

Asymmetrical Polarization Within US Congress Members: A New Approach

1.Introduction: Woes of polarization are nothing new in American politics. Increasingly, commentators on both sides of the political spectrum decry increased shares of extremist views expressed in policy discussions and ever-growing obstructionism aiming to prevent the other party from effectively governing.

While polarization is surely taking the US by storm, efforts to point out the source of this discord have surfaced. Since the party switch of the 1960s has given us a relatively narrow timeframe to measure ideological tendencies,¹ partisan polarization we see today can be viewed as a relatively new phenomenon. Within this narrow timeframe we find arguments blaming the Republican party specifically for the increase in polarized rhetoric and congressional action. Mann and Ornstein invigorate the term “asymmetrical polarization” in their book within the field of political science,² claiming there is an asymmetrical relationship between the two main American political parties with Republican Congress members driving up polarization more than their Democratic counterparts.

There are several explanations as to why this is the case, but one factor stands out: election campaign funding³. For the purposes of this paper, I took into account the case of gun rights/gun control groups and US House candidates running in the 2016 and 2018 election cycles to see if receiving funding from interest groups increases partisan polarization.

¹ Grose, C. R., & Yoshinaka, A. (2003). The electoral consequences of party switching by incumbent members of Congress, 1947–2000. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 28(1), 55-75.

² Mann, T. E., & Ornstein, N. J. (2016). *It's even worse than it looks: How the American constitutional system collided with the new politics of extremism*. Basic Books.

³ Geoffrey C. Layman, T. Carsey, and J. Horowitz, “PARTY POLARIZATION IN AMERICAN POLITICS: Characteristics, Causes, and Consequences,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 9 (2006): 83–110, <https://doi.org/10.1146/ANNUREV.POLISCI.9.070204.105138>.

2. Theory and Literature: The literature on asymmetrical polarization, while new, touches on several factors, such as varying voter bases of the two parties, donor influences and intra/inter-party networks.

Democratic voters are a large coalition of voters across diverse social groups banding together to protect their interests while Republicans have a base that is much more ideologically coherent, resulting in Republicans responding to changes in policy mood more sharply compared to Democrats as they cannot coalesce around policies like the Republicans can⁴.

Another theory involves donor influence. Donors tend to pick “purist” candidates as they believe they have the greatest chance at achieving their own desired policy goals as opposed to party networks that focus primarily on winning their elections rather than proving themselves worthy to ideologically sharpened donors⁵.

An under-appreciated influence is intra-party networks that focus on recruiting promising politicians to their ranks in the halls of Congress. Running for federal office is prohibitively costly, therefore recruitment networks carry huge importance for prospective Congress members looking to appear on the ballot⁶. This recruitment process can take place in both formal settings such as Democratic grassroots organizations like Brand New Congress or informal settings made possible by word of mouth and personal networks. Just like intra-party networks, inter-party networks can play a huge role in shaping the strength of stances taken by members of Congress⁷. Although not as influential as it once was, bipartisanship can still be seen as a virtue in American politics.

⁴ Matt Grossmann and David A. Hopkins, “Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats: The Asymmetry of American Party Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics* 13, no. 1 (March 2015): 119–39, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592714003168>.

⁵ R. J. Raja and Brian F. Schaffner, “Campaign Finance and Political Polarization: When Purists Prevail,” 2015, <https://doi.org/10.3998/ump.13855466.0001.001>.

⁶ Andrew B. Hall, “What Happens When Extremists Win Primaries?,” *American Political Science Review* 109 (2015): 18–42, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055414000641>.

⁷ J. Hejny and Adam Hilton, “Contentious Institutions and Party Orders in American Politics,” 2021, <https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2021-w6lbr>.

All in all, there are plenty of explanations, but they all leave something to be desired. For example, can we say the Republican Party purely organizes itself around keeping government small and the Democrats around protecting the rights of diverse groups? After all, American voters are in the middle of a new realignment partially revolving around economic status and educational attainment⁸. Same questions remain valid regarding donor influence. Can we argue that small, individual donors can retain their influence since *Citizens United* changed campaign financing as we know it a decade ago? Lastly, can party networks protect their influence in an era when a total outsider to politics can instantaneously find themselves occupying the highest office of the land?

All these questions require us to take an even newer look at a phenomenon that is already in its infancy. In this paper, I propose an approach taking all three arguments seriously in a realistic way and understanding their limitations while approaching the issue in a holistic way.

To demonstrate this approach, I will examine the case of US House candidates running in both the 2016 and 2018 election cycles and their attitudes on gun control. A mass shooting targeting a high school in northern Florida in 2018 changed the outlook of the congressional elections that year with gun rights groups facing a significant amount of pressure⁹. In this paper, I will examine how donations from gun rights organizations and views on gun control interact, using data from the Federal Elections Commission (FEC) and the NRA.

