

The Root Causes of Political Polarization: Role of the Youth

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Abstract

This study aims to determine the main factor causing polarization within the United States by interviewing the youth population—hearing their perspective and their experience on politics. Through comprehensive literature analysis and evaluation of current scholarly arguments on the main cause of political polarization, I found that there is no single factor that causes polarization, but through a combination of all factors. Additionally, this paper shares the ideas and viewpoints of adolescents (ages 16-19) on current politics, which offers a glimpse of potential problems that the government should consider fixing. Polarization is currently on the rise and has broached major debates among researchers and also concerns among adolescents.

Keywords: political polarization, adolescents, youth, root cause, politics, concern, divergence

1. Introduction

US society is deemed to have greatly polarized in recent decades, with a drift to political extremes (both to the right and to the left) and a hollowing out of the political middle. This trend is concerning for a variety of reasons, including partisan protests, policy swings, and bias formation. Because of this, scholars have been interested in researching its root causes and possible remedies. In essence, is political polarization truly on the rise? If so, where and why?

Within that perspective, a key question that has great implications for the future of this trend is about patterns of polarization among youth.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the root causes of political polarization and the role of youths — through presenting insight of their perspectives and experiences on modern politics. The significance of this study is to examine how youth are affected by political polarization, as they represent our last hope for patching cracks of political division. We use theoretical review of the existing literature to test hypotheses about the relative contributions of economic, social and political influences to this trend. Furthermore, this paper takes in the opinions of 17 adolescents with a mean age of 17.24 on their perception of politics and what known factors have influenced their opinion. The paper is structured as follows: First, I critically review the definitions, dimensions and trends of polarization. Then, I explore the potential role of four sets of factors. Finally, I conclude with an analysis of the relative manifestation of this phenomenon among youth.

2. Conceptual background

Polarization is defined as the growing divergence of ideologies formed between opposing societies—characterized by deeply conflicting opinions and distrust. It contains multiple dimensions, including economic, cultural, and social. In modern politics, government-elected officials aim to address these three dimensions within the scope of their political stance (left-leaning or right-leaning). The Republican parties (right-leaning) generally uphold traditional values, whereas in Democratic parties (left-leaning) open themselves up for change. Because these party alignments often correlate with individual values and beliefs, many have associated these alignments with their identities. Thus, a crystallization of difference between these two sides can fuel the debate and partisan behavior, and indeed at times: violence—including immigration crackdowns, “No Kings” protests, and the 125 protesters in the United States Capitol attack on January 6th.

3. Trends and Background

From the time our founding fathers created the US Constitution, it was deemed to be a single entity and the original constitution didn't mention political parties. In fact, Washington's Farewell Address stated that parties could present a threat to US democracy (U.S. Senate, 2017).

Arguably, the US doesn't even need political parties. An article from Carnegie and AP news noted that although Americans may disagree with one another, their opinions converge on major issues (Kleinfeld, 2023; Fields & Thomson-Deveaux, 2024).

Because parties must differentiate themselves during political competitions, this tends to exacerbate perceived points of conflict in their proposed agendas. While the US can form a consensus on many issues, the widening divide between parties threatens the possibility of future agreement. Polarization could be explained as recent political competitions have fueled more hostile language during political rallies, which may push this divergence. In the 2024 election of Trump vs Harris, news outlets note there has been increased normalization of personal attacks, identity questioning, and aggressive rhetoric contributing to a deeply polarized atmosphere between the two candidates (Stirrat & Abbondanza, 2024). As bipartisan cooperation becomes increasingly rare, this political discourse fuels distrust from the Americans and questions the government's accountability. Elected officials have been reported to have been stalked, firebombed, shot, and killed not because of who they are, but what they believe and represent (McCormick, 2025). In order to understand what led to the violent behavior of individuals that led to such discourse, it is important to understand what has happened in the past centuries that led to the actions of these individuals.

3.1 The Late 19th Century

Going back into history, the 19th century marked the beginning of growing separation between parties. When Abraham Lincoln was elected president on November 6th, 1860, the nation was thrust into turmoil. Many southern states feared that his ideology of abolishing slavery would present a threat to Southern states' traditional way of life as they mainly relied on agricultural labor for living. Because the Northern states had industries that were more developed, they didn't rely on agriculture to support their life. Indirectly, Lincoln's stance on slavery was embedded within the broader ideology of the party itself. Starting December of that year, southern states started seceding from the union. The start of the Civil War marked the first growing divergence of party alignment between the north and south. This fueled the separation of parties for the decades to come.

3.2 The Mid-20th Century

Politicians often mention how the start of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s marked the beginning of a pivotal contribution to polarization. During this time, individuals noted that race, cultural background, and geographic factors aligned with the sides of differing parties. There was a clear split between the values of each party. The Democratic Party was increasingly associated with progressivism, whereas the Republican Party was associated with conservative values in opposition to radical change. This growing divergence highlights the significance of demographics and background on ideological shift. To measure the extent how much ideologies shifted, Poole and Rosenthal developed DW-NOMINATE (Dynamic Weighted NOMINAL Three-step Estimation) scores to evaluate Congressional voting patterns along a spectrum. The 1960s marked the first significant DW-NOMINATE score divide between parties, showing that there was little to no ideological overlap between the two parties, and that there was growing conflict over legislation at the time. Opinion polls showed that feelings toward one's own party identification remained positive and steady over the past 40 years, whereas ratings for the rivalry showed a stronger dislike in 2020 compared to 1980.

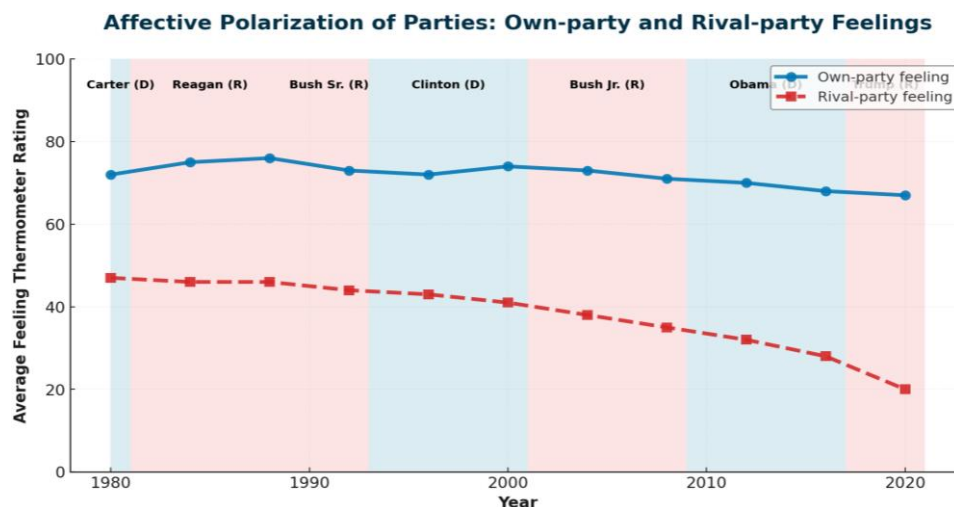


Figure 1. comparison of own-party and rival-party feelings. Data: The ANES Guide of Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior

Additionally, the election of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s marked a turning point in the rise of modern conservatism. Compared to the Democratic policies during the Great Depression on the New Deal and Great Society through which FDR and LBJ expanded large-scale social programs, Reagan ran on ideas of small government, tax cuts, and decreasing spending of the Federal government (Reaganomics). This shows an ideological departure away from interventionist policies of earlier Democratic leadership.

