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An Evaluation of Reforms that Aim to Address Political Polarization

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An Evaluation of Reforms that Aim to Address Political Polarization

By

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Introduction

The topic of political polarization in America is one that has increasingly become of interest to scholars and political pundits alike, particularly as the American political system has begun to feel the effects of higher levels of polarization in government. These affects include, but are not limited to, a state of gridlock in Congress, increased hostility between the two parties both in and out of government, and an erosion of bipartisanship. The focus of my research was to evaluate some of the main proposed reforms that aim to address political polarization to determine which single reform was most worthwhile of pursuit.

The reforms I focused on fell into four distinct categories, the first of which were governmental reforms. These reforms propose altering or eliminating certain governmental procedures or rules that exacerbate the consequences of political polarization. The second area of reform I focused on relates to the political parties in America. The reforms discussed in that section look at how strengthening political parties, primarily their role in elections, can affect political polarization. The third area that I discussed was reforms that target the American electorate. The reforms in this section specifically focus on creating a more informed electorate as a means of addressing political polarization. The final area of reforms I analyze deal with the American electoral system. These reforms look at altering various aspects of the system including primary elections and redistricting procedures.

In order to determine which of the reforms is most worthy of pursuing I asked and answered two main questions for each reform. The two guiding questions

are: does this reform affect political polarization and what is the political viability of the reform. The first question is of course essential as a proposed reform is of no use if it cannot successfully affect political polarization. The question regarding political viability is also significant as what good is a reform if it stands no chance of actually coming to fruition.

After evaluating each of the reforms using the two aforementioned questions, I concluded that the proposal dealing with the American electorate, specifically the reform that aims to provide a non-partisan election information guide to all voters, was the reform that was most worthy of pursuit. Not only does this reform possess a strong political viability due to the fact that members of both parties would support expanding election information, but also it has the ability to impact political polarization significantly. Studies have shown that voters are likely to alter their vote choice and ideological alignment when presented with substantive information about an election, something that if implemented nationwide would undoubtedly alter the outcomes of hundreds of elections. Thus, the proposed reform that creates a non-partisan election information guide, once implemented, would directly affect the type of individuals elected to government and therefore likely lower the levels of political polarization.

Chapter 1: An Overview of Political Polarization in America

The issue of political polarization in America is one that is widely discussed and debated for its implications are far reaching, affecting everything from our government's ability to do its job to the reality of our electoral process. As will be discussed in depth later on, political polarization has influenced the type of legislation that Congress produces, the competitiveness of elections both nationally and at the local level, and affected the levels of political engagement amongst the American public.

Before discussing the sources, trends, effects and potential solutions to political polarization it is crucial to have a basic definition of the term. Political polarization in America is often defined as "the sorting of political convictions by either the mass public or ruling elites, or both, into roughly two distinct camps: persons inclined to support [either] the Democratic or Republican parties' policies and candidates for office" (Nivola, 2005, 2). Furthermore, it is important to differentiate between issue polarization, which focuses on policy and issues, and affective polarization which is defined as "the tendency of people identifying as Republicans or Democrats to view opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively" (Iyengar and Westwood 2014, 691). Going forward the discussion of political polarization will address both issue and affective polarization, with shifting emphasis when appropriate.

In order to fully understand political polarization in America, it is important to discuss several aspects of the phenomenon. First, I will address the trends in political polarization amongst both the American public as well as in government.

Secondly, I will discuss the causes of polarization in order to illustrate what factors combined to lead to what we see today. Next, I will discuss the impact of political polarization, addressing three aspects: what has happened to our government, what has happened to the electoral reality, and what has changed in American political discourse and the two political parties. Finally, I will look at the potential solutions that have been put forth thus far that attempt to mitigate political polarization in America.

Trends in Political Polarization

As scholars have evaluated the trends in levels of political polarization amongst the American public, there has been some differing in opinion as to what has occurred. Scholars such as Alan Abramowitz (2015a), Reiter (2010) and Carson, Finocchiaro, and Rohde (2007) believe that the American electorate has, in fact, become increasingly polarized, while individuals such as Matt Levendusky (2009), Samuel Abrams and Morris Fiorina (2015) argue that the American public has become sorted, but not polarized.

Proponents of the theory of increased political polarization amongst the American public, such as Alan Abramowitz (2015a), draw upon a whole host of data that examines the trends of the American public's ideology, how they view the opposing party, and views on issues to illustrate that in fact the public has become polarized. Abramowitz (2015a, 25) highlights the 2012 American National Election Study (ANES) which shows that "91 percent of party identifiers, including leaning independents, voted for their own party's candidate. This was the highest level of

party loyalty in any presidential election since the ANES began asking the party identification question in 1952.” In fact, the American electorate does not confine their party loyalty to simply the presidential election, with Abramowitz (2015a, 26) noting, “92 percent of Obama voters supported a Democratic House candidate, while 92 percent of Romney voters supported a Republican House candidate.” The election results of 2012 continued the trend of straight ticket voting and party loyalty in America, both of which have only become stronger in recent electoral cycles (Abramowitz 2015a).

Those who claim that the American electorate has become increasingly polarized also draw upon studies that examine the ideological shifts of the public. A study conducted by Dimock, et. al (2014) illustrates the numerous ways in which the two parties have diverged ideologically in the last few decades. In 2014, 23 percent of Democrats indicated that they hold political values that are consistently liberal, compared to only five percent of Democrats that indicated the same in 1994. During the same time period the share of Republicans who indicated that they hold political values that are consistently conservative increased as well from 13 percent in 1994 to 20 percent in 2014. In that same study, Dimock, et. al analyzed the overlap in ideology between the two parties. In 1994, 64 percent of Republicans were more conservative than the median Democrat, while 70 percent of Democrats were more liberal than the median Republican. In 2014 those figures were up to 92 percent for Republicans and 94 percent for Democrats. The data from Dimock, et. al (2014) indicates both that the ideological overlap between the two parties almost

entirely disappeared and that both parties have shifted away from one another ideologically.

The notion that the American electorate has become increasingly polarized is also supported by trends in the American electorate's feelings towards the opposition party, commonly referred to as affective polarization. The same Dimock, et. al (2014) study also asked the participants to describe how they view the opposing party, finding that 79 percent of Democrats and 82 percent of Republicans viewed the opposition party unfavorably. Of those figures, 38 percent of Democrats and 43 percent of Republicans viewed the opposition very unfavorably. Both of these responses are higher than they were in 1994, when only 57 percent of Democrats and 68 percent of Republicans viewed the opposition unfavorably, and only 16 percent of Democrats and 17 percent of Republicans viewed the opposing party very unfavorably. Abramowitz (2015a) points out, using candidate thermometer data from the ANES, that the American electorate has also become deeply polarized in how they view presidential candidates. In 1984, the difference between how Republicans viewed Reagan and Mondale and how Democrats viewed Reagan and Mondale was on average 71.8 degrees apart. Moving to 2012, the difference between how Republicans viewed Romney and Obama and how Democrats viewed the two candidates was 105.2 degrees apart. Abramowitz (2015a, 40) writes, "The large increase in partisan polarization on relative thermometer ratings of the presidential candidates between 1984 and 2012 is especially impressive given that the choices presented to the voters by the two major parties appeared to be no more polarized in 2012 than in 1984." What is

implied by that is that when analyzing the two major candidates' stances on issues, and voting records in office, one would be hard-pressed to argue that Obama was more liberal than Walter Mondale or that Romney was more conservative than Reagan, and thus the party difference in thermometer ratings should be roughly the same, not 43 degrees apart. Abramowitz and others claim that the increased levels of negativity amongst the American public for the opposition party and candidates is evidence that there has been an increase in levels of polarization.

Aside from voting patterns and feeling thermometers, scholars have also looked at how the American electorate has polarized along certain factors. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2016) note the correlation between levels of political polarization and income inequality, noting that the public has become polarized based on income. Both Reiter (2010) and Carson, Finocchiaro, and Rohde (2007) note the degree to which the American public has become polarized based on geographic location, particularly in the Northeast and the South as well as the effects that redistricting has had on the correlation between the two factors. Abramowitz (2015a) also notes how the country has polarized on the lines of gender and race, with Democrats getting more of the female and minority vote and Republicans receiving the majority of white and male voters. Scholars who believe that the American public has become polarized point to these and other factors to illustrate their claims.

Scholars like Levendusky (2009) and Abrams and Fiorina (2015) oppose the theory that the American public has become politically polarized, instead arguing that the electorate has become increasingly sorted. Like advocates of the theory of

polarization, proponents of the sorted theory utilize data illustrating how the American public has shifted politically over the years to explain the phenomenon of sorting that they believe to have occurred in America.

To explain party sorting amongst the American public it is important to understand that advocates of this theory do not dispute the presence of political polarization in American but instead they believe that only the party elites, such as elected officials, have become polarized. In fact, Levendusky (2009) believes that elite polarization is the source of all party sorting in America; breaking the process into four, distinct steps. Levendusky (2009, 37) writes, “As elites polarize, they clarify where the parties stand on the issues of the day... Voters then use these clearer elite cues to align their own partisanship and ideology, that is, to sort.” Additionally, both Levendusky (2009) and Abrams and Fiorina (2015) blame the role of the media in emboldening the claim that the American public has become increasingly polarized.

The main evidence utilized by supporters of the sorted theory is the lack of change in party identification amongst the American public. The Dimock, et al (2014) study exemplifies this in its analysis of party identification over the last 60 years. Currently, 30 percent of the electorate identifies as a member of the Republican Party, a figure that is nearly unchanged from 60 years ago. The Democratic Party has seen a drop in affiliation, with only 35 percent identifying as a member of the party, down from nearly 50 percent in the 1950s. Finally, the percentage of Americans identifying as independent has increased from 20 percent in 1952 to 35 percent in 2014. If the American public has become polarized, the

question that Levendusky, Abrams and Fiorina ask is why has that not resulted in any change in the party identification of Americans? How could there be a greater number of individuals who identify as independent of the two political parties while the country is supposedly becoming more divided? Instead, these scholars point to sorting to explain this phenomenon.

As opposed to a great alteration in the makeup of the American electorate, advocates of the sorting theory believe that “party and ideology are more tightly aligned in the mass electorate than they were a generation ago” (Levendusky 2009, 77). What Levendusky means by this is that the general public is more likely to take their stances on issues from the cues presented by their party elites. As a result of elite polarization, more individuals are likely to define themselves as liberal or conservative, adopt the stances of their party and the parties themselves have become more ideologically homogeneous (Levendusky 2009). This reality cannot only explain issue attitudes of voters, but also political evaluations and voting behavior of the electorate.

To explain why the American electorate has gone sour on the opposition party and their candidates over the years Abrams and Fiorina (2015) simply point to the nature of party sorting. If the two political parties have become sorted as Abrams and Fiorina (2015, 122) claim, it would follow suit that “If a Republican president adopts an agenda at the mode of his party, his policies will be farther away from more Democrats on average... hence, more [Democrats] will disapprove and/or disapprove more strongly.” The same applies to how a sorted electorate views the opposing party, as the individual and the opposition’s party viewpoints on

an issue grow apart, the more likely they are to view that party in a negative light. The loyalty of the sorted electorate also explains the trends in voting behavior. The elections of 1968 and 1972 saw sizable portions of one party cross party lines to vote for the opposition, something that Abramowitz (2015a) points out does not occur today. As was true in the case of political and candidate evaluations, individuals are unlikely to vote for a candidate that does not share their views on issues, which has increasingly become the case as the parties have become more sorted. Thus is why, Abrams and Fiorina (2015) argue, 91 percent of individuals who align with a particular party voted for that party's candidate in 2012.

The debate over whether or not the American public has become polarized is vibrant, with both sides interpreting the changes in the electorate in different ways. Scholars in support of both theories do not argue as to whether or not political elites have become polarized, nor do they argue as to whether or not the share of liberal and conservative voters has increased in the country. Instead their debate centers on what has been the cause of these changes. Supporters of the polarized theory do not see a way in which an increase in party sorting could be the cause of the racial and gender divide in our country. Likewise, supporters of the sorted theory do not see evidence of polarization in the party identification of the American public, something that would be apparent if polarization was widespread. Supporters of both sides do not dispute that changes have occurred, but rather attribute different phenomenon as to why they have taken place.

When we as a country focus on the state of politics in America, it is likely that any analysis will rely heavily on references to Congress. Since the people choose

their members of Congress, it should be the case that their policy positions and actions will mirror the ideological makeup of our country, but it has become abundantly clear that this is not the case. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2016), in their analysis of members of Congress, find that there has been an increase in representation of extremely conservative as well as extremely liberal members. Similar to what Levendusky (2009) points out amongst the general public, McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2016) find that members of Congress too have begun to define themselves more so as either liberal or conservative and within that they have begun to identify as more extreme in their views. Not only does this indicate that there has been a disappearance of moderates in Congress, but it also indicates that the Democratic and Republican parties have undergone significant alterations over the years.

The change in the ideological views of the two political parties has shifted for both particularly in the last century. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2016, 31) note that since the 1970's the Democratic Party has become homogeneous "as the party's moderate southern wing has almost vanished." Republicans, on the other hand, have also seen a change in the composition of their party, as "its moderates have also vanished, but they have been replaced by extreme conservatives. The effect of the two changes has been to hold homogeneity constant as the party has shifted to the right," (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016, 31; see also Abramowitz 2011). As McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2016) illustrate, the two parties have become increasingly polarized, leading to an exiting of moderates on both sides, which has

effectively left the middle empty, something that is exemplified in the policy positions of members of Congress.

It used to be the case, in Congress, that there was a degree of overlap, of common ground between the two parties (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016). In fact, in between 1933 and 1941, there was approximately a 17 percent overlap in the Senate, meaning that 17 percent of the members of the Senate had political views that were closer to the average view of the opposition party than they were to their own affiliated party (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2016). What is evident by this fact is that just as Abrams and Fiorina (2015) point out, the voting behavior of the American electorate has become more single-party support. Additionally, there has also been a trend in more polarized voting habits for members of Congress (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016). What results from this is a great deal of gridlock, something that will be discussed at length in a later section, but also in the emergence of partisan warriors and the Tea Party movement (Abramowitz 2011).

While there have always been stalwarts in Congress, the increased levels of polarization amongst members of Congress has led to the emergence of partisan warriors, who engage in legislative warfare to prevent the opposition from achieving their goals. Theriault (2015) uses the term to describe individuals like Jim DeMint, Ted Kennedy, and Rand Paul, who, during their time in office, utilized legislative warfare tactics, most specifically the use of roll call votes on amendments, to grind the governing process to a halt and prevent their opposition from finding legislative success. In fact, individuals like Kennedy and Paul only exemplify the ongoing trend of obstruction in the Senate, as Theriault (2015, 164) finds that

“during the 10 congresses since 1993, the minority party senators are responsible for two-thirds more amendment roll call votes than the majority party senators.” This is indicative of the multi-faceted approach that the minority parties have used in Congress to delay the ability of their opposition to pass legislation, something that frankly did not occur in a less polarized state of government (Theriault 2015).

While in the last half century there is a valid debate as to whether or not the American public has become politically polarized, there is not much debate surrounding the increased levels of polarization that has occurred in Congress. In order to understand the underlying causes behind this phenomenon, it is important to analyze a bevy of factors.

Causes of Political Polarization

As the trend of political polarization in America has become more thoroughly analyzed, so too has the analysis of the potential causes of polarization in our country. Thus far, scholars have centralized their analysis on both internal and external factors. The external factors, that is factors outside of government itself, that will be discussed include: redistricting, the southern realignment, the nature of the economy, the structure of primary elections, and money in politics. The internal factors, factors that are within the government that will be discussed are: the centralization of power in government to party leaders, the breakdown of bipartisan norms, and rule changes.

