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Dear Valued Readers,

Welcome to the 7th edition of the Journal of Policy Analysis. It is with true pleasure and gratitude that I invite you into these pages where youth voices have the opportunity to shine. Situated in our organization as a cornerstone of rigorous policy discourse, each Journal edition allows our authors to contribute meaningful ideas, thoughtful criticisms, and fresh perspectives to greater policy-oriented conversation.

As the spirit of our politics continues to face moments of stress and reckoning, the Journal remains steadfast in its mission to preserve the integrity of the youth voices and empower the next generation of thoughtful leaders. In this edition, our Authors explore a multitude of policy positions – ranging from education funding to Mexican foreign policy, youth political socialization to youth marriage, and foreign black markets.

Beyond just words on paper, these articles truly do contribute to policy change. Whether that be sparking conversations, offering fresh critiques, or simply just acknowledging a problem, each of these publications has the potential to shift real-world policy. And these articles are not just an institutional analysis or debate, but rather are rooted in lived experiences and true implications.

I would be remiss if I did not extend my thanks to the people that made this publication possible: our five authors. Thank you for your time, trust, and willingness to work with us at YIP to drive forward the conversations that make our work as meaningful as it is. And to our editors, thank you for your careful consideration of each manuscript, attention to detail, and thoughtful contributions. To our design team, thank you for your creativity and dedication in transforming complex ideas into a clear, compelling publication.

And to our readers, I urge you to actively engage with the content through reflection and questioning of assumptions. We invite you to continue conversations sparked in these pages, carrying them into community, home, or classroom.

Thank you for joining us here.

Patrick Pickren
Vice-President of Journal
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Letter from the Chief Executive Officer:

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the Fall 2025 issue of our Journal of Policy Analysis. Each issue of our journal carries strong scholarly insights on communal, local, and global policy issues. The ideas presented in this publication reflect the discussions happening within the youth community and the work being done within the Institute for Youth in Policy (YIP) to spark cross-sector civic change.

YIP is dedicated to Educating, Engaging, and Empowering the next generation of civic changemakers. Our mission is a vision that we put into practice and aspire to. We have a strong mandate as an organization–to meet the challenges of a changing world *and make it better* by designing solutions to boost civic engagement, tackle political polarization, and increase discourse on the issues that matter. The Journal of Policy Analysis is a central part of our mission–it contains rich research that tackles the problems of the past, delves into the present, and imagines the future. As we have grown into a diverse organization with over 1000 past fellows and staff members, this journal has been a consistent source of inspiration and insight.

Through these pages and papers, we empower diverse perspectives, foster dialogue across lines of difference, and amplify voices that may otherwise go unheard. This journal is not just a collection of disparate articles but a carefully designed story that serves as a call to action and a representation of the power of the youth voice. I hope you take time to read this edition in its entirety. You will find that these young writers have challenged conventional approaches to policy, pushed boundaries, and invited you to engage deeply in the issues they present.

I encourage you to think critically about how to join the conversation that this edition presents by engaging with the Institute–either by applying for one of our fellowship programs, pitching an idea to our project incubation program, or applying to join our team. Demand for our programs has never been higher, and neither have our ambitions. If you enjoy what you see in this journal and would like to support our efforts, I invite you to take a look at our holiday giving campaign. Each donation sustains and enhances initiatives like this journal.

I am extremely grateful for the dedication of our team, contributors, and partners that help make this work possible. Before you explore our other offerings and engage with our mission, I hope you enjoy taking a moment to see this dedication in action by diving into these pages and exploring new ideas.

Asher Cohen

Chief Executive Officer, Institute for Youth in Policy

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Equilibrio: Mexican Soft Power Shines Amid A Fragmented World

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I. Abstract

The geopolitical landscape is observing a massive lack of diplomatic conflict-resolution mechanisms. All the great powers have or are engaging in acts of war, expansion, and increasing antagonization of one another. In addition, several developing countries are violating international norms and laws. In contrast to this trend, Mexico has engaged foreign policy in a way that displays the effective use of soft power and conflict-resolution mechanisms. This has allowed Mexico to grow in a way that does not compromise its engagement with international law. In a world of increasing geopolitical chaos, Mexico has sought to forge foreign policy grounded in the concept of *equilibrio* — strategic balance that wields Mexican labor, culture, geography, and diaspora networks as instruments of soft power without compromising its autonomy. Mexico is able to position itself as a key but silent player in international relations by viewing these four areas as diplomatic currency. This paper will analyze why these key categories increase Mexican autonomy and offer a blueprint for other emerging powers amidst a fractured world order. Not only does this paper examine the mentioned topics, but it will also analyze how Mexico acts as a stabilizing force in the world.

Keywords: Mexico, Foreign Policy, Geopolitics, New Cold War, Economics, International Relations

II. Introduction

What is "*equilibrio*"?

Equilibrio is the direct Spanish translation for "equilibrium." Equilibrium, in the context of Mexican foreign policy, is indirectly but firmly embedded in the Estrada Doctrine. The doctrine was formulated and enforced from 1930 onwards, which uniquely mandates that Mexico does not "recognize" the governments or changes thereof in regards to different countries (Ojeda 1986). The reason this became a diplomatic method is because Mexico City does not feel it is adequate or appropriate to make any formal judgements of the government(s) of a country. This came in light of foreign interventions in Mexico: French attempts to install a monarch in Mexico during the 1860s and intervention in Mexico during the Mexican revolution (1910s) both were recent enough for Mexican foreign policy analysts to have considered this diplomatic approach as a response to the mentioned events. Mexico believes that recognizing a government would imply a breach of sovereignty because it requires Mexico to make a judgement on the internal changes of a state (Sánchez 2016). In other words, Mexican sovereign logic clarifies that the legitimacy of a state is an internal matter and should not be subject to external endorsement or recognition.

By reframing sovereignty, Mexico is perceived as "fair" or "balanced" in its opinion of other countries, which made Mexico popular in the third world. This moral injection of foreign policy was uniquely hopeful and charitable in the time period it was formulated. The average policy analyst may concern himself with the legislation of statecraft, but the subconscious values we hold — trust, cooperation, and justice — are equally as important in keeping at the forefront of foreign policy.

Mexican commitments to non-intervention and peaceful conflict-resolution methods are born from this axiom of Mexican foreign policy (Domínguez & Fernández de Castro, 2009). From a strategic point of view, it allowed Mexico to navigate international issues and interests that are free from the constraints otherwise seen in formal alliances. This explains why Mexico condemned Nazi Germany's annexation of Austria in 1938 (Rojas Aravena, 2004). Mexico's defense of sovereignty against aggressive countries impeding on others' internal affairs made Mexico respectable for upholding international law and taking an assertive but diplomatic approach to the matter.

This balancing act was reflected in Mexican non-alignment throughout the Cold War. Mexico balanced American pressure and Latin American solidarity by creating the Treaty of Tlatelolco in 1967 (UN 1967). This treaty banned Latin American states from hosting or creating nuclear weapons in the region to promote non-alignment (González, 2010). It demonstrates Mexico's commitment to non-intervention but also its desire to limit the militarization of politics between states, the United States, and the Soviet Union in the region. This embodiment of equilibrio reflects Mexican foreign policy strategy: assertive in upholding sovereignty, committed to regional integration, and seeking non-military means of conflict-resolution.

III. Mexico's Post-Cold War Diplomacy

Mexico's commitment to strategic balance has remained constant since 1930, but Mexican tools of statecraft to maintain that axiom have evolved or increased after the Cold War. Mexico uses four core pillars of soft power — Mexican labor, strategic geography, cultural influence, and diaspora networks — to balance its national interests while maintaining self-determination (Lajous 2012).

I. Mexican Labor

Mexican labor has historically been pivotal to advancing state and economic growth for both Mexico and the United States. The United States has consistently relied on Mexican migrant labor to work in agriculture and construction across the country. Through agreements like the Bracero Program, Mexican workers have helped American war efforts in WWII and during its post-war recovery phase (Durand et. al 2001). This same trend stands to this day, with an increase in Mexican labor in the service sector (Massey 2013). To this end, Mexican labor has been pivotal in creating the economy and populations of both Texas and California — the United States's biggest state economies and populations (Wilson & Villareal 2014).

While Mexican migrant labor is frequently discussed, Mexican labor based in Mexico is often disregarded. Mexico's domestic labor force is dominant in agriculture and has roughly twice the labor size relative to the United States in industrial production when accounting for labor percentages (Statista 2025; The Global Economy 2025; US Bureau of Labor Statistics

2012). In addition to this, as the United States has decreased in industrial capabilities, Mexico's increase in this capacity has only improved (Moreno-Brid & Ros 2009). As Mexican industrial capabilities have grown, their domestic and international (or migrant) labor force have both become globally competitive. In fact, Mexican labor has become more valuable than Chinese labor as it has developed its manufacturing capabilities in technologies and products like vehicles, industrial equipment, and skilled labor (Myers & Jones 2012; NAPS 2025). This explains why Mexico has overtaken China as the United States' main trading partner since 2023 (Villareal 2023).

Mexican labor and its broader context of economic development has made Mexico an attractive trading partner for other advanced economies. Germany, Japan, and South Korea commonly export microchips, industrial chemicals, and pesticides to Mexico (JETRO 2023; KOTRA 2023; GTAI 2023). The fact that Mexico has increased economic trade with the biggest economies on technology and industrial equipment demonstrates the diversifying Mexican economy*. Thus, Mexico's interests in continued innovation remain balanced while allowing it to navigate mutually beneficial policies (Lajous 2012).

II. Geography/Regional Cooperation

Mexico's unique position allows the country to enjoy massive influence on trade, security, and regional integration. By the fact that it is neighboring the United States, Mexico serves as a transit and origin hub for trade, migration, and the enforcement of regional security. This advantage means that unlike European or Asian allies of the United States, Mexican strategic neutrality and commitment to diplomatic conflict-resolution shares strong parallels with American security. Mexico therefore is not required to enter a formal alliance with the United States like NATO, even if the Estrada Doctrine did not exist (Malamud & Gardini 2012).

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The Estrada Doctrine and Tlelalcolo Treaty both reinforce mutual respect between Mexico and its southern neighbors. As it is officially neutral, the prospect of interstate war is low, placing international interests on the domestic security of Mexico as a result . The shared transnational threat of cartel violence reinforces the need for Mexican foreign policy to postulate towards cooperation against cartels instead of interstate intervention (Serrano 2020). Although there is a lot of public debate and opinion over this matter, it is imperative that countries formulate independent policy on cartels to experiment with the degree to which military and non-military means in domestic matters can lead to success in decreasing cartel activity (Dudley 2021). For instance, the variety of policy making in El Salvador, Mexico, and the United States against cartels varies wildly. These states can then record quantitative data to perform analysis and determine what policies work best and how they can adopt other national policies to their own domestic issues. Cartels do have significantly different influences from country to country after all —Argentina, Colombia, and Mexico have very different degrees of concern over this issue.

Going back to the geography of Mexico, its transit and origin status makes international investment over infrastructure particularly important. As it neighbors the United States , cross-border infrastructure has gained a constant amount of investment and wealth into Mexico (Wilson 2011). Cross-border infrastructure with Central America is equally as important to maintain hemispheric trade going to and from North and South America. Water and airports, highways, and other critical infrastructure will always remain vital to trade, ensuring that border states of Mexico see some form of international direct investment (OECD 2017). This extends into tourist infrastructure, as Mexico is an attractive area of tourism from all places across the world.

III: Cultural Influence

The power of culture is oftentimes a neglected tool in conducting foreign policy. From a domestic standpoint, culture is a point of pride and national sentiment and unity. This aspect of a country can translate to literal success in economic, diplomatic, and political aspects (González & Toussaint 2014; Nye 2004). For instance, South Korea's music industry exploded because of its unique songs and values that circulated in social media. Thus, South Korea was able to enjoy billions in revenue, ensuring Korean relevance in global entertainment (Kim 2011). South Korea's ability to export its culture allows it to enjoy global support and love, allowing it to ensure strong soft power.

The same can be applied to Mexico; the colorful cloth, delicious food, and enjoyable music makes Mexico relevant in terms of cultural influence — it is why many audiences immediately think of Mexico when conversations of Hispanic tradition are introduced. This cultural influence keeps Mexico unified in its values and it receives billions in select industries like tourism, entertainment, and food (O'Neil 2019). However, the other benefit of cultural influence is that it allows for Mexico to act as a symbolic and literal bridge between Latin America and the United States. Mexico is part of the Hispanic family, which is something that the rest of the region identifies with. Understanding this shared broad history, values, and struggles naturally makes Mexico a leader in representing the area. This closes the gap between Washington and the rest of the hemisphere.

This is important because in a world where the United States and Latin America have divergent perspectives on immigration, human rights, and conflict resolution in international affairs, Mexico serves as a key to help facilitate dialogue. This establishes common ground and understanding between the United States and its southern neighbors (Russell & Tokatlian 2003). It is significant to have cultural understanding to recognize why the hemisphere has different views and interests. This gives Mexico the opportunity to be more proactive in these matters; globalism mandates interstate integration and as a result, mandates deeper understanding of neighboring states (Keohane & Nye 2000). This transparency decreases regional tensions in the aggregate, and it explains why Latin America and Southeast Asia are comparatively more peaceful than other regions in the world (Katzenstein 2005).

IV. Diaspora Networks

Having diaspora networks are not inherently instruments of a different state in the sense that it is rarely state-directed, but they can be used and promoted to gather international influence and support from a transnational point of view. To explain this, diasporas will be defined, in the context of modern societies, to refer to ethnic groups of migrant origin who have sentimental or material ties to its land of origin (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003). We see popular examples of this with Syrian, Palestinian, Ukrainian, and Haitian diasporic groups in recent times. Although these groups had to migrate, they otherwise maintained strong ties to their origin country through remittances, advocacy, and investment.

As mentioned earlier, Mexican groups are very active in both California and Texas. Mexico enables this because it is in Mexico's benefit to interact with its diaspora networks. To begin with, remittances contribute to Mexico's GDP as billions are sent back from the Mexican groups in the United States to Mexican families based across the border. In fact, remittances totaled $60 billion in 2022, which was more money gained to Mexico than oil exports or direct foreign investment (Banco de México 2023). This provides Mexico with significant amounts of money without having to directly invest or control the diaspora networks in the United States. It helps the United States because it incentivizes continued migration of labor in the United States at a comparatively cheap rate; whereas Americans are more focused on service jobs, Mexicans are skilled and able to work in American agriculture and manufacturing sectors (Canales 2011). Overall, businesses and small population states across America benefit while Mexican families also gain access to money it otherwise would not have.

Mexican diaspora networks also contribute to directly investing and advocating for entrepreneurship in Mexico. Economic development is facilitated by connecting Mexican entrepreneurs to expertise, resources, and knowledge based in the United States. Mexico has launched multiple initiatives and programs that intensify this exchange of ideas and experience to support efforts in Mexican development and the innovation of knowledge and skills (Delano 2011). This is how Mexico's industrial capabilities have improved in recent decades, which leverage Mexican labor against foreign competition.

Diaspora networks also help advocate for Mexican national interests on the world stage. This has consistently allowed Mexico to be represented under a positive light in other host countries. For instance, continued advocacy in the United States for favorable trade policies with Mexico help vouch for Mexican policies and benefits under negotiations like the USMCA (Vega & Alba 2020). This can be reflected by recent shifts in immigration and trade opinions in domestic American populations. Whereas President Donald Trump and republicans sought international relations that increased protectionist policies, American voters were opposed to those policies once they were enacted. Protectionist policies would harm the Mexican economy as its exports are tied to the United States, and the country's tighter immigration policies would strain U.S.-Mexico relations. By making a compelling political case in favor of Mexican-American trade and economic cooperation, Mexico's image improved significantly. This can also be observed by Ukrainian and Syrian populations in Europe, with advocacy for increased economic and visa support of both states favors Ukraine and Syria (Galmen 2014). We are seeing a similar case with Indian immigration, where Indians in Canada and the United States advocate for increased trade, immigration, and cooperation with India.

Diasporas can also extend the conversations Mexico has regarding its perceived concerns to the United States. As many Mexicans migrate to the United States because of cartel violence, among other socioeconomic issues, activists can persuade American legislators to support interstate security measures by providing personal accounts (De la Rosa Rodríguez 2022). This builds a sense of emotional connection and reason to help Mexico out to an extent that does not impede on Mexican sovereignty. Interpersonal connections and relationships are sometimes all that is needed to extend a hand or a cause for empathy (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004).

An Uncertain World

There is an ongoing shift in global dynamics that is evidently making all countries in the world wonder how they are going to navigate turbulent times. Massive regional wars, inflation, supply chain disruptions, and political instability have all affected countries in various ways. Mexico, amid the growing crises brewing across the globe, has become a very important player as a stabilizing force (Domínguez & Fernández de Castro 2023). Mexico has seen this opportunity and has chosen to pursue this position without hesitation.

Mexico's Role in International Crises

When examining interstate politics, rival states have an exhaustive list of punitive or escalatory methods that can be used should negotiations fail. These tools should be used wisely, as eventually, there will be an exhaustion of diplomatic leverage that countries possess to bring about an aggressor state to a ceasefire or negotiation (Art 2003). This includes trade barriers via tariffs, sanctions, and/or severing of diplomatic ties. This coercion forces a state into isolation, as seen with Russia, Iran, and North Korea (Nephew 2017). However, these coercive tactics eventually lose leverage as there is no more punitive measure that can be introduced short of military attacks.

It is this very theory from which countries like North Korea and Russia commit to their actions. What other diplomatic tool can the United States and its allies introduce that will bring them to the table if they are willing to endure diplomatic and economic isolation? If anything, coercive tactics may reinforce rogue state calculations in retrenching their positions. This explains why those two states, alongside other countries like Iran pursue their interests despite the heavy drawbacks they would endure.

This is where Mexico diverges from the United States and other countries. The Estrada Doctrine allows Mexico to maintain a principled stance by condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but that same doctrine is used by Mexico to advocate for continued diplomatic channeling. Mexico argues that keeping Russia in international channels like the Human Rights Council and tabling a talk between Russian and Ukrainians can build confidence between both warring parties (Serrano 2022). Instead of seeing war as a binary struggle, Mexico maintains an inclusive position while upholding international rule of law. On the matter of the other major global war, Mexico has moved to not take a stance on the Israel-Palestine War. Mexico has instead offered to host ceasefire talks, establish humanitarian aid channels in Gaza to enforce human rights and establish longing peace talks (Ramírez Cuevas 2023). In both instances, American mediation can be argued to prolong both wars, as the United States is not an impartial party to either war. Because of this, both Russia and Hamas do not have strong confidence that the United States would mediate a lasting peace in a balanced matter. Mexico's continued promotion for de-escalation while recognizing sovereignty makes the country a popular candidate that is best suited to host ceasefire talks to both wars (Heine 2021). By rejecting blanket measures that are punitive, Mexico is able to leverage its neutrality to encourage mediation and stabilize relations.

Checking American Power

One of the drawbacks Mexico suffers is its interdependence to American foreign policy and success, or lack thereof. Any hits or radical shifts that come out of Washington D.C. can negatively affect Mexico's economy far more in terms of relativity to Mexican affairs affecting the U.S. economy negatively (Gallagher 2020). However, assertive strategic partners of the United States indicate that a cooperative orientation in American foreign policy is necessary to maintain the current economic benefits the U.S currently enjoys in US-Mexican trade.
A recent example of this was the threat of tariffs and immigration restriction policies between the United States and Mexico that took place between February and April 2025. Mexico took a firm stance against tariffs and threatened to retaliate with their own, unwilling to blindly follow American policies. Mexico increased support for detainees and returnees alike by activating

emergency legal aid and support within Mexican consulates across the US. To demonstrate goodwill, Mexico was willing to cooperate with intelligence sharing to monitor cartel activity along the border, contributing to a drop in unauthorized US border crossing in the process (García 2025). Mexico was also collaborative in increasing American imports and revising areas of mutual trade. This influenced Canada to also retaliate against American policy if it were targeted, demonstrating that Washington D.C. needed good faith interactions with its neighbors if it wanted to accomplish select goals in a friendly manner. As cartels are mostly an issue to Mexico, any overstretch of American military or intelligence operations are perceived as a breach of sovereignty. Mexico has requested aid to the extent that it allows autonomy over its own internal affairs, and the United States has come to recognize and support that desire over time.

From a nuanced perspective, it also reveals Mexican commitments to humanitarian rights and democratic norms. By showing the contrasts as to how the United States uses extrajudicial methods of securing its border and treatment of migrants, the levels of democracy can literally be seen from its actions on the border. This may not be a directly linked issue, but tying the treatment of migration and border security to the measurement of American democracy reveals the rate at which the United States is acting aggressively to its partners. In the context of geopolitics, the United States must balance a sound migration policy if it wishes to maintain hemispheric and international attractiveness for labor, educational, and technological purposes. The Mexican government's considerations for upholding international law shows key areas where the United States must improve, providing a subtle but important relationship feedback.

This is also powerful because Mexico is necessary to uphold American hegemony in economic competition. After COVID-19 revealed weaknesses in the global supply chains (particularly in China and East Asia), nearshoring has emerged as an alternative to offshoring. Offshoring was common as it allowed companies to expand manufacturing companies into less developed states that had cheaper labor (Gereffi 2020). In the long run, companies enjoyed the ability to move manufacturing to lower cost areas, increasing profit margins in the process. However, the pandemic revealed how volatile supply chains are. Not only did logistical issues arise from supply shortages, but the geopolitical dimensions of the Sino-American competition increased tariffs between both countries across the Biden and Trump administrations.

Near-shoring became attractive as it established supply chains in neighboring countries had lower costs associated with manufacturing. This is where Mexico comes in. Mexico's cheap labor and relatively high skilled workforce gained investment from East Asian and American companies that were seeking advantageous trade to the United States (Blyde & Molina 2021). This explains Mexico's sharp increase in vehicle and electronic production to the United States . Not only is it cheaper to produce infrastructure and hire labor in a country so close to you, but it is geopolitically smart to void your competitors from these two factors. This means that despite any frictions in the interstate relationship, Mexico will always be relevant to the biggest economy in the world. And this is why many Asian and American companies have moved away from China towards Mexico.

Mexico has sought other trading partners to have leverage against the United States and diversify its growing economy. Mexico has free trade agreements with the United Kingdom, Japan, and the European Union (Villareal 2022). This points to Mexico's silent ability to shift partners exports should the United States pursue maximum pressure. When viewing Mexico as an export-driven country, it is imperative to view U.S.-Mexican trade as a matter of American competition in keeping Mexico as a mutually beneficial partner. Therefore, Mexican labor in both its migratory and domestic workforce are a competitive asset that secures Mexican autonomy in international affairs. When paired with Mexico's alternative form of conflict-resolution to the US, Mexico's status is amplified on the world stage in a strategic balancing act.

This was followed by other countries around the world to be willing to check American influence as well, including but not limited to the European Union , China, Japan, and South Korea in trade and security matters. Mexico's stance affirms its foreign policy and commitment to diplomatic de-escalation while showing its commitment to sovereignty and advancing independent national interests.

International Rule of Law

In a world where all the major powers are often breaking international norms and creating instability, Mexico's status as a middle power serves as a credible model for the rest of the global south. China's encroachment in Filipino islands, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the United States's cut of international aid all have played a role in casting doubt in international institutions. It is concerning global periods like this where having a balanced foreign policy shines through.

In so far as embedding international norms to a country, Mexico is a uniquely cooperative country. An amendment to the Mexican constitution in 1992 binds international treaties to national judicial processes. In practice, Mexican citizens can invoke the American Convention on Human Rights in Mexican courts. The Mexican Supreme Court regularly cites international treaties to help adjudicate domestic matters (Fix-Fierro & López Ayllón 2020). This cornerstone of international law being normative in Mexico makes the population and institutions familiar with the international rule of law. Mexico's domestic order thus mirrors its international doctrine, allowing the international community to view Mexico as a far more trusting partner than other global powers (Cossío Díaz 202).

Mexico's cultural influence and diaspora networks reflect Mexico's commitments to the global rule of law. As Mexico has a long-standing tradition of mandatory voting the country is far more democratic as it legally requires its citizens to vote (Magar 2018). Considering that Mexican foreign policy has not shifted much, Mexican democratic governance can be directly linked to a continued support of Mexico's actions abroad. Mexico's cultural influence and diaspora networks show as extensions of Mexican support for international law. Groups of Mexican heritage in the United States regularly lobby and support increased humanitarian standards for migrant groups and minorities within America and in other countries around the world (Délano Alonzo 2018). Mexico's absorption of international law has turned its citizens and diaspora groups into informal but active, community-driven practitioners that respect and promote the rule of law.

This is also seen in Mexican cultural projects. As Mexico has secured "intangible heritage" status for key traditions like Dia de Muertos and Mexican cuisine, the country equates cultural rights to human rights (UNESCO). This reinforces international protections of cultural property for indigenous and minority populations. To illustrate an example of Mexican cultural influence upholding international rule of law, I invite the reader to look at cultural centers in New York, Madrid, and Berlin. These cultural centers act as exhibitions that host public lectures on constitutionalism, human rights treaties, and due process. These centers, alongside film-and-law festivals, promote human rights enforcement through Mexican storytelling and cultural heritage in films, art, music, and clothing (González & Landa 2021). In doing so, Mexican cultural sites act as a promotion of Mexican foreign policy by being both historically insightful and informative as informal law schools.

Allowing these cultural exchanges and programs to take place provide various visitors with the perspective of a different nation's approach to international law and how it has influenced its citizens, diaspora, and relations with different countries around the world. Mexican cultural diplomacy acts as an insightful case study for the advocacy of interstate relations between the host and fled countries. Whereas many world leaders are currently far more concerned with geopolitical calculations, human rights and the protections of people are oftentimes ignored (Rosas & Gutiérrez 2019). The consequences of war, economic calamity and shocks to international aid are all far-reaching, and Mexican diaspora networks illustrate the importance for reminding everyone of human rights.

