Racial Party Polarization Under Donald Trump

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Abstract

Growing party polarization directly results from increasing economic inequalities, racial tensions and the idea that the white majority is now a minority. This paper identifies the sources of party polarization. Combining social, economic, and racial factors, it builds on popular scholarly works that show white people feel left behind. Acknowledging that income inequality is the root of polarization, the paper argues that the interaction between race, economics and social status provides a more well-rounded look at party polarization. Party polarization has caused an increase in non-college-educated people participating in voting. This, in turn, led to Donald Trump's popularity. This study pulls from exit polls from the last three US Presidential elections to conduct an extensive statistical analysis. The study also uses polling from Gallup and United States Federal Reserve Board's 2020 Survey of Household Economics and Decision Making (SHED). Findings reveal that people are voting more conservatively based on education and income. These findings indicate that party polarization is on the rise due to a divide in income and education but not on the basis of race.

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Growing party polarization directly results from increasing economic inequalities, racial tensions and the idea that the white majority is now a minority. This paper identifies the sources of party polarization. Combining social, economic, and racial factors, it builds on popular scholarly works that show white people feel left behind. Acknowledging that income inequality is the root of polarization, the paper argues that the interaction between race, economics and social status provides a more well-rounded look at party polarization. Party polarization has caused an increase in non-college-educated people participating in voting. This, in turn, led to Donald Trump's popularity. This study pulls from exit polls from the last three US Presidential elections to conduct an extensive statistical analysis. The study also uses polling from Gallup and United States Federal Reserve Board's 2020 Survey of Household Economics and Decision Making (SHED). Findings reveal that people are voting more conservatively based on education and income. These findings indicate that party polarization is on the rise due to a divide in income and education but not on the basis of race.

Introduction

'A house divided against itself cannot stand."-Abraham Lincoln

The process of political polarization is, at its core, a divisive one. It is centered around the ideas of racism, a growing white minority, and the "feeling of being left behind." Polarization creates an in-group and an outgroup, both of whom feel their ideas are correct. Polarization, at its core, is differences in ideological basis between the Democratic and Republican parties. Polarization causes a divide in the ideological spectrum, which classifies party positions and

ideas about one another. President Trump has taken advantage of party polarization and used it for his benefit.

Party polarization appeals most to those who have felt left behind and who struggle to accept a changing America. Capturing this feeling, party leaders, such as Trump, can quickly gain the trust and support of their following.Thus, some scholars have claimed that party polarization is nothing new but Trump brought out these feelings. The rise of party polarization contributes greatly to the need to be heard for marginalized groups.

This study will focus on how polarization has risen over the last three presidential elections. These elections are 2012, 2016, and 2020. This, in turn, will answer the question: What factors led to increased party polarization under the Trump administration?

Literature Review

Party polarization has been a long-standing issue in American democracy that increased under the Trump administration. Several scholars have varying opinions on what caused this polarization. Bittner (2021) and Abramowitz and McCoy (2019) argue that the change in social basis is critical to this polarization. *Social basis* can be defined as the people supporting the party. Religion, economic standing, education and race can all determine one's social basis. On the other hand, Polacko and Heath (2021) argue that income inequality is critical to this polarization and is the root of it. Inglehart and Weltz (2005) argue that there are four reasons for the link between institutions and values. Scholars Schaffner et al. (2018) have a similar argument as the other authors and argue that white dominance, increased racial tensions, and a growing minority class is critical to increased polarization. Fried and Harris (2020) argue that the Trump administration, as a whole, decreased trust in democracy. Lui (2020) takes an entirely different approach from the other scholars and argues that religion is the basis of this polarization. These

theories are critical to understanding how polarization has increased under the Trump administration.

