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Research Honors

Democracy in Crisis:

An Examination of the Negative Effects of Political Parties on Democracy

Abstract

Over the last decade, many political analyst's multiple has observed what they perceive to be a crisis of democracy in advanced developed democracies. These analysts associate the crisis of democracy with declines in party membership, widespread distrust in representative government, and a lack of participation in electoral practices. However, although there is a large literature that maintains that political parties are the 'gatekeepers' of democracy, the critical role of political parties in intensifying the democratic crisis has not been adequately examined. This paper offers a theoretical account of party function for the electorate, the party organization, and the government to understand how the diminishment may undermine democratic norms. This paper focuses its empirical analysis on polarization in the United States and examines changes in co-sponsorship of congressional bills and circuit court judge confirmations.

Introduction

Recently, there has been renewed interest amongst political scholars and political figures in democracy in crisis. There has been a significant increase in research and debates about what causes democracy in crisis, what the indicators are, and what the consequences of democracy in crisis; and more importantly if crisis necessarily implies democratic backsliding and breakdown (Applebaum 2018; Ercan & Gagnon 2014; Hobson 2016). Additionally, indices measuring the prosperity and health of democracy, such as the Freedom House and The Economist's Democracy Index, have consistently reported erosions in the quality of democracy, attacks on democratic freedoms, and increasing conflict between political actors for more than a decade (Freedom in the World Report 2017, 2018, 2019; Democracy Index 2018). These indices have also noted that in the last thirteen years there have been declines in global freedom, stagnation in democratic progress in developing countries, a rise of illiberal practices by elected officials, and a host of other issues detrimental to the sustainability of democracy (Freedom in the World Report 2016, 2017). While discussion about democracy in crisis is not new, the ways in which scholars are beginning to conceptualize the consequences of democracy in crisis across the globe are expanding (Ercan & Gagnon 2014; Hobson 2016; Brechenmacher 2018).

Democracy in crisis has been attributed to a multitude of factors. Scholars have maintained that high levels of citizen disaffection with politics and low levels of trust in government (McCaffrie & Akram 2014; Brechenmacher 2018; Rahman 2018), gradual declines in membership of mainstream parties (Dalton et. al 2000), and the failure or ineffectiveness of representative government (Jones 2001; Rosenthal 2002; Brechenmacher 2018) are indicators of democracy in crisis. Along with this, scholars have paid increased attention to political parties and ideological polarization and the ways these factors may be correlated to the crisis, and the intensification of said crisis (Brechenmacher 2018; Rahman 2018). At the heart of most democracies is a multiparty system that facilitates competitive elections and offer citizens real choices amongst political candidates. Over time, political parties have come to be recognized as the ‘gatekeepers’ of democracy because of the different functions they perform to help sustain democratic governance (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018; Aldrich 2011). While parties have been deemed as crucial to democracy, scholars have found that the intensification of elite-driven polarization has contributed to the democratic crisis in different ways (Costa 2016; Thomsen 2014; McCoy et al. 2018).

While there are many ways in which one can conceptualize parties, this essay offers a functional account of political parties to show how their actions or inactions are related to the crisis of democracy. This essay seeks to connect prior literature on party function, party decline and party polarization into a cohesive account of what parties do for democracy and how. Reiter (2006) notes that while the study of political parties was once robust, the research has been “[narrowly-gauged], methodologically unimaginative, and theoretically thin,” focusing on things such as party behavior, party function, and party discipline (616). Party literature has not been fully put into conversation with each other and this has caused party research to dwindle. Furthermore, past research has too often championed political parties as they are or as they should be ideally, without criticizing the actions of political parties, and the consequences these actions have for democratic society (Reiter 2006).

Secondly, this essay seeks to examine the ways in which the political action or inaction of parties and intensified polarization between parties and their constituents have been consequential to democratic society, in order to delineate how these factors contribute to a crisis of democracy. While many scholars have identified indicators of democracy in crisis, few have given explicit accounts of how the democratic crisis occurs nor how political parties directly contribute.

Brechenmacher (2016), for example, offers a review of the vast literature on democracy in crisis, and notes that parties in Western democratic societies are highly polarized and that citizens are disenchanted with government and political parties, but she does not fully show how these indicators are directly connected to causing a crisis. Costa (2016), Merkel (2014), and Ercan & Gagnon (2014) each try to explain why we should deem democracy to be in crisis and the ways in which we can discern the crisis of democracy from simple problems that occur in diverse democratic societies from time to time. Although it is necessary to identify that there is a problem, this is not a sufficient practice. It is also necessary that scholars and political actors understand the causes and effects of democracy in crisis so that one can attempt to develop solutions.

This essay utilizes a functional account of political parties that focuses on the functions that parties perform to sustain the conditions fit for democratic governance. These functions include the aggregation of voter preferences to allow parties to represent the people, the recruitment and oversight of members and potential political candidates to sustain the party, and policy implementation once in government as to follow through on their promises to their respective constituents. Polarization, which is often understood as the ideological distance separating two parties, requires parties to create compromise once elected to government and allows for the electorate to decipher between parties. The empirical data focuses on the United States because not only is it a nation with one of the longest experiences with modern political parties, it also is said to be clearly experiencing a crisis of democracy. This essay focuses its account on the United States, as it not only has the longest experience of political parties in modern democracy but also is said to be clearly experiencing a crisis of democracy. This paper tests two central hypotheses, first: As polarization between political parties in government increases, the function of political parties diminishes. When polarization in the government increases to significant levels, conflict between parties and elected government officials is more likely to occur. This creates political and social spaces where it is harder to reach compromise and more likely to consistently cause governmental gridlock. The substantial change in levels of polarization and diminishment of party functions may have further effects because as parties become more and more polarized they become more exclusive, sectarian and less representative of multiple subgroups. When this occurs parties are unable to create malleable sets of agreements and less able to extend the groups of voters whose interests they claim to represent. The second hypothesis maintains: The change in levels of polarization and party function weakens institutions crucial to

operation of democracy. Polarization often leads to intensified conflict between parties because they are less likely to have malleable sets of agreements that allow them to catch moderate voters. This situation increases the consequences of losing elections when parties see the rule of opposing parties as reprehensible and changes the ways in which political parties interact with each other and the formal institutions at work in democracy.

It has become increasingly important to study the ways in which the intensification of partisan polarization between mainstream parties affects the health of democracy. Partisan polarization most often refers to the ideological distance that separates political parties from one another. Brechenmacher (2018) and Levitsky & Ziblatt (2018) make similar claims, maintaining that the unusually high levels of partisan polarization and legislative and institutional gridlock have weakened democratic norms (both formal and informal) and have contributed to declining public confidence in elected officials and government institutions. The rise in partisan polarization and the subjugation of democratic norms by political actors has detrimental consequences not only domestically for democratic countries such as the United States but also internationally. Scholars acknowledge that some polarization is necessary for democracy because it can mobilize the electorate and allow for real choice within the polity (McCoy et al. 2018). Bouts of episodic polarization between political parties have the ability to add to the vitality of democracy because we can assume that constituent's preferences are being adequately represented in government. Yet, when polarization reaches significant levels over sustained periods of time, it makes democracy vulnerable and allows for partisan conflict and governmental inefficiency (McCoy et al. 2018; Brechenmacher 2018). Political parties are important because they are the vehicles through which individual constituents' social and political preferences are advanced, and through which the terms of compromise and implementation are met. As parties experience high levels of polarization, the vulnerability inherent in democracy allows for the subversion of political institutions and the breakdown of long-established norms (Thomsen, 2014).

In this essay I will first outline what polarization is and what negative effects high levels of polarization may have for democracy. Then, I will delineate the necessary components of understanding political parties functionally in the United States. This includes what parties are, what they do for different parts of society by way of their primary functions, and how they have become essential to the operation of representative democracy in the United States. I seek to then

understand the ways in which the electoral, organizational, and governmental functions of parties have been diminished and the ways in which institutions have been weakened. I accomplish this by providing a brief outline of what formal and informal institutions are and then used empirical examples to show the ways in which polarization is correlated with diminished party function and creates conditions under which legislative gridlock ensues. This argument is then empirically tested by focusing on the change in occurrence of cosponsored bipartisan bills in the U.S congress and the change in confirmation rates of judicial circuit court nominations in the senate.

Literature Review

What does Polarization do?

The United States is now experiencing record high rates of polarization that have negatively impacted democratic governance and democratic norms (Brechenmacher 2018). Issues of party polarization consistently make national headlines and affect many democratic nations. In January of 2019, the New York Times reported that the U.S. and Britain were both experiencing governmental paralysis due largely to legislative gridlock and polarization between parties that prohibits compromise and the passage of legislation (Barry & Landler, 2019). Barry & Landler (2019) note further that governmental dysfunction in highly regarded Western democracies has “far-reaching ramifications, [especially] given the roles of the US and Britain in the NATO alliance, in counterterrorism operations, intelligence sharing, sanctions enforcement, and dealing with conflict zones like Syria” (Barry & Landler, The New York Times). Significantly high levels of political polarization create circumstances that place pressure on governmental efficiency and productivity. Higher levels of party polarization increase gridlock, creating situations that cause legislative stalemates (Herman 2017; McCoy et al. 2018; Neal 2018). These high levels of polarization increase conflict between partisan groupings because the increased ideological distance between parties creates dynamics make it more difficult for groups to reach compromise and reach mutually acceptable decisions. For example, when high ideological polarization occurs, parties will adopt more extreme platforms and policy positions (Todosijevic, 2008). This is problematic because the closer that parties move to their respective extreme poles, the rarer it is for them to adopt similar positions and the harder it is for them to agree to co-partisan compromises. This paper focuses specifically on elite-driven polarization, which looks at the

relative ideological distance between political parties and the effects it has on the relation between political parties and institutions, and between political parties and the electorate.

