

DIVIDED BY DECADES: POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND  
GENERATIONAL CHANGE IN THE UNITED STATES

By

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## **Abstract**

In a time marked by deep political turmoil that is met with heightened ideological tensions towards a large array of issues, one thing emerges: political polarization. This divide is most commonly seen between Democrats and Republicans, the two major parties within the United States. There are many things that greatly divide us based on how we prioritize various issues and policies in accordance. Many different factors go into shaping political views and partisan alignments. In recent years, though, these factors have become more likely to impact the polarization of citizens in the United States. However, while many factors are reported on, age is a factor that is frequently left out in the discussion of what affects political polarization. In recent years, the erosion of the middle ground is certainly prominent, and this thesis aims to see if and how age plays a role in shaping political attitudes and engagements and if this in turn creates an increase in political polarization. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of the social dynamics that underpin political polarization in contemporary society. Overall, this thesis finds that age functions not only as a contributing factor in polarization but a significant determinant that shapes its depth and trajectory.

*Keywords:* polarization, Democrat, Republican, middle ground, age

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## ***1. Political Polarization***

### **1.1 Background**

Political polarization is fracturing the foundations that uphold democracy in the United States. As a result, things like inefficient government operations, inability to compromise, pressure towards holding more extreme beliefs, and weakened trust in institutions emerges. It is imperative to make the distinction that these results do not arise because of the existence of different political views. Rather, they arise from extreme polarization that distorts and deepens those differences. To better explain this, *Political Epistemology* has a chapter entitled “Problems of Polarization” written by Robert B. Talisse. This research reads, “In a democracy even when an outcome is the product of impeccably democratic process, citizens may still enact various forms of critique, protest, and resistance. The democratic thought is that where citizens have rights to hold government accountable, they retain their status as political equals even while being subject to the law,” (Talisse, 223). An inherent aspect of politics has and will always be disagreement. The expectation is not to have mere consensus and that is not how democracy survives. Citizens can express their grievances and disappointment as is their constitutionally protected right. However, when the ability to understand one another and to find common ground is completely unattainable, it signals a dysfunction in the system itself. An epidemic that is affecting the United States currently. An epidemic that has repercussions that will last for centuries. It is no secret that political polarization is occurring and that its effects can be and are profound, however, what this research paper will examine is whether or not age can be a large contributing factor when it comes to this destruction of the middle ground.

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## 1.2 Definitional Difficulties

While often discussed in a political setting, polarization also holds definitions and meanings in ideological and broader social terms. Research that has been done on this topic even says that the idea of political polarization itself is polarized. That is what makes it so inherently interesting. Some think it is exaggerated while others think it has hit the point of becoming detrimental. There are four main types of political polarization that have been researched as widely appearing in literature: ideological consistency, ideological divergence, perceived polarization, and affective polarization (Lelkes). These four variations all are understood and even weaponized at times in different ways but this idea further solidifies one thing. Political polarization resists easy definition.

Given these varying interpretations, political scientists have found it essentially impossible to create a single, universal definition that is agreed upon. An article published by Cambridge University Press even reads, “ I argue that ‘polarization’ cannot be understood as one phenomenon that should be evaluated in one way. Nor is the problem for democracy that polarization has become too severe and the solution to find its ‘right level’” (Rostbøll). Ironically, it appears that there is more consensus on the ambiguity of the term itself. However, for purposes of this research, when there is discussion of polarization in this thesis it refers to that of political nature. Specifically, it refers to the political system that exists within the United States. While the role of third parties will be explored, the polarization that is discussed and observed in this paper will focus on that which manifests between the two major parties the U.S. has: Republican and Democrat.

