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Reducing Political Polarization

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Introduction

Political polarization has become one of the defining characteristics of modern American politics. The growing ideological and emotional divide between Democrats and Republicans has influenced voting behavior, public discourse, policymaking, and social relationships. While disagreement is a natural component of democracy, polarization becomes problematic when political opponents are viewed not merely as people with different ideas but as threats to society's functioning. This dynamic has contributed to legislative gridlock, declining trust in institutions, and increased conflict between citizens.

Understanding polarization requires examining both its historical roots and the contemporary forces that sustain it. Political parties have always represented competing visions of government and society, but recent developments have intensified these divisions. Factors such as party sorting, gerrymandering, media fragmentation, identity politics, and declining civic engagement have all contributed to the current political climate. At the same time, research suggests that education, civic-mindedness, and meaningful dialogue can help reduce political hostility and strengthen democratic institutions. This paper explores the causes of political polarization and identifies strategies for promoting unity while maintaining political diversity, ranging from restructuring election rules to rebuilding trust among citizens, leaders, and the institutions meant to serve them both.

Historical Context

Political polarization is often described as a modern phenomenon, yet American political history demonstrates that intense partisan division has existed throughout much of the nation's development. Political parties were created to organize competing interests and viewpoints, making some degree of polarization inevitable. Historically, parties have frequently engaged in fierce political competition and ideological conflict (Brady & Han, 2007).

One of the most polarized periods in American history occurred during the Civil War era. During this time, debates over slavery, secession, and civil rights created profound moral divisions between political factions. Party coalitions were highly cohesive, and ideological differences were clearly defined. The passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 intensified these conflicts, helping transform the Republican Party from a small political movement into a national political force. Voter turnout surged as citizens became deeply invested in these issues, demonstrating that polarization extended beyond political elites into the broader electorate (Brady & Han, 2007).

Another significant period of polarization emerged during the transition to an industrial economy and later during the Great Depression. Political debates centered on the role of government in regulating the economy and responding to economic crises. While these disputes were intense, they largely focused on competing solutions to shared economic challenges rather than fundamental moral disagreements. According to scholars, moral conflicts are often more difficult to resolve than economic disagreements because they involve competing visions of right and wrong rather than differences in policy preferences alone (Brady & Han, 2007).

The historical record suggests that polarization is most severe when ideological differences are reinforced by strong party cohesion and broad public participation. Modern polarization shares several characteristics with earlier periods, particularly the integration of political conflict into citizens' identities and everyday lives, with many arguing that differences in political opinions cannot be reduced to mere ideology and that they are actually differences in morals.

Party Sorting & Ideological Divide

A significant factor contributing to today's political polarization is party sorting, which is the trend where conservatives are more likely to identify as Republicans, while liberals increasingly identify as Democrats. As the ideological gap between the two parties has widened, voters are increasingly likely to align with the party that best reflects their political beliefs. Research suggests that polarization is connected not only to ideological differences but also to the organizational structure of political parties. Strong and cohesive parties can screen candidates and encourage moderation, while weaker party organizations may allow more ideologically extreme candidates to emerge. When parties cannot effectively regulate candidate selection, political entrepreneurs and interest groups often fill the gap, pushing candidates toward the ideological extremes (McCarty, 2015).

The rise of partisan media, activist networks, and highly engaged political donors has further amplified ideological sorting. Candidates increasingly appeal to partisan primary voters rather than moderate general-election voters; states with weaker party organizations frequently experience greater legislative polarization, particularly among Republican legislators. This trend suggests that contemporary polarization may be driven not simply by strong parties but by party systems that lack the ability to discipline extreme candidates and balance competing interests.

The relationship between party organization and polarization is both strong and statistically significant, and the results remain consistent even after accounting for factors such as region, economic inequality, and racial composition. It was observed that a variable showing a positive coefficient for Democrats and a negative coefficient for Republicans tends to decrease polarization. While the effect on Democratic legislators is positive, it is relatively small and imprecise. In contrast, the impact on Republicans is substantial. This finding aligns with several studies that link the recent rise in polarization to the rightward shift of the Republican Party. (McCarty, 2015).

As ideological identities become more closely linked to party labels, citizens are increasingly likely to view politics through a binary framework. This framework reinforces an environment in which compromise is often interpreted as weakness rather than effective governance.