One of the most common responses to what has caused the political polarization in America is redistricting. Redistricting describes, “the process of

periodically drawing district boundaries to ostensibly align them with communities of interest, representational criteria, and neutral administrative goals, such as equalizing populations following a new decennial census” (Altman and McDonald 2015, 45). The nature of redistricting provides value as it ensures that every citizen is represented properly and adequately. The problem with redistricting occurs when politicians utilize it to uniquely favor their electoral viability, by redrawing districts that create homogenous partisan constituencies, which solidifies one party’s control (Carson, Finocchiaro, and Rohde 2007; see also Altman and McDonald 2015). The new districts result in changes in the type of elected officials that are supported, with ideologically extreme candidates, who were previously unviable in a more moderate district, winning out. The impact of redistricting has not only been felt at the Congressional level but also during presidential elections as the number of states that are up for grabs have decreased over the years (Altman and McDonald 2015). Gerrymandering has made our elections at nearly every level less competitive, for it has limited the access of moderates to political office, while at the same time emboldened partisan politics. This combination has enabled ideological poles of the two parties to have significant sway over the discourse of government.

A second factor that is often cited as a potential cause of the polarization in our country is the Southern realignment. The South went under a massive transformation during the Civil Rights era, shifting from solidly Democratic to solidly Republican in just under a decade. In 1950, the South accounted for zero percent of Republican Senate seats, compared to 2014 where it accounted for nearly

90 percent of Republican seats in the Senate (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016). The story is the same for the House, where the South accounted for roughly five percent of Republican seats in 1950, a far cry off from the nearly 80 percent figure that the South made up in 2014 (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016). The transition of the South from the Democratic to the Republican Party fundamentally altered the two parties, as the great influence of the South led to an influx of its values in the Republican Party, including the migration of Christian conservatives to the party. While Southern realignment made the Democratic Party more liberal, as the moderate wing of its party was lost when the South left, the Republican Party's conservative wing was only emboldened as the Southerners who joined espoused conservative social views and molded their economic values into the party.

Much has been said about the impact that money has had on politics, more specifically on elections in our country, so it should come as no surprise that there are some who blame the current state of polarization on the influence of money. The influence of money has grown tremendously as the cost of campaigning increases. McCarty and Barber (2015, 31) note, "Since 1990, the average amount of money spent in US House elections has nearly doubled in real terms." This influx of money is partly due to the rise of PACs and Super PACs, but a great deal can be attributed to wealthy individual donors. McCarty and Barber (2015) focus more on the individual contributors, as they show that in 2012 nearly 80 percent of a candidate's funds came from individual donors, while just under 20 percent came from PACs. Of the individual donors, recent years have seen a surge in the percentage of funds that came from individuals donors that are out-of-district, as in 1990 less than 60

percent of individual contributions came from out-of-district, while in 2012 that figure was above 85 percent (McCarty and Barber 2015). This fact is of concern due to the reality that ideologically extreme individuals are more likely to donate to political campaigns than moderates (Dimock, et. al 2014). Therefore an increase in the importance of ideologically extreme donors might lead to candidates altering their viewpoints to gain access to an important resource (Ensley 2009). The ability to raise money is something that determines whether or not a candidate is viable, and with the increased pressure to raise great sums, candidates may be altering their political stances to match the more ideologically extreme donors in order to remain politically viable.

Another factor that many scholars have focused on as a cause of polarization is the nature of the economy, specifically the increased levels of economic inequality. McCarty and Barber (2015) indicate that economic inequality and polarization have tracked together in the last 50 years, for during times when inequality was low so too were the levels of polarization and when inequality was high as it is presently so too are the levels of polarization. The changing economic circumstances have also impacted the political realities of individual congressional districts as “district income [has become] a direct and indirect effect on the conservatism of the district’s House member,” (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016, 46). McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2016) illustrate this fact by analyzing the share of votes that the Republican Party gets in the 125 richest and 125 poorest Congressional districts. They found that between 2003 and 2014 the vote share in the wealthiest districts was an average of 51.2 percent, while in the poorest districts

it was only 36.6 percent. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2016) explain this reality by arguing that the increase in economic inequality leads to an increase in top-earners incomes, which translates to greater support for conservative economic policies and thus leads to the Republican Party to shift to its right fiscally. As many in the public vote with their checkbook, it should follow that an increase in economic inequality would lead to a shift in the levels of polarization as the disparity between the incomes of Americans at the top and bottom increases.

A final factor that many scholars point to as directly affecting the levels of polarization in America is our country's primary election system. Scholars point out that in closed primary systems, the most likely voters to turn out are highly partisan, which results in the general election candidates being more conservative or liberal than the public (Dimock, et. al 2014). Many observers suggest that switching to an open primary system, where independents can participate, results in candidates that align more so with the general election electorate than the primary electorate (McCarty and Barber 2015, from Kaufmann, Gimpel and Hoffman 2003). In fact, several states including the nation's most populous state, California, have switched over to open primaries in the hopes of altering the ideological makeup of the primary victors (McGhee et. al 2014). The importance of understanding the impact our voting system has on the levels of polarization is crucial as a variety of different primary systems may produce a whole host of different results that can sway the degree to which our nation's politicians are polarized.

Aside from the external factors that are mentioned above, scholars have also focused on the impact of changes in the nature of our government, one of which is

the increased power that party leaders have obtained in House and Senate. McCarty and Barber (2015, 36) write, “party leaders in the House and Senate have become increasingly powerful and as such, can apply greater pressure on members to vote along party lines.” With their expanded reach, party leaders can provide various incentives including funds for reelection campaigns or placement on a particular committee (Theriault 2008). Members of Congress feel increased pressure to align with their party leaders given the increased level of control that they possess over party agenda and overall functionality of government (Theriault 2008).

Additionally, Theriault (2015) notes that party leaders have an outsized role in obstructionism, and given their increased control there is less likelihood that party members will object or dissent. Thus, if the party leaders have become increasingly polarized, which Theriault (2015) demonstrates to be true, it would follow suit that individual members fall in line with those who have the power.

A second internal factor that scholars point to is the alteration of rules in Congress. In recent years the House made procedural changes that “made it easier for amendments to be proposed when considering legislation,” (McCarty and Barber 2015, 35). The new amendments that were being added were often completely unrelated to the bill and were used as a partisan ploy to create a roadblock to legislating, as members had to choose between voting on a controversial amendment or having their proposed legislation die (McCarty and Barber 2015, Snowe 2013). Although this may have affected the levels of polarization in the House, as McCarty and Barber (2015) note, it does not directly explain the same increase in levels of polarization in the Senate, which Snowe (2013) illustrates. It

may be the case that members of the two houses of the legislative branch take cues from one another and the changes that have occurred in the House have in spirit made their way to the Senate, but as of now, there is no quantitative evidence to prove that hypothesis.

A final potential source of polarization in Congress that scholars point to is the breakdown of bipartisan norms in Congress. This deals with the nature of how members of Congress choose to allocate their time between D.C. and their district among other factors. McCarty and Barber (2015, 38) note, “in the past several decades, members of Congress have increasingly chosen not to relocate their families to Washington and therefore spend far less time there and more time home in their home districts. This lack of time in Washington has made it more difficult to form the personal relationships that would foster bipartisan trust and civility.” In other words, as members of Congress have chosen to spend less of their time in Washington, there has been a breakdown in outside-of-work relationships between members, which was often been a focal point in fostering bipartisanship.

Impact of Political Polarization

While the impact that political polarization has on our country is still unfolding, scholars have already begun to analyze some of the more defined challenges polarization has caused. Scholars who have studied the impacts of political polarization typically have focused their analysis on three aspects: what polarization has done to our government’s ability to govern, what polarization has done to the electoral map, and finally what polarization has done to general political

discourse and the two major political parties. As a closer reading will show, the impact that political polarization has had on our country is profound even at such a young stage.

In recent years it seems as if Congress has been in a constant state of gridlock. Members complain about an inability to get anything done, even the simple budget authorizations, which used to be routine, have now become drawn-out, complex processes (Lee 2013). Olympia Snowe, a former Senator from Maine, became so frustrated that she declined to run for another term due to the effects of polarization on the Senate that prevented her from doing her job. Snowe (2013, 27) states, “much of what occurs today is what is often called ‘political messaging.’ Rather than putting forward a plausible, realistic solution to a problem, members on both sides offer legislation that is designed to make a political statement.” Snowe’s observed trend in the type of legislation that is put forth is something that was highlighted earlier by McCarty and Barber (2015) as well as Theriault (2015). Snowe (2013) also comments on the filibuster, something that has been used to grind the functionality of the Senate to a complete halt with more regularity in recent years. The filibuster has not only been used to prevent the opposition from quickly passing their legislation, but also as a platform for partisan warriors to raise their profile and embolden their fellow ideologically extreme representatives. Furthermore, Snowe (2013) highlights the impact of two, more recently utilized strategies, the cloture motion and what is called “filling the amendment tree.” The cloture motion, which is utilized by the majority leader, prevents the minority party from debating a bill or filing a filibuster. In fact, as Snowe (2013, 29) notes, “in the

last three Congresses, the Senate has reached triple digits in the number of cloture motions filed-shattering the previous high of eighty-two motions.” Not only has the number of cloture motions filed increased but so too has the frequency of majority leaders filling the amendment tree (Sinclair 2008). This practice enables the majority leader to decide which amendments the Senate will vote upon effectively limiting the minority party’s rights. Regardless of the tactic being utilized, it is clear that members of Congress have begun to use their abilities to, depending on their party’s control, either inhibit the opposition’s ability to obstruct them or to try and obstruct the opposition. No matter how you look at it, Congress has transformed into a deeply polarized and highly dysfunctional body, as members of Congress have begun to more regularly abuse the intentions of the rules and procedure to further their partisan goals.

Aside from discussing the rules that are employed by members of Congress in order to prevent legislative success for the opposition, there has also been a legitimate impact on the quality and type of legislation that occurs in Congress (Lee 2013). Sinclair (2008), highlights the fact that a great deal of the talented Congressional staffers left for more lucrative lobbyist positions, leaving less knowledgeable staffers to draft major pieces of legislation. Furthermore, appropriations bills have become more regularly used to boost up the candidacies of weak incumbents in election years. Sinclair (2008, 80) cites the instance of 1996 when then-Speaker Newt Gingrich, “sent a memo to Appropriations subcommittee leaders urging them to support projects in the districts of politically vulnerable Republicans.” Factoring in the impact of Snowe’s (2013) aforementioned tactics has

led to very little bipartisanship, for as the political attractiveness and viability of bipartisan bills decreases, members begin to emphasize their ideologically extreme views.

Moving to an analysis of how political polarization has impacted the electoral realities of America, it is clear that for one, our elections have become nationalized at nearly every level (Levendusky, Pope, and Jackman 2008). In their study of presidential and congressional elections from 1952 to 2000, Levendusky, Pope, and Jackman (2008) find a strong correlation between the district-level vote for a presidential election and the outcome of the Congressional election in that district. They find that “district-level vote shares in presidential and congressional elections have become more tightly tied to partisanship,” (Levendusky, Pope, and Jackman 2008, 750). Jones (2015) also finds this correlation to be true, noting that there is a correlation between the levels of polarization in Congress, how individuals evaluate the job done by Congress and how they vote up and down the ballot. In other words, as the parties have separated, our elections have become increasingly nationalized, with little difference between how a district votes in its congressional election and how it votes in the presidential election. Voters have begun to take a more nationalized view of the two parties, associating the work done in Congress to represent the larger party at whole, as well as the candidates who run on party lines.

An implication that is drawn from the work conducted by Levendusky, Pope, and Jackman (2008) as well as Jones (2015), is something that Abramowitz and Webster (2016) point out: the American electorate is demonstrating the highest

levels of straight ticket voting and party loyalty in the past half-century. In 2012, 90 percent of ballots demonstrated straight-ticket voting, an all-time high for presidential elections (Abramowitz and Webster 2016). The figures for party loyalty also set an all-time high in 2012, with 81 percent of all party identifiers saying that they are consistently loyal (Abramowitz and Webster 2016). As party identifiers grow increasingly loyal and vote straight-ticket, we have seen an increase in the level of competition in presidential elections as well as a decrease in the levels of competition in Congressional elections. Presidential elections today are more competitive than ever, as Alan Abramowitz (2015a, 20) notes, “Of the 17 presidential elections between 1920 and 1984, 10 were won by a double-digit margin. But there hasn’t been a landslide election since Ronald Reagan’s drubbing of Walter Mondale in 1984.” Although the outcomes of presidential elections have tightened significantly over the years, there has been a decrease in the number of states that are actually competitive, both in the presidential race but also at the Congressional level. Abramowitz (2015a, 21) highlights that for the 2012 election, “only four states were decided by a margin of less than five percentage points: Florida, Ohio, Virginia, and North Carolina. On the other hand, 27 states, as well as the District of Columbia were decided by a margin of at least 15 percentage points.” This is compared to the 1976 election where 20 states were won by less than five percentage points. This trend also continues when you analyze the Congressional races. Abramowitz (2015a, 22) gives some insight noting that in the 1976 election only 26 districts were decided by margins of 20 points or greater, compared to 232 districts in 2012. In this highly polarized state of America, elections have become

both competitive and uncompetitive, for as many states and districts see a decrease in the competitiveness of their elections, the presidential results tighten.

A final alteration that scholars have tied to the increased levels of political polarization is the change in the political engagement by Americans. Marc Hetherington (2008) analyzed various indicators of political engagement for the electorate between the years of 1952 and 2004. He found that the polarized nature of politics has not deterred Americans from participating in the electoral process, as the voting-eligible population turnout was 60 percent in 2004, the same as it was in 1956, and only three points lower than the high of 63 percent in 1960. Hetherington (2008) also broke down voter turnout by ideological affiliation and found that self-identified conservatives and liberals were more likely to turnout than moderates and nonideologues were. Liberals and conservatives were also more likely to indicate that they are “very much interested in the election,” with liberals and conservatives hovering around 50 percent and only 30 percent of moderates indicating the same (Hetherington 2008). While Hetherington (2008) does note that because of the increased levels of polarization amongst party elites it would follow suit that the ideologues amongst the electorate would be energized, but he also notes that moderates have followed suit in their increased likelihood that they participate in the electoral process. While many of the effects of political polarization have been negative, based on the data that Hetherington (2008) provides, it seems as if polarization has had some positive impact as it has led to more Americans being engaged in politics.

Not only has the American electorate become more likely to vote and be engaged in an election, but they have also increased their levels of nonvoting participation in elections. In his same analysis, Hetherington (2008) found that in the 2004 election, Americans set all-time high in the percentage of participation in giving to campaigns, attempting to influence others' votes, and displaying campaign stickers or other paraphernalia. Hetherington (2008, 8) notes, "the present polarized period has seen a remarkable increase in a range of different forms of political involvement." While Hetherington's (2008) analysis does not break that new form of participation down into ideologues versus non-ideologues, the Dimock, et. al (2014) study found that liberals and conservatives were far more likely than their moderate peers to partake in nonvoting forms of electoral participation.

Original Research

It is apparent, from the extensive research conducted by scholars, that the levels of political polarization in Congress have increased, and the impacts of this trend are widespread. Scholars have also studied potential reforms that would help reduce political polarization in America, but it is important to evaluate each of these proposed reforms in order to understand which should be prioritized in order to reduce the level of polarization and its effects.

In attempting to reduce the levels of political polarization and its effects, scholars have targeted several areas for reform, which will be fleshed out in the following chapters and follow as such: government reforms, political party reforms, electorate reforms, and electoral reforms. Government reform, which will be discussed at length in chapter 2, targets the rules and procedures of Congress that

enable partisan warfare and gridlock. Specifically, I will be focusing on reforms to the filibuster and the debt ceiling. Political party reform, which will be addressed in chapter 3, seeks to strengthen the parties to lessen the effects of polarization.

Electorate reform, which is the focus of chapter 4, looks at how we can create a more knowledgeable electorate that will elect less ideologically extreme politicians.

Finally, electorate reform, which is the subject of chapter 5, seeks to alter the way in which our nation's elections are held, who participates in them, and what is important to them.

The reforms that will be analyzed, which were stated above, will be evaluated for both their viability and how much impact they would likely have on reducing the levels of political polarization. Additionally, a series of five questions will be answered for each of the reforms discussed in this work. Those five questions are: what is the reform, what is the problem the reform aims to solve, how is that problem related to political polarization, does the reform affect political polarization, and what is the political viability of the reform. Depending on the reform there may or may not be quantitative data supplied from the reform's implementation, for example the effects of open primary systems or mandatory voting could be analyzed by looking at the effects of their implementation, but altering our nation's political parties can only be discussed through a philosophical lens as many of its proposals have yet to be implemented.