3.3 The 21st Century

The last 40 years saw a substantial increase in party identification and social identification with Americans increasingly diverging along ideological lines. This may have coincided with the rise of technological advancements and the creation of new outlet platforms from the places individuals get their news source as that would have presented differing storytelling methods of the same situation (Ojer et al., 2025). In addition to this, The PRC (Pew Research Center) notes a great trend in polarization over the past 50 years. According to this study, Democrats have shifted left by 0.06 points along with Republicans towards the right at 0.28 points for the representatives in the Senate. This correlation is also found among members of the House. There has been a widening ideological gap between these two parties since the early 1970s, with noting that the number of moderate Democrats/Republicans in Congress has sharply decreased. Many sources online have mentioned that Southern Democrats have been increasing and turned to become more liberal where the Southern Republicans have shown increased conservatism (DeSilver, 2022).

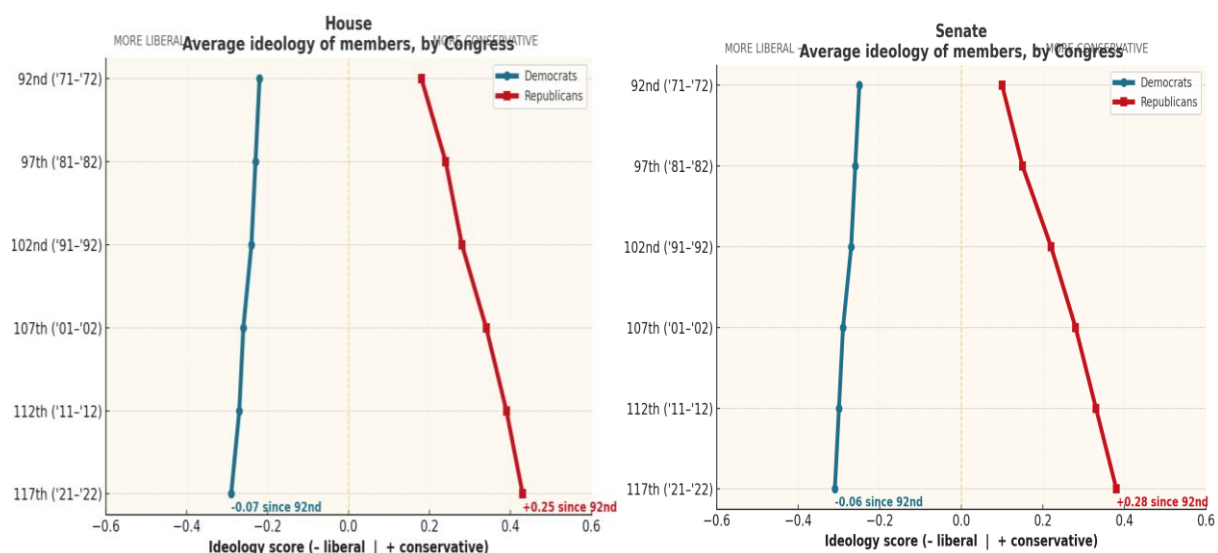


Figure 2, 3 Left and right ideology scores for House and Senate conclude that Republicans have moved further right and Democrats further left. Data: Pew Research Center

While it is true that polarization in Congress doesn't directly mean the proportionate polarization is among civilians, however, their influence on the public must not be underestimated. Asisonline notes that senior officials have often faced criticism for decisions aligned too closely with partisan interests (Gates, 2025). Aside from the reason that individuals may specifically target senior officials as they are more vulnerable, sources have suggested that particular characteristics they hold may make them a target. Compared to younger generations, senior officials may occasionally show a greater tendency towards reluctance to adapt, which may question the credibility of their term, even if their actions may not have infringed the law. Consequently, some individuals may align this issue with conservatism and right-sidedness. In parents, this can be seen through the desire to take control of their child as they become more independent, with politicians, the duality between aging and having a leadership role then solidifies that sense of stubbornness in office among those senior officials (Blue Ridge Assisted Living & Memory Care, 2022). The claim that Congressional polarization aligns with public polarization is supported by other sources as well. Recent surveys confirmed that the percentage of Americans who identify as political moderates is at an all-time low, with most people knowing that they stand on the extremes (Brenan, 2025). Additionally, studies note that Americans who identify as politically moderate have hit a record low of 34%, among republicans 77% identify as conservatives, and among democrats 55% identify as liberal (Wikipedia contributors, 2025). These studies show that congressional debates most likely have a significant impact on the general public.

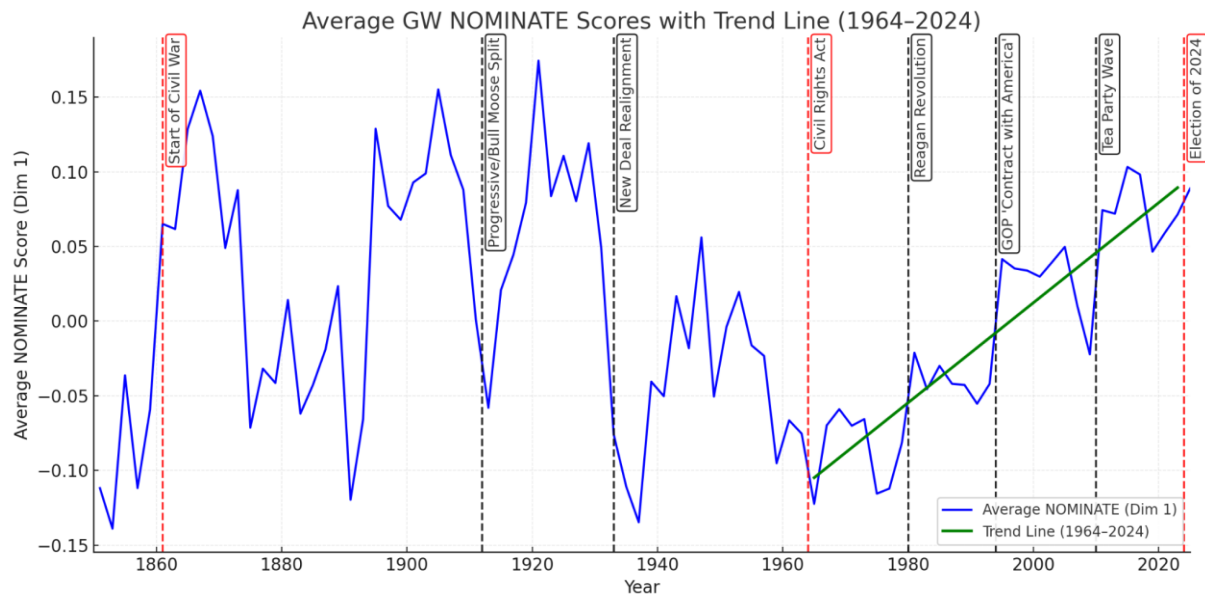


Figure 4. Graph based on GW Nominat scores from 1860 to 2024, matching key historical events in vertical lines, and average polarization index (for both parties) in blue. Data: Voteview

It is helpful to note that in the earlier years, the values held by the republican and democratic parties aren't the same as they are in the present, which accounts for the great scale variation in years before 1960. Since the start of the Civil Rights Act issued after the 1960s, polarization has largely shifted and continues on today. The evidence for polarization within the United States can be proven by multiple studies. According to Listen First Project, surveys have recorded 87% of individuals feeling tired of political division, 87% say that it presents a threat to America, and 81% are concerned about the political divisions within our country.

