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The Downturn of Representative Democracy: An Analysis of How Strategic Voting Drives Political Polarization

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Abstract

Over the years, polarization in America has not only increased but also become more ideologically focused on in government. Furthermore, scholarship on polarization has ignored the payoffs that political actors seek while they pursue re-election. Elected representatives have numerous objectives to balance while in office. Not only do they need to manage the preferences of the people and the party, but re-election is at the centerfold of their decision-making process. To evaluate this decision-making process a difference is identified between actual vs. perceived polarization. By illustrating a gap between the constituents' preferences and representatives' voting choices via actual and perceived polarization, it is shown that there is a difference in the ideological outcomes representatives seek from what their constituents truly want. This gap then helps explain the strategic voting process done by political actors to drive polarization. Although an uncommon route, to evaluate polarization, I utilize game theory. The game theoretical framework within this analysis demonstrates that in America, representative democracy has changed and no longer serves the purpose it was intended to because of polarization.

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Political Polarization

By: Anna Eager

Abstract

Over the years, polarization in America has not only increased but also become more ideologically focused on in government. Furthermore, scholarship on polarization has ignored the payoffs that political actors seek while they pursue re-election. Elected representatives have numerous objectives to balance while in office. Not only do they need to manage the preferences of the people and the party, but re-election is at the centerfold of their decision-making process. To evaluate this decision-making process a difference is identified between actual vs. perceived polarization. By illustrating a gap between the constituents' preferences and representatives' voting choices via actual and perceived polarization, it is shown that there is a difference in the ideological outcomes representatives seek from what their constituents truly want. This gap then helps explain the strategic voting process done by political actors to drive polarization. Although an uncommon route, to evaluate polarization, I utilize game theory. The game theoretical framework within this analysis demonstrates that in America, representative democracy has changed and no longer serves the purpose it was intended to because of polarization.

Notes of Recognition

It should be noted that the equations and mathematics utilized in this analysis were not just created by the author. She received help and instruction numerous times from one of her Economics Professors, Dr. Oberg. At the time of writing this piece, the author was in an Economics course that had a unit on Game Theory but there is no way she would have been able

to create the basis for this paper without Dr. Oberg and wanted to take this time to thank him.

Additionally, she wanted to thank Dr. Munro, her senior seminar Political Science professor who spent countless hours editing, meeting and advising the author on her analysis.

Introduction

American government is a representative democracy. Characteristics of this type of democracy include individual citizens who can determine and articulate their preferences and elected representatives who have a responsibility of democratic legitimacy imposed upon them to advance policies that their constituents want. If a representative does not do what the voters want, the voters in turn should no longer cast the votes to keep that representative in power. Thus, the preferences of voters should lie at the heart of the electoral system.

In American politics today, however, many people believe that the voice of the constituent is no longer at the center of this decision-making process. Instead, it is assumed that political actors make decisions for themselves, or that the party is putting incessant pressure on their representative to uphold the party's ideological beliefs. Thus, if American democracy is no longer acting like a representative democracy, there is a significant problem in the system. If the voices of the people are not impacting government and political actors' decisions, then democracy as we know it has been altered. It no longer serves the same purpose it had the intent of serving. This cannot be something we turn a blind eye to because to be informed citizens and voters, we must understand what our vote truly means. If elected representatives prioritize their own self-interest and party interests rather than voters' preferences in their decision-making, and the meaning of our vote is simply an effect of the polarization party demagogues have created, it changes representative democracy.

When a representative makes a decision in office, they are managing the balancing act of the interests of their party, the constituents and themselves. This paper will show that unfortunately our vote no longer means what it is supposed to in that it does not represent the aggregated partisan preferences of the voters. The decisions of policy makers can be explained by this premise: initially they listen to the voters. However, eventually their strategy for staying in power evolves. Their motives for policy voting are shifted from being a representative to instead focusing on their party preferences. To do this, they must push ideological polarization further to not only keep the party happy but to intuitively keep the voters on their side. Once ideological polarization is enhanced even further, this creates a gap between actual and perceived polarization. This gap is shown by focusing on salient issues such as healthcare, immigration and trade policy. It could be assumed that using these three issues would push representatives to create policies that agree with their constituency's preferences. Instead we see a gap that can be explained by the strategic self-serving process that political actors indulge in. By using game theory, it is shown that the decision-making process in an elected representative's head is an individualistic calculus problem in which the solution equates to keeping their power. This strategic self-serving process then drives the cyclical unending polarization trends within the United States.