⁸ Zingher, Joshua N. "Trends: Diploma divide: Educational attainment and the realignment of the american electorate." *Political Research Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2022): 263-277.

⁹ Hamzehee, Joshua. "Your time is running out: After the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School mass shooting, the NRA aims for enemyship, and a survivor responds." *Florida Communication Journal* 141 (2021).

3. Research Questions and Hypotheses: I have already established the aim of my research as to bring together the arguments made regarding partisanship, networks and donor influence, utilizing the 2018 Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting as a vantage point. Therefore, there is a necessity to set several research questions to set a proper boundary for this study:

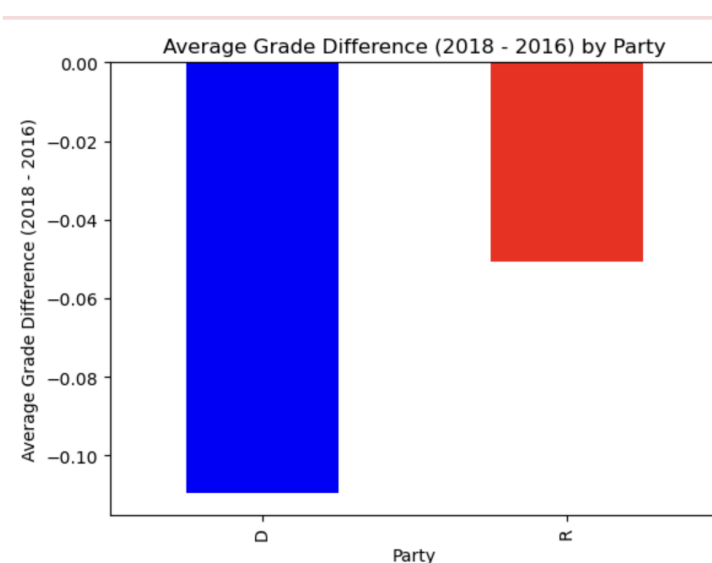
Q1-Did the increased public demand for gun control measures after the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting lead to changes in political behavior of Congresspeople overcoming partisan boundaries?

Q2-Was funding from gun rights organizations in the 2018 election cycle enough to sway Congressional behavior beyond patterns of policy positions already established?

Based on this, I put forward two hypotheses to test:

H1: Campaign funding from gun rights organizations pushed US House of Representatives members to more extreme positions in the 2018 election cycle.

H2: Campaign funding from gun rights organizations followed positions already established by US House of Representatives members themselves before the 2018 election cycle.



These hypotheses, while covering a small portion of time and policy debates happening on the federal level, still carry significance to them as gun control debates constituted a major part of the 2018 midterm elections' agenda.

Figure 1: Change in grades given by the NRA to congressional candidates of both parties between 2016 and 2018. Grades given to Democrats decreased by about 0.1 letter grades while Republicans saw their grades decrease by about half that amount.

4.Methods: Data to test the hypotheses was found entirely from public sources.

Congressional campaigns are obligated by law to disclose campaign contributions made to them to the Federal Elections Commission (FEC), an independent organ of the federal government, which in turn makes campaign contribution data available to researchers and the general public to examine and scrutinize¹⁰. Data on 2nd Amendment “grades” given out by the NRA has been compiled by Everytown for Gun Safety Research¹¹ and The Trace¹², two organizations dedicated to researching gun violence in the US.

Social Network Analysis (SNA) and linear regression were used to analyze the data.

Donation data obtained from the FEC was turned into a directed and weighted social network graph going from donors to candidates. The added weight of edges directed to each node was calculated, resulting in the totals of campaign contributions each member received from gun rights organizations in the 2018 election cycle. NRA grades obtained by candidates were converted into numbers from 1 to 7, with 1 corresponding to an F, the unfriendliest to the gun rights organization, and 7 corresponding to an A+, the highest grade the organization attributes to candidates. The grades given by the NRA should not be taken as an objective evaluation of all candidates’ positions on gun control. However, they are still valuable as a way to comprehend who the organization (as the largest gun rights organization in the country) aligns itself with.

These amounts were then placed in a linear regression model first with the difference between the candidates’ scores in 2018 and 2016 to observe changes within the electoral cycle. After that, they were again placed in a linear regression model with the candidates’ 2016 grades to measure already existing partisanship.

¹⁰ “Browse Data | FEC,” accessed January 20, 2024, <https://www.fec.gov/data/browse-data/?tab=raising>.

¹¹ “NRA Grades Archive,” Everytown, June 14, 2018, <https://www.everytown.org/nra-grades-archive/>.

