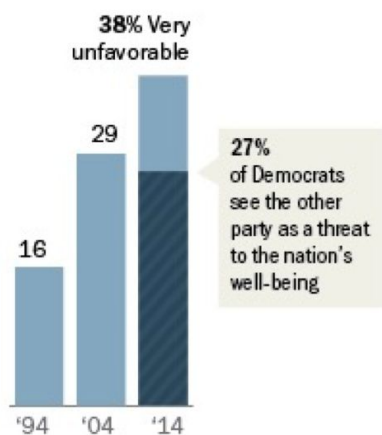


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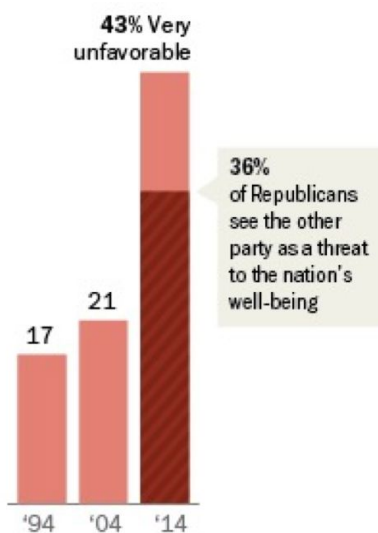
Polarization in Modern American Politics

President Donald J. Trump led a campaign promising the American citizens he would “Make America Great Again”. While, to some degree, this should be a general “goal” of all presidents, is it a realistic one for the America that exists today? I would say that it is more *realistic* to maintain and build upon the greatness that already exists. After a week in D.C., it is obvious that a large blockade to reaching this nation’s full potential is the polarized political environment that faces the United States now more than ever. Pew Research Center conducted a study in 2014 illustrating the “growing animosity” between the left and the right- the image is

Democratic attitudes about the Republican Party



Republican attitudes about the Democratic Party



below (Doherty).

What this looks like in real time is a lack of compromise within the American political system. Congressmen and women on the left and right are showing exponentially decreasing efforts to work across the aisle. One of the

most valuable aspects of my trip to Washington was in having the opportunity to meet with individuals of various walks of life from *both* sides of the aisle- which proved to be much more important than I realized at the time. This sense of polarization was profound in many of the meetings during the trip, I will highlight some of these examples later on. To be direct, the problem within modern American politics relies on the fact that it has become too polarized. With growing animosity between the left and right incessantly looming in the background,

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government is going to continue to be a problem and have problems- both internally and externally.

While in Washington, I took a brief trip to the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial. Amidst my walk through the memorial, I came across a quote that reads: "The structure of world peace cannot be the work of one man, or one party, or one nation... it must be a peace which rests on the cooperative effort of the whole world." This quote, from Franklin Delano Roosevelt's fourth term as president really stuck out to me. At first, I read it passively- merely positioning myself to take a photo and moving along. But then I went back, because I realized that I was going the wrong way, and the memorial made so much more sense. This quote was placed in a part of the memorial marking his fourth term. This term was his legacy- post New Deal, post World War II, he wanted the American people and his fellow representatives to understand the importance of compromise. Instead, America has seen the opposite happen in the years since 1945. This is representative of the issue that has become of modern American politics and it was evident during my time there.

As it was my first time in our nation's capital, I have nothing to compare this experience to. What I do have, though, is the personal accounts of those that we met with during our week in Washington. We were fortunate enough to have met with a slew of people who told personal anecdotes about their area of knowledge- all bountiful in expertise. I was pleasantly shocked at the honesty we received, to some extent. While I know some of the conversation we had I should take with a grain of salt, others were far too profound and impactful to be seen that way. Each of them spoke candidly about most questions they were asked. Every time I heard something along the lines of, "Off the record," I knew what followed would be well worth paying extra attention to. I ultimately chose to tell the "tale" of polarization because regardless of the public policy issue at hand, the topic remains relevant. I will focus my

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examples on the issues that interested me most during that week: health care, foreign affairs, and the political process/environment that currently exists. Each will illustrate the problem I defined earlier- too much polarization in modern day American politics.

I. Health Care

As is no secret, health care has been a hot button issue, and probably will be for awhile. Much of the debate comes out of President Obama's Affordable Healthcare Act (informally known as "Obamacare"). Now President Trump has promised to "repeal and replace" "Obamacare"- but it has not been going as planned. There have been multiple rounds of tug-o-war within Congress about how this issue should be handled. These wars are not just between the left and right, there is visible polarization within the party as well. A group commonly referred to as the "Freedom Caucus" has caused a lot of strife for the Republican party as they have been much less willing to compromise with a replacement of the Affordable Healthcare Act and they would like to see a complete drawback of universal healthcare.

The polarization that is being seen in Congress has made the jobs of our elected officials extremely difficult. Many American families are worried about their state as insured men, women, and children- especially those who are currently covered by Medicaid, but could see a quick swoop of those essential benefits in the near future. It's gruesome to imagine what could become of the United States healthcare system- right now it is looking more and more like a pendulum swinging back and forth as the US Government switches between the left and right leaning. While some speculate this pendulum swing will lead to compromise, this is a true danger for America- our government is supposed to be one that functions as one, not as a war between two parties.