Bittner (2021) brought up the theory that change in social basis has led to increased polarization. She uses cross-national longitudinal analysis from five countries to show that leaders are more important today than ever before. Under her research, she argues that partisanship in the United States is increasing, and people in the center are moving more toward the party that they align most with. Due to people moving away from the center, polarization has increased at a rapid rate. Scholars may argue that this movement from the center is a direct result of millennials who "hate everything". However, this is not a correct view, and millennials appear to be more engaged than in previous elections. According to Pew Research, "Millennials and Gen X together cast 21.9 million more votes in 2018 than in 2014. By comparison, the number of votes cast by Boomers and older generations increased by 3.6 million. (Pew Research,2018)" Millennials and Gen X are more engaged than previous generations, thus arguing that millennials are not politically is engaged false.

She also argues that personalization, the idea that the personality of the person running for office matters, is mainly due to individualization, emphasis on candidates in the media, increased prominence of leaders, and changes in party organization (Bittner, 2021). Bittner writes, "The emerging literature has noted the factors motivating the decision-making process of voters has shifted over time, as voters note that the "man" is having an increased influence on their vote choice than "the party" (Bittner, 2021, pg. 3). Thus, Bittner claims that personalization has become an important factor when selecting a candidate. People want someone they feel like they can relate to (Bittner, 2021, pg. 4). Individualization is the argument that people value what is best for them as an individual when voting (Bittner, 2021, pg. 4).

The author, Amanda Bittner, makes use of several graphs in her argument. In one particular figure, which shows the leader's competence, character, and thermometer ratings across all five countries being studied, the line clearly fluctuates. No line is straight, and no line is identical. She argues that "Even in situations where the same leader contests more than a single election in a country, we see fluctuations, indicating that voters perceive the leader differently over time" (Bittner, 2021, pg. 7). This can be especially true with President Trump as people viewed him differently in each election. This fluctuation can be seen in the data analyzed later in the paper. Bittner's argument that people view leaders differently due to personalization is true in the case of President Trump.

Due to the importance of individualization and people viewing leaders differently each cycle, the change in social basis has led to the personalization of candidates. Additionally, because people are moving away from the political center, polarization has increased rapidly.

Abramowitz and McCoy (2021) argue a similar argument as Bittner with a few slight differences. Abramowitz and McCoy argue that while President Trump's victory was shocking to many, it was a sign of deep division in the nation. The authors argue that due to voter shifts since the early 1970s and 1980s, increased party polarization has occurred due to voters finding a party they agree most with. Abramowitz and McCoy argue that this divide has become more apparent following the election of President Obama. After President Obama was elected, a new group of minority voters could be heard. The empowerment of this group reinforced a sense of loss felt by white, working-class voters in the next election. This sense of loss by white people was due to their social status being challenged. President Trump acknowledged their emotions, and as a result, Trump was able to capture several key states where white, working-class voters are the majority of the population, fueling his victory in 2016. These states were not only

captured due to one's social standing but also due to racial resentment. Trump was able to capture and appeal to white racial resentment and ethnonationalism. Abramowitz and McCoy argue that Trump was able to exploit people's weaknesses to win the election and that Trump is just a microcosm of a much larger issue.

On the other hand, Polacko et al. (2019) argue that the change in social basis is not the reason for polarization. The reasons for polarization are due to a change in income inequality, and thus, polarization has increased. Income inequality directly results from a failed trickle-down economic theory that has persisted for generations.

Inglehart and Weltz (2005) make four particular cases about the rise in the lack of democratic institutions. They argue about the civil and political rights that formally define democracy. The congruent thesis is that institutionalization of civil and political liberties is needed for democracy. However, they are not the only things that define it, and the discrepancy between formal and effective democracies. They define *democracy* as "liberties that empower individuals" (Inglehart and Weltz, 2005, p. 175). These liberties define and shape one's life. The liberties include voting and political suffrage, but they are much more than that alone. They measure this in terms of self-expression and socioeconomic development. Inglehart and Weltz argue that self-expression causes democracy (Inglehart, 2005, p. 186). The congruent theory argues that the institution of democracy must be consistent with the values of the citizens. Otherwise the institution will not be viewed as legitimate. Because of this, self-expression is critical to forming and maintaining a democracy. Without self-expression, citizens are not able to have an institution that properly reflects them. Officeholders should not deprive citizens of the ability to have self-expression. These abilities must be carried out both on paper and through the

state. Trump was able to rise into power. He acknowledged the inability of self-expression and used it to fuel his campaign.