I view Republican ideologies as having traditionally been about giving power to the people and believing in a smaller, less “hands on” government. Some key issues, especially in

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current society, that are associated with Republican values include reduced taxation, limited government regulation of business, finance, industry, education, and policing, strong national defense, opposition to abortion, affirmative action, gun control, and policies and laws that are viewed as challenging traditional social and family structures and constructs. I view Democratic ideologies as traditionally practicing or believing in social equality as well as a firmer hand in everyday life from the U.S. government. This party is also often associated with government regulation of business, finance, and industry, with federally funded educational and social services, with separation of church and state, with support for abortion rights, affirmative action, gun control, policies and laws that protect and support the rights of workers and minorities, and room for redefining social and family norms and constructs. However, it is important to note that these definitions are my own. They, like the definition of political polarization, are fluid and list views on major issues that would have had no bearing on any sort of definition even fifty years ago.

In fact, Jay Nordlinger, an American Journalist and a political activist, discussed this concept. He hit on key ideas in a talk given at the University of Arizona to PPEL students in March of 2024. He discussed concepts about political identification and ideology and explained how defining political views is a near impossible task. He even demonstrated how saying what you believe in is more important and powerful than saying what party you believe in and explained this phenomena with historically significant examples (Nordlinger).

Personally, I define political polarization simply: the destruction of the middle ground. I view political parties as existing on a sliding scale, with emerging extremes on both ends. In contemporary society, it seems we slide closer and closer to those ends than we have in the past, but I also believe that there is a reason for that. Although my definition may not align with

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formal, academic interpretations, it is included to reflect the varying perceptions that exist on this ideal and in the broader political climate the world now exists in. No two individuals share exactly the same views when it comes to politics, largely due to what I refer to as our personal “algebra”. This concept encompasses the things that impact how we perceive issues and make decisions. For instance, I grew up dancing which has made me more inclined to support Democratic policies and ideals that aim at protecting the arts and people that are non-gender conforming or queer that are deeply rooted within the world of dance. At the exact same time, being raised with a set of parents that present strong Republican beliefs and support Republican policies also has played a role in the way I view and perceive politics. There are countless other factors, but those factors are unique to each person and determine their views, sentiments, and what they value as important. As this paper will explore, these generational shifts in values and what various people identify as important and key voting issues for them, have played a significant role in the erosion of the political middle ground.

### **1.3 Age - The Missing Piece**

The existing literature around politics, especially over the last twelve months, is essentially unlimited. Different news sources tell different versions of the same half truth and story. What is under published about, however, is how age contributes to political polarization. There is countless amounts of research and statistical analysis on how race, gender, polarizing issues, geographical location, family history, educational level, and social media contribute to polarization as well as to why people vote in the way they do. When you take a closer look, it becomes apparent that the polarization exists largely among different age groups even in the confinement of the major contributors that were just listed. Specifically, we can see a growing animosity and opposition on key issues.

