BEYOND POLARIZATION: 
FRAGMENTATION, CYBERBALKANIZATION, AND THE 
POLITICS OF FACTIONS

by
Andrew Schmidt

A thesis submitted to Johns Hopkins University in conformity with the 
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Government

Baltimore, Maryland
December 2016

© 2016 Andrew Schmidt
All Rights Reserved
ABSTRACT

As the political environment in the United States becomes more divisive and contentious with every election cycle, political commentators and scholars become more convinced that the root of the problem is polarization. But although party polarization may be occurring, it does not paint the full picture, and viewing modern politics through only the lens of polarization limits our understanding of the trends in American political society and their effects. This thesis argues that politics in the United States has moved beyond polarization and is becoming increasingly factionalized and fragmented.

The three chapters of this thesis each discuss a different facet of American politics and how they have become increasingly fragmented. The first chapter discusses social media and the internet, and their effects on social capital in the US. The second chapter looks at political parties and the changing dynamic between factions and parties. Finally, the third chapter focuses on the fragmentation of the news media, and in particular the emergence of digital media outlets. While each chapter addresses a distinct aspect of American political society, they also represent three of the most important ways people engage and interact with politics in the US, and as this thesis shows, all three are becoming more divided, segregated, and factionalized, while also themselves contributing to the fragmentation evident throughout the political system and the country.

Thesis Reviewers: Matt Laslo and Robert Guttman
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my professors and instructors at Johns Hopkins: Doug Harris, Matt Laslo, Bob Guttman, Jason Linde, and others, who guided me through this thesis process and my studies at JHU;

To Paul Trible, and all the professors and faculty at Christopher Newport University, who made learning so enjoyable and fulfilling that I decided to keep at it for another three years, and especially to Quentin Kidd, who – whether he knows it or not – has had a profound impact on the way I think about political science;

To my brothers and sisters in Christ and fellow alumni from CNU, who have supported me from afar since graduation and have always made me smarter;

To Bruce and Julie Knight, who made it possible to begin my career without missing a beat with my studies;

To Jen Mock Schaeffer and Devin DeMario, whose support, encouragement, and flexibility were invaluable as I approached the finish line;

To my sister, whose love and friendship has made me so grateful to have family right down the street;

To my parents, who have always challenged my intellect, encouraged my curiosity, and supported me in my endeavors, all with unconditional and never-ending love, patience, and dedication; and finally,

To my wife, Maddie, my rock and best friend, who endured late night Metro pickups and anxiety-filled weekends of me writing the paper that follows, supporting me from the beginning of this journey, always pushing me to be better and do better, and who patiently waited to get a dog until this was in the books:

Thank you. Without you, this would not have been possible.

Soli Deo gloria
# Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii  

Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................... iii  

Table of Contents ............................................................................................................ iv  

List of Figures .................................................................................................................. v  

Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 1  

Chapter I: Bowling in Separate Lanes ............................................................................ 9  
  Political Deliberation ...................................................................................................... 11  
  Bowling Alone, Social Capital, and the Internet ............................................................ 14  
  Cyberbalkanization and The Big Sort ............................................................................ 20  
  The Big Sort Moves Online ........................................................................................ 24  
  Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 30  

Chapter II: Mischiefs of Faction .................................................................................... 34  
  Literature Review: Party Polarization in American Politics ........................................... 36  
  Madison and Federalist No. 10 .................................................................................... 41  
  Historical Perspectives of Factions and Parties .............................................................. 44  
  Changing Party Dynamics ............................................................................................ 48  
  The Bubble Bursts ....................................................................................................... 53  
  Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 62  

Chapter III: The Fragmentation of the Fourth Estate ..................................................... 64  
  Literature Review: Cable News and Partisan Media ....................................................... 67  
  Digital News ................................................................................................................ 75  
  The Media, Negative Partisanship, and the 2016 Election .............................................. 78  
  Political Parallelism and the American Media ............................................................... 88  
  Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 93  

Conclusion ...................................................................................................................... 96  

Limitations and Future Considerations ......................................................................... 103  

Works Cited .................................................................................................................... 108  

Curriculum Vitae ........................................................................................................... 123
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: ANES Feeling Thermometer Ratings of Own and Opposing Parties
(1980-2012) .................................................................................................................. 53
INTRODUCTION

One of the most vibrant ongoing discussions in political science in recent decades has revolved around the divisiveness and partisanship that has become so prevalent in today’s political arena. This discussion has extended well beyond academia, with pundits, politicians, and other prominent media voices lamenting the increasing amount of partisan division in American politics. They rightly point out that we now see partisan grandstanding instead of bipartisan compromise, ideological purity instead of big tent parties, and government shutdowns and fiscal cliffs instead of effective governance.

Often the “problem” with modern American politics is identified as polarization, with the increasingly negative and hyperpartisan rhetoric being characterized as a symptom of the increased distance between the two main political parties. The term polarization has become a buzzword, and it’s not uncommon to hear it used to describe the divisiveness and partisan gridlock that plagues our politics today, and commentators lament the ever-increasing gap between Democrats and Republicans. But viewing the contentious and divided nature of politics today through only the lens of polarization leads to an oversimplification and misrepresentation of what is happening in American politics.

Political polarization occurs when each political party’s voters and leaders grow more homogeneous in their ideology and policy positions,
causing individuals’ stances on issues, policies, and candidates to be more closely connected with their political party, while at the same time increasing the distance between the parties.¹ In other words, as the parties become more polarized, they move further to the ideological extremes. Polarization is also often used to describe what could also be considered party sorting, meaning that Democrats are becoming more homogeneously liberal and Republicans becoming more homogeneously conservative.

Since the term primarily refers to the relationship between the two major parties, framing the discussion around polarization limits the ability to see the divisions within the parties themselves. One would only need to look at the 2016 GOP primary as evidence of how polarization falls short in fully encapsulating the problem facing politics today. If the parties were simply polarized and homogeneously sorted, then we would have seen a primary where most of the candidates were similar in their ideology and policy positions – something any reasonable person would be hard-pressed to argue.

This thesis instead argues that the politics in the United States has moved beyond polarization and is becoming increasingly factionalized and fragmented. The three chapters of this thesis each discuss a different facet of American politics and how they have become increasingly fragmented. The

first chapter discusses social media and the internet, the second chapter looks at political parties, and the third chapter addresses the news media, particularly the emergence of digital media outlets, many of which are explicitly partisan and ideological.

Chapter I focuses on the effects of the internet and social media on how we interact and engage in political deliberation with others, beginning with an overview of the importance of political deliberation, and why it is crucial for citizens to engage in meaningful discourse with those with whom they disagree. The chapter then moves to a discussion of social capital, using Robert Putnam’s work in his book *Bowling Alone* as a foundation. Putnam’s main argument in *Bowling Alone* is that social capital has been in decline since the mid-twentieth century. However, there has been hope in recent years that the internet has the potential to rekindle and rebuild the social capital that has been such an integral part of American identity and society. The chapter looks at these arguments in the light of how the internet is used to assess whether the internet is fulfilling this potential.

The chapter then discusses research into whether Americans are gravitating towards physical communities and neighborhoods where other residents share their political views, religious beliefs, and education status. While evidence of this political segregation has been challenged in some academic circles, the effects of such a trend are important to understand as a clustering of like-minded individuals is happening, only it is a virtual
clustering rather than physical. The fragmentation of internet communities—or cyberbalkanization—results in isolated discussions, with little to no contribution to political deliberation.

Chapter I concludes with a discussion on bridging and bonding social capital, and the importance of maintaining a balance between the two. Without this balance, it will continue to be far too easy for individuals to remain isolated from those with whom they disagree, leading to more weighted-down political views, lower levels of trust in others outside their group, and less willingness to hear differing viewpoints and perspectives.

Chapter II then looks at political parties and the increase in intraparty conflict and tension. First, to help lay the foundation for the chapter, I provide a review of the literature on party polarization in American politics. Commentators and scholars alike will often place the blame for the divided state of American politics today on the political parties, and many argue that the Founding Fathers did not want political parties. This chapter takes a closer look at the writings of James Madison, and Federalist No. 10 in particular, to examine whether this theory holds. To do so, it is also important to explore what the words “faction” and “party” meant at that time, as these terms are so often conflated in today’s world. Are the factions that Madison warned of indeed analogous to today’s political parties? The terms are often used interchangeably when discussing this topic, pointing to Madison’s warnings about the “dangers of factions,” but a closer examination
of how factions were understood at the time shows that Madison and his contemporaries are often misunderstood when attempting to apply their writings to modern politics.

Armed with a better understanding of how parties are formed around varying interests and subgroups, the chapter then looks at how party dynamics have shifted over time, particularly in the last half-century. Using the recent wave of Tea Party conservatism as a backdrop, I then move to a discussion on how the rise of negative partisanship has increasingly shaped politics and campaigns. The anti-establishment sentiment that dealt such a strong blow to the Democratic majority in the House of Representatives in 2010 has become the new normal, culminating in Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign.

Returning to Federalist No. 10, I reexamine Madison’s arguments for why the effects of factions would be controlled under the Constitution and why these solutions have been successful in limiting factions for much of American history. I conclude that, counter to what may be the conventional wisdom of today, political parties have long been the antidote for the factious tendencies of voters and politicians alike. Rather than being the cause, parties have been the solution, taming the effects of ideological factions. However, the parties have grown significantly weaker in recent years, and as the parties weaken, they are unable to act as a limiting force on factions,
leading politics beyond polarization and into a fractured, factionalized system.

Finally, Chapter III discusses the effects of digital media outlets on the news media in the United States. The news media, which has long been the primary vehicle through which elite discourse reaches and influences the public, has gone through an evolution that has fundamentally changed how the public interacts with political leaders and receives news information. Like the political parties they cover, the partisan media is ostensibly split between liberal and conservative outlets. This view is often within the context of cable news – Fox News on the right, MSNBC on the left, and CNN somewhere in the middle. But this view tends to overlook an increasingly saturated media landscape that includes much more than the traditional pillars of television, radio, and newspaper. While cable news still dominates the news media, it’s important to fully account for the digital outlets that continue to gain momentum and audience share. When considering these increasingly influential news sources, you begin to see a media landscape that is much more fragmented than we thought before.

Just as market forces drove cable news networks to move into more partisan territory, the nature of the media market has driven digital news outlets to carve out an even narrower partisan niche. Because of the saturation of the market, these outlets have had to be more than simply
The 2016 GOP primary was unlike any previous primary campaign in that it was extraordinarily negative in tone, pitting many former political allies against one another, and ultimately led to an all-out civil war within conservative media. The more neoconservative outlets criticized him for foreign policy, fiscal conservatives highlighted increases in government spending, those with a more constitutional bent spoke out against federal government overreach, and so on. But one thing was consistent throughout: Obama was wrong. This loose alliance was only held together by a unified opposition to Barack Obama, and subsequently, Hillary Clinton. Using the 2016 election as a case study, the chapter discusses how the primary campaign not only pulled back the curtain on an increasingly divided Republican Party, but also revealed an extremely fractured conservative media.

The chapter then shifts to a discussion of media systems in Western democracies, and specifically the concept of political parallelism, which analyzes the links between the press and political parties in a country. The United States is largely viewed as having a Liberal media system, with a low level of political parallelism. However, this assessment may be incomplete as it fails to fully account for the surge in digital media sources, and instead is limited to the context of print newspapers and television news as being the
primary sources of news. When accounting for these additional sources, and the growing fractures within the political parties and the news media, it becomes evident that more research and analysis is needed to properly and accurately categorize the US media system.

It is more common every year for US adults, and especially younger adults, to seek and find their news from digital sources, and more and more households are cutting the cord and getting rid of cable, meaning these digital sources are going to only grow in influence. As this influence grows, it is imperative that we change how we analyze news and information dissemination to better incorporate the digital media landscape.

While each of these chapters addresses a distinct aspect of American political society, they also represent three of the most important ways the people engage and interact with politics in the United States: through our communities, through political parties, and through the news. As this thesis shows, all three are becoming more divided, segregated, and factionalized, while also themselves contributing to the fragmentation evident throughout the political system and the country and political system.
CHAPTER I:

BOWLING IN SEPARATE LANES

Political Deliberation and Cyberbalkanization
Political deliberation and a diverse culture of social and political discourse are the bedrocks of a healthy and thriving democracy, and this culture relies on the exchange of different ideas, opinions, and perspectives. The ability to engage in meaningful discussion across partisan and ideological lines is intrinsically linked to how we interact with one another and connect with the communities around us – two things that have gone through a dramatic transformation in American society. With advancements in internet and communication technologies, the primary communities in American society have gone from physical, geographically-determined, and diverse to virtual, distant, and homogeneous. Individuals’ ability to tailor and mold their communities to their liking has, in effect, enabled them to create their own social bubble, in which they are often shielded (whether intentionally or not) from outside viewpoints.

Robert Putnam’s work in the 1990s and 2000s helped bring the concept of social capital to the forefront. He painted a picture of a changing society with a diminishing level of civic engagement and social interconnectivity, both of which are critical elements of a strong democracy. But the rise of the internet, and the social networking websites that soon followed, gave hope to those who lamented the decline of social capital. Indeed, the internet has fundamentally changed how we engage in civic life, opening up new opportunities for interaction.

---

possibilities for a stronger and more connected society. The structural
changes in how we interact with one another and engage in politics have
transformed political deliberation in America, but it may be overly optimistic
to suggest that the internet has been the saving grace of social capital that
Putnam sought. Instead, these changes have helped exacerbate many of the
negative effects of declining social capital in America. Furthermore, rather
than contributing to the public exchange of ideas and opinions, they have
played a critical role in creating a culture of division and political
segregation.