Recently scholars have begun to question the ways in which political parties directly contribute to the crisis of democracy. In examining this relationship, it is the case that different actions or inactions by parties affect the crisis in different ways. It is necessary to understand what polarization is in order to clearly articulate how the consequences result in democracy in crisis. Polarization is a broad concept that refers to the existence or formation of distinguishable of groups or views that differ on one or more characteristics (Neal, 2016). Scholars maintain that polarization can refer to the ideological distance between people or political entities, such as political representatives and parties as a whole (Bernhardt et al., 2009; Neal, 2016, Brechenmacher, 2018; Thomsen, 2014). Therefore, political polarization would focus on the differentiation amongst political ideologies. Within the United States this polarization is often tied to party affiliation and can therefore be described as partisan polarization. But distance can be characterized in various manners. Polarized relationships can be observed amongst citizens within the electorate, or amongst political elites elected to government. Most often polarization is talked about in reference to the distance between figures on the horizontal left-right spectrum (where the left represents liberals and the right conservatives), but polarization can be conceptualized along multiple dimensions (Callaghan, 2003). For instance, Brechenmacher (2018) notes that there has been increasing vertical polarization where socioeconomic inequality causes conflict between a small (and wealthy) group at the top and the rest of society at the bottom because the former is equipped with the resources to exert disproportionate influence on the political process, especially policy making. While there are instances when polarization is not bad because it can help to consolidate the democratic system by allowing for choice between political candidates and parties, at certain levels polarization can cause conflict amongst political actors and lead to governmental paralysis and gridlock. The distinction between which forms of polarization are good and which are bad is associated with the distinction between healthy competition and systematic exclusion (Thomsen, 2014; McCoy, 2018).

Intensified polarization has consequences not only for political parties but also for democracy overall. First, intensified partisan polarization amongst political elites limits the effectiveness and proficiency of the U.S. government by creating gridlock and policy inaction.

Further, this lack of proficiency obscures the perception of the government in the electorate causing disillusionment for government and its institutions, and dealignment from mainstream parties, decreasing the amount of electoral participation amongst citizens. Lastly, intense polarization and partisan conflict can lead political parties to inaction. As previously stated, a party's organizational capacity creates gateways through which it brings new candidates into the political arena. When disillusionment is high and political engagement is low, parties may be less inclined to place restrictions on who enters the political game. This allows illiberal figures to enter the political arena and directed attacks on democracy become reality.

Why Political Parties?

To understand both how and why polarization inhibits parties from doing their principal functions, it is necessary to establish what political parties are, why they have been deemed important to democracy, and what their central functions are. Many political thinkers have posited what political parties are and their utility for democracy (Dalton, Farrell & McAllister, 2011; Schumacher, 2017). Current conceptions of party function are rooted in early theories of factionalism. Early political figures warned of the dangers of emerging factions, implying that if factions became central to politics it would be to the detriment of a democratic system (Schumacher, 2017). James Madison maintained that factions were “a number of citizens, whether amounting to a minority or majority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community” (Hamilton et al., 2014). Even further, thinkers such as Machiavelli and Montesquieu maintained that there were dangers posed by the emergence of factions because if they had a large enough following and a significant amount of power they would be able to impose their will on both the minority of people in the polity and the system itself (Schumacher, 2017; Grayling, 2017). We can then understand why factions become problematic if democracy implies that the means and ends of the government are to be decided by the mythical ‘will of the people.’

Yet the conversations around factions and their effects changed from the 1840s onward (Dalton, Farrell & McAllister, 2011). Aldrich (2011) and Baylor (2018) both give theoretical accounts for why society shifted from viewing political factions as divisive and problematic to

valuing them and viewing them as central to democracy. By the 1820s America had effectively become a one-party system, which created concerns amongst the polity about the viability of democracy (Aldrich, 2011). In response, the Whig party formed, creating two parties within the US. Even once the two original parties (the Federalists and the Democratic Republicans) collapsed there were incentives to maintain a party system. For example, at crucial moments early in American history, politicians sought to create lasting solutions to what they perceived to be critical problems. As a means of realizing their policy aims, politicians saw that it was beneficial to use new partisan institutions—political parties—to try to get things done. By banding together into coalitions or groups, politicians could gain the power to enact the policies that they prefer (Baylor, 2018). There are then incentives for politicians to turn to parties because the use of party mechanisms makes it more likely that an individual can turn their preferences into enacted policy (Aldrich, 2011). For example, if there are ten people in government and each has an equal vote for which policies are enacted and which are rejected, the one who is most interested in the law has a high incentive to form a coalition with one or more of the other legislators in order to increase the weight of the vote. By banding together and creating intergroup compromises, it is more likely that the desired outcome will be actualized.

As parties developed, ideologies distinguished the parties from one another and allowed for the development of intergroup trust and created issue positions for politicians to hold (Baylor, 8). Factions became known as political parties and were looked on fondly by political theorists and political elites alike. The purpose of parties was perceived to be functional to democracy and its survival because it solved collective action problems and allowed for greater productivity and efficiency in government. Furthermore, these conditions provide the context for Down's 'median voter theorem,' which posits that parties will reach towards the middle in order to attract moderate voters (Stokes 1999). This tendency of parties moving towards the ideological middle is lost when polarization intensifies (Brechenmacher 2018; Useem 1998) While parties were acknowledged more favorably, there was disagreement amongst scholars on how to define parties. For example, English politician Edmund Burke defined a political party as a "group of men who stand for election to promote the interest based on a shared principle," whereas Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter later defined political parties alternatively as "groups of men who stand for office in order to acquire political power" (Ware 1996; Schumacher 2017, 163). Even with the differences

in definition, scholars were assuming that political parties incentivized engagement in politics for political elites when this is not necessarily the case.

The motives that drive party behavior are pertinent to understanding their role in the democratic system and the ways in which it is governed. Motive-based definitions of political parties should be distinguished according to policy-seeking and office-seeking characterizations because of their implications. A policy-seeking party engages in politics for the sake of established principles whereas an office-seeking party engages in politics for the sake of gaining power (Schumacher 2017). Yet, political parties should not be defined so simply because it is hard to distinguish and define parties solely on their motives for seeking office. It is not clear that one would be able to clearly decipher whether a politician and their party were engaging in politics solely because of principles that they believed in or because they simply wanted power. It also seems counterintuitive to have politicians who are solely involved in politics for the sake of being in office rely on the party. If the purpose of the party is to collectively advance preferences that are in line with shared aggregated principles, candidates who are simply office-seeking have no real incentive to work with the party. In any case, for political parties to be consistently successful they would need to balance being both policy-seeking and office-seeking. If it is the case that party's aggregate preferences of subgroups based on their shared core principles and then represent these aggregated preferences in government, they should have a set of policies that they want to see actualized in government which would make them policy-seeking. Further, at the point at which political parties attain seats in government, they should become office-seeking, as they should want to maintain power in government in order to continuously realize their policy goals. In any case it would be difficult, to a certain extent, to decipher whether a party is solely office-seeking or policy-seeking. It seems sensible that parties would always want to appear to be policy-seeking (even if they are solely office-seeking) in order to keep their power and influence. Scholars may be better suited to distinguish parties as being *principled* policy-seeking versus *strategic* policy-seeking. For the former it would be the case that they seek office for the sake of making changes that are in line with their core principles, whereas the latter would adopt policies that would give them the highest chances of attaining seats in government during election cycles.

Alan Ware (1996) finds that there are potential problems with definitions of parties such as Burke's and Schumpeter's. First, Ware maintains that we should expect parties to embrace a

wide range of views and to occasionally have the potential for serious disagreement to arise amongst party members. Burke's definition fails here because it would seem to only apply to relatively small parties or single-issue parties. While parties attract people with some commonalities, not all the interests of the members of the party will be identical. Burke's definition implies that parties are constituted of only like-minded individuals with similar, if not identical, preferences. Second, Ware asserts that there are parties that represent such a wide range of opinions that it is difficult to consolidate all of them into a single "organized opinion." Because of this, it seems that in many cases Burke's party would not be actualized. Further, while Ware does not make specific mention of Schumpeter's definition of political parties, it is implied that Schumpeter's definition would also not work because it implies a single function and motive of parties when parties are quite complicated. Not only are there boundaries between parties and other institutions but there are also a host of different functions that parties perform that cannot be captured neatly by such definitions.