4. Theories

Understanding the main causes of polarization requires an in-depth analysis of the economic, demographic, cultural, and political influences. Scholars have long debated which of these factors serves as the primary driver, however, evidence suggests there is no single factor that can fully explain this phenomenon. Instead, polarization is influenced by multiple transcending factors across categories, with each subtopic contributing a part to the political affiliation and behavior. While some of these factors do take on a greater influence than others, it can't be given sole credit. In this section, we will discuss scholars' research, major theories across each category, and explain each study's strengths and weaknesses.

4.1 Economic

4.1.1 Job & Educational Polarization

Educational inequality often corresponds to income inequality (mentioned in a later subsection)—incomes tend to increase with education; however, in recent years—where machinery and technological advancements have replaced most human jobs including manufacturing, clergy and administration roles – the members of the middle-class have been hollowed out, with their share of income becoming growingly imbalanced (Salvatori & Manfredi, 2019).

As high-skilled, high-wage jobs stay relevant to society, those from low-skilled, low-wage jobs are facing high risks of displacement. The wealth gap increases the separation among individuals. From there, individuals who have experienced job replacement unite under the same cause because the perceived link between economic hardship and political choices isn't uncommon.

On the demand side of why voters choose populists, Benczes and Szabo, from Corvinus University of Budapest and Central European University, suggest the rise of populist power comes from the concern of individuals about potential economic hardships, including globalization through trade stocks, large influx of immigration, and the financial crisis of 2008. These shocks heighten the awareness of civilians and raise doubt about the mainstream parties that function within the United States. In addition to this, the study further states that populist parties often centralize their campaign strategies through the incorporation of topics regarding the members of the “elites” and

“outsiders” as scapegoats for the potential harm that may happen within the US. Once in office, populist parties promise the economic recovery of the nation through expansionary fiscal and monetary policies, but fail to realize that these policies would only have short-term boosts and long-term crises. Through uniting the struggle of common civilians against elite individuals, the populist party rises through an emotional common ground. As a result of this perception, the formation of the populist party steps falls outside the realm of common practice. As the populist parties exist on both sides of political rallies, criticism would indeed only further separate Democrats and Republicans.

4.1.2 Income Inequality

Another plausible economic cause of polarization is income inequality. There has been a widely accepted claim that income inequality may have caused the polarization of political parties; however, there has not been enough evidence to generalize this polarization beyond the state level legislatures (Voorheis et al., 2015). The study further improves on the statistical findings of how income inequality leads to political polarization, as previous scholars have not been able to identify the causal relationships between the two subjects. The study showed a positive relationship between how inequality not only pushes Democratic parties to the left, but simultaneously causes the opposition to shift to the right. Although the study uses Shor-McCarty ideology scores, one of the most widely accepted scores of measurements for comparing state legislature ideology scale, it can be argued that the data collected with state legislatures can not be assumed beyond that basis. In addition, the data included in the research ends in 2013, failing to integrate recent trends in polarization, including the years of COVID, hate-speech rallies, and the capitol attack. A recent study supports the claim that income inequality contributes to political polarization, using data from the thirty years of World Values Survey across 100 countries to explain the relationship (Gu & Wang, 2021). The study explains that when the wealth gap widens between individuals, they feel a strong feeling of disconnect including viewing themselves as the “winner” or the “loser”. This in turn, increases the political divide between party groups as assumed that gaining/losing money has a greater effect on people’s satisfaction levels. Additionally, the study states that the economic status of individuals pushes them into an “us vs them” mentality that is increasingly popular. Moreover, inequality that separates the middle-class majority from the elite minorities, asks questions regarding if more money returns greater power or more people. Indeed, this study seeks to improve on previous research linking income inequality to polarization, which often lacked supporting evidence. However, this research heavily relies on data that is collected through the World Values Survey which is mainly on self-reported attitudes across various cultures that contain vulnerability in its reliability. The analysis of multi-continental examples may fail to address each issue within countries individually. The survey data taken from Europe in sync with the United States may not be accurate to address the US specifically.

Let us consider the reasons why economic values may not be the root cause of political polarization. In 2009, Professor Cassie Mogilner from marketing and behavioral decision making conducted three separate studies among US adults, low-income individuals, and in a University cafe about the relationship between money, time and happiness. 318 US adults (ages 18-75 with an average of 35) were randomly assigned to think about the topic of time, money, and neutral concepts by completing a series of scrambled-word tasks. They were primed (within one of those three topics) to read and create sentences relating to the topic that they were assigned to. After priming, participants were shown a list of everyday activities, including socializing, commuting, working, etc., and were asked to rate how likely they were going to do this activity in the next 24 hours, along with how happy each activity made them feel. Participants who were primed with time-related words showed greater satisfaction performing socializing activities (correlated to high happiness), and those who were primed with money-related words showed satisfaction in working. In another study among 76 low-income individuals, the same result was concluded. Participants were primed in the same way as in the previous study, and participants self-reported happiness one week later. When focused on time, individuals value experiences, relationships, and moments. Whereas in money, they value material gain, productivity, and economic benefits. From this study, Mogilner concluded that subtle mindset shifts can change how people plan their day, and that social activities are linked to greater happiness—even among low-income individuals (Mogilner, 2011).

Therefore, while economic inequality may shape how people classify themselves politically, it is not necessarily material wealth or poverty alone that drives political behavior, but how people perceive the value of their time and relationships. Because happiness is more likely derived from time than from money, affiliations of certain economic decisions are most likely not the core cause of polarization in the US, but rather some form of emotional connection. Although some may view economic promises made during political rallies as a factor intertwined with their emotion, however, it is proven to be false. There is a larger tangibility between the emotional influence on

voting and over economic policies that politicians offer. It should be noted that although economic decisions may act as a prominent factor shaping political decisions and separation, it's not a leading one.

4.2 Demographic Explanations

4.2.1 Population Shifts and Distribution

Statistical findings suggest that a region's demographic makeup could play an influential role in polarization within the United States. When there is a significant change in the population volume of particular racial or ethnic groups, political leaders often seize their chance of winning or switching sides on their beliefs. Politicians often highlight particular traits in majority populations and mention policies satisfying these populations. From this, the minority population within those regions may feel alienated and perceive their interest as disregarded. In addition to this, different racial and ethnic groups hold distinct views on a variety of topics. Often, these views have defining contrasts. The increase in minority representation in Congress that doesn't uphold traditional values fuels controversial debates. Indeed, demographic explanations for political polarization are well supported. In February of 2020, Levi Boxell—a student from Stanford University Institute for Research in Social Science—constructed seven measures of polarization and found a convincing correlation between political polarization within the United States to demographic changes. Boxell uses regression models to estimate each demographic group's propensity for polarization using American National Election Studies (ANES) data from 1984-2016. Key findings presented a 34% increase in polarization between these years, attributed to demographic factors alone. The strongest driver factors were education, religion, and age, while other ones, including income, gender, and race, had little to no effect. Boxell's study had some limitations, though. It was assumed the polarization index for all years after 1984 was fixed at the same level, which may not have been the finest year for data collection, as it was before major changes in infrastructure, media, and political discourse. Assuming the 1984 data as the basis of which other years were compared may present misleading results that may have overly attributed population shifts as the main component for polarization. Indeed there are qualifications, but this still provides a strong suit of potential causes of polarization. The fixed-data comparison approach allowed him to gain a baseline understanding of what to expect for the years to come, and what could potentially fuel change in future years. $\frac{1}{3}$ times increase through population shifts undoubtedly suggests although there could be flaws within the data collection, there is a prominent factor. The framework offers a rigorous way of presenting polarization and offers a strong argument for demographic changes to be the cause of division (Boxell, 2020).