Political Deliberation

Looking to the deliberative model of democracy, political deliberation is
the transformation of personal and private opinions on public issues into
viewpoints that can withstand scrutiny and criticism. Critical to this model is
the assumption that citizens regularly engage with opposing points of view.³
John Stuart Mill wrote extensively of the need for exposure to a wide range of
opinions and perspectives: “It is hardly possible to overrate the value...of
placing human beings in contact with persons dissimilar to themselves, and
with modes of thought and action unlike those with which they are familiar.”⁴

³ David Held, Models of Democracy, 3rd Ed, (Stanford University Press, 2006).
⁴ John Stuart Mill, Principles of Political Economy, with Some of Their Applications to Social
Philosophy (London: John W. Parker & Son, 1848), 121.
Later in *On Liberty*, Mill wrote, “If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.”

Arendt reiterated and expanded upon Mill’s assertion that being exposed to cross-ideological views is vital to encouraging the consideration of important issues from different perspectives. Habermas further stated that this type of exposure often leads to increased interpersonal deliberation and intrapersonal reflection. Research has also supported the notion that discussion among unique and diverse perspectives provides benefits to individuals and society at large. Discussing politics with someone possessing different opinions leads to an increased level of political knowledge and tolerance. This tolerance results in individuals developing higher quality opinions as a result, and increases an individual’s ability to see a legitimate

---

rationale of those with whom they disagree. Political conversation, whether with those who agree or disagree, also facilitates a desire to participate in political activities in a more involved and engaged way since the conversation itself leads to more crystallized opinions and views.11

Just as there are various positive benefits stemming from cross-ideological discussion, there are also significant negative effects when there is a lack of heterogeneity in political networks. When discussions about political issues are between like-minded individuals, opinions become more extreme and solidified. When an opinion is corroborated, as is likely to happen in a discussion that is limited to individuals that agree, people become more confident in their views, a natural result of discovering that they share views with others. In one study, when Democrats and Republicans participated in panels made up of all Democrats or all Republicans, the differences in voting patterns were amplified when compared with those on panels including members of both parties.12 Likewise, discussion with like-minded individuals solidifies political affiliation and ideology, in addition to increasing voting along party lines.13

13 Jaeho Cho, “Media, Interpersonal Discussion, and Electoral Choice,” Communication Research 32 (2005); Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague, Citizens, Politics and Social
Bowling Alone, Social Capital, and the Internet

When Alexis de Tocqueville first visited the United States in the early nineteenth century, he was immediately impressed by how Americans had a proclivity for civic participation. He writes in Democracy in America:

“There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types – religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute... Nothing, in my view, more deserved attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America.”

The notion of social capital has its roots in the writings of Tocqueville and his admiration of the pronounced social aspect of American society. To Tocqueville, the tendency of Americans to gather socially and join these associations increased the opportunities for discussion and deliberation of issues such as politics, economics, and world affairs, leading to greater participation in political and civic life.

In his book Bowling Alone, Robert Putnam makes a series of observations about social capital in the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century. One of the central arguments in his work posits that social capital – which he defines as the “connections among individuals and social


14
networks, with the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” – hit its peak in the mid-twentieth century, and has been declining since. The main evidence Putnam cites for this is the decrease in both political and civic participation on a local level, specifically attendance of public meetings, individuals serving as members on local committees, and voter turnout, among other activities.

Using membership in bowling leagues as an example, Putnam argues that with less engagement in social activities and the local community, individuals miss out on the civic and social interaction that is necessary for democracy to thrive. In his example, the number of people who bowl has increased, but bowling leagues have all but disappeared. While local participation has decreased, it has been replaced with civic participation on a national or global scale. Participation in “mass-membership” organizations, like the Sierra Club or the National Rifle Association, has been on the rise. Because participation in these organizations does not lead to conventional social interaction, it does little to curb the rising sense of individualism. Members of these types of organizations have little to no interaction with fellow members, and the only unifying factor between members is a shared interest in the goal of the organization.

________________________

Unlike local community organizations like gardening clubs or recreational sports, where participants come together to engage in an activity together, developing relationships beyond that purpose, mass-member organizations rarely interact beyond mass-mailings or internet-based social networks. Furthermore, the extent to which an organization has beneficial effects on the norms of reciprocity and general trust that Putnam writes about depends largely on the group’s mission, inclusiveness, and the nature of its activities.\(^\text{16}\) Indeed, groups segregated by class, ethnicity, or occupation can build trust within group members, but ultimately fosters distrust of those outside the organization. There was evidence of this found in Weimar Germany, where existing social cleavages developed their own specialized organizations, where “socialists, Catholics, and bourgeois Protestants each joined their own choral societies and bird-watching clubs.”\(^\text{17}\)

Putnam points out that members of the Sierra Club and NRA are more like two fans of the same sports team:

They root for the same team and they share some of the same interests, but they are unaware of each other’s existence. Their ties, in short, are to common symbols, common leaders, and perhaps common ideals, but not to one another. The theory of social capital argues that associational membership should, for example, increase social trust,


but this prediction is much less straightforward with regard to membership in tertiary associations.\textsuperscript{18}

The consequence of this new type of political and civic participation is the decline of political deliberation, and Putnam voices concern over the lack of cross-ideological exposure: “Politics without social capital is politics at a distance...Participants need never meaningfully engage with opposing views and hence learn from that engagement.”\textsuperscript{19} The real problem with this lack of interaction is that individuals no longer have their views challenged or questioned, resulting in individuals finding it easier to “hawk quick fixes and to demonize anyone who disagrees.”\textsuperscript{20}

Since \textit{Bowling Alone} was published as a book in 2000, we have seen a dramatic change in how individuals interact and engage with those around them. The internet, with its plethora of choices for social networks, forums, and other similar sites, makes it easier to interact with others without being limited by time or geographic constraints, and in many ways has the potential to mitigate and slow the decline in social capital and civic participation. Through social networking sites and other media, the cost of connecting with others is lowered, creating a simpler method of connecting

\textsuperscript{19} Putnam, \textit{Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community}, 341.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 342.
with others due to the asynchronous nature of online interaction, with individuals able to interact on their own time.

For example, one person is able to read or access a post online, regardless of whether or not the author is online at the same time. In the same way that individuals can catch up on their favorite shows using a DVR or through a streaming service, they can also view past tweets or posts on social media at their own leisure, saving interesting or relevant articles for later rather than stopping what they are doing to interact. It is also easier to carry on conversations with other users without disrupting other activities or responsibilities. From a purely social standpoint, the internet has us into a new era of connectivity and interaction.²¹

Putnam attempted to preemptively counter the arguments that the internet could be a mitigating factor in the decline of social capital, pointing to four primary reasons.²² The first reason, which is least surprising, is that online interactions eliminate the ability for the non-verbal communication enabled by face-to-face interactions. Second, access to the internet is contingent upon social and economic factors, potentially leading to a “digital divide.” Third, Putnam voiced concern that the internet would develop and expand primarily as a form of passive entertainment, and not a method of

---

²² Putnam, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.
communication. Finally, he argues that face-to-face communication and interaction are more suited for bringing diverse people together, while the internet makes it easier for like-minded people to connect, something that has been referred to as “cyberbalkanization.”

At the time of writing for *Bowling Alone*, all four of these concerns would be understandable, but how we use the internet is considerably different a decade and a half later. Indeed, four of the most popular websites in the United States are now social networks and/or sharing-based websites (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Reddit), creating a more interactive and social internet. With widespread use of services like Skype, FaceTime, and others, it is becoming easier to take advantage of the benefits of internet connectivity without sacrificing certain aspects of face-to-face interaction.

The problem of inequality of access to the internet has also been dramatically reduced in recent years, and the gap continues to close. Furthermore, the internet has been shown to possess much stronger communicative and mobilizing forces than Putnam assumed, and it has moved beyond being

---

23 Ibid., 170-179.
primarily a passive tool for entertainment.\textsuperscript{25} The concerns about cyberbalkanization, however, are not as easy to refute.

**Cyberbalkanization and *The Big Sort***

Cyberbalkanization refers to the segregation and fragmentation of the internet into groups organized around special interests, which results in people focusing more on these interests, screening out content that is less preferred and creating increasingly homogeneous communities.\textsuperscript{26} Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson introduced the concept as the balkanization, or fragmentation, “of preferences, including social, intellectual and economic affiliations, analogous to geographic regions. Just as separation in physical space, or basic balkanization, can divide geographic groups, we find that separation in virtual space, or ‘cyberbalkanization’ can divide special interest groups.”\textsuperscript{27} Putnam used the term in a more explicitly political context, viewing it as the “phenomenon in which people seek out only like-minded others and thereby close themselves off from ideological opposition, alternative understandings, and uncomfortable discussions.”\textsuperscript{28}

---


\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 3.

In everyday, offline life, people come in contact with different perspectives, opinions, and worldviews than their own on a regular basis, in addition to receiving information they did not intentionally seek. One example of this is reading the newspaper in the morning, skimming from one page to the next, reading articles or stories they would have not seen or sought out elsewhere. In this age of near-unlimited digital choice and customization, someone may now simply set their home page a particular website focusing on a specific subject area or ideological point of view. For instance, rather than flipping through the newspaper until arriving at the sports page, one can now merely open up ESPN’s website directly.

Journalist Bill Bishop, in his book *The Big Sort*, writes that Americans are becoming increasingly clustered into like-minded communities and neighborhoods, choosing to live with those who agree with them and think like them – a sort of voluntary balkanization. In this “age of political segregation,” Bishop points out that people gravitate towards communities that share their political views, religious beliefs, and education status, and it is becoming easier to do so. Because of this, he argues, Americans are becoming increasingly divided not only along party lines, but along county and geographic lines as well. One effect of this is what Bishop calls the

“United States of ‘Those People,’”\textsuperscript{30} causing many to see those who disagree as another type of American, sparking even more division.

While compelling, Bishop’s work has been met with mixed reactions from some in the academic community. Abrams and Fiorina challenge Bishop’s conclusions on multiple levels. First, they contend that presidential voting – the method used by Bishop to measure political preference – cannot be treated as a reliable indicator of partisanship, since presidential election returns can be dependent on the candidates more so than parties. Instead, they present voter registration as a more accurate measure of party identification. Abrams and Fiorina used party registration in place of presidential voting and then completed the same analysis as Bishop, only their results were dramatically different. Using presidential voting, the fraction of the population living in “landslide counties” – how Bishop determined the “clustering” of communities – has been steadily increasing. However, when using party identification, this trend is reversed, falling from 50 percent in 1976 to 15 percent in 2008.\textsuperscript{31}

Abrams and Fiorina acknowledge that partisan sorting may be occurring and could potentially be shown with more detailed research, but they dispute Bishop’s conclusions that this type of political segregation will

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 37.
inherently have negative consequences. Citing work by Putnam and others, they point out that neighborhoods simply do not carry the same amount of influence as they used to:

In sum, neighborhoods are not important centers of contemporary American life. Americans today do not know their neighbors very well, do not talk to their neighbors very much, and talk to their neighbors about politics even less. And they do not see themselves as swimming in a sea of like-minded people who have intimidated or cast out anyone who believed otherwise; they are aware that their neighbors differ politically. Even if geographic political sorting were ongoing, its effects would be limited by the preceding facts about contemporary neighborhood life.\textsuperscript{32}

Abrams and Fiorina make a strong case against Bishop's evidence, as well as his conclusions for what the implications of physical sorting would be. However, their argument begs the question, if neighborhoods and physical communities are no longer “centers of contemporary American life” (and especially political life), what are?

Putnam, with the help of Thomas Sander, give a partial answer to this question in a follow-up to \textit{Bowling Alone} a decade later. They acknowledge that the advent of social networking websites has caused people to interact differently, and recognize that these virtual networks may have largely taken the place of physical neighborhoods and communities.\textsuperscript{33} Indeed, a study by the Pew Research Center found that 80 percent of internet users are involved

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 208.
\end{footnotesize}
in groups, compared to the 56 percent of non-internet users.\textsuperscript{34} The effect is even greater among users of social media, with 82 percent of Facebook users and 85 percent of Twitter users involved in some sort of group or organization. The internet has increasingly become the center of our social and political lives, and although Bishop’s evidence has been questioned, his concerns regarding the clustering of like-minded Americans are still valid – only instead of physical communities, this segregation is happening online.

