

POLARIZED POLITICS: HOW DOES IT AFFECT YOU?

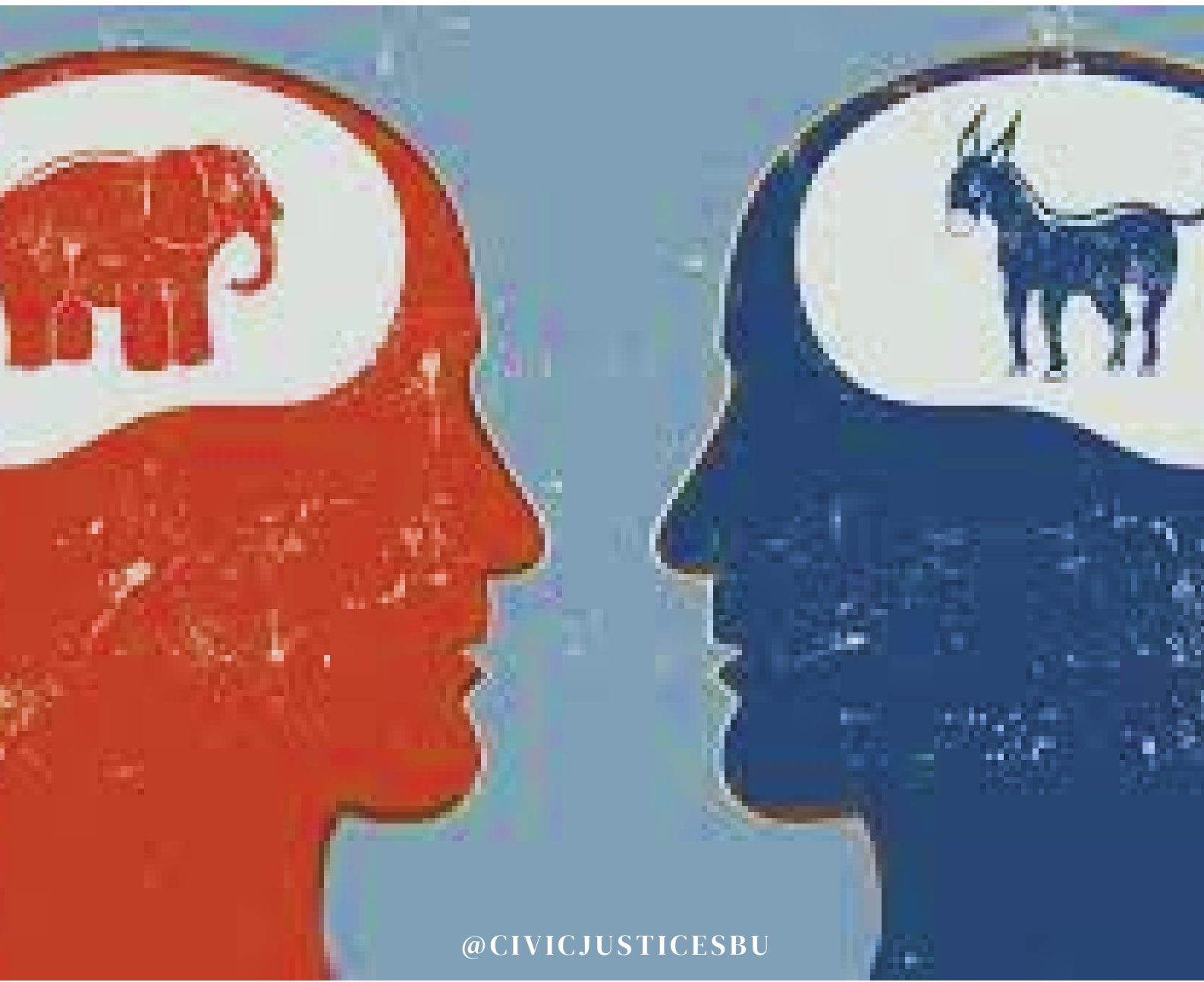


Stony Brook
University

Center for Civic Justice

*UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL POLARIZATION
AND ITS IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH*

COMMUNITY DIALOGUE FALL 2022



@CIVICJUSTICESBU

What is political polarization, and why should we care about it?

Political Polarization is what we are witnessing in the US political landscape every day: the birth of two ideological extremes. Both parties' political platforms have slowly drifted from the center, creating strong opposition between the two ends of the spectrum. Erupting around 2015, we witnessed the presence of polarizing politics increase rapidly. In this dialogue, we will discuss how polarization affects partisanship, how these political attitudes exist within the media, and how these factors can detrimentally affect the mental health of college students around the globe.

Defining partisanship:

Partisan: *bias towards a particular cause*

Bipartisan: *support or cooperation of two political parties that usually disagree with each other's policies*

Nonpartisan: *not biased or partisan, especially toward any particular political group*

TERMS TO KNOW

POLARIZATION

Divide or cause to divide into two sharply contrasting groups or sets of opinions or beliefs.