Schaffner et al. (2018) argue that racism and sexism are leading causes of democratic polarization. In 2016, the issues of racism and sexism were at the forefront of the election. During this period, white people felt increasingly threatened by feeling left behind during economic recovery. Trump was able to appeal to voters through racist and sexist comments The authors argue that the gap between college and non-college-educated was nearly 18 points during this period. The points are in reference to the electoral college points that each state is given. This was the most significant gap in the election cycle. Lui (2020) makes a very different and interesting argument compared to the other scholars mentioned throughout this literature review. Lui argues that religion was the key element in increased polarization during the 2016 election. He uses quotes and readings from other scholars to highlight this point. He believes that America was already deeply polarized prior to the election of Trump. Lui writes," Political polarization has formed two opposing national identities, each holding the other as an unpatriotic betrayal of the nation's heritage and a threat to its future" (Lui, 2020, p. 1). Within this quote, Lui makes it clear that polarization is not new. The nation is deeply polarized on policies between parties and what each party represents. As a result of these differences, it is hard to create a middle ground in the United States. However, President Trump exacerbated this issue. Lui compares examples from the American Jeremiad to party polarization within the United States. Under President Trump, party polarization in the United States was rooted in American exceptionalism Lui believes. The first element to the Jeremiad is an assumed special relationship that makes their society different from others (Liu, 2020 p. 1). The second is a cause-and-effect relationship between faith and societal flourishing (Lui, 2020, p. 1). This assumes that blessings

and curses were a part of a national covenant. Lui argues that both of these can be seen in Trump as he lamented the harsh relations of the present by refusing to do anything to solve the ongoing pandemic and by believing that he won the 2020 election. Trump also believes that he is exceptional, which has led to the creation of his version of American exceptionalism (Lui, 2020, p. 9).

Fried and Harris (2020) make a critical argument. They use examples from Twitter and other news sources to claim that during the 2020 election, both sides worked to cultivate public distrust. President Trump pushed strategies of distrust that were already in place by the republican party to a new level. He challenged the legitimacy of the FBI and elections. This was mainly done in fraud claims and claims that the election was rigged. President Trump himself led these claims. President Trump used Twitter and other social media to validate the legitimacy of the government long before he was president. Some examples of these claims can be traced back to early in his campaign for the 2016 election when he claimed that President Obama was not born in the US and claimed that Ted Cruz stole the election when he lost the Iowa caucuses (Fried, 2020, p. 7). Fried and Harris state, "As November 2018 approached and Democrats seemed to be headed towards a midterm victory, Trump claimed that a caravan of illegal immigrants was heading towards the US"(Fried & Harris, 2020, p 3). Trump was able to create distractions during the election cycles, which caused people to be less likely to vote for democrats or in the election itself. People worried about illegal immigrants or claims of voter fraud may be less incentivized to vote because they are distracted or believe that the election is being rigged.

In the 2020 election, Trump did not stop with the claims of a weakened democracy. His election-related tweets often involved discredited polls, voting processes, and election outcomes

(Fried & Harris, 2020, p. 4). Trump often claimed that democrats would rig the 2020 election. The president, Donald Trump, worked to weaken trust in democracy through his tweets and in his news conferences. President Trump continued to attack the legitimacy of democracy by claiming that vote-by-mail ballots were fraudulent and harming the postal services (Fried, 2020, p. 5). President Trump influenced his supporters with these claims, which caused them to be less likely to accept the election outcome.

President Trump was able to gather distrust due to a weakened public view of democracy through tweets and news interviews. This distrust began as early as the 2016 election cycle and lasted until the election outcome was deemed legitimate by the electoral college. The effects of this distrust may be seen for decades to come.

