

John V. Witt

Dr. Timothy Nokken

POLS – 3321

1 August 2024

“Note 3. The Search for Causes,” A Brief Analysis of Partisan Polarization

Partisan polarization has become an increasingly relevant feature of life for the casual American citizen. It is arguable that partisan polarization has not seen such dramatic espousal since the birth of the U.S. Even the Civil War, while somewhat partisan, was more geographic in nature. The divide in basic values is evidenced in contemporary politics, with a canyon-esque ideological gap stranding independent voters who may have previously aligned with more centric elements of one party or another. While some causes of this problematic rift are subject to speculation, others may be identified with relative ease.

Within Congress, party loyalty represents a key component of any incumbent representative's success. Many congressmen are threatened with the loss of their party's support if they deviate or depart from that party's respective agenda. Powerful Political Action Committees (PACs) support party agendas as well and are important campaign contributors for candidates who align with their missions or ideals. This means that any dissident representatives face the real and consistent threat of being primaried out of office in future elections if they are perceived as disloyal. Such high stakes are usually enough to convince the average congressman to vote with his party in most cases, consequently creating the illusion of widespread polarization.

Partisan polarization among common citizenry is slightly less straightforward. A significant effort has been undertaken by, at minimum, a coalition of PACs and more progressive legislators to provide incentives for corporate America to perpetuate their agenda. A relevant example of this is the Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) tax benefit, which is enjoyed by shareholding investment firms that heavily incorporate ESG-friendly policies into their majority holdings (Blackrock, Inc. ESG integration – sustainable investing - themes). This novel form of promotion, powered by quasi-private facework and marketing tactics, necessarily blends social issues with agenda items and is presented to the public as a form of popular culture. Because the attention paid to popular culture is inherently shallow and peripheral, the quality of implied arguments being presented becomes significantly less important than their quantity (Gass and Seiter *Persuasion: Social influence and compliance gaining*). Consequently, the media-consuming public is inorganically predisposed to alignment with the dominant agenda.

As influenced voters grow in number, they elect representatives who more closely resemble their new values. The newly elected representatives continue to find ways to offer corporate incentives, and a self-perpetuating political machine is formed. The natural symptom of this behavior is increased partisan polarization as countrymen lose the ability to relate to one another. The political machine does its work over time, and the issue becomes more complicated: the relative center of the U.S. political spectrum is shifted to accommodate new values, creating an updated vision of what may be called left, right, or the extreme of either.

Steve Smith mentions several proposed solutions to the overall issue of partisan polarization in “Note 3. The Search for Causes,” sorting them by their associated sphere of influence. These include election reform, media legislation, influencer reform, and procedural and structural reform of the executive and legislative branches. The most likely of these to

produce positive results is media reform. Smith proposes a censorship approach in order to dismantle disinformation and misinformation. The censorship method may be effective but only if it is used to suppress all content that is political in nature. A thorough banning of such content may be unlikely (and, indeed, a violation of first amendment rights), but it would also end artificial digital intervention via bots, eliminate propaganda peddling influencers, and diminish the risk of political abuse via one-sided censorship.

An alternative to a heavy-handed crackdown on political commentary and advertisement may be as simple as adjusting campaign finance and lobbying laws. Many PACs have a disproportionate amount of influence over lawmakers, at times exercising a quid-pro-quo relationship. A prominent example of modern PAC influence can be witnessed in the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). AIPAC's website boasts a 98% general election win rate for the candidates that it funds, along with \$17.4 million in campaign contributions (The AIPAC PAC in 2022). Additionally, a recent statement from House Republican Thomas Massie detailed how many congressmen defer to AIPAC members for recommendations before voting on legislation (Carlson and Massie Rep. Thomas Massie: Israel Lobbyists, the Cowards in Congress, and Living off the Grid). Diminishing the abilities of campaign donors and lobbyists may wear down the political machine and return some degree of organic centrism to partisan politics.

The social component of partisan polarization leaves investigating political scientists with a very important question to answer: which came first, the chicken or the egg? Is partisan polarization within Congress merely a symptom of public sentiment, or is the government causing the divide? The answers to such questions will give some insight into what solutions should be sought and whether the focus of those solutions should be on social, procedural, or

policy-based change. In the meantime, the most effective and immediate way to handle partisan polarization is certainly with an egalitarian mindset. Though parties have their differences, the ultimate fate and success of the country may only be found at the true intersection of the real and practicable ideals of the left and right.

Works Cited

Adler, E. S., Jenkins, J. A., & Shipan, C. R. (2021). *The U.S. Congress* (2nd ed.). W. W. Norton.

The AIPAC PAC in 2022, AIPAC PAC,

aipacorg.app.box.com/s/7hzemrhlblft231s77wvpyjai6snhkwa. Accessed 1 Aug. 2024.

Carlson, Tucker. Interview with Thomas Massie, *Rep. Thomas Massie: Israel Lobbyists, the Cowards in Congress, and Living off the Grid*, Tucker Carlson Network,

<https://tuckercarlson.com/tucker-show-thomas-massie>.

Smith, Steven S. “Note 3. The Search for Causes Partisan Polarization and Intensifying Partisanship.” *Note 18. Why 435? - By Steven S. Smith*, Steve’s Notes on Congressional Politics, 30 May 2021, stevesnotes.substack.com/p/note-3-partisan-polarization-and.

“ESG Integration – Sustainable Investing - Themes.” BlackRock, Blackrock, Inc., 2024, www.blackrock.com/lu/intermediaries/themes/sustainable-investing/esg-integration.

Gass, Robert H., and John S. Seiter. *Persuasion: Social Influence and Compliance Gaining*. 7th ed., Routledge, 2023.