HYPER PARTISANSHIP

A sharply polarized situation in which political parties are in fierce disagreement with each other.

POLITICAL IDENTITY

Refers to only the aspects of an overarching identity that are political, such as beliefs about what a “good society” means or how much government regulation is appropriate.

IDEOLOGY

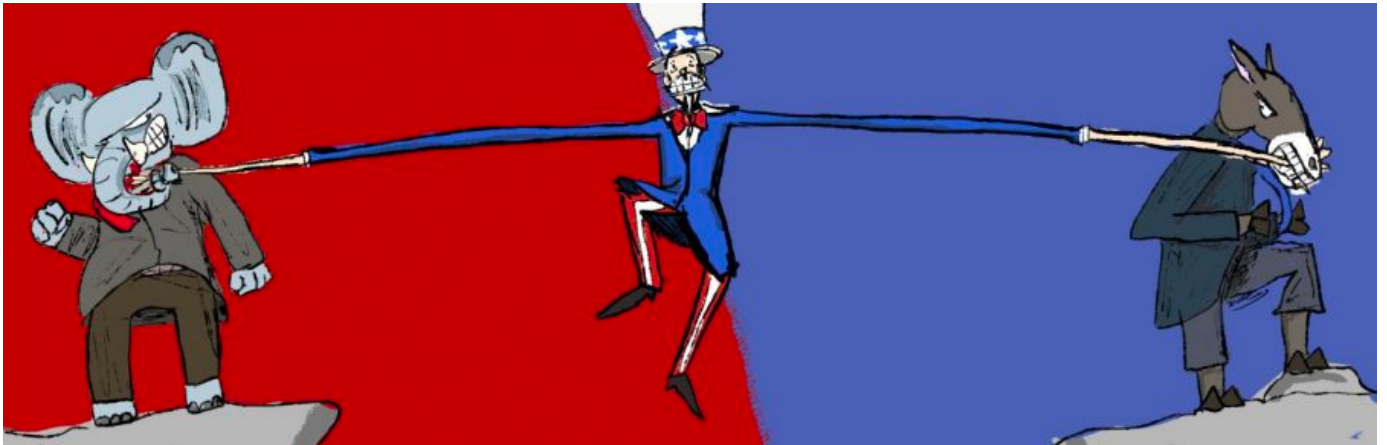
A system of ideas and ideals, especially one which forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy.

TWO-PARTY SYSTEM

The sense of two-party system describes an arrangement in which all or nearly all elected officials belong to either of the two major parties.

COALITION

An alliance for combined action, especially a temporary alliance of political parties forming a government or of states.



Consequences of Hyperpartisanship

Why has the US become so polarized? Political economist and researcher Jesse Shapiro answers this question by identifying that since the 1970s, major political parties have become increasingly aligned with specific ideologies, races, and religious identities. For example, Republicans are more likely to be religious, while Democrats are more likely to be secular.

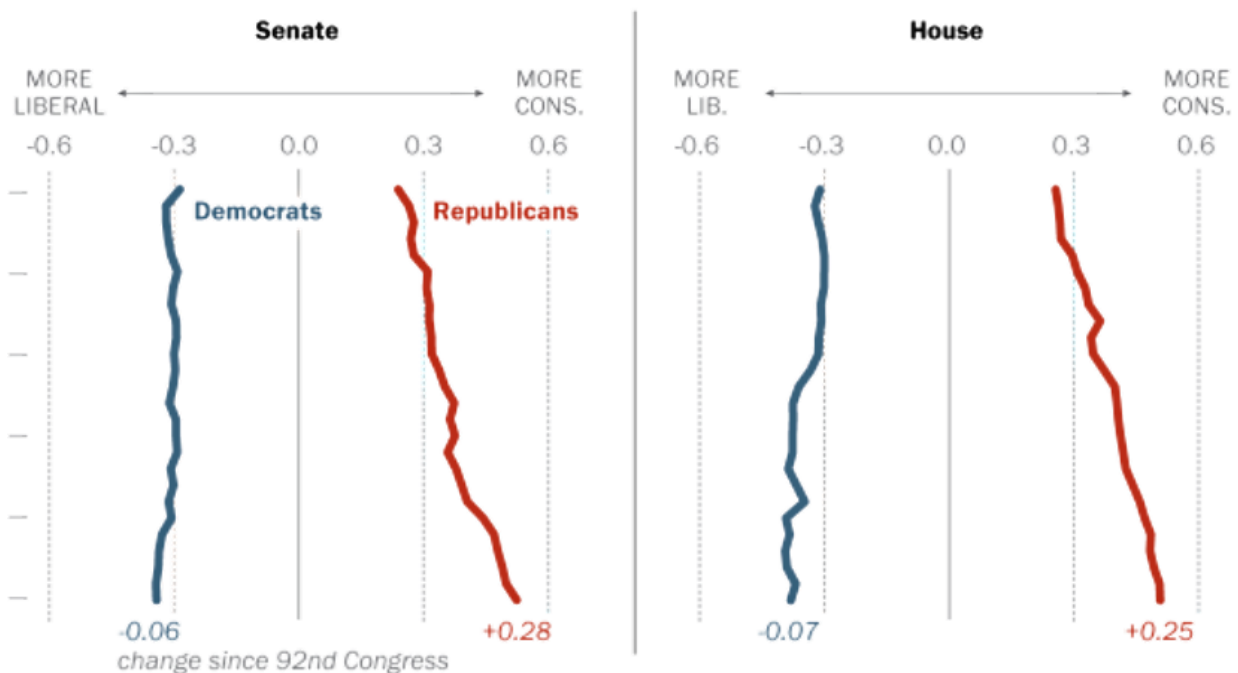
Researchers conducted a study analyzing 40 years of surveys observing political bias and polarized thinking. Researchers used a “Feeling Thermometer” to rate attitudes on a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 reflected no negative feelings towards other parties. They found that in 1978, the average American rated members of the opposing party 27 points lower than members of their party.