While the problem of defining parties is not necessarily solved completely, Ware (1996) proposes an alternative definition of political parties as "[institutions] that (a) seek to influence a state, often by attempting to occupy positions in government, and (b) usually consist of more than a single interest in the society and so to some degree attempt to 'aggregate interests'" (5). Ware's definition has several advantages over the alternatives mentioned above. For example, Ware notes that this definition is advantageous because it focuses attention on the centrality of the state for party activity and recognizes that being 'in government' plays a significant part in a party's ability to exercise influence. When we think of political parties it is usually in relation to a state and the state's various institutional arrangements. Political parties cannot function in the same way without a state apparatus. For parties to impose the will of the constituents they represent, they need to have a majority of seats in government (which are selected via elections that the state oversees) and then occupy a functional legislature to review and pass bills and other policies. More importantly, this definition applies to all types of political regimes. Political parties can operate in systems that are neither liberal nor democratic. In the 2016 Freedom in the World Report, Freedom House notes that autocratic or illiberal parties allow for leaders and nations to "pursue their own narrow interests without meaningful constraints, and without regard for share benefits of global peace, freedom, and prosperity." Such parties are often more likely to violate the civil rights and liberties of the people living under their rule. In contrast, democratic parties are constrained not

only by their own shared ideologies (Baylor 2018) but also by opposing parties and the voters that have mandated their power (Lipset 2000), as well as the democratic norms that have become embedded in the society and its institutions (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Lastly, Ware's alternative definition allows one to distinguish political parties from other groups and allows for the existence of parties that are either united or divided in shared principles and opinions. For these reasons, when referring to political parties throughout this essay I will use Ware's definition of political parties.

Parties' central functions to democracy

Many political scholars have deemed parties to be important to democracy. Some scholars have gone as far as to say that democracy is 'unthinkable except for in terms of political parties' (Schattschneider 1948, 12), and that parties are the 'gatekeepers for democracy' (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018, 20). It is critical to understand the utility of parties for democracy in order to induce arguments demonstrating the ways in which the functions of parties have diminished or changed and the effect this has on democracy. Parties are said to perform a host of different functions, but these functions can be divided into three separate categories: functions for the electorate; functions for the organization of the party; and functions for the government (Dalton & Wattenberg 2000). These distinctions encompass the wide range of functions that parties perform in order to create transparency between the electorate and the government, to create a conduit between citizens and the state, and for the continual functioning of the governmental apparatus itself.

First, parties receive their political power through the support of the electorate by way of subgroups of constituencies (Lipset 2000). It makes sense, then, that they have functions that are directly related to citizens. Ware (1996) notes that parties seek legitimate means for pursuing their ends in government. They actualize goals by appealing to groups in the electorate through presentation of platforms. Parties achieve this function for the electorate in various ways. First, political parties can simplify electoral and policy choices for citizens. Some scholars maintain that in large and diverse societies, democratic governance has the potential to produce negative outcomes, because the people at large are uninformed and incompetent in areas of government and will still vote on policies and laws that they are largely uninformed on (Brennan 2016). Political parties not only streamline this process by making it so that voters only vote for representatives

and their issue positions, but they also work to inform voters via paths of direct communication (Schumacher 2017). Parties also serve as a tool to directly educate, inform and persuade the public. They do this during the campaign trail at various debates, and at public speaking events. In modern democracies, social media and news outlets have become increasingly important for political parties' ability to adequately disseminate information to large portions of the citizenry at a fast pace.

Additionally, parties serve to mobilize the electorate by different means of getting people out to vote and participating actively in the electoral process (Dalton et al. 2011; Taylor & Francis 2000; Dalton & Wattenberg 2000). Parties can do this in various ways, by either canvassing neighborhoods or cold calling potential supporters, and by also getting citizens directly involved in the campaign process itself through jobs and volunteer opportunities. This is an important aspect of the process because if parties can do this well, they can create feelings of attachment for citizens to the party and this will further motivate citizens to vote with the respective party during future elections.

While a decline in citizens' participation with and attachment to political parties may not imply that they are simply not participating in government, this occurrence should still concern us. Central to democracy is the idea that political parties get their power and legitimacy through political support (Abramowitz 2010). Constituents identify and join parties which closely align with their opinions, beliefs and goals of how the government should be run. Citizens then vote to choose amongst candidates and those who get a majority in the U.S. system (and a plurality in other systems) are given a mandate to exercise power which legitimizes their time in government and their ability to make decisions for the constituents that support them and their party (Ware, 1996; Dalton et al. 2000).

Secondly, political parties have important organizational functions that they must consistently perform as they seek to gain and keep control of the governing apparatus. Because political parties are not made up of a single person, it is necessary for them to sustain membership and to continuously recruit leadership and potential political elites (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). They do this in multiple ways. First, parties need to recruit both rank-and-file members to sustain the life of the party and also political elites in order to have candidates who can consistently run

for and participate in government. Parties can recruit members for both roles through different youth and party-based community organizations. They can also recruit potential political elites through pipeline programs which allow citizens to have direct access to current political elites and allow for training of potential elites in various ways.

The training of potential elites and prospective political candidates also falls within the parameters of party as an organization. Political parties will recruit and then train and select people to be politically active (Schumacher 2017). Parties train candidates and political elites on the democratic process, the rules of the electoral game, democratic norms, and the central principles of their party (Dalton & Wattenberg 2000). Training is materialized in different ways because it may come through a long career of activism within the party, or it may occur with party office-holding that develops into an elective office. Training also gives a party some amount of control over who can transition into governmental representative positions. This is important because as parties are the gatekeepers of democracy, they should limit or screen out candidates who are perceived to be detrimental to democracy and the governmental process. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) note that Donald Trump's electoral success in the 2016 U.S. presidential election was largely due to the Republican party's inaction. Throughout the campaign trail, political elites aligned with the Republican party failed to condemn Trump's actions as well as his speech as anti-democratic. Their failure to condemn Trump not only legitimized him as a viable political option but it also aligned him with a well-established mainstream party.

Furthermore, within a party's organizational function they also need to both articulate and aggregate the political interests of the public at large (Dalton & Wattenberg 2000; Gunther & Diamond 2001; Petri 1976; Carswell 2016). A key function of political parties is to articulate the interests of their supporters. This function is understandable because the power that parties and candidates can acquire is derived directly from their constituents. Parties need to expand their base of constituents in order to maintain and grow their political significance (Ware 1996; Dalton et al. 2011). Voters entrust the management of legal and various social matters to the government and parties are legitimated by this mandate which allows them to act on behalf of voters on what they believe to be the most appropriate decision (Ninet 2013). Likewise, political parties also allow for democracies to provide a way to aggregate a variety of individual and group issue preferences and interests into a comprehensive policy agenda that is presented to the public, and if the party

candidate wins an electoral seat they should work to actualize the agenda they have created. Because societies have grown to have larger populations, it is necessary for a figure to take the most prominent issues that represent the concerns of a multitude of people and turn them into policy outputs. If a party develops as a cohesive unit, they are able to replicate this outcome at multiple levels of government.

It is important to note that when parties' aggregate interests they are not necessarily creating one singular platform on which they run (Ware 1996). Political parties are multi-faceted, and in the United States political candidates of the same party can centralize substantially different preferences and outcomes while still sharing similar general principles that are at the heart of their party. Instead, preference aggregation allows them to take a range of issue positions and preferences coalesce them into like categories and then prioritize them based on their perception of the will of their constituents (Ware 1996. Dalton et al. 2011). Lastly, once elected, political parties have functions that they perform for the state and its operation at large. Elections achieve a generally good congruence between citizen policy preferences and the policies of the parties represented in government, but after elections parties need to act on the policies that they presented to the public.

Once in government parties can fulfil the governmental function in several ways. In the United States, it is the responsibility of a political party to bring together enough elected officials to organize the two houses of the legislature. Parties need to create majorities in government so that coalitions may form but also for there to be clear representation of party policy positions (Dalton & Wattenberg 2000). Parties also organize the government by organizing the legislative process. Dalton and Wattenberg indicate that parties provide an efficient and systemic mechanism for organizing interests and ensuring cooperation among individual legislators (2000, 8). It is often deemed the responsibility of parties in legislatures to maintain party discipline. This can be done through different incentives and control mechanisms. Further, parties will monitor individual legislators and enforce party discipline and at times speak out publicly against the actions of legislators who have stepped out of line. For example, parties control selection of legislative leadership offices such as committee chair positions and other positions in legislative leadership offices. Because of the wide scope and range of functions that parties serve it is inconceivable to

have large modern legislatures without political parties. Parties have become central to the day to day functions of the legislature and the government at large.

Parties also work to implement policy objectives. While not every policy promise is met by the end of a term of a given candidate, parties are the central actors in deciding what the government's policy outputs are. If a party system is highly disciplined, parties promote manifestoes and policy agendas, and once in office will transform these promises into laws. Although the United States has a weaker discipline system, the established parties are still the primary agents in negotiating public policy decisions. Parties function to additionally organize dissent and opposition (Dalton & Wattenberg 2000). In any given society it is the case that not every party will make it into government. Instead there may exist several small niches (single-issue or alternative) parties that receive a minimal number of votes (Rosenstone et al. 1984). In the U.S. it is often the case that these parties do not gain seats in government unless mainstream parties really strike a negative chord with the public. But both parties in the minority as well as parties outside of government are responsible for offering alternative views and alternative ways in which the government can be run to the people. But this aspect is so important because an opposition party presents a political alternative and acts in ways to limit the present government and offers the potential for change in the next government (Dalton & Wattenberg 2000).

Lastly, political parties in the government work to ensure responsibility over governmental action and to control a presiding government administration. Party government allows for ensuring responsibility because with a single party (in the US case) or a coalition of parties controlling the government it is sometimes unclear who is indirectly responsible for governmental actions. This can sometimes make it easier for the public to decipher who is to blame for actions and how to vote in the following election (Dalton et al. 2011; Dalton & Wattenberg 2000).