Chapter 2: Governmental Reforms

As previously noted, when scholars or political pundits look to illustrate the effects that political polarization has on our country they point to Congress. As Snowe (2013), Theriault (2015) and others have noted, there has been a tremendous increase in the utilization of Congressional rules and procedures to further their partisan politics. The actions of members of Congress and their success in derailing the opposition's policies are why a great deal of focus has come on reforming Congress in order to curb the effects of polarization. As was detailed in the previous chapter, elected officials in Congress now are almost always in a state of partisan warfare. This means that rather than focusing on working together to create solutions, members of both parties intentionally use the procedural rules of Congress to impede their opposition's progress on a piece of legislation, nomination or other matter before the legislative body. Abramowitz (2015b) argues that America needs to adopt a form of party democracy, in which the party who wins control of government is able to govern their way until the next election, but he remarks that there must be several changes in order to loosen the grip that the minority party has on the legislative process. He highlights two reforms that could be implemented that would aide in the reduction of party polarization: filibuster reform and getting rid of the debt ceiling. Abramowitz (2015b, 205) writes, "the minority does not need even more protection against the will of the majority in the Senate," and calls for the Senate to remove the filibuster entirely. Additionally, he suggests that the burden of gathering votes should be on those wishing to filibuster. Secondly, Abramowitz (2015b) calls for the abolition of the debt ceiling, which he

decries as a tool for members of Congress to use for political manipulation. The reforms discussed by Abramowitz (2015b) highlight a sentiment held by many scholars, that the procedural rules that govern Congress have become an impediment to legislating.

It is important to establish that these reforms do not directly aim to fundamentally alter the motor by which our federal government functions, but instead attempt to curb the repeated manipulation of the rules and procedures of the body, which has rendered the legislative body almost entirely useless. That is to say that the rules that govern Congress have transformed into something entirely different than what their intentions were and thus have become more of an obstacle than of an aide to the body.

Furthermore, for each reform, the following questions will be asked: what is the reform, what is the problem the reform aims to solve, how is that problem related to political polarization, how does the reform address political polarization, and what is the political viability of the reform. Answering all of these questions enable us to get a better grasp for how effective the reform will be. For this chapter and all future chapters, the goal is to determine which of the reforms discussed in the chapter is most worthwhile of pursuit.

History of the Filibuster:

Before jumping directly into reforms that propose altering the filibuster, it is important that some background history is provided on the filibuster itself. The term filibuster, which is defined as “an action such as a prolonged speech that obstructs progress in a legislative assembly,” is often synonymous with elongated

speeches made by Senators as a form of protest, but in fact, the rule has predominantly been used without the grandiose speeches (Senate Historical Office, 2016). Beginning in 1917, with President Woodrow Wilson, the filibuster has repeatedly been altered as a means of limiting the impact that it can have on the legislative process (U.S. Senate Historical Office 2016). A popular opinion regarding the filibuster is that it is too powerful, as it has the ability to grind the legislative process to a halt, and thus in periods of immense gridlock measures are taken to roll back the reach of the filibuster. Such was the case in 1975 when the Senate altered its cloture rule to only require three-fifths as opposed to two-thirds votes to end a filibuster on any piece of legislation (U.S. Senate Historical Office 2016).

Closely related to the filibuster, and of a great deal of importance, are cloture motions. As was mentioned earlier, filibusters occur more often than one might think, and are normally not accompanied by a 12 hour-long speech. These filibusters come through cloture motions. In the Senate, any individual Senator can file a cloture motion on a piece of legislation or action the body must take, as a result a roll call vote must be held (U.S. Senate Historical Office 2016). In order for cloture to be invoked, there must be 60 “Yay” votes, without the sufficient votes, debate on a particular action or bill cannot end and thus no further action can be taken on a bill, effectively killing it. Thus, cloture motions have the ability to act in a similar manner to filibusters and many consider the two Senate procedures to be the same.

Proposal: Requiring 60 Senators to Vote in Favor of Filibustering

On its face, this reform is quite a big change from the present situation, as the burden of finding votes is now placed on the individual Senator or group of Senators who wish to delay the voting or hearing of a piece of legislation. As is the case now, any individual member of the Senate may filibuster a bill on their own, but also must find at least 40 of their colleagues to support their measure, in order to ensure that they have sufficient support when the cloture motion is voted upon. Under the implementation of this proposal, Senators would now have to secure 60 of their colleague's support in order to ensure that their blockade of further action is upheld when the cloture motion is voted upon.

The problem that this reform aims to resolve is that there have been far too many filibusters and failed cloture motions in the Senate, which has tremendously hindered the body's ability to govern. In the 113th Congress (2013-2014) alone, there were 66 pieces of legislation that failed to receive the necessary votes for cloture to be invoked, effectively leaving those bills dead in the water (U.S. Senate Records 2016). This problem creates a system by which our government functions at an astoundingly ineffective pace, often struggling to produce the necessary budgetary bills in a timely manner each year. By removing this barrier from the Senate, the body would once again be able to function normally, helping rid Congress as a whole of its dysfunctional nature.

The problem of a dysfunctional Congress is one that is directly related to the levels of political polarization in America, as the dysfunctional state of the federal

government is a direct byproduct of the levels of political polarization present in the system. Specifically, there is a correlation between the levels of polarization in government and the frequency by which the filibuster and cloture motions are utilized. I used data from the Pew Research Center (DeSilver 2014) on the ideological makeup of Congress to illustrate this relationship. Starting with the 93rd Congress (1973-74) there were 29 senators who had an ideological voting record that fell between the most conservative Democrat and the most liberal Republican. During the 93rd Congress, there were 44 cloture motions, filed, of which 9 were invoked. During the 103rd Congress only three senators had ideological voting records that fell between the most conservative Democrat and the most liberal Republican, and during that session 80 cloture motions were filed, 14 of which were invoked. Finally, in the 112th Congress, there was no overlap ideologically in the Senate and there were 115 cloture motions filed, and 41 of them were invoked. What is illustrated by this information is that not only is there a relationship between the levels of political polarization in government and the functionality Congress, but that both the filibuster and cloture motions have become increasingly more common as the ideological divide in Congress has grown.

This reform, which aims to shift the burden of obtaining votes to Senators who favor filibustering a bill by requiring 60 “Nay” votes to prevent any further action on a piece of legislation, can sufficiently address one of the main effects of political polarization. In that sense, this proposal is unlike many of the others that will be discussed throughout this work, as it does not aim to directly affect the overall levels of political polarization, but instead, its aim is to simply mitigate the

effects of political polarization. Enacting this reform would almost certainly lead to a significant reduction in the number of bills that are either filibustered or fail to have cloture invoked, as it would make the legislative obstruction process much more difficult. This is particularly true, as neither party has held a 60-seat majority since the 95th Congress (1977-1979) when Democrats controlled 61 of the 100 chamber seats (U.S. Senate Records 2016). Acknowledging this reality is why this proposed reform would significantly reduce the dysfunction of the Senate, as obstructive measures would now require Senators gaining bipartisan support for their efforts. Presently, with the burden of support placed on those who wish to continue progress on a bill, Senators from the minority party, provided that their party possesses at least 40 seats, can effectively prevent further Senate by producing support from just within their party. To further illustrate the added difficulty that this new reform would impose, I looked at the degree of bipartisanship voting on cloture motions in the 112th, 113th, and 114th Congresses. Unsurprisingly the overwhelming majority of cloture motion votes held in all three Congressional sessions were cast along party lines (U.S. Senate Records 2016). This fact shows how not only it is currently difficult to gain bipartisan support for a cloture motion, but also indicates how difficult it would be to gain significant bipartisan support against invoking cloture and the filibuster. Thus, by effectively limiting the degree to which the minority party can obstruct the legislative agenda of the majority party, this reform creates a more functional Senate, in the sense that there will be fewer obstacles on the path to creating legislation.

Moving to an examination of the political viability of the proposal to require 60 Senators to support to vote in favor of a filibuster, I believe that this reform does not have a strong likelihood of being enacted. The reason why I believe this reform is unlikely to even come into existence is that the reform would fundamentally shift America away from protecting the views and the voice of the minority. By allowing the majority party of the Senate to effectively govern as they see fit, this reform quashes the balance of government and injects undemocratic values into the federal government. As a result, I believe both parties would be quite unlikely to support such a proposal, as they would fear that the day would come that their affiliated political party became the minority party. Additionally, even publicly considering this reform would almost certainly cause a great deal of backlash from constituents and democratic observers, who would oppose such a proposal on the grounds that were mentioned earlier. Thus, based on these notions I believe that this reform, rather than being politically viable, is quite politically unviable.

Proposal: Removing the Filibuster Altogether

In addition to those who simply aim to alter the process by which a filibuster can be implemented in the Senate, there are those who suggest that the procedure altogether should be eliminated. This, of course, is a more extreme option than the previous proposal, as this proposal would leave no avenue for recourse, regardless of the level of support in favor or against a particular bill or action no action. As is stated in the title of the reform, this proposal would eliminate cloture votes and the

filibuster, as well as prevent further obstruction that is currently derived from the use of these two Senate procedures.

As this reform and the prior reform are quite similar, the problem that both aim to solve are identical, so too is the way in which that problem is related to political polarization. To reiterate both, the problem that this reform aims to solve is that there have been far too many filibusters and cloture motions in the Senate, which has led to a significant period of gridlock and dysfunction in the legislative body. This problem directly relates to the issue of political polarization, as there is a relationship between both the frequency of filibusters and the volume of cloture motions filed and the level of political polarization in the Senate. The only difference between the two proposals is the methods by which they aim to solve the problem.

It is clear that this reform would affect political polarization by mitigating its effects on the legislative process. In fact, this reform is likely to be more effective in mitigating the effects of political polarization than the previous reform as this proposal suggests that the problem itself be eliminated. Without the existence of filibusters or cloture motions there can be very little obstruction in the Senate, and thus their elimination would mean that the problem of a gridlocked Senate would no longer exist. Again, the implementation of this reform would almost certainly mean that the majority party would be allowed to govern without constraint, effectively reducing the minority party to no more than a political symbol. Of course, as the implementation of this reform would almost certainly result in partisan tension, in my opinion there would be a negative impact on the levels of political polarization. What makes this reform unique is that although I believe it would make the problem

of political polarization worse off, it would lessen the impact that political polarization has on Congress.

Looking at the political viability of this reform, I believe that the proposal to eliminate the filibuster and cloture motion votes would be a political dead end. Not only does this reform raise similar concerns about the rights of the minority in government, it goes further eliminating all possible recourse for protection. Thus, in my opinion politicians who propose or suggest the implementation of this reform would not only face immense criticism from their constituents and democracy organizations, but I believe that this reform is on patchy legal ground, in the sense that even if it were to be implemented that the courts might strike it down for violating the principles laid out in the Constitution.

History of the Debt Ceiling

Prior to moving on to a discussion of a proposed reform that aims to alter the debt ceiling as a means of addressing political polarization, it is important that some background information is provided on the debt ceiling itself.

The debt ceiling, also sometimes known as the debt limit, is defined by the U.S. Department of the Treasury (2016) as, “the total amount of money that the United States government is authorized to borrow to meet its existing legal obligations, including Social Security and Medicare benefits, military salaries, interest on the national debt, tax refunds, and other payments.” Throughout history, it was not uncommon for both parties in government to raise the ceiling, or even for one administration to raise the debt limit multiple times. In fact, it has been raised

roughly 90 times since its creation in 1914. Historically, raising the debt ceiling was an uncontroversial issue, one that warranted little discussion as both parties understood the importance of keeping the country financially afloat. It was only recently that the process of raising the debt ceiling became controversial, and at the root of that controversy was partisan warfare.

The recent notable U.S. debt ceiling crises occurred in 2013 when House Republicans refused to raise the debt ceiling without some concessions pertaining to cutting federal government spending. In January of 2013, the U.S. had reached the then maximum level of debt, which was \$16.4 trillion dollars, thus calling into question the ability of the U.S. Treasury to repay the loans of the U.S. government (Austin 2015). This is just one example of a debt-ceiling crisis, but this example models the typical circumstances by which these crises occur, noting that one party, who controls Congress, threatens to not raise the debt ceiling and thus make the U.S. unable to pay its loans, without some sort of legislative concession from their opposition party. Debt ceiling crises represent a new tactic in partisan warfare, as one party threatens to risk the financial solvency of the U.S. if their political demands are not met, effectively forcing their opposition to compromise.

Proposal: Enable the President to Unilaterally Raise the Debt Ceiling

This reform aims to alter the process by which the debt ceiling is raised, by shifting the control of the process from Congress to the President. Currently, as is the case with most of the federal budgetary matters, the President puts forth his proposals, which are taken into consideration by the House, which is officially in

charge of all financials for the U.S. government. After the implementation of this reform, the President would unilaterally raise the debt ceiling as he or she saw fit without regard for Congressional opinion.

The problem that this reform is designed to target is the fact that raising the debt ceiling has become a partisan warfare tactic. By using holding the ability of the U.S. to pay its debts hostage, politicians have not only jeopardized the solvency of America, but they have also reduced the efficiency by which the federal government functions. The use of the debt ceiling as a hostage in partisan warfare is a reckless and destructive tactic that poses a significant threat to both the finances of the U.S. and to the functionality of the federal government.

Like the proposals that deal with the filibuster, the problem this reform aims to address is directly related to political polarization. This reform aims to mitigate an effect of the levels of political polarization; in this case how political polarization has transformed raising the debt ceiling into a hostage of partisan warfare. In order to determine the relationship between instances of debt ceiling crises and the levels of political polarization, I again revisited the work of DeSilver (2014) on the ideological makeup of Congress and compared it to instances of debt ceiling crises. Prior to 1995, there was no controversy surrounding the raising of the debt ceiling, in fact prior to that year the “Gephardt Rule” was in effect that ruled that every time a new budget was passed the debt ceiling was raised (Austin 2015). The “Gephardt Rule” was put in place in 1979, an era that DeSilver (2014) shows to still possess a degree of bipartisan overlap, as 240 members of the House possessed an ideological voting record that fell between the most conservative Democrat and the most liberal

Republican. Fast forward to the 1990s, when the debt ceiling controversy begins, and DeSilver (2014) notes that there were only 9 members of the House that had that type of voting record. In 2011, during the 2011 debt ceiling crises and two years prior to the aforementioned 2013 crises no members of the House of Representatives possessed such a voting record. Thus, as the levels of political polarization have risen in Congress, so too has the frequency by which the debt ceiling has been used as a political threat.

This reform attempts to remove the debt ceiling from the grasp of political polarization by adjusting the process by which the debt ceiling can be raised. Instead of having to go to Congress to raise the debt ceiling, the President him or herself controls the process, thus eliminating any threat of crisis. I believe that this reform possesses some benefits, but also is not entirely effective in how it addresses the problem. First, the benefits that I believe this proposed reform has is that in many cases it would be quite effective in preventing the debt ceiling from being manipulated for political negotiations, as whoever is the President would simply raise the debt ceiling when the ceiling itself was approaching avoiding all conflict. Although effective in this nature, the main problem I see with this reform is that if the President were to reverse the present situation, by refusing to raise the debt ceiling if Congress does not abide by his or her political will. In that situation, the reform would have had no impact on addressing the effect of political polarization, and instead simply shifts the power from Congress to the President. This downside calls into question the degree to which this reform can effectively mitigate the effects of political polarization.

Analyzing the political viability of this reform, it is my estimation that this proposal would face some significant opposition from the Republican Party. As was the case in the 2013 crises, as well as in earlier crises, members of the Republican Party in Congress were the individuals who took the debt ceiling hostage in order to coerce Democrats to succumb to their legislative demands (Austin 2015). Not only would Republicans oppose this reform because it would strip them of a valued tool for political negotiation, but also they would be deeply opposed, as the implementation of this reform could create a scenario by which the U.S. debt limit could be continuously raised. Furthermore, there would likely be those in both parties who would be troubled by giving unilateral control over the debt ceiling to the President, for not only would it go against the “power of the purse” but it would certainly unbalance the scales of equality between the three branches of government. Although there would surely be many individuals and politicians who would find merit in the proposal to give the President unilateral control over raising the debt ceiling, in my opinion, there are far too many troubling aspects of the reform that would cause it to be politically unviable.