\textit{The Big Sort Moves Online}

Some view social media as having the potential to increase the amount of social capital, limiting the effects of cyberbalkanization and forming connections between different groups.\textsuperscript{35} While social media may indeed have this potential, it also has the ability to accelerate and amplify the negative effects of these trends, and the result largely depends on why and how an individual uses social media. Any effects on social capital, engagement, and participation depend heavily on the motivation for using social media, whether for political news, connecting with friends, or entertainment.\textsuperscript{36}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}
Likewise, the specific ways people use media have a pronounced influence on their social capital.\textsuperscript{37}

Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of American adults use social media websites, compared to 7 percent in 2005, and a 2012 Pew study found that 66 percent of those connected to social networking sites used them to engage in political activity, including getting information, following/liking a candidate, or discovering a friend’s political interests or affiliations.\textsuperscript{38}

Research has shown that Twitter users are increasingly cocooned, politically-speaking, and interact primarily with like-minded information from other users.\textsuperscript{39} Nearly 40 percent of users are “worn out” by seeing so much political content when using social media, almost twice that of those who like seeing the same content, indicating that social media is oversaturated with political content, and users are well-aware of it.\textsuperscript{40} After interacting with those on the opposite side of the political spectrum, 64 percent are left feeling like they have less in common than they thought


before, and 59 percent say encounters with opposing political views from other users are stressful and frustrating. Normally, users will simply ignore it when they see political posts they disagree with, but almost 40 percent of users will take steps to remove these posts from their feed as it grows in frequency and intensity, either by changing their settings or blocking and/or unfriending someone.41

Kelly, Fisher, and Smith highlight the distinctions between online communities and physical communities, seeing the internet as the “anti-commons” where people can choose to only associate with those holding the same preferences, resulting in these individual preferences rarely being held in check.42 While many users interact with other perspectives and views online, they often do so with intent to argue, rather than seeking agreement or a deliberative discussion. Similarly, Yardi and boyd recognize the potential for social media to have positive results when it comes to exposure to other opinions and views, but users showed a limited ability to engage in any meaningful discussion, resulting in few, if any, positive benefits of exposure.43 Cass Sunstein expresses skepticism of the notion that online networks successfully facilitate diverse and vibrant political deliberation, arguing

41 Ibid.
instead that online discussion is fragmented as like-minded users seek one another out, resulting in echo chambers and an increased level of group polarization.\textsuperscript{44} As one study puts it, “birds of a feather tweet together.”\textsuperscript{45}

The same trend has been observed for political blogs, with conservative blogs predominately linking to conservative news sites, and the same being true for liberal blogs.\textsuperscript{46} Readers of these blogs generally gravitate towards blogs that are in line with their political beliefs, with the authors and sponsors often discouraging, or outright restricting, opposing viewpoints.\textsuperscript{47} For example, take this description of \textit{The Daily Kos} by one of its staff, posted on the site in 2006:

This site is primarily a Democratic site, with a heavy emphasis on progressive politics. It is not intended for Republicans, or conservatives...This is not a site for conservatives and progressives to meet and discuss their differences...This is a site for progressive Democrats. Conservative debaters are not welcome simply because the efforts here are to define and build a progressive infrastructure, and conservatives can't help with that.\textsuperscript{48}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}
On Twitter, there is potential for interaction and discussion outside of an individual’s personalized network, but the effects of these interactions are more limited due to the unique aspects and features of the website. For instance, the real-time nature of Twitter, combined with the 140-character limit, influences the extent to which users are exposed to information and actually understand complex issues. In a political climate already driven by sound bites, it is even easier to focus in on one or two sentences and react without context or allowing for nuance.

Furthermore, if two users communicate via the @ reply function, this interaction generally does not extend to each user’s community save for those who follow both users. In other words, the information is not shared outside of the specific conversation. In some cases, users will readily interact with those who hold different views, eager to voice their disagreement. One would only need to look at the replies to tweets by presidential candidates, news reporters, or pundits to see examples of this. While this might technically be an “interaction” with someone with opposing views, they will ultimately remain entrenched in their own like-minded networks, returning to the pack after the work is done, not entirely unlike a town member standing up to loudly voice their disagreement at a community meeting.49 The end result is

_________________________

an isolated argument, without any significant contribution to the ongoing deliberative process.

Of course, the use of social media is not limited to political purposes. Individuals create social ties around a wide array of topics and interests, interacting with a wide range of people who undoubtedly hold differing views or perspectives on any number of issues. Social media users acknowledge this, as well, as a little over half of Facebook users and one-third of Twitter users say there is a mix of political views among those in their networks. However, the ability to customize and organize multiple online networks and subnetworks limits the effectiveness of these interactions, and political content often remains confined to like-minded clusters. That is, users may interact with a wide variety of people, but they will only discuss politics with a limited number of them, often limiting their political conversations to those they feel will agree with them. This trend is amplified with social media users with already-high levels of political engagement, as these users are more likely to take steps to curate and customize their social media networks to reflect their own views and interests.

50 Himelboim et al., “Birds of a Feather Tweet Together.”
51 Duggan and Smith, “The Political Environment on Social Media.”
52 Halberstam and Knight, “Homophily, Group Size, and the Diffusion of Political Information in Social Networks.”
53 Duggan and Smith, “The Political Environment on Social Media.”
The clustering that Bishop warned about in *The Big Sort* is occurring, only not in the same way that he originally concluded. Abrams and Fiorina were also correct in arguing that since neighborhoods and physical communities are no longer the influential centers of social and political life, the effects of geographic sorting would be limited. But when the primary medium of political deliberation and civic engagement is a collection of divided, segregated, and siloed communities, like the internet has become, the results are the same.

**Conclusion**

Putnam’s original conceptualization identified two different types of social capital: *bridging* and *bonding*. Bridging social capital is focused on relationships and connections between individuals with “weak ties,” such as those with different ethnic, occupational, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Bonding social capital exists between individuals who have already strong ties, reinforcing identities and backgrounds, and are largely inwardly focused. In other words, bridging social capital is connected to heterogeneous groups while bonding social capital is connected to homogeneous communities.

---

On the surface, it may appear that widespread use of social media and the internet is increasing social capital, but this is largely confined to bonding social capital. Putnam argues that, for social capital to be beneficial, it must include a healthy balance of bridging and bonding aspects, not weighted towards one or the other. When one type predominates, social capital can carry with it a number of negative effects. For example, although Weimar Germany was a “joining” society rooted in civic engagement and participation, its social clubs and organizations were fragmented by religion and ideology, leading to large amount of bonding social capital, with little bridging occurring between different social cleavages. One would be hard-pressed to argue that this led to a more trusting and interconnected society among these different groups at that point in history.

When not held in check by bridging between groups, bonding social capital leads to more introverted and exclusive groups. While bonding social capital is instrumental in building trust in a society, too much trust, when limited to one group, can have adverse effects on how members view or interact with those on the outside. This results in the exclusion of others, leading to an increasingly homogeneous group shunning outside influence or discussion.55 While this undoubtedly occurred before the internet, it has become even more prominent in the digital age.

A balance of bridging and bonding social capital can lead to norms of reciprocity and general trust – both of which are critical to a healthy and strong democracy. However, the increasing dominance of bonding social capital found on the internet can have numerous consequences. As online communities continue to grow increasingly homogeneous, their members are less interested in hearing from those who may disagree, and are content to screen out those opinions that may cause discomfort. Moreover, individuals within these networks are less likely to interact with those who disagree with them, leading to more ideologically extreme positions.

There is no doubt that the internet provides countless benefits to society, both political and non-political. More information is at our fingertips and readily available than ever before, and through email, social media, online news, and other uses of the internet, we are more connected as a society than ever before. The world has become smaller with the cost of communicating with those around the world now almost nonexistent. In the view of some, this new way of engaging with the world has given way to a revitalization of social capital in American society.

But the digital age is also the age of choice, and we tend to prefer interacting with people we know to be like us, whether that is through shared interest in a sports team, a type of car, a hobby, or a political party. We may indeed be seeing a resurgence of social capital, but it is dramatically different from the balanced social capital of the past. While the internet holds the
potential to be the answer to Putnam’s plea, it has so far contributed more so to the continuing decline in political deliberation and social capital. In this sense – and to continue the metaphor – we may not be bowling alone anymore, but we are still staying within our lanes, building virtual walls to keep out those who might make us feel uncomfortable.
CHAPTER II:

MISCHIEFS OF FACTION

Madison’s Cure and Party Fragmentation
A common refrain of commentators is that the two-party system, and the political parties themselves, is to blame for the divisive and hyperpartisan politics in modern American politics, arguing that America’s Founding Fathers – and specifically James Madison – dreaded the idea of political parties, citing their warnings about the dangers of factions. This theory, while convenient, is an oversimplification of the framers’ views, and does not fully consider how parties and factions were viewed in the eighteenth century. A closer examination of Madison’s oft-cited Federalist No. 10, as well as what would have been the prevailing attitude towards factions in that era, reveals a much different understanding of political organization and mobilization than what exists in modern politics. Modern political parties, unlike eighteenth century factions, are highly durable and formal organizations, and emerged as coalitions of factions and interest groups themselves.

The conversation regarding political polarization has focused primarily on the divide between the two parties, and the causes and effects of that divide. At the same time, however, there has been a growing level of political fragmentation within the parties, with these factions and tendencies that make up the party growing more influential and more disruptive. This fragmentation is the result of the gradual weakening of political parties and the increasingly populist tone and messaging of political campaigns. Another significant factor has been the revolution in communication and information
technology, enabling more like-minded citizens to connect and coordinate with one another, allowing factions to play a greater role in American politics.

Counter to what may be the conventional wisdom of today, political parties – and what is now referred to as the “establishment” – have long been the antidote for the factious tendencies of voters and politicians alike. Rather than being the cause, political parties have long been the solution, taming the effects of the ideological factions throughout the country and within the parties. However, as the parties have weakened, they are unable to act as a limiting force on factions, leading politics beyond polarization and into a fractured, factionalized system. Given the increasingly divided and partisan state of American politics, this chapter will reexamine Madison’s arguments in Federalist No. 10 and his understanding of factions and parties to better inform a discussion of America’s modern political parties, and the divisions between and within Democrats and Republicans today.

**Literature Review: Party Polarization in American Politics**

There is broad agreement among scholars that polarization exists today among political elites (that is, the elected officials, party leaders, political activists, and others with increased influence over public discourse). Beginning with Congress, research has shown that the Democrats and Republicans in both houses of Congress are more ideologically divided than at
any point in the last century.\textsuperscript{56} When using legislative roll call records as basis for analysis, the parties within Congress have also grown more consistent, resulting in an increase in party unity on roll call votes.\textsuperscript{57} The increasing divide in Congress is not an isolated occurrence either, as party divisions have extended to state legislatures and even the Supreme Court, where justices are coming down along party lines more than ever before.\textsuperscript{58}

However, just like the parties they are studying, scholars are divided on whether this polarization within the political elite has extended to the general electorate. Abramowitz argues that polarization is not limited to the elite and is also present throughout the voting public.\textsuperscript{59} Pointing to data from

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}


\item Alan Abramowitz, \textit{The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy} (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010); Abramowitz and Saunders, "Is Polarization a Myth?"
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
the American National Election Studies, he notes that the percentage of the public placing themselves in the middle of an ideological scale has fallen significantly since 1972, with those closer to the ideological extremes growing during the same period.

Fiorina and Abrams, on the other hand, argue that there is a significant gap between America’s polarized elite and the more moderate mass public, and that the majority of Americans are not as polarized as many believe. The same authors have compared the situation to that of unfortunate citizens caught in the crossfire while “left-wing guerrillas and right-wing death squads shoot at each other.” The result is a moderate electorate that has largely exited the political process, leaving the more polarized party elites and voters to move the parties to the extremes, particularly in the primaries. For the moderate voters that remain, there are fewer like-minded candidates to support, giving the impression that voters are becoming more polarized, when in reality they may simply be choosing a candidate due to the lack of a more moderate option.

Prior to the 1960s and 1970s, views on racial and moral issues were often unrelated to one’s party identification. As a whole, the country was generally more conservative on these issues, and those who did hold more

---

liberal views existed in both parties. Today, issues like abortion, school prayer, and same-sex marriage are as much a part of the party platforms as economic issues.\textsuperscript{62} Furthermore, with an increased focus on moral issues also comes a diminished capacity to find common ground or reach compromise. Whereas there may be a middle ground on how to approach tax policy or health care reform, there is often much less room for compromise when it comes to abortion or same-sex marriage.\textsuperscript{63}

Scholars have laid out a variety of factors that had led to this increase in political polarization, including the Southern realignment that followed the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, increases in income inequality, partisan gerrymandering, the increase in partisan news, and other potential causes. Generally speaking, it is likely that a combination of these trends, and others, has led to where we are now.

Regardless of its causes, and despite their differing views on its extent, the aforementioned authors do agree that a significant increase in polarization, whether at the elite or mass level, can have detrimental effects on politics and government. For Abramowitz, the result is an inability of the parties to find common ground and put aside their quest for ideological


purity. Similarly, Fiorina warns that the disconnect between the parties and voters results in politicians eschewing broad coalitions of voters that represent a wide range of interests, and argues that representative democracy is under threat if the pattern of elite polarization continues.

According to Fiorina and others, the elite-mass disconnect ultimately leads to party sorting, with voters increasingly identifying with the “ideologically correct party” as the parties become more distinct and coherent in their policy positions.\textsuperscript{64} While this sorting indicates a stronger link between policy preference and political parties, Fiorina argues that this does not equate a change in policy preferences of voters. In other words, voters will continue voting for the party with which they identify, even if the candidates themselves are more polarized. Moreover, it is common for voters to adjust their views on certain policy issues to line up with those of their party.\textsuperscript{65} While this does not necessarily result in a more extreme electorate, it does create a more party-centric system, with a sharp decline in ticket-splitting.\textsuperscript{66}


Madison and Federalist No. 10

Commentators often point to James Madison’s writings in Federalist No. 10 and elsewhere as evidence that Madison and his fellow Founding Fathers neither wanted nor expected political parties to form. If that were the case, however, Madison would have had to be either misguided in his attempts to limit their effects, or hypocritical in his decision to become a prominent leader of the Democratic-Republicans. Indeed, Madison readily acknowledged the existence of factions in American society, writing in Federalist No. 10 that the “latent causes of faction” are “sown in the nature of man.”67 In the same year that he penned Federalist No. 10, Madison also spoke of politics as being an inherently partisan endeavor: “No free country has ever been without parties, which are a natural offspring of freedom.”68 Thomas Jefferson, despite saying in 1789 that if he “could not go to heaven but with a [political] party,” he would rather not go there at all,69 founded the Democratic-Republican Party only two years later, a party that Madison also played an instrumental role in building and leading.