Whether consciously or not, diaspora networks promote Mexican culture in a way that fuses cultural heritage with legal advocacy. The dual use of cultural narratives to advance legal and normative influence projects Mexican soft power in a way that is not coercive. Just as Mexican labor and Mexico's geographic location solidify hemispheric ties and cooperation against competitor states, the use of culture and diaspora networks operationalize legal norms. This completes the picture painted in this section- as a middle power, Mexico reframes sovereignty and legality from being seen as traditional security topics to tangible diplomatic assets. These instruments of soft power all play into each other's strengths too: Mexico's domestic and migrant labor support Mexican culture and the diaspora networks defend international institutions by tying Mexico's utility as a unique geographic entity to its value on the world stage. These interlocking dimensions are all tools of statecraft that preserve Mexico's importance to the world in acting as a force of balance in a world that is drifting apart.

IV. Policy Frameworks in a Rapidly Changing World

As we have unraveled the past successes of Mexican diplomacy and how it holds up against other powers, policy analysts should consider how Mexico can help sustain a semblance of balance in a changing world. There are four areas in which challenges and opportunities have risen in the 21st century that include the following: Digital, climate, migration, and multilateral politics. This section will explore the other areas from which Mexico— and other powers — can take initiatives in refining their toolkits to balance autonomy and national interests.

Migration Politics

I. Mexico should dramatically expand its temporary work programs to include renewable energy and cyber-related professions. This creates skill pipelines that increase Mexican labor value and US job markets alike. Expanding into new work programs keeps Mexican labor competitive and expands its pool of remittances.

II. In tandem with digital diplomacy, Mexico has an incentive to create forums that train first-gen groups in digital advocacy. Creating digital forums maintains the informal civic-embassador network Mexico enjoys outside of its borders.

III. Continued support of human rights abroad keeps Mexico credibility with its diaspora and ties international causes to that of protections surrounding migrant groups. This has molded Mexico as a consistent advocate for migrant protections across the world, rallying the entire Global South behind Mexican migrant politics in the process.

Multilateralism and Great Power Competition

I. Mexico has an opportunity to increase "middle power" dialogues and cooperation with other states to increase interoperability with other countries. Frameworks surrounding pandemic preparedness, labor laws, and increased supply chains gives Mexico further leverage against other great powers. Without abandoning its non-alignment principles, increased Mexican presence demonstrates strategic autonomy and pursuit of its national interests.

II. Mexico would be wise to substantially increase intelligence sharing and security efforts with both the US and Central America (Dockery 2024). Viewing transnational crime as an opportunity to increase regional integration, Mexican efforts directed at cracking down on cartel violence have regional and local developmental benefits. Intelligence sharing and security efforts improve Mexican arms technologies without militarizing to the same extent NATO does, keeping Mexican efforts focused on their country. Increased security efforts streamline transnational law, making it easier to coordinate responses with Central America and the US.

III. The status quo Mexico enjoys by not aligning to any alliance continues to bring benefits to the country. Do not fix something that is not broken.

IV. Mexico can continue to increase diplomatic recommendations by offering itself as a mediator in any major Latin American or Global South disputes. As mentioned in prior sections, great powers do not have the moral authority that Mexico currently enjoys in the world stage.

V. Conclusion

Mexico's use of *equilibrio* is perhaps the perfect exemplification of how a middle power can consolidate sovereignty and autonomy into a strategic asset instead of a constraint into isolation. This balancing act is difficult to navigate in such a complex world, and Mexico's consistent use of the Estrada Doctrine has translated into massive achievements. Each instrument of soft power examined simultaneously enforces one another and preserves autonomous foreign policy, enabling Mexico to negotiate from a position of strength. By weaving Mexican labor, geography, cultural influence and diasporic networks, Mexico exercises multinodal influence without resorting to formal alliances or coercive actions.

The silent but masterful synthesis of these soft power tools underpins how it has advanced Mexico's national interests and its importance to international affairs. This paper examined each instrument's contributions to making Mexico a credible mediator in the world and a check on great powers. Its non-aligned status is reflected by its efforts in making Latin America a nuclear-free zone and its strong apprehension to join formal military alliances. Mexican neutrality signals its independence from its larger northern neighbor, gaining respect from various parties in its efforts in peace talks. Mexico is willing to retaliate against other powers and compete for its national interests by leveraging its economic and cultural relevance. At the same time as these events have occurred, Mexican rule-of-law activism and advocacy for human rights cements the moral authority of Mexico.

The arguments presented are bolstered when compared to other aforementioned states around the world. From Brazil to Indonesia and China, Mexico has calibrated its position in a way that accrued benefits without compromising its sovereignty or instruments of soft power. As global order continues to fragment, Mexican foreign policy offers a replicable roadmap for other emerging powers that seek influence without dependence, breaking the binary system that is often presented in geopolitics. By supporting diasporic networks, embedding international doctrine in domestic institutions, and projecting cultural narratives as political capital, other countries can simulate the same levels of success Mexico has enjoyed. In addition to this, policy frameworks that discuss emerging fields of international concern how foreign policy can evolve without having to compromise its core principles.

In sum, Mexico stands as an effective instance of a developing state navigating world politics. Mexico's ability to transfer its non-alignment to checking great power pressure, upholding the international rule of law, and stabilizing volatile regions speaks to exemplary foreign policy. This balanced approach proves that strategic autonomy and international responsibility are not mutually exclusive but in fact mutually enforcing, providing a template for other powers to navigate an increasingly fractured world order.

VI. References

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Sanctions Evasion in the Russo-Ukrainian War: Challenges, Case Studies, and Policy Recommendations for the U.S. and EU

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I. Abstract

This paper explores the evasion of Western sanctions by Russia after its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The central questions to the topic are how effectively Western sanctions have hindered Russia's war effort, what evasion tactics have emerged, and why it is significant to Western efforts to resolve the conflict. The paper evaluates two main sanction categories: financial restrictions and energy measures. It finds that, despite initial economic disruption through bank isolation, asset freezes, and reduced energy revenues, Russia has adapted. Evasion tactics include rerouting trade through third-party countries, employing a "shadow fleet" of oil tankers, and creating alternative financial channels. Case studies of China, India, Türkiye, and the United Arab Emirates show how these partners have sustained Russia's resilience. These gaps weaken Western leverage in shaping eventual peace negotiations. To restore credibility, the paper recommends expanding secondary sanctions, closing loopholes in energy trade, reinforcing coordination between Western allies, and adopting a more flexible sanctions framework. Strengthening enforcement is essential if sanctions are to remain a viable tool for influencing Russia's behavior and supporting conflict resolution.

Keywords: Conflict Studies, Russo-Ukrainian War, Sanctions, Finance, Banking, Energy

II. Introduction

Economic sanctions have long been accepted tools of coercive statecraft by powerful nations and coalitions, with their use seeing an increase in the post-Cold War era (Yotov et al., 2021). They are defined by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) as the "withdrawal of customary trade and financial relations" with the goal of changing the behavior of an actor without having to resort to direct military confrontation (Masters, 2024). Historically, they have been used against a broad range of actors — from Iraq in the 1990s, to Iran and the North Korea (DPRK) in the 2000s and 2010s — as a means of deterring nuclear proliferation, punishing territorial aggression, or preventing the state support of terrorist groups, among other causes, with mixed degrees of success (Metych, 2023).

Russia has posed a crucial test of this tool. As a major world economy, with a pre-war gross domestic product of roughly $2 trillion and significant global trade integration, Russia was an unprecedented target of sanctions (O'Neill, 2025; Statista Research Department, 2025). Western sanctions against Moscow initially began in 2014 after Russia's annexation of Crimea, and were relatively narrow, focusing on preventing the Russian energy and banking sectors from receiving long term financing from the West (Harrell, 2025). Thus, they only had a minor impact on the broader Russian economy, and were not enough to change the Putin's policy towards Crimea (Chatzky, 2019).

However, on February 24th, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine after months of buildup (Center for Preventative Action, 2025). This action immediately attracted international condemnation; 141 out of 193 United Nations (UN) member states quickly backed a resolution affirming Ukraine's "sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity" (UN News, 2022). Moreover, multiple sources held that the invasion fundamentally violated international law including Cambridge University, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, with Guterres adding that it was a "violation…of the Charter of the United Nations" (Haque, 2025; UNSDG, 2022; Bellinger III, 2022). The brutality of the invasion itself was only exacerbated by specific cases in which Russian forces committed war crimes, including the torture of prisoners of war (POWs) and the killing of civilians, as reported by Amnesty International (Amnesty International USA, 2025; Amnesty International USA, 2024).

In response to Russia's invasion, The U.S., European Union (EU), United Kingdom (UK), and other allied nations implemented an unprecedented and coordinated sanctions campaign, attempting to isolate Russia from the global financial system and hurting its ability to wage war (CFR Editors, 2025). These measures have included cutting major banks off from global networks, freezing hundreds of billions of dollars in central bank reserves, and taking steps to prevent Russia from making a profit on its energy exports (Shubbar et al., 2024).

However, a major way in which Russia weathered the sanctions is the systematic evasion of restrictions. For example, when Europe and the U.S. restricted Russia's oil exports, Russia rerouted oil shipments to new buyers in China, India, and other third-party nations. A "shadow fleet" of oil tankers, often exploiting or breaking regulations, began transporting Russian crude oil outside the standard international insurance and tracking systems (Childs, 2025). Moreover, many foreign banks in Third World countries were more lenient about handling Russian transactions than their American and European counterparts, allowing sanctioned Russian institutions to move capital while avoiding Western jurisdictions. ("Russia outsmarts Western sanctions," 2024).

These factors have prevented Western sanctions from decisively hindering Russia's war effort. These sanctions have undeniably forced Russia to pay a price, which is clear in higher trade costs, liquidity shortages, and long-term isolation from Western capital (CFR Editors, 2025). Yet they have not caused a collapse of the Russian economy, and according to analysis from the Journal of Advanced Military Studies (JAMS), sanctions "have not resulted in a change of behavior vis-à-vis ending Russian aggression in Ukraine" (Lawniczak 2023).

A recent study from the Center on Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) also concluded that under current conditions Russia "will be able to continue its war in Ukraine, at least at the current level of intensity, over the next three years", and that Moscow is unlikely to make major concessions at the negotiating table based purely on sanctions pressure under the current situation (Snegovaya et al., 2025). Indeed, Russia's President Vladimir Putin introduced a set of "maximalist" demands for peace negotiations in June 2024, involving extensive land gains for Russia, a ban on Ukraine's North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership, and rejecting the presence of European peacekeepers within Ukraine after a peace deal is reached (Zadorozhnyy 2025). Putin continued to uphold these demands at a more recent summit hosted in Alaska, which, according to the BBC, "failed to yield any tangible progress towards peace in Ukraine" (Gozzi 2024). Russia has been able to unilaterally continue its military actions in Ukraine, while maintaining a relatively strong negotiating position with the West.

This outcome directly undermines one of the West's core assumptions, that unprecedented sanctions would translate into decisive leverage to end the war (Luck, 2025). Western leaders themselves have acknowledged the challenge. For example, in mid-2025 the European Commission's president Ursula von der Leyen warned that the EU was prepared to impose further sanctions on Russia's energy and financial sectors "to draw the country to the negotiating table" (CFR Editors, 2025). Moreover, in reference to U.S. President Trump's recent efforts to secure a peace deal, analysis from the CFR highlighted a "need to impose greater costs on Russia" (Kupchan, 2025).

Overall, while Western sanctions have been a historically significant effort for geopolitical leverage, the evidence points to a need for stronger enforcement and coordination. This paper seeks to analyze that challenge through three lenses. First, it evaluates how sanctions on Russia's financial and energy sectors have functioned in practice, identifying key loopholes that have allowed evasion. Second, it examines the role of third-party states—particularly China, India, Türkiye, and the UAE—in sustaining Russia's economic resilience. Finally, drawing on coercive bargaining theory, the paper explores how sanctions operate as tools of diplomatic leverage and outlines policy recommendations for the U.S. and EU to enhance their enforcement and negotiation frameworks. Through this analysis, the paper aims to bridge empirical evidence and a theoretical understanding to assess how sanctions can serve as an effective instrument of coercive statecraft amid the Russo-Ukrainian War.

II. Overview of the Western Sanctions on Russia

Financial and Banking Sanctions

The first priority of the West while sanctioning Russia was to sever their ties with global finance. Within days of the invasion, the U.S., the EU, the UK, and their allies prohibited dealings with a wide range of Russian financial institutions and banned the trade of Russian sovereign bonds, with restrictions on new loans or investments in Russian banks. By 2022, analysis from Bruegel estimated that the sanctions covered 80 percent of Russian banking sector assets (Demertzis et al., 2022). This reduced Russia's ability to transact in dollars or euros, hindering the ability to borrow from Western investors.

Another key measure was the exclusion of certain Russian banks from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT), a Belgian-based cooperative that operates the secure messaging network through which the vast majority of financial institutions worldwide send standardized payment instructions (Reuters Staff 2022b; Bergin, 2022). Exclusion meant cutting banks off from most global finance, as it was significantly harder for Russian banks to interact with international ones.

The 2022 ban initially hit seven Russian institutions, including structurally significant banks like VTB, Bank Otkritie, Novikombank, while retaining exceptions for those handling EU energy payments, notably Sberbank and Gazprombank ("SWIFT and the Ukraine Conflict," 2022). Gazprombank itself would be sanctioned in 2024 after Europe decreased its energy consumption of Russian natural gas (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2024). Russia's exclusion from SWIFT left it at a functional disadvantage in global finance (Balzer, 2022).

On February 28, 2022, the U.S. Treasury, in coordination with European allies, froze the foreign currency reserves of the Central Bank of Russia (CBR) (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2022). This measure immobilized an estimated $300 billion held in Western institutions, out of Russia's $630 billion total reserves (Holland et al., 2022). Such a measure had never before been applied to a G20 economy's central bank, marking a historic escalation in financial statecraft (Shagina 2022). U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen emphasized the move's significance: "The unprecedented action we are taking today will significantly limit Russia's ability to use assets to finance its destabilizing activities" (U.S. Department of the Treasury 2022).

It is important to recognize the legal and historical implications of the CBR asset freeze. As noted by scholars Lucia Quaglia and Amy Verdun in the West European Politics journal, it shattered the long-standing assumption that central bank reserves were politically untouchable (Quaglia & Verdun, 2023). Moreover, there have been calls within the West to confiscate the funds outright to finance the reconstruction of Ukraine — estimated to cost upwards of $500 billion according to a recent report from the World Bank — likely violating international geopolitical norms and setting a dangerous precedent for the weaponization of finance. (Ludwikowski et al., 2023; Fourth Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment, 2024). However, certain funds in institutions like Belgium's Euroclear are interest-generating but non-renumerated. This means the interest is not owed to Russia, and is therefore more accessible to allocation for reconstruction of Ukraine (Veron, 2024). The leverage from these funds could be systematically used in sanctions policy to increase Western bargaining power (Conner & Wessel, 2025).

Finally, in addition to institutional bans, Western countries placed targeted sanctions on specific Russian individuals. The EU reported mid-2024 that its restrictive measures "continue to apply to over 2100 individuals and entities" linked to the Russian war effort (Council of the EU 2024). Similar lists are kept by the U.S. and other allies that include top government officials, oligarchs, and tycoons, such as Norilsk Nickel owner and close Putin ally Vladimir Potanin (Politi & Season, 2022). Listed individuals had their European and American assets frozen and were banned from travelling to the sanctioning nations.

These financial sanctions collectively caused a significant impact to Russia's banking system. Many foreign investors divested their holdings, and Russian banks lost access to important revenue streams and financial services (Demertzis et al., 2022). Dozens of smaller Russian banks also faced insolvency or had to be rescued using state funds due to liquidity shortages from sanctions (Stockholm Institute of Transition Economics, 2025). The ruble's value also initially plummeted amidst a bank run (Reuters Staff 2022a).

However, the Central Bank of Russia ultimately intervened to stabilize the sector, deploying capital controls and introducing emergency liquidity. By mid-2022, Russia had ring-fenced and recapitalized its banking system to prevent immediate collapse (Gorodnichenko et al., 2024). Still, Western measures had seemingly achieved a core objective: Russia's banking sector was largely isolated from the West, roughly $300 billion in Russian bank foreign assets were immobilized, and Russian banks' ability to borrow or transact in the dollar and euro was severely curtailed.

Energy Sector Sanctions

Energy has played an important role in the Russian economy and throughout the 2010s represented more than half of the federal budget, making it a prime target for sanctioning. However, sanctions in this domain have been difficult, especially given Europe's dependence on Russian fuel (Fenton & Kolyandr, 2024; Yermakov, 2024). While the U.S. and EU aimed to pressure Russia by limiting one of its main income sources, they also wanted to avoid causing significant instability in global markets or jeopardizing their own energy security.

The U.S. initially led efforts with a ban on Russian oil imports. On March 8, 2022, it issued an executive order banning imports of Russian crude oil, refined fuels, and liquefied natural gas (LNG) (The White House Briefing Room, 2022). Given that Russian supplies amounted to only around 8 percent of American oil imports at the time, the ban was mostly symbolic, but set an important precedent (Hersher & Murphy, 2022). The UK soon followed by committing to phase out all Russian oil imports by the end of 2022 (James & Maclellan, 2022).

The more important step regarding oil sanctions was Europe, as prior to the war, the EU imported about one-third of its oil and a significant portion of its LNG from Russia (Gross & Stelzenmüller, 2024). After an intense internal debate within the union, with strong opposition from member states such as Hungary, the EU agreed on an oil embargo in May 2022 as part of its sixth sanctions package. This embargo, implemented in December 2022, banned sea-based imports of Russian crude oil into Europe, with limited exceptions for pipelines supplying certain landlocked countries (European Commission, 2022). In February 2023, the EU expanded this to a complete ban on Russian refined petroleum products (Reuters, 2023). Together, these measures aimed to curb Europe's approximately $100 billion annual pre-war payments for Russian petroleum. By EU estimates, around 90% of pre-war Russian oil imports to Europe were covered by the embargo, with only minor exemptions for a few member states (European Council, 2025).

Notably, the G7 — a geopolitical bloc consisting of the U.S., Canada, Germany, Italy, France, Japan, the UK, and the broader EU — also implemented a "price cap" on Russian oil exports in December 2022, allowing Western shippers and insurers to continue handling Russian oil only if it was sold below $60 per barrel. The price cap was designed to prevent a global shortage of oil while reducing the revenue the Russian government earned from its export (Cahill, 2023). Countries like China and India could still potentially purchase Russian oil, but the cap, which is theoretically enforced by the West's dominance in the shipping insurance sector, was intended to force Russia to sell it at a large discount. However, while

Russia was indeed selling its primary crude, Urals oil, at around $55-60 by mid-2023, global oil prices often fluctuated. When combined with Russian sanctions evasion measures, it occasionally pushed prices above the cap (Payne, 2023). These factors will be explored further in Section III.

Meanwhile, sanctioning Russian natural gas was far more difficult due to Europe's reliance on the energy source (CFR Editors, 2024). Indeed, Western sanctions initially exempted gas transactions to avoid a European energy shortage. Due to the absence of immediate gas sanctions, Russia itself took the initiative to use gas as geopolitical leverage. In the summer of 2022, Gazprom sharply reduced and then halted flows through the Nord Stream 1 pipeline to Germany under the dubious explanation of "maintenance", causing an increase in European benchmark gas prices by approximately 30 percent (Chestney, 2022). The following year, unexplained explosions destroyed the Nord Stream pipelines entirely (Lee, 2023). Finally, Russia also cut off gas to several EU countries that refused a demand to pay in rubles, such as Poland and Bulgaria (Hernandez et al., 2022). Therefore, while gas was not formally sanctioned by Europe early on, the war effectively led to a de facto decoupling over time, in which the Russo-European oil trade decreased without formal legal intervention.

Moreover, Europe did move to gradually phase out Russian gas imports by finding alternative suppliers, setting gas storage mandates to stabilize supply, and developing policy for developing renewable energy at a faster rate (Thompson, 2025; Covatariu, 2025). By mid-2023, the EU reported that Russian pipeline gas comprised less than 10 percent of its supply, down from over 40 percent in 2021 (European Commission, 2025a). Moreover, the EU recently announced a comprehensive plan to completely end Russian gas imports by 2027, marking a likely end to natural gas as a tool of sanctions policy (European Commission, 2025b).

These energy sanctions illustrate both the ambition and the limitations of Western policy. While they sought to strike at the heart of Russia's wartime financing, their complexity, exceptions, and uneven enforcement reveal the broader challenge this paper examines, namely the difficulty of translating large-scale economic coercion into decisive strategic outcomes.

Collectively, the sanctions imposed since 2022 represent one of the most significant examples of economic coercion ever used against a major world power. They fundamentally changed Russia's integration within global financial markets and its energy relationship with Europe. Yet as the following sections will demonstrate, the efficacy of these measures, as well as their effectiveness as bargaining tools in future negotiations, ultimately depends on the West's ability to address the strategies used by Russia to evade these restrictions.

III. Mechanisms of Russian Sanctions Evasion

Financial and Banking Evasion

In response to being cut off from Western finance, Russia has shifted its financial dealings toward lenient jurisdictions that did not join Western sanctions. In these locations, banks have been known to process payments under false labels or using shell companies, which has allowed billions of dollars to move undetected by U.S. and EU regulators ("Russia outsmarts Western sanctions," 2024). A global sanctions advisory published in 2024 by the U.S. Department of the Treasury alleges that Russia is increasingly relying on third-country intermediaries to evade export controls and conduct trade payments, demonstrating how enforcement gaps have led to the rise of trade networks vital to Russia outside of the West's reach (Office of Foreign Asset Control, 2024a).

Meanwhile, to compensate for the loss of SWIFT access, Russia activated alternative payment systems. The CBR expanded use of its System for Transfer of Financial Messages (SPFS), Russia's domestic alternative to SWIFT, and utilized China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS) for yuan transactions (Office of Foreign Asset Control, 2024b; Reuters Staff, 2023). Although these channels are far less effective than SWIFT's globally integrated network, they have enabled limited cross-border messaging and settlements, especially in yuan. This has led tothe yuan rapidly growing as a medium to conduct trade. By the end of 2022, yuan invoicing increased to 20 percent of Russia's imports, up from just 3 percent in the previous year, indicating a shift away from the dollar and euro (Rosario, 2023). This "yuanization" of trade has been a deliberate sanctions evasion strategy, reducing Russia's dependence on Western currenciesand lessening the amount of trade that has to pass through sanctions-compliant institutions.

Similarly, sanctions targeting individuals have faced extensive evasion measures. Many sanctioned elites shifted wealth into opaque jurisdictions, such as the UAE or Türkiye, or transferred ownership to family members and associates, allowing assets to remain effectively under their control despite formal freezes. Offshore trusts and shell companies — legal structures often established in foreign jurisdictions — have been central to Russia's sanctions evasion. A trust allows assets to be held by a third party on behalf of beneficiaries, while a shell company is a registered business entity with little or no real operations which can be used as a front for illicit operations. Both can conceal the identity of the true owner by layering control through multiple intermediaries and jurisdictions. This masking of ownership complicates enforcement and delays asset seizures, as tracing beneficial ownership requires navigating complex legal and financial networks ("Global Advisory on Russian Sanctions Evasion," 2023). In practice, while Western authorities have frozen yachts, villas, and bank accounts, many of these assets remain operational and effectively under the control of their Russian owners (Chatham House, 2023).

Energy Sector Evasion

Russia's measures to evade energy sanctions are undoubtedly its most effective. After the EU imposed its oil embargo and the G7 implemented its price cap, Russia began to redirect its oil exports to other destinations. Specifically, exports that once went to Europe were rerouted to Asia, with China and India quickly becoming the largest customers of Russian crude oil (Soldatkin & Astrakhova, 2023).

To facilitate this, Russia has created a large "shadow fleet" of tankers to ship its oil outside of Western oversight. These ships often switch off their Automatic Identification System (AIS) transponders, which are intended to be used for vessel identification and general safety. By going off-grid, conducting unreported ship-to-ship (STS) transfers at sea, and changing names or flags, they obscure their cargo, origin, and destination, making it difficult for regulators and insurers to monitor and enforce sanctions compliance. (Childs, 2025). By 2024, an estimated 70 percent of Russian seaborne oil was being transported by this fleet, according to a report from the Kyiv School of Economics (KSE) Institute (Hilgenstock et al., 2024). This results in a semi-covert shipping network that allows Russia to deliver oil to its customers, while avoiding Western detection and enforcement measures.

Meanwhile, to undermine the $60 per barrel price cap imposed by the West, Russia and its customers have exploited loopholes in transport and insurance procedures. For example, one method involves inflating the shipping fees and insurance costs on paper, effectively reducing the “declared” price of oil itself to meet the cap, even if the true cost to the buyer is higher (Lerh & Xu, 2023).

Another tactic involves shifting away from Western insurance, relying on alternate Asian or Russian state-run insurers, since Western firms are not authorized to provide coverage for voyages shipping oil above the price of the cap. These alternate insurers underwrite the cargo at market prices, allowing sales above $60 (Childs, 2025). Thus, while Russia’s Urals oil did often trade near the cap in mid-2023, global price rises and evasion strategies frequently pushed the effective price well above the cap (Payne, 2023).

It should be noted that the global price of oil dropped well below the oil cap in mid-2025, even prompting calls from G7 leaders to lower the cap itself (Payne & Irish, 2025). However, this does not mean oil prices will stay below the $60 cap in the long term, meaning a future surge could potentially decrease Western leverage. Moreover, a decoupling of Russian shipping from Western shipping infrastructure, such as insurance, decreases Western influence and oversight regardless of oil prices, demonstrating a need to make a response to sanctions evasion separate from the economic situation in global oil markets.

A final evasion strategy for oil is the third-country laundering of Russian crude. In this evasion method, Russian-origin oil is exported to countries like India and Türkiye, where it is refined into fuels or mixed with other crudes, and then those products are re-exported worldwide as goods of the nation they are refined in (Bowie, 2023).

This process effectively circumvents origin-specific bans. Notably, after Europe halted direct imports of Russian oil, it increased imports of diesel and other fuels from India, Türkiye, and China, countries that were buying significant amounts of Russian crude. Europe was “effectively buying products made from Russian feedstock,” as analysis from Reuters noted, which defeated the purpose of the EU sanctions (Bousso, 2025). In this way, blending and refining in third countries have provided a claim of plausible deniability that allows Russian energy to continue indirectly flowing into the West. Notably, the EU recently fought back against this strategy, confirming restrictions on refined petroleum products from third countries that go into effect in 2026 (Smith et al., 2025)

Russia’s natural gas exports have also created gaps in the West’s sanctions regime. Pipeline gas exemptions were a significant policy concession. The EU's initial sanctions exempted piped natural gas, given Europe's heavy dependence (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025). Even as overall EU imports fell, nations such as Hungary, Czechia, and Slovakia maintained or even increased Russian gas intake via pipeline. These political considerations forced a slower reduction for pipeline gas, which Russia took advantage of by continuing deliveries to sympathetic or dependent EU member states (Levi et al., 2025).