Proposal: Eliminate the Debt Ceiling

Revisiting Abramowitz’s (2015b) proposal to eliminate the debt ceiling entirely, one finds a great deal of overlap between this proposal and the prior reform, which allows the President to take unilateral control over the debt ceiling. Eliminating the debt ceiling entirely would differ from the previous proposal in the sense that the Treasury Department would be allowed to automatically raise the debt limit of the country without having to ask Congress. This reform would make

certain that the federal spending limit does not become a hostage to partisan tactics. The Treasury, which keeps track of and pays the country's bills, would be able to raise the limit if the Congressional budget did not already account for it. With the impending threat of a financial shutdown of the U.S. government out to the way, Congressional leaders and the White House could use their time to negotiate other pieces of legislation.

The problem that this reform aims to address, as well as how that problem is related to political polarization are the same as the prior reform discussed. Both acknowledge the relationship between the debt ceiling and the levels of political polarization and attempt to mitigate the effects that the current levels of political polarization has on how America raises its debt limit.

In my opinion, this reform would be far more effective than the previously discussed reform, as it would remove the risk of the debt ceiling being held hostage entirely off the table by making it an automatic process. By making the raising of the debt ceiling automatic, this reform not only removes a tool from the partisan warfare toolbox but also removes one of the most alarming effects that political polarization has had. Additionally, as was stated earlier, another benefit of this reform is that it would free up room for negotiation on other pieces of legislation, as Congress would not have to deal with any looming financial shutdowns.

Moving to an evaluation of this reform's political viability, it is my estimation that this reform would have some people who would be opposed to its implementation. I believe that this proposal would face a great deal of opposition from the Republican Party. Being that the Republican Party is typically opposed to

excessive government spending, and their efforts to curb government spending is what has caused all of the debt ceiling crises, Congressional Republicans would likely vehemently oppose the implementation of this change, which would likely lead to a number of increases to the debt limit. Furthermore, this reform would strike a blow to their ability to forcefully negotiate the federal budget in future years as Republicans had previously used the debt ceiling as a negotiation tool when a Democrat is in the White House. All that being said, I believe that this reform is still politically viable as it would likely have a great deal of support from Democrats as well as pragmatists, who grasp how important raising the debt ceiling is to the functionality of America.

Conclusion:

A great deal of why our country has come to realize that political polarization has become a problem is due to the effects it has had on Congress, particularly the way in which partisan warfare has become seemingly more important than legislating. This reality becomes even more apparent as we look at the ways in which members of Congress go about using the rules and procedures of the body to aid their goals, which is why scholars have targeted these maneuvers as a means of mitigating the effects of political polarization. Altering the filibuster as well as the debt ceiling are ambitious goals and ones that would, to varying degrees of success, help alleviate the ramifications of our polarized state. What neither of these nor other government reforms would do particularly well is have an impact on bridging the divide between the two sides of political America. I believe to be that case due to the fact that although these types of reforms would certainly rid the government of

the debilitating effects of polarization, it would do nothing to spur bipartisanship. Additionally, it would not bridge the wide gap in the ideological differences between the two parties.

Though none of the reforms discussed are perfect, after a thorough analysis it becomes clear that the reform that suggests eliminating the debt ceiling is most worthwhile of pursuit. Not only would this reform successfully mitigate the effects of political polarization on the process of raising the debt ceiling, but also it would do so in a way that still allows the reform to be politically viable, something that cannot be said about its peers in this chapter. Although deemed the most worthy of pursuit out of the governmental reforms presented in this chapter, the proposal to eliminate the debt ceiling will likely have a hard time stacking up to other reforms discussed in its work, as it is inherently limited to alleviating the effects of political polarization as opposed to addressing the issue directly.

Chapter 3: Increasing the Influence of Political Parties in Elections

For any government election, but particularly elections within the United States, the role of political parties cannot be understated. In America, politics at all levels is dominated by two major parties: Republican and Democratic. The parties provide a whole host of resources to candidates during campaigns, including money, endorsements, and most importantly platforms for candidates to utilize throughout their campaigns. As political parties are such an integral factor in the running and outcome of elections, it should come as no surprise that they have been a target for reform, particularly as scholars have increasingly begun to wrestle with how to solve the problem of political polarization. This is especially true as one begins to look at how the role of political parties in the electoral process has been slowly diminished over the years, something that will be discussed later on in greater detail.

In recent years, scholars such as Nathaniel Persily (2015) and Bruce Cain (2015) have argued that by increasing the influence of political parties in the electoral process, that America can address the issue of political polarization. In this chapter, three reforms, put forth by Persily (2015) and Cain (2015) will be discussed, all of which aim to increase the influence of political parties in the electoral process. The three reforms are as follows: enable political parties to endorse candidates on the ballot, a proposal to allow political parties to determine who may run on the party's line, and finally a reform that suggests altering the campaign finance system to strengthen the financial capabilities of the political

parties. Both Persily (2015) and Cain (2015) argue that the implementation of these three reforms will lead to a decrease in the levels of political polarization.

As each reform is discussed, the same guiding questions will be answered. Those questions are: what is the reform? What is the problem that the reform addresses? How is that reform related to political polarization? How does the reform address political polarization? And, what is the political viability of the reform? Using the answers to these questions as a guide, this chapter aims to determine which of the reforms is most worthwhile of pursuit out of the three discussed in this chapter.

The Role of Political Parties Over the Years

Before moving on to examine each of the reforms it is important that role of political parties have played in the electoral process over the years is explained in greater detail. Doing so not only contextualizes the modern role of political parties in elections but also illustrates why these three specific reforms have been put forth by Persily (2015) and Cain (2015).

For the majority of America's existence, political parties held a great deal of control over the electoral process. As noted in the book *Campaign and Elections* (Sides, et al. 2015), up until the 1968 presidential election, nearly every general election candidate from both the Democratic and Republican parties was chosen not directly by the people, but instead through backroom dealings among party leaders. The primary election process of 1898 or even 1956 looked nothing like the one we have today where millions cast their ballots to determine who represents their affiliated party. The backroom dealings often led to the nomination of more

establishment candidates, which began to upset the primary voters of both parties. For example, the 1968 Democratic convention selected then Vice-President Hubert Humphrey as its nominee, although he had not participated in any of the primary contests held in that cycle. The influence of political parties in elections was not limited to the presidential races, but in fact was even more important at the congressional, state and local levels of government. In those races, local party bosses often unilaterally decided who would be allowed to become a candidate for office, and even were able to push other candidates out of the race in order to create an unopposed election. Nowadays, we know that the reach of political parties is far more subdued, as both parties allow the voters to choose who represents them in elections at all levels of government.

In addition to the shift in control of candidate selection away from political parties, there has also been a great deal of change over the years in the financial role of the political parties in elections. Robert Mutch (2016 ,6) highlights the present role of political parties in the financing of campaigns, writing, “party money only accounts for a small share of most candidates’ campaign funds. In 2012, party money made up only 1 percent of House candidates’ receipts and 3 percent of Senate candidates’ seats.” While the amount of party money going towards individual campaigns has always been relatively minuscule amount compared to total spending figures, the real change in the political parties’ role in campaign finance has come as a result of the elimination of “soft money” and the creation of Super PACs.

The elimination of “soft money” came as a result of the 2002 Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA). The BCRA “prohibits national party committees and federal candidates from raising and spending nonfederal money,” (Mutch 2016, 158). Prior to the BCRA passing Congress, crafty donors and campaigns utilized the political parties to channel additional financial resources to campaigns. The political parties did so by using state funds to pay for party-building activities, such as registering voters, yard signs, and other grass-roots activities, that provided a benefit to federal candidates and campaigns as well. Prior to 2002, the political parties provided a crucial source of financial resources to federal campaigns in the form of “soft money”, something that increased their influence of candidates, campaigns, and donors alike. The elimination of “soft money” was just one way in which the political parties’ role in campaign finance has been diminished over time.

The second way in which the role that political parties play in campaign finance has been diminished is through the creation of Super PACs. After the *Citizens United* ruling, the creation of Super PACs led to an influx of donations from wealthy individuals as well as corporations. This new form of outside expenditure not only increased the amount of money spent on elections but also diminished the importance of party money. After the creation of Super PACs, it was more beneficial for individuals to contribute to those committees, given the lack of contribution limits, than it was to donate to a political party directly. Thus, after already having the influence of “soft money” stripped from them, the political parties were dealt another blow to the financial importance after the creation of Super PACs, as both donors became invested in the new, limitless, form of contributing.

Reform: Allow Political Parties to Determine Who May Run on Party Line

Often in a primary election, voters and political pundits are left wondering why a candidate would choose to run on a party line that they typically are not affiliated. For example, Sen. Bernie Sanders, who in his political life never had designated himself as a member of the Democratic Party, ran for that party's nomination during the 2016 Democratic primary contest. What Persily's (2015) proposal would do is it would allow political parties to determine who is allowed to run in their party's primary contest. Under this reform, the political parties would have to approve all individual's requests to run for office, regardless of whether or not the individual is a member of that party at the time of the election. This would be a dramatic shift from the present situation by which anyone has permission to run on any party line they see fit as long as they meet petitioning requirements. By enacting this reform, the political parties would immediately control who is able to run on party lines, something that as stated earlier, is very important in terms of candidate viability.

The problem that this reform aims to address is that there are far too many ideologically extreme candidates running for office today. Given that anyone can run for elected office and that currently there are very few restrictions preventing any individual from running for a party's nomination it is no surprise that we have seen ideologically extreme candidates from both the far left and far right run for office. Ideologically extreme candidates on both sides have in the past shifted the nature of discussion in a campaign, which has forced more moderate candidates to shift their positions to compete. In that sense, not only has the presence of ideologically

extreme candidates led to more of those individuals being elected to office but also their mere presence, regardless of their viability, alters the nature of the campaign and can have lasting political implications. Thusly, the implementation of this reform would enable both parties to possess the ability to prevent future instances of ideologically extreme candidates wrecking havoc on primary elections, or even possibly lower the number of ideologically extreme candidates who win.

In looking at how the problem of a large number of ideologically extreme candidates running for office, which this reform aims to solve, is related to political polarization, the connection is relatively clear. As more ideologically extreme candidates run for office not only is there a greater likelihood those individuals might win their contests, but the likelihood that in a primary election they drag their more moderate opponents to the left or right also increases. This directly affects the levels of political polarization in government, as these ideologically extreme individuals are the ones who are becoming members of Congress. One only needs to look at the role that fringe conservative candidates had on the general election viability of Mitt Romney, who was damaged by his “self-deportation” and abortion remarks which were made to compete with his more fringe but less viable opponents. Individuals like Herman Cain, Rick Santorum, Rick Perry, and Michele Bachman helped shape the rhetoric that framed the 2012 Republican primary election, even though none of them even won a single primary contest (New York Times 2012). Without having to know a great deal about the way America’s federal government operates, it is clear that the problem that Persily’s (2015) reform aims to solve, which is the large number of ideologically extreme individuals running for

office, is a problem that directly relates to the levels of political polarization, as the individuals elected to Congress are composed entirely of those who choose to run for office.

The next question then is whether or not the proposal to allow political parties to determine who may run on party lines would be able to affect political polarization. In my estimation, this reform would only minimally affect political polarization in America. My reasoning stems from one main fact, which is that many of the state political parties are far more conservative or liberal than their corresponding national parties. To illustrate this, I looked at the research conducted by Jeffrey Jones (2015), which analyzes which states favor which party politically. During the course of his analysis, Jones (2015) notes that Massachusetts and Maryland are the states that favor the Democratic Party the most, while Wyoming and Utah are the two states that favor the Republican Party the most. In Massachusetts and Maryland, the support for the Democratic Party is very high and thus the Maryland or Massachusetts State Democratic Party are likely comprised of individuals who are equally as liberal as their peers in the respective states. As a result, if this reform were to be enacted the state Democratic Parties in both Maryland and Massachusetts are likely to allow ideologically far left individuals to run for office. The same can be said about Utah or Wyoming, where after the inaction of this reform, state party leaders are likely to continue to allow ideologically far right individuals to run for office. Thus, given the various political leanings of all 50 states, the only true moderating effect that this reform would have

comes in the form of the national parties, which could permit or deny candidates for presidential elections.

That being said, another likely result of the inaction of this reform should be evaluated to determine whether or not Persily's (2015) reform affects political polarization. This opportunity to affect political polarization stems from the fact that the implementation of this reform would likely boost the credibility and viability of third parties. As candidates that would have initially run on one of the two major party lines are unable to gain the permission to do so, they would have to campaign on a different party platform, thus increasing the number of elections with third party candidates. Russell Dalton (2008) studied the effect of third parties on political polarization and discovered, that in fact it was not the sheer number of parties that affects the levels of political polarization but instead the competitiveness of those additional parties. Taking Dalton's (2008) work into account, there is no guarantee that although third parties may see an uptick in the number individuals running on their platforms that those parties would be any more competitive than they are today. Therefore, I believe that it is unlikely that any positive effect on political polarization will arise as a result of this byproduct of Persily's (2015) reform.

Moving on to a discussion of the political viability of the proposed reform to allow political parties to determine who may run on party lines, it is clear that this proposal is quite controversial. The two major political parties themselves would not necessarily oppose enacting this reform, but it is my estimation that groups aiming to preserve the importance of democracy as well as those who aim to ensure

the freedom of elections would definitely take qualm with this reform. Furthermore, as this reform would openly promote the blocking of access to elected office, it would likely not receive widespread support from the general public and thus elected officials, who would feel the immense pressure to side with their constituents. Another question that arises when discussing the political viability of this reform is whether or not the reform itself is constitutional. Given that the reform limits access to elected office, in my opinion, there would certainly be legal efforts made in opposition to this reform. Based on these two factors it is my estimation that these reforms are not viable in the present day political climate.

Reform: Enable Political Parties to “Endorse” Candidates on the Ballot

As is often the case, primary elections consist of multiple candidates who are all vying for their party’s nomination and a general election contest. Currently, the local, state or national party is intended to be a non-participant and simply adjudicate any issues with the race itself. As a result, the parties cannot sway the nature of the election in the favor of one candidate or another. The reform that enables political parties to endorse candidates on the ballot aims to change all that by enabling political parties to play favorites in elections. Under this reform, parties would be free to choose one of the candidates running in a given primary election and endorse them. Furthermore, that endorsement would be indicated on the physical ballot for the primary election, providing voters with an additional reminder as to whom the local, state or national party supports in that race. This proposal would not only remove the notion that political parties are non-

participants in primary elections, but would also have a tremendous impact on the outcome of elections.

The problem that enabling political parties to endorse candidates on the ballot aims to solve is again directly related to the problem of the viability of ideologically extreme candidates. As was mentioned earlier, ideologically extreme candidates not only pose a threat in the sense that those individuals might win their elections and enter government, but also that they have the ability to shape the discussion in a campaign cycle. This reality is aided by the fact that political parties are meant to stay on the sidelines during primary elections, and therefore cannot openly take actions or stances that favor one candidate over another. By eliminating this invisible political barrier, political parties would directly affect this problem, as voters would not have an indication of whom their local, state or national party views as the best candidate. Parties would now be allowed to urge people to support their ideal candidate, something that would have a tremendous effect on the outcomes of elections nationwide. Although this reform would not entirely eliminate the problem of ideologically extreme candidates, it would likely have a positive impact on reducing those individual's political influence.

Revisiting the connection between ideologically extreme candidates and the levels of political polarization, there is a clear relationship between the two. The main impact that ideologically extreme candidates have on political polarization occurs when those candidates win elections and enter into government. The influx of ideologically extreme candidates on both the left and the right would almost certainly further the ideological gap between the two parties. Furthermore, as the

ideological divide in government increases, the likelihood that bipartisan action will be taken decreases. To illustrate that point I combined the data collected by DeSilver (2014) on the ideological overlap in Congress with the data collected by Congressional Quarterly (2014) on bipartisan voting behavior in Congress. DeSilver (2014) notes that in 1973-1974 there were 240 members of the House and 29 members of the Senate that had ideological overlap with members of another party. CQ (2014) shows that in 1974 29 percent of House votes and 44 percent of Senate votes were “party unity votes” meaning that a majority of voting Democrats opposed a majority of voting Republicans. Moving ahead to the 21st Century, DeSilver (2014) points out that by the 2011-2012 session of Congress there was no ideological overlap in either chamber, while CQ (2014) notes that 73 percent of all House votes and 60 percent of all Senate votes were “party unity votes”. Combining these two sets of data illustrates the impact of a growing ideological divide in Congress on bipartisan behavior. Aside from the impact that ideologically extreme candidates have on the makeup of government, it is clear that their presence affects political polarization by impacting bipartisanship and the overall nature of campaigns.