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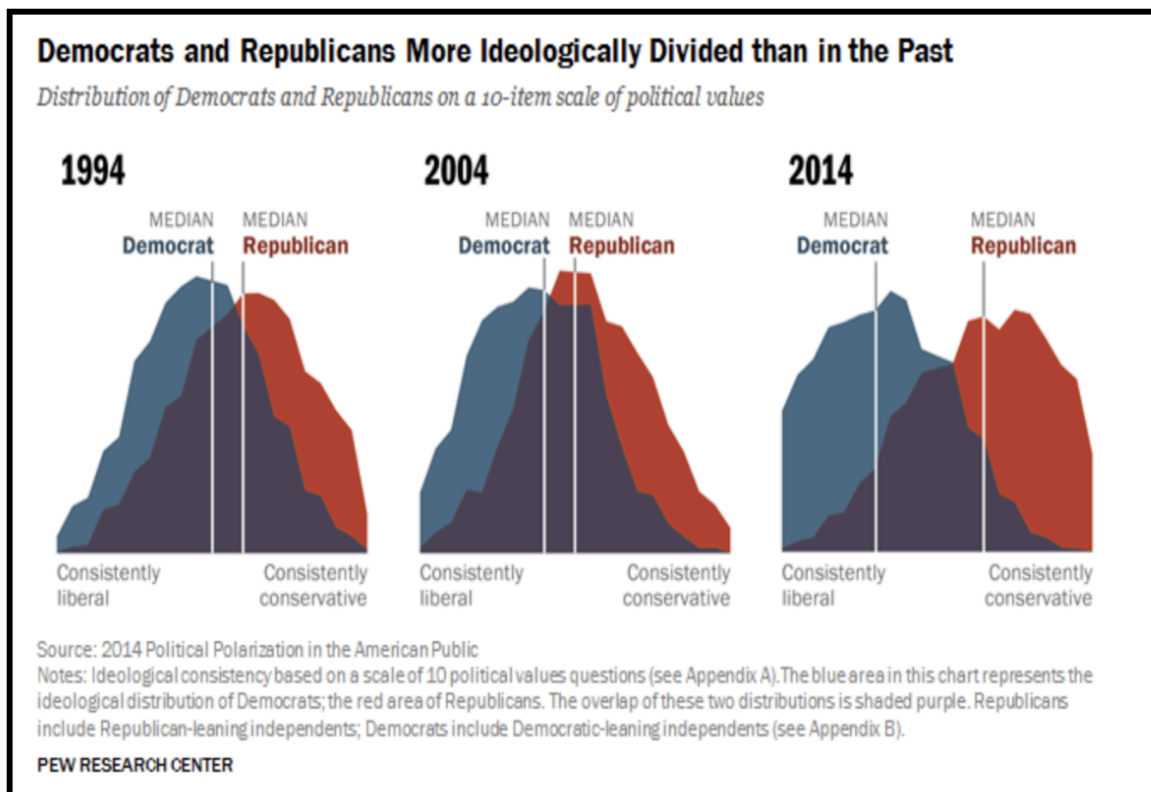
Largely, generations like the Silent Generation (born roughly 1928-1945) and the Baby Boomer generation (born 1946-1964) stand in strong opposition to the Millennial generation (born 1981-1996) and Generation Z (born 1997-2012). The literature that does explore this, shows substantial evidence that there has been a leap in political polarization and that this leap is because of the key issues and prevalence of stronger ties and personal relations. This thesis aims to trace back polarizing issues and investigate whether, in part, these issues are linked and influenced by generational divides. While an abundance of literature exists on other influential factors, relatively little attention and time have been paid to age as the primary lens that political polarization is investigated through. The analysis of various groups' political identity and response to divisive circumstances is a foundational step towards filling the gap of literature on the basis of age based polarization.

## ***2. Data and Charts***

### **2.1 Political Polarization in Data**

In order to see the involvement of age when it comes to political polarization, it is important to take a step back and examine the broader polarization trends that define the contemporary United States. Doing this is crucial to discover the underpinnings of how the degree of political polarization came about and the leap it has taken to get to the point it is currently at. This destruction of the middle ground is something that we have never seen reach such substantial levels before and is rather unprecedented prior to the 2010s. The Pew Research Center gives many different pieces of key information and data that documents these shifts in tolerance for other beliefs, and they can be observed below.