Gerrymandering

Gerrymandering has also played an important role in increasing political polarization. By strategically drawing electoral district boundaries, political parties can create districts that favor their candidates and reduce electoral competition. Advances in data analytics and mapping technology have made modern gerrymandering increasingly effective and prominent. Following the 2010 census, extensive redistricting efforts allowed parties to maximize electoral advantages in many states. Geographic polarization further intensified the effects of gerrymandering as Democratic voters became more concentrated in urban areas while Republican voters became increasingly concentrated in rural and suburban regions. This pattern reduced the number of competitive congressional districts and strengthened partisan advantages (Jasny et al, 2025).

The decline in competitive elections has important consequences for political behavior. In districts where one party dominates, general elections often become less meaningful because the outcome is largely predetermined. Instead, primary elections become the decisive contests - candidates must therefore focus on appealing to highly partisan primary voters, who are often more ideologically extreme than the broader electorate. As representatives become increasingly accountable to partisan activists rather than moderate constituents, incentives for bipartisan cooperation decline (Jasny et al, 2025).

While gerrymandering is not the sole cause of polarization, it contributes to a political environment that rewards partisan loyalty and discourages compromise. The result is a Congress that often reflects ideological extremes rather than the public's diverse views.

Social Media, Media, and Echo Chambers

The rise of digital communication has transformed the way citizens consume political information. Social media platforms allow individuals to access vast amounts of news and commentary, but they also create opportunities for political echo chambers. In these instances, users mostly interact with content and accounts that reinforce their existing beliefs, limiting exposure to different perspectives (Barberá, 2020). Algorithms on social networking sites often prioritize content that maximizes user engagement. Therefore, because emotionally charged and political content often elicits stronger reactions, users may encounter content that reinforces political divisions. Scholars have argued that these systems contribute to “filter bubbles”, where individuals receive information that confirms their viewpoints while limiting exposure to challenging ideas, which can increase distrust of political opponents and create the perception that one’s personal views are universally shared (Barberá, 2020).

However, research presents a more nuanced image. Some studies suggest that social media users encounter more political disagreement online than they do in interpersonal, offline settings. Exposure to coworkers, acquaintances, and distant social connections can introduce a wider range of viewpoints. Nonetheless, repeated encounters with opposing perspectives do not always produce political moderation - in *highly* polarized environments, increased awareness of political identities may actually heighten emotional hostility toward political opponents.

Cultural/Identity-Based Division

Recent research highlights the central role of identity in political polarization. Bauer, Chen, Hett, and Kosfeld found that group identity influences belief formation in distinct and important ways. Their experiments demonstrated that individuals develop biased prior beliefs, select informational sources, and evaluate knowledge and topics differently depending on the political beliefs they identify with. Participants consistently expected better outcomes when their preferred political candidates won and were more likely to trust information from members of their own political group (Bauer et al, 2023). It is important to acknowledge that personal upbringing, parental beliefs, and access to resources significantly shape biases and affiliations with specific political parties. Individuals from similar cultural backgrounds and upbringings often exhibit comparable political views.

Group identity shapes how individuals perceive reality itself - political polarization is not merely a disagreement over personal beliefs and how those beliefs influence perceptions of facts. Reducing visibility of partisan identities decreased outgroup information avoidance by nearly 50 percent, suggesting that polarization can be reduced when political labels become less prominent.

A mechanism called “source utility”, which explains that people value information differently based on who provides it, rather than solely on its factual content, was taken into account when study participants showed a preference for avoiding information from political opponents. They placed approximately 33 percent more weight on information from their own group and even sacrificed financial incentives to avoid receiving information from opposing political groups (Bauer et al., 2023). While extreme views drive political polarization, intolerance for interacting with differing viewpoints is what reinforces it.

The Civic Mindset

To address polarization, scholars advocate for developing a civic mindset. Daniel Shapiro argues that modern politics is often shaped by a partisan mindset characterized by adversarial thinking, self-righteousness, and insularity. Individuals operating within this framework tend to highlight interpersonal differences, prioritize loyalty to their political “tribe”, and avoid engagement with political opponents (Shapiro, 2021).

In contrast, however, a civic mindset emphasizes identification as fellow citizens rather than members of opposing political parties. This perspective encourages cooperation, pluralism, and concern for the broader community, since citizens with a civic mindset recognize that multiple perspectives can coexist and that democratic societies require both competition *and* collaboration. Rather than abandoning political identities, they place them within the broader framework of shared citizenship (Shapiro, 2021).

