of Republicans Say It Is Important to Prosecute Jan. 6 Rioters", Pew Research Center, last modified September 26, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/09/28/declining-share-of-republicans-say-it-is-important-to-prosecute-jan-6-rioters/>.

from the public eye, it had proven to be a major failing of the American justice system because it had failed to prosecute people who have undermined the safety of our civil servants and citizens.

The 2020 election had been a major source of the political polarization that defines the United States today, however, I will argue that the beginning of this modern-day level of division began in the 2016 election. While the Clinton campaign depended on calling Donald Trump a racist bigot because of his advocacy for a border wall along the southern United States and Mexico border, Trump had ranted endlessly about Clinton's emails. While both sides hurling increasingly personal insults at each other during their campaigns, the press and individual citizens had then integrated those sentiments within their politics. This had come to a head when Trump finally won the election, despite Clinton winning the popular vote—various Democrats had called for the abolition of the electoral college, while Republicans had rejoiced at the victory after Obama's two terms. Currently, the same sentiments—news stories written for shock value, misinformation on social media, and emotional reactions coming before calculated, researched arguments.

Because of political polarization in the United States, governance on the local and federal level had become difficult. With race, gender, sexuality, religion, and federalism becoming hot-button issues to be avoided at the dinner table and in the public forum instead of topics to be calmly discussed as a nation, tensions are becoming increasingly high, and no end seems to be in sight. In the wake of 9/11, the citizens of the United States, regardless of social position, had come together to mourn the lives lost in the unfortunate terrorist attack that had taken place in New York. While many look back on that day with grief and sorrow, it was one that had brought together people of various beliefs and backgrounds while condemning terrorism. Ever since, the American people had become more and more divided, which is shameful because a tragedy should not have to happen to maintain unity. To regain that unity, the press, both in print and on screen, *must* discuss modern events based on facts, not independent political biases. While this is a tall order for major newscasts, it is important to start on a local level—namely, within schoolboards and local newspapers. In addition, individuals must be prudent when posting information on social media, as social media, while a platform that encourages political expression, is a place that also encourages angry yet personal exchanges on the bases of political belief.

Both the news and social media are private sectors and depend on individuals to be more careful about the ways that they engage with one another. However, governments would also benefit from being less combative because the taboo issues that often create division are taboo in the first place because neither side is willing to negotiate. For example, on the local level, critical race theory is a major hot-button issue, but an easy negotiation to that issue in public schools would be to teach historically accurate and unbiased information—including slavery of Africans in the United States, the genocide of Native Americans, as well as the Civil Rights movement while explaining how those marginalized individuals do have a much greater amount of upward mobility in terms of finances, jobs, and voting, even if there is work that must still be done. Despite this being one current example of how mutual negotiation can operate, it is still a necessary first step to work toward political and patriotic unity in the United States. Without that unity, there is little to no hope for a future for the American republic.

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