4.2.2 Generational Divides

When taking into account individuals' values and traits in political rallies, it is important to note their characteristic and personal background as well. Researchers Ahlfeldt et al. analyzed generational gaps using postelection survey data of 300 Swiss referendums over the course of four decades (1981-2017). Using an unconstrained panel rank regression approach, the methodology allowed them to separately distinguish age with other cohort influences of political attitudes. The study found that aging increased their sense of conservatism because – one, when policies change, they are unable to garner future benefits as their age is the limitation; two, prioritizing and preserving policies that they currently have before radical change (Ahlfeldt et al., 2022). The study explained that it wasn't just the "status-quo bias" that caused these individuals to feel this way, but because of their life horizons and need for comfort. Indeed, others may argue that this may be attributed to constant environmental policies issued by the government in Switzerland that have presented some short-term drawbacks for the elderly and can't be attributed to the US, however, statistical data from PRRI (Public Religion Research Institute) shows similar polarization measures. Gen Z adults (under 30) show a 28% lower chance of identifying themselves as conservative (PRRI Staff, 2024;) Indeed, later populations present more left-leaning ideologies compared to elders that feel more conservative feelings over time.

4.2.3 Educational Accessibility

Education has long since been a strong argument for political polarization, not only because of higher and lower educational attainments, but higher education presents more knowledge on aspects of parties that individuals could debate about. At last, no single party is perfect. Educators often lean on more progressive sides and promote social change as they aim at globalization through classes of social justice, equity, and inclusion (Hess, 2005).

Without the appropriate provisions to these academic resources, viewpoints from the opposing party may be limited to follow logistics, typically not much in depth.

Voting can be a sign of education and intellectual capability. A study by Nicholas Janetos from the Penn Institute for Economic Research explains that educated individuals vote off the basis that they have a better understanding of who the more qualified candidate is (Janetos, 2017). From this, people with lower-education want to also

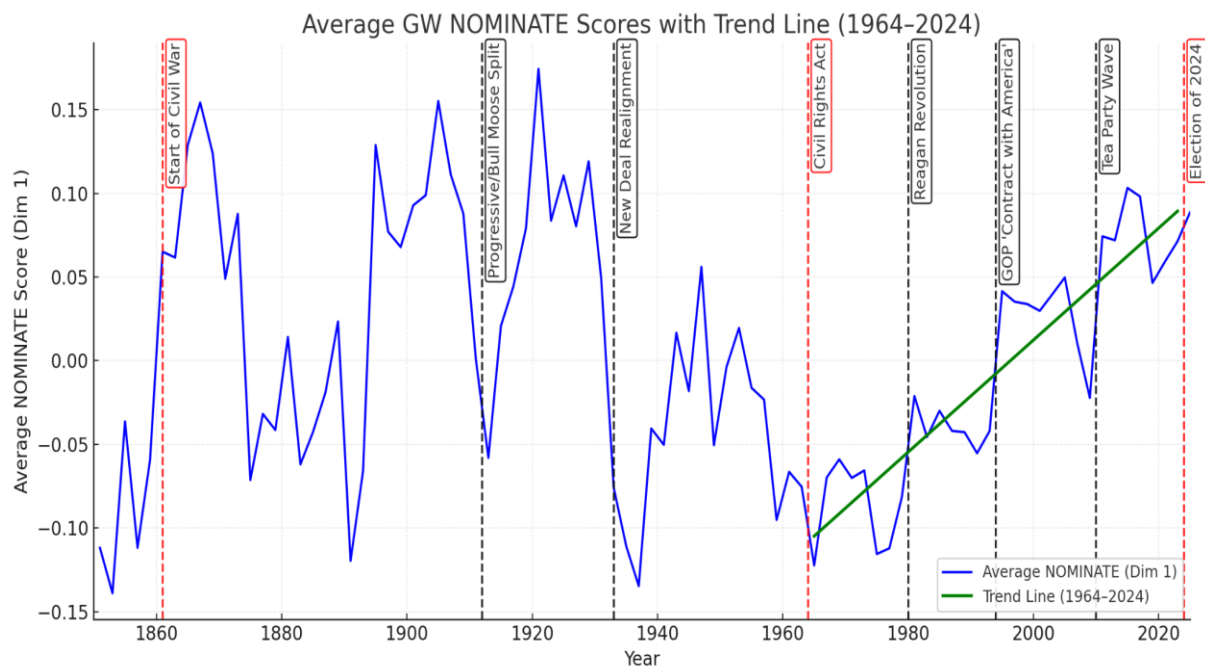
demonstrate this capability through voting. So no, participation in politics doesn't require educational background, but good participation does. The access to education swings the views of politics to the left or right. Within "The Diploma Divide" article in Michigan State University, researchers show that white voters without a college degree were significantly more likely to vote Republican, while those educated voted Democratic (Vallejo, 2021). Although there is no effort to criticize either political stances, this claim has been backed up by numerous other studies. Pew Research finds that among white voters without a bachelor's degree, individuals vote Republican by a 63% to 33% majority. For those with a degree, the split is more closely aligned with 47% (Republican) to 51% (Democratic) (Pew Research Center, 2024a). This shows that individuals can make more conscious decisions through their access to education. In the recent election, hostile and sexist attitudes measured in national polls showed a tangible effect on voter support. Compared to those who may have received education regarding the important role of women and ideas of feminism, such correlation wouldn't appear. The survey found those with lower levels of sexist attitudes were much more likely to support Harris, while those with strongly hostile views towards women overwhelmingly supported Trump. Researchers concluded that hostile sexism played a greater role in shaping the electorate in 2024 than in previous cycles, particularly after Harris became the Democratic nominee (Eichen et al., 2024).

As seen, education plays an influential role in voting behavior, and a consequence of demographic alignment to party stance. Like mentioned before, access to education correlates with job placement as well. Those of higher-paying jobs would most likely vote for policies with lower taxation on the elites, while those with lower-paying jobs may do the exact opposite. Demographic factors that group Americans within certain traits is a reason for separation (Pew Research Center, 2024a).

4.3 Cultural Explanations

4.3.1 Impact of Social Media

The rise of social media has had a significant contribution to polarization as well. Dating to times back before social media, the rise of technological advancement like news networks and TV platforms hold strong arguments for this to be the main cause of polarization (comparison of figure 1 and technological advancement is below).