Moving on to an analysis of how enabling political parties to endorse candidates on the ballot would affect political polarization, it is important to first understand the logic behind the proposal before moving on to an examination of its effectiveness. The thought behind this reform is that by enabling political parties to endorse candidates, many voters will follow the party’s lead and vote for the selected candidate. Furthermore, this reform relies heavily on the fact that the

political parties, once allowed to endorse candidates, would primarily endorse more moderate candidates. Revisiting the data collected by Jones (2015) it becomes clear that in fact, state parties across the country differ in their ideological leanings, in the sense that they reflect how liberal, conservative or moderate their particular state is. The implication for this reform is that its intended effects would not actually come to fruition, as instead of endorsing moderate candidates in primary elections, many state parties will select more ideologically extreme candidates that mirror that state's ideological composition. Jones' (2015) research leads me to believe that in states like Massachusetts and Maryland, the state Democratic parties are more inclined to endorse a progressive Democrat than a moderate Democrat, as their state's population is particularly liberal. Similarly, I believe that more conservative states like Utah and Wyoming will see their state Republican parties endorsing more conservative candidates over moderate ones. Based on this reality, it is my estimation that this reform will likely only minimally affect political polarization.

Looking at the political viability of the proposal to enable political parties to endorse candidates on the ballot, it is my estimation that this reform is somewhat viable. This conclusion stems from the fact that although many would oppose to grant political parties this power, the reform itself would not face any significant opposition from either political party. In theory, both parties would likely support the implementation of this reform, as it would tremendously increase their reach in elections at all levels of government. Furthermore, even though this reform would not necessarily lead to a reduction in the number of ideologically extreme candidates, what it would likely do is increase the number of winning candidates

who are the preferred candidates of either the local, state or national party. That being said, I believe that in reality there would be some intra-party conflict over supporting this reform, which would stem from the various political wings of the two parties. For example, the Tea Party wing of the Republican Party would likely have a different preferred candidate than the establishment wing of the Republican Party, which holds most of the leadership roles today. The same would be true about the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, which although influential, does not hold the same weight as the establishment wing of the party. For those reasons, the far left and far right might oppose this reform given that it has the potential to harm the viability of their preferred candidates. In my mind, though, this conflict would cease to exist if the reform were to be implemented on the basis that the state parties control the endorsement process for congressional elections, while the national party simply controls the process for presidential elections. By implementing the reform in that way the various ideological wings of the two parties would still maintain some control and influence over the endorsement process. All of that said, the proposal to allow political parties to endorse candidates on the ballot would not have the smoothest road to existence.

Reform: Altering the Campaign Finance System to Strengthen Political Parties

With the rise of Super PACs after the *Citizens United* ruling, many in American have begun to question the role that money plays in elections. The increased role of independent expenditures, as was stated earlier, has had a detrimental impact on the influence of political parties in the financing of elections. This reform would overhaul the campaign finance system as we know it, by eliminating Super PACs and

instead enabling the unlimited donation of funds to national political parties instead. Doing so would create an influx of funds to political parties at the state, local and national level and would dramatically increase the financial reach and capabilities of both parties at all levels of government.

The problem that this reform aims to solve is that independent expenditures have led to the increased viability of ideologically extreme political candidates and campaigns. While Super PACs and other independent actors are primarily involved in presidential elections, their existence has impacted the importance of political party contributions. Thus, by eliminating Super PACs and extending the unlimited contribution clause to political parties, hundreds of millions of dollars would be funneled into political parties, which could then provide resources to hundreds of races across the country. The hope is that by implementing this change, the resources would be directed to more moderate candidates and this notion will be evaluated later on.

Like the two previous reforms discussed in this chapter, this proposed alteration to campaign finance rules aims to solve a problem that is directly connected to political polarization by addressing the viability of ideologically extreme candidates. By funneling financial resources away from Super PACs and into political parties far more resources would be available to take down those ideologically extreme candidates, thus lowering the likelihood they win their primary contests. As has been stated numerous times throughout this chapter, the levels of political polarization in government are directly tied to the individuals who are elected to government. Therefore by weakening the odds of extreme candidates

winning primary contests, America would see a direct impact on the trend of political polarization.

Moving on to a discussion of how this proposed reform would affect political polarization, it is again important to first discuss the logic behind the reform and then evaluate the reform for its effectiveness. The thought behind this reform is that by eliminating Super PACs while at the same time enabling unlimited contributions to national political parties, an influx of funds would be received by political parties, which would then be dispersed to races across the country. Where this reform seeks to affect political polarization is through the assumption that the national political party is more likely to support candidates that are moderate over ideologically extreme candidates. Furthermore, the elimination of Super PACs would directly affect the political viability of ideologically extreme individuals running for president. Individuals like Rick Santorum, Newt Gingrich who in the past have relied upon one mega-wealthy donor financing a Super PAC, would no longer be able to rely on that source of financial support. In theory, these proposed campaign finance changes have the potential to address the issue of political polarization by reducing the viability of ideologically extreme candidates; the question now is whether or not these political notions match reality.

Dealing first with the implications for the presidential nominating processes, I believe that the elimination of Super PACs would be successful in limiting the viability of ideologically extreme candidates, particularly on the Republican side. Without the financial resources that Super PACs provide, many of the candidacies mentioned earlier would have failed to get off the ground, and without them,

ideologically extreme individuals are unlikely to receive the financial backing of the national party. That is the case as for the presidential election as the national party is typically concerned with having a more moderate, establishment candidate represent the party in the general election. National parties prefer moderate candidates for a general election, as they will be in a direct competition with the opposing party for undecided and independent voters who tend to be more moderate in the ideological views. Without those financial resources, the likelihood that ideologically extreme candidates would be able to secure their party's nomination is significantly hampered. Thus, it is my estimation that this aspect of the proposed reform to alter campaign finance rules would be successful in affecting political polarization.

Next, it is important to determine whether or not the same would be true for congressional races. As I have noted repeatedly throughout this chapter, the work done by Jones (2015) illustrates the differences in ideological leanings across individual states. The implication of this reality on the proposal to alter campaign finance rules is that in all likelihood the national party would direct financial resources to candidates that are most likely to win the general election in a given race. Acknowledging that both parties' aim is to secure a governing majority, it is my estimation that ideological leanings would be cast aside by the national parties and instead those organizations would funnel money to candidates that have the greatest chance of winning, regardless of whether or not they are on the far left or far right. Keeping that in mind, it is my opinion that although this reform is capable of addressing the number of ideologically extreme candidates at the presidential

level, it is unable to affect the congressional level and thus its overall ability to affect political polarization is severely limited.

In looking at the political viability of these proposed campaign finance rule changes, it is clear that this reform faces one major obstacle. The major roadblock is that the alteration of campaign finance laws would require a change to the *Citizens United* ruling, which currently enables the existence of Super PACs. As a result, this reform would not only face political obstacles but even before this reform could reach that stage there would need to be massive legal upheaval. Leaving prospective legal battles aside, it is my estimation that this proposal would face opposition from the Democrats in government. Democrats have been strong opponents of unlimited political contributions and would likely not support any extension of an individual's or corporation's right to give endlessly to political parties. Keeping that in mind, I believe that Democrats would utilize all their resources to oppose this reform, adding a second roadblock to the successful implementation of this reform. Given the presence of two daunting obstacles, it is my estimation that the political viability of the proposal to eliminate Super PACs and instead allow unlimited contributions to political parties is quite low.

Conclusion:

By effectively allowing political parties to put their thumbs on the electoral scale, America would have to question the current electoral system and balance in place, which is a debate that would rage almost surely for eternity. The question our country must then deal with is whether or not strengthening political parties is the proper way to guide our country out a politically divided time. Out of the three

reforms discussed in this chapter, it is my estimation that the third reform discussed, which is the proposal to eliminate Super PACs and instead permit unlimited contributions to political parties is the most worthwhile of pursuit. This conclusion does not stem from my belief that this reform itself is exceptional, but instead is derived from the fact that the other two reforms discussed in this chapter were deemed to be politically unviable and also unable to affect political polarization. In fact, based on the evidence presented, it is my belief that political parties as an entity are the entirely wrong vessel to deliver a remedy to political polarization.

Chapter 4: Electorate Reforms

Another area that scholars have studied as a potential source for alleviating political polarization in America is the American electorate. Given the nature of American democracy, it is quite apparent how important the electorate is in any election. Given that the voting public are the ones who are actually responsible for selecting the elected officials, scholars have begun to focus on ways to improve the quality of information accessible to voters, something that has become increasingly important as the levels of polarization has risen over the years. In part, this increased focus has been derived from the fact that the quality and quantity of non-partisan information is scarce. Additionally, as scholars are constantly studying the voter decision-making process, the importance of the how candidate information and campaign news coverage affects individual's voter decision-making process remains key.

In particular scholars such as Adam Bonica (2015) and Markus Prior and Natalie Stroud (2015) have argued that voters should be provided with high quality, non-partisan information in elections in the form of a voter's guide. These scholars believe that it is important to not only create a more knowledgeable electorate but also a more open-minded electorate. This reform would address the issue of partisan news bubbles, something that has become increasingly worse and dangerous with the development of cable news networks such as MSNBC and Fox News. A second reform, that works closely off the nature of what has been proposed by Bonica (2015) and Prior and Stroud (2015) addresses the issue of news coverage during an election. Their proposal aims to reform what sort of content is covered by

the major news outlets, thus influencing what information is put before the American public. The goal of this reform would be to push major news sources to focus their coverage on more substantive content, replacing the peripheral coverage that is disseminated today. The goal of this chapter, as is the goal of every chapter, is to analyze reforms that address these concerns to determine if they would be worthwhile in pursuing in the fight to reduce political polarization.

For each reform discussed, the following questions will be answered: what is the reform? What is the problem that the reform addresses? How is this problem related to polarization? And finally, what is the political viability of this reform?

Reform: Providing Non-Partisan Candidate Information to Voters

A push to provide non-partisan electoral information to voters could come in the form of hundreds of different vessels. Thus, it is important to be specific with both what kind of data would be provided to voters and in what form and platforms that data would be provided. In terms of what information would be provided to voters, the question arises of what would most likely lead voters to choose less ideologically extreme or polarized candidates. Both Bonica (2015) and Prior and Stroud (2015) suggest that information on candidates' ideological scores as well as their policy platforms are most important in terms of informing voter decision-making. I tend to agree with their selection in this regard as placing candidates on an easily interpreted ideological chart would enable voters to clearly compare the ideologies of candidates in the race. Additionally, as many policy positions and proposals often receive less attention during the campaign, the suggestion to

include a brief description of the implications of the policies proposed by a candidate, of course, provided by an independent non-partisan expert, would allow the voters to see how each proposal would affect their lives. Currently, such information exists, but it is not common nor easily accessible as it's not located in one central location and thus many voters often do not come across it. If properly promoted and disseminated, this voter's guide would provide all Americans with a common, trusted source of non-partisan political information, which could then be factored into the decision-making process of voters across the country.

Many would ask, why is it necessary to increase the quality and level of information provided to voters as we live in the most information accessible era in the history of society. The reality is that although there is a great deal of new sources, many of them cater to a particular ideological viewpoint, which can lead to individuals only being exposed to news that reinforces their own views. Furthermore, as the number of news networks catering to a particular political viewpoint has increased, so too has the degree to which users have drawn upon those sorts of networks for their news as it fits their political bubbles. Looking at a study conducted by Jeffrey Gottfried, Michael Barthel, and Amy Mitchell (2017) of the Pew Research Center, the partisan news networks, and social media feeds dominated the news coverage in the 2016 election. According to the study, 19 percent of all voters cited Fox News as their main source for news about the 2016 election, 13 percent cited CNN and 8 percent cited Facebook. Additionally, 7 percent of all voters indicated that the "local news" was the primary source of campaign news, while both NBC and ABC received 5 percent and CBS received 4 percent of

respondents. Looking at Clinton and Trump voters, 40 percent of Trump voters surveyed indicated that Fox News was their main sources of campaign coverage, while CNN was the top coverage source for Clinton voters with 18 percent. MSNBC, which is largely considered to be the liberal counterpart to Fox News, was 5 percent of all respondent's choice and 9 percent of Clinton voters. Interpreting their data I gather that regardless of partisan affiliation a sizable portion of the population relied on sources that tend to be biased in their coverage. Voters who only are exposed to partisan information are likely to act upon that information when making a decision on whom to vote for in an election. Looking at the trends in partisan news consumption by utilizing the data collected by the Pew Research Center (2009), we can see there is a relationship between the levels of political polarization and the viewership of partisan news networks. In 1998 only 14 percent of Republicans said they watched Fox News regularly, compared to 36 percent in 2008. The rise of Fox News amongst Republicans also meant a decrease of CNN viewership by Republicans as in 1998 25 percent indicated they watched CNN frequently, compared to only 17 percent in 2008. Looking at the trends in Democrats' viewing habits, collected by the same Pew Research Center (2009) study, both MSNBC and CNN increased in viewership over the ten-year period, with MSNBC going from 10 to 18 percent of respondents and CNN going from 25 to 33 percent. Without the type of information that would be provided to voters from this reform, I strongly believe that our country's news consumption habits will continue to trend in a more partisan manner and thus our elections will continue to produce

a polarized government and voters continue to draw upon their favorite partisan news networks.

As is the case in most scenarios, individuals who are misinformed or unprepared often perform worse than their counterparts who are prepared. This is not to state that voting for one party or another would classify someone as being misinformed or unprepared, but instead that voters who are not receiving quality, in-depth coverage of the issues, speeches, and policy positions that matter in an election are not making the best decision they are capable of. To borrow the definition of Richard Lau and David Redlawsk (1997 586), “a ‘correct’ vote decision [is] one that is the same as the choice which would have been made under conditions of full information.” A study conducted by Anthony Fowler and Michele Margolis (2013) illustrates this point. Their study tested the effects of additional electoral and political information on vote choice, and they found that “many Americans are uninformed about the positions of major political parties on key issues, and this lack of information distorts their ability to translate their preferences into partisan preferences and vote choices,” (Fowler and Margolis 2013). Furthermore, Fowler and Margolis’ study (2013, 109) illustrates a clear connection between information and political polarization, as one of their major findings was that “when the electorate receives more policy-relevant information it systematically shifts towards the Democratic Party.” This study illustrates not only how political information can shape vote choice, but also demonstrates how this new information leads to many voters to change their ideological identification. Until all voters are capable of accessing and drawing upon non-partisan, quality

information in their candidate evaluations, it is likely that results that we increasingly witnessed in elections will continue: that America will continue to elect ideologically extreme individuals and form a polarized government. Thus if implemented, I believe that this reform would provide insight and information to voters, perhaps altering their political perspective and voting habits, something that would directly affect the levels of political polarization in America.

In terms of understanding how creating a more informed electorate would address the issue of political polarization, it is clear that this reform would aim primarily to address the levels of political polarization and the issue at its core as opposed to tackling the effects of political polarization. While of course, if successful, this reform would gradually rid American government of the debilitating effects of political polarization, it would do so by bridging the gap between voters on the two ideological sides of the divide. As voters would be able to visualize and better comprehend the various ideological views of candidates, the nation's electorate would undergo a transitional period between their partisan voting behavior and a voting behavior that would be shaped by their new insight. Ideally, as voters understand the various ideologies possessed by candidates, they will factor that new information into their decision-making process. If so, the hope would be that as voters get a greater sense of candidates' ideologies they would favor less ideologically extreme individuals for office. In that sense, the proposal that Bonica (2015) and Prior and Stroud (2015) put forth is the one that in my estimation is quite capable of bringing about substantial change to political polarization in America.