Literature Review

Focusing on political polarization for this study aids to understand what is driving the way that representatives act and why constituents hold certain political beliefs. "Polarization [is]—the idea that there is a widening gulf on attitudes about various political issues and stimuli between groups in the American mass public..." (Enders, 2018, p. 816). This widening gulf or gap has existed for a long time; however, it has been increasing since the early 1980s. The

increasing gap is a worry because the more polarization there is, the less middle ground there is between the two sides of the political spectrum. This creates an ingroup vs. outgroup mentality between opposing sides. This leads to others being more dubious of not only the outgroup but also the representatives of the outgroup (Iyengar, 2015). Also, currently in the United States, the public is supporting their respective candidates at increasing rates, but they also view the opposing party with greater antipathy. Thus, "...citizens form increasingly polarized evaluations of candidates and officeholders when these political figures support more ideological divergent policy positions" (Rogowski, 2015, p. 486). In other words, the more different representatives are in their policies, the more likely citizens are to view these representatives as more polarized.

Additionally, people are often very opinionated on issues they see as of utmost importance to the country. As Westfall (2015) ascertained, respondents perceive greater polarization on those issues for which they hold more extreme partisan attitudes than on those issues for which they hold less extreme partisan attitudes. Thus, it could be assumed that those issues of extreme partisan attitudes would lead to extreme policies and perhaps even drag citizens to more polarized perceptions of the alternative party. Furthermore, if it is found that a gap exists between the issues constituents hold extreme partisan attitudes on, and the way their representatives vote on those issues, then this gap needs to be explained. Therefore, if it is revealed that political actors are making their political voting choices based on individual cost-benefit calculations instead of a misunderstanding of the constituents' concerns, it changes what democracy is supposed to represent.

Specifically, for this study the type of polarization that is utilized is ideological. Ideological polarization refers to the gap between groups of people based on the ethical and principle ideals that underpin their political attitudes. Abramowitz (2008) ascertains that at the

elite level of representatives in office, ideological frameworks are at their greatest difference than ever seen before. Additionally, “Some studies have found evidence that growing elite polarization has led to an increase in ideological awareness and polarization among the public” (Abramowitz, 2008, p. 543). The increasing gap is a worry because the more polarization there is, the less middle ground there is between the public. While this gap may not seem to be an issue because it is common for people to differ on beliefs, if polarization is changing American democracy then this issue needs our attention.

This study focuses on ideological polarization because a lot of the awareness of political differences that exist today in the United States can be traced to the growth of ideological conflict amongst many political actors. This is because people whose attitudes correspond with partisan identity perceive the greatest levels of political polarization (Westfall, 2015). Thus, citizens are taking their ideological cues from party leaders and then those leaders are becoming even more polarized. Or as Rogowski (2015: 486) notes, “...citizens form increasingly polarized evaluations of candidates and officeholders when these political figures support more ideologically divergent policy positions.” These cues and evaluations that both constituents and political actors are partaking in creates this cyclical trend of polarization. It can create even more polarization just from the observation of what one’s leaders or partisans are doing. In turn, the presumed assumption for this study is that the party wants to be more polarized in order to keep current supporters on their side rather than risk moving towards the middle and losing those same party supporters.

When evaluating polarization in this context one must understand that there is a conception that an *actual* polarization exists but also that a *perceived* polarization exists. There is a difference between the two not only in how they are defined but how they impact democracy.

Some scholars such as Westfall and Enders believe that perceived polarization can cause even more polarization to occur between citizens from opposing political sides. The perception can occur between politicians to constituents, or constituents to politicians, or constituents to fellow constituents. Actual polarization can be described as the legitimate differences in political perspectives between two groups based on where citizens align with their attitudes. Perceived polarization is the 'imagined distance' which is the extra gap or difference that citizens add on to the polarization that already exists between themselves and the outgroup. In this study, this refers to the extra gap that citizens place on outgroups after seeing the policies their representatives vote on. The perception of their representatives that inhibits individuals to view their opposing as more polarized creates a cyclical trend regarding the aggravation of polarization.

It is important to understand that the difference between actual and perceived polarization exists because as Huber (2015:2) states, "Both the actual and perceived divide along political party lines exacerbate political gridlock, pose barriers to civil dialogue, and contribute to a political environment filled with vitriol and mutual distrust." This type of political environment can then lead to an ineffective democracy. Even more importantly, if one is to understand how policy making is impacted by polarization, the concept of perceived polarization within this equation needs to be addressed. Additionally, if one is perceiving more polarization than there actually is, it leads to the question of whether elected politicians are voting on policies based on false perception or the strategic voting process already discussed.