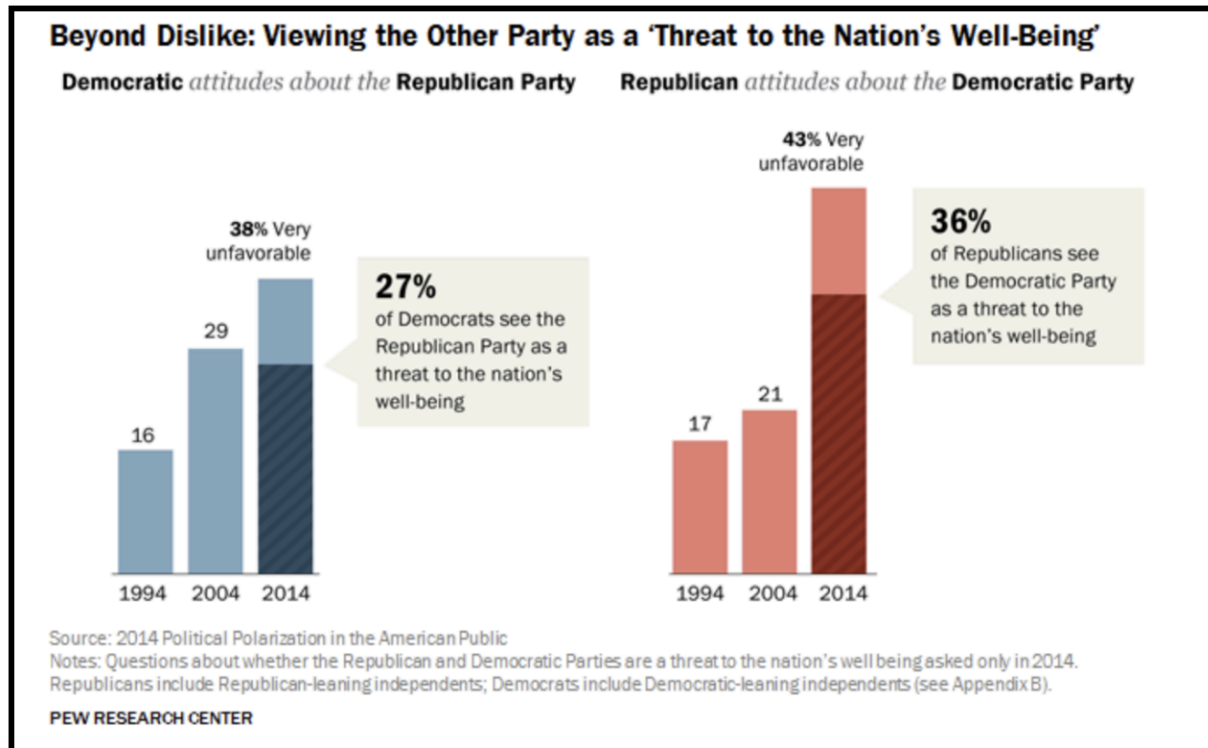
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**Figure 1 - Ideological Divisions between Democrats and Republicans**

Figure 1 walks us through the political identities across the United States and how they are distributed. Throughout the set of years listed, we can see the gap widening and widening and the medians getting closer to the farthest points of the political spectrum. While the research does not extend to today, we can see and identify the substantial jump between 2004 and 2014 in comparison to 1994 and 2004 (Geiger). This same research article also implies this large gap was observed during a time with a large rise in media. Specifically, in media that focused on politics and would simply align with the beliefs that people already conceived. Essentially, political policy information was at the fingertips of individuals because of things like social media and that was seen as a primary source of information for politics according to Adrienne Russell, a professor of communication at the University of Washington (Russell et al.).

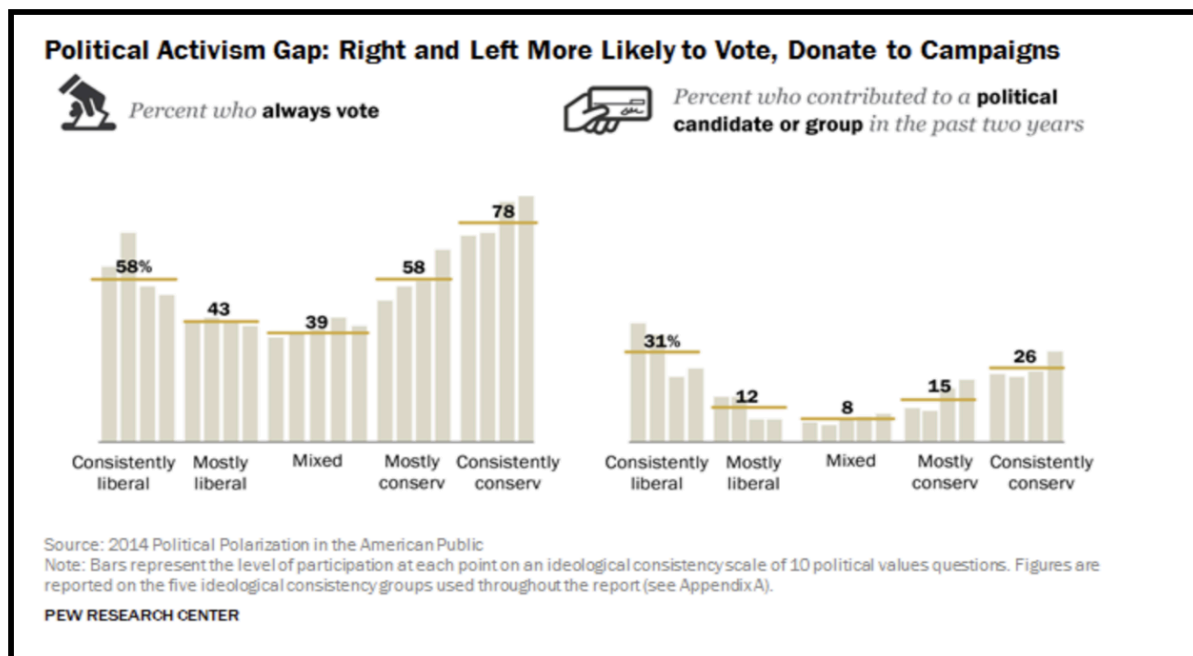
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**Figure 2 - Views of Opposing Party**