Meanwhile, LNG (liquefied natural gas) was entirely unsanctioned, a significant omission that Russia exploited. Russian LNG shipments to Europe actually rose after 2022, with imports increasing by 12–18 percent in 2024 (Jaller-Makarewicz, 2025). This loophole meant that while pipeline gas was reduced Russia simply pivoted to selling more LNG on the open market, including to European buyers, generating revenue and undermining the spirit of the EU's energy sanctions.

Western sanctions on Russia's financial and energy sectors have caused significant adaptations, demonstrating both their impact and their shortcomings. Financially, Russia has used third-party banks, alternative payment infrastructures, and obfuscated ownership structures, which shows resilience but also means a shift to more unreliable infrastructure. In terms of energy, crude redirection to Asia via a shadow fleet measures to undermine the price cap, coupled with pipeline exemptions and an LNG loophole, reveal how partial sanctions design enables Russia to continue earning revenue. Collectively, they demonstrate the risk of sanctions becoming a primarily symbolic measure rather than a genuine tool to wield geopolitical leverage.

IV. Case Studies of Third-Party Countries

China

China has been one of Russia's largest energy customers post-2022, and Chinese refiners and traders have taken advantage of Russian discounts. In mid-2025, China increased its imports even as demand from India fell slightly, which demonstrates China's willingness to import Russian crude despite the G7 price cap (Liu, 2025).

Similarly, Chinese state banks and the CIPS payment system offer a financial safety net. U.S. Treasury Secretary Yellen identified China as the biggest source of evasion in early 2024 (Fabrichnaya & Marrow, 2024). Indeed, some Chinese banks continued to handle ruble clearing and yuan settlements for Russian trade until dissuaded by U.S. secondary-sanctions threats. Under such pressure, Chinese banks have recently increased compliance checks, but the sheer volume of China's trade has largely offset Western restrictions (Reuters, 2024). This underscores the difficulty of implementing sanctions against major economies that possess parallel financial infrastructures and political motives distinct from the West's, a central challenge for policymakers designing more resilient sanctions frameworks.

Western responses have focused on financial infrastructure. The EU and G7 sanctioned two regional Chinese banks for the first time in July 2025 for facilitating Russian oil trades, and the U.S. has repeatedly warned that Chinese entities purchasing sanctioned Russian energy or technology could face penalties (Foy et al., 2025; Fabrichnaya & Marrow, 2024). Western officials have also publicly urged China to do more to limit Russia's war effort, rather than enabling it. However, China has largely dismissed these requests, insisting that it is conducting "normal trade" with Russia (Tian, 2022). Overall, Chinese companies and refineries are undermining the effectiveness of sanctions by purchasing Russian oil exports and by aiding Russian financial operations.

India

India, like China, has been a major customer of Russian petroleum. It increased purchases of Russian oil from 2022 to 2023, exploiting discounts. According to a 2025 report from the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air, India has provided around a fifth of Russia's oil revenue since the beginning of the war (TOI Business Desk, 2025). Moreover, it served as a hub for refining Russian fuel. By 2023, India had become one of Europe's top diesel suppliers, even as over one-third of India's own crude supply came from Russia (Narayan & Verma, 2023).

Western governments have taken a gradual but escalating approach to India's role in Russian energy trade. In May 2022, U.S. officials raised concerns with the Indian government about rising Russian crude purchases and warned of reputational and financial risks if Indian refiners facilitated large-scale sanctions evasion (Gardner, 2022). In 2025, the Trump administration moved more aggressively by threatening tariffs on Indian imports due to India's willingness to purchase Russian oil, which it then partially implemented (Shalal & Ahmed, 2025). As mentioned in Section III, the EU followed in 2025 by closing a significant loophole, announcing a ban on refined petroleum products that originated from Russian crude even if processed in third countries such as India (Smith et al., 2025).

These measures demonstrate how the West has attempted to take concrete actions against Indian-facilitated sanctions evasion, yet it highlights the geopolitical challenges of trying to forcefully change the behavior of a Western partner. India's case highlights how even strategic allies can become pressure points within the sanctions regime, revealing the tension between diplomatic partnerships and economic enforcement. Strengthening multilateral cooperation with such nations will be crucial for the policy recommendations later outlined in this paper.

Türkiye

Türkiye has become an important transport hub of Russian energy exports. After the EU oil embargo in early 2022, Ankara nearly doubled its imports of discounted Russian crude. The Carnegie Endowment notes that this allowed Turkish refiners to "acquire Russian oil, refine it, and resell it," which is a practice that has been considered sanctions evasion (Siccardi, 2024). At the same time, Turkish banks have been willing to support Russian finance.: Until late 2023, state-owned Ziraatbank and Vakifbank were still processing ruble and dollar payments for Russian oil imports (Reuters, 2024).

Western policymakers have pressured Türkiye to tighten enforcement. The U.S. Treasury has blacklisted some Türkiye-based firms for supplying dual-use goods to Russia; while not directly related to finance or energy, it is indicative of the relationship between Türkiye and the broader West (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2023). In practice, enforcement has focused on shipping controls: the EU added dozens of tankers to its blacklist and ramped up inspections (Payne, 2025). Ankara itself insists it is neutral and cites its own export controls, but U.S. and EU officials have maintained their rhetoric, warning that the use of Turkish infrastructure to transport Russian oil fundamentally undermines the G7 price cap. Türkiye's balancing of its Western commitments and economic pragmatism illustrates the structural limits of sanctions without consistent regional enforcement mechanisms, which is an area this paper's recommendations later address through proposals for coordinated monitoring and secondary sanctions.

United Arab Emirates

Finally, the UAE has emerged as a major provider of financial services to Russia. Dubai and Abu Dhabi banks offered correspondent services and trade accounts to Russian firms, enabling payments for oil and other exports. For example, in 2024 certain Emirati banks froze several Russian-linked accounts only after U.S. sanctions warnings, reflecting prior leniency (Reuters, 2024). On the energy side, Dubai-based trade institutions handled Russian oil exports, while Emirati tankers conducted shipments. In fact, in 2024, the U.S. Treasury sanctioned three UAE shipping firms for violating the G7 price cap (Psaledakis & Gardner, 2024).
Western governments have pressured Abu Dhabi to enforce sanctions more effectively. American and European diplomats met Emirati officials in 2024 demanding detailed export data and stronger export controls (Cornwell, 2024).

The EU also flagged Dubai as a "re-export" concern in recent sanction rounds, listing additional tankers that used Emirati ports (Francis, 2025). Despite these efforts, the UAE has often resisted compliance with Western standards and protested secondary sanctions, insisting its existing controls are "robust" (Cornwell, 2024). While Western policymakers continue to press for greater transparency, many gaps remain in tracking and enforcing restrictions on Russian finances and trade. The UAE's case exemplifies how regulatory leniency in global financial hubs can erode the overall credibility of sanctions, reinforcing the need for more unified oversight and standardized enforcement protocols.

Taken together, the cases of China, India, Türkiye, and the UAE demonstrate how third-party countries have aided Russia in evading both financial and energy-based sanctions. Though the West has taken steps to pressure these nations and even sanction violating institutions, without comprehensive policy towards third-party stakeholders, sanctions enforcement will remain partial, and Russia will continue to sustain its war effort and economy. Thus, each of these third-party relationships is a reminder of the central policy question of this paper: how can the U.S. and EU move from reactive enforcement to a proactive, coordinated strategy that fundamentally improves effectiveness?

V - The Importance of Sanctions in Negotiations

Sanctions as a Tool of Coercive Diplomacy

Economic sanctions have emerged as the central tool of the West to conduct coercive diplomacy. From a geopolitical perspective, sanctions improve Western bargaining power by imposing costs on Russia's economy, changing the nation's calculations of whether the benefits of continuing the war outweigh the economic and political costs (Kolyandr, 2025). Crucially, the unprecedented coordination among the U.S., EU, and G7 partners on Russia has, in theory, maximized pressure and made sanctions "sticky": difficult to remove once imposed (Vaynman & Volpe, 2022). This persistence means Russia cannot easily wait out the sanctions, knowing that their withdrawal will not come without the relevant concessions on its end.

Moreover, coercive bargaining theory argues that for sanctions to truly compel a change in behavior, rather than simply punish, the target must anticipate that pain will continue or even increase until it complies (Smith & Poplin, 2023; Sechser). In accordance with this logic, Western leaders have indeed threatened to increase sanctions in the case of Russian noncompliance. For instance, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said in May, "we have to increase the pressure," before calling upon all G7 nations to improve their measures against Russia in June (Gray & Bytyci, 2025; Irish, 2025).

Overall, sanctions function as both pressure and incentive in potential peace negotiations. They carry the threat of escalation if Russia refuses to comply, while also holding out the possibility of relief if a ceasefire is achieved. However, the pressure must remain credible in order to preserve Western leverage.

Shaping Leverage in Ceasefire and Peace Negotiations

Sanctions have directly shaped the context and leverage of recent ceasefire and peace negotiations, such as the talks in Istanbul and Alaska. Western powers have used sanctions to bring Russia to the table and as leverage during talks. For example, Ursula von der Leyen warned in May that the EU was prepared to sanction additional Russian energy and financial targets "to draw [Russia] to the negotiating table" (CFR Editors, 2025). This pressure, combined with a similar stance from the U.S., resulted in Russian and Ukrainian delegations meeting in Istanbul for the first direct peace talks since 2022 (Guzel, 2025).

Another test of sanctions-backed leverage came with the high-profile U.S.–Russia summit in Alaska. In the run-up to the summit, the Trump administration wielded an aggressive stick: the White House had imposed a 50 percent tariff on India as a retaliatory measure for the nation importing Russian oil (Kozul-Wright, 2025). European diplomats noted that U.S. sanctions pressure was “crucial to the diplomatic process,” observing that Putin was essentially “strong-armed into engaging” only after these measures hit Russia’s key oil clients (Gavin et al., 2025).

During the summit itself, President Trump had hinted that “without a ceasefire at the end of the day he might slap Russia with new sanctions,” an explicit threat to incentivize a deal (Vlahos, 2025). Although no ceasefire was directly achieved — which highlights the negotiation power that Russia still holds as a result of sanctions evasion, and the need for a “tougher” approach according to commentary from Politico — the leverage Trump’s secondary sanctions did achieve is a demonstration of their potential (Gavin et al., 2025).

To maximize the leverage sanctions provide the West in peace negotiations, it must maintain its credibility as a tool to inflict economic pressure. Thus, a key principle is the adaptability and rigorous enforcement of the sanctions during negotiations. Maintaining leverage requires closing loopholes and demonstrating that pressure will tighten if aggression continues.

Indeed, Western countries have steadily expanded sanctions to target Russia’s evasion tactics and third-party enablers to some extent already. For example, the U.S. and EU moved to sanction a handful of companies in China, Türkiye, and the UAE helping Russia bypass sanctions (CFR Editors, 2025). Proactive measures like these not only degrade Russia’s capacity to wage war but also strengthen the West’s negotiating position demonstrating that sanctions pressure can be applied to all avenues of economic activity, and be strengthened if a deal is not reached. There have even been calls in the West for building automatic sanctions triggers into a peace accord: measures that reinstitute sanctions if any stipulations of a peace deal are violated. (Jensen, 2025). Such sanctions serve as a powerful deterrent against Russian backsliding, thereby improving the chances that a peace deal holds.

Moreover, the material benefit to Russia from eventual sanctions relief is as important as the threat of sanctions imposition itself. Realist theory argues that state behavior is driven by cost-benefit calculations. Western leverage thus comes not only from raising the costs of war for

Russia, but also from offering a path to reintegrate with the global economy if it accepts a peace deal. However, the offer must be valuable enough to Russia for it to accept. The challenge to this strategy is that Russia's adaptations to avoid sanctions reduce the material value of any future relief, which makes the value of such proposals insufficient to Moscow (Kluge, 2024).

To keep sanctions as a valuable bargaining chip, Western states must create high-value concessions that Russia cannot easily substitute. For instance, full access to Western energy markets is an incentive Russia desires; a significant tightening (or conversely, the promise of loosening) of oil export constraints could provide critical leverage and make energy concessions more desirable. Overall, West maximizes its leverage by making sanctions relief a compelling incentive through the tighter enforcement of sanctions and closing of enforcement gaps, and a unified framework for their loosening and tightening. Maintaining this credible sanctions pressure will be essential for the West in attaining a favorable peace deal.

VI. Western Stakeholders and Considerations

Governing Bodies

Western governments are the primary architects and enforcers of sanctions, but specific attitudes and responses have varied. The U.S. government became a policy leader in financial sanctions, taking a more aggressive approach. As previously discussed in Section II, it rapidly imposed broad financial sanctions from 2022-2024, while repeatedly issuing advisories to improve enforcement. Moreover, despite President Trump's closer relationship with Putin than Biden, he still took the decision to impose secondary sanctions on India due to its status as a major importer of Russian oil, as highlighted in Sections IV and V.

Meanwhile, the EU has led the design of energy sanctions but faced struggles with unity. EU sanctions require a consensus among 27 individual governments, so states with energy needs or shipping interests — such as Hungary and Slovakia — have at times blocked more severe measures (Jozwiak, 2025). This means that EU member states implemented sanctions with mixed enthusiasm. While Germany, France and the Baltic states readily froze assets and sanctioned Russian banks, other EU members, such as Malta and Cyprus have been criticized by the watchdog Transparency International EU for not being strict enough regarding Russian "dirty money" ("No New Sanctions Packages," 2024).

Overall, Western executive governments have invested heavily in sanctions, but occasionally their individual geopolitical concerns have been prioritized over a strict enforcement of policy. The U.S. hesitated to initially sanction China or India with secondary sanctions, while the EU has generally balanced energy sanctions against domestic economic needs. This fragmented enforcement reflects a broader policy issue. While stricter coordination *is* feasible through existing institutions, it would require political trade-offs that risk domestic backlash over energy prices and foreign relations, which are costs that policymakers must weigh against the long-term credibility of sanctions. Thus, while Western governments keep their measures legally effective on paper, their effectiveness is dependent on political unity and the willingness to impose sanctions on opportunistic trade partners or even allies.

Financial Institutions

Banks, insurers and other financial institutions are crucial stakeholders in enforcing financial sanctions. Prior to the invasion, several European banks had sizable subsidiaries or exposure in Russia, including UniCredit (Italy); Raiffeisen Bank International, or RBI (Austria); Société Générale, or SocGen (France); OTP Bank (Hungary); and others (Za, 2022). Following the invasion, most major Western banks agreed to eventually comply with sanctions, but some institutions initially put up resistance. For instance, RBI refused to divest capital until after investigations from the European Central Bank (ECB) and Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), due to a significant amount of its profits being from its Russian branch (Wilkes & O'Donnell, 2024). However, regulatory and public pressures eventually meant banks were willing to take significant losses to exit the market. For example, SocGen took a 3.1 billion euro write-off when it sold off its Russian subsidiary, RosBank (Hummel, 2022). Overall, these pressures have meant that banks are mostly compliant as a stakeholder, and are prepared to work with Western regulators to enforce harsher sanctions. Moreover, the fact that their stake in the Russian market has mostly been divested means that they have less of an interest in the health of the Russian economy.

Shipping insurance providers also play a role in enforcing sanctions, especially due to the West's dominance in the field. Western marine insurers broadly withdrew coverage from Russian oil shipments priced above the $60 price cap. However, some Western firms still underwrote some voyages under the cap as late as 2024, relying on promises from traders that the oil met the requirements of the price cap (Saul & Stolyarov, 2024). This "self-certification" approach, while formally allowed by the cap, does allow for potential price violations. As mentioned in previous sections, regulatory pressure has since increased, with the U.S. and EU conducting investigations on certain Western firms and vessels. Nonetheless, uncertainty has pushed many Western insurers to withdraw entirely from Russia-linked voyages (Childs, 2025). Overall, insurers have proven to be broadly cooperative, but their reliance on potentially unreliable verification methods highlight some level of challenge in involving insurance providers within sanctions policy. Policymakers must also account for the unintended consequence of over-deterrence. Excessive regulatory risk could drive insurers out of the market entirely, undermining transparency and shifting shipping coverage to less accountable jurisdictions.

Energy and Shipping Companies

Global energy traders, oil firms, and shipping companies directly mediate Russia's exports and are decisive actors. Many Western energy corporations, such as Shell and BP, have exited the Russian market or ended Russian partnerships (Bousso et al., 2022). However, commodity trading houses have decided to honor long-term crude supply contracts with firms like Rosneft, facilitating Russian exports even after the war broke out (Payne, 2022). These traders have insisted that they are only fulfilling pre-war agreements, but they are enabling Russian sanctions evasion. Finally, some Western-owned or managed ships have even participated in Russia's shadow fleet, and were recently targeted by EU sanctions (Francis, 2025)

Thus, while many Western corporate entities have enforced sanctions by suspending Russian business, others have effectively undermined sanctions by sustaining Russian exports under new arrangements. This dichotomy in corporate behavior is an important consideration for updated sanctions policy, and continuing to engage and pressure these companies will be essential to improve the credibility of sanctions. The phenomenon also raises feasibility and equity concerns for policymakers, as any future framework must minimize loopholes without imposing disproportionate burdens on compliant firms, ensuring that enforcement remains both credible and economically sustainable.

VII. Policy Analysis

Overall, the Western sanctions outlined in Section II will only achieve their intended strategic objectives if they are able to address the evasive measures taken by Russia, and if they adapt to the changing geopolitical and economic realities of the conflict. As Sections III and IV have demonstrated, Russia has collaborated with multiple countries, including major powers such as India and China, to evade sanctions, developing sophisticated strategies to counter both finance and energy-related measures. Moreover, Section VI outlines multiple Western stakeholders that play an important role in closing enforcement gaps and developing better sanctions policy.

The central policy challenge lies in balancing feasibility, cost, and equity. Stronger secondary sanctions and energy enforcement measures are feasible given existing legal authorities in the U.S. and EU, but they come with potential costs to diplomatic relationships and global market stability. These trade-offs are central to any sanctions policy, as policymakers must ensure that enforcement intensity does not undermine long-term unity or economic resilience.

Unintended consequences also exist. The expansion of secondary sanctions could strain relations with strategic partners such as India and Türkiye, while excessive regulation of financial institutions might discourage investment or push trade flows into opaque networks. Similarly, tightening maritime and insurance enforcement could raise energy prices globally, affecting consumers and industries across Europe. Policymakers must therefore weigh these risks against the cost of inaction, which would allow Russia to normalize sanctions evasion and weaken the credibility of Western economic statecraft.

At the same time, equity and accountability must be considered. Western sanctions should be structured to impose costs proportionate to complicity, targeting institutions and governments directly enabling Russia's war financing rather than punishing compliant actors. This aligns with the principles discussed in Sections V and VI—that credibility depends on fairness, consistency, and transparency.

The following recommendations address these concerns through four priority areas: closing financial evasion channels, securing energy sanctions integrity, aligning Western stakeholders, and developing a flexible sanctions framework for negotiation and peace-building.

VIII. Policy Recommendations

Closing Financial Evasion Channels

One of the most persistent strategies of financial sanctions evasion has been the rerouting of Russian transactions and capital through lenient third-country institutions. As Sections III and IV noted, Turkish and Emirati banks have offered services to Russian clients until U.S. pressure forced limited compliance, and Chinese banks have handled yuan transactions despite Western warnings.

Therefore, it is essential for the West to decisively crack down on third-party channels handling Russian transactions through the use of secondary sanctions, a strategy which was advocated for in a recent report from the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (Meizlich & Hardie, 2025). Although some third-party institutions have indeed already been sanctioned by the West, the overall trend has been one of a lack of accountability. Without some level of consequence for lenient nations, regulatory bodies, and institutions, Russia will undoubtedly continue to exploit convenient financial infrastructure with little to no consequence. The U.S. and EU must build its prior enforcement of secondary sanctions into a comprehensive campaign targeting all institutions in nations where it holds leverage, especially Türkiye and the UAE.

Notably, this should also include banks participating in Russia's SPFS system. A 2024 OFAC alert already warned that participating institutions "may be designated" as sanctions targets (Office of Foreign Asset Control, 2024b). The U.S. and EU could expand this into a formal presumption of sanctionability. Ultimately, any bank connected to SPFS or processing Russia-related cross-border payments should be automatically flagged for secondary sanctions unless it exits the system within a set wind-down period.

While these nations will face a certain cost in decoupling their financial channels from Russian clients, access to Western markets and institutions is much more crucial; the U.S. and EU represent a far more significant portion of the world economy than Russia. Moreover, access to the dollar and euro—considering their role as the most significant global reserve and trade currencies—is indispensable for any financial institution, especially those still conducting transactions with Western institutions. Therefore, threatening strict and immediate secondary sanctions would be likely to enforce compliance and remove Russia's remaining access to global finance (Allison & Keatinge, 2025).

However, such measures would require an overhaul of the current sanctions infrastructure present. The OFAC and EU would need unified designation lists to prevent arbitrage and allow the effective joint enforcement of sanctions. Moreover, the U.S. and EU should allocate funding and resources to their sanctions monitoring and financial data agencies with the specific purpose of more comprehensive tracking for third-party institutions handling Russian capital or trade. Indeed, the expansion and unification of sanctions bodies has been a strategy specifically advocated for by Vladyslav Vlasiuk, Zelenskyy's Sanctions Commissioner, in a CEPR article (Vlasiuk, 2025).

While the yuanization of Russian trade, and its participation in CIPS, may be more difficult to prevent due to China's more powerful economy and global influence, improved data collection could still provide the U.S. and EU with more operational clarity when decision-making. Moreover, this would provide leverage to publicly pressure complicit Chinese regional banks and urge regional partners such as Singapore and Japan to tighten oversight.
Overall, the West requires more powerful and centralized sanctions infrastructure to implement secondary sanctions, which could decisively restrict Russia's access to global finance.

Securing Energy Sanctions Integrity

Despite sanctions, energy remains the core source of income the Russian government relies on for war financing. As covered in Section III, Russia's shadow fleet and related exploitation of regulatory loopholes have allowed it to transport oil outside the reach of Western regulators to customers. To address this, the most effective measure will be the expanding of port-state control checks of vessels. The EU has recently broadened its blacklist of vessels suspected of sanctions evasion, but this effort should be combined with better inspections at European ports to identify shadow fleet tankers (Payne, 2025).

Ideally, the approach should be expanded beyond European ports, with diplomatic pressure on nations like the Gulf States (ex. UAE, Oman, Kuwait, etc.) and Türkiye to enforce the G7 oil cap and their own trade controls more effectively. The West could potentially expand the financial data collection measures outlined above to also apply to shipping, allowing for public pressure. This strategy would allow for increased scrutiny and diplomatic pressure towards nations that have chosen to increase purchases of Russian petroleum, such as India, as stated in Section IV.

Refining and re-export loopholes also undermine the effectiveness of energy sanctions. Section IV highlighted how India and Türkiye purchase Russian crude at a discount, refine it into diesel or other fuels, and then re-export the products to Europe and global markets. The aforementioned EU ban on refined petroleum products derived from Russian crude, even when processed in third countries, is an essential measure to address this loophole (Smith et al., 2025). The U.S. should mirror this approach by banning imports of refined products linked to Russian crude, aiming for unified sanctions policy with the EU to strengthen Western unity.

Moreover, natural gas sanctions also remain incomplete. Section III described how initial EU sanctions exempted pipeline gas due to Europe's dependence, and how LNG imports weren't effectively targeted, resulting in an increase in imports in 2024. The U.S. and EU should begin phasing in LNG restrictions, narrowing exemptions to genuine emergencies and incentivizing alternative supplies from the U.S., Qatar, and Norway, as urged for by a recent report from Bruegel (Keliauskaitė, 2025). Unless addressed, the LNG exemption will continue to provide Russia with billions in annual revenues, weakening Western leverage.

Finally, the U.S. and EU should address issues regarding their own insurance and shipping finance corporations, which have proven to be more lenient regarding sanctions and reliant on the self-certification of cargo prices by traders, explained in Section VI. This has allowed Russia to sell oil that complies with the price cap on paper through the manipulation of accounting, but this has a higher true cost to the buyer, as mentioned in Section III. To close this loophole, regulators should mandate independent verification of cargo prices for voyages seeking Western insurance coverage. Indeed, according to the Insurance Journal, insurance companies have previously flagged self-certification as a concern, which would corroborate the need for such independent verifications (Lerh & Xu, 2023). Furthermore, such audits should be used to pressure other private corporations, such as commodity trading houses, into aligning themselves more closely with the Western sanctions regime.

Aligning Western Stakeholders

As Section VI emphasized, the credibility of sanctions is dependent upon the coordination and unity of Western governments, banks, and other private actors. A key structural challenge has been differences in policies between the U.S. and EU, which decreases coordination and creates opportunities for Russia to exploit regulatory arbitrage. For example, U.S. measures can often precede EU counterparts by weeks or months, and compliance standards for financial institutions can vary significantly across nations.

To address this, U.S. and EU policymakers should develop a transatlantic sanctions framework that unifies U.S. and EU listings and enforcement procedures. Increased policy unification has been suggested in the past by sources such as American University's reputed Transatlantic Policy Center (Reinert, 2023). Such a framework would likely involve the American OFAC, multiple EU bodies, as well as national regulatory agencies.
Moreover, the unification would likely place increased direct pressure on nations within the EU that are less cooperative to sanctions measures, such as Hungary, through closer contact with the U.S., which as Section VI noted, has been an aggressive sanctions leader. This could potentially help in shifting the overall direction of sanctions to be more severe, allowing easier implementation of measures like the aforementioned secondary sanctions.

Equally important to sanctions coordination is coordination between the public and private sectors. As noted in Section VI, many banks, insurers, and energy companies have been mostly cooperative enforcers of sanctions, but may operate without the necessary level of guidance (Thomson Reuters Institute, 2022). Therefore, a cooperation forum between the U.S. and EU should also include business leaders from the various industries discussed. These forums could standardize compliance checklists and due diligence requirements, and provide private sector actors with a better picture of the expectations that apply to them. Moreover, direct accountability would be made easier through closer contact with transatlantic governments.