“Political polarization among Americans has grown rapidly in the last 40 years — more than in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, or Germany — a phenomenon possibly due to increased racial division, the rise of partisan cable news, and changes in the composition of the Democratic and Republican parties.”

However, by 2016 they found that the average American rated members of the opposing party 45.9 points lower than members of their party. Consequently, negative feelings towards an opposing party compared to one’s party increased by an average of 4.8 points per decade.

The dynamics of today's political polarization are the long-term results of two key trends:

- Both parties have shifted closer to the extreme ends of their political spectrum: Democrats have become much more liberal, while Republicans have become much more conservative.
- There is a greater affiliation with partisan extremes, seen by a significant decrease in moderate Democrats and Republicans in Congress.



“As Democrats have grown more liberal over time and Republicans much more conservative, the “middle” – where moderate-to-liberal Republicans could sometimes find common ground with moderate-to-conservative Democrats on contentious issues – has vanished.”

-Drew Desilver

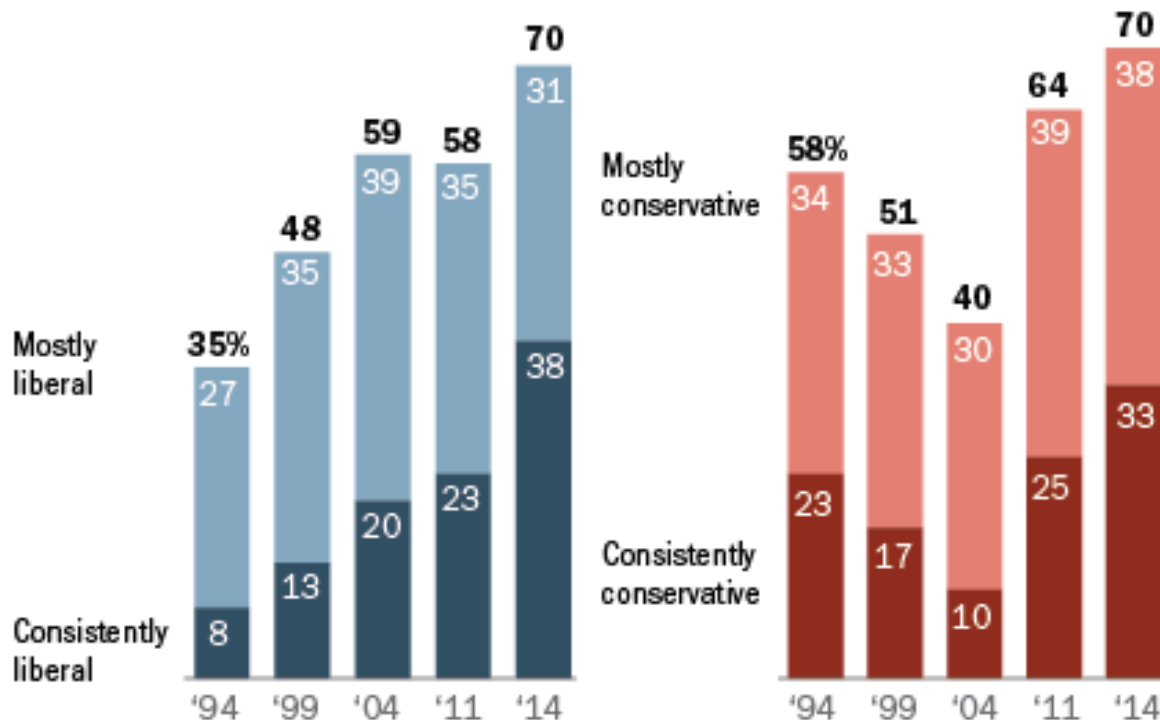
Growth in Ideological Polarization is Sharper Among the Politically Engaged

The share of Democrats who hold consistently liberal positions has quadrupled over the course of the last 20 years, growing from just 5% in 1994 to 13% in 2004 to 23% today. More Republicans are consistently conservative than in the past (20% today, up from 6% in 2004 and 13% in 1994), even as the country as a whole has shifted slightly to the left on the 10 item scale.