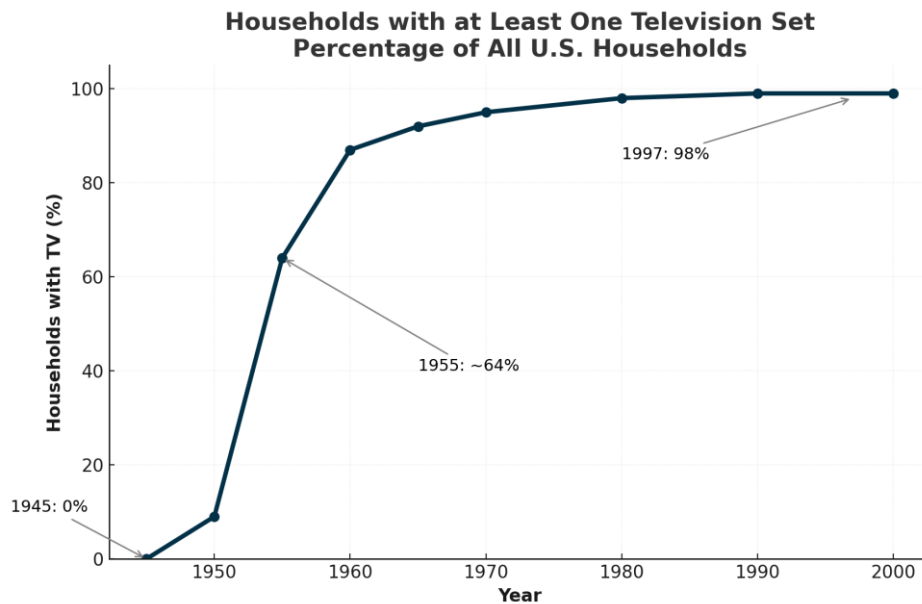


Figure 4, 5. Comparison of rise of televisions vs GW nominate (polarization) scores. Data: Sweeney, taken from The History of Television

From the CS website built by Cornell students, as of 1967 there were 98% of individuals who have TVs in their household. This new technology provided a new means of communication through broadcasting events (including politics). The 1960s sparked the beginning of growing divergence of government structure in the US. Indeed, the exponential growth of TV ownership doesn't match the trend line of linear growth of GW Nominate scores, however, such lines don't require the same geographic shape to support each other. TV production acts as the structural enabler of polarization. Television brought politics home in a way that newspapers never did, the more exposure towards ideologies faced by parties have fueled the steady growth of divergence. TV didn't make us more divergent, but rather, more vulnerable to divergence as we are exposed to more bias: the same way other technologies do. In recent years, as technological advancements and social media become personalized, we see a positive correlation between it and polarization.

Number of people using social media platforms, 2004 to 2018

Estimates correspond to monthly active users (MAUs). Facebook, for example, measures MAUs as users that have logged in during the past 30 days. See source for more details.

Our World
in Data

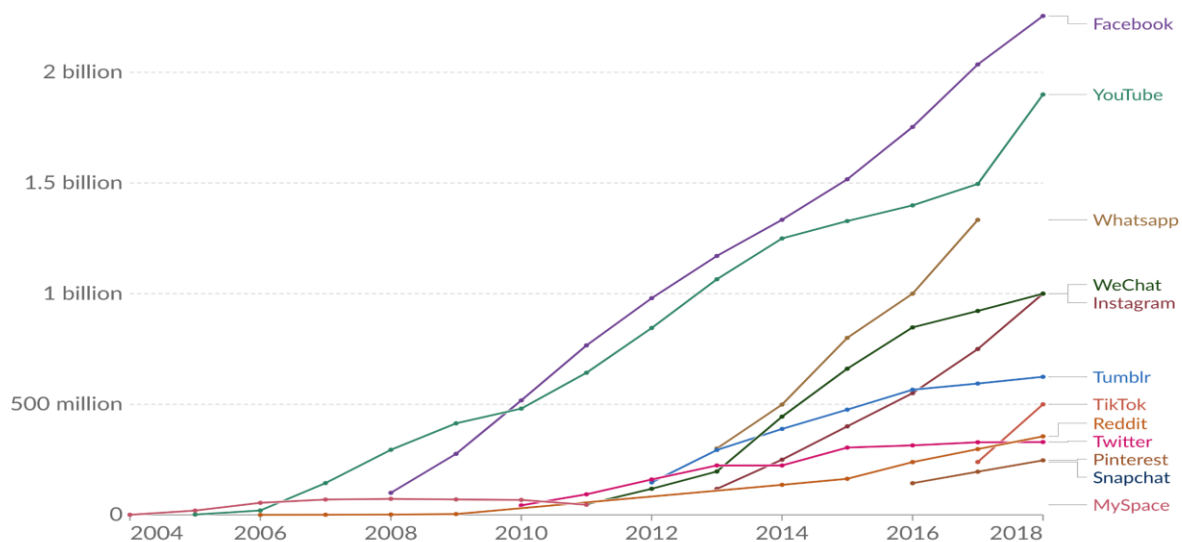


Figure 6. Number of users on social media from 2004-2018. Directly taken: Statista and TNW, taken from Our World In Data

Our World in Data explores the number of active users per year on various social media platforms and reports that almost all most-top 10 platforms (of the most popular online) have increased their user base compared to previous years (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). This could be explained by the operation mode of these platforms. The action of scrolling, stated by the National Library of Medicine, releases small doses of dopamine in the brain (Sharpe & Spooner, 2025). In result, this can be habit-forming due to the variable and uncertain nature of online rewards. Satisfaction earned from messages, likes, and posts are only a couple examples of this phenomenon. Studies from University of Minnesota Twin Cities notes dopamine is the main driver of all human decisions (University of Minnesota – Twin Cities, 2025). For actions that require the same amount of effort, we make decisions that provide more satisfaction.

In more advanced methods of calculating user-interest for them to stay on the app longer, algorithms like FYP (For You Pages) on social media promote tend to emphasize values that the user already shares. Through re-emphasizing the claims of the user and what the user wants to hear, social media makes their users hooked. This is a problem, however, especially in the world of politics. Through getting their claims re-emphasized, individuals are more stubborn to what they believe in and have a disinterest in hearing the opposing opinion. Additionally, in order to attract attention, FYPs promote content that focuses on partisan behavior. Alarming protests or claims stick out from the platform and get promoted as some may find it interesting to watch. In fact, politicians may use this partisan behavior to fuel their campaign. There has been a marked increase in the mentioning and use of partisan language and behavior in political speeches over the past few decades (Crawford, 2016).

That being said, those who watch those content would hear their claims more often, then ultimately, side with their stance—known as the infamous echo chamber—separating people.

Social media isn't the only source of media that present misinformation and fuel partisanship. Even the most credible journals and newspapers do the same.



Figure 7. level of bias from news/tv outlets. Directly taken: AllSides Media

AllSides Media explores the left and right-hand bias from news networks and aims to present stories told from unbiased perspectives. Ultimately, it's almost like we don't know "what is real" anymore (Pazzanese, 2020).

4.3.2 Identity Classification

Identification of race, gender, and religion have the potential to connect self-qualities to political affiliation. In recent years, we've incorporated our personal values and background in choosing political parties to vote based on identity. Political parties are now part of who we are. In recent years, political affiliation has evolved from being a mere preference to a core aspect of personal identity and self-expression (Zajnal, 2023; Kleinfeld, 2023; Ward, 2024). Research shows that race is the most significant predictor of party identification. The background of where individuals came from has much to do with what values they align themselves with (Pew Research Center, 2024a). For example, those belonging within the ethnic minority mainly vote Democratic including Hispanic, Asian, and Black. Those that vote Republican, on the other hand, consist of mainly Whites.