In order to have a complete understanding of party polarization, this research builds on works done by Abramowitz and McCoy (2021) and Bittner's (2021) idea of racism and economics as the causes of party polarization. This research adds the variables of race, education, and economic status. The research also shows exactly how people feel not heard by the government, which earlier authors failed to show. This paper focuses on race and economic factors that led to increased party polarization. The hypothesis argues that due to white people's expectations of the government not being met because of economic, social, and racial tensions, party polarization caused an increase in non-college-educated people participating in voting which led to Trump's popularity.

Research Design

This paper will use exit polling data from the past three presidential elections. The analysis produced will be generalizable and account for party polarization across the United States by using exit polling data. Since the sample size varies in each poll, the individual

conditions of each poll are not controlled for. The survey size in 2012 exit polls was based on voters in 350 randomly chosen precincts across the United States and includes absentee voters and early voters interviewed by telephone. In 2016, exit poll data was based on questionnaires completed by 24,537 voters, leaving 350 voting places throughout the United States on Election Day, including 4,398 telephone interviews with early and absentee voters. In 2020, exit poll data was based on interviews with 15,590 voters.

The study used data from Gallup, taken in 2021. Gallup results are based on telephone interviews conducted January 4-15, 2021 with a random sample of 1,023adults, ages 18+, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. This study also used data from the United States Federal Reserve Board's 2020 Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking (SHED). There were 11,713 people that completed the survey.

The dependent variable is party polarization. This will be operationalized as support for democratic or republican party candidates. The independent variable is race. The second independent variable is income. This will be operationally defined as people's feelings about the thought of being left behind due to a widening economic gap. The third independent variable is education. This will be operationally defined as college or non-college educated. Other possible independent variables include gender, age, urban or rural location, and religion.

Findings and Analysis

This study used graphs made on excel to help establish data analytics. In each graph, red represents republican voters, and blue is the percentage of voters who are democrats.

Figure 1

Voting based on race from 2012 to 2020
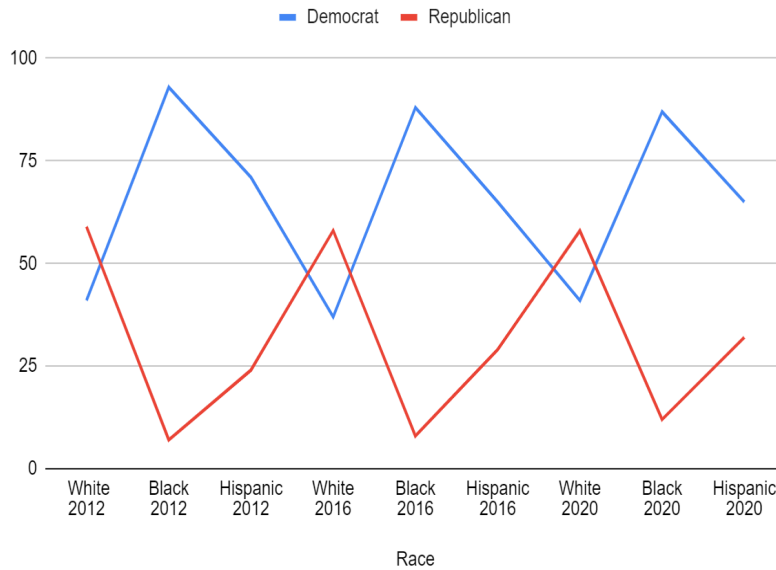
In figure one, race was measured across three presidential elections. As seen in the graphs, white people tend to constantly have the same trends across all three elections. There is very little change among whites voting for democrat and republican for white people. For people who are black, the percentage of those voting democrat and republican in 2012 to 2016 remains constant. However, when looking at black voters and the change from 2016 to 2020, there was a four percent increase in those voting republican. Black people voting democrat between 2016 and 2020 remained stable, but this was not the case for those voting republican. Things remained the same for Hispanic voters between the 2012 and 2016 elections. However, like black voters, Hispanic had an upsurge in those voting republican in 2020. The Hispanic voters going for republicans in 2020 increased by three percent points from 2016. This data is significant because it argues against the hypothesis that was made in the paper. Democrats experienced a gain amongst white voters from 2016 to 2020. This data is critical to the understanding of voting patterns based on race.