Understanding the nature of the Crisis

How we think of crisis in relation to democracy is important because it allows us to decipher if we are facing dire problems, or if everything is business as usual with minor hiccups. The scholarly conversation around democracy in crisis can at times be misleading because for many decades, if not centuries, political thinkers have talked about democracy in terms of crisis. At the core of democracy is the idea that the “will of the people” decides the means and ends of

government, yet “we the people” is an “empty designator” because it refers to no one and everyone at once (Costa 2016). This can have either an empowering or a paralyzing effect for individuals and groups in society. When “we the people” is understood broadly and everyone in the polity is included or considered to be a member, then there is no problem. Members of society can participate in government indirectly through their representative, and even if their party does not occupy a majority, at least some of their preferences and concerns are heard. However, when “the people” is defined as or attached to a distinct group, it becomes exclusionary and politics are seen as being completely “winner take all” (Costa 2016; Hobson 2016; Ercan & Gagnon 2014). Such instances are inherently divisive and ultimately polarizing because the stakes of losing an election are substantially higher for parties and citizens in the electorate.

To understand how crisis is connected to democracy, one should conceptualize democracy in terms of types of relationships between the state and citizens and not simply in terms of institutional setups (Rahman 2018). Such relationships can be “broad, equal, protected and mutually binding consultation” (Rahman, 1558). Understanding that democracy is also relational and not simply institutional shows that there is a balancing act between institutions, political actors, citizens, and political actions. At the point at which one of these components tips past what is acceptable, democracy is curtailed for the life of democracy is largely dependent upon acting in a way that sustains democratic norms.

A crisis of democracy can be regarded as either an acute or a chronic crisis (Ercan & Gagnon 2014). Acute crisis occurs when the problems democracy faces are relatively small and easily fixable, whereas chronic crisis occurs when democracy is itself at risk of failure (or backsliding in cases of recently democratized nations), or when major existential crises arise. The current crisis may be considered chronic because of the various attacks on the institutions that uphold the democratic system. Chronic crisis can consist of different problems: a crisis of the representative dimension of democracy, since there is a conscious and clear gap between the represented and the representatives; a crisis that exposes the tensions and contradictions between political and financial orders; a crisis of democratic governance and public trust; or a crisis that questions the future of democracy as a viable governing option (Costa 2016; Ercan & Gagnon 2014; Merkel 2014; Brechenmacher 2018). This big crisis extends farther than the examples

mentioned here, and for this reason it is necessary to look at the ways in which democracy may be in crisis and how such crisis have developed.

Democratic Institutions and Established Norms

Political parties have day-to-day interactions with formal institutions (such as the legislature and various bureaucratic departments), and their actions can hurt or help the institutions they work with. Institutions matter because parties' political struggles are mediated by the institutional settings in which they take place (Ware 2011). Consequently, institutions can determine who is a legitimate political actor, when these actors should act, and how they should function in relation to other actors. Further, institutions can mediate the conflicts between political parties in government. Ware notes that "changing or altering aspects of political rules [and institutions] may be expected to affect the nature of other institutions and of how politics is conducted" (9). Democracies are made up of formal institutions which consist of the different configurations of formal laws, rules and administrative structures. Yet formal structures do not help to fully explain political behavior or policy outcomes in government. Instead, informal institutions are also important, if not more important than formal institutions, because informal institutions shape political interactions. Informal institutions are unwritten, yet well-established, norms that reinforce the constitution and general ideals of democracy (Levitsky & Ziblatt). Informal institutions condition or limit the process of politics and policy making and the ways in which individuals political actors strategize and pursue policy goals (Thelen & Steinmo, 1992; Shomer et al. 2016). It is then important, when examining the threats to democracy, to look at the ways in which actions by political parties may come into conflict with these informal institutions.

Parties abide by formalized written rules as well as informal unspoken rules. The informal unspoken rules create norms that not only restrict political actors in certain ways, but also uphold democracy. Some have maintained that the norms that are absolutely crucial to sustaining democracy, especially American democracy, are tolerance and forbearance (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018; Brechenmacher 2018; Rahman 2018). Mutual toleration is the idea that competing parties will accept one another as legitimate rivals and will not question the existential legitimacy of the opposing party. Majority and minority parties will exercise mutual toleration by accepting each other as legitimate sources of power mandated by the people and will not make it seem as if one

party is the morally reprehensible option. Further, forbearance is the idea that politicians should exercise restraint in deploying their institutional prerogatives. In governments, this includes majority parties allowing the minority to pass bills that they are largely invested in, to have their nominations for cabinet positions and court seats considered and heard in a timely fashion, and even collaboration and co-sponsorship between parties. Levitsky and Ziblatt note that parties and their leaders need to both recognize each other as legitimate as well as resist the temptation to use their temporary control of a given (formal) institution (in the legislature, executive, or judicial branches) to maximize their partisan advantage in perpetuity (2018, 9). These informal institutions are important because they offer soft guardrails for democracy and help it avoid the sort of partisan infighting to the death that has been detrimental to other democracies around the world (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018). Yet contemporary events suggest that these norms are under threat in the US and leave room for major concern for the health of democracy.

Empirical Analysis

Gridlock, within and between the branches of government, effectively diminishes the governmental function of political parties because it does not allow for parties and the representatives of those parties to promote or pass policy. Parties in government are to (1) organize the government by organizing the legislative process, (2) provide efficient and systemic mechanisms for organizing interests and ensuring cooperation amongst individual legislators, and (3) see through the passage and implementation of bills, policies and various nominations. When high polarization and gridlock occur, political parties are inhibited from carrying out their principal functions.

Empirical examples help to demonstrate how intensified polarization can have detrimental effects on the function of government and for society at large. From December of 2018 until January of 2019 the United States experienced a 35-day government shutdown because of the inability of Democrats and Republicans to reach compromise over the spending bill for the next fiscal year which included demands for a \$5.7 billion spending bill for a border wall (Collins et al. 2019). Republicans in Senate and Trump refused to compromise on a lower cost for the proposed border wall, and Democrats refused to give in to fund the proposed bill.

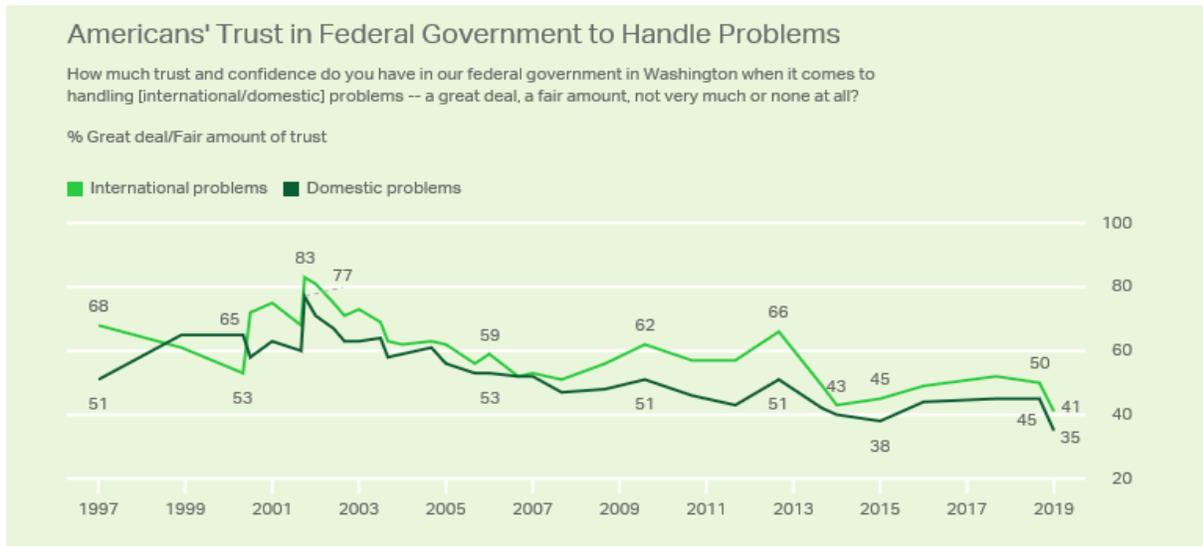
The inability of these parties to come to compromises has adverse effects on society. First, different agencies within the federal government are negatively impacted. Davis and Cochrane (2018) note that when the partial government shutdown occurred in late December of 2018 it “affected core government functions such as the Postal Service, the military, the Department of Veterans Affairs and entitlement programs, including Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare and food stamps” (The New York Times). This is problematic because it stops necessary services used by millions of Americans on a day to day basis, many of which affect the livelihood of citizens occupying the lowest socioeconomic strata in the country. Furthermore, the shutdown had negative effects on the Securities and Exchange Commission and later the entire economy. When the government shuts down for extended periods of time staffing is first limited and then the little staff left is required to work without pay. This is especially problematic because it stops the reviews of company stock offerings and mergers and acquisitions (Lu & Singhvi 2019). When shutdowns occur, it creates instability in the economy because investors are unsure of the stock and GDP trends because they are reported less and may begin to pull investments out of the economy. At the end of the federal government shutdown the US economy lost \$11 billion from lost output from federal workers, delayed government spending, and reduced demand (Mui 2019) Mui notes that while some of this damage would be reversed as the government reopened, at least 0.2 percent of GDP would be permanently lost.