Figure 2 is where we really begin to see the polarization element of it all. This data does not merely show that there are strongly opposing views with little room for collaboration and the middle ground, but it also shows us how each party viewed the other as a “threat to the nation’s well-being” and “unfavorable”. Again, during the election years listed in the figure, similar to Figure 1, we see a substantial increase that aligns with a large jump in 2014 (Geiger). These established attitudes carry great significance as it shows that there is not just a two party split, it is a two party split with a growing intolerance and almost this overarching fear of the opposing party.

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**Figure 3 - Political Activism and Campaign Donation by Party**

To wrap up this section of research, Figure 3 shows us how voters and financial supporters of political campaigns, in 2014, largely fell to one extreme with the lowest percentages being in the middle both times. What this goes to show and what the Center’s analysis of the data synthesizes is that voters are becoming so extreme that the voices and concerns of those in the middle are faded out. In other words, “the most politically polarized are more actively involved in politics, amplifying the voices that are the least willing to see the parties meet each other halfway” (Geiger). The research also tells us that the views by each party when it comes to heavily contested issues, such as homosexuality and government programs, were once contested among the parties, but are now rather synonymous. This shows us that the important issues are becoming an all or nothing phenomena, and if you do not fit into one category or the other, your voice becomes smaller, the middle ground shrinks, and the polarization is amplified.

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Overall, these graphs tell us different things, but the overarching theme and message is the same. Political polarization skyrocketed in 2014 and took root in our country. While these statistics outline the changes seen in years up until 2014, this does not mean that polarization remained stagnant in the following years. In fact, a piece done by the *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* entitled “Polarization, Partisanship, and Health in the United States” outlines specifics of how polarization in the United States continued to grow because of the 2020 and 2024 elections. A specific example of how the author of this research article describes this reads “The refusal of President Donald Trump and many Republican lawmakers to accept the results of the 2020 elections, and the efforts by Trump and his allies to stage a coup that would keep him in office, underscore the extent to which American democracy is itself increasingly in peril in a polarized era,” (Oberlander). This is just one direct example of how polarization not only exists in these years displayed in the chart above but it has actually been widened by the results and process of the election in the United States.

### **2.2 Political Polarization Data in Congress**

Something about the United States that makes this growing political polarization so interesting is that it is not only observable within the community and the people that elect those in power, but there is also a widening gap and destruction of the middle ground within the people that are elected to represent their constituents. Within Congress, specifically, this change is especially notable and it can be observed through similar data that is found from the Pew Research Center. This research shows how elected representatives are unwilling to coincide on policies that may be more bipartisan strictly on the basis of political party. This data shows the views and willingness/unwillingness of the officials of the 92nd to 117th Congress to agree with or support the ideas of one another (DeSilver).