Percent with political values that are ...

AMONG ENGAGED DEMOCRATS

AMONG ENGAGED REPUBLICANS



Note: Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents.

Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public

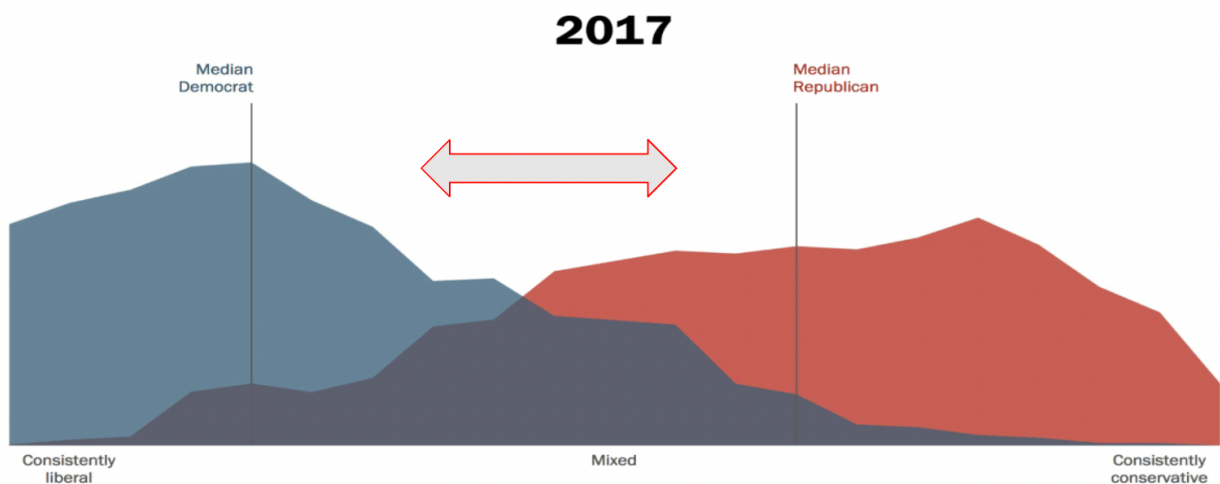
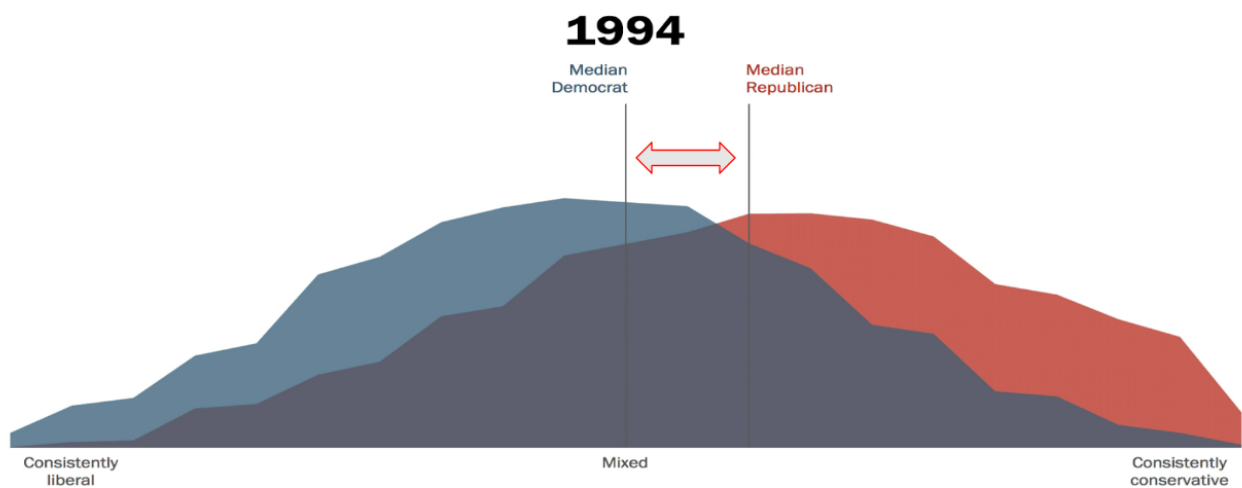
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