Partisan Lean of U.S. Voters by Race/Ethnicity (1994-2023)

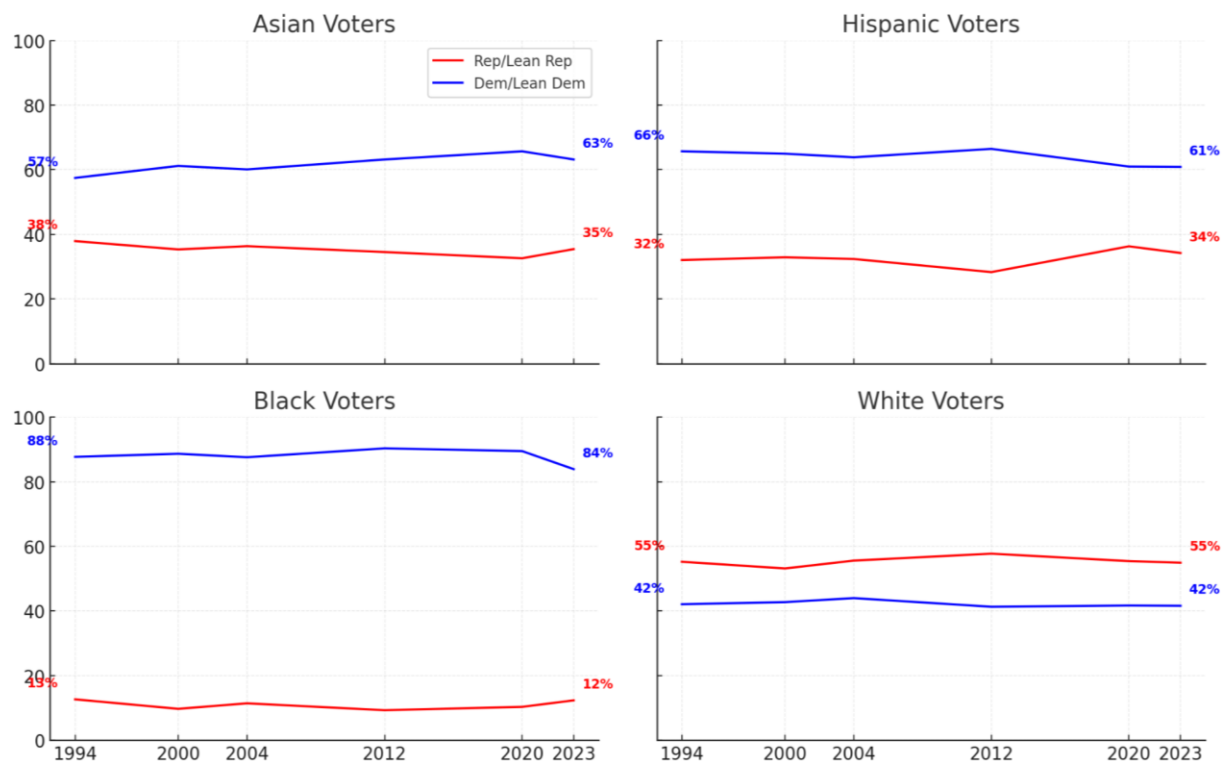


Figure 8. Comparison of racial background vs party choice. Data: Pew Research Center

The chart above tracks the party identification among racial ethnic groups. The vertical axis represents the estimated percentage of the total group population that supports either party and trend line connecting years from 1994 to 2023. Among racial groups, voting patterns of race and party alignment have become rather consistent over time. From 1994 to 2023 for all four ethnic groups, we can see a difference of 12% Democratic shift for Asians; 5% Republican shift for Hispanics; 4% Republican shift for Blacks; and 55% consistent Republican vote for Whites (Pew Research Center, 2024a). Decisions to act a particular way or to perform a certain action related to personal political belief (such as protests, riots, violence, and chaos) is shown to be influenced by in-group and out-group dynamics (Kleinfeld, 2023). The Social identity Theory shows that people's behaviors are shaped by interpersonal interaction (one on one) and intergroup interaction (identification with a large group of people and the interaction between other groups).

4.4 Political Explanations

4.4.1 Political Corruption

The rise of social elites taking control within government policies has recently outraged many Americans. This divide is exacerbated by the economic status among individuals. In the latest 2024 election, Musk (a multi-billionaire entrepreneur) donated approximately \$75 million to a pro-Trump political action committee (American PAC) and has reportedly spent over \$270 million supporting Trump and other Republican candidates during the election cycle. Additionally, on March 20th, 2025, Musk awarded Wisconsin voters who signed the petition "in

opposition to activist judges”, or rather, in support of the Republican party \$100 (Schleifer, 2025). When Trump took office in January of 2025, he thanked Musk for his efforts to help him win the election. In exchange, Trump created the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) to give Musk influence, which caused public outcry. Musk stepping into politics aside from his prior image as a tech innovator drew concern about his expertise (Basu, 2025; Gangitano, 2025).

This perceived political corruption eroded public trust and also reshaped public debates on TV and online, a crime of increasing influence of social media. Take the Watergate Scandal, for example. In hopes of renewing his presidency, Richard Nixon (Republican) allegedly hired burglars to break into the Watergate Office Complex where important campaign strategies by the DNC (Democratic National Committee) resided. Later, when tape-recordings were found in the oval office about his conversation of the plan, Nixon eventually resigned in the face of impeachment. From the starting to the end of Nixon’s presidency, public trust within the government dropped from 62% in 1968 to 36% in 1974 (Pew Research Center, 2024b).

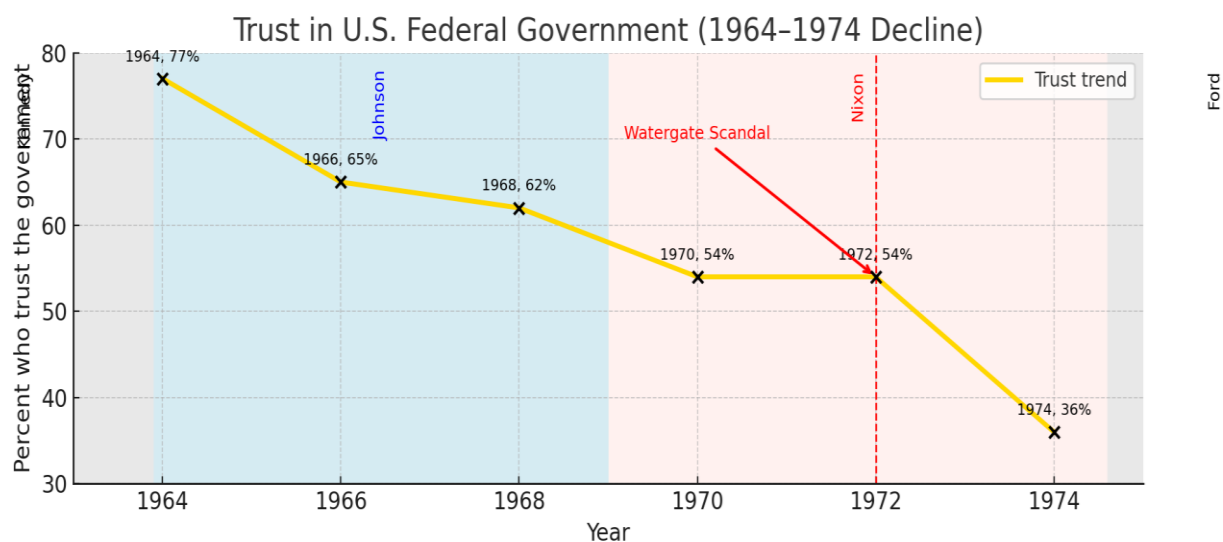


Figure 9. Trust within the US government. Data: Pew Research Center

4.4.2 Hottest Debates

The connection between disagreement and opinion has long been a strong factor in shaping the tenor of political debates and polarization. The issue is whether people can calmly debate hot topics such as, gender identity, immigration, gun rights, healthcare reform, and taxation just to name a few. Because these arguments often form the structure of people’s fundamental way of life, many argue that the differing opinions among them have caused parties to diverge. Indeed, the differences between Democratic and Republican party values are clear, however, individuals may not agree with every value of their party. The individuals that fall under this grey are, however, have decreased overtime as influenced by economic, demographic, and cultural factors mentioned, causing this polarization to take place. Polarization happens not because individuals share and agree with all values that a particular party holds, but rather, because they value some ideologies over others. Core values including the rights to develop a democracy under the original constitution seems to still be in common agreement no matter the political party. There is a small variance between how Democratic and Republican parties believe when it comes to the Bill of Rights including right to vote at 91% agreement, the freedom of speech at 90% agreement, and right to privacy at 88% agreement (Fields & Thomson-Deveaux, 2024).