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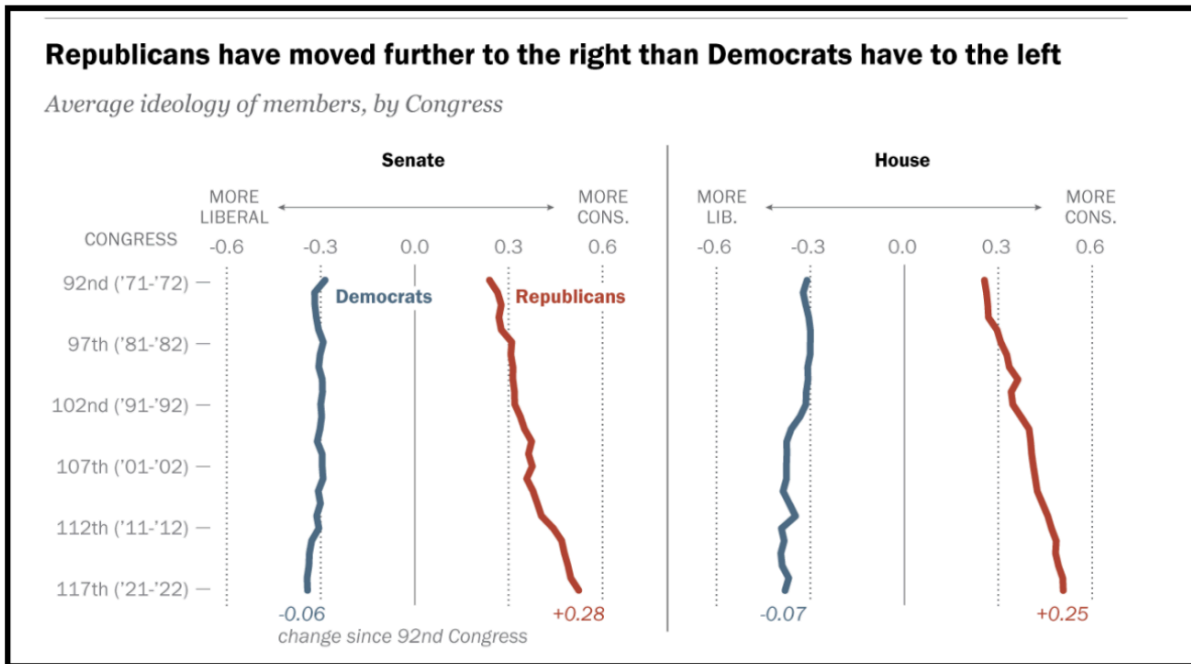


Figure 4 - Congressional Political Movement



Figure 5 - Conservative Congressional Movement

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Figures 4 and 5 show changes and shifts towards both extremes on both sides of the aisle. However, it can be seen, especially in Figure 5, that the Republican change has a more severe shift in comparison with the Democratic side. In the House we see a 0.28 change and a 0.25 change in the Senate for Republicans in comparison to a 0.06 change in the House and a 0.07 change in the Senate for Democrats. The Pew Research Institute attributes this largely to the fact that the demographic for both parties have changed. The article reads, “The geographic and demographic makeup of both congressional parties has changed dramatically. Nearly half of House Republicans now come from Southern states, while nearly half of House Democrats are Black, Hispanic or Asian/Pacific Islander,” (DeSilver). This is significant in showing how the ideologies of different demographic groups vary and how this affects politics as seen within the data. Furthermore, the older generations of representatives tend to be more white and only recently are there more diverse demographics represented which contributes to an age wide shift that is backed and explained by the demographic shift that is also being seen (DeSilver).

In addition, it is important to note that the U.S. House of Representatives Press Gallery shows that the current House holds zero representatives outside of the two major parties, and the U.S. Senate has two representatives that fall under “independents”. These staggering numbers have a profound impact in showing how this division does not allow for middle ground or welcome representatives with middleground or third party views especially when parties grow closer and closer to the opposite ends of the spectrum and are becoming more “Republican” and more “Democrat”.