Shapiro argues that fostering loyalty to democratic institutions and encouraging cooperative problem-solving can help citizens address societal changes more effectively. A strong civic

culture enables disagreement without dehumanization and encourages individuals to work together despite ideological differences.

Education

Education is one of the most promising tools for reducing political polarization - schools provide opportunities for young people to interact with diverse viewpoints, develop critical thinking skills, and learn democratic norms. Research by Levy, Babb-Guerra, Batt, and Owczarek found that students who participated in an extended political simulation, the “Legislative Semester,” became more politically engaged and open-minded than students enrolled in traditional government courses (Levy et al., 2019). The study demonstrated that exposure to diverse perspectives in a supportive classroom environment fostered open-minded political engagement. Students benefited from researching controversial issues, debating policy alternatives, and examining differing viewpoints respectfully.

Importantly, classrooms that encouraged partisan conformity were less successful in promoting political open-mindedness. These findings suggest that civic education should move beyond memorization of governmental structures and focus on developing democratic habits. Teaching students how to listen, evaluate evidence, and engage respectfully with disagreement can prepare future citizens to navigate political differences constructively and form their own informed opinions (Levy et al, 2019).

Dialogue Across Differences

Constructive dialogue is essential for reducing polarization and rebuilding social trust. Shapiro’s Connect-Respect-Transcend model provides a useful framework for facilitating meaningful

conversations across political divides. The first step, connection, involves establishing genuine human relationships before discussing political disagreements, a step that has been frequently overlooked by many people as they have formed kinship ties over the last several years. When individuals see one another as multifaceted human beings rather than partisan stereotypes, conversations become less adversarial.

The second step, respect, requires participants to resist the impulse to attack opposing viewpoints or to question others' motives. Respectful engagement creates conditions in which disagreement can exist without hostility, maintaining human connection without severing ties over political disagreement. Lastly, transcendence involves listening with the goal of learning, rather than winning. Participants seek broader understandings and identify areas of common interest despite ongoing disagreements (Shapiro, 2021).

Research on identity-based polarization further supports the importance of dialogue. Since individuals often reject information because of its source, rather than its content, reducing partisan cues and encouraging interpersonal interaction can increase openness to alternative perspectives. Meaningful engagement across differences helps weaken stereotypes, build empathy, and strengthen democratic norms.

Institutional Reforms (Electoral)

Beyond cultural and civic interventions, the structure of electoral institutions plays a significant role in shaping the degree of political polarization. The rules governing how candidates are selected and how elections are conducted create incentives that either encourage moderation or

reward ideological rigidity. Two reforms have received considerable attention from scholars and policymakers: ranked choice voting and open primaries.

Primary elections determine which candidates advance to the general election, yet participation tends to be far lower and less representative than in general elections. Research from the University of Chicago confirms that primary elections push candidates toward more partisan positions, particularly among those who face challenges from within their own party (Fowler and Fu, 2026). Because primary voters tend to hold more extreme views than the broader electorate, candidates who appeal to moderate voters often find themselves at a disadvantage. This structural reality helps explain why legislative behavior has grown increasingly polarized even as public opinion on many issues has remained comparatively moderate.

