Combatting the Causes and Consequences of Affective Polarization
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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Affective polarization (AP) is the growing emotional divide between political groups. Instead of focusing on policy differences, AP is defined by animosity towards party affiliations. Leading to distrust, avoidance, and hostility, AP threatens relationships, democracy, and civil order. This brief will cover how AP creates challenges and can be combated with policy implementations.

II. OVERVIEW

Affective polarization and disagreement are deeply ingrained in American identity.

At its fundamental aspect, this concept draws on social identity theory (SIT), where people develop their identity through interaction with society. Involving social categorization, comparison, and identification, citizens classify themselves into specific groups. These classifications influence attitudes towards one's own group (the in-group) and shape opinions against other groups (the out-group).

The inclination to align social identities (i.e., gender, nationality, race, religion, geography) with party identity contributes to growing polarization as it elicits strong emotional attachments to one's political identities. Often, this emotional attachment results in comparison with in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination. Divergent beliefs are then heightened among news outlets and other resources with selective exposure, highlighting in-groups and perpetuating negative views towards the out-groups. Known as echo chambers, the SIT commonly amplifies one belief and curates one-sided, narrow thinking.

While Affective Polarization can increase voting turnout, it reduces moderates and independents, who often fear their vote being drowned out. Additionally, with an all-or-nothing identity, challenges among political beliefs become personal attacks, heightening hostilities within political groups.

Hence, this paper investigates the root causes behind why affective polarization has developed to this extremity, focusing on its direct negative impact on democracy, and how civic engagement can continue to be increased without political extremities.

A. Relevance

The feeling thermometer is a scale first used by the American National Election Study in 1964 to rank feelings towards political parties, with the warmer, the more favorable. In a study from the Northwestern Institute for Policy Research, the average feeling thermometer scores towards "out groups" have dropped from 48 degrees in the 1970s to 20 degrees today. They also found the average feeling thermometer differential averaged about 20 degrees in the 1970s, and today, it's now

roughly -10 degrees. In part, this can be attributed to the current media environment. With a rise in social media, it brings 24-hour news sources and algorithms that are designed to lead to echo chambers, escalating one negative view. It can also be attributed to cancel culture (fueling "us vs them", utilized for group animosity and division).

Evidenced by the 2020 election, this can be seen through uncivil conversations and interactions. In the aftermath of the 2020 election, this manifested into a refusal to accept electoral outcomes and the January 6th insurrection, where property was stolen, vandalized, and police officers were attacked, highlighting the extremity of political hostilities. This translates to the highly polarized climate of the 2024 election as well, marking an election with more voters holding extreme views from both sides of the political spectrum.

Recently, in Congress, legislators have been experiencing gridlock, as the government first shut down at 12:01 a.m. October 1st. Unable to agree on a federal budget and becoming the second-longest government shutdown in U.S. history, Congressmen aren't able to take action on key problems or pay federal workers. Fueled by affective polarization and the inability to compromise between parties, this is extremely detrimental to the U.S.. Overall, polarization is a significant issue that requires attention due to the growing threats to democracy.

HISTORY

A. Current Stances

Affective polarization (AP) isn't new, dating back to the founding of the U.S and its first party system. Over time, polarization has shifted in both intensity and nature, becoming extremely personal and fragmenting society in unprecedented ways.

In a study by Princeton University of 20 countries, the United States was ranked 8th in affective polarization, indicating the number of citizens who hold negative feelings towards the opposing side, being unwilling to compromise or engage in dialogue across party lines. In fact, when asked to describe the recent political climate in the United States in a single word or phrase, an overwhelming majority of Americans (79%) expressed a negative sentiment. Just 2% offered a positive word.

AP brings a significant barrier to compromise and the political process. 84% of adults say political debate has become less respectful over the last several years, and according to YouGov, 29% of U.S. adults believe a civil war is somewhat likely in the next decade, and 14% think it is very likely. This is because, historically, the U.S. is more polarized now than ever before.

Stereotypes about the 'other' also drive AP and are directly linked to its rise in society. According to numerous studies, it is a common bias to assume the other party is a threat to democracy, dishonest, and immoral, hence unworthy of being viewed remotely in the same light. In recent years, society has become close-minded, even refusing to date or live with someone holding opposite political views, leading to more division along party lines.

III. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

It is given that the primary stakeholders are the American public, especially those who are

actively involved in the political climate and voting in elections. Additionally, digitally active individuals are easily influenced by media such as TikTok and X, platforms that regularly spread misinformation or perpetuate one side of an argument. As a result, democratic institutions are stakeholders as they become prone to political violence from radicalized groups and views. Politicians and governmental figures are also stakeholders as polarization places them in gridlock, affects their workplace atmosphere, performance, and productivity. Being in a bipartisan committee, they stand to benefit from reducing polarization and bridging relationships between ideological parties. Without extensive action, our country will further divide, contributing to an increase in hostilities.