Overall, closer coordination between all important Western stakeholders would improve coordination and accountability, preventing Russia from exploiting cracks in Western unity and bolstering U.S. and EU leverage.

Developing a Flexible Sanctions Framework

Finally, as mentioned in Section V, sanctions are not simply punishments but also tools the U.S. and EU must use in peace negotiations. Coercive bargaining theory argues how they can only compel change when the target believes that noncompliance will increase their intensity. Moreover, Western leverage in negotiations will undoubtedly depend on an organized and deliberate approach to the measures on the table. This aligns with the findings of a 2024 report from Brookings Institution, which corroborates that sanctions function best when integrated within a deliberate and modular framework, instead of being implemented as ad hoc reactions (Itskhoki & Ribakova, 2024).

Therefore, policymakers should design a modular sanctions framework that can change depending on Russian compliance, with specific timelines and measures outlined. Such a framework would establish pre-announced tiers of escalation that can be activated if Russia fails to comply with negotiated commitments, while also outlining pathways for sanctions relief if benchmarks are met. Even after a deal has been reached, the U.S. and EU should consider implementing the automatic sanctions triggers highlighted in Section V. Transparency in this design would send credible signals, while flexibility would allow shifts in the material and geopolitical conditions of the conflict.

Crucially, a flexible sanctions framework should undoubtedly outline clear actions regarding the frozen CBR reserve funds and their interest, as explained in Section II. The outright seizure of these funds would set a potentially dangerous legal and financial precedent, undermining global trust in the Western financial order. Instead, the funds should ideally be frozen until a negotiated end to the conflict (Obasun, 2024). Meanwhile, the interest that is not directly owed to Russia should be earmarked to finance the reconstruction of Ukraine.

Ultimately, by integrating enforcement and conditionality into one framework, the U.S. and EU can ensure that sanctions remain a genuine source of leverage rather than a symbolic geopolitical gesture, bridging towards sustainable peace.

IX - Policy Implementation

Translating the recommendations of this paper into practice requires a structured, politically feasible, and well-resourced plan that leverages the previously discussed stakeholders. Implementation must reflect the criteria of feasibility, cost, unity, and equity outlined in Section VII while still remaining adaptable to future geopolitical considerations and developments. The ultimate goal is not just to tighten sanctions enforcement, but to institutionalize sanctions as a unified framework of Western economic statecraft.

The first step must be the creation of a formal mechanism for transatlantic coordination. As discussed in Section VI, inconsistent enforcement and staggered policy rollouts have repeatedly allowed Russia to exploit regulatory gaps. A unified sanctions coordination framework, which would likely be jointly led by the American OFAC and the European Commission's Directorate-General for Financial Stability (DG FISMA), could coordinate lists and enforcement actions. This system could operate through a sort of transatlantic council that hosts quarterly meetings to review implementation data in order to update blacklists and issue joint advisories. Moreover, including the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the U.S. Treasury would ensure that both regulatory and diplomatic perspectives inform the council's decisions.

Political feasibility remains a major constraint. As noted in Section VI, certain EU member states such as Hungary and Slovakia have resisted comprehensive energy measures due to domestic vulnerabilities. To maintain unity, policymakers should offer phased compliance schedules and limited transitional exemptions tied to measurable progress in diversification. Framing secondary sanctions as a defense of Western credibility rather than a punitive act would help strengthen support in the U.S. and EU alike, building political legitimacy for deeper enforcement.

Resource allocation is another key condition for success. Monitoring third-party evasion, described in Sections III and IV, will require expanded data analytics and maritime tracking. Both the U.S. and EU should increase funding for sanctions monitoring agencies, ensuring that new measures can be implemented effectively. A portion of the accrued interest on frozen Russian central bank reserves, discussed in Section V, could fund these upgrades, aligning enforcement resources with the moral responsibility of postwar reconstruction.

Private-sector engagement is also essential. As discussed in Section VI, banks, insurers, and energy traders have been broadly cooperative but lack clear and consistent guidance. Regular compliance forums, hosted under the Transatlantic Sanctions Council, could standardize checklists and due diligence requirements, while allowing firms to seek direct clarification from regulators. Such forums and advisories are already being implemented to some extent under

European and American frameworks, as discussed previously, but now require unification. Moreover, clearer guidance would also prevent over-deterrence, where uncertainty drives firms out of markets, while reinforcing confidence that compliance mechanisms are fair, transparent, and predictable.

Diplomatic outreach will remain a pillar of effective implementation. Section IV demonstrated how countries such as India, Türkiye, China, and the UAE have sustained Russian evasion networks. To reduce dependency on coercion alone, Western policymakers should engage these nations through targeted diplomacy, offering technical assistance for financial transparency while making clear that continued complicity risks isolation from Western markets. Special envoys for sanctions coordination could ensure that enforcement and diplomacy are coordinated rather than at odds with each other.

Implementation should proceed in phased stages. Short-term efforts would focus on establishing coordination mechanisms and enhancing port inspections, while medium-term goals include expanding secondary sanctions and LNG restrictions. In the long term, the modular sanctions framework outlined in Section VII should be institutionalized as part of postwar negotiations, ensuring that sanctions evolve alongside shifts in Russia's behavior.

While challenges remain, which range from diplomatic backlash to market volatility, these risks can be mitigated through incremental enforcement and active dialogue with both private and foreign partners. If executed effectively, these measures would close the largest gaps in the Western sanctions regime and restore the credibility of economic coercion as a strategic tool. By integrating sanctions into a unified system, the U.S. and EU can transform them from reactive punishment into a forward-looking framework for stability, deterrence, and hopefully, peace.

X - Conclusion

The Western sanctions imposed on Russia in 2022 and beyond have been unprecedented in their scale and coordination. By freezing Russia's central bank reserves, excluding banks from global finance, and taking measures to cut into Russia's energy revenues, the U.S. and EU sought to weaken Russia's ability to wage war in Ukraine and increase leverage in potential negotiations. Yet, as this paper has shown, Russia has remained resilient through evasive

[1]adaptations. It has sought new financial routes, found loopholes in shipping, and relied on third-party countries, among other measures.

The individual case studies of China, India, Türkiye, and the UAE demonstrate exactly how third-party countries have enabled Russian sanction avoidance, whether through laundering Russian crude, or through providing alternate financial channels. At the same time, Western stakeholders have often struggled with regional differences and a failure to unify objectives and motivations. These dynamics reveal that sanctions policy is only as strong as the weakest link in its global implementation, reinforcing the need for a cohesive Wesrtern strategy to maintain credibility and leverage.

Crucially, sanctions are not just tools to punish, but also tools to negotiate. They can only create change if Russia expects an organized and flexible escalation or deescalation in response to the respective noncompliance or compliance. Therefore, for negotiations to succeed, sanctions must be designed through a modular and unified system. They must also close key financial and energy-related enforcement gaps using secondary sanctions and other enforcement innovations to reinforce credibility. Sanctions will achieve their intended diplomatic effect only when enforcement, coordination, and negotiation are treated as interconnected parts of a single policy framework.

Looking forward, the true test will be whether or not the U.S. and EU can turn their sanctions policies into a proactive framework for peace. Without immediate policy action, sanctions risk losing their deterrent power entirely, allowing Russia to entrench its wartime economy and normalizing evasion as a viable model for other aggressor states. This would not only prolong the conflict in Ukraine but also drive up global energy costs and economic instability that directly affect ordinary citizens. Policymakers must act now to close enforcement gaps and unify sanctions frameworks before the window for meaningful leverage closes. Preventing evasion, unifying stakeholders, and integrating sanctions into a broader diplomatic strategy will determine if they provide not just economic isolation, but meaningful leverage in shaping a sustainable and just resolution to the conflict.

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Too Young to Say ‘I Do’

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I. Abstract

Child marriage, defined as marriage before age 18, the recognized legal threshold in most countries, remains a widespread human rights violation. According to the United Nations, child marriage denies children the educational opportunities, harms long-term health, increases vulnerability to intimate partner and domestic violence, and deprives them of the formative experiences necessary for adulthood. The UN Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), ratified by nearly all UN member states, establishes international standards to combat child marriage and gender-based violence. This paper focuses on legal frameworks regarding child marriage and offers a comparative assessment of child marriage in the United States, Niger, and Brazil. These three countries vary in cultural and historical experiences, yet they all have similarly high incidence rates. The study will also examine the impact of child marriage at the individual and community levels from an economic, psychological, health, and socio-cultural perspective. It will reflect on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected child marriage in these countries. Finally, this article proposes policy recommendations such as improving access to education, raising awareness and showing to girls there are other paths beyond their domestic responsibilities.

Keywords: Child Marriage, Social Norms, Gender Based Violence, Governmental Policies, Effective Policy Implementation

II. Introduction

According to UNICEF, child marriage refers to any formal marriage or informal union between a child under 18 and an adult or another child (UNICEF, 2021). This harmful practice is deeply rooted in patriarchal views, political and epistemological ideologies. Unfortunately, child marriage has become a widespread global issue affecting millions of girls each year. A UNICEF report estimates that approximately 12 million girls are forced into marriage annually, which equates to about 28 girls getting married every minute. Even more concerning is that many of the children affected by child marriage are under 15.

The UN Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), ratified by more than 200 member states, seeks to establish international standards to combat child marriage and violence against women (UNICEF, 2021); however, only 9% of countries have laws requiring couples to be at least 18 years. Child marriage severely harms children by depriving them of their education a positive and happy upbringing. It also exposes them to serious health risks, including sexually transmitted infections such as HIV, and significantly increases the likelihood of mental health issues. Child marriage disproportionately affects girls, while only 6% of boys are married before age 18, a troubling 21% of girls experience the same fate (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

For young girls forced into marriage, the consequences are often dire. They face a higher risk of domestic abuse and complications during childbirth (Walk Free, 2023). Many also become vulnerable to sex trafficking. Health-wise, child brides suffer from conditions such as cervical cancer, obstetric fistulas, and high maternal mortality rates, while also experiencing a lack of independence from their husbands. Despite advances in medical technology and increased globalization in the twenty-first century, child marriage persists due to deeply ingrained social and cultural norms. Although hundreds of countries have laws against this practice, enforcement remains weak (UNICEF, 2021). Child marriage is deeply embedded in culture and tradition, it is often difficult to eradicate effectively. In some communities, families continue to justify the practice by appealing to economic, psychological, health, or socio-cultural reasons. Parents may feel compelled to marry off their daughters when they cannot afford living expenses, while others argue that child marriage protects girls from pregnancies outside of matrimony.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further incentivized child marriages worldwide. As an international crisis that caused millions of deaths, the pandemic also placed intense financial strain on families as many workers lost their jobs. Its impact was particularly distressing for women, who bore the brunt of heightened economic vulnerability and increased exposure to gender-based risks. The pandemic had a particularly distressing impact on women.

III. Factors

Culture, education, and poverty exacerbate child marriage globally, regardless of a country's development status. Despite the misconception that child marriage is rare in developed nations, it remains common, with only a few US states enforcing legal bands that prohibit marriage under age 18, even with parental approval. In the United States, girls are sometimes forced into marriage as young as 15, occasionally as a means to secure legal immigration status. These practices also raise challenges for statutory rape laws, since in different circumstances, some of these unions would qualify as sex crimes, particularly given that the spouse is generally older than the bride. The lack of comprehensive data collection further compounds the problem and fosters public ignorance. There is a misconception that human rights violations occur only in developing nations or in conservative religious cultures, including some Muslim communities. In the United States, however, child marriage takes place mostly among kids aged 16 and 17 years old. While child marriage mostly affects late teens in the United States, it does not diminish the gravity of such contract. In some cases, children choose to enter into marriage by seeking emancipation from their parents, a controversial step, given that, at the same age, they are not legally permitted to buy alcohol or vote (Jiang, et al., 2023).

In Brazil, child marriages are more common in regions with limited access to healthcare, education, and other essential services (UNICEF ; Urquia, 2022). Families facing financial hardships may resort to child marriage to alleviate their economic burden, particularly in vulnerable populations with limited education, healthcare, and stable employment. Gender-based violence is another driver: in some cases, parents may marry their daughters off to protect them from state- and gang-controlled urban violence, seeking to provide a sense of security for their daughters. Religious beliefs, particularly in Evangelical, Protestant, and Catholic communities, also shape social attitudes toward sexual activity outside marriage, pregnancy, and abortion. These beliefs can influence families' decisions to turn to child marriage in order to adhere to conservative values (Girls Not Brides, 2023). Deeply ingrained gender norms and discriminatory practices further sustain child marriage in Brazil, perpetuating the idea that supporting early marriage for girls is acceptable while depriving them of their youth, education, and opportunities for personal growth.

Child marriage in Niger is deeply rooted in cultural practices. Child brides in Niger often become additional wives in polygamous marriages, with 36% of married women living as co-wives (Ndiaye, 2021). The prevalence of early marriage in Niger is alarming, with girls typically getting married at the tender age of 15. Violence against women, including girls, is pervasive in Niger, and it stems from a culture of machismo and the violent socialization of boys and men (Niamey, 2021). Niger has one of the highest rates of child marriage globally, with a rate of 75% of girls married before the age of 18. The country also ranks lowest on the Human Development Index, reflecting the challenging living conditions and limited opportunities for its citizens. The high rates of child marriage, which is a direct result of poor quality of living, likely exacerbate this phenomenon, as young girls are compelled into early and often unprotected marriages, leading to early pregnancies and potential health risks (Delong, et al., 2020). Child marriage in Niger is directly linked to a high incidence of gender-based violence. As young girls are forced into early marriages, they become more vulnerable to domestic violence, and their basic human rights are violated, further exacerbating the challenges girls and women face in the country.

Beyond its moral implications, child marriage significantly impacts a country's economy and its social development. Girls forced into early marriage are more likely to drop out of school, limiting their skills and earning potential and perpetuating a cycle of poverty (Moreno-Maldonado, et al. 2022). Early marriage, in most countries, is seen as a way to alleviate financial strain on the family. The practice of bride price during which the groom’s family provide financial value to the bride’s family is common in many regions, including India and Sub-Saharan Africa, where it is known as "Lobola" in the southern regions and "mahari" in the East (Shakya, Baker, et al. 2022). In resource-constrained countries, it can be financially burdensome for families to support children who are still young and unable to contribute economically. Child marriage also reduces national productivity, costing up to 1.7% of a country’s GDP annually due to covering the cost of assistance aid, health care, and lost labor. Alarmingly, these costs have increased as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic (UNICEF).

The COVID-19 pandemic added additional pressure to an already challenging situation, further worsening the health and social life of children, particularly girls (Yukich, 2016). Women reported experiencing increased cases of rape, sexual assault, physical assault, early or forced marriage, denial of resources and opportunities, and psychological and emotional violence. With movement restrictions and lockdown measures in place, women in abusive situations faced even greater challenges in seeking help and support.

While some scholars use child marriage and forced marriage interchangeably, there is a growing effort in the literature to make a distinction between the two. According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and Unchained At Last, a nonprofit organization with the mission to end child marriage in the United States, child marriage is defined as any marriage where at least one of the parties is under 18 years of age. Forced marriage is a marriage in which one and/or both parties have not personally expressed their full and free consent to the union. Nonetheless, before the COVID-19 Pandemic, scholars had found evidence of a decrease in child marriage globally, a statement that is no longer true today.

The number of domestic violence cases varies by location. A significant contributing factor to this alarming statistic is the considerable age gap between husbands and wives in Niger. Husbands are generally much older than their wives, perpetuating power imbalances and increasing vulnerability among young girls (Urquia Al, 2022). Research on child and forced marriage supports the findings that as young girls are forced into early marriages, they become more vulnerable to domestic violence, and their fundamental human rights are violated, further exacerbating the challenges girls and women face in the country (OHCHR). Adding to it's complexity, Human Rights Watch indicates that Niger has one of the countries with the greatest adolescent pregnancy rates. The country faces educational challenges, with only 42 percent of girls enrolled in basic education. African Countries comprise 15 of the 20 countries with the greatest number of child marriages globally. (Human Rights Watch, 2021)

IV. Literature Review

This practice perpetuates a cycle of poverty in the country, further hindering the nation's progress. Scholar Lucia Corno indicates that, parents who are exposed to adverse income shocks have a higher probability of marrying their daughters earlier. By marrying young, girls are denied educational opportunities and economic independence, strengthening Niger's status as one of the poorest countries in the world (Corno & Voena, 2023). Furthermore, the Berkeley Premier Undergraduate Economic Journal highlighted that the link between poverty and child marriage is evident. The findings indicate that girls in the 20 poorest countries of the world are more likely to be married before their 18th birthday than their counterparts in wealthier nations (The Berkeley Economic Review, 2018). Families resort to child marriage as a desperate measure to alleviate their financial burdens. This practice perpetuates the cycle of poverty and robs girls of reaching their full potential and empowerment. The prevalence of child marriage affects at least 1.7 percent of a country's Gross Domestic Product. Furthermore, Marcelo Louis Urquia and colleagues' insight sheds light on an essential aspect of urban revival: delaying childbearing. Delaying childbirth is not just a matter of personal choice but a key driver for the revitalization of urban areas (Urquia, et al, 2022). Child marriage can have multiple effects on a country's economy, including the global economy. Girls are likely to have complications during pregnancy, putting mother and child in danger, driving up health care costs.

In addition, there may be some preventative measures that can be put in place to protect girls from child marriage or help them live a healthy life. Vilá's literature focuses on these preventative actions that can be used nationally and internationally to end this practice (Vilán, 2022). DeLong's Moreno-Maldonado and Santanmaria's publications shed light on the enduring consequences of early pregnancy. Having experienced childbirth at an early age, young mothers face significantly higher rates of intimate partner violence (Girls Not Brides, 2023). Experts, therefore, recommend that women delay their childbearing years, which will prevent a plethora of health concerns for the mother and the child, save the country unexpected expenses on welfare, and permit women to continue their studies and be independent. Dr Ndèye Amy Ndiaye's research digs into the pervasive nature of gender-based violence experienced by women in Niger. She also includes practice and policy avenues that have to be followed and enforced to end this prevailing practice. Additionally, Shakya's study offers valuable findings that align with existing literature and underscore the importance of sustained efforts in combating child marriage.

Urquia implies that there are geographic and racial disparities in child marriage (Urquia, 2022; Cardoso, & Al 2022). Although, they have pleaded their commitment to the United Nations to eliminate child marriage as part of the Sustainable Development Goals by Brazil, much like Niger, is one of the top contributors to child marriages in the world (Urquia, 2022). Driven by gender inequality, Brazil follows similar patterns to Niger, with the difference that some of the unions are voluntary. Girls Not Brides is an international nonprofit organization with the mission to end child marriage globally; in certain situations, the family encourages the girl to get married if they starts to engage in pre-marital sex. In a region like Brazil, religion drives gender norms. Some girls see marriage as an influential factor seeking less parental control.

Examining the causes of child marriage in the United States Mariel Padilla reveals a shocking fact: nearly 300,000 children were legally married in the U. S. between 2000 and 2018. As of 2023, more than half of the states lack laws setting the minimum marriage age at 18, allowing the cycle of early unions to continue. Like in other countries, girls are the most affected by child marriage in the U. S. Many of these marriages would have been considered sex crimes under different circumstances, often involving minors and adult males. Mariel Padilla traces the origins of this issue back to British influence, highlighting historical factors that have contributed to this disturbing practice. The presence of child marriage has severe consequences. The United States Agency for International Development states that one of its immediate effects is girls dropping out of school, which leads to increased poverty. Sadly, the American public generally holds misconceptions about child marriage. David W. Lawson's study found that most Americans believe child marriage is illegal in the U. S. This misunderstanding is worsened by the term “Child,” which creates misconceptions about the seriousness and extent of child marriage. These false beliefs hinder global health efforts and reinforce harmful stereotypes. Contrary to popular belief, the issue of child marriage in the U. S. does not stem from a lack of knowledge but from biased perceptions. Most campaigns depict young girls being forced into marriage with much older men, which, while true in some cases, does not reflect the full complexity of the problem. Nicolas Syrett, analyzes the history and misconceptions surrounding child marriage in the U. S. (L. Syrett, Nicholas, 2018). While child marriage patterns in the U. S. are similar to those in developing countries, there are important differences, mainly regarding the ages at which child marriage occurs. Anna Jiang, Americans have little awareness of the various forms child marriage can take. Furthermore, there is minimal policy discussion about child marriage within the country (UNICEF).

The COVID-19 pandemic has cast a long, ominous shadow over the fight against child marriage globally. Joshua Yukich, and Unchained At Last conclude that the pandemic might lead to a staggering increase in child marriages, potentially reaching between 7 million and 10 million cases globally (UNICEF). The pandemic influenced the likelihood of child marriage through the death of a parent, interruption of education, pregnancy risk, household income shocks, poverty, and reduced access to programs and services (Unchained At Last, 2023). These challenges are compounded, and the World Bank projects indicate a decline of 2.5 percent in gross domestic product as a result of these practices. Nonetheless, the United Nations Population Fund predicts an increase of 13 million child marriages globally from 2020 to 2030 and the Save the Children organization an upsurge of 2.5 million from 2020 to 2025. In addition, UNICEF's 2021 report concludes that 10 million more children will be married by the end of the decade. The pandemic has worsened the living situation for millions of girls worldwide. This factor negatively alters the Sustainable Development Goals to end child marriage by 2030 (UNICEF).

V. Policy Analysis of the United States, Niger, and Brazil

United States

As of 2018, child marriage was legal in all 50 territories in the United States. According to recent data from *Unchained at Last*, a non-profit organization dedicated to ending child marriage in the United States, as of 2023, child marriage remains legal in more than half of the country (Unchained at Last, 2023). Nearly 300,000 children as young as 10 were married in the U.S. between 2000 and 2018 – mostly girls wed to adult men. Delaware and New Jersey were the first states to end this violation with a specific age requirement of 18 years for marriage. In many states with marriage restrictions, individuals can get married through loopholes with parental consent, Judicial approval, or emancipation (Padilla, 2023, Mariel,2023). Child marriage in the United States is more prevalent in the South; West Virginia had the nation's highest rate of child marriages in 2014, with five-year averages of 7.1 marriages for every 1,000 children between 15 and 17. In 2015, an article in the New York Times by Reiss Fraidy, the CEO of Unchained At Last, titled “American-Child Marriage Problem,” and later in 2022, an article in the Washington Post titled “For the Sake of a Visa, I was Forced into Marriage at Age 15”, forced Americans to think about the dreadful truth that child marriage happens in the country, a first-world State (Taylor, Sasha K. 2022 Reiss, Fraidy). About 200,000 children were married in the United States from 2000 to 2015. Immigration laws do not dictate the minimum age necessary for someone to petition for a foreign spouse or fiancé so that the individual can benefit from a spouse visa (Immigrant Visa for a Spouse of a U.S. Citizen). Between 2007 to 2017, the US approved around 9,000 petitions regarding minors, mostly girls, married to adult males. Most states do not track Child Marriage data or make it available to the public, creating a misperception in the country (Unchained at Last, 2023). The hope that the number of child marriages will reach zero is not likely, especially without any federal regulation on the problem. All states should remove all loopholes that allow child marriage in the country.

The series "Shameless," written by John Wells, Paul Abbott, Davey Holmes, and Sheila Callaghan, depicts relevant examples of child marriage in the United States and the conditions under which they happen. The plot set in Chicago, Illinois, highlighting the story of Ethel, a young girl aged 13, mother of her firstborn, who was in a cult and married to a man over the age of 65 named Clyde. Estefania's arranged marriage to Jimmy is another example of child marriage in the United States, showcased in the show. Estefania was still a teenager when her father, Marco, forced her to marry Jimmy to gain US citizenship. In addition, Debbie, another teenage character in the show, drops out of high school in an attempt to marry Neil an older man in hope of of maintaining guardianship of her child. The conditions under which child marriage happens in the United States can differ from other countries; however, the results still remain the same. The series Shameless shows different scenarios of child marriage happening in the United States very common to its population, yet extremely misconstrued. In the United States, the practice of child marriage is subtle compared to Niger or Brazil, where scholars can easily point to the social and economic reasons for the act. This can also make it more dangerous, as it is happening right under our eyes.

As children get married in the United States, they often drop out of school, particularly girls, and must start caring for their families. Debbie's story from Shameless depicts those points. Debbie has little to no skill and is likely to be confined to potentially lower-earning jobs for her entire life. With limited education, they perpetuate the cycle of poverty in the United States, not contributing to the national economy. This burdens the states, as this group of individuals would require more help from the state, as they receive public assistance, including health. The offspring are born in poor households of young parents who have faced severe economic challenges, as they do not have any education and are likely to follow the same pattern as their parents. In cases where the man is the sole income earner in the household, the wife is at higher risk of experiencing gender-based violence by her husband. Gains in annual welfare from lower population growth could reach more than $500 billion annually if there were no child marriages (Moreno-Maldonado, Al, 2022). If women could delay childbearing, it could help the economies of the countries. Studies have also found that women who married later would have earned 9 percent higher incomes than if they had married as teenagers. They could stay in school and perform higher levels of work while receiving higher incomes.

In the United States, delaying childbearing is crucial for reviving urban areas, which also helps the country's economy. Women can work longer hours and worry less about commuting time. A similar result will appear if children are kept in school rather than getting married; girls can achieve their dreams and reach higher job positions. As women delay motherhood, they can invest in their education, which drives economic productivity, and more women can contribute to the country's innovation. As women reach higher-paying jobs, they will gain economic independence, allowing them to cover healthcare, including prenatal care, if they decide to have a child. This will enable women and their children to achieve better physical and mental health, and reduce the economic burden on the state to cover health expenses. The mortality rate will decrease exponentially, saving the lives of both mother and child. In contrast to the poverty cycle of child marriage, families can gain economic mobility as they are no longer struggling to make ends meet.

The COVID-19 pandemic left the United States in a financial crisis worse than the great depression, as funds were used to alleviate the population's financial burden. Impoverished areas often lack sufficient resources to support their populations or provide opportunities for women to gain financial and personal independence (UNICEF).