Figure 2

*Voting based on income from 2012 to 2020*
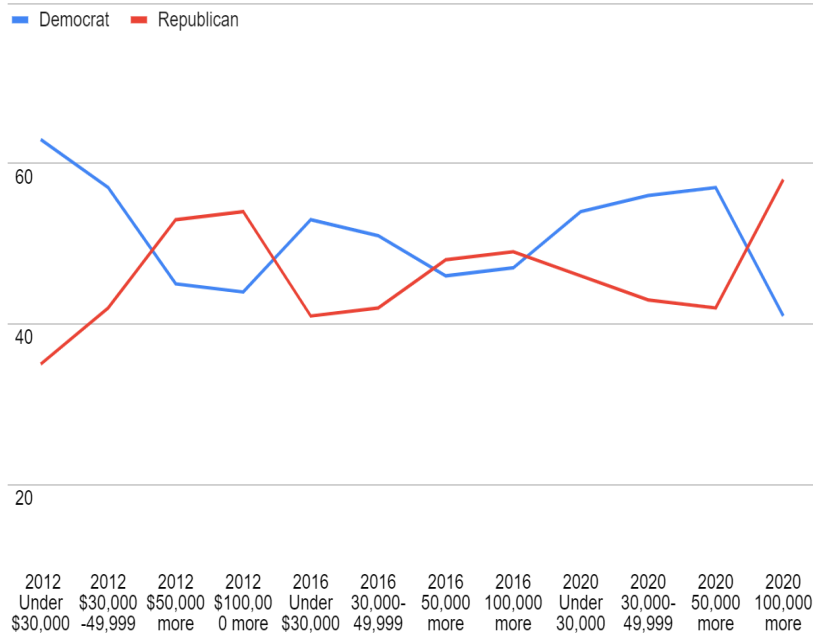
In figure two, income was measured across the same three elections. Four ranges of income were measured. All experienced a significant gain or decrease in voting percentage between election cycles. From 2012 to 2016, the following areas experienced a loss of voters: democrats in the $30,000 to $49,999 bracket, republicans in the $50,000 or more and republicans in $100,000 or more brackets. The other two areas remained stable across the two elections. When comparing 2016 to 2020, democrats in the $50,000 or more category experienced the largest gain, eleven percentage points. In the $30,000 or under category, democrats remained stable from 2016 while republicans again experienced a five percent increase. In the $100,000 or more category, both the democrats and the republicans experienced gains. Democrats experienced a six percent increase while republicans experienced a nine percent increase. In the $39,999 to $49,999 bracket, democrats were able to rebound from their 2016 losses and have a five percent increase in the 2020 election. The other income brackets remained stable. This data is consistent with the hypothesis made in the paper earlier. Democrats are experiencing a loss of

lower-income voters. At the same time, they are experiencing a rise in upper-class voters. Republicans, at the same time, are experiencing gains with lower-income voters while remaining stable with middle-income voters. The data is consistent with the hypothesis.