Not only has polarization received attention because it is growing, but perceived polarization has received much more attention due to its growth in recent decades. As Huber (2015) says, "Americans are not only increasingly polarized, they are also increasingly *perceived* as politically polarized" (2). This increased perception of polarization can lead to misinformed

members of society viewing outgroup opinions in an incorrect manner. As Enders (2018) asserts, "...these inter-group biases are not always based in fact and the extremity with which people hold polarized beliefs—both affect and issue-based—is often a function of "false" perceptions" (817); or better termed, perceived polarization.

Furthermore, polarization is a phenomenon of concern because not only is political polarization in the United States electorate currently very high, but the divide between representatives is high as well. "The division between Democrats and Republicans has arguably caused the economy to stagnate, both in the United States and globally, and poses substantial barriers to enacting bipartisan policies that address the major economic, environmental and social challenges of our time" (Westfall, 2015, p. 146). Arguably, the assumption that polarization affects these challenges negatively depends on the circumstances. Partisans have continuously been separated on policies and the economy has still succeeded. However, the concept of "...merely placing individuals into distinct groups of *Democrats* and *Republicans* can make those groups seem further apart" (Westfall, 2015, p. 147). There is a big emphasis on *seem* here because Americans have overestimated party polarization; this overestimation is illustrated through policy makers decisions in voting and the perception citizens have of their representatives consequently. The perception that Americans see each other as more polarized leads Democrats and Republicans to feel like their position or 'group' is threatened. Thus, this leads them to be involved more politically to try and keep their party safe. Or as Van Boven (2012) mentions, "...because perceptions of polarization can independently influence behavior [perceptions] of political polarization may become self-fulfilling through conformity processes surrounding pluralistic ignorance"(p. 84). This ignorance supports the assumption that constituents will sometimes support a representative who has not always voted the way they

would like on policies. They hardly know what the policy means or does for them, but because the candidate is typically on their side, they will allow policy polarization and even support it because this candidate ‘protects their group’. Furthermore, when representatives perceive their constituents as more polarized than they actually are, it can lead them to attempt to “rally the base”. This perception and rallying leads to the suggestion that “...partisans exaggerate polarization of the group that opposes them beyond simply exaggerating the polarization of outgroups” (Westfall, 2015, p. 152) to try and gain support. Again, it is assumed that the party wants more ideological polarization so that their voters perceive the other group as more different and thus they are less likely to switch parties.

Furthermore, the reason partisans are exaggerating polarization of their constituent’s ideologies and parties can be explained by Iyengar (2015). He introduces the term of ‘affective polarization’ which many scholars use throughout their work as well. He defines it “...as the tendency of people identifying as Republicans or Democrats to view opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively” (Iyengar, 2015, p. 691). What differentiates this from regular polarization is that actual polarization is simply the difference between the ideologies whereas effective affective is the acknowledgement of this difference as well, but viewing those opposing parties in a negative manner. Like Westfall, he discusses how ingroup vs. outgroup mentality often triggers negative evaluations of outgroups or an exaggeration of their ideological perspective (Iyengar, 2015). Or as Van Boven (2012) mentions, “People project the extremity of their own partisan attitudes onto others such that those with more extreme attitudes perceive greater polarization than do those with less extreme attitudes” (p. 96). The negative perspective towards opposition parties sends a message to representatives who try to reach across the aisle that people view them as “appeasers.” In this context, again, this is where polarization can affect

democracy negatively because reaching across the aisle allows for compromises to be met and progress to be made. Yet, if leaders think this makes them look weak, they may never reach across the aisle which can lead to government gridlock.

These difficulties within government are further accentuated via Kirkland's work. He asserts that there are polarization issues that arise within the electoral process too: "States with ideologically heterogeneous citizens produce ideologically extreme legislative districts, which in turn elect ideologically extreme legislators, which in turn produce polarized legislative chambers" (Kirkland, 2014, p. 539). This means that there is a certain type of responsiveness to the constituent vote, but it is an encouragement to be more polarized. It allows for differing policies and thus, chances are, statistically speaking, it could at least help a portion of those heterogeneous citizens. It implies that due to the differing opinions of numerous citizens; political actors will be more ideologically polarized. Hence, "This electoral responsiveness implies that increasingly heterogeneous citizen ideologies are met with ideologically polarized, highly cohesive parties, which are the two critical components for legislative gridlock and dysfunction" (Kirkland, 2014, p. 543). Thus, if both the citizens and the representatives are increasingly more polarized it can lead to more difficulties such as the inability to create bipartisan legislation or the inability to pass any type of legislation.