Sarah Eggy, the Senior Manager at Ernst and Young, told a personal anecdote that truly allowed the dangers of political polarization to shine through. She began by telling us of her

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involvement in the creation and passing of the Affordable Care Act in March of 2010. It was so inspiring to listen to her talk about her work and passion for healthcare, especially for those who have little to no voice, but need it the most. As many good stories come to an end, this one did, too. While it is no secret that most Republicans, if not all, have an issue with the Affordable Care Act, the severity of it was exponentially higher when hearing it from an insider perspective. She placed a lot of blame on the Republican party, saying that they will be responsible for undoing all of the good that was done with the ACA. What is more frustrating, is the lack of compromise that was happening. Many of the proponents of "Obamacare" do not believe it is in its perfect form, or that it needs no tweaking. The Republican party is unwilling to work with the Democratic party to fix the flaws of the ACA and want to completely repeal it. While this is not necessarily going as planned, it is still important to see the lack of continuity and willingness to work together due to severe polarization in our United States government.

II. Foreign Affairs

I realized quickly that when anyone talked about foreign affairs or national security during the meetings in Washington, there was more tension between the executive branch and legislative branch versus between political parties. In almost 100% of the meetings, each presenter started off by expressing their dislike of our current president. I found it most interesting that those who were further right made it more of a point to do so. This is probably just because it often is no surprise when someone on the left expresses dislike for someone on the right, especially today. And vice versa.

Our meeting with Dr. Matthews, the CEO of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace shed a lot of light on the impact polarization can have on foreign affairs. Typically, the President of the United States and executive branch has a lot more involvement in foreign affairs than the other two branches. That being said, a lot of what he or she does comes with

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less check and/or balance from other branches. Dr. Matthews had a lot of commentary on the Paris Climate Deal that I took to be the most profound example of polarization between branches. President Trump was openly keen about pulling out of the Paris Climate Deal and doing so angered a lot of people on the left, naturally, but also on the right. The short and long term policy implications of a President consistently going “rogue” is already proving to be a dangerous thing. For me personally, hearing those who are of the same political party as our president expressing mistrust and dislike only frightens me more for the next three or so years to come.

While the intent of this paper is to show how the degree of polarization is hurting the growth of the United States, it seems that when more animosity exists between branches, there is more support within the branch. In terms of foreign affairs, the Republicans and Democrats seemed to coalesce around each other more when it comes to foreign affairs. A good example of this was the amendment passed by the Senate to provide sanctions in Russia and Iran by an almost unanimous vote (97-2). There are still things the parties do work together on and it is more extensive when the legislative branch is at odds with the executive.

III. Political Process/Environment

There was a time when working across the aisle was encouraged, and members of Congress routinely worked together, so the decline of this phenomenon is disheartening to say the least. Political parties are increasingly stepping over the political parties, and over their “coworkers”, just so they can say, “I won.” The Democrats, for example, did this when they decided to get rid of the filibuster on most nominations back in 2013. The Republicans were enraged by this, and fought back when it came to the nomination of Merrick Garland for the Supreme Court. Further, the Republicans followed suit and changed the rules, aiding the “nuclear option” and changing the way the Senate will operate forever- now requiring only a

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simple majority to pass and execute changes (Kane). Senator Lamar Alexander of Tennessee told reporters, "It's another raw exercise of political power to permit the majority to do anything it wants whenever it wants to do it," and that is simply dangerous for society and our government functionality as a whole.

We cannot completely blame the government for our polarized society. Among other things, this is in large part due to decreased voter turnout. The population of voters among those who are eligible is not increasing, but instead decreasing, especially when the candidates are more extreme. This is something the U.S. saw with our most recent presidential election. Some see not voting as a way of remaining politically active but it is simply untrue. This proved true for the millennial generation, having one of the lowest voter turnouts in history for young voters.

IV. Things to Remember

Despite its political flaws, Washington, D.C. is an undeniably magical city and I am proud to call it our nation's capital. This city is filled with young, bright, and energetic minds who want to create a society that functions at its highest potential. I would give three pieces of advice to future policy students that is of utmost importance when in Washington.

The first, ask questions. We have all heard our teachers and parents tell us that there are no "stupid" questions; There are, however, some questions which are better than others. Ask questions in a way that genuinely provokes intellect. People in Washington are of a different breed; they are well-informed of many things all of the time and there is probably not a single day that goes by that they ever miss a beat. To succeed in a place as fast paced as Washington, it is imperative to be well informed, well researched, and well read. You will be asked questions that you will want to know the answers to or at least have some sort of inkling as to what your opinions are.

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This sets up my second piece of advice: have opinions, but don't be argumentative. You will not get very far in a place like Washington if you don't have opinions that can't be backed up with more than, "well that's just what I believe." Having opinions, though, should not mean creating rifts with those who disagree with you. It is so important to be open minded and willing to hear another point of view other than your own without attacking them (this is where compromise is born!)

My last piece of advice, if I had to pick, would come from a law clerk for Justice Gorsuch, Michael Davis. On our exit from his rogue tour of the Supreme Court he said: "Remember to be bold". I may have had skepticism about this advice had he given this advice at the beginning of the tour, but we had the absolute pleasure of seeing him live his own advice. Michael Davis showed us a part of the Supreme Court we would not have seen were it not for him, he went completely off the beaten trail and gave us an insider's look at the highest court in the land. It really made an impact on the way that I view Washington. Our nation's capital is, without a doubt, filled with people like Michael Davis. Those are the people that Washington needs, they are the people that make the city run, and I am awe inspired by it.

To come full circle, think about President Trump's campaign slogan I presented at the beginning of this paper: "Make America Great Again". Is this achievable? Are people already achieving it? Yes, we are. And I have met people that are striving for it every day, many of whom we met in Washington, D.C. just a couple weeks ago.

NOTE-

Professor Caldwell, I would like to take just a second to thank you once again for the trip that we were on. It showed me a part of our nation's culture that I have been longing to see for so long. I appreciate your budget class so much more than I had previously- it really gave us an edge knowing the budget process like we do now.

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