Some maintain that divided government is the cause of both gridlock and partisan conflict, but this is not necessarily the case. For example, the government shutdown that started in December of 2018 and ended January 25, 2019 was the third governmental shutdown in two years of unified Republican rule in Washington (Davis & Cochrane 2018). Jones (2001) finds that from 1975 to 1998 divided government did not necessarily cause governmental gridlock (a lack of legislative productivity), instead higher levels of party polarization or partisan conflict increases gridlock. This is not an absolute claim as Jones shows that once a party is closer to having enough seats in either the senate or the house to halt filibusters and vetoes, the magnitude of legislative gridlock decreases. This means that a government can be both divided and highly polarized but once a single party has a large enough majority in either the house or the senate then the potential for gridlock should decline as that party has enough seats to pass legislation without reaching across the aisle and may even have the power to thwart bills in the Senate or House. When considering contemporary examples, the 116th Congress has now experienced gridlock because

the Democrats have a large enough majority to postpone or veto Republican legislative measures (Barry & Landler 2019). This example demonstrates that it was not divided government that led to gridlock and later a thirty-six-day government shutdown; rather, it was polarization, which rendered Trump and House Democrats incapable of reaching any sort of compromise with Trump's proposed budget and border wall plans. It is also important to note that this implies that unified governments which are highly polarized and see neither party having a large majority will have a high propensity for gridlock.

Furthermore, the lack of proficiency obscures the perception of the government in the electorate causing disillusionment for government and its institutions, and dealignment from mainstream parties, decreasing electoral participation amongst citizens. Attachment to political parties is important because it can channel political and ideological polarization away from system-challenging activities towards support for the regime and the acceptance of the prevailing democratic order (Druckman & Lupia 2016). Yet, the heightened polarization and gridlock seen in the federal government have caused citizens to become disenchanted with governmental institutions and political parties (Brechenmacher, 2018). When citizens perceive the conflict in the government to be exceptionally high to the point that representatives cannot get things done, and situations similar to the 2019 federal government shutdown occur, trust in the government can decline significantly. In January of 2019 it was reported that only 35 percent of citizens had trust in the government to handle domestic issues and only 41 percent of citizens trusted the government to handle international issues (Brennan 2019). These were some of the lowest points of trust in government in American history. A key reason for this perception stems from that perception that these central institutions are failing to do their jobs (Brechenmacher 2018). Even further, popular discontent has been directed at mainstream political parties because these parties have struggled to engage ordinary citizens. This should be of grave concern because as mentioned previously, parties receive their legitimacy to exert their power in government from citizens' votes. When parties are only able to engage small portions of society it seems that the 'will of the people' is not met. Parties are supposed to aggregate the interests of large parts of society and then develop comprehensive policies that can become laws. When only a small portion of society is engaged, societies have less of a democratic process.

The following images produced by Gallup (Brenan 2019) may help to substantiate the above claims. In a poll conducted from January 21–27, Gallup used questions that prompted participants to rate their trust in the government’s ability to handle problems domestically and internationally. Several polls similar to this one in January have been conducted since the 1970s and have been regularly conducted since 1997.



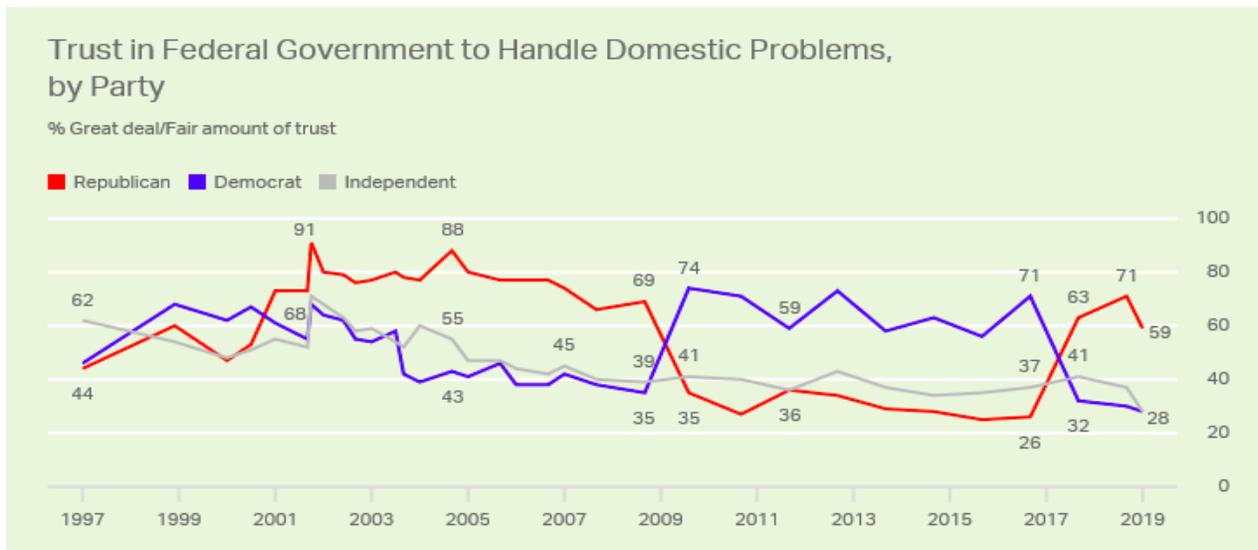
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The first image shows that the trust in government to handle problems internationally and domestically have experienced a negative trend since 1991. In 1997, 68 percent of Americans trusted the government's ability to handle international problems a great or fair amount and 51 percent of Americans trusted the government's ability to handle problems domestically a great or fair amount. Between 1999 and 2011 these ratings fluctuated between the 60s and 50s which does not give room for great concern. Yet in 2019 these ratings hit the lowest recorder points in the history of the poll since President Barack Obama’s second term in 2015 when Republican confidence was weak. In January of 2019 only 41 percent of Americans felt they could trust the federal government a great or fair amount to handle domestic problems and only 35 percent of

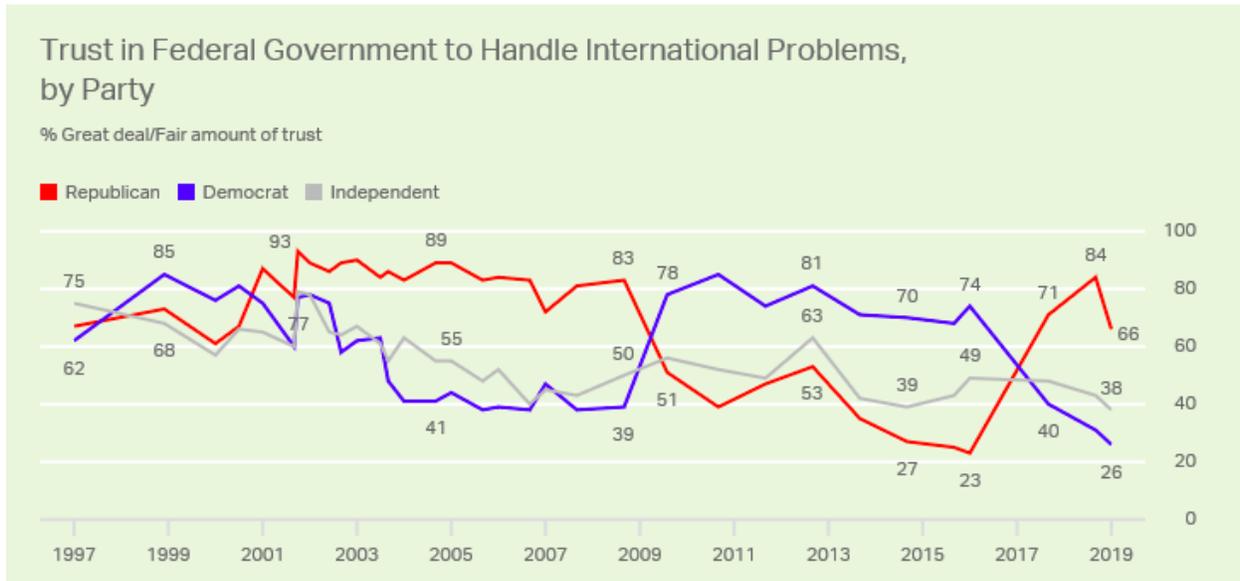
¹ Source. Gallup (2019)

“Americans Trust in Government to Handle Problems at New Low’ Brenan, Megan

Americans felt that they could trust the federal government a great or fair amount to handle domestic problems.



Further, Gallup has controlled for the ratings of public trust in government by political party (Democrat, Republican, and Independent). When looking at the domestic government specifically, one can see the greatest decline in trust for Republicans in the last year in the second image below. Between September, of 2018 and January 2019, the percentage of Republicans who trusted federal government a great or fair amount to handle domestic problems declined 12 points, from 71 to only 59 percent. In that same time frame, those who identified as Independents experienced a similar decline of 13 percentage points. In September of 2018, 41 percent of those who identified as Independents trusted the government a great or fair amount of the time to handle domestic problems whereas by January only 28 percent of Independents felt this way. By contrast, the Democrats experienced small declines in ratings of trust in the same five-month period. In September of 2018, 32 percent of those who identified as Democrats trusted the government a great or fair amount to handle domestic problems and by January of 2019 there was a five-percentage point drop in trust with only 28 percent of Democrats trusting the federal government a great or fair amount of the time.