¹² Daniel Nass, “NRA Goes on Downgrade Spree in the Wake of GOP Defections,” The Trace, October 18, 2018, <https://www.thetrace.org/2018/10/nra-grades-republican-candidates/>.

5. Analysis and Results: It is difficult to utilize methods of Social Network Analysis to test hypotheses like the ones that are found in this paper. However, SNA is still useful as a tool to shape data into a format that is useful for linear regression. The sums of the weights of all

edges going into nodes representing candidates for the US House revealed the amounts each candidate received from each organization.

Other metrics that are obtainable through SNA methods such as transitivity, centrality and reciprocity were not useful if not unavailable,

Figure 2: Social network graphic representing donations to candidates for the US House of Representatives by gun rights organizations in the 2018 election cycle. Donors can be identified by their central position in the graph and the large numbers of edges going out of them.

as the network consisted of two types of nodes representing donors and receivers. Every donor has a fixed distance to their receivers and none of the relationships represented by the graph are reciprocal as all of the transactions displayed are directional in one direction.

Nodes with the highest weighted incoming edges:		
Node	Total Incoming Weight	
CULBERSON FOR CONGRESS	23900	
PETERSON FOR CONGRESS	20900	
RYAN FOR CONGRESS, INC.	19900	
PETE SESSIONS FOR CONGRESS	19400	
POLIUIN FOR CONGRESS	17900	
TED BUDD FOR CONGRESS	16000	
COFFMAN FOR CONGRESS 2018	15950	
HURD FOR CONGRESS	15450	
COMSTOCK FOR CONGRESS	14950	
DENHAM FOR CONGRESS	14500	

Table 1: 10 candidates for Congress that received the most campaign contributions from gun rights groups in the 2018 election cycle.

After being gathered, donation data was processed alongside NRA grade data. The change in NRA grades between 2018 and 2016 was measured alongside donations received by gun rights groups. The p-value was 0.453, rendering the model statistically insignificant and nullifying H1 as it does not provide an adequate level of change in NRA grades relative to changes in contribution amounts.



Figure 3: Linear regression graphic of NRA grade differences between 2016 and 2018 relative to campaign contributions received by gun rights groups.

OLS Regression Results						
Dep. Variable:	grade_difference	R-squared:	0.002			
Model:	OLS	Adj. R-squared:	-0.001			
Method:	Least Squares	F-statistic:	0.5634			
Date:	Sun, 21 Jan 2024	Prob (F-statistic):	0.453			
Time:	05:31:30	Log-Likelihood:	-425.58			
No. Observations:	355	AIC:	855.2			
Df Residuals:	353	BIC:	862.9			
Df Model:	1					
Covariance Type:	nonrobust					
	coef	std err	t	P> t	[0.025	0.975]
const	-0.0929	0.048	-1.926	0.055	-0.188	0.002
Total Incoming Weight	8.549e-06	1.14e-05	0.751	0.453	-1.38e-05	3.09e-05
Omnibus:	319.026	Durbin-Watson:	2.113			
Prob(Omnibus):	0.000	Jarque-Bera (JB):	9866.580			
Skew:	-3.636	Prob(JB):	0.00			
Kurtosis:	27.782	Cond. No.	4.78e+03			

Table 2: Regression results for H1.

Pre-existing partisanship may be a better explanation for differences in donation amounts.

