THE CURRENT POLITICAL CLIMATE IN THE UNITED STATES AND ITS THREAT TO DEMOCRACY AND HEALTHCARE

By

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I will address the current political climate, the divide it has caused, and how it is posing a threat on the ability to make sound policy decisions that benefit all groups of people in America. The current political climate has caused a huge shift in healthcare, as well as led to overarching complications in the healthcare system. The lack of unanimity in the way healthcare should be addressed is a factor that has led to the chaotic political climate that we experience today. Whether it be prescription cost, drug abuse, or women's healthcare, there have been many negative implications from the lack of a functioning healthcare system. The Federal system in the United States lacks a balance of power, and the current administration has posed considerable debate in regard to the way healthcare should be addressed.

The current political climate in the United States of America is complicated, which makes it difficult to make sound policy decisions that will benefit the majority of American Citizens. The need for a functioning healthcare system is an example of one such policy area. The way to achieve a better and more comprehensive healthcare system has been the focus of considerable debate. The effectiveness of our healthcare system is too often attributed to income and geographic location. In order to achieve a higher functioning healthcare system, it is arguably important to maintain a balance of power within our federal system. Unfortunately, one of the reasons it is difficult to improve the healthcare system is because of the chaotic nature of the nation's political climate.

In order to understand the current political climate in the United States, it is important to recognize the different factors leading to political instability and division, which includes the media, polarization, and extreme income inequality. In this thesis, I will address the current political climate, how government officials and lawmakers address healthcare, and how US citizens are being impacted by the current healthcare policies in the United States.

Addressing The Current Political Climate:

First it is important to understand the overall political climate in the United States as a whole. Many citizens believe that healthcare is a human right. However, the current republican administration, which adheres to conservative viewpoints, is much less favorable to this position. For example, The Whitehouse healthcare page shares that the Trump Administration wants to cut funding for Planned Parenthood, repeal the

Affordable Care Act, and limit funding for other health related organizations, such as the World Health Organization (Healthcare 2020).

The media has also played a role in the deterioration of the current political climate by intensifying polarization. The information coming from Fox News and CNN, for example, are often conveying completely different messages in regard to the same topic. The issue with having such a polarizing media is that it divides the country to the point where people become much less willing to compromise. Arguably, the current administration has proven this to be true, as there have been many situations where the Trump Administration has taken advantage of the media for political reasons. [1]

Political Climate Research - What We See in Today's Voters:

In a study I conducted earlier this year for an honors Political Science Statistics course, I was looking to distinguish whether the ability to see if a candidate's political party next to their name affects the way people vote. Since I knew there were considerable factors leading to polarization in the United States, I wanted to see if the results from polls were being affected by people simply looking at a candidates party preference, and aligning their vote with that single factor, or if that was not causing too

[1] For example, Donald Trump has stated time and time again that he refuses to compromise on many aspects regarding the border wall. Quint Forgey notes an example of this in his article which includes quotes from President Trump. Forgey states, "On the morning after the partial government shutdown ended, President Donald Trump said talks with congressional Democrats over border security measures "will start immediately," but warned that it "will not be easy" to reach a compromise within the next three weeks" (Forgey 2019).

much of an impact. Many people might be voting for stances, candidates, and issues that they do not actually agree with, only because the name on the ballot is represented by the party ID they registered as or affiliate with. It is apparent that when many people go to vote, they simply pick whatever candidate has the letter next to their name, such as an "R" or a "D," that they typically align with. A ballot can be daunting, and for many people, they do not have the time to do much research regarding the election they are voting in.

This led to the following question: What would occur if people were presented with clear excerpts that displayed two congress people's stances on taxes, a democrat and a republican, but some of the people taking my survey saw the party ID flipped. Would they still vote for the actual stance they believe in, or just gravitate toward the party ID next to the congress person's name? Many people can agree that it is absolutely crucial for Americans to inform themselves on current issues and candidates in order to vote for what they truly believe in, regardless of the party they think that they identify with.

This experiment was classified as a survey experiment. The treatment was an excerpt from a congress person with the party ID switched. The republican stance had a "D" next to the congress person's name, and the democratic stance had an "R" next to the congress person's name. The control was the excerpt displayed as it properly was. The two other groups were the treatment and control with a moderator. Below is a table to represent the four experimental groups:

	Control	Treatment
Moderator	Inter-party statement with question	Outer-party statement with question
No Moderator	Inter-party statement without question	Outer-party statement without question