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### **Linkage to Age**

Another powerful force driving this divide is none other than age. The life expectancy of the members of Congress has gone up significantly along with that of the rest of the general U.S. population. The CDC shows that life expectancy is growing and will continue to do so, and Congress and other elected officials are really no exception (CDC). The statistics also confirm this phenomenon. An analytical article published by PBC about older lawmakers in the government reads, “nearly 20 percent of House and Senate members are 70 or older, compared with about 6 percent who are under 40,” (Hunt). As society grows into being more politically and socially advanced and progressive, Congress often lags behind. This leads to growing hostility and animosity when it comes to politics as the meanings behind being a Republican and being a Democratic shift as discussed previously.

These statistics show us that despite the members of Congress remaining the same or similar throughout different Congresses, their views do not change, they just become more affirmed and that is clear through the statistics. The PBS article does, however, offer solutions that we can look to in accordance with the growth in unwillingness to cooperate. It says, “Political science findings indicate that seeing people who are ‘like us’ in Congress or other offices helps us to feel properly represented and to view our political institutions as more legitimate. The success of younger candidates encourages other young people to make the leap themselves, kicking off a virtuous cycle of representation,” (Hunt). It makes sense. The population is able to live to an older age on average because of advances, and this equals being able to continue to vote and also encourage those who look and think like them to stay in office. However, this is a two sided coin, and on the flip side, younger constituents grow resentment towards those who take away the seats of those that act, think, and directly represent them, at

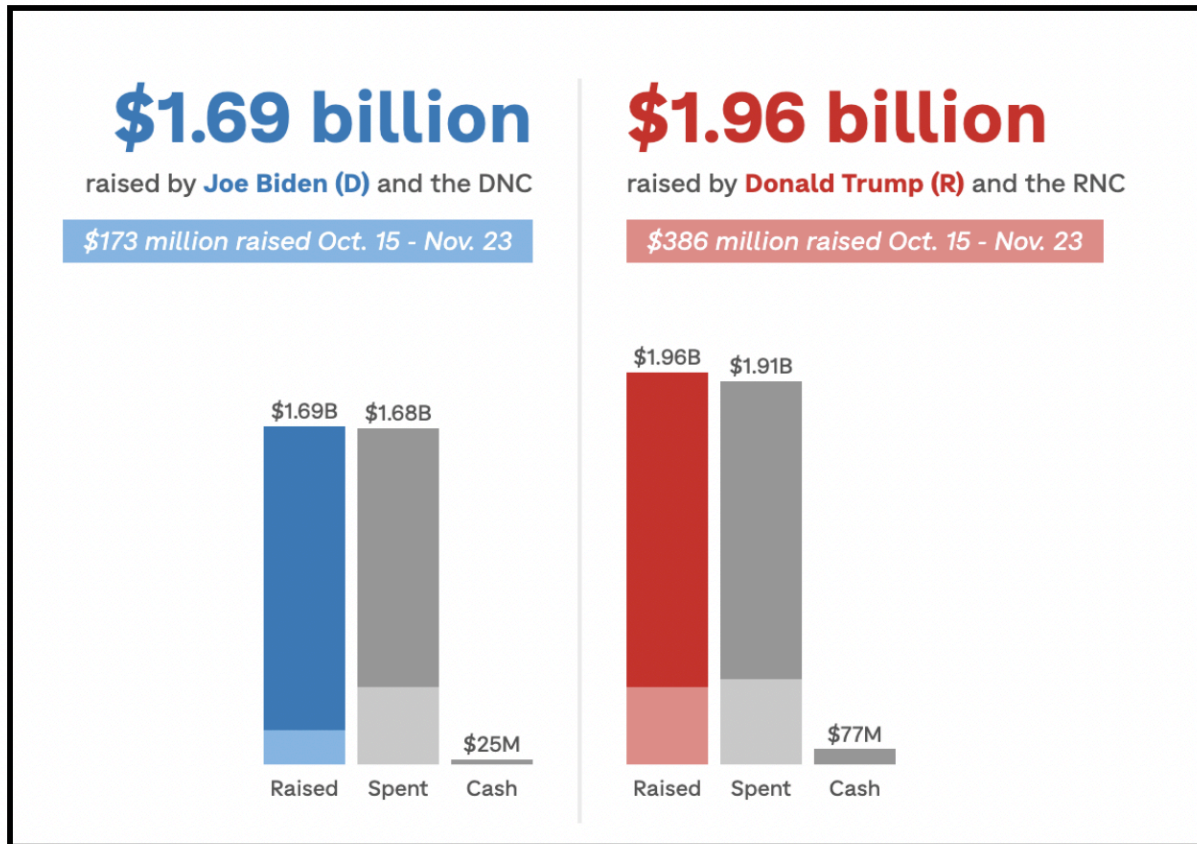
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least as far as age goes. This is our first look into how age may directly affect political polarization within the capacity of elected officials and in turn roll that polarization into the voters as well.