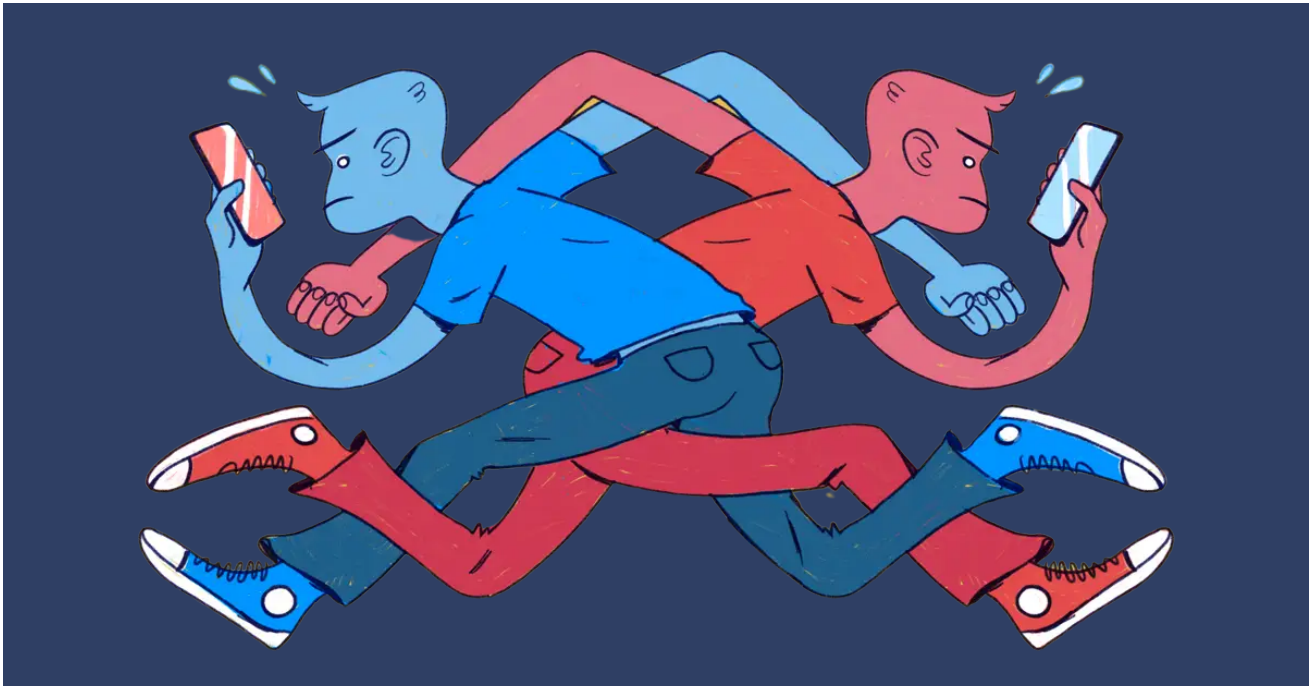
POLARIZATION

29 November 2022
Community Dialogue

The charts below illustrate the shift in the American public's political values over a span of 20 years from 1994 to 2017. This information was collected from survey questions conducted by Pew Research Center. These are 3 key takeaways:

- Americans with ideologically consistent values have increased over time
- Their political values have become more strongly associated with partisanship.
- The divide had significantly shifted towards the two extremes of the consistently liberal/conservative scale.





What Contributes to Polarization?

A report published through the Center for Business and Human Rights at New York University sheds light on the relationship between tech platforms and extreme polarization that can lead to the erosion of democratic values and partisan violence. The study stated:

"While Facebook, the largest social media platform, has gone out of its way to deny that it contributes to extreme divisiveness, a growing body of social science research, as well as Facebook's own actions and leaked documents, indicate that an important relationship exists."

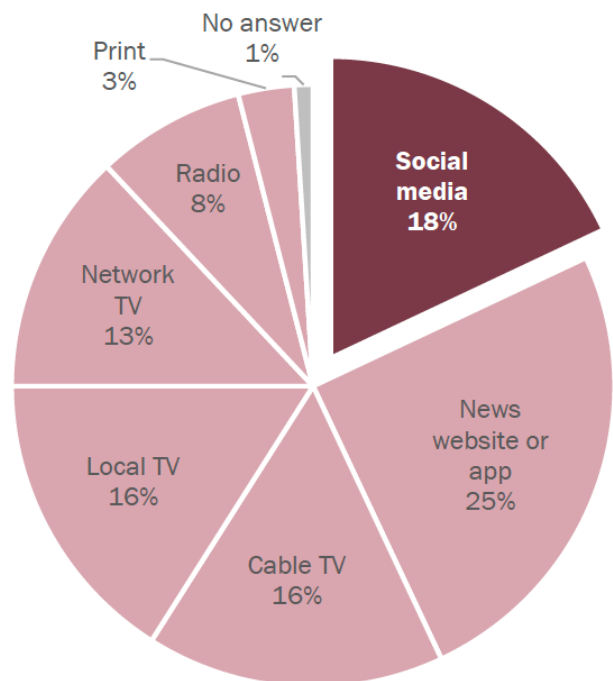
One study published in March 2020 had subjects stop using Facebook for a month, and were then surveyed on their views. Staying off the platform "significantly reduced polarization of views on policy issues," researchers found, although it didn't diminish divisiveness based strictly on party identity.