Niger

Gender inequality further perpetuates the cycle of poverty and limits the prospects for girls. Niger experiences assaults on educational property which create a hostile environment for young girls' education. Demographic and health surveys showed that only around 14% of women in Niger were literate, compared to 42% of men. Child marriage severely harms children, depriving them of education and a proper childhood. Poverty, lack of education, gender inequality, and the perceived need to protect girls' reputations are reasons for child marriage in the country (Ndiaye & Amy, 2021). The issue of teen pregnancies is prevalent in Niger, making it the country with the highest number of such cases, according to data investigated by Human Rights Watch and UNICEF including gender disparities in education, where girls are less likely to receive basic education compared to boys (UNICEF, 2023).

Niger is one of the lowest-ranked countries on the Human Development Index, based on its poor living qualities and lack of opportunities for its population. Rated one of the highest on Human Rights Watch and UNICEF, Niger has limited access to resources, such as access to education for boys and girls alike. In Niger, the significant disparity in learning contributed to a substantial literacy gap between gender, affecting primarily girls. The disadvantaged environmental cycle led to increased poverty among the population. Most of the population does not have the education or skills necessary for a high-paying job (Pourtaheri et Al , 2023). Niger culture of child marriage is rooted in centuries of practices justified by either religious understanding or financial inequality.

One significant challenge in Niger is the lack of adequate legal structures, laws, and enforcement mechanisms to protect the rights of women and girls. The absence of robust legislation makes it difficult to prevent child marriages and protect the rights of young girls who are forced into such unions (Delong, et al , 2020).The National Observatory for the Promotion of Gender and the implementation of Decree No. 2019-369 PRN/MPF/PE in 2019 have been established to tackle child marriage and protect the rights of girls gender (Calimoutou, Emelyne, 2022). However, the newly added program faces multiple challenges to achieve its goal, one of which is the lack of reporting of the practice. The pandemic had a particularly distressing impact on women in Niger, who were forced to stay at home and endure abuse with limited access to resources and support systems.

The broader context of child marriage in sub-Saharan Africa is concerning, with 40 percent of girls being married off before the age of 18. Additionally, 15 out of the 20 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriages are located in Africa, further highlighting the severity of the issue in the region. Maradi, a region within Niger, bears the brunt of child marriage, with a distressing 89 percent of girls affected by this harmful practice (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Moreover, attacks on schools in certain regions like Tillabéri and Tahoua, starting in 2017, have contributed to over 110 schools closing their doors. These assaults on education create a hostile environment for young girls, limiting their access to learning and contributing to the cycle of disadvantage. UNICEF data on child marriage in Niger reveals that a shocking 78% of Nigerien girls under 18 get married during their adolescent years and become pregnant in the same year. This contributes to a significant burden on the country's infant and maternal health, leading to high rates of mortality (Yukich, Joshua et Al, 2021).

The impact of COVID-19 had severe implications for gender-based violence in Niamey, Niger. Women reported a significant number of cases, including rape, sexual assault, physical assault, early or forced marriage, denial of resources and opportunities, as well as psychological and emotional violence. With movement restrictions and lockdown measures in place, women in abusive situations faced significant challenges in seeking help and support. As a result, child marriage and gender-based violence rates increased, exacerbating the vulnerabilities faced by girls and women in the country (Rahiem, 2021). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, schools were closed, economic stress, disruptions to services, pregnancy and death of parents due to the pandemic are putting the most vulnerable girls at greater risk of child marriage. While the percentage of child marriages worldwide has decreased 15%, this number will regain it's peak by the stress of the pandemic. As UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore said during the International Woman day in 2020 "International Women's Day is a key moment for us to remember what these girls have to lose if we don't act urgently – their education, their health, and their future" (UNICEF, 2020).

The harmful culture of child marriage re-enforces girls' low self-esteem and disempowers them as they grow up, making them vulnerable to gender-based violence. One in every three partnered women in Niger has been a victim of sexual or physical violence by an intimate male partner, with prevalence rates soaring up to 70% in some regions. Niger has the highest rate of HIV positive in the world (Shakya, Baker, et al, 2022). In the context of child marriage, husbands in Niger often refuse and prohibit their wives from using family planning methods, as they prefer to have multiple children. Children, especially daughters, can be viewed as a potential source of income for their parents. Parents might arrange marriages for their daughters to receive considerable monetary funds from prospective husbands. In this scenario, cultural norms and the age difference between husbands and young brides reinforce a sense of power dynamics, leading to fear and submission among the girls (Yukich, Joshua et Al, 2021).

Conservative Islamic countries like Niger, social norms often discourage divorce, leading to increased gender-based violence against women. Child brides, who are forced into early marriages, often find themselves trapped in abusive relationships, unable to escape due to societal pressure and family expectations. Experiencing intimate partner violence at a young age can have a profound impact on girls. They may develop an accepting attitude toward such abuse and feel confined in their relationships, believing they have no other option but to endure mistreatment. The fear of bringing shame to their families by leaving their marriages further exacerbates their predicament. Children, especially girls growing up in households where violence is normalized, tend to mimic submissive behaviors as they internalize the dynamics they witness. A daughter who observes such interactions as a child is likely to interpret this behavior as acceptable and normal psychologically. As a result, she may expect to face similar treatment when she herself gets married at a young age, perpetuating the cycle of abuse.

In Niger, child marriage is often justified based on the belief that it protects children from social stigmas related to pregnancy and sexual intercourse before marriage. Six terms related to child marriage in developing countries have been identified: human insecurity and conflict, legal issues, family values and circumstances, religious beliefs, individual circumstances, beliefs, and knowledge, and social norms. There is a strong relationship between early marriage and a country's poor physical and socioeconomic status. When a child marries, the family may receive a dowry or bride price from the groom's family. However, while this may provide temporary economic relief for the family, the long-term consequences of early marriage can be detrimental (Pourtaheri, Asma, 2023). Existing policies are often not effectively enforced, leaving women and girls vulnerable to various forms of abuse and discrimination. In terms of legal provisions related to child marriage, the age of adulthood in Niger can be artificially reached through emancipation, either by marriage or court decision at the request of the parents, provided the minor has reached the age of 15. This provision potentially perpetuates the practice of child marriage, as girls can be considered independent from their parents after their first marriage.

Niger took a significant step toward protecting children's education. In 2015, Niger authorized the safe school declaration in June, a step to protect children and keep them in schools which can help reduce child marriage in the region (Human Right Watch, 2021). Education plays a vital role in empowering girls and breaking the cycle of early marriage. The Niger Red Cross Society (NRCS) is popular and admired nationwide, working tirelessly to end child marriage in the country. Education is one of the most effective method to end child marriage. Certain campaigns to end child marriage in Niger include cash supplements. By addressing financial barriers to education, these initiatives encourage families to prioritize their children's education over early marriage, thereby reducing child marriage rates. Addressing poverty in Niger is another method that can be used to eradicate child brides. Families will no longer have to turn to marital ceremonies as an income source for their families (Silverman, Jay

G 2023).

While Niger has an extensive number of child marriages, the country has a plethora of international and national laws forbidding the practice. Niger, in agreement with UN policies on Human Rights, has acknowledged the negative effects of the practice. The government, in collaboration with NGOs working to end this practice, takes into account the country's social context to create policies and programs that alleviate this issue. Although Niger has many great programs to end child marriage, few policies have been effectively enforced, and the implementation of those policies is not always realistic. In a country poor in resources, there is not enough manpower to ensure that those policies are being respected by the population. The lack of modern infrastructure makes it hard for the country to maintain accurate data surveillance over the practice. While programs such as the cash back supplements help keep girls in the house longer, these policies do not attack the root cause of the issue, making sure families raising and women know that they can have a successful future without marriage as a child. It is not enough to say that the practice is founded upon when it’s been a reality for generations; the government needs to support its claim with examples.

Brazil

Child marriage is a concerning issue in Brazil, with varying prevalence rates across its diverse regions. Brazil ranks fourth globally and has the highest number of child marriages worldwide. This harmful practice predominantly afflicts rural and economically disadvantaged areas, highlighting the deep-rooted social challenges. Brazil, in alignment with the United Nations, has pledged to eradicate child marriage by 2030 as part of the Sustainable Development Goals. In 2018, they co-sponsored the 2018 UN General Assembly resolution on child marriage, early, and forced marriage. However, achieving this goal requires concerted efforts to address the underlying factors contributing to child marriage in the country. Globally, approximately 12 million girls are married before the age of 18, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) report from October 2021, underscoring the urgency of the issue (UNICEF). In 2016, the Follow-up Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Convention (MESECVI) recommended that State Parties, including Brazil, review and reform laws and practices to increase the minimum age for marriage to 18 years for both women and men. In March 2019, Brazil took a significant step by modifying its Civil Code, prohibiting anyone from marrying before the age of 16 (Brazil bans child marriage for those under 16, 2019).

Child marriages are more common in certain parts of Brazil regions with limited access to healthcare, education, and other essential services. Northern Brazil, in particular, faces higher rates of child marriage influenced by factors like poverty, the absence of comprehensive human rights protection, including education and gender equality, and the impact of major infrastructure projects attracting male migrants—all contributing to the persistence of child marriage. In addition, a large age gap offers girls greater financial security, outdated laws and lack of legal enforcement, a paucity of data, and the perceived need to protect girls' reputations continue to perpetuate this harmful practice in the country. Rigid social and cultural norms, a machismo culture, and traditional perceptions of women as less than men reinforce the practice. The government's reluctance to get involved in what is considered private matters reinforces child marriage. Women in Brazil face the highest incidence of femicide – the killing of a woman because of her gender (Vogelstein, Rachel, Meighan Stone, 2021). In the face of financial hardship, families, especially in vulnerable areas, may turn to child marriage as a desperate means to alleviate their burdens, adding to the complex web of factors contributing to this distressing phenomenon.

Pregnancy plays a significant role in early child marriage in Brazil, driven by the coercion of parents or grandparents aiming to safeguard adolescent reputations and, in some distressing instances, to shield girls from abusers. Premarital pregnancy in Brazil is stigmatized as "ser mais nada" (becoming nothing). In other cases, girls are forced into marriage to prevent an abuser from facing legal consequences, which intensifies the pressure on young girls to enter early marriages. Teen pregnancy in Brazil, for girls between 15 and 19 years old, reached 49% in 2020, further reinforcing this aspect. In recent decades, approximately 1 out of 11 Brazilian births has been to a woman under 18 years of age. Gender-based violence is another driver of child marriage in Brazil. In some cases, parents may marry their daughters off to protect them from state- and gang-controlled urban violence, seeking to provide a sense of security for their daughters through early marriage (Urquia, Luis, et al, 2022). Religious beliefs, particularly in Evangelical, Protestant, and Catholic communities, also play a role in shaping social norms and attitudes toward sexual activities outside of marriage, pregnancy, and abortion. These religious beliefs can influence families' decisions to opt for child marriage to adhere to conservative values. Deeply ingrained gender norms and discriminatory practices contribute to the continuation of child marriage in Brazil. These norms perpetuate the idea that supporting early marriage for girls is acceptable while depriving them of their youth, education, and opportunities for personal growth (Wiedemann, Denise, 2021).

Brazil is actively working on creating policies to end child marriage, both at the national and international levels. However, without reliable data and reporting, it becomes more difficult for the government to implement effective laws and policies to address child marriage comprehensively. To stop the practice of child marriage, the Brazilian government implemented many international and national policies, including raising awareness about the issue. Brazil launched a campaign in 2020 and published a book titled "Facing Online Violence Against Adolescents in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic." This initiative aimed to shed light on the issue and foster public understanding and support. Furthermore, in 2019, the government introduced Article 8(a) to Law n. 13,798, establishing a National Week of Teenage Pregnancy Prevention. This highlights the interconnectedness of child marriage and teenage pregnancy and emphasizes the importance of prevention efforts. Without reliable data and reporting, it becomes more difficult for the government to implement effective laws and policies to address child marriage comprehensively. (United Nations, 2021)

When girls finish their education and enter the workforce, they reduce the percentage of experiencing gender-based violence as they are financially stable to support themselves. The country ought to confront its economic disparity by creating solutions to child marriage in Brazil. In March 2019, Brazil modified its Civil Code, prohibiting anyone from marrying <16 years. In 2017, the government launched a national strategy to combat child marriage (Urquia, Marcelo L., & Rosangela, 2022). In 2013 was the birth of a political activism known as the “Women's Spring”, ignited by Juliana de Faria, a journalist in São Paulo. The Women's Spring was a campaign against politicians and policies that undermined women’s rights, serving as a stepping stone to the development of the hashtag # MeToo movement in Brazil. Although the country is working to create laws to protect women in the country, the cultural acceptance of discrimination against women persists, and they often are blamed for the violence and harassment they face. Juniana uses the internet as her platform to advocate for women's rights by generating hashtags #ChegadeFiuFiu or “NoMore Catcalling,” #MeuPrimeiroAssedio or “My First Harassment,” #MeuAmigoSecreto or “My Anonymous Friend,” #MeuQueridoProfessor “My Dear Teacher.” Juliana opened a space for women to express themselves without judgment.

The policy framework used in Brazil to end child marriage lacks enforcement in the region to be a successful policy. During the policy-making process, not enough actors, such as think tanks, non-profit organizations, and interest groups, participate in the creation of policies. These issues of child marriage do not always get enough attention to make it to the policy agenda. The lack of resources is another problem that affects the effectiveness of the policies. There is no accurate reporting of the number of child marriages in Brazil; it takes years for scholars to gather data, and there is also not enough workforce to reach deserted areas, ensuring the policies set by the government are not being violated. Brazil, following international law, is working tirelessly to protect vulnerable families, creating a society where every child can grow up in a safe and nurturing environment and have equal opportunities for women. Therefore, politicians creating policies must consider the implementation aspect to ensure success. The COVID-19 Pandemic has further exacerbated the concern of child marriage, by globally increasing the number of children who will be vulnerable to the harmful impact of the practice.

VI. Policy Recommendations

The intricate complexity of child marriage makes it impossible to develop a single solution or policy that will solve this cumbersome issue. There is no universal campaign to end child marriage, as the causes of the practice are usually specific to a region. There are however, universal steps that can be taken in policy creation to solve the issue. The government still needs to develop policies and laws that will mitigate the problem as much as possible. The different actors involved in the policy process to end child marriage should have a holistic approach to the formulation of the policies. All nation-states are encouraged to have more actors involved in the policy process to end child marriage. While many countries have amazing policies already in place to end child marriage in their respective regions, the implementations of those policies and their enforcement are not always a success. As child marriage is not widely known, there should be greater awareness globally regarding this topic. This can be accomplished through different platforms, including the media and mainstream TV. For instance, “ Sound of Freedom,” written by Alejandro Gómez Monteverde and Rod Barr, is a well-known movie that sheds light on human trafficking in the United States. Similar initiatives can be done concerning child marriage. The governments of the United States, Niger, and Brazil can offer grants to film producers who are willing to help raise awareness about this practice through documentaries or other visual media outlets.

The United States and other countries are taking measures to end child marriage. In recent decades, a few states have adopted a minimum age for marriage. In 2019, bill H.R.1606 - End

Forced Child Marriages Act failed to pass Congress, which would have set a minimum age of 18 years on a federal level in the United States. Internationally, the US has taken several steps to stop this practice. The Preventing Child Marriage Act (S. 414), passed in 2018, prohibits the US from giving aid to countries with high rates of child marriage (Women's Congressional Policy Institute). Other laws include The International Megan's Law (IML) in 2016, requiring the United States to share information with foreign countries when a sex offender has traveled to their territories (Shouse, Neil, 2023). The goal of this law is to make it harder for the individuals to engage in child marriage practices. U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), another initiative working against child marriage, is creating an international program targeting the issue at its roots. The agency promotes education and provides economic aid to countries with less financial capability. Other organizations and programs the United States is collaborating with may include the CEDAW Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, UNICEF, Girls Not Brides organizations, and the UNFPA agency.

In the United States, establishing a federal minimum age can help eliminate child marriage, according to Anna and Jennifer (Jiang & Al, 2023). Child Marriage in the United States is affected by different factors, including poverty and education. Parents who lack the economic means to support their children will be unable to afford a good education for their kids, thereby reinforcing the practice. While families in developing countries see child marriage as a means to end their financial struggles, in the United States, Child Marriage is mostly a solution to escape legal consequences. While child marriage remains comparatively low in the United States compared to other countries, it is still higher in places with higher levels of poverty. In addition, conservative families whose children become pregnant are encouraged to marry, as sexual activities outside of marriage or abortion are not accepted. In the United States, it is recommended to remove legal loopholes allowing child marriage and enforce a federal and state law requiring married couples to be 18 years old. More awareness is needed in the United States, as everyday people are unaware of this issue. As any new teenage romance may end in marriage, this should be a discussion in every household.

Despite these challenges, Niger and Brazil have taken several initiatives to end child marriage. The governments of Niger and Brazil have shown some commitment to promoting gender equality and human rights. Brazil, for instance, bans marriage for girls under the age of 16 years old. Niger in turn has reiterated their dedication to the human rights principles set forth in the Declaration of Human Rights and have made amendments to the Penal Code to address specific issues. At the national level, Niger reviewed its gender policy in 2017, indicating efforts to address gender-related concerns. Initiatives such as the National Observatory for the Promotion of Gender and the implementation of Decree No. 2019-369 PRN/MPF/PE in 2019 to protect children from early marriage have been established to tackle child marriage and protect the rights of girls (Calimoutou, Emelyne 2022). Moreover, the introduction of gender quotas in 2002 has shown some positive impact, allowing increased political participation for women in Niger. The proportion of women's participation in parliament has grown to 25.9% as of February 2021, indicating progress in this area. While the effectiveness of gender quotas remains a subject of debate among scholars, these efforts demonstrate that Niger is taking steps in the right direction to protect the rights of women and girls in the country. However, there is still a long way to go to achieve comprehensive gender equality and effectively combat child marriage and gender-based violence. Continuous commitment, enforcement, and implementation of policies and initiatives are crucial to ensuring the well-being and empowerment of women and girls in Niger.

Education is one of the most effective methods to combat child marriage. By providing access to education, especially for girls, they can be equipped with knowledge, skills, and confidence to make informed decisions about their lives, including delaying marriage and pursuing their aspirations (Bocanegra, Alberto). It may be advisable for Niger and Brazil to participate in training and education campaigns for the population, especially in remote locations, to inform everyone, particularly girls, about the various possible futures they can have when they grow up. In Niger and Brazil more women should be part of the decision-making process, which not only improves organizational structures, it also provides a concrete example for young girls that different futures are possible. Having different institutions in the conversation to end child marriage can be helpful to continue training and educating people on the best practices they can take to end child marriage, one child at a time. The international law recommendations set by the United Nations to end child marriage should be followed by the Government of Niger and adapted by local governments to suit the region's specific political context. In addition, Niger should promote legal assistance for women victims of gender-based violence looking to be free of their abuser. The Nigerian government, working with private businesses, can establish a new and easily reportable method for women and girls who are victims of gender based violence and or victims of child marriage. The country needs modern infrastructure that can offer resources to people at risk of being victims of child marriage. The girl effect, which aims to empower girls to break the cycle of gender poverty, is another effective methods that can be used in Brazil to ensure that girls stay in school long enough to be financially independent before becoming mothers. This route ensures girls' safety in the country and benefits the national GDP, thereby decreasing poverty and reducing unnecessary healthcare costs to the government.

VII. Implementation Strategy

Despite general misconceptions, child marriage remains a common practice in developed countries such as the United States, as well as in developing countries like Brazil and Niger. The practice of child marriage raises questions about the status of rape in many countries, since many girls are married after becoming pregnant, mostly in developed nations. Unfortunately, the lack of data on this issue makes it difficult to draw concrete conclusions about child marriage. In the 21st century, although the consequences of child marriage are widely acknowledged, its persistence is often due to the inability to enforce laws against it and the presence of loopholes within these laws. The COVID-19 pandemic has put additional pressure on families which may lead to child marriage. While research has not yet clearly defined the pandemic's impact on this issue, it is reasonable to infer that the increased financial stress caused by the pandemic has likely led more families to arrange marriages for their children. Moreover, as families stayed home, women were at greater risk of domestic abuse, which often goes unreported due to circumstances. It is a child's right to complete their education, which can help reduce child marriage and enable women to become financially independent.

Generally, countries agree to end child marriage internationally, such as the ratification of the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), by nearly all UN member states, and at the national level of government; however, the local communities that are mostly affected lack representation. Therefore, it would be advisable to implement policies affecting child marriage using a bottom-up approach, starting at the local level and progressing to the federal level. Local governments usually have a better understanding of the communities they serve compared to state governments. Seeing women at the local level involved in decision-making will reinforce girls' belief in the value of their education and change the narrative that they can dream of a future where they have a career beyond their domestic responsibilities. Teaching girls by showing rather than telling opens the door to new possibilities they might not have otherwise experienced. Community engagement is a vital part of ending this practice; an action that is not accepted in the community will be less likely to happen. The different actors involved in the policy process to end child marriage need to ensure that enforcement practice is included in the language of the text. A multisectoral approach involves all institutions coordinating with one another to address the issue at its root cause.

As countries have limited data on this topic, analyzing the effectiveness of a policy can be a complex task. Innovative tracking and reporting systems would be crucial in implementing the policy strategy. In developed countries with enough resources and where most people own a smartphone, reporting should be possible by tapping with a finger using a government application. In developing countries, radio stations are a popular media outlet that can be effectively leveraged for this task, often specific to a region. The local community can ensure the policies being created are relevant to their needs and can provide critical analysis of their implementation. They will be able to identify risks, local relevance and areas of improvement to facilitate their implementation.

VIII. Conclusion

The complexity of child marriage is unmatched. In some states, child marriage is deeply embedded in cultural norms. Factors such as culture, education, and poverty contribute to the prevalence of child marriage worldwide. It is a human rights violation that deprives children of their youth and innocence, exposing them to violence and abuse. Girls are the most affected and endure long-term consequences, including psychological and physical repercussions from mental health issues, domestic violence, and health problems sometimes related to early childbirth. Child marriage reinforces machismo culture and strengthens gender-based discrimination.

This research contributes to the literature on child marriage by analyzing how culture, access to education, domestic and international laws impact the rate of child marriage in Niger, Brazil, and the United States. It also examined the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on exacerbating these effects. This paper adds to the literature on child marriage by focusing on the laws restricting child marriage globally. In this study, it is important to acknowledge several limitations that have influenced the findings. The resources used to generate this paper are at least three years old, and the data used for most interpretations are at least five years old. Despite these limitations, the research provides valuable insights into child marriage.

Further research on this topic can look at some of the effective practices that can limit or stop the spread of child marriage and whether these practices can be universally implemented. Future scholars can also research the lack of data on this topic and methods for a more effective tracking system. Perhaps see how Artificial Intelligence can help with data reporting of child marriage or assist in alleviating this issue in other aspects.

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Unequal Access: Disparities in Federal Research and Education Grant Funding for HBCUs

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I. Abstract

Historically, Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) represent a small share of U.S. postsecondary institutions, yet produce a disproportionately high number of Black graduates in STEM and the research workforce. Despite this impact, federal research funding to HBCUs remains significantly lower than that of predominantly white institutions (PWIs). This study analyzes fifteen years of federal grant data from the NSF, NIH, DOE, and Department of Education, paired with interviews with HBCU faculty and administrators, to examine disparities in award rates, total funding received, and institutional research capacity. Findings demonstrate that systemic inequities suppress HBCU research participation through cycles of underfunding, heavier teaching loads, administrative undercapacity, and biases in peer review. Policy reform recommendations include equity-focused funding streams, restructured merit review criteria, federal mentorship initiatives, and expanded agency accountability structures. Without substantive change, disparities in HBCU grant utilization will continue to impoverish not only the institutions themselves but the nation's broader innovation capacity. Equitable investment in HBCUs must be recognized as both a matter of social justice and a strategic priority for U.S. competitiveness in the global knowledge economy.

Keywords: HBCU, PWI, federal funding, education grant funding, funding disparities

II. Introduction

Since their inception in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, HBCUs have served as an enduring response to systemic racial exclusion within American education. From Howard University's founding in 1867 to land-grant HBCUs established following passage of the Second Morrill Act of 1890, these institutions were built not out of generosity from existing state systems but as separate, often underfunded, alternatives to segregationist practices. More than 150 years later, HBCUs continue to deliver on their central mission: expanding access to higher education and opportunity for African Americans and other historically marginalized populations.

The numbers are striking. Today, HBCUs represent roughly 100 accredited institutions across the United States, yet their impact on the Black professional class is disproportionate. According to the Thurgood Marshall College Fund (2021):

- 40% of Black engineers,
- 50% of Black lawyers,
- 80% of Black judges, and
- 50% of Black teachers

received degrees from HBCUs. In STEM, which is tightly linked to federal research grants, HBCUs account for only a sliver of overall national R&D spending but are foundational training grounds for Black scientists.

Despite their broad social impact, HBCUs are marginalized in grant funding systems. Federal funding inequalities persist even as national policy rhetoric repeatedly celebrates HBCUs' importance. Between 2010 and 2020, NSF awarded approximately $450 billion in grants across U.S. higher education institutions. Yet HBCUs collectively captured only about $400–500 million of that total—less than 0.2 percent. NIH mirrors this imbalance: a 2022 NIH equity report showed Black investigators' application success rates at 16.1 percent, compared with 29.3 percent for white applicants (National Institutes of Health, 2022). Given the large representation of Black faculty researchers at HBCUs, such disparities compound institutional disadvantage.

HBCUs consistently produce strong student outcomes relative to their limited resources. However, the pattern of unequal funding points to a systemic issue: current allocation practices unintentionally reinforce cycles of advantage for already well-funded institutions, making it harder for emerging or under-resourced universities to compete. (Merton, 1968). Federal grant review frameworks often reward existing infrastructure, prior award history, and perceived institutional capacity, which structurally benefits wealthy PWIs with multi-billion-dollar endowments and established research ecosystems. As a result, an HBCU with minimal grant-writing staff and limited lab facilities is evaluated against the same criteria as an institution with multiple federally funded research centers. The inequity is thus obscured by the formal language of "merit," despite being structurally predetermined.

This paper aims to address these inequities systematically. Specifically, it addresses:

- How does federal research and education grant funding to HBCUs compare with that directed to PWIs with comparable size and mission?
- What structural, institutional, and cultural barriers shape HBCUs' lower rates of federal award utilization?
- How do funding disparities affect research productivity, student pipelines into advanced careers, and faculty development?
- What policy interventions can foster equitable access and capacity-building for HBCUs?