Opponents of the Constitution at the time pointed to the dangers of factions and parties when campaigning against ratification, arguing that the system would lead to the proliferation of political factions. Despite his acknowledgement of their place in politics, Madison was not ignorant of the danger that factions pose to the political system. After all, he places the blame for the “instability, injustice, and confusion introduced into the public councils” squarely on the “mischiefs of faction,” labeling them a “dangerous vice.” To address this danger, Madison considers two potential solutions – or cures – for the mischiefs of faction: either removing the causes of faction, or controlling its effects. Removing the causes of faction, according to Madison, would require either restricting liberty or giving all citizens the same opinions. Madison quickly rejects the latter as impracticable, and the former as a “cure worse than the disease itself,” writing:

Liberty is to faction what air is to fire, an aliment without which it instantly expires. But it could not be less folly to abolish liberty, which is essential to political life, because it nourishes faction, than it would be to wish the annihilation of air, which is essential to animal life, because it imparts to fire its destructive agency.

Since the causes of factions cannot be removed without extinguishing liberty, Madison concludes that it is instead prudent to seek to control their effects. Adopting the proposed Constitution and its republican institutions, he argues, is the most effective and practical way to do this. According to

70 Madison, “Federalist No. 10,” 145.
71 Ibid., 146.
Madison, in a republic, where a small number of representatives are elected by the larger citizenry, these representatives are more likely to promote the interests of the wider community. Acknowledging that, even in a republic, “men of factious tempers” may still be able to achieve power and then “betray the interests of the people,” Madison argues that an extensive republic with a larger population is well-suited to diminish the effects of factions. In a larger republic, for instance, there is a greater probability that a “fit character” be chosen as a representative. Moreover, the larger population makes it more difficult for those who practice the “vicious arts” of rhetoric to gain influence. Thus, people are more likely to coalesce around representatives that “possess the most attractive merit and the most diffusive and established characters.”

The benefits of a large republic are not limited to representatives, either. Madison saw the dangers not only of individuals that seek to gain influence over the population, but also the inherent danger of a majority faction. In a small republic, there will be fewer distinct factions and interest groups, resulting in it being easier for a majority faction to emerge. When you extend the republic, you will increase the number of factions, thereby diminishing the chances of any one of them achieving a majority. With a larger and more expansive population, it is more difficult for those who share

\[72\] Ibid., 150.
an interest or motive “to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other.”  

**Historical Perspectives of Factions and Parties**

Given the fact that the two main political parties are now more polarized than at any point since the nineteenth century, many look to *Federalist* No. 10 and ask what, if anything, went wrong? Can we still hold up the Constitution and republican government as sufficient to limit the effects of factions, or have the powers of faction become too strong to control? If Madison sought to control the effects of faction, why was he a prominent leader in one of the first political parties in American history?

To answer these questions, we must first examine what should be construed as “faction” in the Madisonian sense, considering the historical context in which Madison wrote. Madison defines it as a group of citizens “who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, ad\-\-versed to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.” The terms “faction” and “party” were used interchangeably with little to no distinction between them, and the reputation of factions was one of disunity and divisiveness, as is evident in

---

73 Ibid., 151.
74 Ibid., 146.
Madison’s writings in *Federalist* No. 10 and Washington’s farewell address.\textsuperscript{75} For the Founding Fathers, the notion of factions and parties would bring to mind the most divisive, ruthless contemporaneous examples of political factions: The Whigs and Tories of seventeenth century England.

The conflict between these rival factions could be traced back to the English Civil War, which originated from an attempt by Parliament to bar James, Duke of York from the thrones of England, Scotland, and Ireland because of his Roman Catholic faith, and grew to be even more contentious in the decades following the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The Whigs and Tories were primarily divided over their view of how strong the government and the monarchy ought to be, with the Tories supporting a strong monarchy, and the Whigs advocating for the supremacy of Parliament and increased rights for the common man. While the Whigs and Tories of the seventeenth and earlier eighteenth centuries can be seen as embryonic forms of political parties, they lacked the infrastructure and organization of a modern political party. In fact, true party alignments only developed later into the reign of George III, in no small part because of the American Revolution.

Madison’s views on factions and parties were also heavily influenced by the work of David Hume. In *History of England*, Hume wrote that religion and the desire for ruling power had been the primary point of difference

\textsuperscript{75} Austin Ranney and Wilmoore Kendall, *Democracy and the American Party System* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1956).
between the factions in the English Civil War, and that they were also the least prone to compromise or moderation between the factions. Similarly, Madison held that a “zeal for different opinions concerning religion, concerning government, and many other points,” as well as “attachment to different leaders ambitiously contending for pre-eminence and power...have, in turn, divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good.” Understanding how Madison and his contemporaries viewed factions is important: factions were not entities with institutional or organizational structure, but were instead a fluid arrangement of loyalties and allegiances, often centering on underlying religious or economic interests. More importantly, they were inherently informal and unstable, developing and existing without requiring concerted planning or coordination.

Despite these distinctions, it is not uncommon to see Madison’s use of “faction” conflated with today’s political parties, but at the time, the political machines that are the modern Democratic and Republican parties were unheard of. The parties that emerged in the early days of the United States

76 Mark Spencer, "Hume and Madison on Faction," *William and Mary Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (2002)
77 Madison, “Federalist No. 10,” 147.
were founded as a means to influence and mobilize the electorate on a mass scale, made necessary in such a large and extensive republic. They were not individual factions, but instead coalitions of various interest groups and social cleavages formed to surmount the very obstacle laid before them by Madison and the Constitution.

The United States is, and has long been, comprised of a wide range of social, economic, religious, ethnic, racial, cultural, and ideological cleavages, with many, if not all, of these groups organizing themselves into societies, associations, leagues, and other organizations. Even with the country becoming significantly more diverse over time, this was still the case at the time of its founding. With a country was so extensive and so vast, Madison argued that the number of factions and their myriad interests would be so great that it would be near impossible for any one faction to find itself in the majority. That being said, American political leaders were tasked with performing functions that were not necessary before the American Revolution. With a new nation founded on ideals of republican government and public participation on a greater scale than ever before, parties were needed to give the clarity and stability required to effectively engage and mobilize the expanded electorate.

Alexander Hamilton realized early on that he would need to bring together a wider coalition to achieve results, leading to the organizing of the Federalist Party. To do this, Hamilton brought together leaders who were:
Men of position and high respectability in their communities: former military officers everywhere, or mercantile magnates in New York; the Congregational divines in Massachusetts and Connecticut, or Episcopalian ministers in the Middle Atlantic region and in the coastal plains of the South; captains of finance in Philadelphia...From the Federalists' center at the capital to their periphery in the counties and towns, relationships among established notables provided the strong strands of the emerging Federalist structure. Such notables drew in other participants, and together they soon formed the ranks of the active workers or "cadre" of the emerging party.79

Modern American political parties are not dissimilar to Hamilton’s Federalists, as the idea of building a coalition comprised of a wide variety of interests and tendencies continues to this day. For the same reason that Madison argues the effects of factions would be controlled, parties were necessary to connect and organize the public throughout the country.

**Changing Party Dynamics**

Despite the increase in interest and discussion around party polarization, the deep divisions between America’s political parties are not new, but for much of American history, this polarization would often only exist in one major policy issue or area at a time. The Federalist and Democratic-Republican parties were formed to address the general issue of federal versus state power, which manifested itself in debates on the national bank, tariffs, and other related issues. These same issues remained at the

---

79 Ibid., 40.
forefront in the 1830s and 1840s, when Andrew Jackson’s Democratic Party battled with the Whigs. Party polarization then hit historic levels when the Democrats and those in the newly founded Republican Party became deeply divided over slavery. Following the Civil War, the same parties were polarized over issues such as the Gold Standard, then the New Deal, and ultimately the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

Because the polarization existed primarily in one issue area, the parties continued to cooperate and were able to effectively govern, despite the deep divisions between them. Although they were divided over the primary policy debate of the day, the parties were still able to find common ground on some of the more peripheral issues. This process of conflict displacement, however, has itself been supplanted by a process termed “conflict extension,” with party polarization now expanding to multiple issues at once.\footnote{Geoffrey C. Layman, Thomas M. Carsey, and Juliana M. Horowitz, "Party Polarization in American Politics: Characteristics, Causes, and Consequences," \textit{Annual Review of Political Science} 8 (2006).} Data from the American National Election Studies show that party polarization has steadily increased on four issues from 1972 through 2012: the legality of abortion, whether it is government’s responsibility to ensure that everyone has a good standard of living, whether government should provide health insurance for all citizens, and whether the government should help improve
the social and economic position of African Americans.\textsuperscript{81} If conflict displacement were still the dominant trend, polarization on a newer issue such as abortion would have happened alongside a decrease in polarization on some of the more longstanding issues. Instead, polarization has increased across the board between the two parties.

This emergence of conflict extension has in large part been driven by the increased role and influence of activists within the parties, specifically in the nomination process. Layman et al. write:

In today’s parties, office-seekers compete for party nominations by vying for the support of diverse activists. That competition, and the ease with which activists with different issue concerns can participate in the process, encourage candidates to take polar positions on multiple issue dimensions. As such candidates grow more prevalent and become the standard bearers of their parties, activists and voters with strong commitments to the party may bring their own issue positions into line with the non-centrist stands of the candidates and their active supporters. The result is an extension of partisan conflict to multiple issue dimensions.\textsuperscript{82}

This increase in influence among activists has also coincided with a weakening of parties in general. This “political fragmentation,” according to Pildes, is “the diffusion of the power in elections away from the formal campaigns and the political parties – and even more importantly, the


diffusion of power in government away from the leadership of the major political parties to their more extreme factions.”

Throughout much of American history, the presence of various factions within the parties have functioned as a moderating force on the factions themselves. For example, in forming the New Deal Coalition, Franklin D. Roosevelt brought together Catholics, African-Americans, Jews, labor unions, party machines in Northern cities, farmers in the rural West, and white Southerners, all under the banner of the Democratic Party. While issues of race and foreign policy were sources of disagreement among the factions, the party as a whole agreed on the more liberal proposals coming from Roosevelt’s New Deal. Even in recent years as we watched the increase in polarization across multiple issues, the Democrats of the 1990s and 2000s continued working to keep the peace between the moderate New Democrat wing of the party, led by the Democratic Leadership Council, and the more ideologically-driven liberal wing. The Republican Party, too, has for decades had to perform a balancing act in an effort to reconcile the views of pro-business conservatives with those of social and cultural conservatives.

As a result of conflict extension, our conceptualization of political parties has changed. They are no longer diverse coalitions based on various demographic, regional, and economic cleavages, and are now generally seen

---

as ideological cohesive entities: The Republican Party has become increasingly synonymous with conservatism, and likewise with the Democratic Party and liberalism. Conflict extension is evident on the mass level as well, with voters becoming more ideologically consistent across multiple issues.\(^{84}\) Despite evidence for both of these trends, there has not been the increase in partisan identification and party loyalty that one might expect. To be sure, there has been an increase in straight-ticket voting, with voters becoming more consistent in their choices, but the same voters are also more reluctant to identify with a political party than ever before.\(^{85}\) Instead, these voting trends have largely been the result of a rise in negative partisanship – that is, voters are increasingly voting against a candidate or party, rather than voting for their own party.\(^{86}\)

Even beyond voting behavior, more than ever, politics is about what (or who) you are against. During the 2012 presidential election, 70 percent of the ads airing on television were negative, an astounding jump from 9 percent in 2008.\(^{87}\) According to the American National Elections Study’s feeling thermometer scale, which ranges from the most negative rating of zero

\(^{84}\) Carsey and Layman, “Our Politics is More Polarized on More Issues than Ever Before.”


\(^{86}\) Alan Abramowitz and Steven Webster, ”The Only Thing We Have to Fear Is the Other Party,” Sabato’s Crystal Ball, June 4, 2015, http://www.centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/the-only-thing-we-have-to-fear-is-the-other-party/.

degrees to the most positive rating of 100 degrees, those who identify or support a party (including independents who lean towards one party or another), party supporters are more likely to view the opposing party negatively than they are their own party positively.88

Figure 1: ANES Feeling Thermometer Ratings of Own and Opposing Parties (1980-2012)

The Bubble Bursts

The strategy of blaming the other party has proven to be an effective one, as long as the party employing the strategy was at least partly out of power. In 2006, the Democrats were able to unite against George W. Bush

88 Abramowitz and Webster, “The Only Thing We Have to Fear Is the Other Party.”
and the Republican Congress, riding the wave of opposition to an
overwhelming victory in the midterms. Similarly, Barack Obama’s lead over
John McCain grew even wider when the economy collapsed in September
2008, with the Democrats cashing in on the ever-increasing political
resentment of the Republican leadership in DC. In the span of only two
election cycles, the Democratic Party went from being the minority party in
both houses of Congress and out of the White House, to controlling all three.

When Rick Santelli launched into a rant on the floor of the Chicago
Mercantile Exchange against the housing bailout plan announced by
President Obama in February 2009, it sparked what soon became the Tea
Party movement. Although it seemed like a new phenomenon, the Tea Party
was really a culmination of multiple trends; a perfect storm of the long-
standing distrust of government, the deeply-held negative feelings about the
opposing party (in this case, Democrats), and an economic recession that left
the lower and middle class in its wake.89 With the Republicans on the
outside, somewhere they had not been since the beginning of the Clinton
Administration, and recognizing the downward trend of party identification,
the GOP was able to move beyond simply being anti-Democrat and position
itself as anti-government party. Moreover, since they were now out of power

89 Marc Hetherington and Thomas Rudolph, Why Washington Won’t Work: Polarization,
Political Trust, and the Governing Crisis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Theda
Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican
Conservatism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013)
in Washington, Republicans were able to fuel anti-establishment rhetoric and political messaging without bearing the responsibility of governing.