In addition to evaluating how the reform to create a more informed electorate would address the issue of political polarization, it, of course, is vital to grasp the political viability of the reform. In my estimation, reforms to provide greater access to information would be met with resounding support from politicians, politically involved groups, as well as the public. I believe this for several reasons, first of which is the fact that the reform does not benefit one political party over another and thus would not immediately be shot down by a sizable portion of the American political system. Secondly, the public perception of any groups or individuals opposed to providing greater resources to voters would be quite negative, as it would give the appearance of intentionally trying to suppress voters.

Although there would be general support for reform, I believe that there would be an intense battle over the details of the proposal. As stated before, American politics is presently in a highly polarized state, something that is furthered by the fact that many Americans only consume news from sources that match their ideological viewpoints, something illustrated by the study cited above by Gottfried, Barthel, and Mitchell (2017). I believe that the results of this study show that most Americans would have a hard time overcoming their skepticism in trusting a source other than their preferred one, particularly one that claims to be non-partisan. In order to sufficiently win support for this new information guide, it is important that both elected officials from both parties as well as both sides' party leaders endorse this reform. If not addressed properly and sufficiently, this problem could leave the reform toothless, as many Americans would simply fail to consume the information being provided to them. A second issue that I believe would impact

the political viability of this reform is the fact that politicians would nitpick at who would be entrusted to provide this non-partisan information, and of course once produced the content of the voter guide would almost certainly be contested. In my estimation, this problem would occur after the implementation of the reform, and if politicians begin to question the validity of the information provided in the guide and it would be quite easy for the guide to be framed as a source of biased, untrustworthy news. No reform is without its political obstacles, and so too is the case with this proposal, even though it may be the least controversial and most impactful of the three reforms discussed in this chapter.

It is my estimation that in theory this reform to provide quality, in-depth and non-partisan information to voters in the form of a guide would be one that could be easily implemented as well as the one that is likely to bring about a great deal of change to the levels of political polarization in America. This reform goes directly to what I believe to be the source of the problem with the American public, the fact that many voters often lack adequate knowledge on the issues and positions of candidates, and thus fail to see the implications of voting to office ideologically extreme individuals. Furthermore, of the many proposals discussed, the challenges on the path to implementation are far fewer and far less towering than those faced by other reforms. The only risk that troubles me is the fact that this reform would require the buy-in of voters to actually use it during their decision-making process. Further research could be conducted to determine whether or not these sorts of guides would actually be utilized by voters to determine whether America's voters simply do not have access to the information or whether they do not actually care

about having information at all. In all, this reform has the ability to reshape the nature of the American electorate and thus bring the needed change to our polarized state of government.

Reform: Altering the Content Covered by Major News Outlets

The news sources in America are vast in number as well as in viewpoints. Dealing with the medium of television the sources range from the most local news stations that cover the events in a certain town to national cable networks that highlight the major stories in an entire country or world. The process of reforming a sector as large as the media is no small feat, but the reality is that the role of the media in politics is deeply intertwined with the problem of political polarization. In understanding why the television media has been targeted specifically, it is important to note that according to a Pew Research Center poll from 2016, approximately 57 percent of all Americans get their news from watching TV (Mitchell et. al 2016). The reform would push the major news outlets to dedicate a greater portion of their news packages to candidate speeches, policy evaluations, and other substantive election news. This does not mean the coverage has to be completely unbiased. Cable news networks like Fox News and MSNBC would still be able to provide punditry that either bashes or promotes a particular issue or candidate, but they would still need to provide an unbiased explanation of a candidate's platform or policies. This too would apply to local news channels, which also reach a broad audience, and again fails to provide viewers with substantive coverage of elections. Presently, the American public can choose from a whole host

of news platforms, but the major news outlets, particularly the sources that distribute the news primarily through the television, tend to focus their content on polling or personality as opposed speeches and policy. This was the case in the 2016 election, as a study conducted by Thomas Patterson (2016) details the breakdown of the type of campaign coverage during the primary contests. Patterson (2016) notes that 56 percent of coverage was dedicated to the “competitive game” or as many refer to it as the “horse race” narrative, essentially a discussion of who was winning or losing in a given contest. Comparatively, substantive concerns, such as policy positions and background election issues, only received 11 percent of all coverage. From Patterson’s (2016) work, it is clear that the media coverage was lacking in its substantive coverage.

Media is crucial to the outcome of any election, and this is indicated by the fact that campaigns at nearly all levels of government retain staffers to deal with the press or even public relations firms. The media acts as a megaphone that if used correctly, can broadcast a campaign’s messages to voters frequently and can shape the nature of discussion in an election. In addition to the role that the media plays in the campaigns themselves, the public relies on media to learn about the issues at hand and what each candidate has proposed to address them. The fact is that as polarization has risen, there also has been an emergence of partisan cable news networks, which in turn has impacted the popularity, and viability of traditional news networks. While the traditional news networks are still popular, as the study conducted by Gottfried, Barthel, and Mitchell (2017) shows, more and more voters are favoring partisan cable news. The circumstances create an electorate that turns

to news sources that are biased in their coverage, something that has been translated into the nature of our government. As stated before, a great deal of Americans get their news from within their political circles, and as the study conducted by Gottfried, Barthel, and Mitchell (2017) shows, where people get their news is becoming even more partisan based. Thus if it were possible to inject the coverage provided partisan news sources like Fox News or MSNBC with a degree of unbiased, factual coverage it would go a long way to creating a more informed voting public.

The present problem with the media's coverage of elections contributes to the issue that was touched upon in Bonica (2015) and Prior and Stroud's (2015) proposed reform: the fact that voters lack access and exposure to quality, substantive coverage has contributed to the levels of polarization in government. Revisiting the study conducted by Fowler and Margolis (2014), there is a clear effect on vote choice, particularly the degree to which the electorate supports one party, that stems from individuals being provided additional information. Again, voting for one party or another does not qualify an individual's decision as a poor one, but instead the fact that an individual fails to receive quality, non-partisan campaign coverage prevents them from making a fully informed decision. Without this type of coverage, which is essentially relatively uncommon in the present day media, voters are left to make their decisions based on the partisan cues that are covered in the media.

In order to solve the problem of what information is received by voters, many would say that the most efficient way is to go directly to the source of the

information and reform it. By having media outlets, particularly the television mediums, devote a larger portion of their coverage to the substantive material in campaigns, voters would gain exposure to the political reality outside their bubbles. Furthermore, they would be more knowledgeable about where candidates stand on a particular issue. Through this method, this reform aims to address the issue of political polarization head on. Assuming that voters form the foundations of their voting habits through the information they receive, by altering their exposure to include more unbiased and substantive policy information, their habits overall would likely be impacted. Furthermore, it is important to note that this proposal does not eliminate partisan news, but instead increases the accessibility of more substantive information. The reason why the content of news coverage is targeted as opposed to say eliminating partisan news sources entirely is that studies have been conducted that say that partisan news networks do not directly affect the levels of political polarization amongst the public. Markus Prior (2013) studied this topic and concluded that there was mixed evidence to support the notion that partisan news networks increase the levels of polarization. What Prior's study indicates is that a great deal of the issue stems from the content of coverage, which lacks devotion to substantive issues. Given that the new information would be relatively unbiased and would provide a larger foundation of policy information leads me to believe that in fact, many voters would come to a different conclusion in the voting booth, as this new information would alter their voter decision-making process throughout the campaign. The changes that would arise as a result of the

implementation of this reform would undoubtedly impact the levels of political polarization in government.

Enacting this reform would explicitly impact the First Amendment rights of the media outlets, by essentially making them alter the way that they cover campaigns. Thus, I deem the political viability of this reform to be highly questionable. In previous generations, such a move would be considered to be undemocratic and compared to actions in Soviet Russia, but as politicians, pundits and the general public begin to grasp with the challenge of “fake news” and begin to understand how the media influences voter decision-making, there are many who could be persuaded to support the implementation of a form of news regulation. Factoring in the broad support that the First Amendment has in America, it seems unlikely to me that a proposal that directly meddles with the media outlets would receive support from politicians or the public. In fact, I believe that many in America would perceive the implementation of this reform as the beginning of a slippery slope, one that would slowly erode the freedoms granted by the First Amendment. Based on the sentiment presented above, I deem the likelihood that this reform would be able to be enacted presently to be quite low.

Although the role that the media plays in elections only continues to grow, the present path that our country is one that is troublesome given the degree to which the coverage presented is biased and focuses on more peripheral issues of the campaign as opposed to the substantive ones. Additionally, as America has seemingly entered into a “post-truth” society where even the president attempts to discredit opposing news sources, it is not surprising that scholars have taken aim at

the industry. Although reforming the media outlets to change the type of coverage they provide to the public is an alarming action to take, and one that is almost certainly unachievable currently, it is one that would bring about a great deal of positive change, including broadening the perspectives of many Americans. Further research could be conducted in order to determine how this proposal could be implemented in online mediums, as the role of online sources is only poised to grow in the years to come. Many would not deem this reform necessary today, but in two or three years if the Trump administration continues to repeat its actions towards the press, for example calling certain outlets like CNN and *The New York Times* enemies of the public, that sentiment may certainly change.

Conclusion

As voters are the most important actors in any election, it should be a cause for concern when they are so clearly being deprived of the full picture. The two reforms discussed above would each take aim at providing more information to the electorate in the hopes of alleviating the levels of political polarization in America. Being that I believe Bonica (2015) and Prior and Stroud's (2015) proposal to create a voter guide with evaluations of the candidates' ideologies and their policy proposals has a great likelihood of to impact the issue of political polarization and is also much more feasible than the proposal to force the media to alter its coverage of elections, I deem that reform to be the most worthwhile of pursuing in the fight against political polarization in America out of the two reforms reviewed in this chapter.

Chapter 5: Electoral Reforms

A fourth and final area that scholars have targeted for reform in the hopes of addressing the levels of political polarization in America is our nation's electoral system. The electoral system encompasses a variety of different aspects, including the drawing of districts, both primary and general elections, and voter engagement amongst others, which combine to create the process by which America forms its government at all levels. As the electoral system carries a tremendous weight in both who gets elected to political office and the overall political discourse in this country, scholars have rightfully targeted this area as a means of solving the problem of political polarization.

In this chapter, I will be focusing on three proposed reforms that target different areas of America's electoral system. These reforms are redistricting reform, voter turnout reform, and primary election reform. Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein (2012), as well as Gary Jacobson (2015), have identified that the process by which our congressional districts are drawn has become extremely flawed, and suggest handing over the redistricting process to an independent non-partisan commission. Several scholars, including Mann and Ornstein (2012), Arend Lijphart (2015), and Elaine Kamarck (2015), hone in on the issue of voter turnout in elections, suggesting many reforms that address how individuals register to vote, ID laws, and when Election Day is held. A great deal of reforms have targeted the primary electoral system in our country indirectly, but both Mann and Ornstein (2012) as well as Jacobson (2015), suggest that we must take steps to reform the system directly by implementing alternative primary systems.

The goal for this chapter is to evaluate which of the aforementioned reforms addressing the American electoral system is most worthwhile of pursuing. To do so, the follow five questions will be answered for each proposed reform: what is the reform, what is the problem that the reform addresses, how is that problem related to political polarization, how does the reform address political polarization, and what is the political viability of this reform. The answers to these questions allows for a comparison between each of the reforms discussed and provide the justification for why one reform is the most worthy of pursuing.

Reform: Redistricting Reform

One reform that is backed by Mann and Ornstein (2012), as well as Jacobson (2015), is to shift control of the redistricting process to independent non-partisan commissions. Independent non-partisan redistricting commissions can vary in their size but are balanced in the political leanings of its members (Loyola Law School 2017). The individuals selected to serve on a redistricting commission are tasked with redrawing a given state's various political districts, in the case of this reform the congressional districts. Furthermore, the factors that guide the redistricting commissions vary, but typically are centered on district shape, geographical features and political competitiveness (Loyola Law School 2017). This would be a dramatic change from most present redistricting process whereby each state is allowed to determine how its congressional districts are drawn. Of the 43 states that have more than one congressional district, only four of them (California, Arizona, Idaho, and Washington) have redistricting processes that are not handled by

politicians in some form (Loyola Law School 2017). Not only would this reform mean that 43 states would have to completely overhaul their redistricting process, but also the implementation of this reform would remove the partisan aspect of redistricting by dramatically reducing the influence of politicians in the process. What this reform would not do is that it would not force states to alter how frequently districts would be redrawn. The reform proposed by Mann and Ornstein (2012) and Jacobson (2015) would attempt to remove the partisan influence in the redistricting process by giving control of all state's redistricting systems to independent commissions.

The problem that scholars have identified is that the process by which America's congressional districts are drawn is an unbalanced one and one that is purposely crafted with the intent of lowering the degree of competitiveness in the districts. State legislatures, which are responsible for the redistricting process in 37 states, often draw districts in such a way to favor the party that is in the majority within the state legislature (Loyola Law School 2017). As districts have been drawn in favor of one political party or another, the overall level of competition has diminished and thus the redistricting process has led to the creation of more ideologically extreme districts. Nate Silver (2012) notes this change highlighting the fact that in 1992, 103 members of the House were elected from swing districts or districts where the margin of victory was within 5 percentage points of the national total. Silver notes that in 2012 that number was down to 35 members of the House. Thus, the redistricting process has not only impacted the overall level of political

competition across America, it has also contributed to who can get elected to Congress.

The proposal to give redistricting power in all states to an independent commission clearly addresses an issue that is tied directly to the problem of political polarization in America. The lack of competition within congressional districts, as many districts are drawn to favor one party, has enabled those on far right and far left to push into government many of their ideological peers. I have noted repeatedly that the ideological overlap amongst members of Congress has disappeared entirely in the last 40 years, something that in part has become a reality due to the more frequent election of ideologically extreme candidates (DeSilver 2014). Those candidates are able to flourish within politically uncompetitive and unbalanced districts as those who consistently turn out to vote are more likely to be ideologically far left or far right (Dimock et al. 2014). Furthermore, as districts have continuously been drawn in such a way that prevents a competitive election between both parties, the ideologically extreme elected officials sent to Congress from these districts have contributed to the overall levels of gridlock and dysfunction of the federal government. The problem of a broken redistricting process, a problem that Mann and Ornstein (2012) and Jacobson's (2015) proposal aims to fix, is one that has clearly contributed to the overall levels of political polarization in America, particularly in Congress as the flaws in the system make it easier for more ideologically extreme individuals to be elected.

Looking at how redistricting reform will address the issue of political polarization, I first will look at the methods by which the reform aims to address the

issue and then examine scholarly analysis that looks at whether or not the reform, where it has been implemented, has been successful in achieving its aim.

Redistricting reform is clear in its intentions, as it aims to lower the levels of political polarization by redrawing districts in such a way as to create more politically heterogeneous districts that are more competitive. In theory, this would be a fantastic way to significantly lower the number of ideologically extreme members of Congress, but several studies conducted by scholars show that in many cases of redistricting reform, the redrawn districts tend to have more ideologically extreme representatives. The research, which was conducted by Nolan McCarty and Boris Shor (2015, 30), says that many redistricting reform efforts fail, “given the strong residential clustering of citizens with similar social, economic, and political views.” Thus, McCarty and Shor (2015, 30) state that many redistricting reforms aim to create spatially diverse districts, which “refer to the variation of individual attributes (e.g. income, race, education) across geographic space.” McCarty and Shor (2015) point to the work of Nicholas Stephanopoulos (2011), who analyzed spatial diversity in congressional districts and came to the conclusion that districts that were more spatially diverse elected to the House of Representatives more ideologically polarized individuals than less spatially diverse districts. McCarty and Shor (2015) concur with Stephanopoulos’ (2011) conclusion, and essentially argue that to fix the issue of political polarization by focusing on redistricting reform would be a fruitless endeavor. That being said, there are also studies that implicate that redistricting can have an effect on the levels of polarization in government. Research conducted by David Oedel, Allen Lynch, Sean Mulholland and

Neil Edwards (2009) finds that members of the House of Representatives elected from states with independent redistricting commissions have less partisan voting records than their peers from states without independent commissions. Based on the work of scholars like McCarty and Shor (2015), Stephanopoulos (2011) and Oedel et al. (2009), it is clear that scholars are mixed in their evaluations of the effects of reforming the redistricting process on political polarization. Thusly, although I accept the validity of the theory behind the reform, but based on the empirical evidence undertaken by others, I cannot definitively say that the implementation of this reform would address the issue of political polarization.