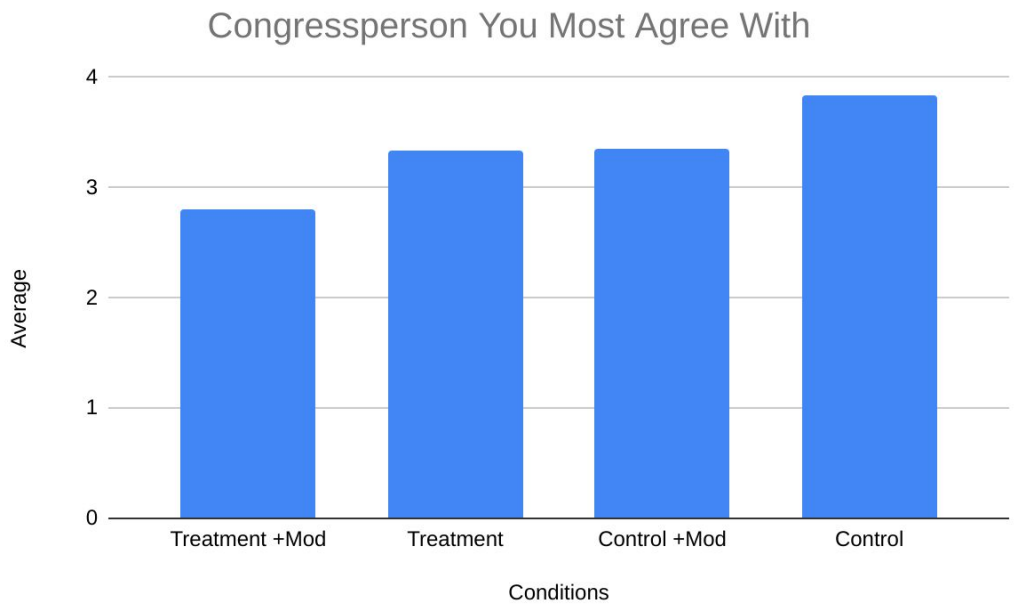
The moderator in this experiment was asking what the person taking the survey disliked most about the other party that they do not affiliate with. By choosing this to be the moderator, the person was reminded why they think so highly of the party that they do affiliate with, and would then hopefully have a better chance of focusing on that.

The results of this experiment were less surprising than I had hoped, but still, I was able to indicate some changes among each group. Below is a cross-tabulation that shows the mean responses to the dependent variable across three groups.

	Congressperson Agree With	Voting in Next Election	Voting for Trump
Control with moderator	3.35 mean 1.27 s.d.	1.26 0.59	4.86 0.35
Control without moderator	3.84 1.01	1.31 0.95	4.36 1.25
Treatment with moderator	2.81 1.4	1.3 0.48	4.18 1.32
Treatment without moderator	3.33 1.04	1.17 0.33	4.47 1.17

The three groups were which congressperson the person taking the survey most agreed with, if they were planning to vote in the next election, and lastly if they were planning to vote to re-elect Donald Trump as the next president.

The results for which congressperson the person taking the survey most agreed with are represented below.



The standard errors for this graph include:

Treatment - 4.37; 2.29

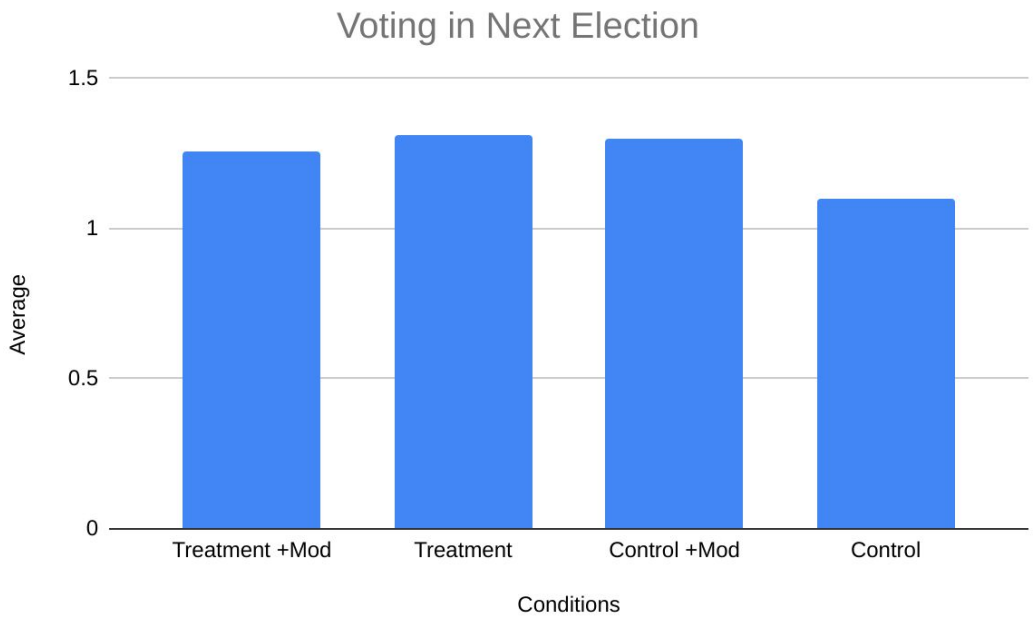
Control with the moderator - 4.62; 2.08

Control - 4.85; 2.83ment with moderator - 4.21; 1.41

These results lead to the conclusion that they were not statistically significant, nor were they substantively significant in my opinion. One finding that stood out from this was that the control group had a higher average than the other groups, which leads me to

believe that there was some kind of effect, even if small, among the other groups that had some kind of difference.

Next, the results for voting in the next election are represented below.



The higher the average, the more likely someone was going to vote in the next election.