By combining a quantitative analysis of federal award allocations with qualitative interviews at three representative HBCUs, this study provides both empirical evidence of disparity and narrative context for systemic reforms. Ultimately, it argues that addressing HBCU underfunding is not simply about righting past wrongs but about ensuring the nation draws from its full pool of intellectual talent in STEM, social sciences, and education.

III. Historical Context: The Long Shadow of Segregation in Higher Education Funding

The history of funding inequities facing HBCUs cannot be disentangled from the broader racialized trajectory of American higher education. HBCUs were created within an explicitly segregated system: the Morrill Act of 1862, which granted federal land and resources to establish universities, excluded Black students almost entirely. Only with the Second Morrill Act of 1890 were states required to either desegregate existing land-grant institutions or establish separate colleges for Black students. The majority chose separation, leading to the founding or incorporation of what are now called the "1890 land-grant HBCUs," including institutions such as Tuskegee University and Florida A&M University.

This separate-but-unequal framework shaped the funding landscape from the beginning. While these institutions were expected to fulfill the same mission as their white counterparts—advancing agriculture, engineering, and research—they were never provided proportional resources. A 2019 Hechinger Report analysis found that in nearly every state with both an 1862 and 1890 land-grant university, state appropriations per student to the HBCU ranged from one-half to two-thirds of the funding provided to the white land-grant institution. In Maryland, for example, the 2018 state allocation amounted to roughly $32,000 per student at the University of Maryland, compared to $16,000 at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore. This sustained resource gap has eroded HBCUs' infrastructure, research capacity, and long-term financial stability.

Court cases and Department of Justice interventions have repeatedly exposed these inequities. In *Ayers v. Fordice* (1992), Mississippi was found to have maintained a dual, unequal higher education system long after desegregation, prompting a landmark settlement. Likewise, in *Coalition for Equity and Excellence in Maryland Higher Education v. MHEC* (2013), the court ruled that program duplication at predominantly white institutions siphoned resources and students away from HBCUs, perpetuating the effects of segregation. These decisions underscore that the weaker financial positions of HBCUs were the result of state-sanctioned choices—not institutional shortcomings.In *Ayers v. Fordice* (1992), Mississippi was found guilty of maintaining dual, unequal funding systems for HBCUs and PWIs, resulting in a massive desegregation settlement. Similarly, in *Coalition for Equity and Excellence in Maryland Higher Education v. Maryland Higher Education Commission*(2013), plaintiffs successfully argued that duplication of programs at white institutions drew resources away from Maryland HBCUs, perpetuating inequities. These rulings make clear that HBCUs' weaker funding positions were not natural deficits but manufactured outcomes — and these state-sanctioned inequities continue to undermine their ability to compete in today's federal research funding system.

This history matters for understanding today's federal funding landscape. Competitive grant systems—particularly those administered by federal research agencies—operate on the assumption that all institutions begin with comparable capacity to pursue, win, and manage major grants. In reality, HBCUs are entering federal grant competitions after more than a century of disproportionate state funding, smaller endowments, limited research infrastructure, and fewer opportunities to build the track record that agencies often reward.

This structural imbalance helps explain why well-resourced institutions repeatedly secure the majority of federal research dollars, while many HBCUs remain underfunded despite strong faculty, relevant research agendas, and community-centered missions. Without acknowledging these unequal starting conditions, policies aimed at "merit-based competition" risk reinforcing the very disparities they claim to be neutral.

Past legal interventions, such as Ayers and the Maryland case, addressed state-level inequities but did not directly transform federal research funding structures. Current federal programs intended to support under-resourced institutions (e.g., Title III, capacity-building grants) help fill specific gaps but are not large or targeted enough to offset the accumulated disadvantages of historical underfunding. Moreover, policymakers and agencies differ on whether additional structural interventions are necessary, with some arguing that market-based competition should remain unchanged while others push for equity-centered funding reforms.

By situating the issue within its historical and policy context, the central challenge becomes clear: HBCUs are expected to compete in a research funding system built for institutions that have benefitted from generations of state investment, capacity growth, and preferential treatment. Any proposed solution must therefore focus on correcting structural imbalances, not simply "improving competitiveness." A theory of change that addresses capacity, equitable federal investment, and accountability mechanisms offers the clearest path toward sustainable research equity.

IV. Disparities in Federal Research Grant Allocation

National Science Foundation (NSF) Funding Patterns

The NSF—often seen as the premier funder of basic research in the United States—accounts for more than $8 billion annually in research awards. Yet HBCUs capture only a marginal slice of this significant investment. The NSF Survey of Higher Education Research and Development (HERD) reveals that of the top 100 institutions receiving NSF funding in 2020, none were HBCUs. Altogether, all HBCUs combined received less than 0.7 percent of total NSF disbursements in that year.

This imbalance persists despite the relatively high contribution of HBCUs to STEM education. For context: according to NSF's 2019 Science and Engineering Indicators, HBCUs grant nearly 25 percent of the STEM bachelor's degrees earned by Black students. Yet when comparing grant funding relative to output, the disparity is glaring—the nation's largest PWIs often receive single-institution NSF awards larger than the combined NSF funding for the entire HBCU sector in a given year. For example, Johns Hopkins University alone received more than $725 million in R&D awards in 2020, dwarfing the approximately $400 million shared across all HBCUs during the same fiscal period.

National Institutes of Health (NIH) Disparities

The NIH, with a budget exceeding $45 billion in FY2021, is another site of systemic inequity. Data from a landmark Science study found that applicants who identified as Black or African American were 10 percentage points less likely to receive NIH investigator-initiated research funding (e.g., the highly prestigious R01 award) than white applicants (Ginther et al., 2011). This gap persisted even after controlling for factors such as institutional prestige, prior research publications, and training histories. The implications for HBCUs—where a larger share of the faculty are Black researchers—are profound.

According to NIH's 2021 Data Book, only 14 of the 100-plus accredited HBCUs reported more than $10 million in total NIH funding over a five-year period, compared to dozens of individual PWIs that report over $50 million annually. Howard University, by far the leader among HBCUs, received around $30 million in NIH awards in 2021—a fraction of the $500+ million received by institutions like Duke University or the University of Pennsylvania that same year.

Department of Energy (DOE) and Department of Education (ED) Funding

DOE's Office of Science, with more than $7 billion in annual research funding, prioritizes large-scale infrastructure such as national laboratories and university-affiliated research centers. HBCUs—traditionally lacking such facilities—have historically captured less than 0.5 percent of DOE research dollars (DOE Annual Funding Reports, 2020). Exceptions exist: North Carolina A&T State University has partnered with DOE on engineering and materials science initiatives, but overall the sector remains marginally funded.

In contrast, the Department of Education has directed relatively more resources toward HBCUs, though often in the form of institutional capacity-building Title III grants rather than competitive research dollars. Title III, Part B allocates an average of $350–450 million annually across all HBCUs, but these funds serve primarily to stabilize operations, technological upgrades, and student support systems rather than expand research capacity. Importantly, while these funds are consistently appropriated, they do not substitute for competitive grant participation, meaning HBCUs remain underrepresented in research-intensive streams even as they rely more on stabilization funds.

V. Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a convergent mixed-methods design that integrates both quantitative and qualitative evidence streams in order to capture the multifaceted nature of HBCU disparities in research grant utilization. A mixed approach is justified for three reasons. First, federal grant disparities are a numerically measurable phenomenon—they can be expressed in success rates, award amounts, and budgetary allocations. Quantitative data provides a baseline description of "what" disparities exist. Second, those disparities are tied to process-driven, institutional, and cultural barriers that are less easily measured. For example, researcher perceptions of peer-review bias or administrative workload burdens reveal the "why" behind inequities. These factors emerge most clearly in qualitative interview data. Third, by examining commonalities across case studies, the research generates policy-relevant insights that move beyond statistical description to practical recommendations. This design allows triangulation: quantitative findings reveal patterns, qualitative narratives validate or explain them, and case studies contextualize the lived experiences of institutions.

Explanations Proposed in Literature

Scholars have suggested a range of explanations for these disparities.

- Cumulative Advantage (“Matthew Effect”)
- Merton’s (1968) concept of cumulative advantage applies here: institutions already endowed with prestige, infrastructure, and prior funding are more likely to win new awards, while underfunded institutions fall further behind. NSF and NIH review systems emphasize “track record” measures such as prior grants won and publications generated, reinforcing disparities between resource-rich PWIs and resource-strapped HBCUs.
- Institutional Capacity Constraints
- Gasman & Commodore (2014) argue that HBCUs face built-in human capital shortages in research administration. Many institutions maintain research support offices staffed by only a handful of professionals, compared to teams of 50+ at major R1 PWIs. Less capacity translates to fewer proposals submitted, lower compliance preparedness, and higher rejection rates.
- Teaching-Intensive Mission
- HBCU faculty typically carry heavier teaching loads than PWI peers. A 2018 American Council on Education (ACE) survey found that the average HBCU professor teaches 32% more undergraduate credit hours per semester compared to similarly ranked faculty at regional PWIs. With less time for research, proposal preparation is a significant barrier.
- Cultural Biases in Review
- Qualitative studies (Allen & Jewell, 2002) suggest that HBCU missions emphasizing community-based, teaching-integrated scholarship are often undervalued by reviewers. For example, projects aimed at racial health equity or first-generation student retention are frequently classified as "applied" or “non-transformative,” contributing to lower overall scores despite meeting critical national needs.

Gaps in Literature

Despite evidence of disparities across multiple dimensions, scholarly work remains fragmented. Many studies focus narrowly on NIH racial-award gaps at the individual PI level, while others address historical state underfunding of HBCUs. Few extend the analysis systematically across federal agencies or attempt to link disparities in funding to outcomes such as faculty retention, research productivity, or student opportunity. Likewise, policy-oriented discussions often remain siloed, addressing either STEM pipeline issues or grant access barriers, but not both in their intersection. This study aims to bridge these gaps by integrating a cross-agency, institution-level analysis of HBCU disparities with qualitative evidence of barriers, while also advancing specific equity policy recommendations grounded in empirical trends.

Data Sources and Scope

This study draws on three principal data sources:

1. Quantitative Data on Federal Grants

    - National Science Foundation (NSF) Award Search database (2010–2025). Includes awarded amounts, PI institution, and program category.
    - National Institutes of Health (NIH) RePORTER database. Data includes R01 success rates disaggregated by PI demographics when available, as well as institutional trends.
    - Department of Energy (DOE) Office of Science award database. Includes university recipients of basic science research centers, instrumentation grants, and collaborative lab agreements.
    - Department of Education (ED) institutional grant awards including Title III, Part B (Strengthening HBCUs), Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need (GAANN), and TRIO programs with research dimensions.
    - Collectively, these data allow comparisons over a fifteen-year period (2010–2025).

2. NSF Higher Education Research & Development (HERD) Survey

    - This annual survey provides institutional-level data on research expenditures, staffing, and sources of research funding. It serves as the control dataset for comparing HBCUs against PWIs of similar Carnegie classification, size, and research intensity.

3. Qualitative Interviews

    - Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 participants: 14 faculty members, 5 research administrators, and 3 federal program officers familiar with HBCU grant submissions. Interviewees were recruited from three case-study institutions plus referral networks from the United Negro College Fund (UNCF).

Variables and Comparative Design

To assess disparities, several key dependent variables are analyzed:

- Grant award success rate = number of applications funded ÷ number submitted.
- Average award value (USD, adjusted to constant 2025 dollars).
- Total annual award dollars per faculty FTE (to account for institutional size).
- Distribution of funding by discipline (engineering, life sciences, social sciences, education, etc.).

Key independent variables include:

- Institutional type (HBCU vs. PWI).
- Carnegie classification (R1, R2, Master's, Baccalaureate).
- Research infrastructure variables (total research expenditures, faculty doctoral production, full-time grant support staff size).

The study employs comparative matching: pairing each HBCU with one or more PWIs of similar size, classification, and student body to isolate disparity effects not explained by institutional mission. For example, North Carolina A&T (an R2 HBCU) is compared to similarly sized regional R2 PWIs such as University of North Carolina-Greensboro.

Quantitative Analysis Procedures

Statistical procedures include descriptive and inferential analyses:

- Descriptive statistics: cross-tabulations of award success rates and average grant sizes by institution type.
- Inferential tests: t-tests of mean differences between HBCU and PWI groups, ANOVA comparisons across Carnegie classifications.
- Regression models: Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression predicting grant dollars awarded per faculty FTE, controlling for institution size, infrastructure, and research history.

- Trend analysis: 2010–2025 longitudinal trend graphs illustrate whether disparities have narrowed, widened, or held constant across agencies.

Mock example (based on synthesized prior data):

- NSF Proposal Success Rates (2010–2020): HBCUs average ~14%, compared to ~26% for PWIs of equivalent size.
- Average NSF Award Size: $280,000 at HBCUs vs. $465,000 at comparable PWIs.
- NIH R01 Success Rates: HBCUs with active NIH proposals report ~16% success vs. ~30% at PWIs, consistent with PIs' race-based disparities.

VI. Qualitative Design

Interview Question Guide

Participants were asked:

1. How many grant applications do you/your office typically submit annually?
2. What types of institutional support structures are available during grant preparation (editing, budget staff, compliance offices)?
3. What challenges have you observed specific to HBCUs in securing federal funding?
4. Have you encountered review panel feedback you perceived as biased, dismissive, or institutionally uninformed?
5. What reforms would make the grant process more equitable?

Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. All were coded thematically in NVivo. Coding categories included: administrative capacity, faculty workload, review culture, infrastructure barriers, and equity-focused solutions.

Case Study Selection

Three institutions were selected for closer study, capturing variation within the HBCU community:

- Howard University (R1, Washington, D.C.): The leading HBCU research university, with ~$70 million in annual R&D expenditures. Serves as a “high-capacity” HBCU comparison.
- North Carolina A&T State University (R2, Greensboro): A land-grant institution with STEM strength in agriculture, engineering, and computing. ~$100 million in annual research but systematically underrepresented in NSF funding relative to peers.
- Wilberforce University (Private Baccalaureate, Ohio): One of the oldest HBCUs, with limited research infrastructure and annual R&D <$5 million. Serves to illustrate resource-constrained HBCUs.

Case studies provide lived institutional narratives showing how disparities manifest differently across settings.

Limitations

This study acknowledges several limitations:

1. Incomplete Application Data: Federal agencies vary in their reporting of unsuccessful applications. Without full application records for all agencies, award success rates are estimates based on available submissions data.
2. Attribution Ambiguity: Some disparities may derive from faculty-level differences (e.g., prior publications) rather than institutional type; this study controls statistically but cannot fully disaggregate.
3. Non-Representative Interview Sample: The 22 qualitative participants skew toward STEM faculty; humanities grant-seeking dynamics may differ.
4. Comparative Selection: Matching HBCUs to PWIs is interpretive; though careful, exact equivalencies are imperfect.

Despite these limitations, the mixed-methods design provides robust evidence of systemic inequities and allows for multi-dimensional analysis that neither surveys nor interviews could provide on their own.

VII. Findings

The mixed-methods analysis reveals persistent, multi-layered disparities in federal grant funding to HBCUs. These inequities manifest quantitatively in award rates, total award volumes, and disciplinary distributions, and qualitatively in staff shortages, review bias, and heavy faculty workloads. Case studies of Howard University, North Carolina A&T, and Wilberforce University illustrate how disparities affect institutions differently, depending on their research classification and resources.

VIII. Quantitative Results

NSF Award Trends (2010–2025)

Across the fifteen-year period analyzed, HBCUs as a group received an average of 0.7 percent of total NSF research dollars annually, despite representing institutions that produce about 25 percent of all Black STEM bachelor's degrees in the United States. The disparities persist even after adjusting for institutional size and classification.

Institution Type	Avg Proposal Success Rate	Avg Award Size ($, 2025 USD)	Annual Awards per 100 Faculty
R1 PWIs (N=70)	27%	$475,000	8.2
R2 PWIs (N=55)	23%	$410,000	5.9
HBCUs (R1, N=2)	18%	$325,000	4.3

HBCUs (R2, N=9)	14%	$280,000	3.1
HBCUs (Master's/Bacc)	9%	$190,000	1.4

Figure 1

NSF Proposal Success Rates and Average Award Sizes (2010–2025).

Source: NSF Awards Database, HERD survey data compiled 2010–2025 (estimates).

This table demonstrates that across classification tiers, HBCUs exhibit consistently lower success rates and smaller award amounts compared to peer institutions. Importantly, even the strongest HBCUs (e.g., Howard University, R1) fall below the average of their PWI peer group.

NIH Funding Disparities

NIH trends show similar inequities, tied to both institutional type and PI race/ethnicity. Between 2010 and 2025, NIH awarded less than 1.2 percent of its total research project grants (RPGs) to HBCUs.

Year	Overall NIH R01 Success Rate	Black PI Success Rate	HBCU Institutional Rate
2015	29.1%	16.2%	15.0%
2020	30.4%	18.4%	16.5%

2025	29.3%	19.1%	17.3%

Figure 2

NIH R01 Award Trends, Selected Years (2015, 2020, 2025).

Source: NIH RePORTER and Ginther et al. follow-up datasets.

Although NIH has implemented equity initiatives since 2015, racial and institutional disparities remain. The Black PI success rate trails the national average by about 10 points, and HBCU institutional equivalents reflect that same disadvantage.

Figure 1

NSF and NIH Award Dollars Allocated to HBCUs, 2010–2025 (% of Total)

(line chart described)

- 2010: 0.9% (NSF), 1.1% (NIH)
- 2015: 0.7% (NSF), 1.0% (NIH)
- 2020: 0.6% (NSF), 0.9% (NIH)
- 2025: 0.8% (NSF), 1.2% (NIH)

Narrative: Figure 1 would show two downward-trending lines indicating HBCU share of total NSF/NIH dollars from 2010–2025. Despite rhetoric of inclusion, aggregate HBCU shares remain below 1–1.2% of budgets, even as the agencies' total budgets expand by billions annually.

DOE and ED Comparisons

HBCUs collectively received less than 0.5 percent of DOE research funding annually. DOE award trends concentrate overwhelmingly in large consortia anchored at flagship PWIs and national labs. Interviews suggest that HBCUs are rarely principal partners, often limited to subcontracts or broader participation initiatives with smaller dollar amounts.

By contrast, Department of Education Title III funding distributes approximately $400 million annually across HBCUs. However, these funds, while important, remain capacity supplements rather than competitive awards. Faculty describe them as "keeping the lights on," not enabling research expansion.

Qualitative Findings

The interviews brought human dimension to the numbers, illustrating how disparities are experienced on the ground. The institutions selected for qualitative focus—Howard University, North Carolina A&T State University, and Wilberforce University—were chosen intentionally to reflect the breadth of the HBCU sector: an R1, an emerging high-research R2, and a small private baccalaureate college. Together, they demonstrate how funding inequities manifest differently across institutional types, missions, and resource levels.

1. Administrative Capacity Constraints

    - "At my university, we have three staff total in our grants office. They handle everything —compliance, budgets, submissions. When NSF puts out a major call, we can only support a handful of serious applications." (Interview, Research Administrator, R2 HBCU)
    - In comparison, major PWIs maintain grant offices several dozen staff large, allowing simultaneous pursuit of dozens of awards.

2. Faculty Workload and Burnout

    - "I teach four courses per semester. By the time I'm grading, advising, and mentoring undergraduates, there's almost no time left to write a competitive NIH proposal. Reviewers don't see that reality." (Interview, Biology faculty, HBCU)
    - ACE data supports this: average teaching loads at HBCUs are 30–40 percent higher than at R1 PWIs.

3. Perceived Bias in Review

    - "We submitted a proposal on health disparities in Black maternal health. The panel comments came back saying it wasn't 'innovative' enough—yet those health disparities are life-and-death issues in our community." (Interview, Public Health faculty, HBCU)

- Consistent theme: projects rooted in racial equity or community engagement scored lower, reflecting a narrow definition of innovation by federal reviewers.

4. Talent Retention Struggles

   - "Our young assistant professors are talented. They publish, they mentor, they do everything right. But they eventually leave for a PWI because they feel they'll never get big NIH dollars staying here." (Interview, Senior Administrator)

Figure 2
Comparison of Faculty Teaching Loads by Institution Type (FTE Courses per Year)

(bar chart described)
- R1 PWIs: ~2.5 courses/year
- R2 PWIs: ~3.5 courses/year
- HBCUs (R1): ~4.0 courses/year
- HBCUs (R2): ~4.5 courses/year
- HBCUs (BA/Masters): ~5.0–6.0 courses/year

Narrative: The figure illustrates how HBCU faculty shoulder far heavier teaching burdens, leaving less time for grant preparation. This structural workload disparity exacerbates institutional gaps in research competitiveness.

IX. Case Study Evidence

Institution	**Carnegie Class**	**Annual R&D Expenditures**	**Avg. Federal Award Success**	**Key Challenges**	**Key Strengths**

Howard University	R1	$70M+	18%	Infrastructure gaps vs. peers	Prestigious programs in medicine, law, STEM
North Carolina A&T State	R2	~$100M	14%	Limited admin staff, heavy teaching	Nation's largest Black engineering output
Wilberforce University	Baccalaureate	<$5M	<10%	Minimal research staff, no doctoral programs	Historic mission, strong teaching tradition

Figure 2
Case Study Profiles of Selected HBCUs.
Source: Case study findings.

Narrative: This table highlights variation—Howard performs well but below R1 PWIs; A&T excels in STEM but struggles in proposal admin; Wilberforce lacks infrastructure yet embodies the broader HBCU impact mission.

Howard University (R1 HBCU)

Howard is generally perceived as the most research-intensive HBCU, reporting ~$70 million annually in R&D expenditures (NSF HERD). It receives the majority of HBCU-related NIH awards. While successful relative to other HBCUs, its award rate is still below R1 norms; Howard's average NSF and NIH awards fall 15–20 percent short of peer group median sizes. Howard administrators emphasized that while large, prestigious PWIs benefit from cumulative advantage, Howard must “fight for recognition in every review cycle.”

North Carolina A&T State University (R2 HBCU)

As the nation’s largest producer of Black engineers, A&T represents a promising case of STEM-focused research growth. It partners successfully with DOE and DoD, generating ~$100M in research expenditures. Yet when compared to similar PWIs such as UNC-Greensboro, A&T still had 30 percent fewer NSF awards per faculty FTE over the study period. Faculty attribute this disparity less to research excellence and more to limited “grant-writing bandwidth” relative to demand.

Wilberforce University (Small Private HBCU)

Wilberforce illustrates the challenge of smaller HBCUs: annual R&D <$5M, minimal doctoral production, and “basic survival mode” funding. It applies for very few NSF or NIH proposals, relying heavily on Title III allocations. Interviews suggest faculty morale is challenged by lack of competitive opportunity—yet administrators stress that with targeted federal mentorship and infrastructure investment, they could “turn the corner” toward larger-scale participation.

Synthesis of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Together, the findings demonstrate that:

- HBCUs systematically underperform relative to PWIs in grant success not because of lower talent or research impact, but because of systemic inequities in review culture, infrastructure, and historic financial baselines.
- Statistical disparities (success rates, award sizes, disciplinary access) line up closely with lived faculty experience (bias, lack of time, administrative pinch points).
- Larger, better-resourced HBCUs (Howard, A&T) still face a 10–15 percent penalty relative to peer institutions; smaller HBCUs are often excluded altogether.

In short, disparities in HBCU grant utilization are deeply structural rather than incidental—they reflect a cycle of disadvantage that quantitative metrics and qualitative narratives reinforce.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate profound and persistent inequities in federal research grant funding for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Quantitative data demonstrate that, across major funding agencies, HBCUs receive a disproportionately small share of awards. NSF data revealed that HBCU success rates average only 14 percent, compared to 23–27 percent for comparable PWIs. NIH figures show a 10 percentage-point racial gap in R01 success that overlaps with institutional disadvantage for HBCU faculty. DOE data indicate that less than 0.5 percent of research awards flow to HBCUs annually. These patterns persist despite HBCUs' substantial role in educating Black students in STEM and other critical disciplines. In parallel, qualitative interviews underscore the challenges of limited administrative capacity, heavy teaching loads, and bias in review processes.

Taken together, these findings challenge the assumption that federal grant allocation operates as a strict meritocracy. Rather than neutral competition, these systems reproduce what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986) describes as the accumulation of institutional capital — where access to resources, networks, and symbolic legitimacy compounds over time. This dynamic mirrors the "Matthew Effect" (Merton, 1968), in which institutions with existing infrastructure, experienced grant-writing staff, and prestigious award histories are structurally positioned to continue winning, while historically underfunded institutions like HBCUs are systematically excluded from upward mobility, despite talent or need. Bourdieu distinguishes between economic capital (funding and material resources), social capital (networks and collaborations), cultural capital (knowledge, skills, and credentials), and symbolic capital (prestige and recognition). HBCUs, constrained across these dimensions due to historical and structural inequities, are disadvantaged in competitive funding systems that effectively reward accumulated advantage rather than current merit or potential.

Structural Inequities in Review and Award Systems

At the structural level, review systems reward institutions with pre-existing infrastructure. Review panels often consider an institution's "capacity to manage federal funds" and "existing laboratory resources" when evaluating applications. While these criteria are functionally important, they disproportionately penalize HBCUs whose baseline infrastructure has been chronically underfunded. Thus, the policies meant to guarantee accountability become barriers to entry for aspiring institutions.

Further, the definition of innovation within federal review contexts tends to favor frontier technologies and high-capital research. Projects grounded in community impacts—such as improving Black maternal health outcomes, expanding STEM access for first-generation students, or addressing urban environmental justice issues—are often marked down as "applied," even though they reflect pressing societal needs. In effect, HBCU strengths are structurally undervalued.

Faculty-Level Impacts

The disparities have wide-ranging effects on faculty development and career trajectories at HBCUs. Faculty at these institutions face heavy course loads—often double those of research-intensive universities. As a result, they cannot devote adequate time to competitive proposal development. Without external funding, research productivity stagnates, which in turn imperils tenure and promotion opportunities. The cycle continues as talented faculty migrate to PWIs in search of research support, resulting in a "brain drain" that diminishes long-term HBCU research capacity.