If representatives refuse to reach across the aisle and even widen the gap between themselves with their ideologies, it can lead to many outcomes. Rogowski (2015) found that if there are greater ideological differences between candidates this increases the polarization of the public. Additionally, there is an increase in the level of stakes involved when choosing between these ideologically different candidates. This is because these types of candidates provide very distinct programs and answers to the public's problems due to their polarity. The main point he

makes is that "...affective evaluations are not explained simply by the partisan orientations of the political officials, but instead result largely from the relative ideological differences between them" (Rogowski, 2015, p. 503). These affective evaluations are the policy decisions that political actors make which is in direct reference to the voting choices evaluated in this study. Furthermore, this links the idea that the party ideologies and agenda of enhancing separations are what is differentiating the public.

Additionally, "If MC's (congressional members) tend to be more ideologically extreme than their median constituent, members with greater electoral leeway may be more likely to vote in a relatively more extreme ideological manner than they otherwise would." (Ladewig, 2010, p. 502). Therefore, if representatives can be more polarized and still win, they will do it. This points to the idea that they are not unknowingly or accidentally misperceiving the public, but instead making decisions based on a strategic voting process.

Specifically, Westfall's findings show that the most politically engaged are the most polarized in their views. Logically, this is correlative because if they are paying attention to their ideologically polarized representatives and involved in those politics, they will likely become polarized too. Just as they take those cues, representatives show exactly how different these groups are. "As voters become more polarized, it is more important for parties to appeal to extreme voters, as there are more of them" (Waters, 2017, p. 75). In this context, polarization presents a cyclical trend. If representatives push the gap further based on policies they create, then this leads to more polarization among their constituents due to their constituents perceiving their leaders as more polarized. Parties will respond to greater polarization among voters not just by becoming more polarized with their platforms, but additionally by giving legislators more freedom to be more ideologically polarized too and even rewarding them for their polarization.

While this may seem like a response to voters in the way representative democracy should be, it is not because as shown in the study, representatives are pushing polarization further due to party wants.

The essence of political actors becoming more polarized yet still being re-elected is where democracy has evolved. As Svulik (2018) notes, "...high levels of polity-wide political polarization make democracies vulnerable to subversion by elected incumbents. In polarized societies, most voters have a strong preference for their favorite candidate or party with only a few indifferent between those competing" (p. 3). This means that while incumbents may become more ideologically polarized with their policies and different from where they originally began, they will still be able to hold office and continue this trend. In this sense, they are not concerned if they believe in their ideological stance, they are just focused on re-election.

The most revealing prediction is from Svulik (2018). He states, "Strong partisans, meanwhile, stick with their preferred candidate even if he adopts an undemocratic platform and are effectively trading-off democratic principles for their partisan interests" (p. 7). Regardless of why representatives are voting the way they do, even if it is for a strategic game winning idea, constituents will not change how they vote. Thus, polarization can be a cyclical trend that leads to undemocratic behavior because it allows representatives to vote in a way that self-serves themselves and not their constituency. If polarized policies are created in government and citizens take these ideological cues from their leaders, it can lead citizens to become more polarized. This is a change from the initial idea of democracy that individuals can know and articulate their preferences. Svulik's point alludes to the idea that as long as individuals are getting somewhat of what they want, they have no issue with undemocratic strategic voting or polarized policies from their leaders.

Operationalization

For this study, first, a gap needed to be illustrated between the constituency and the representatives. By looking at citizen survey polls via Pew Research Foundation on the issues of immigration, trade, and healthcare, we can see how the general public aligns ideologically. Next, I examined congressional voting records regarding the same issues that are approximately 6-18 months after these polls were released. I establish where the congressional members align ideologically based on the percentage of votes in favor of or against a policy within each party. This percentage is then converted into a scaled number from 0-20. Thus, it is signified that a change in 5% on the opinion poll or policy voting is equal to a change on the scale of 1 point. For example, if 80% of surveyed Democrat citizens vote “yes” for an issue they are in favor of, while 90% of representatives in office for the Democratic party vote “yes” on a policy in favor of that issue, this shows an increase in polarization by 2 points. While a difference of 2 points appears to be minor, that is a difference of 10%, which is enough to sway a vote if it is close enough between two sides. Thus, a gap is identified in preferences between constituents and representatives in their respective parties.

The three issues were chosen because they are problems that Americans feel very different about depending on which side you are on. By using these issues, it allows this study to be evaluated on a bi-partisan basis since all three are important to both Republicans and Democrats. Using the opinion polls, a general average consensus can be created on healthcare, immigration and trade depending on which party an individual is a part of. That general average is the opinion poll percentage that is provided based on how a sample of Americans are ideologically aligned. Thus, a gap is identified in preferences between constituents and

representatives in their respective parties. Below, each issue will have a crosstab visual as well as an explanation of the data.