The standard errors for this graph include:

Treatment with moderator - 1.78; 0.82

Treatment - 1.5; 0.84

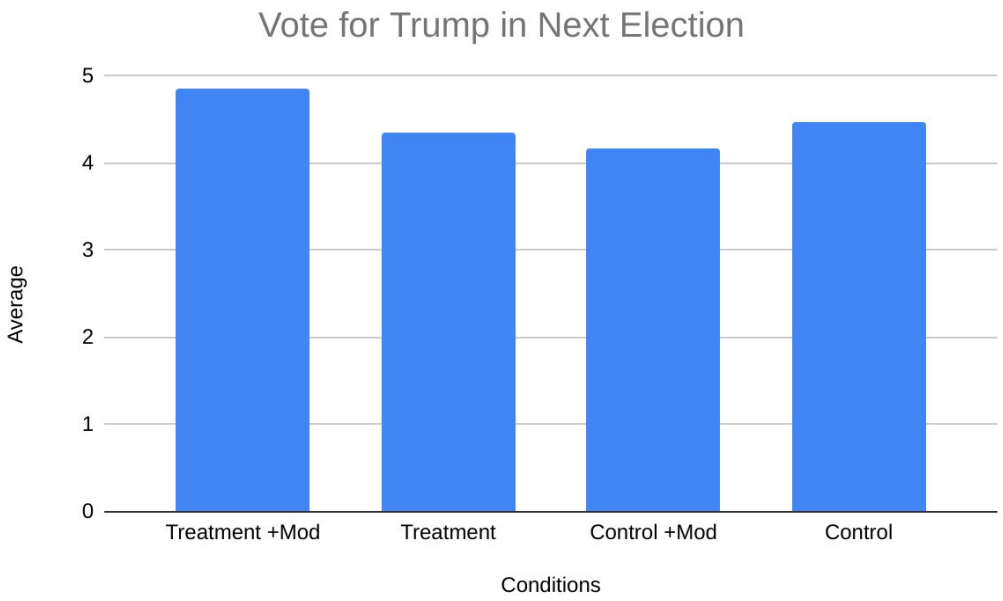
Control with moderator - 1.85; 0.67

Control - 2.26; 0.36

These results were also not statistically significant, but I did find them to be substantively significant. It is especially interesting that when the moderator was added to the control group, people said that they were much more likely to vote in the next election. By

posing a question that reminds people what they dislike about the other party, it appears it really did sway many people a certain way.

Lastly, the results for voting to re-elect President Trump in the next election are represented in the graph below.



The standard errors for this graph include:

Treatment with moderator - 5.5; 2.86

Treatment - 5.64; 3.3

Control with moderator - 5.21; 4.5

Control - 5.61; 3.11

The higher the average indicates that one is less likely to vote to re-elect Trump in the next election. These results were also not statistically significant, but again, I did find them to be substantively significant. Again, when a moderator is put in place, as we see

with the treatment with moderator group and treatment group, it appears that the push, or reminder of what they dislike most about the party they do not affiliate with, is enough of an encouragement to want to make a change and have a stronger opinion regarding the topic. This experiment was meant to indicate a huge flaw in the current political system and climate. I was able to utilize this experiment to show how there are many different examples of how the political climate is threatened. So many people vote blindly, and vote based on information they hear from biased news networks and people. That does not allow for an optimal outcome, and can lead to elections that cause the political climate to be jeopardized, which then jeopardizes the citizens of the United States.

The Current Administration's Platforms and Practices, and its Threat to Federalism:

Donald Trump's political platform when running for the 2016 presidential election was based on a number of ideas. According to BallotPedia.org, "Focal points of Trump's campaign included strengthening U.S. immigration laws, renegotiating or withdrawing from international trade deals, a more aggressive foreign policy in the Middle East, lowering taxes, and repealing financial and environmental regulations" (Donald Trump Presidential Campaign 2016). Shortly into his presidency, he attempted to address these platforms, such as his plans to build a border wall between Mexico and the United States. His healthcare stances became worrisome shortly into his presidency as well.

As noted, the first major healthcare idea Trump announced was repealing the Affordable Care Act. According to HealthCare.gov, the Affordable Care Act is "The comprehensive health care reform law enacted in March 2010" (Affordable Care Act (ACA)). They address the three primary goals being:

1. Make affordable health insurance available to more people. The law provides consumers with subsidies ("premium tax credits") that lower costs for households with incomes between 100% and 400% of the federal poverty level (Affordable Care Act (ACA)).
2. Expand the Medicaid program to cover all adults with income below 138% of the federal poverty level (Not all states have expanded their Medicaid programs) (Affordable Care Act (ACA)).
3. Support innovative medical care delivery methods designed to lower the costs of health care generally (Affordable Care Act (ACA)).

The Affordable Care Act allowed for more than twenty million people to acquire health coverage. Donald Trump opposed the ACA, and wanted to fully repeal it. According to The CommonWealth Fund, "Trump's plan would remove these requirements and subsidies and introduce new policies that affect the individual market, including tax deductions and the ability to sell plans across state lines" (Saltzman et al.). It is also noted that, "Repealing the ACA and adding a tax deduction for health insurance would result in 15.6 million fewer people with health insurance" (Saltzman et al.).

With issues along the lines of the ACA, as well as the Trump Administration's other radical ideas forcing their way into the United States without much room for

discussion, it has led to a major threat to democracy. Institutional relationships have been incredibly jeopardized under the current administration. For example, when the president does not believe that congress has a say, what does that do to the balance of the political system within the United States?

The system of checks and balances has been utilized since the framers of the constitution put it into place. The need for not one branch of government to be too powerful is crucial in our political system. By the Trump Administration opposing much of what other politicians and people from the opposite party have to say, and often refusing to compromise, they are creating an even further separation between our members of government. This creates a vicious cycle, where then less and less gets done.