Figure 3. Map of Congressional Primary Types by Party, 2000–2024

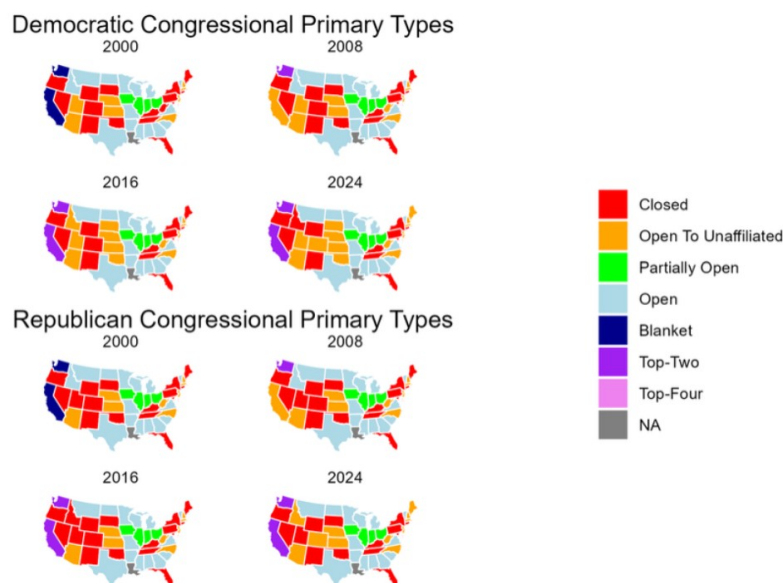


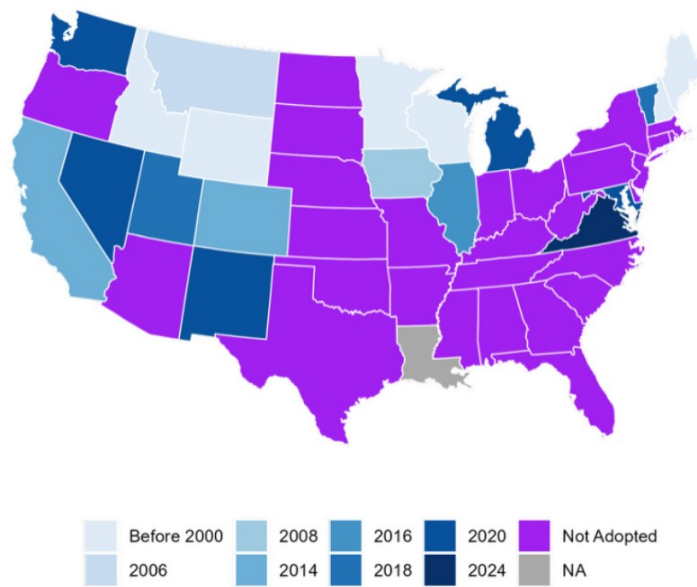
Figure 7. Map of Election Day Registration Adoption, 2000–2024

Figure 1. Primary and general election turnout rates vary significantly depending on whether a state holds open or closed primaries. States with more open primary systems consistently see higher participation, suggesting that broader voter access produces a more representative electorate.

Ranked choice voting has been proposed as one response to this dynamic. Rather than selecting a single candidate, voters rank their preferences in order. If no candidate receives a majority in the first round, the lowest performing candidate is eliminated and those votes are redistributed accordingly. Because candidates must appeal beyond their immediate base to secure second and third choice votes, this system creates incentives for broader coalition building and discourages the kind of negative campaigning that alienates moderate voters. Maine, New York City, and Alaska have all adopted versions of this system with encouraging early results (Atkinson, Foley and Ganz, 2023).

Open and nonpartisan primaries address a related problem: the exclusion of independent voters from the elections that carry the most influence over candidate selection. A record 45% of Americans identified as political independents in 2025, yet many states continue to bar them from participating in primaries (Gallup, 2026). Research indicates that states adopting open systems have seen higher turnout and, in several cases, greater ideological moderation among elected officials (Micatka et al., 2024). California, Washington, and Alaska have all implemented versions of these reforms with promising results.

Institutional Reforms (Government)

Electoral reform alone is insufficient if the institutions that elected officials enter remain structured in ways that discourage cooperation. In most states, elected officials draw the legislative district boundaries that determine their own constituencies, creating a conflict of interest that produces districts so reliably partisan that meaningful competition rarely occurs. Research published in *PS: Political Science and Politics* found that independent redistricting commissions are significantly more likely to produce competitive elections and reduce incumbent party advantages (Nelson, 2023). Ten states have adopted this model, and findings suggest that broader implementation would produce similarly positive outcomes.

Congressional procedure presents a separate but related obstacle. The filibuster allows indefinite blocking of legislation, and cross-party committee work has declined substantially. Brookings Institution research found that 75% of the most significant policy issues before Congress today end in gridlock (Binder, 2014). Scholars have noted that this dysfunction is not simply a byproduct of division but also a driver of it, as repeated legislative failure deepens public

cynicism and strengthens the appeal of candidates who campaign against the institution rather than within it (ProMarket, 2024).

The Role of Leadership

Structural reform creates more favorable conditions for cooperation, but the behavior of political leaders remains an independent and significant factor. Research consistently demonstrates that leaders have a measurable influence on levels of affective polarization, the emotional hostility citizens feel toward members of opposing parties independent of substantive policy disagreement (Peace in Progress, 2022). When leaders model contempt for political opponents, that behavior normalizes hostility more broadly. Conversely, research suggests that leaders who acknowledge the legitimate concerns of opposing viewpoints and frame political conflict in terms of shared democratic participation can meaningfully reduce intergroup hostility (Flodgren et al., 2024).