TABLE 1: ALIGNMENT OF AFFORDABLE CARE ACT

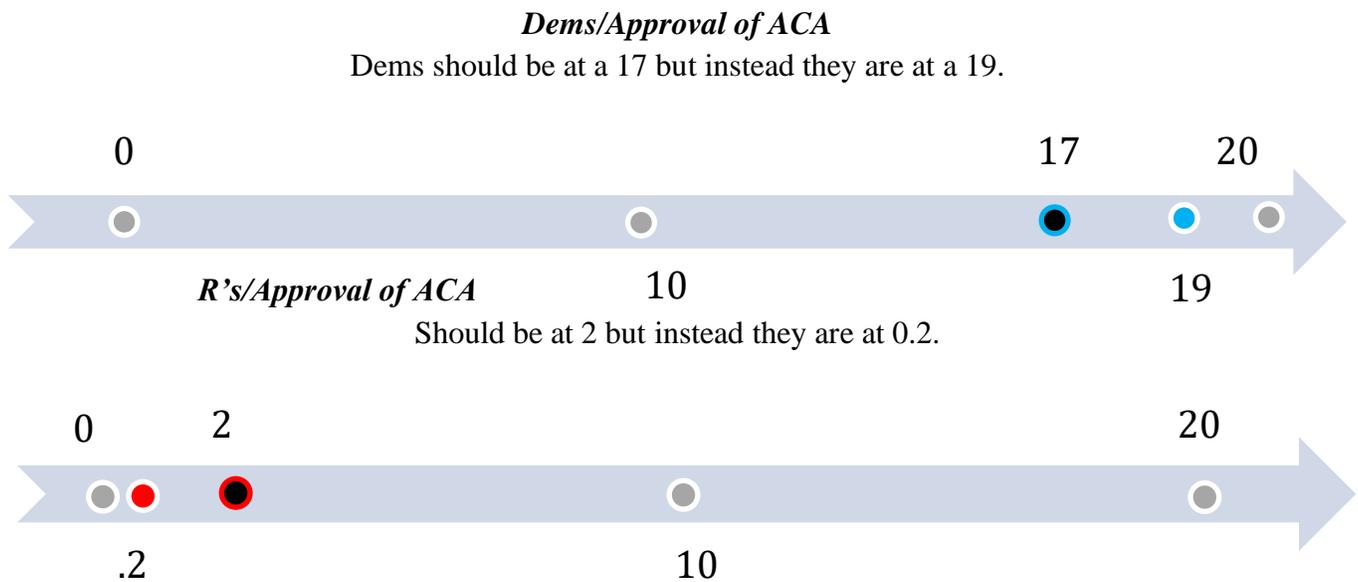
Survey Respondents	Democrats	Republicans	House of Reps Vote	Democrats	Republicans
Approve	78%	11%	No	97%	1%
Disapprove	19%	87%	Yes	0%	98%
Don't Know	1%	1%	Non-Voting	3%	1%

First, we need to establish that there is in fact a difference on this polarization scale. We begin by looking at healthcare. One of the most recent and salient issues regarding healthcare was the Affordable Care Act, or famously known as ‘ObamaCare’. In a Pew Research Poll taken in March of 2015, a random sample of American citizens were asked if they approved or disapproved of the 2010 healthcare law. Among Republicans, 11% approved, 87% disapproved, and 1% did not know. Among Democrats, 78% approved, 19% disapproved, and 3% did not know. About 8 months later in November of 2015, the House of Representatives voted to repeal the Affordable Care Act and replace it with a different system, which had not yet been proposed. Of the 245 Republican Representatives, 239 (98%) voted yes, 3 (1%) voted no and 3 (1%) were non-voting. Of the 188 Democrat Representatives, 183 (97%) voted no and 5 (3%) were non-voting.

Thus, the polling data in terms of *approval* showed Democrat constituents at 78% which is approximately equal to 17 on the scale. And their Democrat counterparts in congress are at 97% which is approximately equal to 19. As for the Republicans, approval among constituents

was at 11% or 2 on the scale. And their representatives were at 1% or 0.2 on the scale. Figure 1 gives the visual representation of this.

Figure 1: Healthcare



Next, we look at immigration. Another Pew Research poll showed that in October of 2018 75% of republicans thought illegal immigration was a big problem while 19% of Democrats thought the same. In June of 2019, The Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Bill was passed by congress. This bill was to provide assistance to respond to migrants attempting to enter the country at the border illegally. It passed with a vote of 129 (58%) out of 224 Democrats voting yes, and 176 (96%) out of 183 Republicans voting yes. Democrats had 95 (42%) representatives voting no and Republicans had 7 (4%) representatives voting no. Using the same scale as earlier this would denote that Democrats should be at a 4 but instead, they are at an 11. Republicans should be at a 15, but are instead at a 19. One can reference Figure 2 to see this layout as well.