An article published by Cornell Law School says, "Federalism is a system of government in which the same territory is controlled by two levels of government. Generally, an overarching national government is responsible for broader governance of larger territorial areas, while the smaller subdivisions, states, and cities govern the issues of local concern" (Federalism). While the Trump Administration sometimes recognizes this practice, they also appear to disregard federalism during times that it would not be used to their advantage. "At least 47 multistate lawsuits have been filed against the federal government since President Donald Trump took office in January 2017" (Multistate lawsuits against the federal government, 2017-2020). This is in part due to the way the government responds to co-equal branches of government, and federal responses for recent problems in the United States.

It is important to recognize when the federal government is responsible, and when it is not. Lenore T. Adkins writes in an article for Share America, "The U.S. relies on a system called "federalism": Powers not granted to the federal government are reserved for the states and the people. It's an important concept to understand because citizens encounter different levels of government daily, but in several ways" (Adkins 2020). If the United States relies on this system, why does its importance vary among different administrations? ShareAmerica.gov provides a photo illustrating the Powers of Government. Below in Figure 1, we see the summary of the kinds of entities in each branch of government.

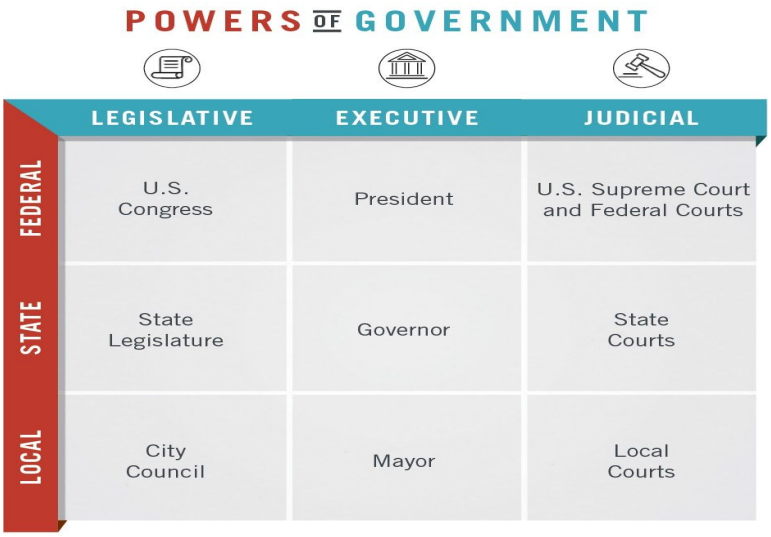


Figure 1. "Powers of Government" (Adkins 2020).

The federal government has successfully responded to different issues in the past, but has also inadequately dealt with various issues. It seems as though when there is a higher success rate among the federal government, some administrations take pride in federalism, but if there is a lower success rate, the opposite occurs.

A notable example of a recent inadequate federal response to a crisis in the United States is the current COVID-19 pandemic. The Center for Disease Control writes, "Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a respiratory illness that can spread from person to person. The virus that causes COVID-19 is a novel coronavirus that was first identified during an investigation into an outbreak in Wuhan, China" (What You Need to Know about Coronavirus Disease 2019). This deadly healthcare disaster has impacted the entire world, but has been handled much differently by each country. The United States appears to have had a later response time to the virus than other places. As of May 2, 2020, the number of cases in the United States continues to rise, and the total number of current cases has reached 1,154,931, with 67,099 deaths, and 170,181 recoveries (WorldOMeter 2020). The pandemic has brought extreme uncertainty, nationwide closures, and immense job losses in the United States.

The first known case of Coronavirus traces back to November 2019. The first confirmed case of Coronavrius in the United States was in January 2020. The Trump Administration originally was not worried about the effects of the Coronavirus. Many other countries, such as Italy, put nationwide mandatory lockdowns in place when the first cases were beginning to appear throughout all of Italy.

Mihai Andrei put together a graphic that shows direct quotes from President Trump from the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic, to the current state of the Coronavirus pandemic. Below, in figure 2, we can see the amount of cases on the y-axis, while we see the monthly timeline on the x-axis. The quotes represent exact words stated by President Trump throughout the entire timeline.