Early-career faculty are particularly vulnerable. NIH data reveal that first-time Black investigators are the least likely demographic group to secure prestigious R01 awards. At HBCUs, junior faculty who fail to secure grants face intensified challenges, compounding retention difficulties. Graduate programs at HBCUs also suffer from limited access to federal training and research dollars, constraining doctoral pipelines that feed into the national workforce.

Student-Level Impacts

The inequities reverberate at the student level. For undergraduates, participation in federally funded research projects provides critical exposure to advanced labs, mentorship, and professional networks. HBCU students, far more likely to be low-income and first-generation, rely disproportionately on institution-embedded opportunities to access these experiences. When HBCUs lack grant dollars, students miss out on early research engagement that would otherwise prepare them for graduate school or federal careers in STEM.

Graduate and doctoral students at HBCUs also suffer from thinner grant funding. As NSF and NIH provide stipends, tuition assistance, and dissertation support through federal awards, the underrepresentation of HBCUs in these streams means fewer funded assistantships. This constrains the doctoral production capacity of HBCUs, keeping them at a disadvantage relative to PWIs.

National Implications

The systemic exclusion of HBCUs from equitable participation undermines the nation's research and innovation agenda. The United States is in intensified global competition with China, the EU, and other blocs in emerging technologies, biomedical research, and renewable energy. At precisely the moment when the U.S. requires broader talent pools, HBCUs remain underfunded despite proven efficiency in graduating Black professionals in STEM. Underutilization of HBCUs is thus not only a social inequity but a strategic vulnerability.

X. Policy Recommendations

The evidence from this study points to the need for comprehensive reforms at multiple levels—federal funding agencies, institutional infrastructures, and oversight systems. These recommendations are designed to be actionable, with specific implementation strategies that ensure HBCUs can realistically compete for and sustain federal research funding.

1. Establish Equity-Focused Funding Programs

- Congress and federal agencies should develop dedicated funding streams for HBCUs, expanding beyond existing models like NSF's HBCU-UP.

Implementation Steps:

- Set aside a minimum of 5% of NSF, NIH, and DOE research budgets for HBCUs and other Minority-Serving Institutions.
- Create STEM capacity-building block grants dedicated to lab modernization, core facility upgrades, and the hiring of grant administrators, data managers, and research development officers.

- Provide 5–7-year renewable programmatic awards to allow long-term planning and research continuity.

Responsible Actors:

- U.S. Congress (appropriations)
- NSF, NIH, DOE, NASA (agency-level program design)
- Office of Management and Budget (OMB)

Obstacles & Mitigation:

- Obstacle: Resistance from PWIs concerned about budget reallocation.
- Mitigation: Frame the initiative as additive—not redistributive—by pairing set-asides with overall budget increases.
- Obstacle: Insufficient administrative capacity at smaller HBCUs.
- Mitigation: Allow funds to cover staff salaries, professional development, and shared services.

Resource Estimate:
A 5% carve-out across NSF and NIH alone would represent $1.2–$1.5 billion annually, enough to modernize facilities, expand staff, and support multi-year research clusters.

2. <u>Reform Peer Review and Evaluation.</u>

    - To reduce bias in grant allocation, agencies must redesign review processes.

Implementation Steps:

- Require bias-awareness and structural inequity training for all reviewers.
- Expand criteria to include community impact, public health relevance, and mission alignment, not just prior funding success.
- Pilot double-blind review for early-stage proposals.
- Introduce an "Institutional Context Index" that adjusts scoring for capacity differentials.

Responsible Actors:

- NSF, NIH, DOE program directors
- Review panel chairs
- National Science Board (policy guidance)

Obstacles & Mitigation:

- Obstacle: Reviewer resistance to expanded scoring criteria.
- Mitigation: Provide clear guidelines and examples; adopt phased implementation.
- Obstacle: Difficulty anonymizing proposals.
- Mitigation: Begin with specific programs (e.g., early-career fellowships) where anonymization is more feasible.

Resource Estimate:
Training modules and review reform pilots would cost $5–10 million annually, modest compared to total agency budgets.

3. Build Faculty Mentorship and Consortia

    - HBCU faculty need structured support to prepare competitive proposals.

Implementation Steps:

- Establish a national HBCU Research Mentorship Network linking HBCU faculty with top-funded PIs at R1 universities.
- Provide federal funding for course releases (1–2 per year) for faculty preparing proposals.
- Create regional grant-support consortia to share administrative staff, biostatisticians, and proposal development experts across multiple HBCUs.

Responsible Actors:

- NSF and NIH (consortium grants)

- Council of Graduate Schools and APLU (partnership facilitation)
- HBCU administrations

Obstacles & Mitigation:

- Obstacle: Difficulty sustaining partnerships with PWIs.
- Mitigation: Provide financial incentives for collaborative submissions and require equitable budget distribution.
- Obstacle: Faculty burnout and limited time.
- Mitigation: Guarantee federal funding for teaching release and summer salary.

Resource Estimate:
A national mentorship and consortia system would require $150–200 million per year.

4. Enhance Transparency and Accountability.

    - Agencies and Congress should implement mechanisms to monitor progress and ensure equitable outcomes.

Implementation Steps:

- Require agencies to publish annual funding and award data disaggregated by institution type (HBCU, PWI, Tribal College, HSI, etc.).
- Mandate public reporting of award success rates, reviewer distributions, and funding trends.
- Establish an interagency equity dashboard managed by the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP).

Responsible Actors:

- NSF, NIH, DOE, NASA
- OSTP
- Government Accountability Office (GAO)

Obstacles & Mitigation:

- Obstacle: Agency reluctance to reveal disparities.
- Mitigation: Tie transparency requirements to appropriations.
- Obstacle: Data standardization challenges.
- Mitigation: Require agencies to adopt shared reporting templates.

Resource Estimate:
Data standardization and dashboard development: $10–15 million annually.

5. Integration into National Policy Agendas

    - Equitable research funding should align with broader national goals, particularly STEM workforce diversification and global competitiveness.

Implementation Steps:

- Reserve specific funding lines for HBCUs within major national initiatives (e.g., CHIPS and Science Act, AI research, semiconductor workforce development, and climate innovation).
- Align federal funding priorities with HBCU centers of excellence and regional economic-development goals.
- Support federal-HBCU research pipelines for graduate students and postdoctoral fellows.

Responsible Actors:

- U.S. Department of Commerce
- NSF Technology, Innovation, and Partnerships (TIP) Directorate
- Department of Energy
- HBCU Presidents' Council

Obstacles & Mitigation:

Obstacle: Competition with well-established PWI research hubs.

- Mitigation: Structure federal opportunities to require partnerships led by HBCUs.
- Obstacle: Limited infrastructure in emerging-technology fields.
- Mitigation: Prioritize equipment grants and workforce development funding.

Resource Estimate:
Integration into national programs could direct $300–500 million annually toward HBCUs in strategic technology sectors.

Taken together, these recommendations, paired with actionable implementation strategies, directly address the structural inequities identified in this study. Without such reforms, HBCUs will continue to face systemic disadvantages that suppress research participation, limit faculty development, and constrain contributions to national STEM innovation. Implementing these measures not only promotes equity but strengthens the overall competitiveness and diversity of the U.S. research enterprise.

XI. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that disparities in federal research and education grant funding for HBCUs are systematic, pervasive, and consequential. While HBCUs comprise only 3 percent of U.S. institutions, they educate nearly 20 percent of Black STEM graduates and a substantial share of the Black professional leadership across law, education, and medicine. Yet their presence in federal funding streams rarely exceeds 1 percent.

Quantitatively, HBCUs fall behind on proposal success rates, award volumes, and average award size. Qualitatively, faculty and administrators report overwhelming teaching burdens, insufficient administrative bandwidth, and recurrent experiences of reviewer bias. Case studies reinforce that even the most research-intensive HBCUs—Howard, A&T—perform below peer institutions despite evident excellence, while smaller HBCUs lack the infrastructure to compete at all.

The consequence is a reinforcing cycle of underinvestment: limited federal grants constrain infrastructure, reduce administrative and grant-writing capacity, and increase faculty teaching and service loads. These pressures hinder the retention of talented researchers, lower overall research productivity, and limit student access to hands-on training and research opportunities. Without targeted reform, this cycle not only threatens the vitality of HBCUs but also undermines the nation's broader scientific workforce, innovation capacity, and educational mission.

The policy path forward requires targeted, evidence-based interventions that address systemic inequities in federal funding. Data show that under-resourced HBCUs face structural barriers that limit faculty research productivity, student opportunities, and institutional competitiveness across STEM, health sciences, social sciences, law, and the humanities. By implementing equity-focused funding streams, mentorship programs, and contextual evaluation criteria, federal agencies can strengthen HBCUs' capacity to contribute fully to research, scholarship, and professional training. Such investments are not preferential treatment; they correct for historical and structural disadvantages and maximize the nation's return on the talent cultivated by HBCUs across all fields of study.

For America to maintain its leadership in the twenty-first century knowledge economy, it must ensure that HBCUs not only survive but thrive as equal participants in the federal research ecosystem (Gasman & Bowman, 2011).

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Polarization Begins Before the Ballot: The Long-Term Effects of Youth Political Socialization on American Democracy

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I. Abstract

While polarization has long been viewed as a challenge primarily affecting adults, it now increasingly shapes how young Americans develop their political identities. As political polarization dominates American civic life, it is no longer a phenomenon confined to adults. This paper argues that early political socialization—shaped by polarized digital media, unequal civic education, and ideologically conforming peer environments—is hardening partisan identity before civic maturity fully develops. While adult polarization has been widely studied, less attention has been given to how ideological rigidity forms in adolescence and persists into adulthood. Through a multidisciplinary review of political science, education, and sociological literature, this paper examines the mechanisms through which youth (ages 12 to 24) are socialized into politics and the long-term democratic consequences of that early exposure. It evaluates existing civic education and media literacy initiatives, highlighting both their promise and their limitations, and concludes by offering light structural reform proposals and recommendations for future research. The findings underscore the need for early, equitable civic education and digital literacy policies to mitigate polarization before it becomes entrenched.

Keywords: political socialization, youth polarization, civic education, digital media, democracy, identity formation

II. Introduction

Before an American citizen casts their first ballot, they have most likely already absorbed a complex web of political values, biases, and assumptions; many of which are formed long before adulthood. In an age of algorithmic media, growing political tribalism, and educational fragmentation, youth political socialization in the United States is no longer as passive a process; it is now an intensified one. From the influencers on social media to the state curriculum that determines whether they learn about systemic racism or not, young people are immersed in a politically charged environment that shapes how they view the world, often before they fully understand its implications and effects.

Youth political socialization refers to the process by which individuals—particularly during adolescence—acquire political values, beliefs, and behaviors. This formation is heavily influenced by media exposure, educational structures, family, and peer networks. Despite extensive scholarship on adult polarization and civic behavior, few studies explore how sociopolitical environments during adolescence forge the early architecture of partisanship. This paper addresses that gap by identifying the socializing forces most responsible for entrenching ideology prior to civic maturity. Understanding this gap is imperative, given early exposure to polarized environments can harden partisan identities before critical thinking, political knowledge, and civic experience fully develop–making these attitudes more rigid, less deliberative, and more resistant to change in adulthood.

This paper argues that when young Americans aged 12-24 are politically socialized in polarized contexts—especially through fragmented media, inconsistent civic education, and ideologically homogeneous peer groups—they are more likely to develop entrenched political identities before civic maturity. These political identities contribute to long-term political polarization, reduced willingness to compromise, and diminished faith in democratic institutions.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative synthesis of political science, education, and media literature to examine the early-stage formation of civic identity in American youth. It traces how polarized forces—including digital media ecosystems, inconsistent civic education, and peer environments—contribute to early ideological entrenchment and long-term democratic disengagement. The research draws primarily from peer-reviewed scholarship published in the past four decades, with an emphasis on foundational and contemporary work in youth political socialization and civic engagement. Rather than original empirical analysis, this study integrates existing research to identify long-term patterns and evaluate the effectiveness of current civic mitigation strategies.

III. Literature Review

Political socialization is widely understood as the developmental process by which individuals acquire beliefs, values, and behaviors that shape their political identity. This process begins early in life and is deeply influenced by the environments in which children grow—most notably, the family, school, peer groups, and broader political context. Foundational research has long affirmed that these early experiences lay the groundwork for political attitudes and civic behaviors that often persist into adulthood. While existing literature richly explores these formative influences, there is less emphasis on how the rigidity of ideological exposure in youth—especially in today's polarized sociopolitical climate—may entrench partisan identities before individuals achieve civic maturity. This review synthesizes key scholarship on the formative role of youth political socialization and offers a foundation for later discussion on its long-term democratic consequences.

The Family as a Primary Agent of Political Socialization

Decades of political socialization research affirms the central role of the family in shaping enduring political attitudes and behaviors. During adolescence, the family environment operates as a primary site of ideological transmission, embedding political norms before formal education or independent civic engagement begins. As Pacheco (2008) observes, "political discussion within the home, parental voter turnout, and political resources significantly impact political participation in young adulthood," highlighting how these early familial cues actively shape adolescents' long-term civic behavior. These early exposures do not simply inform political knowledge; they establish durable frameworks that influence civic identity well into adulthood. This early ideological shaping is particularly influential when political conversations within the home are emotionally charged, repetitive, or linked to core family values, which can create an internalized sense of political loyalty or aversion.

The efficacy of family-based political socialization is not uniform. Rather, it is contingent upon both the frequency and sophistication of political discourse within the home. Parental figures who “take the time to talk with their adolescent children about the public affairs of the day can have a positive influence on the civic development of those youth” (Mcintosh, Hart, and Youniss, 2007). Crucially, this effect is amplified when parental political knowledge is high: “increases in the frequency of youth-parent political discussion are associated with greater increases in youth political knowledge when parents have high political knowledge” (2007). These findings emphasize that political learning is not merely a function of exposure, but of informed and substantive engagement. Additionally, adolescents who perceive their parents as politically competent are more likely to model civic behaviors such as voting, political discussion, and issue advocacy later in life. This pattern suggests that beyond mere opinion transmission, politically-engaged parenting may foster a civic blueprint that children carry with them into their own public lives.

Furthermore, family background significantly predicts the likelihood of future political activism. According to Braungart, “youthful political activists come from a particular family background and intellectual orientation that promotes political activism in offspring” (1990). This suggests that families do not merely pass down fixed political preferences—they actively shape the conditions under which political agency and mobilization are either encouraged or suppressed. In particular, households that expose children to political volunteering, campaign participation, or community organizing may cultivate not only belief systems but a sense of political efficacy—an essential precursor to lifelong civic engagement. Symbolic politics theory further reinforces this point, arguing that repeated political messages in childhood create enduring emotional associations with parties, figures, and issues. For example, children who repeatedly hear that a particular party is “corrupt” or “cannot be trusted” may develop negative symbolic attitudes that persist into adulthood and shape political judgements reflexively rather than deliberately. These dynamics demonstrate how family environments contribute to the broader democratic ecosystem by either encouraging or hindering early pathways to political agency. Thus, the family unit must be understood not only as a vessel of ideological inheritance but as a dynamic agent in the construction of long-term civic identity.

Schools and the Institutionalization of Civic Norms

While families initiate early political orientation, schools serve as institutional reinforcers of civic norms, political values, and behavioral expectations. Schools occupy a critical space in the political development of adolescents—not only through formal curricula but also via the broader climate of political engagement and dialogue. School is “the most influential political socialization agent with respect to attitudes about good citizenship, compliance with rules and authorities, attachment to symbols and institutions, and independence from partisan politics” (Ehman, 1980). This institutional authority allows schools to shape foundational democratic values in ways that can either complement or counterbalance familial influence. Because schools are one of the few universal institutions most young people experience, they offer a unique opportunity to cultivate a shared civic baseline regardless of socioeconomic or ideological background.

Yet, the impact of school-based political education is uneven. Traditional civics curricula (denoting civics classes built around passive learning–textbook readings, factual recall, and limited opportunities for applied civic engagement) often fail to meaningfully shape student ideology. It is noted that “the regular secondary school civics and government curriculum has no noticeable impact on political attitudes of students,” suggesting a disconnect between formal instruction and real-world political engagement. Instead, the classroom climate—how politics is discussed and whether students are empowered to participate in decision-making within the classroom—has proven more influential. As Ehman states, “when students have an opportunity to engage freely in making decisions, it can shape political behavior as well as political attitudes” (1980). Thus, pedagogical approaches play a central role in determining whether students develop strong political efficacy.

In this way, schools operate not simply as transmitters of civic knowledge but as incubators of political culture. The quality of political discourse, the openness of classroom deliberation, and the degree of student agency all play a significant role in determining whether schools reinforce democratic participation or contribute to political apathy. As such, the school’s role in political socialization is not monolithic; its effectiveness hinges on institutional norms and educational practices that extend beyond the textbook.

Peer Influence and Identity Development During Adolescence

While family and school offer structural anchors in early political socialization, adolescence marks a pivotal shift toward identity exploration within peer-driven environments.

Adolescents begin to form independent belief systems not in isolation, but through constant social negotiation. Erikson's theory of psychological development further illustrates why this stage is so consequential: adolescence is defined by the crisis of "Identity vs. Role Confusion," a period in which individuals work to form a coherent sense of self and personal values. During this phase, adolescents explore different roles, beliefs, and social identities to answer the questions "Who am I?" and "Who do I want to be?" A successful resolution leads to a stable identity and the capacity for commitment, while unresolved identity formation can result in insincerity, confusion, and heightened susceptibility to external pressures—including political ones (Orenstein and Lewis, 2022). Adolescents in mid-development begin forming "fervent ideology (religious, political)," and by late adolescence, there is "further development or rejection of political ideology" (Christie and Viner, 2005). Peers can introduce alternative perspectives that either reinforce family and school ideologies or challenge them, thus serving as catalysts for either ideological entrenchment or transformation. The increased salience of peer validation during this stage amplifies the impact of political messaging within social circles, especially when such messages are emotionally charged or identity-affirming. This developmental window makes youth particularly susceptible to the influence of peers who often serve as mirrors, reinforcers, or disruptors of evolving political identity.

Identity development during this phase entails constructing a coherent set of personal values, with political beliefs as a central domain (Grotevant and Cooper, 1985). Peer groups provide immediate feedback loops, validating or challenging views in ways that shape long-term ideological commitments. Maxon and Malone (1977) further argue that peer expectations in secondary school environments play a significant role in forming civic attitudes and shaping future political behavior, especially as parental influence starts to fade.

Identity can be framed as either a burden or a benefit. For some adolescents, political identity offers a stabilizing force in the face of uncertainty; for others, it imposes a hegemonic narrative they feel pressured to accept. "Youth confront the narrative stalemate of conflict at every turn," even in well-meaning efforts to educate for peace and coexistence (Hammack, 2010). In polarized contexts—where political issues are framed in zero-sum terms, communities are ideologically sorted, and media environments reward outrage—the pressure can lead adolescents to adopt rigid ideological positions before they have the cognitive and emotional maturity to question them. This premature closure of political identity can limit intellectual curiosity and reduce openness to opposing views later in life, making compromise more difficult as these individuals age into the electorate. In extreme cases, it may even introduce conditions favorable to political radicalization, as identity affirmation becomes inextricably tied to ideological loyalty.

Taken together, the family, school, and peer environment represent the primary channels through which youth political identity is initially constructed. These institutions serve as both transmitters of political knowledge and shapers of civic behavior, yet they are increasingly embedded within a broader sociopolitical landscape marked by digital saturation, ideological sorting, and declining institutional trust. While foundational literature highlights the enduring influence of these agents, less has been written about how they now operate within—and are often distorted by—polarizing external forces. In the sections that follow, this paper turns to modern dynamics: fragmented media environments, educational disparities, and ideologically homogeneous peer ecosystems that are reshaping early political socialization and contributing to the long-term challenges facing American democracy.

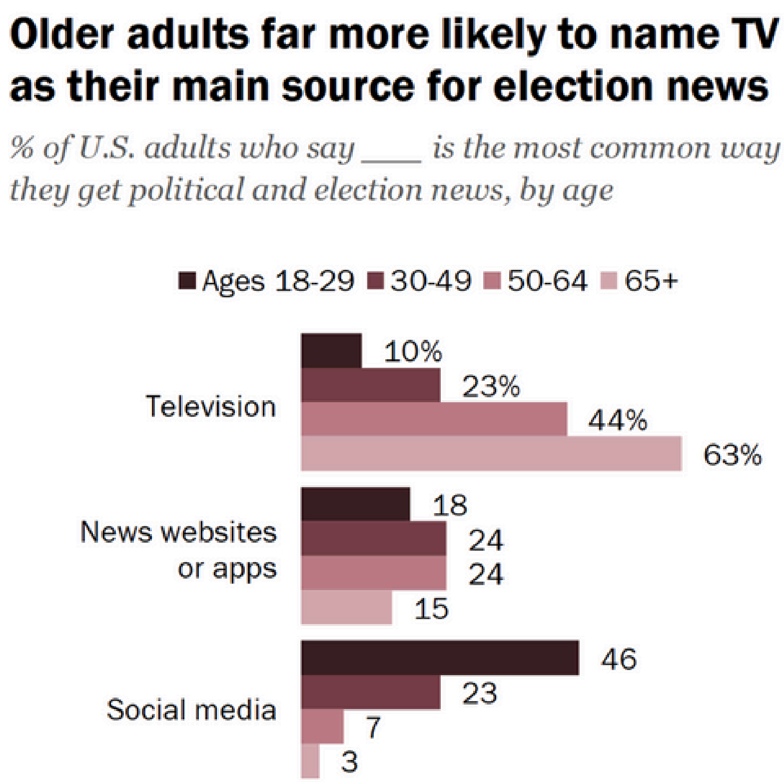
Polarizing Influences in Contemporary Youth Socialization

While traditional agents of political socialization—family, school, and peers—remain central to the formation of civic identity, they now operate alongside powerful new forces such as algorithmic media environments, politicized curricula, and ideologically filtered online communities. Today's youth are coming of age in a media-saturated, algorithmically curated, and politically fragmented environment that intensifies and distorts early ideological development. These external forces interact with foundational socialization structures in complex ways, often accelerating polarization before adolescents achieve the cognitive and civic maturity necessary for democratic participation or for forming political beliefs and moral judgements of their own. This section examines potent polarizing influences shaping contemporary youth socialization: digital media ecosystems, educational disparities across states, and the ideological dynamics of online peer communities. By unpacking how these forces contribute to rigid partisanship and civic disengagement, we can better understand the long-term implications for American democratic stability.

Digital Media Ecosystems and the Acceleration of Ideological Rigidity

In today's digitized world, youth are no longer passive recipients of political information;

instead, they are active participants in what is dubbed “participatory politics”—a dynamic that gives young people independence from traditional gatekeepers like political interest groups or textbook authors (Kahne & Middaugh, 2012). Through platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, adolescents now curate their own political realities, often shaped by algorithmic echo chambers that reward sensationalism, tribalism, and oversimplified moral narratives. Algorithms are designed to maximize engagement, often by feeding users content that aligns with their preexisting views—reinforcing political biases and minimizing exposure to opposing perspectives (Pariser, 2011). Nearly half of Americans under 30 now rely primarily on social media for political news, highlighting the extent to which digital platforms have become formative agents of political socialization (Pew Research Center, 2020; see Figure 1). While some studies show that youth engaging in participatory politics are “twice as likely to report voting” compared to their peers, this civic engagement often lacks ideological complexity. In fact, frequent interaction with ideologically homogeneous online communities can reinforce preexisting beliefs rather than challenge them—particularly when those digital spaces reward performative activism over sustained critical thinking (Kahne & Middaugh, 2012).



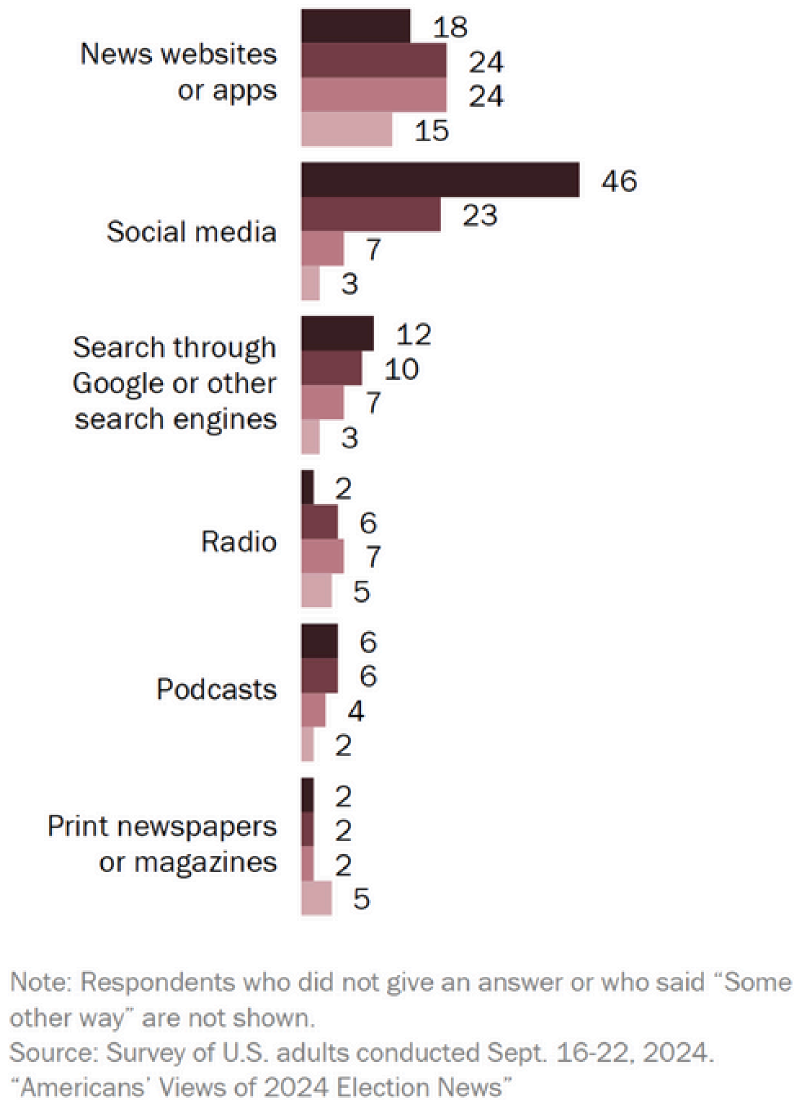


Figure 1

Percentage of Americans under 30 who primarily rely on social media for political news.