Granted, saying that Americans actually share the same values on major debates may sound far-fetched, but there are some nuances that stand out. When it comes to gun policy, the majority of Republicans and Democrats support background checks for all gun sales (Everytown Research & Policy, 2024). When talking about healthcare, the majority supports lowering prescription drug prices and protecting people with pre-existing conditions (Rosenthal, 2021). Although Americans may disagree on the language of climate change, many Americans support investment in clean energy (Solar Energy Industries Association, 2024). These are all examples of agreements of Americans from a cross-party basis. So then, why does America still feel separated? Well, due to the factors concerning media, politicians, and the interest of individuals, the differences between parties are emphasized. It is possible for Americans to unite, we just have to stop highlighting our differences.

5. Impact of the Youth

5.1 Main Causes of Divergence

In addressing the level of polarization among the United States, I tested the views among a small sample of youth. The survey was conducted at random for individuals willing to answer questions regarding politics within the US where they answered questions regarding how polarized the nation feels along with their personal opinions. Additionally, 3 people demonstrated willingness to have a conversation 1 on 1 regarding politics, and share their perspective beyond the survey. In the general survey with a sample size of 17, the mean age of individuals was calculated at 17.24 while all age groups fell under the 16-19 age bracket. In addressing “How polarized do you think US is today?” 85.4% of responses said either very polarized, or extremely polarized and 100% of the surveyed responses said polarization level from moderately polarized up.

From 1-5, how polarized do you think US is today?

 [Copy chart](#)

(Polarization is defined by the growing divergence of ideologies formed from opposing parties, often inciting to conflict.)

17 responses

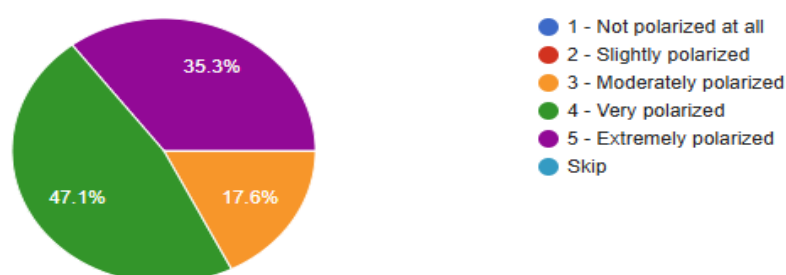


Figure 9. Percentage of youth that believe the US is polarized and to what extent polarized

This information indicates that polarization is not strictly confined in demographic age groups but can also be felt to permeate into younger generations. This is why demographic factors have been suggested not to be one of the main causes of polarization. Additionally, youth adolescents responded with a 58.8% agreement on the country feeling “extremely divided”. In studying the correlation between the cause of polarization and specific entities that would make youth populations feel this way, I asked ways that get their news information. Unsurprisingly to the study of the main cause of polarization, social media and News/TV were mentioned at 82.4% and 76.5% respectively.

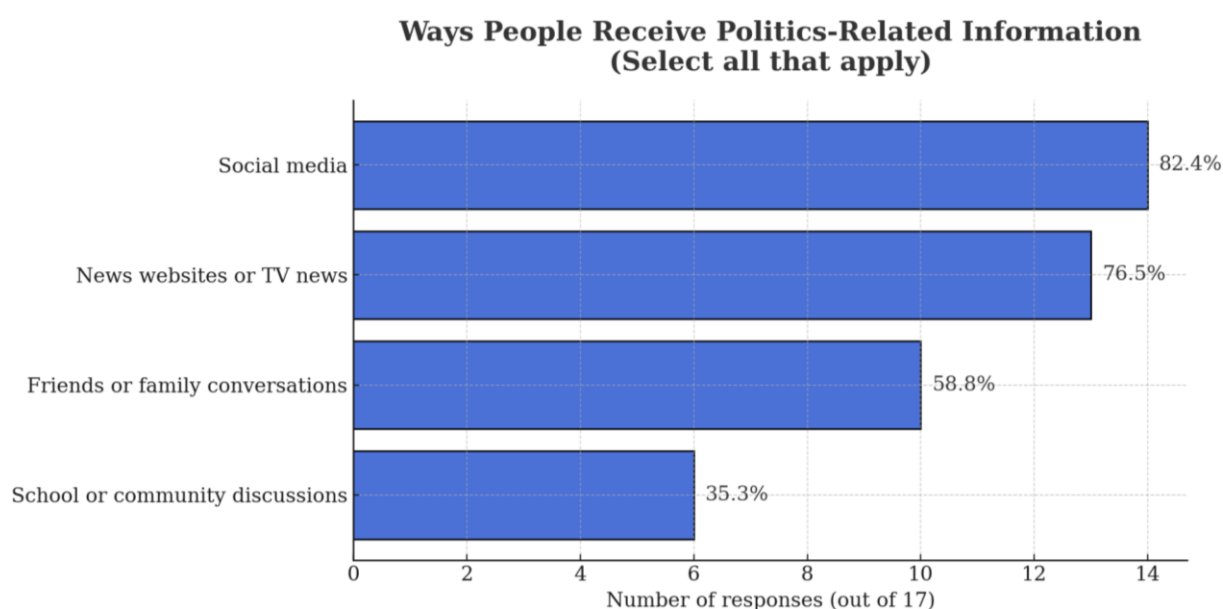


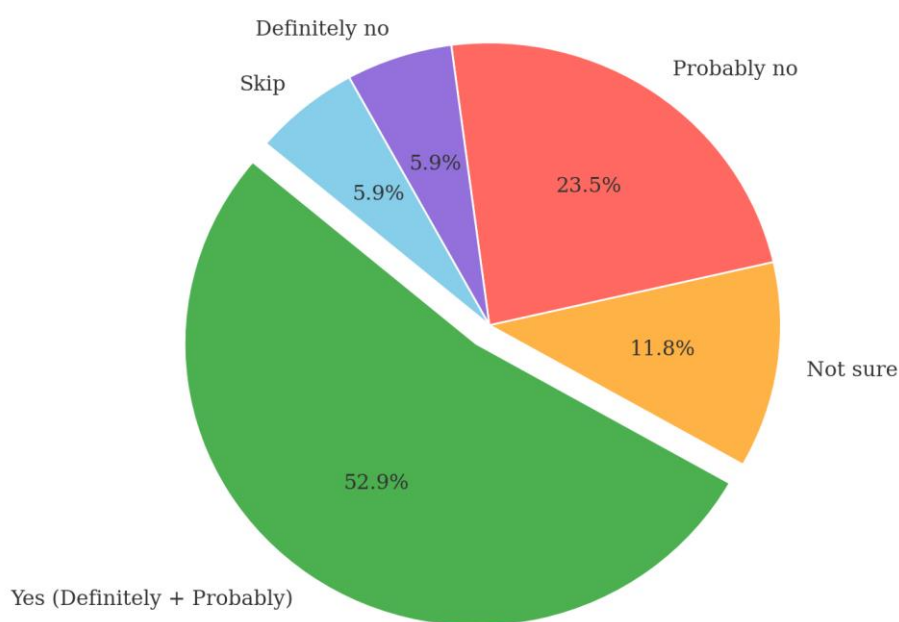
Figure 10. Percentage of youth that select factors relating to how they obtain political news

This finding reveals cultural explanations to be a significant contributor towards feelings of polarization. In a separate question, 54% of our surveyed teenagers mentioned how media coverage is the first thing that comes to mind when polarization is mentioned. Among the youth population, we started living our lives in the digital age of computers and smart phones. Therefore, it would not be uncommon for us to feel this rivalry feeling (in fact, separation can be more pronounced within the youth population) among debates regarding politics as we expose ourselves to social media and televisions.