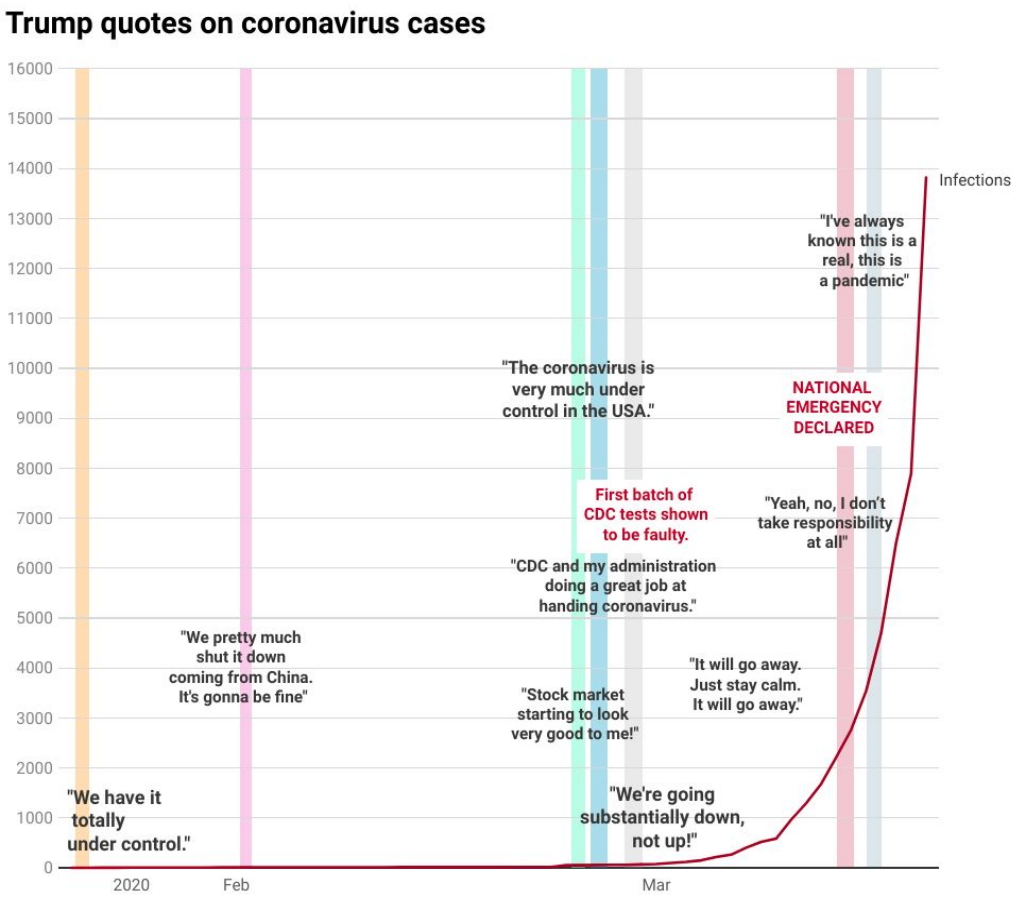


Figure 2. "A Graphic Timeline on Trump's Statements on the Coronavirus" (Andrei 2020).

The initial response to the virus appears to have not been taken as seriously as other countries responded. Tom Howell Jr. of the Washington post shared an article sharing that as of late, the Trump Administration has removed all funding for the World Health Organization (Howell Jr. 2020). By doing this, they are unable to continue in their search for preventative strategies or for a vaccination. In this instance, the Trump Administration has considered the need for COVID-19 testing to be the job of the hospitals and the states, rather than a job of the federal government. Although, tax payer dollars go towards the need for something like the federal government aiding the United States in a

pandemic that is affecting every single state. There is a huge discrepancy in what the Trump Administration believes is a federal job, rather than a state and local job.

When it comes to federal funding for entities such as medicaid, some states are donors, and others receivers. According to World Population Review, "Balance of payments is the amount of revenue paid to the federal government from a state's residents and economy (taxes) minus the amount of federal spending in that state. Donor states are states that pay more to the federal government in taxes than they receive back in funding. There are currently 10 US states that are considered donor states" (Donor States 2020). Arizona is a donor state given that it has residents with some of the highest incomes in the country. Even though these donor states might give more in federal taxes, it does not necessarily ensure that they would receive more federal funding. It is up to the discretion of the federal government.

Federal Responses towards Major U.S. Events:

We can compare the federal response of a nationwide crisis such as COVID-19, to the response by government officials who dealt with a previous national disaster, being Hurricane Katrina. Hurricane Katrina was among the deadliest hurricanes to attack the United States. Its devastation impacted about 15 million people. In regard to the total number of deaths from the catastrophe, WorldVision.org states, "Estimates range from 1,245 to 1,833. The National Hurricane Center states that 1,833 fatalities are directly or indirectly related to Hurricane Katrina, reporting that 1,577 people died in Louisiana, 238 in Mississippi, 14 in Florida, 2 in Georgia, and 2 in Alabama" (2005 Hurricane Katrina:

Facts, FAQs, and How to Help). The end of the physical hurricane still left many people with ramifications that were unthinkable.

The response by the government during the time of Hurricane Katrina was considered inadequate by many. Today, the response to the Coronavirus pandemic has been considered inadequate by many as well. During the Hurricane Katrina crisis, former President George Bush Jr. was in office. His administration was faced with what felt like the end of the road for many people who were deeply affected by the hurricane and its aftermath. So, how did the Bush Administration handle all of this?

The Federal Emergency Management Agency was responsible for many of the decisions made when dealing with the hurricane. FEMA was eventually declared responsible for organizing efforts to mitigate the situation as best as possible as well as provide resources to the states and people affected. Debarshi Chaudhuri of Massachusetts Institute of Technology writes, “In an effort to organize the response, FEMA also asked that no firefighters or ambulance crew respond to areas hit by Hurricane Katrina without being first mobilized by local and state authorities, a declaration that undoubtedly slowed response to the disaster” (Chaudhuri 2010).

The federal government at the time did not maintain healthy relationships across their departments in order to best deal with Hurricane Katrina. Their lack of timely and effective response aligns with the same issues being faced today with the current pandemic. Both the current pandemic, COVID-19, and Hurricane Katrina show a lack of effective government response, clarity, and proper aid. There is a clear institutional problem that has yet to be resolved. Additionally, they show how in both cases,

federalism has been jeopardized as the presidential administrations both used their discretion to either enable government run organizations, or to cut them out of the equation.