Capitalizing on the growing anti-establishment sentiment throughout the country, Republicans took back the House in 2010, and although Mitt Romney was not able to defeat Obama in 2012, they managed to win a majority in the Senate in 2014. Despite campaign promises to “repeal and replace Obamacare” and rein in the executive actions taken by the Obama Administration, little action came from the Republican Congress, leaving many who supported the GOP in these elections wondering if the Republicans were any better.\textsuperscript{90} These disenchanted voters, many of them more engaged in politics than they had been before, are emblematic of the negative partisanship trend: identifying as Tea Party supporters before identifying as Republicans, and above all else, viewing themselves primarily as opponents of President Obama and the Democratic Party. As a result, it did not take

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}
much for these voters – and the representatives they voted in – to turn against the Republican Party establishment next.⁹¹

In 2015, when Donald Trump announced his campaign for president, he immediately positioned himself as the candidate of these voters with his anti-immigration and protectionist rhetoric, highlighting the latent fractures within the Republican Party and its base of supporters. While members of the traditional Republican “establishment” have long made free trade and globalization central to the party’s platform, Trump’s message has had a unique appeal to lower and working class voters who feel as though they have not benefited from an increasingly globalized economy. One political scientist and writer commented:

For decades, they had been told, for partisan reasons, to be angry; they had been told, for partisan reasons, that Washington was corrupt, and that all Washington politicians were evil. Now they finally had somebody who could say those things while actually not embodying any telltale signs of the sins. They also had somebody who could finally and authentically call out all the "corrupt" things Republican establishment types themselves were doing.⁹²

Political scientist Norm Ornstein put it another way:

If you delegitimize government, and make every victory that occurs partisan and ugly, and then refuse to implement the policies to make things work as much as you can but instead try to undermine them, and you cut government funding, and you freeze the salaries of people in government — well, then eventually you’re gonna have a public out

---


there that basically says, "Anything would be better than these idiots."93

Politicians have sought to categorize Trump using conventional political and ideological labels, calling him either too radically conservative (from the left) or “just another liberal” (from the right). Trump’s opponents in the primary constantly criticized him for not being “conservative enough,” failing to realize that the majority of Trump’s supporters were interested less in ideologically purity and more in someone who will change the status quo.

Instead of seeking to lead a movement based on an ideology or political creed, Trump has led a new wave of populism. The ideological leaders of the Tea Party may have held firm to what they deemed conservative values and positions, but the grassroots voters they were leading were primarily interested in the populist, “throw the bums out” part of their message. Whether this was a blind spot to those leaders or an intentional exploitation of voters’ emotions, the populist message of the Tea Party had been cloaked in conservative dogma. Recognizing this gap between the leaders and the voters, Trump filled the space in between – eschewing the need to base his campaign in any label or ideology, instead claiming to be interested only in “Making America Great Again.” Ornstein continues:

When populism emerges in a big way, it has a lot of common themes that cut across typical ideological boundaries. The anger at elites, the protectionism, and the nativism can all unify. So for Trump, in a lot of

ways, the populism and the willingness to take on his own party establishment — as long as he is able to check a few marks on litmus test issues — is enough.  

Returning again to Madison, *Federalist* No. 10 included three primary arguments for why the effects of factions would be controlled in the United States: 1) a small number of representatives elected by the larger electorate will lead to representatives more likely to promote the interests of the wider community; 2) in a large republic with a population spread out, it will be more difficult for factions to coalesce and form; and 3) with a larger and more diverse population, the numbers of factions will increase, thereby diluting the effects of any one faction.

For much of American history, these solutions proved successful, and while fractures have always existed within parties, the parties themselves were a limiting factor on their influence and power. Because of this, the American political system has continued to function, in large part due to the ability of party leadership to engage in discussions, partnerships, and compromises with opponents and colleagues in the government. However, two trends have emerged to counteract the limiting effects of a large republic on factions.

First, it is nearly impossible to overstate the impact that the ongoing revolution in information and communication technology has had on modern

---

94 Ibid.
American politics. In *Federalist* No. 10, Madison argues that “the influence of factious leaders may kindle a flame within their particular States, but will be unable to spread a general conflagration through the other States.”\(^\text{95}\) Indeed, this was true for much of American history, with political parties as extensive and diverse as the country itself. However, with fewer barriers remaining to communication over long distances, the country has effectively decreased in size. It is now easier than ever before for likeminded activists and politically engaged citizens to find each other, and, to use Madison’s words, for a flame kindled within Georgia to catch fire in Arizona and Illinois.

The initial formation of the Tea Party is, once again, a good example of this. Similar to how social media is given credit for its role in the Arab Spring, the internet played a central role in the organization and mobilization of the Tea Party. One would be hard-pressed to argue that the political tendencies and views of Tea Party supporters went through a dramatic shift in 2010, but the realization of others across the country sharing those views served as a motivation for people to put those views into action, while also decreasing the costs of organizing.

Second, as discussed above, political campaigns and messages are increasingly taking on a much more populist tinge. This was evident in the early days of the Tea Party, and has now become commonplace with the

\(^{95}\) Madison, “Federalist No. 10,” 151.
campaigns of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, among others. This leads to a political process built less on coalition-building and effective governance, and instead built on rhetoric and empty promises. This increase in populist politics has contributed to the weakening of parties, as party leadership has become synonymous with the “establishment” being targeted by populist rhetoric.

In a strong party, where members of the party depend on leadership for exposure, influence, and financial support, leaders are able to make the deals they deem necessary. But the parties are growing increasingly weaker, and leaders are watching their leverage over their members disappear. Individual politicians have staked out claims on a personal brand and their own base of voters within the party. Members of Congress like Ted Cruz, Rand Paul, Elizabeth Warren, and others no longer rely on party leadership for fundraising or media exposure. To be sure, insurgent candidates have undoubtedly made their mark on politics before, such as George McGovern’s presidential campaign in 1972 and Ronald Reagan’s in 1976, when they often regarded as taking on the “establishment” of the party. For McGovern, this meant beating establishment favorite Ed Muskie for the Democratic nomination, and for Reagan, it was challenging the incumbent president in Gerald Ford for the GOP nod. But now, in the 2016 campaign, insurgency campaigns are the new normal, with Trump, Sanders, Cruz, Paul, and countless others projecting themselves as “outsiders.”

60
Some have pointed to perceived polarization in Congress as evidence of a more polarized electorate throughout the country, arguing that the country is more clearly divided between Democrats and Republicans, and liberals and conservatives. Primarily citing voting records of members of Congress, these analyses point out that the ideological distance between Republicans and Democrats in both chambers is wider than at any time since the end of Reconstruction. Furthermore, members of Congress are voting along party lines the vast majority of the time. These metrics could also be used as evidence that parties are not weakening, as an increase in party line votes would theoretically reflect greater unanimity within each party, thereby reflecting stronger party leadership. Using roll call votes as a metric, however, may overstate the level of polarization. First, it does not adjust for the plethora of procedural votes that occur on a regular basis in both chambers. Second, the control that House and Senate leaders have over which bills and votes come to the floor also helps ensure a greater level of party unity, despite differences between members of the same party.

To be sure, polarization is indeed at an all-time high in Congress. However, this paper is not meant to discount or counter the evidence of increasing polarization. Rather, the purpose is to move the discussion about the current state of politics in the United States beyond polarization to paint a more complete picture of the divisions and fault lines in politics today.
Conclusion

Although parties have always been divided from one another – as one would expect – they have also been built from coalitions that are often as ideologically and demographically diverse as the country. Consequently, parties have always had to endure internal tension and infighting, as intraparty factions have emerged around individual leaders, ideas and policies, ideological tendencies, and regional and demographical characteristics. Political scientists Gary Miller and Norman Schofield argue, “Successful American parties must be coalitions of enemies. A party gets to be a majority party by forming fragile ties across wide and deep differences in one dimension or the other. Maintaining such diverse majority coalitions is necessarily an enormous struggle against strong centrifugal forces.”\textsuperscript{96} In the same way that parties have competed for power in the government, factions have competed for power within the parties, but the fight for power and influence between factions has now outgrown the party apparatus.

With a weakening central party leadership in both parties (more so with the Republicans, yet still evident in the Democratic Party), factions and their leaders no longer depend on their party leaders for influence or fundraising capability. Instead, candidates and politicians take to social media or cable news, utilizing information and communication technology to

strategically and directly reach potential voters and supporters, bypassing the party structure in an effort to keep their message from being compromised or softened. The increased focus on political polarization has revealed a growing ideological divide between the two parties that now exists across more issues than ever before, but as that divide between the parties has grown wider, factions both inside and outside parties have also grown in strength.

It is tempting to argue that, because these factions are growing stronger, Madison’s solution has ultimately proven to not be enough to keep factions from organizing and coalescing. Throughout much of American history, however, Madison’s scheme to control the effects of factions had largely been successful, thanks in many ways to the political parties themselves. Madison’s cure for the mischief of faction – a large republic spread out over an extensive sphere – forced unique and disparate groups to unite as coalitions, creating political parties that functioned as moderating forces. Thanks to advancements in technology and communication, we are more connected than ever before, and it is becoming easier every day to connect with those who agree with us, regardless of how far away they are. The end result is a fractured political system, and perhaps more disconcerting, a fractured society.
CHAPTER III:

THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE FOURTH ESTATE

Digital Media and the Politics of News
In March 2016, President Barack Obama gave a speech at the Toner Prize dinner in Washington, D.C. to honor the year’s best political reporting. In his speech, President Obama extended a criticism of the news media that has become a recurring theme in modern politics: that the news industry has become so saturated that it enables consumers to seek out that with which they agree, leaving behind objective information and reporting for ideologically slanted coverage:

The balkanization of the media means that we just don’t have a common place where we get common facts and a common worldview the way we did 20, 30 years ago. And that just keeps on accelerating, you know. And I’m not the first to observe this, but you’ve got the Fox News/Rush Limbaugh folks, and then you’ve got the MSNBC folks.97

President Obama is far from the first person to notice and highlight this trend, as political commentators, journalists, and academics have all lamented the dramatic increase in partisan media sources in the last few decades. The news media, long the primary vehicle through which elite discourse reaches and influences the public, has gone through an evolution that has fundamentally changed how the public interacts with political leaders and consumes news. Gone are the days where nightly news broadcasts and newspapers recapped the events of the day for most the country and provided a common baseline of information from which

consumers can develop and inform their personal views. Instead, with cable news and the countless digital media outlets expanding their influence, that common foundation no longer exists, as information becomes individually tailored to reinforce the world view of those who receive it, often strengthening those views even more.

Many have argued that the rise of cable news has played a significant role in the increase of political polarization and division, stemming largely from an increase in ideologically driven information and conversation. Furthermore, the availability of more of news and information sources than ever before gives individuals the ability to choose their news, thereby filtering which information they receive according to which sources they trust, causing more inconsistencies in public perceptions of world events or news stories.

Like the political parties they cover, partisan media outlets are ostensibly split between liberal and conservative outlets – there is Fox News on the right, MSNBC on the left, and CNN in the middle. This view of media organizations, which is usually limited to the context of cable news, tends to overlook an increasingly fragmented media landscape, with the fault lines occurring on multiple levels beyond the liberal-conservative dichotomy. While these networks continue to be dominant forces in news media in the United States, this view does not fully account for the myriad digital outlets that continue to gain momentum and audience share. When considering these increasingly influential sources of news and opinion, the fragmentation of the
news media beyond the liberal-conservative dichotomy becomes more evident, revealing a media landscape much more fractured than commonly thought.