How Does Mass Media Contribute to Polarization?

With over one hundred social media platforms available at our fingertips, information spreads like wildfire. News passes quickly from one person to another on these apps, and it's not checked for accuracy every step of the way, so details often fall through the cracks. It's like a game of telephone-- the facts get lost in translation, so by the time the story gets to you, it looks pretty different from the original source. When social media users are plagued by a constant onslaught of information, much of which could be partially or wholly false, their outlook on world events can deteriorate. They may begin to partake in "doom scrolling" and experience feelings of helplessness. The thought of verifying every claim that comes our way can be incredibly overwhelming, but the mindless scrolling and absorbing can become addicting. The polarization of politics exacerbates social media's misinformation problem, as users are more likely to hold strong biases that affect how they post and what they believe.

About one-in-five U.S. adults say they get their political news primarily through social media

% of U.S. adults who say the most common way they get political and election news is ...



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019. "Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

TERMS TO KNOW

PARTISAN MEDIA

A media outlet that is biased towards particular causes.

MISINFORMATION

False or inaccurate information, especially that which is deliberately intended to deceive.

FAIRNESS DOCTRINE

A policy ensuring television broadcast news has given equal airing time to both sides on controversial issues. It was instated in 1949 and revoked in 1987. A similar approach demands that stations provide similar coverage to candidates.

PROPAGANDA

Information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote or publicize a particular political cause or point of view.

FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION

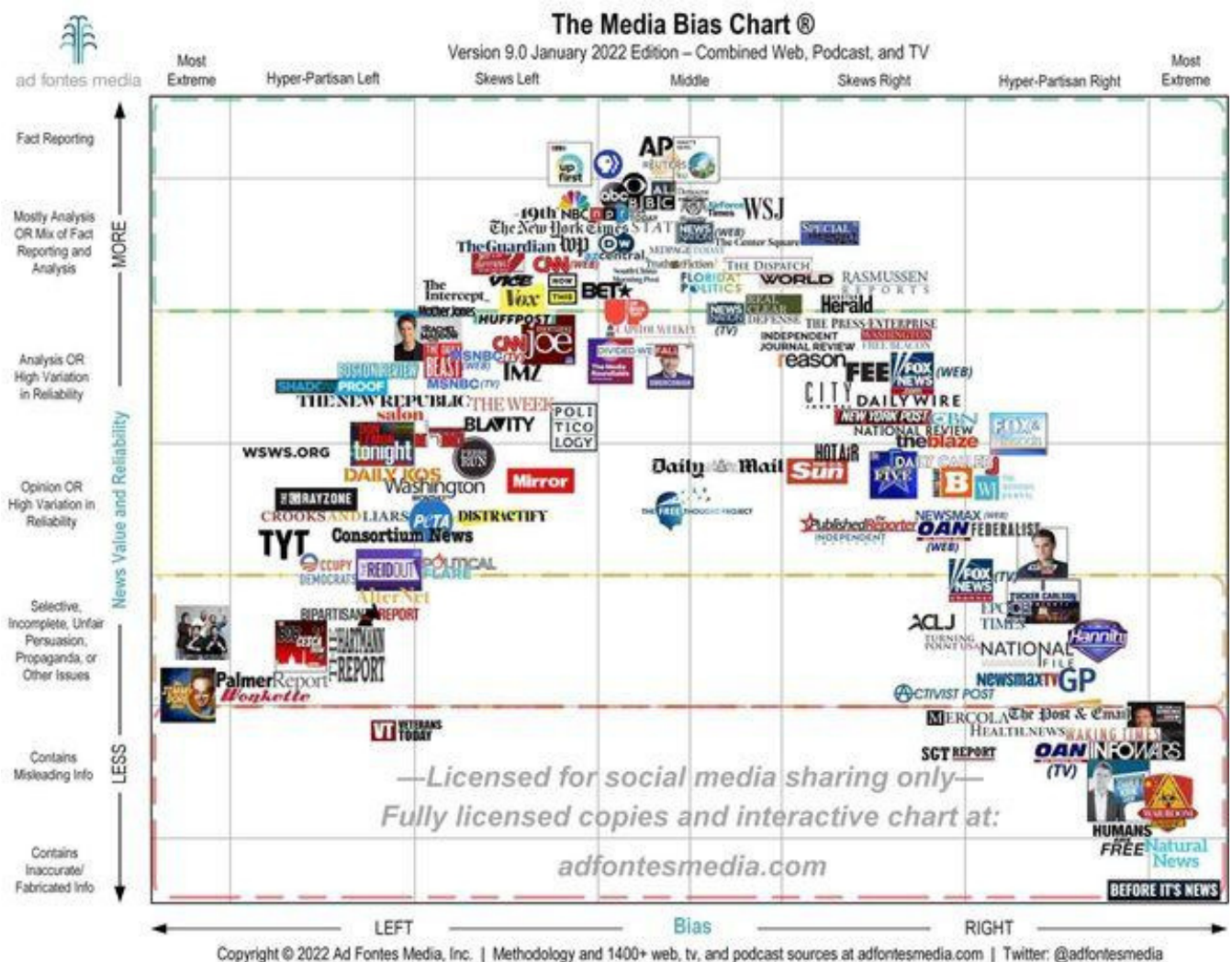
Department responsible for managing interstate/international communication, including TV media