TABLE 2: ALIGNMENT OF ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

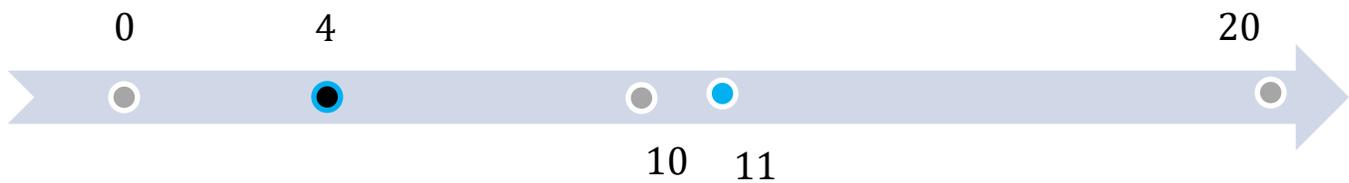
Survey Respondents	Democrats	Republicans
Big Issue	11%	75%
Not a Big Issue	89%	25%

House of Reps Vote	Democrats	Republicans
Yes	58%	96%
No	42%	4%

Figure 2: Immigration

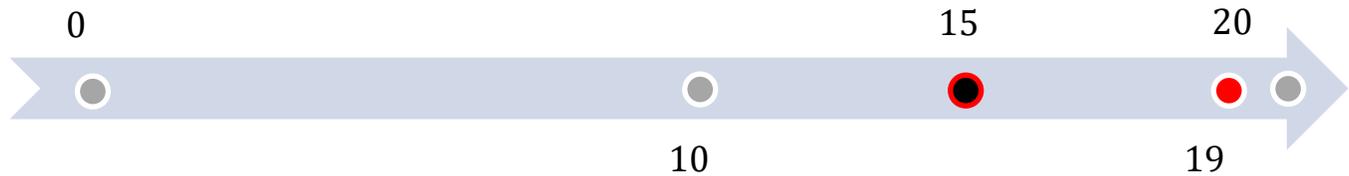
Dem's/Illegal Immigration=issue

The 4 is where they should be at based on polling data, but the 11 is where they actually are.



R's/Illegal Immigration=issue

Should be at the 15 based on polling data but instead are actually at the 19.



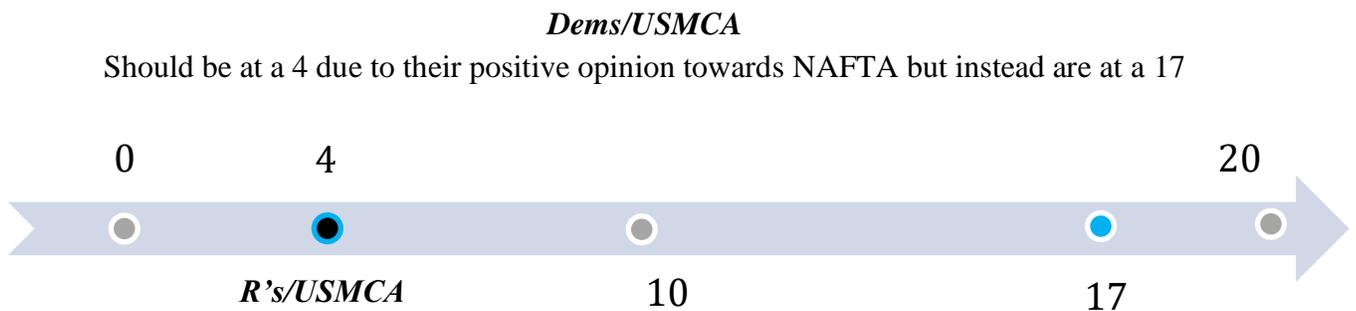
Finally, we look at trade policy. In an October 2018 Pew Research poll respondents were asked if they saw NAFTA as a ‘good thing’ for the United States or a ‘bad thing’. NAFTA is the North American Free Trade Agreement which was signed into effect in 1994 by Mexico, Canada and the United States. It lifted tariffs on a majority of goods traded between the three countries. In the poll 18% of Democrats said it was bad and 72% said it was good. While instead, 54% of

Republicans thought it is bad and 35% think it is good. The “don’t know” responses were omitted. Almost a year later, in December of 2019 Congress passed the USMCA implication act which replaced the NAFTA policy. USMCA is the United States Mexico Canada Agreement which was a new trade agreement specifically impacting farmers, automobile workers and small businesses. It covered digital trade, anti-corruption and regulatory practices (ustr.gov 10/28/20). For Democrats, 193 out of 231 (84%) voted yes, while 38 out of 231 (16%) voted no. For Republicans, 192 out of 194 (99%) voted yes while 2 out of 194 (1%) voted no. Using the scaling technique again, Democrat respondents would be at a 4 when it comes to approval but instead representatives bumped them to a 17. As for Republicans, respondents would put them at an 11 but instead representatives put them at a 19. One can reference Figure 3 for this visual.