**Literature Review: Cable News and Partisan Media**

The television news landscape has dramatically changed since Ted Turner founded the Cable News Network in 1980. Before CNN, no network dared challenge the status quo of broadcast news. In 1980, the combined audiences of NBC Nightly News, CBS Evening News, and ABC World News added up to an average of over 50 million viewers per night.\(^98\) Walter Cronkite of CBS was regarded as the “most trusted man in news,” with over 50 percent of Americans identifying him as their favorite and most trusted news anchor, with the next closest anchor receiving over 12 percent.\(^99\) Even as late as 1993, after CNN became more widely known, 60 percent of Americans said they regularly watch a broadcast network’s evening news program.\(^100\)

Comparing these numbers with those of recent years, it is clear that there has been a major shift in how Americans receive news information. In

---


\(^100\) Guskin and Rosenstiel, “Network: By the Numbers.”
2016, an average of fewer than 24 million Americans watched evening news each night,\footnote{State of the Media 2016: Network News Fact Sheet,” Pew Research Center, June 15, 2016, http://www.journalism.org/2016/06/15/network-news-fact-sheet/} and in 2012, only 27 percent regularly watched nightly network news broadcasts.\footnote{Amy Mitchell et al., "The Modern News Consumer," Pew Research Center, July 7, 2016, http://www.journalism.org/2016/07/07/the-modern-news-consumer/} Four decades ago, the primary choices Americans had for daily news information were three nightly news broadcasts, radio, and the newspaper. Today, with cable news and the plethora of digital news sources available, individuals have endless options when it comes to sources for news information, transforming the way many get their news. Per Pew Research Center, 30 percent of Americans often get their news from cable news, less only than local TV news (46 percent), and more than both network news (30 percent) and newspapers (20 percent).\footnote{Mitchell et al., “The Modern News Consumer.”}

Audience share has also seen a major shift, resulting from the increase in the number of available sources. From 1993 to 2011, audience shares for evening news between NBC, CBS, and ABC rarely saw more than a three percent margin between the highest rated and lowest rated broadcasts.\footnote{Guskin and Rosenstiel, “Network: By the Numbers.”} Cable news audiences, however, vary much more dramatically. Prime-time viewership of the three main cable news networks in 2011 had a margin of nearly 1.2 million viewers between the highest rated network (Fox News at
1.85 million) and the lowest (CNN at 655,000, with MSNBC barely beating out CNN with 773,000).\textsuperscript{105}

It is also important to understand how the partisan nature of cable news influences the public’s perception of bias. Since it first went on the air, Fox News has been widely seen as more conservative than its counterparts: A 2009 Pew study found that 47 percent of Americans perceived Fox News as mostly conservative, and 48 percent of Fox News viewers themselves viewing it as mostly conservative.\textsuperscript{106} Similarly, 36 percent of Americans see MSNBC as mostly liberal, with 43 percent of MSNBC viewers agreeing with this statement. There is also a notable lack of trust of the news media among the public that has increased in recent decades. Even though 72 percent of Americans responded that they trusted the mass media in 1976, that number is down to 40 percent in 2015 according to Gallup, and until 2003, a majority of Americans continued to trust the news media.\textsuperscript{107} In a Suffolk University poll of likely voters in the 2012 presidential election, respondents were asked to identify which reporter or news anchor they trusted the most; no single reporter or news anchor received as much as 10 percent.\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
In the early years of cable news, when CNN was still a fledgling network with a modest audience size, scholars put forth the notion of the “hostile media phenomenon.” The study found that partisans frequently perceive bias in news coverage typically seen as neutral or objective in nature. Though it is hypothesized that the trend had been growing before 1985, it was not until the last decade of the century that other news sources entered the picture on a large scale. First came CNN, then Fox News followed suit in the mid-1990s, with MSNBC also hitting airwaves in 1996, leading to the current cable news landscape. While CNN has put forth considerable effort to keep a reputation for being objective and unbiased, Fox News and MSNBC have often embraced their roles as the standard bearers of the right and left, respectively.

Since 2001, only five years after it first went on the air, Fox News has been a perennial powerhouse in cable ratings, and it is used as an individual’s primary source of political information more than any other television network. Political commentators and pundits on either end of the political spectrum have attributed the success that Fox News has found in the last two decades to the effects of hostile media phenomenon. A familiar

slogan to Fox News watchers (and others), “fair and balanced,” was originally
given as the primary justification for launching the network, and for many, it
would come to be a legitimate alternative to the “liberal media” and its
perceived stronghold on information.\textsuperscript{111}

Fox News and MSNBC’s pundits are often highlighted as evidence for
the networks’ biases. Indeed, it would be difficult to argue that Sean Hannity
and Bill O’Reilly (or Rachel Maddow and Lawrence O’Donnell for MSNBC)
remain objective in their commentary, and although both networks have
attempted to distinguish political commentary from news reporting, the lines
between the two are blurred more often than not. Research has indicated that
Fox News’ coverage of certain issues or news stories is often seen as friendlier
to conservative leaders and issues than to liberals. One such study found that
Fox News’ coverage of the major party conventions in 2004 was significantly
different in tone from that of other networks.\textsuperscript{112} While coverage of the
Democratic National Convention was more negative in tone, the Republican
National Convention was given more time on air, and was generally covered
in a more favorable light. Another study showed that the coverage of the US

\textsuperscript{111} Collins, \textit{Crazy Like A Fox}.\textsuperscript{112} Jonathan Morris and Peter Francia, "From Network News to Cable Commentary: The
Evolution of Television Coverage of Party Conventions," \textit{Presented at the State of the Parties
invasion of Iraq was given more positive coverage on Fox News compared to other networks.\textsuperscript{113}

One explanation for the lack of distinction between news and commentary is that Fox News and MSNBC often see themselves as responding to biased reporting. Perhaps the most telling example of this came in Fox News’ Chris Wallace’s response to The Daily Show’s Jon Stewart’s accusations of bias in 2011. When asked whether Fox News purports to be the “ideological equivalent of NBC News," Wallace answered, "I think we're the counterweight. I think they have a liberal agenda and we tell the other side of the story."\textsuperscript{114} In the same way, MSNBC has grown more liberal over the past decade largely as a response to criticism levied at Fox. Consequently, to be a “counterweight” to biased reporting, as Wallace says, the networks must themselves be biased.

Another analysis, published in 2007, showed that Fox News seemed to benefit the most from the “fragmentation” of the television news audience.\textsuperscript{115} Fox News continues to be one of the most popular sources for political news and information in the United States, and individuals with negative

perceptions of the mainstream media turn to Fox as their primary news source more than any other network. Fox News audiences also have different perceptions of the current state of affairs than CNN and other news sources. Morris highlights this:

"In the past, the homogenized television news environment gave the mass public a greater ability to hear rhetoric from both sides of an issue and often take a more moderate perspective. However, as negative feelings toward the media persist, individuals continue to take advantage of the fragmented media environment and find sources of news that fit better with their own political views."

Despite many observers having lamented the rise of biased journalism in television, viewers continue to flock to these sources. Prior points out in his analysis of the news media, "People have not changed; they have merely changed the channel. And they would have done it sooner, had they been given the chance." The increase in the number of news sources available allows individuals to take action in response to the perceived biases within the news media. Perceptions of bias were evident long before cable news, but with the options of Fox News, MSNBC, and others now available, these observations can be acted upon.

Hollander discusses the notion of selective exposure, derived from the theory of cognitive dissonance, as a process to reduce and avoid potential

---

discomfort.\textsuperscript{118} Selective exposure was originally a concept within psychology, but has become more relevant to the discussion revolving around news media due to the increase in information sources. Not only do individuals migrate to news sources they consider more aligned with their views, but they are also driven away from news sources perceived as “less friendly.”\textsuperscript{119} This polarization of network audiences is further amplified by the decrease in news viewership among less partisan individuals. Whereas in the past these viewers would casually watch the news, they are now being drawn to more entertainment-oriented programming. As a result, less partisan viewers have “left behind a polarized news audience that resembles the ‘red state, blue state’ divide often seen in recent US presidential elections.”\textsuperscript{120}

Partisan selective exposure is also found to have an effect on political polarization, as it allows individuals to avoid having their opinions challenged. Klapper notes, “Selective exposure, selective perception, and selective retention have been shown...to be typically the protectors of predispositions and the handmaidens of reinforcement.”\textsuperscript{121} Other research shows a strong relationship between homogeneous social network exposure

\textsuperscript{118} Barry Hollander, "Tuning Out or Tuning Elsewhere?: Partisanship, Polarization, and Media Migration from 1998-2006,"\textit{ Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly} 85, no. 1 (2008).
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{121} J.T. Klapper, \textit{The Effects of Mass Communication} (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1960), 64.
and political polarization, a relationship that can also be extended
homogeneous media exposure as well.\textsuperscript{122}

Because of the hostile media phenomenon, the notion of an unbiased
news source has all but disappeared for many. Consequently, those who are
less partisan but still interested in current events may be forced to choose a
primary source of news, leading them to decide on the source they perceive as
closest to them ideologically. After extended selective exposure to a certain
source, however, the individual will likely become more partisan, and more
polarized. Indeed, if an issue is highly relevant to an individual, they will
become more polarized in their attitudes toward that topic or issue if they
continue to receive persuasive messages.\textsuperscript{123}

**Digital News**

Much of the analysis and research on the effects of a more partisan
news media has focused on the impact of cable news, and often specifically on
Fox News as the primary source of conservative news. But just as cable news
has been a disruptive force for broadcast and print news over the last three
decades, digital news has become a force to be reckoned with for cable news.


According to a study by Pew, 38 percent of US adults get their news from digital sources on a regular basis, including 18 percent who often use social networking sites like Twitter or Facebook, and 28 percent who said they often used news websites or apps.124 The total percent of US adults who get their news from digital sources is lower than the number for television generally (57 percent), but is higher than both cable news (31 percent) and network nightly news (30 percent).

When discussing the effects of media on political views, it is important to focus in on political news specifically. To do that, Pew looked at the types of sources people used when following the 2016 presidential election. The study found that 65 percent of US adults said they learned about the 2016 election from digital sources, again surpassing those who learned about the election from cable news (54 percent) and nightly network news (49 percent).125 Compare these numbers with those from a similar study focusing on the 2012 election and it is clear that a major shift has taken place in where people get their news. In that study, only 17 percent of adults in the US said they regularly learned about the election from social media, and 36

percent said they looked to internet/digital sources for news on a regular basis.\(^{126}\)

With more people getting their news from internet sources, the last decade has seen an explosion of digital news sites. Similar to the market forces that created partisan cable news networks, the nature of the media market drives these websites and outlets to carve out a partisan niche.\(^{127}\) This surge of online news sources also coincided with the presidency of Barack Obama. This, combined with conservatives’ perception that the media has a liberal bias, has led to a disproportionate number of conservative websites. As of August 2016, nine of the fifteen top political websites were conservative.\(^{128}\) Unlike Fox News, these websites were forced to go beyond the conservative/liberal split as they found themselves in competition with other similarly-minded outlets. While also true for liberal media outlets, this is clearly evident on the conservative side: For neoconservatives and hawkish Republicans, there is *The Weekly Standard*, and for the more orthodox,


mainstream conservatives, there is *National Review*. Breitbart has molded itself into a populist and nativist stronghold for the alt-right and *Independent Journal Review* caters directly to millennials, while culture warriors and social conservatives flock to RedState and Townhall.

**The Media, Negative Partisanship, and the 2016 Election**

The previous chapter discussed the increasing amount of negative partisanship in American politics. As negative partisanship has grown between the parties, a similar trend is observed when looking at cable news coverage during the 2012 presidential campaign. MSNBC spent considerably more time focusing on negative coverage of Mitt Romney than they did on positive coverage of Barack Obama.\(^\text{129}\) The same was also true for Fox News, with the bias reversed.

This trend is not unique to the 2012 presidential election, nor is it confined to Fox News and MSNBC. One of the most common elements of partisan media coverage, whether from cable news or internet outlets, is that it not only seeks to show that one side is right, but also goes to great lengths to prove the other side *wrong*. Outside of the 2012 election, cable news shows have been shown to spend the majority of their time attacking the opposing

party instead of defending their own. The rhetoric employed goes further than incivility and disagreement, and provokes “visceral responses (e.g., anger, righteousness, fear, moral indignation) from the audience through the use of overgeneralizations, sensationalism, misleading or partially inaccurate information, ad hominem attacks, and partial truths about opponents.”

This type of rhetoric not only intensifies the negative feelings and opinions their audience hold towards those with whom they disagree, but it also causes viewers to become distrustful of the opposing party.

This culture of outrage and distrust grew stronger throughout much of Barack Obama’s presidency, as conservative outlets united in their opposition to Obama and the Democratic Party, stoking the fear and distrust their audience felt towards the president and his party. Outlets and commentators criticized the president for different reasons. The more neoconservative outlets criticized him for his foreign policy, fiscal hawks highlighted increases in government spending, and those with a more constitutionalist bent spoke out against federal overreach. Despite often criticizing the president’s actions and positions on different issues, they could all agree on one thing: Obama

was wrong. As distrust of one side grows stronger, it not only makes individuals more extreme in their political views, but also causes individuals to adopt the views contrary to the party they oppose as they pick up cues from the media.\footnote{Ibid.} For example, a Fox News viewer who opposes Obama may not have had strongly held views on health care reform prior to 2009 but then adopted them because of their distrust of the president, which was fueled by what was in the conservative media.

The conservative media’s consistent anti-Obama message gave the impression that the conservative media was unified, masking the fractures that existed within conservatism and the Republican Party. While this dynamic thrived during Obama’s presidency, the first true test of unity within conservative media, and the GOP as a whole, came with the 2016 Republican presidential primary – a test which it failed tremendously. With seventeen candidates at one point in the race, these fractures quickly became apparent, as conservatives and Republicans found themselves supporting different candidates. Pundits began assigning candidates different “lanes”: the libertarians flocked to Rand Paul, the social conservatives to Ted Cruz or Ben Carson, and the more traditional and mainstream Republicans threw their weight behind Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio, or John Kasich. Then there was
a wild card in Donald Trump, who drew supporters from across the GOP, as well as many supporters from outside the party.

While primary campaigns have always been a competition between candidates, they have typically been more positive in tone, as opposed to the onslaught of negative campaigning seen in general election campaigns.\textsuperscript{134} This is the result of two factors: first, the benefits from negative campaigning in a primary do not translate to the general election, given that the opponent has changed; and second, even if they lose in the primary, the majority of candidates in a party’s primary (whether congressional or presidential) still want their party’s eventual nominee to win in the general election, something a negative primary campaign makes more difficult.\textsuperscript{135}

The 2016 GOP primary, however, definitively bucked this trend. With the media, and the audience, primed to be distrustful and conditioned to vote against and not for, the campaign quickly turned negative – something that conservative media outlets were all too eager to capitalize on. Although criticism of then-presumptive Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton was pervasive, the opposition to Secretary Clinton (and by extension, President Obama) was unanimous among the GOP candidates in a way that it effectively amounted to a wash, leaving the candidates unable to create any


\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 20.
distance between themselves – until they turned on each other. Just as the Republican Party splintered on multiple levels, fault lines within conservative media began to appear.