We can compare the two situations, COVID-19 and Hurricane Katrina, to look at how the federal government in both instances responded to the events, and how many people needed aid from the federal government, yet did not receive what felt like enough to them. Today, the government has provided taxpayers who make under $75,000 a stimulus check to help keep struggling people and families afloat during the unprecedented time. Libby Kane and Tanza Loudenback for Business Insider write, "When President Donald Trump signed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, or CARES Act, into law, he initiated a $2 trillion stimulus package, the largest emergency relief bill in American history. Part of that package is one time cash payments of up to $1,200 to Americans who qualify" (Kane et al.). Many recipients have found that this is not enough to support a family after losing their job due to the pandemic.

The Current Effects on U.S. Healthcare:

While democracy as a whole is being jeopardized, one of the most notable effects is the current political climate continuing to pose a huge threat to healthcare. One of the biggest threats is the lack of ability for many to access medications when they do not have health insurance, or their health insurance does not cover what they need. US company Sanofi, which focuses on vaccines and rare diseases, writes, "According to US

government figures, out of pocket costs for many Americans rose 3.9% in 2016 — the fastest rate in a decade — and are expected to rise by 4% in 2018 and 4.9% in 2019" (What to Do When You Can't Afford Your Chronic Disease Medication). Prices continue to rise, while many Americans continue to struggle affording what might keep them alive.

According to Medical Economics, "Some patients have to make hard choices between paying for their medicine or other basic life necessities, such as food and electricity, or are even rationing their insulin, a dangerous practice that can lead to death" (Rosenfeld). The issue of insulin has become an extremely prevalent topic during the Trump presidency. While other politicians have made it clear that they do not support the price hike and profit off insulin and other necessary drugs such as the Epipen, the Trump administration has not made this one of their top priorities. As seen in figure 3, Rachel Gillet and Shayanne Gal of Business Insider have provided a graph that demonstrates the price of insulin among the leading insulin providers over the last decade.

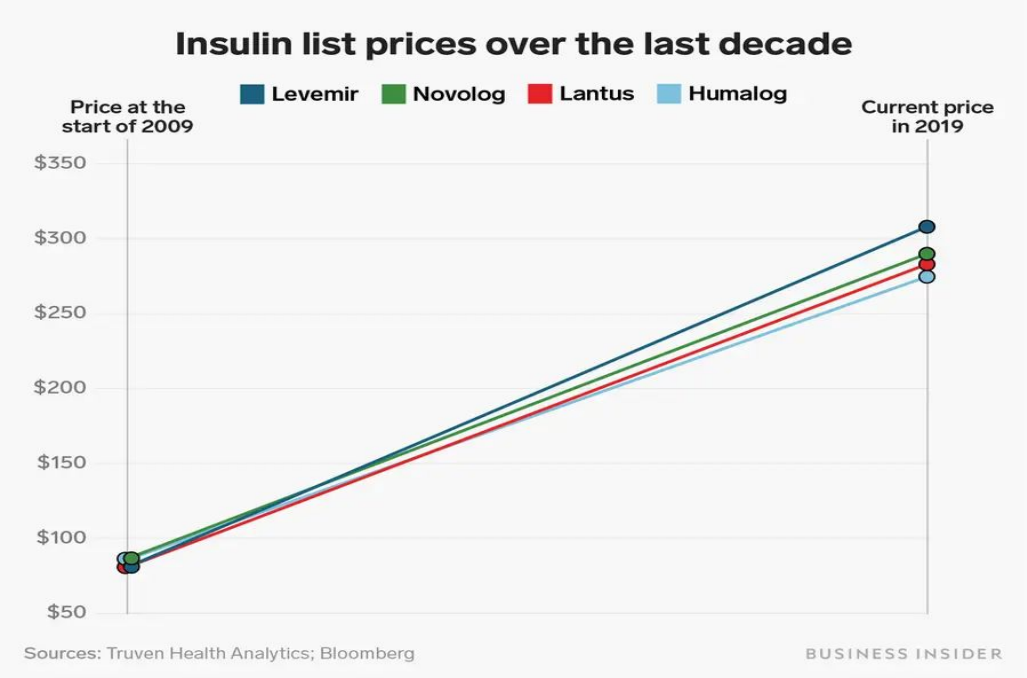


Figure 3. Insulin Prices Over the Last Decade (Gillet et al. 2019).

The hike in price has caused what has become today's reality: One in four Americans are forced to ration insulin, with little to no help from the government.

The lack of necessary healthcare for all has also led to a drug crisis in the United States. Millions of Americans suffer from drug addiction, and as a result are dying every day. The opioid epidemic in the United States has caused a mass amount of deaths which continue to rise. The Council on Foreign Relations writes, "The crisis has reached such a scale that, beyond the risks it poses to public health, it is becoming a drag on the economy and a threat to national security" (Felter 2019). The threat of this epidemic has now affected not just health, but to the economy as well, as there is now a need to aid the different groups attempting to combat this issue.

According to the White House website, the full cost of the opioid crisis over the past four years has totaled 2.5 trillion dollars. With the funds for the crisis rising, the

death rate continues to rise as well. People of all ages are being affected by this crisis. As seen in Figure 4, the death rate has risen since 1999, and is gradually becoming worse.