The reframing of compromise as political weakness has been particularly consequential. Historically, the most productive periods of American governance have been characterized by cross-partisan negotiation rather than ideological rigidity. As scholars have noted, the willingness of senior political figures to model bipartisan engagement shifts what is perceived as politically acceptable for those who follow, suggesting that leadership behavior has effects that extend well beyond individual legislative outcomes (Flodgren et al., 2024).

The Economic Cost of Polarization

The consequences of political polarization extend well beyond electoral politics. A cross-national study examining 75 countries between 1990 and 2019 found that political polarization is negatively associated with economic growth, primarily through its effects on private investment,

human capital development, and productivity (Bosio and Galindo Silva, 2024). When policy priorities shift dramatically with each electoral cycle, businesses face considerable uncertainty in making long-term commitments. Penn State researchers have described this as a pattern of prolonged inaction followed by sudden and sweeping policy changes, a dynamic fundamentally at odds with the stable conditions that sustained economic growth requires (Brock and Mallinson, 2024).

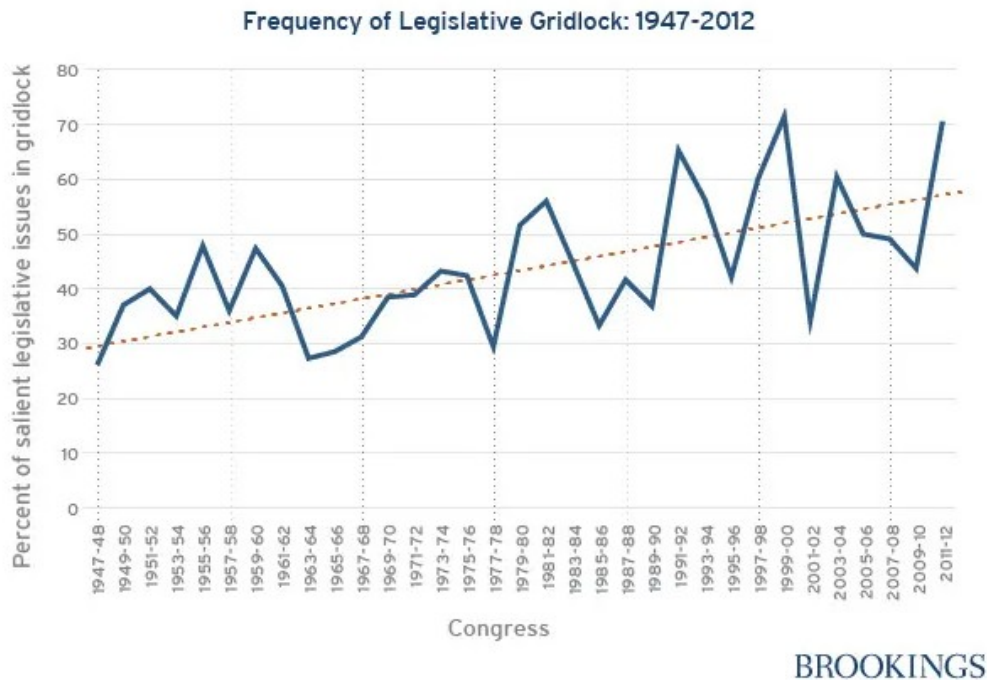


Figure 2. Legislative deadlock on major policy issues has risen steadily since the mid-twentieth century, reflecting the growing inability of Congress to translate debate into action as partisan division has deepened.

Research on comparative political economy suggests that countries with stable and predictable governance frameworks consistently outperform more volatile systems in attracting investment. When businesses perceive the political environment as unreliable, the rational response is to

defer investment, reduce hiring, and limit innovation. Scholars have noted that the cost of governmental dysfunction accumulates gradually and often remains invisible until its effects

Conclusion

At the end of the day, the division we see in American politics did not appear out of nowhere, and it is not going to fix itself. The good news is that most Americans actually want the same things: a government that works, an economy they can count on, and a country that does not feel like it is falling apart. The 2021 bipartisan infrastructure bill showed that when people stop fighting long enough to actually do something, they can. That willingness exists. It just needs the right conditions to show up more often. Democracy was never meant to be easy or comfortable, but it was designed to give people with different views a way to move forward together, and there is no reason that has to stop now.

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