Figure 3

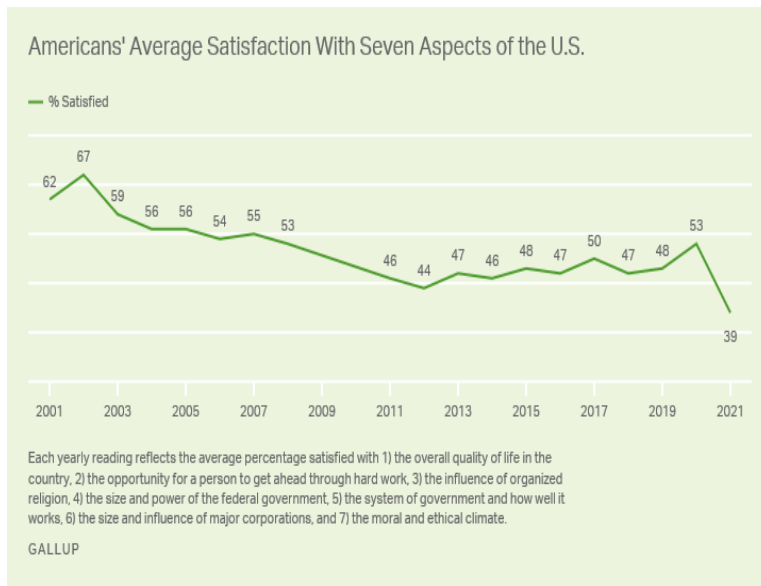*Voting based on education from 2012 to 2020*
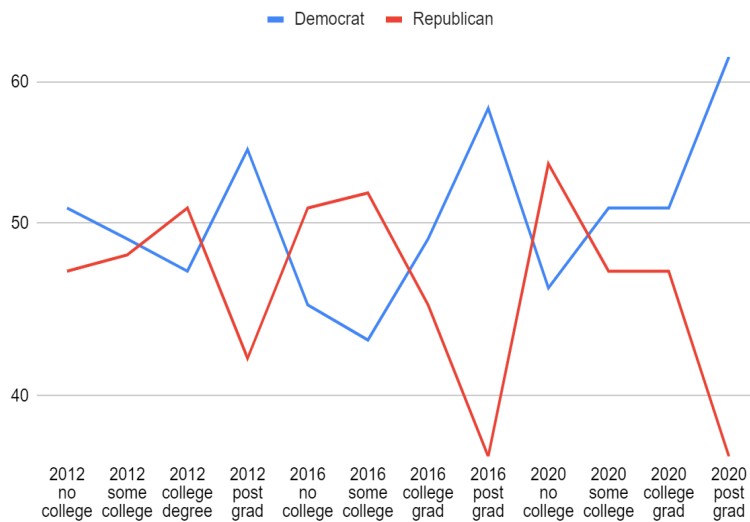
In figure three, education is measured across the last three elections. Four areas of education were measured. Almost all areas experienced either an increase or decrease in the percentage of votes. From 2012- to 2016, three areas experienced a six percent decrease in votes. These areas are no college-educated democrats, some college-educated democrats, and college-educated Republicans. Postgraduate republicans experienced the second-highest loss, which was five percent of the vote. No college-educated republicans and some college-educated republicans experienced a four percent increase from 2012 to 2016. College-educated democrats and postgraduate democrats also experienced an increase in voters in that same period. From 2016 to 2020, the area that experienced the greatest increase in voter turnout was some college-educated democrats. This gain was an eight percent increase. The area that had the greatest loss in that

time was some-college-educated republicans, which was a five percent loss. All other categories experienced smaller gains or remained stable from 2016 to 2020. The data based on education and party vote support the hypothesis. Less college-educated people tend to vote more republican.

Figure 4

Americans' Satisfaction with Life

Americans' Average Satisfaction With Seven Aspects of the U.S.

— % Satisfied

Each yearly reading reflects the average percentage satisfied with 1) the overall quality of life in the country, 2) the opportunity for a person to get ahead through hard work, 3) the influence of organized religion, 4) the size and power of the federal government, 5) the system of government and how well it works, 6) the size and influence of major corporations, and 7) the moral and ethical climate.

GALLUP

Now, this paper will show exactly how people are feeling heard by the government. Using data taken from Gallup, the graph below shows how satisfied Americans are with seven areas of life. These areas include quality of life in the country, the opportunity to get ahead via hard work, the influence of religion, the size and power of the federal government, the system of government and how it works, the size and influence of corporations, and the moral and ethical climate. This data was taken from 2001 to 2021. Overall, people are satisfied with life in the United States. Satisfaction from 2012 to 2019 hovered around 47 %. In 2020, satisfaction reached 53%, the highest since 2007. Figure four thus proves that overall, people are satisfied with their government. While Americans' satisfaction is generally less than 50%, people are

satisfied with the government. This data helps to show that party polarization is not due to people's overall unhappiness with the government.