By spring 2016, prominent conservative commentators had begun to take sides, whether officially or unofficially.\textsuperscript{136} While not an official endorsement, columnist David Brooks of \textit{The New York Times} continually expressed his dislike of both Trump and Cruz, while speaking highly of Rubio.\textsuperscript{137} Conservative talk radio host Mark Levin called Cruz the “most consistently conservative candidate” in the primary.\textsuperscript{138} And while some pundits and commentators were eager to back a particular candidate, such as Glenn Beck endorsing Cruz,\textsuperscript{139} the dividing line in conservative media quickly became either being for or against Donald Trump.\textsuperscript{140}

As it became clear that Trump had a serious chance at winning the GOP nomination, the discord brewing inside the conservative media evolved into an all-out civil war. In what may have been the most potent and direct

attack on Trump, the conservative magazine *National Review* published a special issue entitled “Against Trump” in January 2016. In the issue, the magazine’s editors and over twenty conservative pundits condemned Trump as, among other things, a “glib egomaniac,” a “con man,” a “vicious demagogue,” and the “very epitome of vulgarity.”\(^{141}\) Anti-Trump conservatives also denounced Fox News host and prominent Trump booster Sean Hannity as “stupid or dishonest” and “pathetic.”\(^{142}\) In response, pro-Trump websites and commentators went after the candidate’s critics, claiming betrayal of the Republican Party. For example, Breitbart News, one of the most solidly pro-Trump media outlets, went after Glenn Beck in response to his opposition to Trump and harsh criticism of Trump supporters.\(^{143}\) Hannity himself went after his Fox News colleague Megyn

---


Kelly, publicly accusing her of supporting Hillary Clinton after Kelly criticized Trump for only talking to friendly interviewers such as Hannity.\textsuperscript{144} The hostile media effect came into full view during the 2016 presidential election as the news media was accused of being biased throughout the primaries and into the general election. On the Democratic side, supporters of Bernie Sanders – and often Sanders himself – routinely complained of media bias against the insurgent candidate’s campaign. Cenk Uygur, host of “The Young Turks,” an online news show, accused CNN of “journalistic malpractice” when the network included in her delegate count unpledged super delegates, despite the widespread acknowledgment that the establishment Democrats who made up the vast majority of super delegates would support Hillary Clinton.\textsuperscript{145} A review of the 850 complaints filed to the Federal Communications Commission about the three major cable news networks between August 5, 2015 and March 15, 2016 found that over 160 of those complaints alleged media bias in favor of Clinton, with many specifically identifying CNN.\textsuperscript{146} Despite the FCC’s inability to regulate CNN

---


as it is transmitted over cable and not broadcast airwaves, the sheer number of complaints is revealing.

This is by no means a new occurrence in the general election – Sarah Palin’s criticism of the “lamestream media” in 2012 being a good example – but it has not been as prevalent in primaries. Before the 2016 primaries, most candidates did not regularly lob accusations of media bias within their own party. This changed, of course, when Trump positioned his presidential campaign as running against the media, both conservative and otherwise, as much as he was running against the other candidates.

In September 2015, Trump made clear his feelings about the media to CBS News anchor Scott Pelley:

I don’t mind a bad story. If you did a bad story on me for ‘60 Minutes,’ if it were a fair story I wouldn’t be thin-skinned at all...You know, some of the media is among the worst people I’ve ever met. I mean a pretty good percentage is really a terrible group of people. They write lies, they write false stories. They know they’re false. It makes no difference. And frankly I don’t call it thin-skinned, I’m angry.”

This rhetoric was not limited to the outlets that conservatives would often deride as part of the “liberal media,” as it also extended to those within his party, including columnists Charles Krauthammer and George Will, *National Review*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and Fox News. Trump’s highly-publicized spat with Megyn Kelly following the first GOP primary debate

was, in many ways, a perfect example of his vendetta against the media.

Throughout the primary, and into the general, Trump consistently resorted to ad hominem attacks against media personalities and journalists, calling NBC News correspondent Katy Tur “naïve,” New York Times reporter Jonathan Martin “dishonest,” and Meet the Press host Chuck Todd “pathetic.”

The result was almost universal mistrust in the mainstream media coming from Trump’s supporters, and consequently, widespread skepticism in the information coming from news sources. The shift towards finding news on the internet and through social media opened the door for the emergence of what became known as “fake news.” During the 2016 election, Facebook feeds and Twitter timelines filled up with completely made-up stories such as Denzel Washington and Pope Francis endorsing Trump. Other fake news almost led to tragic results when a heavily-armed man entered Comet Ping Pong, a pizza restaurant in Washington, DC that was a subject of fake news stories about a child sex ring involving Hillary Clinton and her campaign chairman, John Podesta. Because of the tendency of Trump’s supporters to

---


discount information coming from what they considered the mainstream media, many were primed to believe stories like this. Many of these fake news websites will register a domain name similar to a legitimate news outlet, only slightly changing a few characters or the top-level domain of the site, hoping the readers (or clickers) won't notice. With 62 percent of US adults getting at least some news from social media, and 61 percent of millennials using Facebook as their primary source of news, fake news was able to have amplified effect on political news in the election.

Even as polls showed Hillary Clinton increasing the gap between the two candidates, Trump supporters still maintained that the race was close, even swinging in Trump’s favor. Fox News host Eric Bolling discounted the polls because of the crowd size at Trump’s rallies: “Honestly, we have to stop with these polls...Just look at what’s going on. You look at a Trump rally, and there’s 12, 15,000, 10,000 people, and then you look at Hillary Clinton and you have, I don’t know, 1,500, 2,000, but that speaks volumes to me versus a poll 82 days out.” In mid-August, supporters at Trump’s campaign events and on talk radio would assert that the polls are manipulated by the media, believing Trump to be in position to win “by a big margin” in November, even


with Clinton leading in almost every major national poll conducted up until that point.\textsuperscript{152} Ultimately, this type of rhetoric serves to discredit and delegitimize the outcome of the election. The language used by Trump and his supporters quickly moved from skepticism in polls to a belief that the election would be “rigged” to guarantee a Clinton victory,\textsuperscript{153} a dangerous assertion that could have been consequential for the political and electoral system had Trump lost the election.\textsuperscript{154}

**Political Parallelism and the American Media**

In their seminal work *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*, Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini looked at eighteen Western democracies and laid out a conceptual framework that included three different media systems: The Liberal model, the Democratic Corporatist model, and the Polarized Pluralist model. While each of these models include multiple identifiers, such as the role of the state, the structure


\textsuperscript{154} It should also be noted that Trump’s eventual victory on Election Day should not be counted as a vindication of these accusations. While the Electoral College results were surprising to many, Clinton still won the popular vote by a considerable margin. Furthermore, in states where the polls were proven to be wrong, this was largely the result of poor modeling and weighting, rather than media manipulation.
of media markets, and the degree of autonomy found within journalism, of particular focus is the level of political parallelism within the country. Political parallelism is defined by the authors as the degree to which the media “reflect[s] distinct political orientations in their news and current affairs reporting.” Political parallelism encompasses the content of media outlets, an audiences political leanings, and explicit links between an outlet and political actors. Media systems with a high degree of political parallelism are often riddled with politically biased news, with outlets and news sources less concerned with informing their audience and remaining objective and more interested in influencing opinion and political perceptions.

For countries with Liberal media systems, such as the United States and Britain, political parallelism has historically lower as the commercial media are dominant and independent from political party and government control. In countries with a Polarized Pluralist system, such as Greece, Italy, and Spain, the opposite is true, as the dominant media forces are directly connected to parties and the government. The Democratic Corporatist model, seen in Germany, Denmark, and Belgium, among others, is placed in the middle ground between these two systems. Indicators of political parallelism

---

in a media system include: the extent to which media content reflects distinct political orientations or allegiances, the level of professionalism within journalism (that is, whether journalists are inclined to adhere to neutral reporting), the organizational connections between the media and political organizations (including parties), the involvement of former political actors and leaders in the media, and finally, the partisanship of media audiences.\(^{157}\)

While the US is often heralded as an example of a Liberal media system with little political parallelism, this was not always the case. Indeed, in his book *Governing with the News*, Timothy Cook argues that the media’s evolution “has always been and continues to be intimately tied to political sponsorship, subsidization, and protection.”\(^{158}\) In the years following the American Revolution, this connection only strengthened, as newspapers were largely founded to carry the banner of a political party, funded with the help of political actors and parties. As direct sponsorship of newspapers decreased with the mass commercialization of the national press, the American media began to evolve into the current Liberal model.

The US is also viewed as having a lower level of political parallelism, owing in large part to a more ideologically-narrow two-party system in the

However, as has been discussed in this and the previous chapter, the political landscape in the US has grown more fragmented, and while the country is still ostensibly under two-party system in the government, the general electorate is much less dichotomous. Furthermore, political parallelism has been discussed in the context of print newspapers as the primary news medium, but with the surge in digital media sources, it is important to look at how this shift affects the media system in the US, particularly as it relates to political parallelism.

When looking at the indicators of political parallelism in the context of this new era of digital and partisan news, it is worth reassessing how they have changed in recent years. First, many of the most popular political websites almost explicitly reflect distinct political orientations or allegiances. Second, the level of professionalism within journalism, especially with regards to these heavily political digital news outlets, has decreased as journalists and writers are much less concerned with neutral reporting (this is not, by and large, the case with journalists at the more traditional outlets, such as national newspapers and network news, but is more limited to digital outlets). The lines between media outlets and political organizations have become increasingly blurred as well. A prime example of this in the 2016 presidential election was Stephen Bannon, then Executive Chairman of

---

Breitbart News, a right-wing, pro-Trump populist website, joining the Trump campaign as CEO, along with Roger Ailes, former CEO of Fox News, coming on as an adviser to the campaign following his ouster from the network. Current and former political actors are more and more visible in the news media, as cable news panels are saturated with former candidates, campaign staff, and elected officials. Finally, as has been discussed in this chapter, the partisanship of media audiences has increased dramatically.

Although political parallelism is typically referenced in the context of print newspapers, more people now get their news from online sources that are more likely to be politically-slanted and partisan in nature. As such, it is important to acknowledge the influence these outlets have on the political and news media, and where the continuation of this trend may take the media system in the US. While the news media in the US has not moved as far as countries with Polarized Pluralist media systems, it is worth studying more whether the media system in the US can still be viewed as one with little to no political parallelism. Research of other countries with a high degree of political parallelism, such as Spain, showed that the level of political parallelism (and awareness of that trend) has a pronounced effect on the level of trust in the news media.160 With Americans’ trust in the news media “to report the news fully, accurately, and fairly” dropping to

historically low levels, the media in the US may be following in Spain’s footsteps, and for similar reasons.\textsuperscript{161}

**Conclusion**

Much of the discussion regarding the media’s effect on political attitudes and behavior is centered on party polarization and how the media drives attitudes and opinions to the extremes.\textsuperscript{162} While this may be valuable research on the dynamic between the two major political parties, it does not address the effects of partisan media within parties and ideological movements. In the case of conservative media and the 2016 GOP primary, the key issue is not polarization but factionalization and fragmentation. The conversation about partisan media in the United States must go beyond the familiar MSNBC-Fox News dichotomy and acknowledge the influence that digital outlets have on the media landscape, while also recognizing that these same digital outlets are not as easily categorized when it comes to ideology.

The 2016 Republican presidential primary clearly exposed the existing fractures both within the Republican Party and the conservative media. For much of the last half-century, the GOP has held together an uneasy coalition of pro-business and free-market conservatives and social conservatives. But


\textsuperscript{162} See literature review above.
Donald Trump’s controversial campaign, filled with nativist and protectionist rhetoric, threatens to unravel that alliance. A similar loose alliance has also existed in conservative media, with the unifying force being opposition to Barack Obama, and subsequently, Hillary Clinton. When it came time to unite around one candidate to defeat Clinton in 2016, however, the conservative media fell into disarray. The conservative media had become so isolated and confined to its echo chamber that it began to turn on itself, with forces within the movement focusing as much, if not more, effort on fighting those within the party as it did Democrats, particularly during the primary campaign.

It is becoming more common every year for US adults, and especially younger adults, to seek and find their news and information from digital sources. More than ever before, people are getting their news on mobile devices, often through clicking links from Twitter or Facebook. The cord-cutting trend also plays a significant role in where people find their news. In 2015, more than 1.1 million households in the US canceled their cable television subscriptions. This, combined with the increasing number of households and individuals who have never subscribed to cable before, results in over 20 percent of US households (24.6 million) being cable-free at

the end of 2015, with researchers projecting this number to grow even more in the coming years. Reasons for cutting the cord vary and include the proliferation of internet video services such as Netflix and Hulu, as well as the ability to find information and entertainment through other internet sources. One thing is constant, however: without television, news information must come from somewhere else – namely, digital media.

Digital media outlets are growing in influence in American politics, with no sign of this trend reversing or slowing down. With an option for nearly every ideological leaning and faction within both parties, consumers are, in many ways, not just choosing their news, but choosing their reality. This lowers trust in the media, but more significantly, it decreases the level of trust in the institutions and processes vital for a thriving society.

\[165\] Ibid.
CONCLUSION

The notion of social capital has its roots in the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville, who admired the strong social aspect of American society. Tocqueville observed Americans’ propensity for gathering socially, and how these gatherings often present the opportunity for discussion of issues such as politics, economics, and world affairs, noting that this type of open discussion led to greater participation in political and civic life. A democratic society requires social capital to function and thrive, but America’s social capital has been in a steep decline since the mid-twentieth century.