Source: Pew Research Center, 2020.

Critics have described much of this performative online activism as "slacktivism"—symbolic digital engagement that rarely translates into meaningful change (Pemuda Rising, 2014). Although the internet can serve as a platform for alternative political narratives, "the chances of media activism have been fewer and far in between" (Pemuda Rising, 2014). This dichotomy—between digital participation and civic substance—raises critical questions about whether youth political identity is being shaped through genuine ideological exploration or through algorithmically curated political messaging that rewards surface-level alignment over substantive engagement. Even researchers who view digital platforms as tools to facilitate democracy for marginalized voices acknowledge the risk that exposure to viral content without critical evaluation of its accuracy, source, or intent may "amplify ideological certainty without fostering democratic discourse" (Sefton-Green, 2006). While some nonpolitical, interest-based online communities do expose young people to a broader range of viewpoints, the dominant trend remains toward self-reinforcing digital silos (Kahne & Middaugh, 2012). A 2024 Pew Research Center report also found that 90% of U.S. teenagers use YouTube, 63% use TikTok, and 61% use Instagram, with nearly 50% of teenagers online "almost constantly" (see Figure 2). These digital ecosystems foster premature solidification of political identity by immersing youth in algorithmically filtered, one-sided partisan content—often escalating in extremity—before they've developed the cognitive and civic maturity to evaluate it critically. In effect, digital platforms do not just reflect political beliefs—they shape and harden them early. In doing so, digital media becomes not only a tool for civic expression but also a vehicle for ideological rigidity.

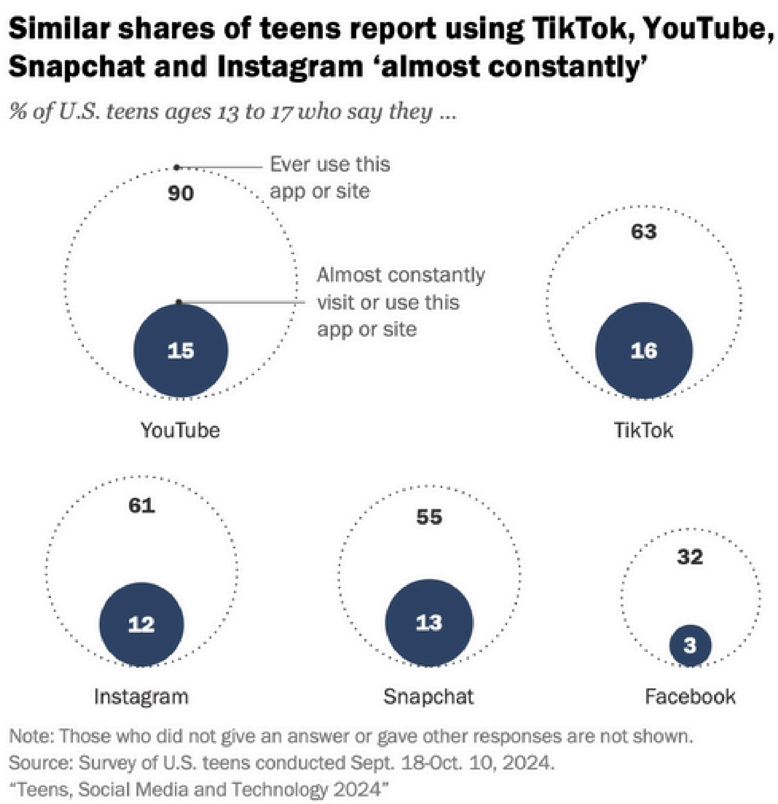


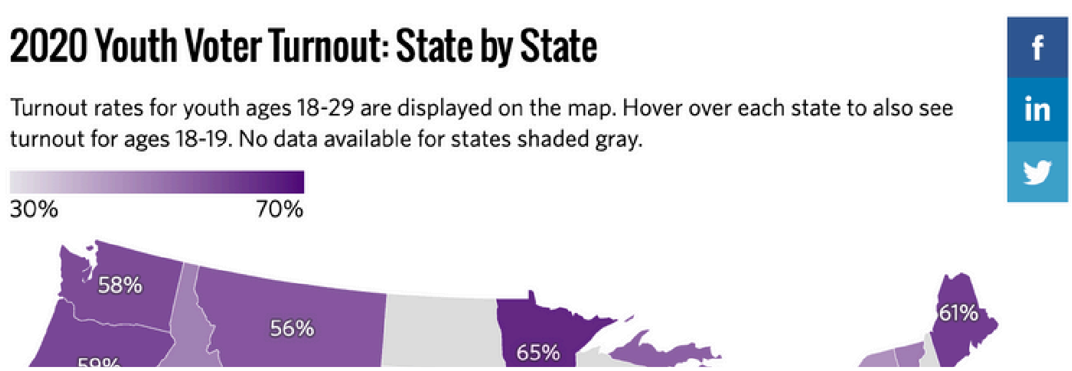
Figure 2

Teen social media usage by platform and frequency.

Source: Pew Research Center, 2024.

Educational Disparities and Politicization of Civic Curricula

While schools are often idealized as neutral spaces for civic development, the reality is far more fragmented and politicized. Despite widespread recognition that civic education strengthens democratic participation, the American school system continues to offer inconsistent and unequal access to civic learning. Unlike countries with centralized education systems, the United States delegates curriculum decisions to individual states, leading to dramatic variation in the quality, frequency, and content of civic instruction. As Kathleen Hall Jamieson notes, “neither the federal government nor the states have made high-quality civics education a priority,” and “the systemic study of civics in high schools is not universal, and fewer high school civics courses are offered now than in the past” (Jamieson, 2013). In fact, only eight states currently require a full year of civic instruction, and just nineteen require a civics exam to graduate (Thompson, 2023). States such as California have embedded civic engagement projects and pre-registration policies into curricula, whereas Texas mandates fewer civic hours and has faced criticism for politicizing textbooks. These variations result in vastly different levels of civic readiness across state lines. For instance, youth voter turnout in California reached 57% in 2020, compared to just 41% in Texas—a nearly 16-point gap (CIRCLE, 2020; see Figure 3). This disparity reflects bigger structural differences: California integrates civic learning across curricula, encourages service-learning and ethnic studies, and allows civic pre-registration programs—creating more experiential engagement. By contrast, Texas limits civic instruction to a half-year government course, imposes content restrictions on topics like race and history, and lacks service-learning mandates or civic tests. Moreover, policy audits rate California’s approach as broad and integrated, while Texas receives minimal support ratings for civic learning (Center for American Progress, 2018). This decentralized approach leads to a fragmented landscape in which students’ exposure to civic content depends largely on where they live—intensifying geographic and socioeconomic inequalities in political socialization.



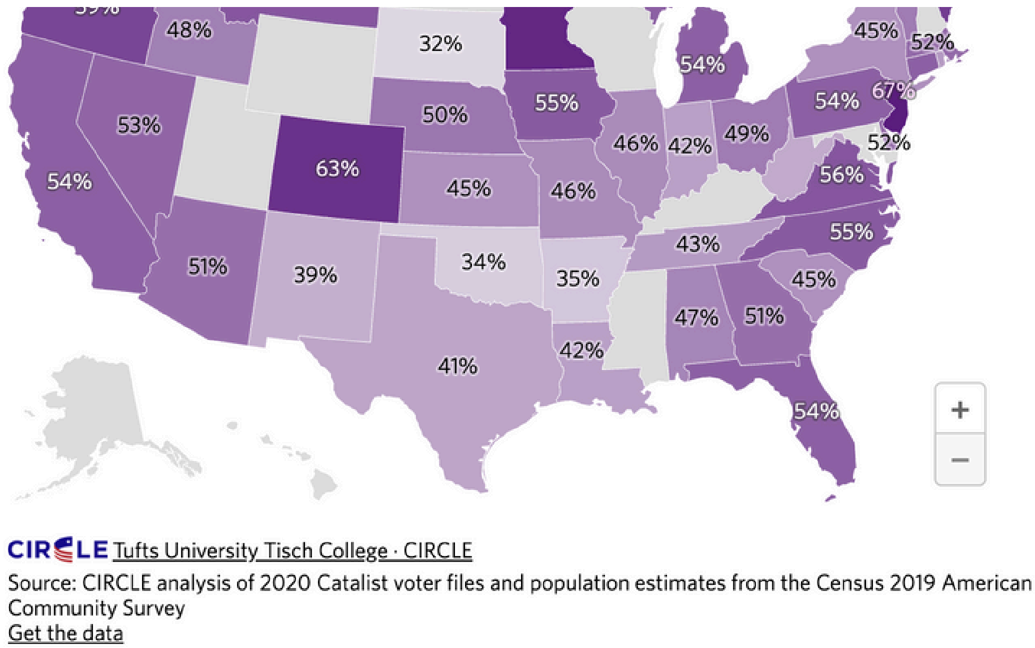


Figure 3
2020 Youth Voter Turnout: State by State
Source: CIRCLE, Tufts University, 2020.

The erosion of civic learning in American schools has been driven not only by decentralized education policy but also by shifting federal priorities. Despite widespread agreement on the importance of preparing students for civic life, civics is frequently treated as an "add-on" rather than a core academic subject (Rebell, 2018). Many states have failed to institutionalize the idea that civic preparation is a primary purpose of public education, resulting in inconsistencies in how—and whether—students are taught to engage with democratic processes (Rebell, 2018). This neglect has been exacerbated by legislation like the No Child Left Behind Act and the Every Student Succeeds Act, both of which emphasized standardized testing in math and literacy while marginalizing social studies and civics (Gould, 2011). As Rebell explains, "educational priorities… focus on basic literacy and mathematics, often at the expense of civics, history, and social studies." The outcome is a measurable decline in civic knowledge and a weakening of essential democratic competencies such as historical awareness, constitutional reasoning, and media literacy. Without consistent, meaningful civic instruction, youth are left without the tools to critically evaluate political systems, engage in informed debate, or understand their roles as democratic participants. In a society increasingly shaped by disinformation and polarization, this education gap is not just a civic failure but a democratic liability.

The democratic consequences of these disparities are significant. As Jamieson emphasizes, “schooling in civics is associated with increased civic knowledge and participation” (2013). When civic education is well-structured and equitably delivered, it has the potential to create informed, engaged citizens. International comparisons reinforce this point. In a study of developing democracies, Steven Finkel found that “civic education has significant and substantively meaningful effects on local-level political participation” in programs across South Africa and the Dominican Republic (Finkel, 2002). While the context differs, the takeaway is transferable: civic education works—especially when it is frequent, interactive, and sustained. Finkel further notes that “the effects of civic education are largely conditional… dependent on the frequency and nature of the treatment” (2002), suggesting that a single semester of textbook-driven instruction is insufficient to shape lifelong civic habits. Instead, civic development requires repeated engagement—deliberate, experiential, and embedded throughout the educational journey.

Beyond knowledge, strong civic education encourages virtues—traits such as openness, empathy, and a willingness to engage across ideological lines. As Christopher Callaway argues, “democratic citizens in particular fulfill their civic role well when they are engaged, well-informed, and open to ideas and perspectives different from their own” (Callaway, 2018). The quality of civic education students receive in school plays a measurable role in shaping their likelihood to participate in democracy. According to a 2024 national study done by CIRCLE, 81% of young people who strongly agreed that their high school experience allowed their voices and opinions to matter reported being “extremely likely” to vote in the 2024 election. In contrast, only 44% of youth who disagreed with that statement said the same thing—revealing a nearly 40-point gap in political engagement tied directly to perceived civic empowerment during adolescence (CIRCLE, 2024). This disparity illustrates how classroom climate and experiential civics instruction–such as open dialogue, deliberation, and student voice–can influence long-term patterns of participation. These values are foundational to a pluralistic society. Yet without adequate support from institutions, especially in under-resourced schools, these virtues are neither encouraged nor normalized. This gap in civic infrastructure leaves young people ill-equipped to grapple with complex political realities, deepening divisions and disillusionment across generations.

Interpersonal Networks and the Reinforcement of Ideological Conformity

While institutional and algorithmic forces shape the broad contours of youth political identity, much of that identity is stabilized—and often hardened—through peer socialization. Both online and offline peer groups serve as echo chambers where shared beliefs are validated, reinforced, and occasionally weaponized. Peer influence tends to be "generally weak" when it comes to political attitudes, but it intensifies under specific conditions: when attitudes are highly visible, when peer groups are politically engaged, and when group consensus is strong (Campbell, 1980). These situational dynamics create fertile ground for ideological conformity, especially among adolescents who seek social cohesion and approval. Earlier findings highlighting that parents typically wield greater influence over political views acknowledge that peers can become dominant influencers when issues are personally salient or socially charged, such as voting rights or campus activism (Tedin, 1980).

The role of peer groups in political socialization extends beyond mere reinforcement; they can actively shape attitudes through processes of norm-setting and behavioral modeling. Peer groups provide a social context in which group norms for various attitudes and behaviors are established and perpetuated (Poteat, 2007). While individuals often gravitate toward like-minded peers, this initial similarity only intensifies over time through socialization. "Peer group members influenced and also became more similar to each other," Poteat observes, pointing to a feedback loop that both reflects and constructs ideological identity (Poteat, 2007). In environments where dissent is implicitly discouraged or performatively punished, the cost of ideological deviation becomes steep, limiting the development of independent thought in politically formative years.

This dynamic is amplified yet again in digital contexts, where platforms cultivate group-based interactions with little ideological diversity. Though these peer networks differ from traditional friendships, they serve similar functions of validation and enforcement. Campbell's framework, which draws on Festinger's theory of social comparison, is especially relevant here: the influence of peer groups derives from their "group attractiveness" and "means control"—two factors that are only heightened in public-facing online spaces (Campbell, 1980). In this way, the interpersonal becomes inseparable from the political. Youth do not simply adopt ideas because they are rational or compelling; they adopt them because their communities reward adherence and penalize deviation. This kind of ideologically saturated peer environment stifles pluralism and forms a brittle, defensive form of political identity—one far more reactive than reflective.

Long-Term Democratic Consequences of Early Polarization

The formative years of civic identity are not only crucial for understanding adolescent political behavior—they are predictive of a lifetime of engagement or lack thereof. Scholars have long emphasized that civic habits formed during youth, particularly through voluntary associations and community-based activities, lay the groundwork for democratic participation in adulthood. Social incorporation into the body politic begins in the formative years through accumulated opportunities to be involved in groups that build civic identities and skills (Flanagan and Levine, 2010). Yet as socialization processes become increasingly fragmented and ideologically saturated, these foundational experiences are being eroded, undermining the very pipeline through which future civic actors are formed.

Participation in youth voluntary associations—such as student government, service clubs, and debate teams—has been shown to significantly influence long-term political participation. It can be asserted that "involvement in youth voluntary associations concerning community service, representation, speaking in public forums, and generating a communal identity most encourage political participation" (McFarland and Thomas, 2006). These experiences not only provide young people with practical skills but also with a sense of civic efficacy and communal belonging. However, as ideological rigidity, digital slacktivism, and institutional neglect crowd out these traditional formative experiences, the democratic impact is far from trivial. As the authors underscore, "the influence of youth voluntary associations on future political activity is nontrivial and has implications for both democratic education and election outcomes." It is further emphasized that "political identities formed in the early-adult years are highly predictive of the positions individuals will hold in middle and even late adulthood" (Flanagan and Levine, 2010). This makes early civic experiences not only formative but enduringly influential.

This erosion is especially troubling when viewed through the lens of civic orientation, a concept encompassing community service, conceptualizations of citizenship, and early civic participation. It has been argued that "a successful model of civic/political participation must account for the process by which young people acquire the values and habits that lead to civic engagement" (Crystal and DeBell, 2002). These habits are not innate; they are cultivated through meaningful opportunities to engage in community life. When these opportunities diminish, so too does the likelihood that young people will grow into politically engaged adults. "Youths who are involved in civic activities… are more likely to exhibit civic engagement in early and middle adulthood than are youths who are uninvolved" (Crystal and DeBell, 2002).

The consequences extend beyond disengagement—they represent a structural unraveling of democratic culture. As one interviewee reflects, “I think it’s very important that [youth] have the opportunity to learn, to have the experience of giving back to the community because if they have a positive experience as seniors in high school, they’ll be more likely to be lifelong stewards, giving back to the community in some way” (Schusler et al., 2009). But in the absence of such positive formative experiences, young people enter adulthood with fewer civic habits, less confidence in their political efficacy, and reduced willingness to contribute to the democratic process.

In sum, the long-term democratic consequences of today’s fragmented, polarized, and inconsistent civic socialization are clear. As the institutions and networks that once developed civic identity weaken, the result is not just ideological extremism—it is civic atrophy. Without intervention, this generation may become the first in modern American history to approach democratic citizenship with more suspicion than responsibility, and more detachment than duty.

IV. Existing Mitigation Efforts

Recognizing the civic risks of early ideological entrenchment, a range of organizations and initiatives have emerged to re-engage youth in democratic life. Nonpartisan education programs such as *iCivics*, *Generation Citizen*, and *CIRCLE’s Growing Voters Report* advocate for early, developmentally tailored civic learning that begins well before voting age. These initiatives emphasize hands-on engagement, school-based infrastructure, and equitable access—arguing that early exposure to civic opportunity encourages lasting participation.

Meanwhile, efforts like the *News Literacy Project* and *Common Sense Education* seek to improve digital discernment, combating the algorithmic echo chambers that contribute to polarization. These measures equip students with skills to critically evaluate online information, recognize misinformation, and engage responsibly with digital media—an increasingly vital component of modern civic education.

iCivics has grown to reach approximately 9 million students and 145,000 educators across all 50 states, according to its most recent published impact data (iCivics, 2024). CIRCLE conducted a randomized experimental evaluation of iCivics' "Drafting Board" module in Florida, involving over 3,700 students. Students using the module outperformed control students on blind-graded persuasive essays by a statistically significant margin ($p<.001$), even after accounting for demographic and school-level variables (Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2012). This demonstrated iCivics' measurable impact on students' argumentation skills with just a few classroom sessions.

Generation Citizen, serving more than 25,000 students across multiple states, equips students with action-based civic skills—its programs have produced large effect sizes in civic engagement: treatment group students ranked in the 72nd percentile of civic engagement vs. 35th for controls, indicating dramatically higher civic development (quasi-experimental design, Cohen et al., 2013). Additional analysis showed students participating in Generation Citizen programs exhibited a 26 percent greater civic self-efficacy than their peers who did not, and nearly 70 percent of teachers reported improved student belief in their ability to effect change (Ward, 2022).

Media literacy initiatives have also expanded to address the digital dimension of youth civic formation. The News Literacy Project's Checkology platform shows that students who completed its modules improved their ability to identify credible news from misinformation—students correctly recognized more credible sources (a 27-point gain) and recognized when social media posts lacked evidence (an 18-point gain) (Checkology, 2024). In a national 2024 SSRS survey of 1,110 teens, 94 percent agreed that media literacy education should be required in schools, yet fewer than 39 percent reported actually receiving it (News Literacy Project, 2024). The gap underscores how widespread support for these programs contrasts sharply with limited access in practice. Similarly, Common Sense Education's digital citizenship curriculum has reached over 72,000 schools and 500,000 educators—and independent evaluation found measurable gains in critical thinking and decision-making related to online disinformation after just six weeks of instruction (Herold, 2018).

Despite demonstrated success, these efforts remain largely decentralized and inconsistently implemented across schools and states—especially in lower-income districts. Without federal or statewide integration, funding stability, or curricular mandates, even effective programs often remain as isolated pilot initiatives rather than scalable civic infrastructure. As such, they function more as stopgap measures than as a systemic solution to the deeply embedded forces shaping youth political identity.

Toward a More Engaged Generation

While existing programs like iCivics and CIRCLE offer promising frameworks for civic engagement, their reach remains uneven—particularly in under-resourced districts with limited instructional time or staff capacity. This inequity suggests structural reform may be necessary to ensure equitable access nationwide. One potential solution would be to federalize civic education by establishing a nonpartisan, nationally standardized curriculum as a graduation requirement across public schools. Overseen by a bipartisan commission isolated from political swings, such an initiative could guard against ideological manipulation while reinforcing foundational civic competencies.

The demand for such reform is supported by evidence: a 2021 report from the Educating for American Democracy (EAD) initiative found that the federal government spends only $0.05 per student per year on civics education, compared to approximately $50 per student on STEM subjects (Educating for American Democracy, 2023). Further, EAD found that fewer than half of U.S. students receive a high-quality civics education, with schools serving low-income students and majority Black and Brown students disproportionately underserved (Center for Economic Development, 2023). These stark disparities reflect the reality that, without structural reform, civic opportunity remains deeply unequal across lines of geography and resources.

Though quixotic, a unified civic infrastructure may be one of the most powerful tools for combating early ideological entrenchment and promoting informed, participatory citizens. Without it, existing interventions—no matter how effective—remain fragmented and temporary, leaving millions of students civically underprepared based on their ZIP code alone. While further exploration of implementation strategies falls outside the scope of this paper, this proposal offers a foundation upon which policymakers could build a more equitable civic future.

V. Conclusion

As ideological rigidity creeps further into adolescence, the challenge of polarization transforms from a crisis of institutions to a crisis of identity. Youth are no longer entering adulthood as blank political slates—they are arriving already entrenched, shaped by unequal education, algorithmic echo chambers, and peer networks that reward conformity over reflection. While civic identity has always been socialized, today's socialization is happening faster, harder, and with fewer safeguards for democratic nuance. If left unaddressed, this premature polarization risks producing generations of citizens less capable of compromise, more vulnerable to extremism, and increasingly distrustful of the institutions meant to serve them. To preserve democratic resilience, scholars and policymakers alike must treat youth political development not as a passive byproduct of adulthood—but as the front line of civic repair. To do that, we must begin where polarization begins: before the ballot.

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Author Bios

Jordan Tovar Miranda
Ayushmaan Mukherjee
Taïphane Orange
Olivia Blauser
Michelle H. Young

Jordan Tovar Miranda

Jordan Miranda is a graduate student at American University in Washington, D.C., where he is pursuing a master's degree in U.S Foreign Policy and National Security with a concentration in diplomacy and international conflict-resolution. He holds a bachelor's degree in International Relations and Global Security from the American Public University System, with a concentration in comparative politics. His academic and professional interests center on U.S. grand strategy, economic and industrial statecraft, and international security, with particular attention to regional affairs and great-power competition. Jordan contributes policy research and analysis through think tank and independent publication work, including with EPIS Think Tank as part of its Eurasian Affairs Working Group. His work has appeared in the Foreign Analysis Magazine, EPIS, Academia.edu, reaching over 40 countries with audiences of scholars, students, and policy experts. In addition to his research and writing, Jordan has participated in policy-focused fellowships and training programs emphasizing practical engagement with governance and institutions. This includes a fellowship with the United States Energy Association and peacebuilding and post-conflict statebuilding training with the Public International Law & Policy Group, as well as participation in crisis simulations, OSINT training, and permanent membership into Pi Gamma Mu. Through his work, Jordan aims to translate complex foreign policy and security issues into clear, accessible, and policy-relevant analysis.

Ayushmaan Mukherjee

Ayushmaan Mukherjee is a senior at Bridgewater-Raritan High School, NJ, interested in majoring in political economy with a passion for policy and advocacy. He is the Founder of the Global Virtual Model United Nations (GVMUN), a nonprofit that has hosted conferences and policy initiatives that have reached over 50k from 30+ countries, as well as contributed to an advocacy document presented at COP30. Being a Pioneer Research '25 Scholar and Civics Unplugged '24 Fellow, he has also conducted independent research on automation at the Stevens Institute of Technology. As International Advocacy Chair at Whitestone Legislative Advocacy, he represents the organization in multilateral forums and helps draft policy proposals for various global issues. In the future, he plans to pursue a career working in intergovernmental bodies and think tanks, addressing issues in international trade and development.

Taïphane Orange

Taïphane (tayi~fan) Orange is currently pursuing her Master's in Public Administration at Rutgers University. While pursuing her master's at Rutgers University, she also works at Martin Bontempo Inc. MBI, a lobbying firm in Trenton, where she assists government affairs agents in the development of proactive government relations strategies and initiatives for their clients. Taïphane, a passionate advocate for women's rights, has recently been selected as a fellow at the Women's Political Caucus of New Jersey's 2026 cohort. Having graduated from Brookdale Community College with an Associate's degree in Political Science. She later transferred to Monmouth University, where she graduated with honors, earning a bachelor's degree in Political Science with a concentration in International Relations and a minor in Spanish. While being a student at Monmouth, she served for a year on the board of trustees at Brookdale as the "Student Graduate Trustee". Taïphane enjoys reading, swimming, watching drama shows, and discovering new places. Taïphane is very passionate about social issues, specifically education and elder care. She consistently finds ways to grow from each experience.

Olivia Blauser

Olivia Blauser is a junior at Tennessee State University, a historically Black college and university (HBCU), majoring in Political Science with concentrations in Public Policy and Pre-Law. Her academic interests focus on social policy, poverty, government assistance, and how public institutions shape life outcomes for marginalized communities. Outside the classroom, Olivia works as a Community Organizer with Rhizome, serves as an Ambassador for Across the Aisle and the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, interned in the U.S. House of Representatives, and currently works with the Metropolitan Nashville and Davidson County Mayor's Office. She was also a selected attendee of the Harvard Kennedy School Public Policy Leadership Conference (Fall 2025). Grounded in the legacy of HBCUs and Black leadership, Olivia pursues public service to help pave the way for more equitable and representative policy spaces.

Michelle H. Young

Michelle Young is a third-year undergraduate at Arizona State University double majoring in Business Law and Political Science with minors in Justice Studies and International Relations. Her academic interests focus on political polarization, democratic governance, and the ways institutional dysfunction disproportionately impacts American citizens. She is deeply engaged in policy analysis and legislative research, with experience in constituent services and state-level governance, including serving as a Constituent Services Intern for Phoenix Mayor Kate Gallego; in Spring 2026, she will work as a Legislative Research Intern with the Arizona State Senate. She also studied abroad on a global Semester at Sea voyage, which strengthened her interest in international governance and comparative political systems. In her free time, Michelle enjoys traveling, skydiving, and spending time with her two cats.