B. Risks of Indifference
The risk of indifference to Affective Polarization lies within its pure nature to divide the country and the resulting loss of productivity and of trust. Failing to invest in prevention, it is a given that Affective Polarization would continue to increase rapidly within society. This could result in a steady decline of public confidence in government officials and institutions. Continued inaction due to political indifference will produce violence and irreparable rifts. Therefore, it only makes sense for there to be action, rather than inaction.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning
Because Affective Polarization affects both individual relationships and communities as a whole, bleeding into the well-being of democracy, nonpartisan intervention must take place. The benefits of such intervention include, but are not limited to, the following:

1) Protection of Democracy and Elections: Dislike for the other party elicits emotions such as anger, fear, and anxiety, prompting polarized voters, and the idea that the opposite view is a threat to democracy. Polarized citizens often become disconnected, disengaged, and apathetic towards democratic ideals, being more likely to resort to violence and terrorism. Affective polarization also creates a barrier for non-extremist voters, who either misperceive a party's negative views or don't want to be associated with the toxicity of the voting environment. Therefore, with its removal, it would encourage participation, increase moderate audiences, and reinstate democratic ideals.

2) Productivity in Congress: As is now made explicit through recent studies and actions, polarization hinders elected officials' ability to approach issues, such as health care or the national budget, leading to difficulty passing legislation, partisan gridlock, and governmental shutdowns. When society works together, instead of against one another, they have proven to increase success in lawmaking. Bridging ideological divides within bipartisan coalitions is necessary to bring an abundance of prosperity.

3) Daily life and social cohesion: Mutual distrust among Republicans and Democrats highlights the need for a correction of misguided beliefs about the opposing party, including stereotypes and biases, all in an effort to reduce extremist and radicalized beliefs. This, in turn, will build trust, relationships, and stability.

States, cities, and towns shouldn't have to be separated by ideological differences, and neither should friendships or relationships.

V. TRIED POLICY

In the United States, there has been little to no tried policy on reducing affective polarization. Since polarization is hard to legislate and politically sensitive, the U.S. has taken more approaches to prevent its root causes and fewer to directly mitigate polarization.

One proposal was the Fair Representation Act. The goal of the Fair Representation Act was to introduce ranked choice voting (RCV) as a way to appeal to a broader range of voters. RCV is used in Alaska, Maine, Hawaii, and other local elections. Additionally, there have been attempts at regulating social media, AI, gerrymandering, and campaign corruption, a few of the root causes of AP.

Policy options, or the absence of policy options, therefore, allow polarization to rise, creating a need for potent change.

Globally, however, the UK has used a Citizens' assembly, a government-initiated process that randomly selects 108 members to discuss, debate, and vote on crucial issues, such as Brexit and climate change.

In a similar fashion, due to the complexity of polarization, efforts in the U.S. have become primarily non-governmental organizations. An abundance of civil discourse initiatives and bipartisan commissions have been produced, including BridgeUSA, More in Common, The Listen First Coalition, and more. However, the impact of these groups remains limited, and despite their efforts, the government needs a comprehensive plan. Younger generations need to continue to pressure the government to pass legislation mitigating polarization.

IV. POLICY OPTIONS

Establish an oversight committee regarding combating the root causes of polarization, or CRCOP.

Polarization is deeply rooted in the rise of social media, the inequality gap, gerrymandering, corrupt politicians, and more. This proposal seeks to establish a federal oversight committee in charge of implementing policies, rules, and regulations to combat each root cause. For example, concerning social media, this committee would allocate a smaller sub-committee to require social media algorithm transparency regulations, requiring platforms to disclose their analytics to combat misinformation. Similarly, in other aspects, CRCOP could establish strict limits on spending and donations within campaigns to combat the perception of an elitist or special interest group. While a big responsibility, complex, and multifaceted, addressing root issues can help prevent heightened polarization.

Expansion of societal initiatives involving civil discourse

This proposed legislation would expand on pre-existing bodies of civil discourse that serve to bridge the deepening ideological divides. It proposes ensuring every community has access to one of these programs. Including, but not limited to, collaborating with public universities and community colleges to create a variety of campus chapters. It would also enact educational requirements and resources for schools and

communities, such as classes dedicated to learning how to disagree respectfully among peers.

Summer Leadership programs for the youth
State education departments would fund summer programs for students who want to get involved in leadership, politics, democracy, and change. Research has shown that today, the youth are more polarized than ever before. This serves as a problem, as the youth are the future of our country. Research also shows that when provided a choice between picking their political party or nationality, the data shows everyone aligns with nationality. By providing resources for students to get involved in politics, without ideological affiliation, and to feel a sense of belonging, it could help overcome and prevent the rise in polarization. Especially with classes offered at this summer program dedicated to civil discourse and respectful use of language.

VII. Conclusions

Affective Polarization has been shown to create a challenge to democracy and productivity within the government. It has also been shown to hinder societal cohesion and relationships among peers. As the divide deepens, so does mistrust. However, it is not wholly reversible. Through expanding on civil discourse groups and reinforcing shared values and ideas, the U.S. can prosper and work together again. Action and policy must take place now to safeguard our citizens.

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