Figure 5

Americans who are financially stable

Figure 1. At least doing okay financially (by year)

Percent

Year	Percent
2013	62
2014	65
2015	69
2016	70
2017	74
2018	75
2019	75
April 2020	72
July 2020	77
2020	75

Note: Among all adults. Except where specified, results are from the fourth quarter of each year.
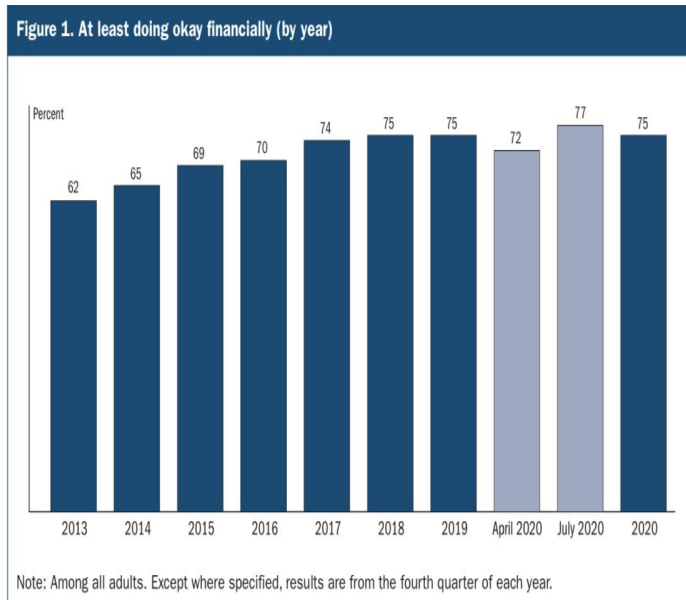
Figure five uses data from the 2020 Survey of Household Economics and Decision making (SHED) done by the US Federal Reserve. The data shows how people are doing financially by year from 2013 to 2021. Financial stability factors included income, employment, ability to deal with unplanned expenses, credit, housing, education, student loans and retirement. Since 2013, the percentage of people doing financially stable has steadily increased. At the start of the pandemic, people felt less financially secure. This is likely due to the loss of jobs, overall uncertainty, increased racial tensions, and much more. Since then, people's economic standings have improved. This data helps to show that, to a certain extent, financial stability is not why people do not feel heard by the government. This data disproves the hypothesis, showing that economic stability is not a direct reason for party polarization.

The paper hypothesizes that due to white people's expectations of the government not being met because of economic, social, and racial tensions, party polarization caused an increase in non-college-educated people voting for President Trump. This hypothesis was found to be proven correct on the basis of education and economics. Race was not an indicator of party polarization. As a whole, people's expectations of the government are being met.

Conclusion

Traditional theories of party polarization use race, economic distrust, and cultural grievances to measure party polarization. By developing off of this thesis, this study has introduced more nuance into the conversation of party polarization. Using exit polls, polls from Gallup, and the 2020 SHED, this study shows that white people are not voting more republican based purely on the characterization of race. Poorer people are voting more towards the republican party, which helps to confirm the hypothesis that poor people lean more toward the republican party. Also, non-college-educated voters are voting less democratic. Using polls from Gallup and the 2020 SHED, people feel that the government is meeting their expectations. This allows us to accept the hypothesis that non-college-educated people feel left behind. However, the paper does not prove the idea that white people, in particular, feel left behind. The paper lacked the necessary data to prove this argument. The data based on race was limited due to being unable to find data that supported this.

This study presents a few intriguing areas for future research. In the future, it would be useful to control gender. This would help capture more nuances based on gender that cannot be expressed otherwise. The study also needs data on combining race and if people feel left behind, which was central to the hypothesis. This study could also be applied to other countries to help capture feelings of party polarization. Also, it could be possible to expand this study once the

2024 presidential election has occurred. This will better help understand if party polarization has increased in the years following Donald Trump.

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