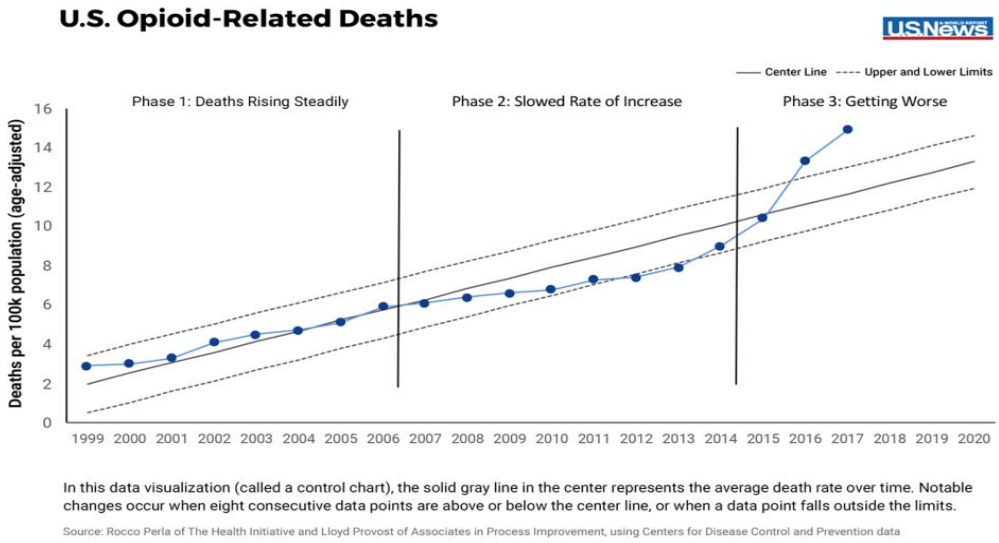


Figure 4. U.S. Opioid-Related Deaths (Sternberg et al. 2019).

Another sector of healthcare that is currently being jeopardized is women's healthcare along with reproductive rights. This has been an ongoing issue for almost sixty years. Francine Nichols, a professor at Georgetown University writes, "The Women's Health Movement (WHM) emerged during the 1960s and the 1970s with the primary goal to improve health care for all women" (Nichols 2000). While some improvements have been made under different administrations, there is still an immense amount of uncertainty and demanded changes awaiting action.

The first major political progress for women's health was made in the 1970's. Planned Parenthood's website states, "In 1970, Title X of the Public Health Services Act became law. It established public funding for family planning and sex education programs in the U.S. That meant Planned Parenthood and other reproductive health organizations were able to provide birth control and sex education services for more

people, especially in low-income communities" (Our History). Nichols of Georgetown University also notes, "The Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues was formed in 1977 as a Legislative Service Organization with an active bipartisan voice in the House of Representatives on the behalf of women" (Nichols 2000). These were both huge stepping stones and support systems for women's health across the United States.

Today, one of the leading supporters and providers of women's health is the organization, Planned Parenthood. "Planned Parenthood is the nation's leading provider and advocate of high-quality, affordable health care for women, men, and young people" (Our History). It is important to note the main functions of Planned Parenthood being cancer screenings, STD/STI testing, and contraception. The political fight against Planned Parenthood stems from the disagreement between political parties regarding abortion. While many believe it is a women's right to choose, the current administration leans with the opposition, and opposes abortion rights. Since abortions are a service offered by Planned Parenthood, the fight for funding of this organization has been an ongoing battle. In reality, the percentage of all Planned Parenthood health services that are abortion services totals 3% (By the Numbers). This makes abortions the least used service offered by Planned Parenthood.

The need for Planned Parenthood additionally stems from its ability to provide care for low-income patients. Their website states, "Planned Parenthood has many payment options available for patients to receive high quality services regardless of income level, including no cost or low cost. We accept most insurance plans, including

Medicaid and Medicare. No one will be denied access to services due to inability to pay" (Paying for Your Health Care).

The current administration heavily opposes funding for Planned Parenthood, and its operation as a whole. By having these views, and enabling bills that decrease their funding, they are threatening healthcare for both men and women who otherwise have no other option. Planned Parenthood noted, "As one of his first acts in office, Trump reinstated and expanded the global gag rule, which eliminates federal funding for non-governmental organizations abroad if they provide abortion counseling or referrals or advocate around abortion" (Tracking Trump). By taking funding away from Planned Parenthood, it makes it much more difficult to provide necessary services that can save lives, such as an early screening detecting cancer in a patient, for patients who otherwise would not be able to afford healthcare at all.

To look at how differently certain states and their government have addressed women's healthcare, two different states can be compared. First, a "red" state, such as Arizona, can be examined. Governor Doug Ducey holds a strong opposition towards Planned Parenthood, as well as efforts that allow women to make their own reproductive choices. AZCentral writes, "About half of Arizona's 36,000 Title X patients get their services at Planned Parenthood clinics" (Rau 2017). Arizona receives about 4.5 million dollars per year in federal Title X funding. Ducey wants to gain control of that in order to secure the funds do not go towards abortions for Arizona residents. "The money assists low-income patients with birth control, pregnancy counseling and treatment for sexually-transmitted diseases. It cannot be used for abortions" (Rau 2017).