In examining the political viability of this proposal, we must first acknowledge the fact that in four states independent commissions already control the redistricting process. What makes this fact more intriguing is the fact two of the states, California and Washington, tend to be strong blue states, while the other two, Arizona and Idaho, tend to be strong red states. What is indicative of this is that past proposals to shift control of the redistricting process to independent commissions has found support from both the left and the right. All four of the states mentioned above switched to an independent redistricting commission after ballot measures that were supported by a majority of residents in those states (Loyola Law School 2017). Although this may be true, as the previous implementations of independent redistricting commissions have all come on a state-by-state basis, it is quite likely that many states that are either deeply liberal or deeply conservative will forgo the implementation of this reform in favor of keeping their current system until they determine that an independent redistricting commission would pose no threat to

their grip on political power. This conclusion stems from the fact that many politicians might be threatened by the implications of creating an independent redistricting commission. It is my estimation that if this reform were to force all 37 states to adopt it, the political viability would be significantly reduced as opposed to if it were to be implemented on a state-by-state basis. An additional benefit of implementing an independent redistricting commission is that the state's control the redistricting process, which means the reform could be implemented without needing the action of Congress. As each state varies in its political makeup and overall level of political competitiveness, there certainly would be pushback from elected officials in states who worry about what stimulating more competition through the redrawing of districts would do their electoral chances. In all, I believe that if carried out by individual states, this reform would have a very strong chance of being implemented, and eventually might even reach all 43 applicable states, particularly as voters in states begin to feel the effects of switching to independent redistricting commissions on their elections.

Reform: Remove Obstacles to Increase Voter Turnout

Many Americans would consider the process of registering to vote and voting itself to be, although somewhat time-consuming, relatively painless. Beneath that surface sentiment, however, there are hundreds of thousands of individuals who cannot vote or are prevented from voting due to several obstacles that make voting entirely too difficult for them. These obstacles include ID laws, the allowable methods of voting, and when Election Day is held. Reforms to increase voter

turnout, which are backed by many scholars, including Mann and Ornstein (2012), Lijphart (2015), and Kamarck (2015) amongst others, focus on removing these obstacles in order to stimulate high voter turnout amongst the electorate. These reforms would fundamentally affect how American elections are held and how voters participate in them, with the hope that if barriers are removed to voting, more people would participate in the process.

The problem that this reform aims to address is the relatively low and inconsistent levels of turnout amongst American voters. According to statistics gathered by the Pew Research Center (DeSilver 2016), only 53.6 percent of the American public of voting age voted in the 2012 presidential election, a figure that puts the U.S. below countries like Norway, Czech Republic, and Turkey. The fact that nearly half the individuals who are eligible to vote don't is a problem in itself. As is clear from the facts presented by DeSilver (2016), present American elections are likely creating results that misrepresent the true sentiment of Americans. Of course, many Americans are not politically engaged, as you recall I discussed a series of reforms targeting the American electorate in a previous chapter, but the voting obstacles that exist also contribute to the dismal turnout figures. Of course, as we begin to consider how this problem is related to the issue of political polarization it is important to consider the fact that who votes in elections has an impact on who gets elected.

The issue of poor voter turnout not only affects both political parties, but it also affects the political middle of the country. What we have seen is that this level of reduced participation, partly as a result of voter ID laws, has increasingly

produced a polarized government, as DeSilver (2014) shows that the ideological overlap in both the House and Senate has significantly dropped off over the years. If obstacles to voting were removed that would increase voter turnout across the country it is likely that many future elections would be more competitive than they are now. Take for example the analysis done by Nate Silver (2012), from FiveThirtyEight, who estimates that ID laws could decrease voter turnout anywhere between .8 percent and 2.4 percent, which may not seem like a great deal of votes, but when looking at a presidential election that percentage can amount to tens or even hundreds of thousands of votes. Each vote lost to ID laws, or from the fact that voting can be inconvenient for individuals who have multiple responsibilities to balance, can accumulate, and before we realize it can swing the outcome of an election in favor of one side or another. Furthermore, as many studies including the one done by Pew Research Center (Dimock et al. 2014), individuals who strongly identify with one party or another are far more likely to turnout to vote. According to Dimock's study, 78 of "consistently conservative" individuals always vote and 58 percent of "consistently liberal" individuals always vote. Compare that to only 39 percent of "mixed ideology" individuals who say the same, and what becomes clear is that regardless of the obstacles to voting those on the far left and far right are always going to make it to the polls, while those in the middle are more likely to stay home. Thus, removing many of the obstacles to voting, as Lijphart (2015), Kamarck (2015) and Mann and Ornstein (2012) suggest we do, would directly impact the levels of political polarization, particularly in government as it would significantly impact the ideological makeup of those who vote in any given election.

Each of the three reforms discussed in this section all aim to increase voter turnout as a means of addressing political polarization, but each of the three reforms are distinct in the means by which they aim to do so, and also vary in the degree to which they are likely to be successful.

First I will discuss the proposal to expand access to mail-in ballots. The thought behind this reform is that by making voting more convenient through allowing individuals to vote without having to leave their home, more people will participate in elections. In fact, several states have implemented voting by mail in their elections, and thus I looked at the trends in voter participation in presidential elections for the state of Oregon, which implemented a vote-by-mail (VBM) system in the late 1990s. In 2000, Oregon held their first presidential general election in a VBM system, and 79.8 percent of registered voters participated, up 8 percentage points from the 1996 election. The upward trend continues in 2004, as 86.5 percent voted in that VBM election, and then essentially plateaus in following elections, as 2008 saw 85.7 percent participation, and 2012 saw 82.8 percent participation (Oregon Secretary of State 2016). The 2016 election saw a slight drop in turnout percentage, dropping down to 80.3 percent, which was still 9 percentage points higher than turnout in 1996 (Oregon Secretary of State 2016). Scholars Elizabeth Bergman and Phillip Yates (2011) studied the effects of switching over to a vote-by-mail electoral system and arrived at two very interesting conclusions. Bergman and Yates (2011) determined that switching to a VMB system, the likelihood that an individual would vote decreased by a little more than 13 percent. They attributed this fact to the poor implementation of the new voting system by the County Board

of Elections. What the scholars also discovered is that if voters were contacted four or more times by their county board of elections, the likelihood that they would vote actually increased by four percent. Therefore, switching to a vote-by-mail system actually increases turnout significantly if accompanied by semi-frequent reminders. Based on this information, I deem the proposal to implement a vote-by-mail system to be successful in its attempts to boost voter turnout, thus affecting the ideological makeup of those voting which has a direct effect on the levels of political polarization in government.

Moving on to an analysis of how moving Election Day to the weekend would address the issue of political polarization by boosting voter turnout, a few studies have been conducted that conclude that the proposal would actually do very little to change voter turnout. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (2012), also known as the GAO, studied the idea of moving Election Day to the weekend and found that there are a whole host of obstacles that would arise that would make voting on the weekend difficult. The same GAO (2012) report concluded that there would be little change in voter turnout if elections were moved to the weekend, pointing to the fact that when it was offered to Maryland voters in 2010, only 1.5 percent took advantage of the weekend voting option. The impact of weekend voting is particularly hard to judge as it has been implemented in such few elections, so a great deal of weight should be placed on the theory behind the proposal. As stated earlier, moving Election Day is aimed at making voting more convenient for everyone and thus more people would turn out to vote. Based on data collected by the Pew Research Center (2014) after the 2014-midterm elections, that sentiment

appears to be true as 35 percent of respondents said they did not vote because of conflicts with work or school. The question then becomes whether or not if moved people would actually take advantage of the new changes. What I believe is that the proposal to move Election Day to the weekend possesses limited potential to raise voter turnout and thus affect political polarization.

Finally, looking at the ability of removing voter ID laws to affect the levels of political polarization, it is clear that the reform would almost certainly be successful in its goal of boosting voter turnout. As mentioned earlier, the exact figures as to how many Americans are prevented from voting due to ID laws is unknown, but regardless of the estimate what is clear is that there are many Americans who cannot vote due to a lack of adequate identification. Individuals who suffer from voter ID laws, particularly those who were turned away at the polls, are particularly likely to turn out to vote as they were attempting to do so in this first place, there is no doubt in my mind that repealing all voter ID laws would lead to an increase in voter turnout. Revisiting the figures presented by Silver on how voter ID laws suppress turnout, he gives a range of .8 percent to 2.4 percent, which would in the 2016 election would have translated into between just over 1 million votes and 2.5 million votes, which depending on the location would have the ability to change the outcome of the contest. Of course, that boost in voter turnout may be temporary as once voters have the ability to vote they may choose not to exercise that right as there is no evidence to support the notion that voters that are affected by ID laws consistently turnout. Therefore out of the three reforms discussed in this section, it

is my estimation that this reform would do the very little to affect political polarization.

In discussing the political viability of reforms to increase voter turnout it is important to establish that each of these sub-reforms that fall under the larger umbrella of increasing voter turnout have varying degrees of opposition. For example, Republicans in government have fought vehemently to keep in place and expand voter ID laws across the country, and thus the proposal to eliminate all voter ID laws would surely be opposed by the party as a whole. In that sense, the reform that targets voter ID laws, as a means of increasing voter turnout is by far the most partisan in its nature, as it would pit the Democrats directly against the Republicans. Given the slim likelihood that there would be bipartisan support for removing ID laws, I deem the political viability of that reform to be the lowest of the three reforms that aim to increase voter turnout.

Looking at the proposal to change the day of the week when elections are held, the prospects are significantly better. Both parties' voters are negatively affected by the fact that Election Day is held during the workweek, as many employers do not permit their employees to take time off to vote. Shifting Election Day to Saturday would make voting a whole lot easier for many Americans, and would boost turnout in a non-partisan way. Both parties have held primary elections on Saturdays, so there is enough precedent to indicate that this reform would not face immediate opposition from one party. It should be noted, though, that Republicans tend to oppose efforts to expand voting, as they believe that effects help Democrats win elections. Furthermore, as there are some religious conflicts

with moving Election Day to the weekend, namely the Sabbath for Judaism and Christianity, which occurs on Saturday and Sunday, respectively. Taking that into account, the proposal could be altered to expand Election Day to the entire weekend to accommodate various religious beliefs. Aside from the potential religious objections, I deem the political viability of shifting Election Day to the weekend to be quite high, although not the highest of all three reforms discussed that aim to increase voter turnout.

I believe that the reform to provide greater access to mail-in voting is the reform, out of the three, that is most likely to be implemented. Several reasons have led me to this conclusion, the first of which is the fact that it is relatively non-partisan. It is my estimation that neither party would either benefit or be harmed by the implementation of this reform. Secondly, the expansion of voting by mail makes voting much more convenient, as voters have the ballot delivered to them, fill it out, and send it back without ever having to miss work or wait in line. Finally, the fact that mail-in ballots have already been implemented in several states, and is being targeted for expansion by other towns and states is indicative of the fact that people already support this proposal. That being said, the sentiment that Republicans oppose all proposals to expand voting still would likely be true in this case. The three factors lead me to believe that if pursued, the reform to expand mail-in voting would have the highest chance of implementation of the three reforms discussed that aim to increase voter turnout.

Reform: Overhauling Primary Elections

America's primary election system has become one of the main antagonists in the struggle to address the issue of political polarization in our country, which is why scholars have put forth a variety of proposals, many of which target different aspects of primary elections, that would reform the system. The reforms that I will be discussing in this section are put forth by scholars like Mann and Ornstein (2012) and Jacobson (2015), and attempt to overhaul the entire primary election process by replacing the current system with a variety of open primary systems, similar to the ones held by states across the country. This reform would eliminate the current system by which both parties hold a primary election, and replace it with either a semi-closed, semi-open, open, or non-partisan election system. McGhee et. al. (2013, 341) created a brilliant table, that I have included below, that illustrates the differences between the various primary systems. The major differences between the various primary systems focus on two factors: who can vote in the primary and how one registers to vote. For example, pure closed primary systems, which are used by most states, only allow individuals who are registered members of a party to vote in that party's primary election, while a pure open system allows members of both parties to vote in the primary election granted that they change their party affiliation prior to Election Day. These alternative primary systems alter participation in primary elections by opening them up to more voters, which then can lead to alternative primary election results. The aim of this reform is to alter the way by which primary elections are run, by changing how they are structured and who can participate in them.

	Crossovers Allowed?	Independents Only?	Public Decision?	Registration Requirement?	Choose Parties?	Literature Prediction
Pure closed	No	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Partisan
Semiclosed	Yes	Yes	Yes	Sometimes	Yes	Moderate
Semiopen	Yes	No	Yes	Sometimes	Yes	Mixed
Pure open	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Mixed
Nonpartisan	Yes	No	No	No	No	Moderate

Note: The first column (Crossovers Allowed?) indicates whether the system allows crossover voters at all; the second column (Independents Only?) indicates whether independents alone are allowed to cross over; the third column (Public Decision?) indicates whether crossover voters must declare their crossover decision publicly; the fourth column (Registration Requirement?) indicates whether crossover voters must register formally with the party they cross to; the fifth column (Choose Parties?) indicates whether crossover voters must stick with the party they cross to or can cross back and forth from race to race; and the final column indicates the prediction from the literature on whether the given system produces moderation.

Before moving on to answer the remainder of questions that are posed to each reform, it is important that the difference between the reform that will be discussed in this section and the ones that were discussed in chapter three are abundantly clear. In chapter three the reforms that were discussed altered primary elections in such a way as to shift more of the power and control over them to the political parties. Those reforms gave control of certain aspects of the election to the parties, which of course affect the entire primary election system as a whole. In this chapter, the reforms that will be discussed aim to entirely revamp the system, and do not aim to shift control to the political parties or any singular political actor. While both sets of reforms may lead to similar outcomes, the methods by which they achieve those outcomes are entirely different.

The problem that this reform aims to address is that America's current primary system produces too many ideologically extreme candidates, which thus leads to more ideologically extreme elected officials. This is partially due to the way that primary elections are set up, with candidates from the same party competing for votes from individuals who, for the most part, are also ideologically aligned with that party. Additionally, the fact that the majority of primary voters are more

ideologically extreme than voters in general elections, which factors into why more ideologically candidates emerge from primary elections. By overhauling the system entirely, this reform aims to rid these two realities from elections.

The problem of an abundance of ideologically extreme candidates and elected officials is directly related to the issue of political polarization. These candidates emerge from the flawed structure of primary election systems, which enable the ideologically extreme voters to play an outsized role in who wins. As was stated earlier, Dimock's (2014) study shows that the far left and far right are more likely to vote, particularly in primary elections, thus the closed primary system, which prevents independents from participating, enables far left and far right candidates to emerge victoriously. There are several ways, in which this problem is related to political polarization the first, and foremost is the more extreme our elected officials are, the more likely they are to act in a partisan manner. This contributes to the levels of political polarization seen in American government, as well as to the degree to which the government works in a functional manner. Furthermore, as many Americans take their political cues and views from elected officials, the more ideologically far-out individuals elected, the greater the likelihood that individuals will draw upon those politicians for their own views. Thus, the impact of primary elections producing partisan candidates reaches beyond the halls of local, state or federal government and can influence the political views and mindsets of Americans across the country.