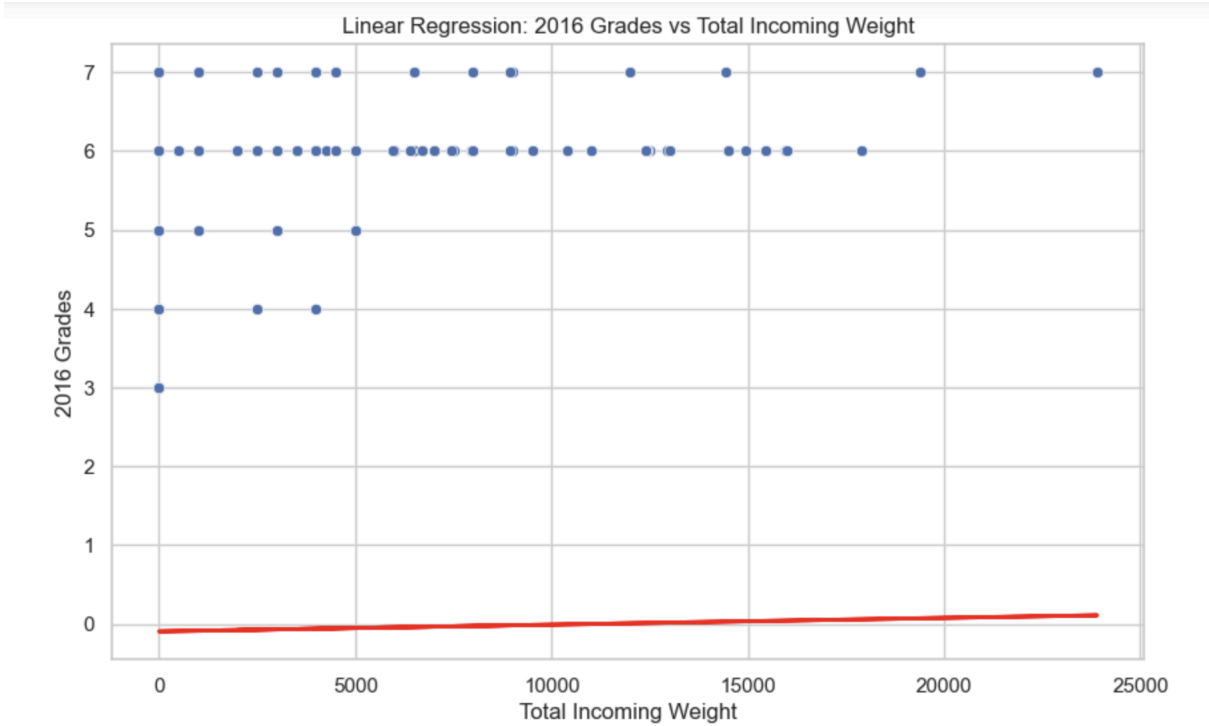


Figure 4: Linear regression graphic of NRA grades given in 2016 relative to campaign contributions received by gun rights groups.

OLS Regression Results						
Dep. Variable:	grade2016	R-squared:	0.029			
Model:	OLS	Adj. R-squared:	0.027			
Method:	Least Squares	F-statistic:	10.72			
Date:	Sun, 21 Jan 2024	Prob (F-statistic):	0.00117			
Time:	05:20:42	Log-Likelihood:	-277.96			
No. Observations:	355	AIC:	559.9			
Df Residuals:	353	BIC:	567.7			
Df Model:	1					
Covariance Type:	nonrobust					
	coef	std err	t	P> t	[0.025	0.975]
const	5.9149	0.032	185.838	0.000	5.852	5.978
Total Incoming Weight	2.46e-05	7.51e-06	3.274	0.001	9.82e-06	3.94e-05
Omnibus:	280.677	Durbin-Watson:	2.086			
Prob(Omnibus):	0.000	Jarque-Bera (JB):	4446.423			
Skew:	-3.260	Prob(JB):	0.00			
Kurtosis:	19.065	Cond. No.	4.78e+03			

Table 3: Regression results for H2.

Although variance is low, the p-value for this hypothesis is 0.001, making it significant. Thus it can be argued that donations from gun rights groups follow the already existing patterns of policy positions of congressional candidates.

Even if we can reject the null hypothesis for one of our hypotheses, we should take into consideration that this result only took into account one congressional term's worth of policy position shifts, making the scope of this study quite limited. The low r-squared value for H2 should also be noted, suggesting that factors other than gun rights groups' campaign donations contribute to differences of policy preferences across US House candidates at a higher rate than donations do.

The results obtained in this study can be enriched by stretching the timeframe by at least several congressional terms, focusing on members of Congress that served across multiple terms, examining donor-politician-politician networks to examine transitivity in order to test for self-reinforcement of political beliefs and policy preferences, controlling for factors other than donations such as the partisanship indexes of the districts members are representing and enriching the policy position data used in this study by including congressional votes; speeches, social media posts and press releases by candidates using methods such as natural language processing and sentiment analysis.

6.Conclusion, Discussion and Further Research: Donors in gun rights organizations reward congressional candidates with campaign contributions rather than using contributions as a recruitment tactic. Election cycles featuring intensified pressure on gun rights groups and gun manufacturers do not affect ties formed between congressional candidates and gun rights groups and do not significantly alter their gun policy positions.

Donations given out by gun rights organizations follow already established partisan lines and do not significantly reach candidates with diverging views from gun rights organizations.

This dynamic results in being against gun control becoming more rewarding compared to being in favor of gun control when the policy mood is suitable for each side. Considering almost all gun rights donation receivers are members of the Republican Party, this dynamic mirrors the general policy dynamics explained by the interest group Democrats theory¹³.

While the same dynamic is repeated across both lines of research, questions remain regarding how the general public and more specifically Democratic and Republican voter bases affect their respective parties' elites differently. Further research on asymmetrical polarization can greatly benefit from untangling the voter bases' relationships with their party elites and the relationships party elites have between each other.

¹³ Matt Grossmann and David A. Hopkins, "Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats: The Asymmetry of American Party Politics," *Perspectives on Politics* 13, no. 1 (March 2015): 119–39, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592714003168>.