There have been many pieces of legislation to ensure the demise of funding for Planned Parenthood in Arizona, and the attempted demise of Planned Parenthood itself. For example, SB 1394 can be noted. “SB 1394 amends current reporting requirements for hospitals or facilities where abortions are performed” (Legislative Tracker). Since the federal government already bans federal dollars towards abortions unless the woman was raped, the baby is a result of incest, or to save a woman’s life. This bill is stating that in Arizona, if abortions must happen, the government requests that the place performing the abortion is required to ask the patient, and document, invasive questions, such as whether the abortion is requested due to sexual assualt, or if the person is a victim of domestic violence. The list goes on.

In a “blue” state, such as Arizona’s neighbor, California, the government has proven that through various ways, including legislation, that they are more supportive of Planned Parenthood. CalMatters.org states, “Today Planned Parenthood is one of California’s major health care providers, operating 115 clinics that serve 850,000 mostly low-income patients a year who rely on Medicaid (in California, Medi-Cal) for health care” (Young 2017). Many California residents rely on Planned Parenthood for necessary check-ups, medication, and various visits. For those patients, the California government has interpreted various laws to ensure that tax dollars continue to fund Planned Parenthood. The difference between the two states is very apparent. It is unfortunate that simply depending on where one lives, they have a better chance of receiving something so crucial like healthcare.

It is because of the current political climate that many have lost hope in the United States Government and the healthcare system being one that benefits all groups of people. The federal government has shown many discrepancies in the way federal tax dollars should be spent, and how involved the federal government should be when it comes to intervening in major U.S issues and events. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities shows a figure that demonstrates where the majority of tax dollars go.

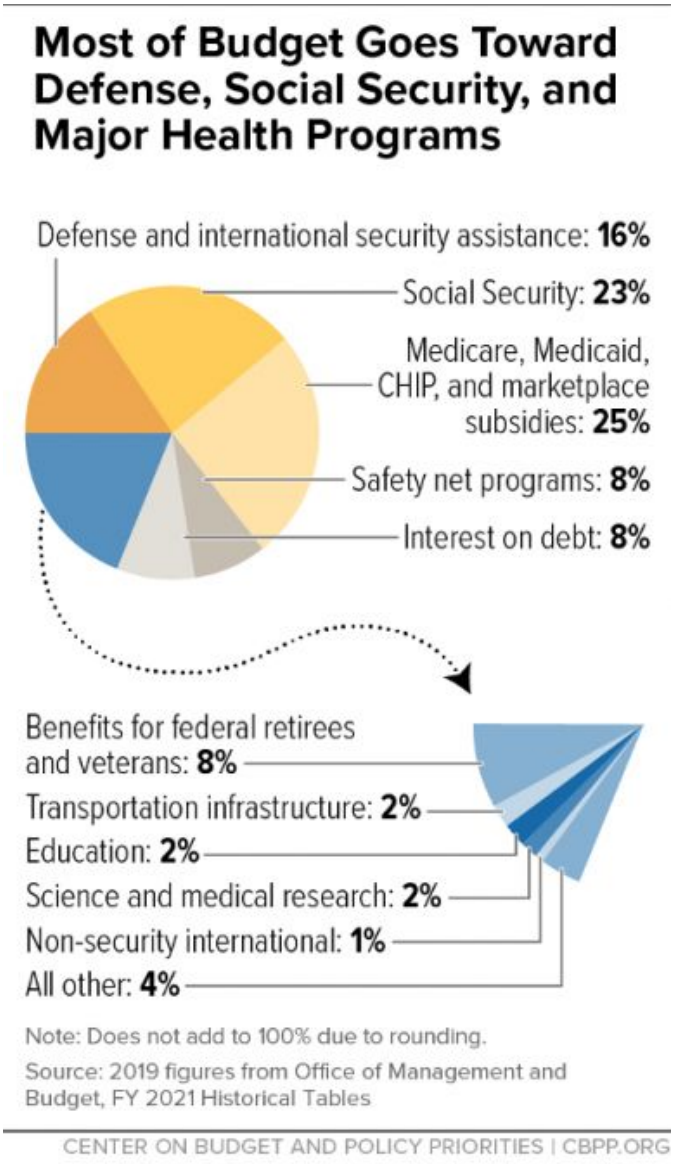


Figure 5. Policy Basics: Where do our Federal Tax Dollars Go? (CBPP 2020).

Since the federal government acquires money from taxpayers to address certain issues and assist in various ways, including in assisting in providing people with healthcare, many people expect the federal government to do so. The Trump Administration has continuously chosen when they want to or when they do not want to involve themselves in state issues, and it seems they only do intervene when it most benefits them. With overarching issues across all departments, healthcare stands out as one of the largest issues to date. While our political institutions are helping some, they are failing in addressing the need for a healthcare system that is a properly functioning part of society. There are still 44 million Americans uninsured today.

There is no unanimity in belief on how a functioning healthcare system should look in the United States. Ideally, complex policy issues like healthcare can be sorted out through democratic processes such as voting, as well as democratic values such as transparency and a balance of power within our federal system. Unfortunately, our current political climate impedes our ability to improve the efficacy of our healthcare system. Therefore, the United States must continue to grapple with a political climate that benefits some and hurts others until changes in our democracy are made.

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