When looking at the breakdown by party for trust in the federal government to handle international problems, one can see a similar trend. In September of 2018, 84 percent of Republicans trusted the federal government a great or fair amount to handle international problems while by January of 2019 there was an 18-percentage point drop, with only 66 percent of Republicans trusting the federal government to handle international problems. In the same time frame Independents went from 49 percent of independents trusting the federal government to handle international problems declining 11 percentage points to just 38 percent of independents holding this view. Lastly, Democrats experienced similar changes in this five-month time frame, with a decline of 14 percentage points. In September of 2018, 40 percent of Democrats trusted the federal government a great or fair amount to handle international problems, whereas by January of 2019 this had declined to only 26 percent of Democrats feeling this way.

This data is concerning because while there have been fluctuations over time in public trust in the ability of the government to handle problems and basically do its job, in the last decade or so there has been a negative trend in overall trust. It also seems to be the case that over time the response to the opposing party gaining control of the government leads to a decline in trust in the ability of the government to handle problems. This can be seen in both image two and three above. Since the election of Donald Trump as President in 2016, Democrat's trust in government to handle both domestic and international problems have declined. The two graphs show that this trend of not trusting the ability of the opposing party has been constant since 2000, yet it has become more

drastic overtime. Brennan (2019) notes that the most recent decline in both Republican and Democratic trust can be partially attributed to the change in control in the House as well as the lengthy government shutdown. But, in order to fully explain this trend more research needs to be done on what factors affect public trust in the government's ability to handle problems. Looking into this causal relationship is important because it allows for one to explore the significance of polarization on perceptions of government and trust.

Alternatively, some scholars have maintained that democracy at large is neither in crisis nor are its central institutions and components experiencing breakdown. McCaffrie & Akram (2014) argue that the decline in citizens' diminishing support for mainstream parties in the last few decades is not necessarily a sign of democratic crisis or political apathy; instead, citizens are turning to alternative and non-traditional forms of political participation in order to have their views adequately represented. The decline in political participation and support for mainstream parties has been connected to democracy in crisis now because many political scientists maintained that robust political participation was an essential component in the health of democracy (McCaffrie & Akram 48).

Yet this still poses a problem: if political parties are a significant component of modern democracies and are important for such democracies to function properly, then constituents using alternative sources for political participation diminishes the role of political parties. As previously stated, one of the roles of political parties is to aggregate the opinions of constituents into comprehensible policy measures and then work to pass bills for the issue at hand. With constituents using other sources as political participation and political outlets, it would seem to be the case one of the functions of political parties is no longer being fully met. Furthermore, even if it was true that citizens are participating in politics in alternative ways, this does not account for the ways in which deep partisan polarization may be detrimental to democracy and thereby constitute a crisis.

When the perception of political parties' changes amongst the electorate, and political elites are no longer able garner the same amount of trust from the public, political elites may turn to drastic measures to recapture lost voters. As previously stated, one of the main organizational functions of political parties is to not only recruit potential candidates and political elites, but to also screen out those who may have negative effects on the party and democratic government.

Levitsky & Ziblatt (2018) note that under certain circumstances, political elites may make mistakes by allowing political outsiders to enter the political arena and gain legitimacy and power. When this occurs it usually has significant ramifications, as political outsiders may spout extreme populist or nationalist rhetoric that deepens divisions within society. This happened during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections when the Republican party negligently failed to dismantle Donald Trump's anti-democratic, anti-pluralist, and anti-establishment campaign (McMannon 2016; Rahman 2018). While some Republican government officials condemned Donald Trump and maintained that he was a threat to democracy, the party apparatus failed to put in place effective measures to ensure Donald Trump was not the primary candidate (Graham 2016; Silver 2016).

Donald Trump has been particularly problematic for democracy in the United States because his politics are both populist and exclusionary. Rahman (2018) notes that the election of Donald Trump as president in 2016 gave voice to “an apparent resurgence of right-wing exclusionary populism premised on distrust of immigrants and minorities and in coalition with elite business interests” (1554). Populism can be dangerous to democracy when it is exclusionary and identifies “the people” within a specific sub-group in society because it cultivates antagonistic relationships between the identified sub-group and those who are against the populist cause and legitimizes othering of groups who do not possess the characteristic of the sub-group (Abts & Rummens 2007). Populism, then, has the ability to diminish the functions of political parties as well.

In instances where a populist candidate campaigns under an established party, this not only has a legitimizing effect of the rhetoric being used, but it also excludes a lot of potential voters from attaching themselves to the party because of the rhetoric being spewed and the platforms put forth to please the populist core. As stated before, parties function to aggregate large amounts of interests from different sub-groups in society. When presidential candidates are populist, as in the case of Trump, this not only makes it harder to aggregate and represent all interests; it also makes it more difficult to promote compromise between parties. Abts and Rummens (2007) note that central to the populist rhetoric is anti-elite and anti-establishment sentiments, along with the idea that only their group can fix the problems that are inherent in society. When this rhetoric is central to a candidate and that candidate wins, there is no incentive to compromise in government. These cases cause such political figures to directly attack democratic norms of mutual toleration and

again leads to legislative inaction and gridlock as populist paint any opposition as wrong and reprehensible.

This shows that political parties can have different effects on democracy. Not only does intensified polarization lead to ineffectiveness and inaction because of an inability to work with other political parties, it also diminishes the core functions of parties themselves. Furthermore, it seems that when intensified polarization occurs and norms of mutual toleration are weakened, a sort of chain reaction occurs: the electorate's perception of political parties' changes causing dealignment and illiberal political figures have an opening to enter government. All of these factors seem to have negative consequences for the health of democratic government.

Method and Data

When political polarization is high, attacks on foundational democratic norms become easier for politicians in government because of the increase in partisan conflict and animosity. When sentiments of animosity towards opposite parties are high and partisan conflict is high, it seems that this will have a negative impact on the norms central to democracy. It is important to reinforce that multiple scholars have acknowledged that democracy rests upon fragile institutions that can be weakened and eventually destroyed (Shapiro 1996; Levitsky & Ziblatt 2019; Ware 1996). In particular, informal institutions comprising norms of mutual toleration can be undermined because opposing parties are less likely to see the preferences of other parties as valid. I have hypothesized that as polarization increases, the function of political parties is diminished. For this portion of research, the function of parties has been operationalized by the ability of government to pass legislation and enact bills during congressional sessions. The productivity of a government can often be measured by their ability to get things done, this can be shown simply through the change in rate of bills introduced in Congress and the change in rate of the bills enacted by Congress over time.

Table 1 shows the amount of legislation introduced and enacted since the 101st Congress. The data shows that while the number of bills introduced has declined significantly over time, with the 112th congress having the lowest numbers in the data set, the number of bills enacted by vote, simple resolution, and concurrent resolution have also declined significantly. It is important to note

that while there were spiked increases in the number of bills introduced and enacted in the 114th and 115th Congress, in comparison to the 101st Congress these numbers are still relatively low. We may assume that as each Congress introduces and enacts less legislation, that are being less efficient or less productive. Yet, this does not fully capture what is happening within government and between party relations because it is plausible that as problems become more complicated within society it is less logical to introduce large amounts of bills and it is less feasible to see the passage of all such bills. It is then necessary to further operationalize the first hypothesis.

Table 1: Congress Bill Breakdown

Congress	101	102	103	104	105	106	107	108	109	110	111	112	113	114	115
Number of Bills Introduced	9161	9655	7874	6158	7133	8275	8624	8100	10383	10509	10658	10325	8571	9665	10750
Bills ordered reported	700	455	447	410	376	497	483	489	550	733	534	540	613	669	724
Passed by House	296	310	281	262	328	384	369	372	376	734	518	301	338	561	721
Passed by Senate	268	287	184	161	203	230	205	289	204	112	72	83	83	93	136
Agreed to (Simple Resolution)	513	511	440	538	555	667	591	773	926	1351	1384	672	608	654	718
Agreed to (Concurrent Resolution)	86	75	69	60	66	102	90	92	101	84	80	50	55	54	40
Bills enacted	663	609	473	334	403	604	383	504	483	456	385	284	296	327	443
Percent of bills passed	7.24%	6.31%	6.01%	5.42%	5.65%	7.3%	4.44%	6.22%	4.65%	4.34%	3.61%	2.75%	3.45%	3.38%	4.12%