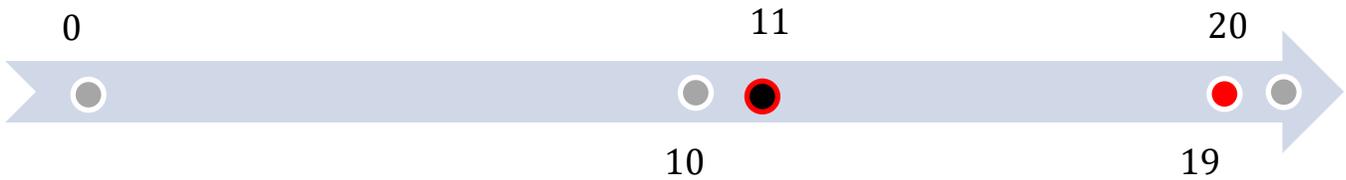
TABLE 3: ALIGNMENT OF TRADE POLICY

Survey Respondents	Democrats	Republicans	House of Reps Vote	Democrats	Republicans
NAFTA= “good thing”	72%	35%	Yes	84%	99%
NAFTA= “bad thing”	18%	54%	No	16%	1%

Figure 3: Trade Policy



Should be at an 11 but instead at a 19.



It is worth noting that while there is a gap between Democrat constituent preferences and their representative's policy voting choices, this gap actually pushes the Democratic Party closer to the center for both immigration and trade policy issues. Essentially, while the Republican Party is furthering the polarization gap, the Democratic Party is mediating this gap on 2/3 issues. There are two possible explanations for this occurrence. The first is that the assumption regarding pushing polarization further depends on the policy that is being voted on and that the Democratic Party is trying to create more bi-partisan efficiencies in government. However, in keeping of the presumption that political actors are primarily self-maximizing agents I posit a different idea instead. The Democratic Party is still influencing their representatives, but it is in a different way. The Democratic party base is not as straightforward as the Republican Party base as it has more differing political coalitions. Thus, while the Republican Party has found success with the method of "rallying the base" and sticking to their strong party allegiances, the Democratic Party has admittedly realized that they needed to change their methods. In 2016 when the Republicans took control of both the legislative and executive branches, the Democratic party saw the importance of changing their methods. Thus, this occurrence can be explained by the Democratic Party still disregarding their constituents in a similar manner to the Republican Party, but since the base is so fragmented and different, they listen to the party instead of attempting to identify what the median constituent from the democratic party would want.

Analysis

This analysis proves that a gap exists between constituent preferences and what is actually being voted on for policies by their representatives. In order to explain this gap, game theory will be utilized because as hypothesized via the literature, elected representatives are acting to best serve their own interests via strategic voting. They are doing this based on the expectation they can take advantage of the voters and that they will still vote for them.

Game theory is defined as "...the study of the ways in which *interacting choices of economic agents* produce *outcomes* with respect to the *preferences* of those agents..." (plato.stanford.edu, 9/28/20). For this study, the agents are the representatives, the party, and the constituents. The utility that the representatives are attempting to maximize is remaining in office all while inputting the ideological polarized policy preferences of their party. This leads to the hypothesis that politicians make their decisions for voting on policies that will maximize their utility and ensure re-election. The decision does not come from what the constituents want; it is solely a self-serving move.

When discussing representatives, the notation that will be used is P.A. (political actor), V (constituency/voter) and P (party). Table 4 below illustrates the game theoretical "payoff" that the P.A. achieves via their decisions when voting in office. Here, Y illustrates that yes it does align with the voters or party's wants and N means no it does not. Thus, there are 8 possible combinations. The mainstream game theoretical approach of a single decision, in this case, a single vote on a policy would create an optimal payoff or alignment option in which all 3 actors align with the P.A.'s decision, Or "yes, yes, yes". Thus, the payoff of "yes, yes, yes" would of course be greater than a situation in which the result is "yes, no, yes". The gap is assumed to be that the "no" comes from the political actor's decision not aligning with the constituency.

Table 4

Who:	P.A.	V	P
Alignment	Y	Y	Y
	Y	Y	N
	Y	N	N
	Y	N	Y
	N	N	N
	N	N	Y
	N	Y	Y
	N	Y	N

Thus, it needs to be explained why the actor would choose a decision that creates a payoff of “yes, no, yes”, being greater than “yes, yes, yes”. This is where the “time” component comes into consideration. Time in this context represents the changing strategy of the political actor and how their preferences shift over time to no longer consider the constituency in order to keep party support.