In looking at how proposed reforms to alter the primary electoral system affect the levels of political polarization it is important to distinguish between the

theory behind the proposal and the actual results that have occurred from its implementation throughout America. As explained earlier, the thought behind changing the means by which primary elections are structured, there would be an increase in moderate candidates elected to office, and thus the overall levels of political polarization in government would decrease. But over time scholars have identified various conclusions on the effects of different primary systems, noting that only some types of alternative primary systems, semi-closed and non-partisan, are moderating in the effects. For example, a study conducted by Elisabeth Gerber and Rebecca Morton (1998) finds that U.S. representatives from states that hold closed primaries take policy positions that are the furthest from their district's median voter's position. Additionally, Gerber and Morton (1998) find that U.S. representatives elected from states that utilize a semi-closed primary system actually stake out policy positions that are the most moderate. Another study conducted in 2013 by Eric McGhee, Seth Masket, Boris Shor, Steven Rogers, and Nolan McCarty (2013, 337), finds that "the openness of a primary election has little, if any, effect on the extremism of the politician it produces." Interestingly enough, although the scholars fail to see a strong connection between the various primary systems and the level of extremism of politicians elected, they do acknowledge that California's blanket primary system has, in fact, achieved bringing about more moderate politicians (McGhee et al 2013). Granted that as many primary systems have come under changes recently, it is understandable that scholars have not reached a strong consensus on the effects of the reforms. That being the case, the lack of consensus concerns me, for it would be disastrous to invest in overhauling

primary election systems across the country only to discover that they truly have no effect on the level of extremism held by the politicians elected. Conversely, compared to the other reforms discussed in this chapter, almost all of which scholars have determined have no effect on the levels of political polarization, the fact that some of the effects of overhauling primary elections are unknown is also a positive when compared to its peers in this chapter. Given that some have identified benefits of implementing alternative forms of primary systems, and thus this reform cannot entirely be classified as ineffective, it is my estimation that reforming primary election systems can still address the issue of political polarization.

As has been the case with several of the reforms discussed in this section, one must acknowledge the fact that some of these reforms have been implemented already in states throughout the country. I believe that this reform would have a strong chance of being implemented if rolled out on a state-by-state basis to begin. Thus far California, Louisiana, Washington and Nebraska all utilize some form of a blanket primary system in their elections, again indicating that both the political left and right have found merits in alternative forms of a primary election. Louisiana, Washington, and Nebraska all implemented their alternative primary systems through their state legislatures, while California's system came into existence via a ballot measure (National Conference of State Legislatures 2016). An additional factor that leads me to believe that this proposal would have a strong chance of being enacted is the fact that states control their own electoral processes, which means that they do not have to go through the federal government to get approval. The benefit of this is that this reform would likely not be impeded by the partisan

state of Congress. Of course in many states, there would be opposition from the political party that stands to lose the most from the implementation of this reform, but the roadblocks are less severe than the ones faced by legislation at the federal level. In all, I estimate the political viability of this reform to be quite high due to its present level of support and the fact that it faces fewer obstacles on the path to implementation.

Conclusion

All three proposals that aim to reform America's electoral system in the hopes of addressing the levels of political polarization all have their merits and faults. Out of the three, I believe that the push to increase voter turnout, more specifically the proposal to switch to a vote-by-mail system, is the most worthwhile of pursuit. The reform, which aims to make voting easier for all Americans, and thus pushes for increased levels of voter turnout, in my opinion, has the ability to address the issue of political polarization and also is quite politically viable. Two other reasons have led to me to such a conclusion. Firstly, switching to a vote-by-mail system has been proven by scholars to significantly increase levels of voter turnout if implemented properly. The increase in voter turnout alters the ideological makeup of those who vote, by diluting the ideological extreme individuals who consistently turnout to vote with more moderate voters. By switching to this new system of voting, the percentage of individuals who vote in elections would surely increase, as was the case in Oregon, which saw a tremendous increase in voter turnout. Additionally, the proposal to overhaul the method by which Americans vote

does not face the likely strong opposition that many other reforms discussed in this chapter face, as it does not favor either political party. That being said, my support does not extend to the rest of the reforms that aim to boost voter turnout, as scholars have yet to determine if moving Election Day would boost turnout and voter ID laws are an extremely partisan issue, and their repeal would certainly face opposition from Republicans. Of the several reforms that were discussed in this chapter, I believe that the reform that pushes to switch to a vote-by-mail system is most worthwhile of pursuing, as it is quite politically viable and would bring about changes that would affect the levels of political polarization in the country.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The level of political polarization remains one of the most troubling issues that faces our country but also is an area of study that is constantly analyzed for potential solutions. The effects of political polarization are far reaching, affecting everything from the functionality of government to everyday political conversations between regular people. As we have seen in recent years, the general political discourse in America has taken a turn for the worse, with both sides becoming increasingly hostile towards one another. This is especially true in the halls of Congress as bipartisanship has almost entirely become extinct, and members of Congress on both sides of the aisle engage in partisan warfare and legislative obstruction.

As the preceding four chapters illustrate, there are numerous ways that scholars have proposed to deal with the issue of political polarization. The overarching areas targeted for reform that I highlighted include, reforming governmental procedures, reforming the political parties, reforming the American electorate, and finally reforming the electoral system in America. The reforms that were discussed in each of these sections differ in their goals, as some aim to simply mitigate the effects of political polarization, while others aim to tackle the levels of political polarization directly.

Before revealing which of the reforms I discussed is most worthwhile of pursuit, it is important that I first explain why the other reforms that were discussed in this work were not as good. The failings of the other reforms discussed typically fall into three distinct characterizations, which are that either they were too

politically controversial, or they did not do enough to address political polarization, or that they were too damaging to the foundations of American democracy.

Dealing first with the reforms that are unlikely to affect political polarization, my research found several reforms that fell into this category. First and foremost, the reforms that targeted governmental rules and procedures aim to simply mitigate the effects of political polarization as opposed to solving the problem itself. As a result, this area of reform is highly unlikely to lead to any significant impact on the levels of political polarization. Similarly, the reforms that aimed to strengthen political parties were also deemed extremely weak in their ability to affect political polarization in America. Additionally, the proposed reform to move Election Day to the weekend was deemed by scholars to be entirely ineffective in terms of addressing political polarization. Finally, the proposal to overhaul the primary election system was also deemed ineffective in creating more moderate elected officials, and thus ineffective in regards to political polarization. Based on the research that indicates these reforms would be unable to affect the issue of political polarization, they were automatically eliminated from contention.

After removing the above proposals from contention, several reforms remain. Before moving on with any further narrowing, it is important that each of the remaining reforms are revisited in order to illustrate how they are likely to affect political polarization.

Discussing first the reforms that target the American electoral system, several reforms were deemed to have an effect on the levels of political polarization. The remaining proposals are as follows: the reform to eliminate voter ID laws, the

reform to switch to independent redistricting commissions, and the reform to switch to a vote-by-mail system. The proposal to eliminate voter ID laws and the proposal to switch to a vote-by-mail system both aim to affect political polarization by increasing voter turnout, although they do so in different ways. Again, to revisit the logic behind increasing voter turnout as a means of addressing political polarization, the idea is that by removing obstacles to voting you would dilute the electoral impact of the far left and far right, who always turn out to vote, by injecting a large number of moderate voters who are less likely to turn out to vote. The reform that implements independent redistricting commissions aims to affect political polarization by overhauling the drawing of congressional districts and balancing the electoral playing field. For each of these reforms, there is scholarly evidence that indicates that they would be successful in accomplishing their goals, which enabled them to pass the initial round of the evaluation.

The second set of reforms that remain are the proposals that target the American electorate. The two proposals that were discussed in this section were, the reform that creates a non-partisan election information guide, and the reform that requires television news networks to devote more campaign coverage to substantive information. Both of these reforms are centered on the notion that a great deal of the American electorate is politically uninformed, and that if they were to be provided additional information, either in the form of an election information guide or news coverage of policy speeches and proposals, that they would vote differently. Significant research has been conducted that shows that voters, in fact, do change their ideological positions and voting behavior, when presented with new

information pertaining to policy platforms of both political parties and individual candidates (Fowler and Margolis 2013). Given the research that supports the merits of these reforms, they moved past the initial stage of evaluation.

The second criterion I used in determining which reform discussed in most worthwhile of pursuit, is would the reform undermine the democratic values of the United States? Of the remaining reforms, it was my estimation that only one reform undermined the democratic values of America, and that was the proposal that aims to force television news networks to provide more substantive coverage of campaigns. The concern surrounding this proposal is due to the fact that this reform gives the appearance that the government is meddling in the First Amendment right of these news networks. Thus, if this reform were to be implemented it would undermine the protections of free speech for all television media outlets.

Having applied the second criterion to the remaining reforms, the following proposals are still in contention: the proposal to switch to a vote-by-mail system, the reform that implements independent redistricting commissions, the proposal to provide a non-partisan information guide to the electorate, and finally the reform that aims to eliminate all voter ID laws. Before making a final determination, it is important that the third and final criterion is used to evaluate the discussed reforms.

The final criterion used to evaluate the remaining reforms was whether or not the reforms were politically viable. Applying this criterion, to the remaining reforms, I determined that one of the reforms was politically unviable. That reform was the proposal to eliminate voter ID laws. The pursuit of the reform that suggests

eliminating all voter ID laws would certainly lead to a partisan battle, given that the Republican Party is responsible for the creation and implementation of these ID laws in states across the country. Thus, it is highly unlikely that any Republicans in government would support such a reform, and therefore the reform's political viability is hampered.

Having applied the three above criterion to each of the reforms discussed in this work, I have identified three reforms that pass all the stages of evaluation. Those reforms are: the proposal to implement a vote-by-mail system, the proposal to create a non-partisan election information guide, and the reform that aims to implement independent redistricting commissions. Out of these three identified reforms, it is my estimation that the reform that aims to provide a non-partisan election information guide is the most worthy of pursuit. Prior to explaining why I have concluded that this reform is most worthy of pursuit, it is important that the limitations of the other two identified reforms are fleshed out.

Although both the proposal to implement a vote-by-mail system and the proposal to shift the redistricting process to an independent commission passed all three of the criterion laid out, the reason that they were not selected as the single reform most worthy of pursuit is that they were less convincing the degree to which they satisfied the criterion. Specifically, both reforms lacked resounding scholarly support for the notion that they could affect the levels of political polarization. For the redistricting reform, there was both scholarly research that supported the notion that the reform could lower the levels of political polarization and research that indicated that the reform would have minimal to no effect on the levels of

political polarization in America. Furthermore, given the proposal to switch to a vote-by-mail system is has only been recently implemented in places like Oregon, Washington, and Colorado, there is only a small amount of scholarly research that indicates the reform's effects on political polarization. Taking into account the limited support that both of these reforms received, it was impossible for me to select them as the reform most worthy of pursuit.

After conducting a thorough analysis of each of the reforms, I have come to the conclusion that the reform that aims to provide additional non-partisan electoral information to voters is the most worthwhile of pursuing. Specifically, the information provided would compare the ideology of every candidate in a particular race as well as provide an unbiased evaluation of each candidate's major policy proposals. Revisiting the two guiding metrics used to evaluate each of the reforms, this reform is both extremely politically viable and would be effective in addressing political polarization. The strong political viability is derived from the fact that elected officials from both sides as well as the general public would emphatically support such a proposal, given that it grants the public access to even more information and provides an added degree of political transparency to elections. This reform would address political polarization by reforming how individuals choose whom to vote for. The introduction of non-partisan information on candidates' ideologies, as well as evaluations of major candidate policy proposals, would provide insight to voters that they currently do not have access to. This information would specifically allow voters to see how these candidates would impact the levels of polarization in government and would lead voters to change

their ideological leanings and vote choice, as studies have shown. Furthermore, this reform is unique in the sense that it has the ability to not only impact the levels of political polarization in government by changing the voting habits of the American public but also bridge some of the ideological gap between the general public by opening their eyes to new information. Although this reform faces a great deal of challenges to its successful implementation, most notably the questions of how to properly disseminate this information and how will this information be received by the public, it is clear that this reform does not fall into many of the pitfalls that its peers succumb to.

Throughout the course of my research, I examined each of these reforms potentials individually, without taking into account how each of the reforms would affect one another. Therefore, it is important that the effects of these proposals be discussed in combination with one another.

The main limitation that a great deal of these reforms face is that they rely upon the presence of moderate individuals running for political office. Proposals like the ones that target the American electorate are focused on pushing more Americans to support moderate candidates, but who's to say there would be any moderate candidates to support to begin with. In that sense, the reforms that target the American electorate are also reliant upon changes in the primary election system and the redistricting process, which would foster a political environment habitable for moderate candidates. Given that reality, it is possible that although individually the proposal to overhaul primary elections does not possess a great deal of merit, it would be necessary to implement that reform prior to pursuing

reforms that target the American electorate in order to efficiently address political polarization.

Another limitation that appears if one were to discuss the effects of the various proposals in combination is the fact that if the effects of political polarization were minimal, there would likely be no support to enact reforms that address the issue. For example, if the filibuster were to be altered or eliminated entirely, Congress would likely emerge from its state of gridlock, which is one of the main effects of political polarization that pundits and scholars point to. If this were to be the case, the average voter, who does not necessarily understand the problem of political polarization as it stands now, could possibly care even less about addressing the levels of political polarization than they do now. In that sense, not only does the success of some reforms rely upon the implementation of other reforms, but also all of the reforms depend on proposals that mitigate the effects of political polarization not being implemented.

Research Limitations:

As is the case with any research, there are limitations and the same can be said about my research for this work. The main limitation that I faced throughout my research is that a great deal of the reforms that were discussed have yet to be implemented and thus the available information pertaining to the reform's ability to affect political polarization is severely limited. This was the case for several reforms, including reforms that aim to strengthen the political parties as well as for the reform proposing to eliminate the debt ceiling. The effect of this limitation on my

conclusion is that I was forced to determine which reform would be most worthwhile of pursuing without a uniform level of information about each reform discussed. Thus, if new research were to emerge that indicates that strengthening political parties would significantly reduce the levels of political polarization in America, my conclusion might differ from the one presented above. This limitation is likely to be continuously faced by researchers focusing on solutions to political polarization as reforms are continuously being generated.

A second limitation that I faced during the course of my research was that several of the reforms discussed have been implemented in individual states across the country, but not enough time has elapsed to determine their true impact on political polarization. This was the case for the aforementioned proposal to switch to a vote-by-mail system, as well as for switching to alternative forms of primary elections. This limitation again impacted my conclusions, given that without a full understanding of the effects of a reform, I was left to make a determination based on the present understanding of the reform's effects. As reforms continue to be studied it is likely that new research will unveil a greater understanding of the recently implemented reforms, thus likely modifying the conclusions of future works that have the same aim as my research.

A third limitation, which was less significant than the first two, was that not all areas of reform were written about with similar depth. During my research, I found it much easier to locate scholarly work written about certain reforms that were discussed than others. While there was an abundance of work done on governmental reforms and electoral reforms, there was less work to be found on the

topic of reforming political parties to address political polarization. As my aim was to evaluate each of these reforms, the reforms that had less written about them were limited in their ability to be fully analyzed. Thus as research continues to be conducted, future works may come to alternative conclusions based on new studies conducted.

Notes for Further Research:

Moving forward, the push back against political polarization must be strong and unified. Scholars, politicians, and political pundits alike all need to understand that this issue threatens to erode the functionality of our government and the general discourse of politics. Political polarization has already created a great deal of political uncertainty and unrest, and if not addressed its effects could easily be crippling. In that sense, each of these three actors must be vigilant in their outspoken criticism of polarization and simultaneously raise awareness amongst the general public about the threat that political polarization poses to America.

Scholars should continue to propose and research various reforms that aim to address political polarization, specifically focusing on reforms that address the issue of political polarization head on, not simply mitigate its effects. Additionally, scholars should constantly be focused on studying the effects of political polarization. These studies will not only raise awareness to the damaging effect that political polarization has, but it will almost certainly spur a larger call for action. By continuously producing research on political polarization, scholars will not only provide a foundation of support for others to call for action but will also act as a guide for the steps that can be taken to address the issue of political polarization.

Members of government at all levels should continue to fund studies and provide grants for research that focuses on political polarization, as once members of Congress become serious about addressing the issue they can use their platform to raise awareness amongst the general public. Additionally, by having elected officials illustrate the dangers of political polarization, it will almost certainly elevate the issue to one of national importance, making any opposition to addressing it politically unviable.

Finally, political pundits should write articles and spread stories that illustrate the need for focus on this topic. Again, the focus here is to stir up public awareness and force individuals to take action to address political polarization. By discussing the issue on Sunday talk shows, on nightly newscasts and in the pages of the local and national papers, Americans will have no choice but to acknowledge the seriousness of the issue.

In all, the issue of political polarization is one that is likely to remain relevant in American political discourse until actors are willing to devote significant time and resources to addressing the problem that currently plagues politics in the United States. Moving forward it is important that there is a unified effort among many political actors to both raise awareness to political polarization and create solutions to address the problem of political polarization.

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