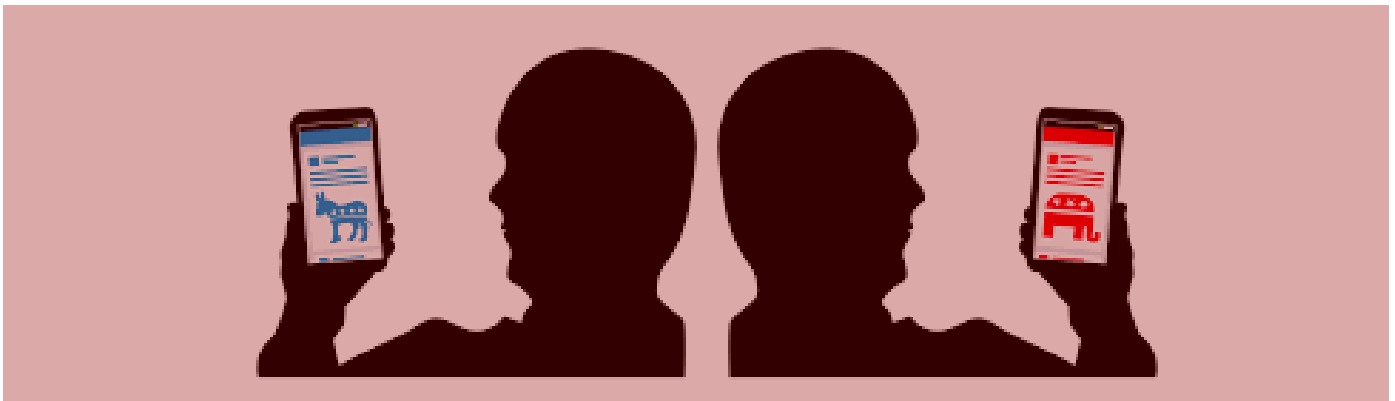
FREE SPEECH

Principle that individuals/communities can express their opinion without persecution from the state.

Media Literacy

The Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook defines media literacy as not only the ability to spot false information that is presented to us but, the power to “develop critical thinking skills in order to judge the reliability and credibility of information, whether it comes via print, television or the Internet.”





Key Results of Social Media Use

“Among the top social platforms for news content, Facebook leads the way, followed by YouTube and Twitter...with various reports showing that [Facebook]’s algorithm favors more provocative, divisive messaging, which tends to generate increased discussion and engagement.”

-Andrew Hutchinson

One of the factors causing social media users to seek news on these platforms is that nearly all news organizations rely on social media to engage with the public or to report and promote a story. A growing issue is that instead of clicking through to the complete report, the social media recap is good enough for many users. Thus, social media often promotes an agenda rather than news to be reported. A pivotal danger to this is that what is often passed as “news” is actually misinformation, incomplete statements, or propaganda.

Furthermore, online content posted on social media is not regulated by the Federal Commission Committee. The Fairness Doctrine introduced in 1949 by the FCC does not regulate how posts are distributed among parties. Meaning that, unlike news media outlets, social media does not have a requirement on how much coverage a party gets. This allows for misinformation to continue to be spread..

Guided Questions:

- 1- Why do you personally care about politics? What are the reasons for participating in or avoiding it?
- 2- Have individual citizens become more partisan, or have the people that represent us become more partisan?
- 3- Do you think polarized politics is unique to the United States, and does the two-party system influence the development of partisanship in this country?
- 4- What are some consequences of political polarization that you've witnessed?
- 5- What media outlets do you feel contribute to polarization? (And why) Do you think that the media you consume is biased, and do you think it's necessary to counter that influence?

The Impact of Polarization

Mental health among college students has been a topic of conversation for many decades, and even more so in the past few years. As we have come to discover, there is always a multitude of things happening both in local and global politics that many consider worrisome. This fear can create a feeling of anxiety and stress which, if left unaddressed, can affect your mental health. In addition, as previously covered, many media sources can be overwhelming, making it hard to absorb and understand, leaving students feeling confused and disheartened by politics. In this section, we will analyze some of the effects polarized politics have had on Americans' mental health and ways that it can contribute to the overall well-being of college students.