5.2 Cross-Party Marriage

Although it might seem early, we asked our participants about the chances they would marry their partner if they were from a different political party. When addressing cross-party marriage, interesting statistics came up. Granted, individuals may argue the reliability of a survey among adolescents from a sample size of 17 could present inaccurate data collection, but our statistics suggest not. In comparison to a survey conducted among adults by Facing History in 2019, we saw significant similarities.

Would You Marry Someone with the Opposite Political View?



Partisan Reactions to Cross-Party Marriage (2019)

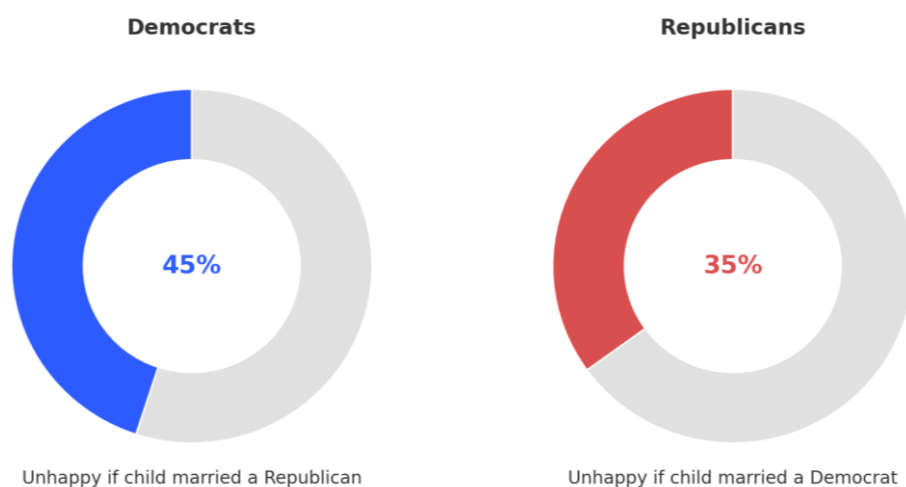


Figure 11, 12. Percentage of youth that do not mind marriage and party affiliation; Percentage of parents that do mind marriage and party affiliation. Source: Facing History (12)

When considering the opposite percentage of individuals that would be happy or have no opinion on such matters, a side by side comparison between parent marriage preference and youth marriage preference differ minimally.

Cross-Party Marriage: Youth Willingness vs. Parental Approval (Average)

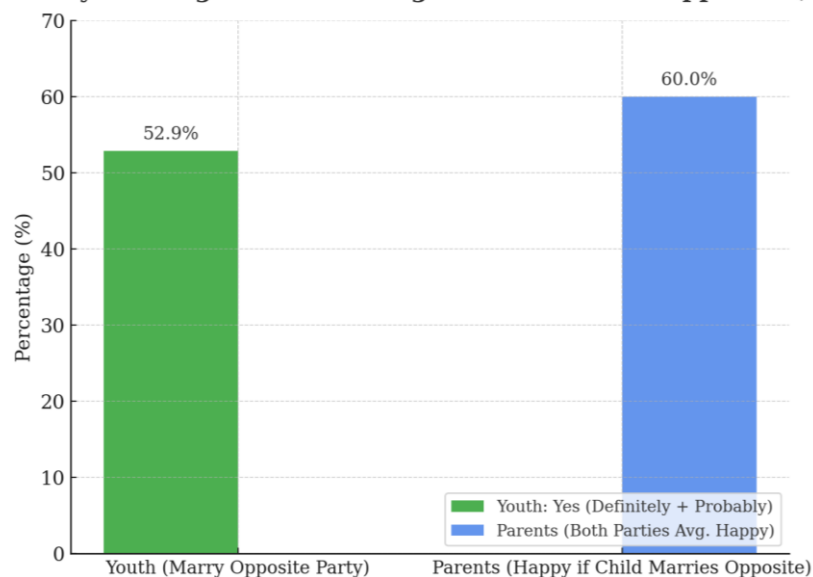


Figure 13. Comparison of the percentages of youth/parents that are fine with opposite party marriage

Speaking of cross-party marriage, it turns out, we aren't significantly separated by our political beliefs even if we might feel like it. Indeed, in current cases like the marriage of Kellyanne Conway (senior advisor of Donald Trump) and George Conway (a conservative who often criticize Trump) eventually broke up, however, in cases of the marriage James Carville (Democrat) and Marty Matalin (Republican), who have been married from 1993 onward, can't be explained by party rivalry feelings. Although it is true that Democratic and Republican parties hold separate ideas, we can still work together. One of our interviews said:

"I think leftists tend to be more angry at conservative beliefs. We saw this with what occurred at Tesla dealerships during Musk's time with the Trump Administration, the assassination attempts at Trump, and more. Though I think that there are discrepancies, we all still live in a country where opposing beliefs can still live in harmony"

Indeed we could work together to build on a better nation, there is a twist. Among the youth population, we can still see discrimination of party alignment to what we think of the individual.

"I sometimes unconsciously change my attitude when I hear someone is affiliated with some party that I support...or don't" says another interviewer.

64.6% surveyed individuals agreed that their view also changed when hearing someone is aligned with a party. As of now, it almost seems like the US is separated by nature.

6. Conclusion

Throughout the past 40 years, the US has increasingly polarized into the left-leaning and the right-leaning parties. The evidence presented in this research makes it clear that polarization is not a waning, but lived reality across generations. Polarization is not only happening to Congress, but to the general American public as well. Through the experiences described by our youth groups and literary analysis of scholar papers polarization is felt everywhere within the US.

The cause of this separation is fueled by a mix of demographic, cultural, and political factors that influence an individual's party alignment. When putting all these factors into consideration, we have seen a significant contribution of polarization by the cultural explanation: the rise of social media, advancement in technology, and background classification. This result is also present among the youth population. Through a survey with a sample size of 17 teenagers ranging from the ages 16-19 and interviews conducted from particular participants willing to share their experience, culture explanation is the most justified. Indeed this is true, however, it should be noted that there is no single factor that contributes to the polarization of the US as a whole. This study conducted among

the youth population shows the significant divergence that is happening to the US now and in the future. From this study, it should be our first priority in fixing polarization problems with social media first as it is the most prominent. The feeling of divergence between the parties in the US has to come to a central consensus.

Indeed the concern for our future should be painted with color, but at the same time, we can fix this rather easily, it just takes time. Americans share the same general values that align with each other and it actually isn't as separate as we think it is. We have to learn how to work together and build a stronger nation no matter our political affiliation. If adolescents today can see beyond party labels and engage in cultural collaboration, then the future of America is not defined by divides but by celebrating our differences.

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