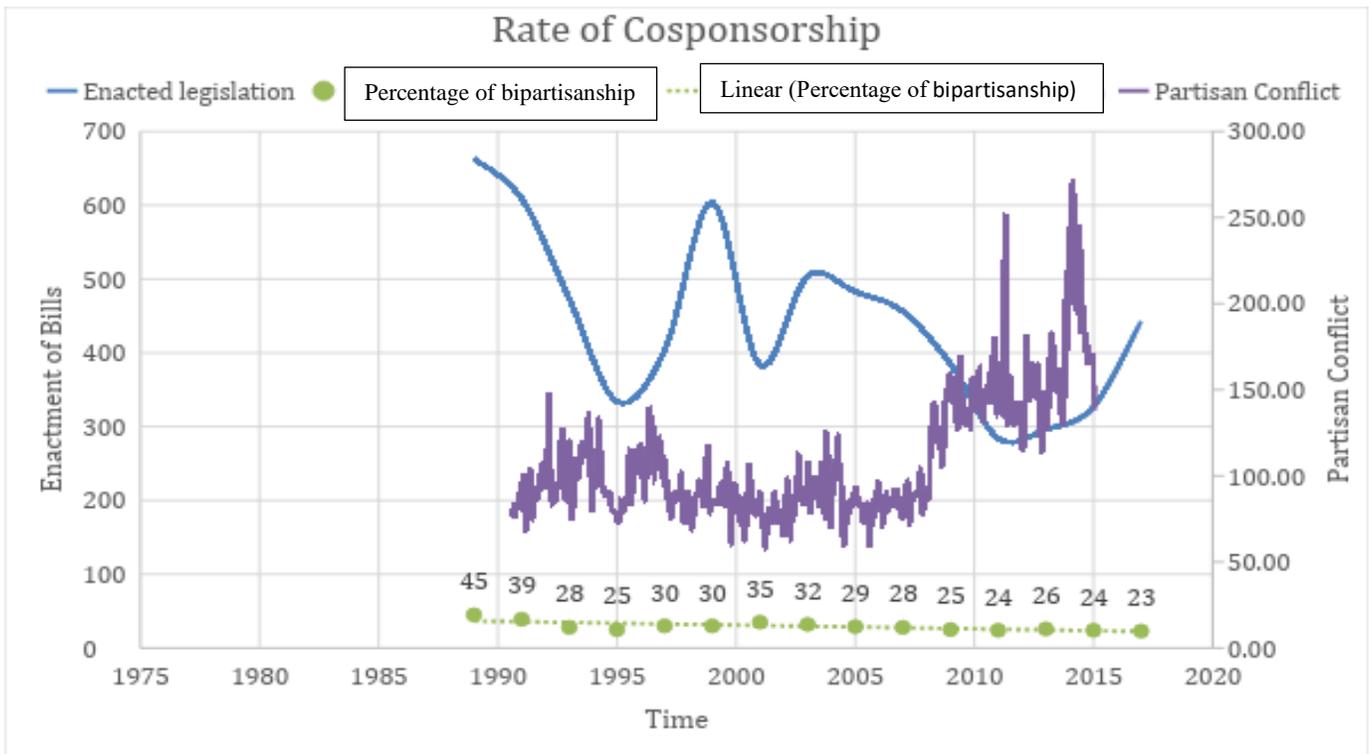
Central to the governmental function of political parties is the ability to collaborate with other parties in order to pass legislation. Parties in control of government need to seem as if they are considering the preferences of all society, even though they can place the preferences of their party at the center, they need to consider the oppositional government at different points. Parties can directly show that they are compromising with an oppositional party through co-sponsorship of potential legislation. When parties in government have high rates of reaching across the ideological aisle to co-sponsor bills with opposing parties, mutual tolerance is high, and parties are performing their necessary functions to government. When co-sponsorship is low, and parties begin to reach across the aisle less often, mutual tolerance is low and the functions that parties should perform for government are diminished. Co-sponsorship hints to the public that the parties in government can make compromises when necessary and in turn effectively run the government. When this breaks down it is often the case that polarization is occurring at high levels, and political elites reach stalemates more often, causing legislative gridlock and governmental inaction. When this occurs, it hinders a party's ability to solve problems both domestically and internationally.

Figure 1 uses data from three sources to show the change in co-sponsorship of bills that were also enacted over time. I have used data from the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia that tracks the degree of political disagreement amongst U.S. politicians at the federal level by measuring the frequency of newspaper articles reporting disagreement in a given month. Partisan conflict is used here as an approximate measure to partisan polarization. For the data to fall in line with hypothesis one, we should see a decline in co-sponsorship of bills when partisan conflict is high. It is important to note that the data used for partisan conflict is not a perfect measure of political polarization because it tells us nothing about the relative ideological distance between parties to help to substantiate the claims made here. Further, the data presented by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia may be slightly worrisome. Because the measure of partisan conflict is based on the frequency of reported disagreements between parties by news outlets, in certain cases, disagreements may be underreported or over reported.

Figure 1 confirms hypothesis one. On the left side of the figure, the first y-axis tracks the amount of cosponsored bills in a specific Congress overtime, whereas the right side of the axis tracks partisan conflict overtime. In the last five years there has been a decline in the number of bipartisan cosponsored bills in both the Senate and the Congress. The rate of bipartisanship has

decreased from around 40 percent of all bills introduced to under 25 percent for both the house and the senate.

To further substantiate the hypothesis that maintains that democratic institutions have been weakened, I have operationalized party function and toleration through the rate of confirmation of Circuit Court judges by the U.S. Senate. I have collected data for qualitative rankings of nominated judges from the American Bar Association, which rates each nominee as Well Qualified, Qualified, or Not Qualified. Further, I have collected data on the number of votes each nominee



receives to be confirmed in government. The ranking is important because those judges who have been rated as Well Qualified by the ABA should have received yes votes from both parties. Because of this, Well Qualified judges should have confirmation votes above the 50-vote mark. For those who are rated Qualified there may be some contestation between parties, with only the party of the president voting yes. Lastly, those who are ranked Not Qualified should not receive any votes; instead their nomination should be either returned by the Senate or withdrawn by the President so that no hearing occurs. We would expect to see democratic norms of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance beginning to break down when there are increasing instances of party voting, wherein the president’s party votes yes for the nominee and the opposition party votes no.

We would expect this to be a signal of democratic crisis because the voting patterns are no longer representative of the ability of the nominee to do their job, instead they are entirely symbolic.

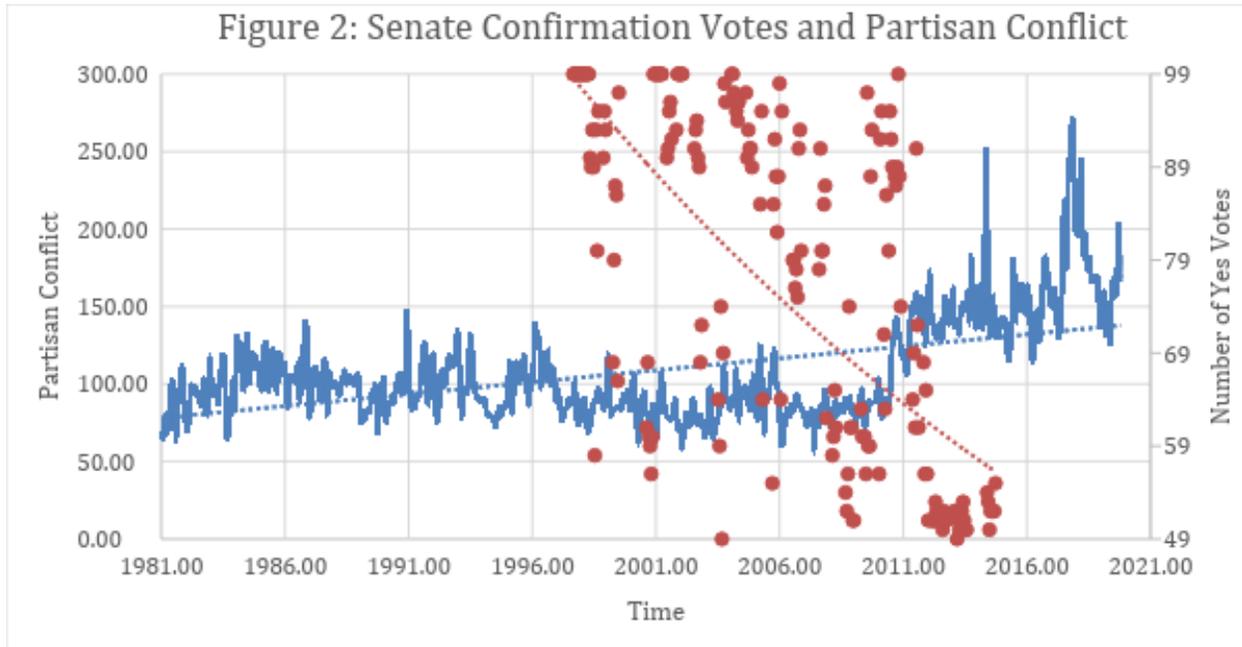
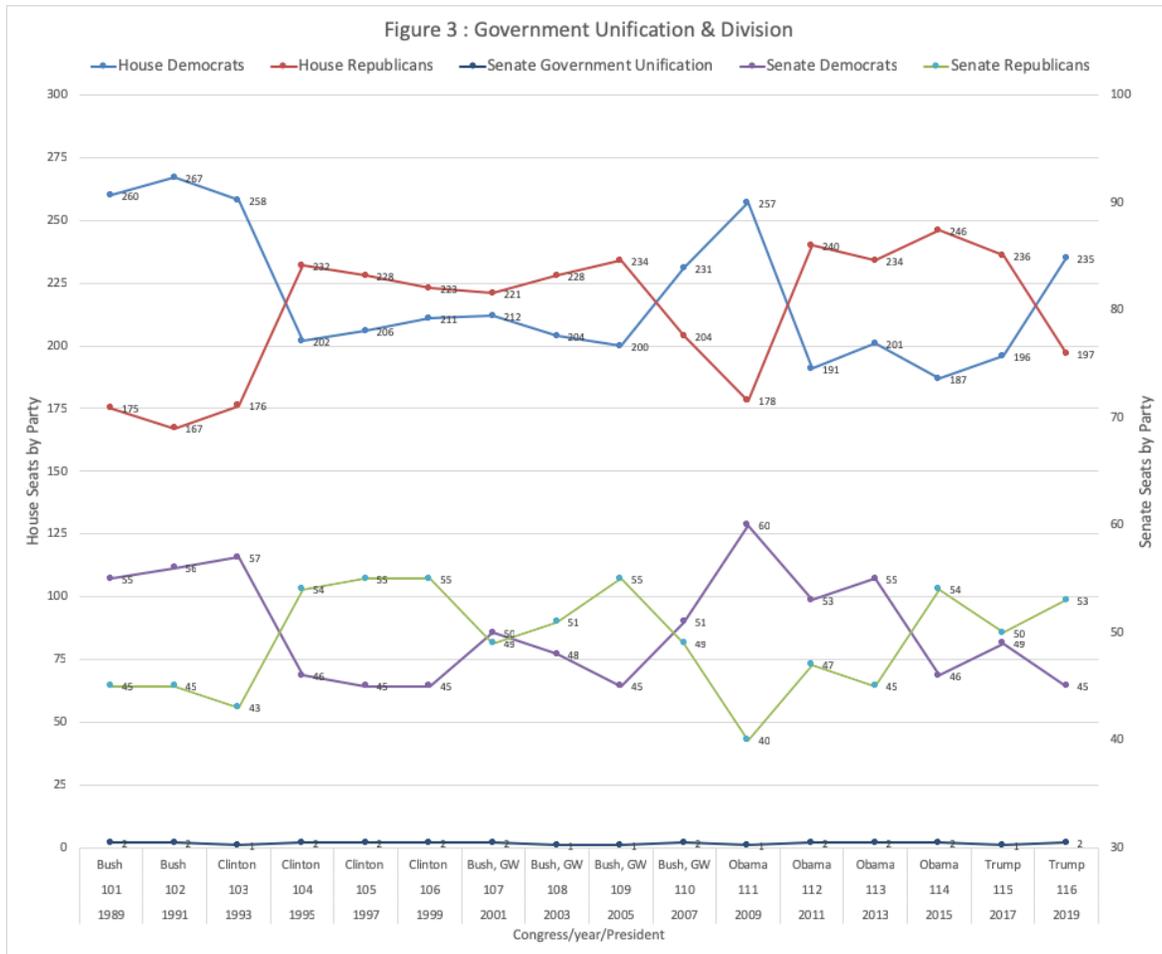