TERMS TO KNOW

MENTAL HEALTH

A person's condition with regard to their psychological and emotional well-being.

ANXIETY

The fearful anticipation of further danger or problems accompanied by an intense unpleasant feeling (dysphoria) or physical symptoms. Anxiety is not uncommon in children and adolescents.

DEPRESSION

A type of mood disorder characterized by low or irritable mood or loss of interest or pleasure in almost all activities over some time.

STIGMA

Negative, judgmental, and/or discriminatory attitudes toward mental health challenges and those who live with them.

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

The conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. They include factors like socioeconomic status, education, neighborhood and physical environment, employment, and social support networks, as well as access to health care.

COPING SKILL

A strategy to help you deal with difficult situations and lessen unpleasant emotions, thoughts, or behaviors.

The Impact of Polarization

There have been some studies conducted on the relationship between politics and mental health, such as that of Queens University, where they found almost 40 percent of Americans said that politics was a source of significant anxiety and stress. It was stated that "the negative impact was more prominent in those [individuals] who were young, politically engaged, or opposed to the government." The chart below shows the results of how much Americans agreed with the following statements. This demonstrates the impact of politics as a whole on individuals' physical and emotional health.

Item	Percent Agreeing	Item-Index Correlation
Physical Health		
Politics has caused me to be stressed.	38	0.79
I have become depressed when a preferred candidate lost.	26.4	0.77
Politics has caused me to be fatigued.	21.4	0.8
I have lost sleep because of politics.	18.3	0.82
Politics has adversely affected my physical health, even if only a little.	11.5	0.77
Politics has caused me to be suicidal.	4.1	0.55
<i>Cronbach's Alpha for all health costs items = .85</i>		
Emotional Health		
Exposure to media outlets promoting views contrary to mine can drive me crazy.	31.8	0.68
I have lost my temper as a result of politics.	29.3	0.73
Politics has led me to hate some people.	26.5	0.73
Politics has caused me to think seriously about moving.	23.3	0.64
On occasion, I have regretted comments I made during a political discussion.	18	0.6
I have secretly wished bad things on those who disagree with me politically.	15.3	0.71
I sometimes feel guilty about the way I feel toward those who disagree with me.	14.1	0.62
I have become annoyed when others are critical of my political views.	11	0.71
<i>Cronbach's Alpha for all emotional costs items = .83</i>		

The Impact of Polarization on Relationships

Polarization as noted earlier has increased among Americans, and it can have a significant impact on the mental health of students. How does this pertain to familial and other such relationships? Studies have shown that increased polarization among families creates uncomfortable environments. This leads families to stay clear of certain conversations, avoid certain topics, or will simply avoid spending as much time with those they feel have opposing views to them. A study conducted in 2018 by researchers at UCLA found that polarization after the 2016 presidential election as polarization among families increased, and there was less time was spent on family occasions such as Thanksgiving dinner.



A different survey poll, conducted by Digital Third Coast found that Americans' use of social media to get news increased over the pandemic. As a result, Americans began engaging more and more with people online about the topics of discussion surrounding Covid-19. According to the results, 24% of Americans were involved in an argument with someone, and 21% of Americans were involved in an argument with a family member/friend. Furthermore, 20% of Americans unfriended a friend over these disagreements, and 15% of Americans unfriended a family member over these disagreements.

Guided Questions:

- 1- Would you question your relationship with someone because of their political beliefs? Has this impacted how you communicate with others, and which topics do you find yourself avoiding?
- 2- Is the ability to ignore certain politics a privilege? What sorts of rifts can that create within communities, and can you think of examples?
- 3- What are methods you use to navigate difficult conversations with friends, family, or peers when you have differing political beliefs? / If so, what coping strategies have you discovered to overcome the discomfort surrounding these conversations?

RESOURCES

CAPS	Offers free and confidential counseling/therapy services to enrolled students. 631-632-6720
CPO	Offers a wide range of prevention and early intervention services and education focused on alcohol and other drugs, mental health, and sexual assault issues. (631) 632-2748
LGBTQ+ Center	An open and inclusive environment for LGBTQ* people in the Stony Brook University community. Center located above West Market. (631) 632-1690
Multicultural Affairs	The Office of Multicultural Affairs provides programs, services, learning experiences, and opportunities that celebrate diversity and promote greater inclusion for all Stony Brook University campus members! (631) 632-9912
Student Support Team	The Student Support Team coordinates efforts to assist students who encounter challenges or concerns in achieving success at Stony Brook University. (631) 632-7320
SASC	Offers students with disabilities support in developing their academic potential by making their educational experience accessible. (631) 632-6000

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