Some have argued that the internet, and the increase in social networking websites, has the potential to mitigate and slow the decline in social capital as it lowers the cost of connecting with one another. After all, because of the internet, we are no longer limited to interacting with those in our physical or geographic communities, opening the door for us to encounter people different from ourselves. But the internet also makes it much easier for like-minded people to seek out one another and close themselves off from ideological opposition and uncomfortable discussion. The result is cyberbalkanization – the segregation and fragmentation of the internet into groups organized around special interests. Of course, the internet is not only used for political purposes, and individuals forge social ties around an array of topics and interests, interacting with a wide range of people who undoubtedly hold differing views or perspectives on any number of issues.
However, the ability to customize and organize multiple networks limits the effectiveness of these interactions as our online lives remain siloed.

Take, for example, a man who is a fan of the Baltimore Orioles, a hunter, and votes Democrat. Other Oriole fans might vote Republican, and other hunters might be Yankee fans, so he is undoubtedly interacting with people who disagree. But this person also has a network for each of these interests and beliefs, and is therefore still able to limit – or even eliminate – his exposure to views he disagrees with. If he so chooses, he could limit conversations with his network of Oriole fans to baseball, avoid talking about anything other than hunting with other hunters, and only bring up politics while around fellow Democrats. Ultimately, this negates any potential benefit of interacting with those who disagree.

As members of society, we are shaped by the communities in which we live. While we may be citizens and residents of our state and country, at our most basic level, we are members of our community. In years past, this would almost universally be taken to mean our physical community – our neighborhoods, towns, churches, and workplaces. But the centers of American life have shifted from being our physical communities to virtual networks. Unlike physical communities, which are formed based on where we live and work, these networks are formed around a common interest, goal, or belief. This is a crucial distinction, as our membership is conditional on our continued stake in the network’s purpose and mission. If our connection to
the network, and the connection of all other members, is predicated on a shared belief, then it would stand to reason that there would be no dissent among the members of the community.

The digital age is the age of choice, and human nature causes us to simply prefer interacting with people like ourselves, whether through shared interest in a sports team, a hobby, or a political party. All of this does indeed lead to a resurgence in social capital, but there is an important distinction to be made in that it is now lopsided towards bonding social capital, while bridging social capital remains in decline. Without a balance between the two, the norms of reciprocity and trust fade, our distrust of those outside our groups increases, political deliberation suffers, and our politics becomes more divided.

It is common to hear the argument that the political parties themselves are at fault for the increasingly divided state of our politics. This line of thinking is often accompanied by calls to heed the warnings of America’s Founding Fathers, with the argument that James Madison and his contemporaries were opposed to political parties. This theory makes for a convenient argument against partisanship, but it is also an oversimplification and mischaracterization of how the framers felt about political parties.

Madison and others did often use “faction” and “party” interchangeably, almost always speaking of them negatively, reflecting the reputation of factions as divisive and dangerous. This reputation, in large
part stemming from the conflict between the Whigs and Tories of seventeenth century England, caused Madison and his contemporaries to be wary of factions in the United States. But the early parties that grew out of the ideological and political conflict within George Washington’s administration were not the same type of factions as those in England, but were organizations and alliances formed out of necessity.

Instead of acting as competing factions, modern political parties are better understood as coalitions and collections of factions coming together to increase political and electoral influence on a mass scale, made necessary in such a large and extensive republic comprised of a wide range of social, economic, religious, racial, cultural, and ideological cleavages. A faction, in the Madisonian sense, is better understood as analogous to interest groups or ideological wings of the parties. Conversely, modern political parties are highly durable and formal organizations, emerging as coalitions of factions and interest groups themselves. In other words, for the same reason that Madison argued the effects of factions would be controlled, parties were necessary to organize and mobilize the public throughout the country.

While polarization has always existed between the parties in one form or another, throughout most of American political history, this polarization was most evident in one issue area at a time. In recent decades, however, the parties have grown to be polarized on multiple issues at once, the result of the increased influence of activists within the parties. Consequently, how we
view parties has changed significantly, as we now see the two main political parties as fundamentally linked to ideology. At the same time, politics and partisan identification is increasingly linked to negative partisanship.

The combination of the rise in negative partisanship, the weakening of political parties, and the revolution in information and communication technology has led to a political environment considerably more favorable to factions. This has allowed these increasingly influential factions to bypass the obstacles that Madison laid before them, ultimately fracturing the political parties and the political system.

In the same way that commentators are quick to point to the two political parties as culprits of political division in the United States, many also focus their attention on a similar rift in cable news. Fox News and MSNBC are frequently deemed as the cable news equivalents of the two primary political parties. Fox News is labeled as the media arm of the Republican Party, and MSNBC (and often the rest of the “mainstream media”) is criticized for having a liberal slant. And just as these same commentators fail to recognize the divisions within the political parties, the fractures within partisan media are also commonly overlooked.

The similarities between the GOP and the conservative media are more than just simple analogies – they are indicative of a wider trend happening in politics today. The Republican National Committee acts as the national leadership for the Republican Party, and in many ways, Fox News
serves in the same role for conservative media. And just as factions within the party have bucked the RNC and gained influence, the same is happening with newer, mostly digital, media outlets and Fox News.

This came into full view during the 2016 presidential election. After years of uniting in opposition to Barack Obama and the Democratic Party, the conservative media fell into disarray as the fault lines began to show. Before 2016, the most common criticism of the media coming from conservatives was that the mainstream media was liberal and supportive of the Democratic Party. Donald Trump took that perception of bias in the media into an all-out assault on the Fourth Estate, lobbing accusations of “rigged elections” and manipulated polls.

This alarming trend of delegitimizing the media is even more distressing when considering the increasing segregation and fragmentation of the internet. With the sheer number of digital media sources available, journalistic standards and the quality of reporting have both declined, yet articles from less reputable sources are still shared on social media sites as if they carry the same veracity as The New York Times, CBS News, or other established news outlets. But the problem also goes beyond simply the sources of news. The ability to curate and tailor their Facebook feeds, Twitter timelines, and news sources causes people to feel as though they are more informed than they are. When much of our news is coming from what is shared on Facebook or Twitter by like-minded people, or from news
aggregation sites that promote stories (whether by users or the site itself) that confirm biases or opinions like Reddit or Drudge Report, it paints an incomplete picture of the news, even though we are still consuming a considerable amount of news information.

Although these three aspects of American political society are discussed in separate chapters, these trends are not independent from one another. In many ways, what is occurring in each feeds into the others, magnifying and amplifying the effects. As our networks and communities grow more fragmented and divided, we interact less with those who disagree with us, causing our opinions and beliefs to become more weighted down and extreme, while at the same time causing us to see those outside our network and community more negatively and less trustworthy. This decline in trust extends far beyond individual people as well, as we are seeing decreasing levels of trust in political parties, government, and the media.

The advancements made in information and communication technology have not only transformed the way we interact and engage with our communities and networks, but have also had a significant effect on party dynamics, empowering factions and weakening party leadership. Intraparty conflict is nothing new in party politics, but the fight for power between the factions within the parties has gone beyond the party apparatus and is now playing out on the public stage, leading these factions to spend nearly as much time competing with one another as they do with the
opposing party. This fight between factions has not only outgrown the party apparatus, but it has also spilled over into the news media. As individual politicians and factions within the parties grow in their influence and prominence, they gain support within the media, and as their boosters in the media give them increased exposure, these politicians and factions gain new voters and supporters throughout the country, something that would not have been possible without the help of the internet and media.

Limitations and Future Considerations

The most notable limitation of this research in many ways reflects the argument of the thesis itself: the overwhelmingly dichotomous nature of political analysis and scholarship. Much of the research studying political attitudes and identification operates on a Democrat-Republican continuum. While this is not surprising with the two-party system in the US, it may no longer be sufficient given how political opinion has been trending and the non-linear nature of political ideology in the current environment. Moving forward, it will be important for future research to address these limitations to get a more accurate picture of political attitudes and trends.

The digital media landscape continues to evolve and grow, with new sites and outlets coming onto the scene and establishing themselves. As such, there is a limited amount of data on the effects of these sources on political views and opinions, as well as ideology and party identification. While there
is research on the different types of media people use to find their news (e.g. television, internet, newspaper), some of which breaks even breaks down political ideology and party identification, it is important to move beyond simply looking at the medium being used.

Television viewership is often broken down to show the differences between audiences of local, broadcast, and cable television, which many studies then break down further to show MSNBC, Fox News, and CNN. However, this is not the case for those who find their news on the internet. While it is understandably difficult for researchers to discern which websites to include, failing to at least partially break down the multitude of digital media sources results in an incomplete picture of news consumption. These sources can include the websites of television networks and newspapers (such as CNN, The New York Times, and CBS News), established mainstream digital-only sources (such as RealClearPolitics and Yahoo! News), and more partisan and ideologically-slanted outlets (such as Breitbart, Drudge Report, and The Huffington Post). All of these sources have varying degrees of journalistic standards, quality, and objectivity, and are no more consistent or uniform than television or print news, necessitating a more detailed look at the impacts of these different types of sources on political attitudes and behavior.

Finally, a limitation of this study may be its timing. The 2016 election is admittedly a small sample size, and as we have seen, the state of American
politics can shift dramatically in a short span of time. This thesis itself, developed and written during the 2016 campaign, has continued to evolve as the effects of these fractures became more pronounced. This will continue to be the case, and some of the aforementioned findings may be a product of the time in which they were written, but what has transpired in the last two years is also a natural progression of the trends in American politics discussed. Further research will be necessary to be able to judge whether 2016 has been an aberration, or indicative of what the future holds in politics and American society.

When searching for a solution to the problems discussed in this paper, we face the same dilemma as Madison did in *Federalist* No. 10 when looking for a solution to the mischiefs of faction. We cannot remove the propensity for factions to form and grow in the United States, just as Madison acknowledged the inability to take away the latent causes of faction that are “sown into the nature of man.” And just as abolishing liberty would be a “cure worse than the disease itself,” we cannot ban the internet and partisan news to limit their effects. We can, however, work to better connect factions and return to the coalition-based parties that have defined partisan politics throughout American history.

While this solution is likely to be a difficult one to attain, the more immediate need is to shift the focus from polarization to fragmentation. As this thesis has shown, polarization is becoming increasingly inadequate in
describing the current state of politics. This is not to say that politics in America has been devoid of polarization. Indeed, throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, the distance between the parties increased as they became more homogeneous and sorted. But the gap between the parties has grown so wide that the parties themselves have begun to splinter, and nowhere is this more evident than among Republicans in Congress.

Democrats and Republicans in Congress are undoubtedly more divided than they have been at any point in the last century, but this is not the full story. The House Freedom Caucus has become a force to be reckoned with, ultimately pushing Speaker John Boehner out and revolting against the nomination of Kevin McCarthy as his successor. In September 2013, Ted Cruz launched into a marathon speech (though often erroneously billed as a filibuster) on the Senate floor on the need to defund Obamacare as Congress prepared to pass a continuing resolution to avoid a government shutdown, but he did so without the support of Senate GOP leadership. In February 2014, as the US neared the federal debt ceiling, the House passed a bill suspending the debt ceiling for another year with only twenty-eight Republicans voting in favor, despite a GOP majority.\footnote{Matt Fuller, "Breaking Down the Debt Ceiling Vote," \textit{Roll Call}, February 11, 2014, http://www.rollcall.com/news/home/breaking-down-the-debt-ceiling-vote.} Even the Republican leadership was split over the vote, as only four members of the leadership voted in favor and five against. Then, eighteen months later, when the House
voted to pass a budget agreement, Democrats again provided the majority of votes in favor, with 167 Republicans opposing the agreement.167

These examples are not signs of polarization as much as they indicative of chaos among factions, and what we see happening in Congress reflects much of what is happening throughout American political society. The gridlock in Washington, DC, the hostility and vitriol on social media towards those who disagree with us, and the ugly rhetoric and shouting matches on the campaign trail all leave little doubt that American politics – and the country as a whole – is divided. But when we conflate division with polarization, we lose sight of the real issue, which is that American society, both political and otherwise, is more and more defined by factions and fragmentation. This factionalization in turn breeds distrust and negative feelings about those outside of our groups, causing doubt and uncertainty in the political and civic institutions that are necessary for a healthy democratic society to endure.

WORKS CITED


Abramowitz, Alan, and Steven Webster. "The Only Thing We Have to Fear Is the Other Party." Sabato’s Crystal Ball. June 4, 2015.
http://www.centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/the-only-thing-we-have-to-fear-is-the-other-party/.


CURRICULUM VITAE

ANDREW SCHMIDT
Born January 24, 1991 in Anchorage, Alaska
apschmidt24@gmail.com

EDUCATION
Johns Hopkins University Washington, D.C
Master of Arts in Government December 2016

Christopher Newport University Newport News, VA
Bachelor of Arts in Political Science May 2013

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE
Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies Washington, DC
Agriculture Policy Coordinator 2015 – Present

Strategic Conservation Solutions, LLC Washington, DC

U.S. House of Representatives Washington, DC
Intern, Office of Congressman Mike Thompson (CA-5) Summer 2012

U.S. Department of the Interior Washington, DC
Fellow, Office of the Secretary Summers 2010 & 2011

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS
“Gift of Grace: Routinization and Succession of Charismatic Authority in Modern Protestantism,” presented at the International Leadership Association Global Conference in Denver, CO, October 2012 (with Eric Fesmire).