Figure 2 displays the change in voting patterns over time. Between the 101st Congress and the 106th Congress the first trend occurred. Of those who were ranked either Well Qualified or Qualified, both parties voted yes on the confirmation of nominated judges. At this point in time the confirmation was either unanimous, a voice vote, or ranged between 98-70 senators voting in favor of the nominee. When the confirmation vote is unanimous, this means that every senator, regardless of party association, voted in favor of the nominee. In instances of a voice vote, the majority party leader calls this vote on the Senate floor, and no record of who voted which way occurs. This is lumped into this positive category because it seems to be the case that majority party leaders only call voice votes when it is highly likely that the nominee will be approved. This trend has changed over time as approximated polarization, partisan conflict, has increased. In the last five Congresses there have been higher rates of voting by party affiliation or the nominee being returned to the President by Senate rule 6. This data confirms the hypothesis because, while the nominees are still ranked as highly qualified by the ABA, senators are more likely to vote in line

with their party. The party of the president votes yes for the nominee, and the opposition party either abstains from voting for the nominees or votes no.



For further context, figure 3 shows the breakdown of party seats in both the house and the senate over time.

Discussion

This essay examines the ways in which political parties have become essential to the day-to-day functions of democracy, specifically in the United States, and how political parties may undermine democracy and contribute to a democratic crisis when their functions are diminished. First, political parties are important because they have functions in the electorate, as an organization, and within the government. Functions in the electorate allow them to aggregate interests of large groups, garner support of citizens, and create cohesive policy platforms. As an

organization, political parties function to recruit membership through various community outreach programs and voter recruitment, while also recruiting potential party candidates and future leaders. In exercising this function, they can screen candidates for political office, allowing in those who will follow democratic norms and keeping out those who will not. Finally, parties have specific functions in government, where they work to turn the platforms they created during the election cycle into implemented policy that is comprehensive and beneficial for society. Once in government, political parties should try their hardest to get their policy goals actualized.

Under conditions of extreme partisan polarization, the ability of parties to perform these functions is undermined, and crucial democratic norms are threatened. Democratic norms are important because they undergird democratic governance. These norms help to ensure that political parties practice mutual tolerance and institutional forbearance in the execution of their governmental functions. In this vein, a party that controls the government will see oppositional parties as a legitimate source of power and political actors, with the converse also being true. Parties will also exercise restraint in deploying their institutional prerogatives to the greatest capacity in order to sustain the functioning of government. Yet when partisan polarization and conflict is high, these democratic norms become threatened. Polarization is a threat to mutual toleration because it creates atmospheres where political parties are largely incapable of working together. Parties see their opposition as reprehensible and are less capable of making any compromise to solve governmental problems. This causes legislative gridlock and governmental inaction to occur. In such cases the perception in the government changes and the electorate is less likely to trust the government to do its job and handle problems. This is problematic because political parties receive their mandated power from the electorate, and when trust and membership decline it seems that political parties have less of a legitimate claim to political power.

Even further, the three functions that parties perform are effectively weakened by intensified polarization and its effects. When polarization occurs at significantly high levels for sustained periods of time increase partisan conflict which reduce the ability of political elites to make compromise and increases the chances of legislative gridlock. When this happens the governmental function of political parties is diminished. The governmental function requires that parties in government turn the policy platforms that they campaigned on into enacted legislation. In multiparty systems, this often calls for parties to compromise with the oppositional party,

especially if they are not in government. Legislative gridlock often causes significant delays which not only prevents important bills from passing in a timely manner but has an effect on all other proposed legislation that can be heard in a congressional session. The lack of productivity and ineffectiveness of government may reduce the amount of trust that the electorate has in the government and may also cause disillusionment and dealignment. When disillusionment and dealignment occur, it may be the case they constituents either leave or become less active with the party. This is problematic because it diminishes the functions parties have in the electorate and organizational functions.

Disillusionment and dealignment from mainstream parties has negative consequences for democracy, insofar as it allows political outsiders to gain power and enter the political arena. This is especially problematic if these political outsiders express exclusionary and anti-democratic populist, authoritarian, or personalist ideals because it diminishes the function of the party in their ability to aggregate a wide range of preferences and excludes a large amount of society from the democratic project. Such figures also further weaken democratic norms because the logic concerned with populism or authoritarianism is undemocratic and often exclusionary. The existence of extreme populism may further intensify partisan polarization and conflict, reinforcing the cycle of political paralysis articulated in this paper.

Furthermore, the data presented here confirms the central hypothesis of this paper. First, as partisan conflict has increased over time, the amount of co-sponsored bills in Congress has experienced a steady decline. This is especially the case for the last five years or so, as partisan conflict has reached all-time highs. Future research could build upon this data by first showing the relationship in relation to direct polarization instead of an approximate or proxy measure and co-sponsorship over time. Furthermore, it may be necessary to control for the types of bills that are most likely to have bipartisan co-sponsors. This is necessary because there are certain issues that are more polarizing than others that opposing parties will never secure compromises on. The problem arises in cases where there are almost no issues that are capable of generating compromise between parties. If it is the case that parties only cosponsor bills that are not polarizing, such as bills that name streets or make civil laws, then it would seem that real compromises are not being made and further research would need to be done to understand what causes political parties to take certain positions, why they are polarized around such positions, and under what conditions

would they concede certain aspects of policy to negotiate favorable legislative outcomes for the proper functioning of government. Secondly, mutual toleration can be seen as weakened in the Senate in terms of circuit court judge confirmations. Over time, U.S. Senators have been more prone to vote in line with their party instead of voting purely on the merit of the nominee. This is worrisome because it places ideological principles above democratic governance

To build upon this research, future studies should first look at the strength of the relationships in the data presented above. In this paper I have merely showed that partisan conflict and the decline of democratic norms, operationalized by way of the rate of change in cosponsored bipartisan bills in Congress and change in the rate of confirmations of circuit court nominations in the Senate, are correlated to intensified polarization and an erosion of democratic norms. One needs to know how strongly related together these factors are in order to fully understand the problem at hand and to be able to establish the causal weight of different factors.

In addition to this, more research needs to be done on which factors directly create systematic polarization and what exacerbates polarization to levels that are detrimental to democracy. Scholars are for the most part unsure of what causes and increases polarization. We have often attributes polarization to the change of issue positioning by political actors, the shift in salient cleavage structures in the electorate. More research needs to look specifically at the effects of populism on polarization and vice versa. Political scholars need to be clear on which way the causal arrow points in order to make attempts to prevent negative forms of populism from arising, but also needs to know what can be done to combat populism directly.

Lastly, it is important that future research not only look at cause and effect but also analyze ways in which political parties may reverse the negative effects that they have on democracy. We do not just want to know that there is a problem, we also need to know what particular avenues can be taken in order to resolve the problem. This can be done in two ways. Further research on polarization can teach political scientists as well as political elites ways in which they may work around high levels of polarization. Addressing these necessary questions may be how we can create spaces where political elites can have intellectual conversations and actually hear and try to understand positions from the other side. Such conversations may help to eliminate information bias while helping to increase understanding and compromise. Further, examination of these

factors is important to not only examine the ways in which we understand parties to function but also for the sustainability of democracy as a viable form of societal governance.

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