NEWS DIGRESSION AND POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract

Political polarization in the United States has grown substantially in recent decades, fueled by both social and political factors. Among these, changes in media structures and the decline in journalistic integrity have played significant roles. This paper briefly explores the historical evolution of political polarization in the U.S., the rise of biased news media, and the role social media has played in exacerbating polarization yet also creating misperceptions about existing political divides.

The Growth of Political Polarization in the U.S.

The history of the United States' two-party system can be traced back to debates over the Constitution and whether it should be ratified. Federalists who sought a strong central government supported the Constitution while Anti-Federalists who sought a weak central government opposed the Constitution. Though it was ultimately adopted, this schism soon evolved into the "Party Wars" of the 1790s, pitting Federalists versus the new Democratic-Republican Party.

Over the centuries, the names, ideologies, and supporters of American political sects have evolved, but the tradition of two major political parties remains. On the one hand, the two-party system has served as a force against extremist ideology. In pluralistic governments, fringe parties can be seated in government with even a small percentage of the vote. But in a two-party system, party leaders often weed out extreme candidates and policies in order to appeal to a majority of American voters.

This structure, however, has also rendered American politics, at times, a zero-sum game, as each party's success often comes at the direct expense of the other. In 2010, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell—a Republican—infamously said, "The single most important thing" his caucus wanted "to achieve is for [Democratic] President Obama to be a one-term president" (Barr, 2010).

A half century prior, though, the ideological differences between Democrats and Republicans were relatively minimal. This changed during the 1960s and 1970s as key social developments, including the Civil Rights Movement (Collins, 1997), Vietnam War protests (Young, 2015), and the Women's Rights Movement (Friedan, 1963), brought to the surface significant ideological rifts (Farber, 1994.).

By the 1990s, the "Republican Revolution" and the rise of figures such as Newt Gingrich shifted the GOP's legislative approach, making obstruction a central strategy in Congress (Strahan & Palazzolo, 2004). This shift intensified with McConnell's use of the filibuster (McConnell, 2019), leading to increased legislative gridlock that helped further polarize Congress (Rahman, 2018) as well as the American public. Donald Trump's first presidency deepened this polarization (Dimock & Gramlich, 2021) but was also a reflection of an existing trend rather than its origin ("U.S. is polarizing faster", 2021).

The Growth of News Bias in the United States

The decline of local newspapers and traditional news media has coincided with the growth of the internet, which has transformed the news industry (Barthel et al., 2020) and contributed to increased political polarization (Ellger et al., 2024). From 2006 to 2020, newspaper advertising revenue declined by over 80% and newsroom employment fell from 75,000 to 30,000 (Insoll, 2022). Local newspapers have been hit particularly hard, with approximately one-quarter of all U.S. newspapers closing in the last two decades, creating vast "news deserts" (Zayed, 2023).

The rise of cable news networks and talk radio has also contributed to news bias, with Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN each providing politically distinct perspectives. Today, there are countless outlets, and now podcasts, that cater to a person's specific world view, serving to reinforce their already established perspective. Studies have found that viewers of partisan news outlets tend to have stronger negative feelings toward the opposing party, a phenomenon known as "affective polarization" (Iyengar et al., 2019). This has been intensified by the shift toward entertainment-focused news, where neutral commentary—if not accurate reporting itself—is often deprioritized for engagement (Griffing, 2023).

The Role of Social Media in Reinforcing Bias and Misinformation

Social media has further fragmented the American news landscape, creating echo chambers (see Figure 1) where users are exposed primarily to information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs (Cinelli et al., 2021). During the 2016 U.S. presidential election, platforms like Facebook actively tailored content to align with users' political views, deepening ideological divides (Kim et al., 2018). Algorithms prioritize content that maximizes engagement, which can inadvertently amplify misinformation; in fact, misinformation on Facebook received six times the engagement of factual news during the 2020 election (Edelson et al., 2021).

Figure 1

Graphic Depiction of an Echo Chamber (European Center for Populism Studies)

Note. This image appears on the page "Echo Chamber" in the Dictionary of Populism *by the European Center for Populism Studies.*

The widespread use of smartphones has facilitated this issue, with about 86% of Americans receiving news digitally (Pew Research Center, 2024a) and approximately half getting their news at least part of the time from social media (Pew Research Center, 2024b). It is, thus, problematic that Meta recently announced it has eliminated its factchecking program (Chan et al., 2025) and will instead rely on "community notes", similar to what X now provides.

Another component to this problem is the role Russia has recently played in efforts to divide Americans and erode their trust in U.S. institutions. For instance, during the 2016 federal election, Russian operatives clandestinely created social media pages and profiles meant to pit Americans of multiple political persuasions against each other. In one example, Russia created a Facebook group with 250,000 followers that opposed the Islamization of Texas while creating another Facebook group—"United Muslims of America"—with 328,000 followers. The effort resulted in what essentially became a protest and counterprotest on the same day, time, and location that turned confrontational. The cost of the ads promoting the protests were a mere $200 (Lucas, 2017).