The payoff to the political actor can be described by the equation:

$$t;a,v,p = a,v,p + t:a,v,p$$

t: denotes time period

a,v,p: political actor, constituency, party of actor

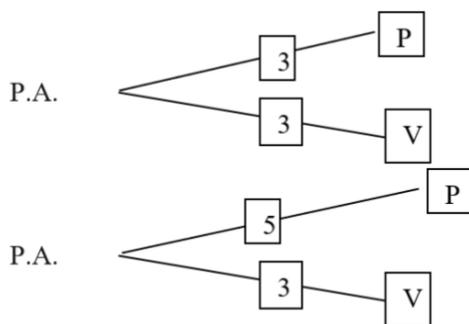
a,v,p { y, n } : the vote of the political actor does (y) or does not (n) align with each groups' interests.

a,v,p is constant over time where $y,y,y > y,n,y$. This is the traditional or rational component of the payoff using game theory. It assumes that when a political actor does what the party, constituency and the actor himself do what they want, it is a higher payoff than disregarding what the constituency would want. However,

t; a,v,p evolves over time, so that $y,y,y < y,n,y$. This is where ideological polarization comes into play. As the ideological goals, framework, and disposition of the representatives change over time, this intensifies the payoff of not doing what their constituents want. This aspect implies that:

$$t;y,y,y < t;y,n,y$$

The description that is made via game theory, is that the payoff of $t;y,y,y < t;y,n,y$ becomes greater for the representative *because of the party*. The cost-benefit analysis going on in the head of the representative can be represented with this decision tree.



When a representative is elected, at first the wants of the party and the constituency have an equal payoff; there is no difference between the decisions they make on policy votes. However, as time passes and the ideological preferences of the party outweigh the voter preferences for the representative, the payoff of choosing what the party wants becomes greater in the individual calculus decision made in the representative's mind due to the re-election support the party can provide. The difference of choosing the party over the voter can be described using the asymmetric information notion in game theory. Asymmetric information, also known as "information failure," occurs when one party to an economic transaction possesses greater material knowledge than the other party (Investopedia.com, 11/16/20). In this scenario it can be explained that representatives use the asymmetric information that the public or voters do not have. This would be the information that even without voting a specific way in policy preference that favors the voters' preferences, the representative will still be able to retain support because the party will support them. This is because the party understands they have the influence to polarize the opposing side and influence the voters to support their party candidate. The asymmetric information allows political actors to know they can discard voters and still maximize their utility. While instead, voters would think there is no way the representatives would discard their preferences because they need their votes to win. Thus, there is a shield that blocks voters from understanding that their articulated preferences are actually not being utilized by representatives.

Furthermore, the party will reward the representative with the resources which can help ensure re-election. They will give them those resources if they discard voter preferences and push ideological party polarization further. Thus, with this asymmetric information, the representative will choose the party over the voter. The party wants this because it hits a certain

tipping point in which they want to create a greater perceived gap amongst constituents, thereby increasing party support. As proved by the literature, those who are more polarized support their party more, so the party would want their representative to increase the gap so that the constituency perceives an even greater ‘imagined distance’ between themselves and the “other group”. Once that perceived gap is created in the minds of the constituents on the other group, they will become actually more polarized, which in turn gives the party and the representative the motive and justification to create more polarized policies. This in turn creates a never-ending cyclical trend of not only an increase in *perceived* polarization but also an increase in *actual* polarization. While the data primarily shows Republicans as increasing this gap, Democrats arguably would need to switch to this method as well when they realize they cannot win over the median constituent.

Conclusion

If the American people are already polarized and their leaders are taking even greater ideological polarization steps, voters perceive their leaders and the other group in a more polarized way. Once this happens, the American people become more polarized themselves, thus giving their representatives justification for voting yes/no on polarized policies. This game theoretical outline implies that democracy has in fact changed as we know it. The typical representational aspect of American democracy no longer holds true. This being the case, it can also explain the aggravation of polarization in the United States.

One may argue that institutionally, polarization is a natural occurrence because Americans will always be divided on politics. Additionally, it adds meaning to the checks and balances system that is in place. For example, if there is a Republican President and a Democratic Congress, it allows the polarity of the two to balance each other out. Yet, while

many individuals see polarization as just a gap between ideological preferences, there is much more at stake. As McLaughlin (2018) said, “If the trends of increased political polarization are indeed being fueled by the perception that the parties are in a contentious battle, then this is a significant societal construction that warrants further attention” (p. 49). If polarization is creating a trend taking us away from Democracy as we know it, this needs to be not only acknowledged but subjected to further analysis.

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