Consequences of Political Polarization and News Digression

The increasing polarization has had severe consequences for American democracy. Studies indicate that the lack of reliable local news sources and the proliferation of social media misinformation contribute to a lower quality of governance, higher levels of political corruption, and greater partisanship among elected officials (Hook & Verdeja, 2022). The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) downgraded the U.S. from a "full democracy" to a "flawed democracy", citing significant erosion of democratic norms and processes (2016). Similarly, Freedom House's Democracy Score for the U.S. has declined by six points since 2017, from 89 (Freedom House, 2017) to 83 (Freedom House, 2024), partly due to increased political violence, misinformation, and election-related conspiracy theories (Freedom House, 2024).

A notable example of the impact of polarization was seen on January 6, 2021, when a mob attacked the United States Capitol on the false premise—fueled by partisans in the news and social media—that Trump had the presidential election stolen from him. Shortly after, 30 percent of Republicans and 11 percent of Democrats believed that "true American patriots might have to resort to violence in order to save our country" (Public Religion Research Institute, 2021).

Another notable example can be seen in public health, in which misinformation about COVID-19 contributed to a significant number of preventable deaths (Martinez & Aubrey, 2022). By 2022, analysis suggested that nearly 319,000 deaths could have been prevented had every adult been vaccinated (Simmons-Duffin & Nakajima, 2022). Unlikely as this may have been, it suggests that without the scourge of mass misinformation, a better public information campaign and adherence to health guidelines would have saved, perhaps, hundreds of thousands of lives.

The Cycle of Misperceptions

Yet, despite the evidence above, the polarization effect is also magnified by public misperceptions regarding the *extent* of ideological differences. Research by the Carnegie Foundation suggests that Americans may not be as polarized as they perceive themselves to be, with overlap in views on issues like gun control and reproductive rights (Kleinfeld, 2023). The research surmises that the greatest misperceptions are held by the most politically active who hold the strongest

feelings against their opposing party. It's worth noting that such Americans are also more likely to consume partisan news (Stroud & Curry, 2015).

For years, political scientists pondered if the growth in public polarization was caused by elected officials becoming more polarized, or if *political* polarization was caused by the *public* becoming more polarized. Whether the former or the latter, elected officials are, in fact, highly polarized (Kleinfeld, 2023). This is not likely to change anytime soon in Congress. There, the proliferation of gerrymandering by both parties and non-competitive congressional districts (Cillizza, 2021) only serve to incentivize partisanship in order for candidates to win primaries and stay in office. As previously discussed, such partisanship in Congress causes public polarization, which is exacerbated by the state of news and social media in the United States. And the cycle continues.

Concluding Thoughts

A shift in media standards and the rise of biased news sources have not only intensified polarization but fostered the perception of a real—yet exaggerated—nation divided. Further, the decline of local news, growth of partisan media, and prevalence of misinformation on social platforms have each played a role in deepening this divide, affecting the quality of democratic governance in the United States.

Moving forward, understanding and mitigating the effects of media digression on political polarization will be critical to fostering a healthier democratic society.

Among the tools most championed to lay this foundation is media literacy education at the grade school level—*before* young people become politically entrenched and, hopefully, begin to vote. While the data surrounding the efficacy of such education is limited, what is available has shown the ability to counteract the effects of misinformation (Huguet, 2019). This is important, because research indicates that young people lack even the most basic skills to circumnavigate the perils of the digital age (Breakstone et al., 2019).

At the same time, just seven of 50 states have taken "significant steps toward comprehensive media literacy education" through legislation, reports Media Literacy Now, a self-described "politically neutral advocacy nonprofit." Another 12 states have "advanced media literacy" through legislation; while seven separate states have "legislation pending" (McNeill, 2024).

But like many educational efforts in the United States, funding has proven to be a challenge (DiGiacomo et al., 2023). And ironically—or perhaps, fittingly—politics

could also prove an inhibitor. Education in the United States is largely determined by the individual states, most of which lean progressive or conservative. Efforts to improve media literacy also provide the opportunity for partisan lawmakers to cast certain outlets or perspectives as factual at the expense of those counter to their own ideologies (Sailer, 2021). One could argue, then, that there is no silver bullet to cure polarization in the United States—other than the will to do so.

At the very least, there ought to be bipartisan support for media literacy education since it need not exclusively focus on news or politics. According to the U.S. Surgeon General, "The mental health crisis among young people is an emergency — and social media has emerged as an important contributor" (Murthy, 2024).

For this reason, the U.S. Surgeon General has issued numerous suggestions regarding social media policy and best practices to policymakers, technology companies, parents and caregivers, and children and adolescents. But among them is, critically, developing efforts toward "learning and utilizing digital media literacy skills to help tell the difference between fact and opinion" (U.S. Surgeon General, 2023).

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