An age-related factor that proves to be a major contributor to sentiments of underrepresentation and polarization is the structural advantage that incumbent representatives hold. Political scientists often note, study, and discuss the difficulty in electing someone that is facing off against an incumbent. Incumbents are at a larger advantage and have what is coined as the “incumbency advantage” (Hunt). Clearly these incumbent members get older and are less representative of the population electing them, but their policies and previous decisions while in office are referenceable to constituents, something their first timer opponents cannot obtain. Younger generations lose those seats because of this phenomenon. This legitimizes age based polarization as we grow further and further from the ability to develop accurate population representation or new, diverse ideas that can be introduced into Congress.

Building off of that concept, we also know that incumbents and “more seasoned” politicians are at an advantage when it comes to elections because they possess the funds necessary to launch a campaign which includes advertisements, events, rallies, campaign trails, and other costly things that are required to ensure a victory. This is something particularly true in the last couple of elections. In the 2020 election specifically, according to a report published by NPR the spending and fundraising of the two presidential candidates, Joe Biden and Donald Trump, can be seen below in the figure (McMinn et. al).

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**Figure 6 - Money Spent in the 2020 Election**

The money spent and received seen in Figure 5, above, is unlike any other. The same rings true in not only the Presidential election but also in the election of the Senate and the House of Representatives, as well as the confirmation of Justices. When it comes to political polarization, money is a big factor as to why our elected officials are not representative of those they are elected by but are rather represented by the money that put them in that position.

The trends that are observed and the data that follows help paint a clear image that has become our critical reality: the United States is experiencing a pronounced and deepening wave of political polarization that is caused by several factors. What is important here is that age is

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certainly seeming to be one of those factors. The divide and age based influence is also not only present in the electorate alone, it is actually mirrored and magnified when it comes to elected representatives and within the halls of Congress. The barriers that exist for younger, diverse candidates, the persistence of frequent incumbents, and the disconnect from different generations when it comes to political prioritization and advocacy are just a few of the contributing factors to political polarization that have roots in age. In fact, age is not just a mere detail of contribution, but rather, it is a driving force to why polarization is worsening and becoming a weapon. When the governing body cannot develop and modernize at the same rate as the electorate they fall out of touch with those they claim to represent and advocate for.

### **2.3 Lack of Data**

There is a wealth of data on political polarization as a whole— where it is worsening, how it manifests, and how it has impacts on both individuals and elected officials. However, what stands out is the relative lack of data that exists that examines the role that age plays when it comes to political polarization. There are not many statistics that are able to link age to this phenomenon when compared with data that links things like gender, race, geographical location, and other things to political polarization. Age is often the less explored variable. This comes as a surprise as age does seem to intersect with these other factors in a meaningful and notable way.

As discussed previously, the increasing amount of diversity that exists among current government representatives stresses the generational gap and growing divide that exists. Older representatives, especially incumbents, cannot keep up. Statistically speaking, elected officials of color tend to be more Democratic. On the other hand white representatives tend to be more Conservative and older. (Nadeem). These older representatives may struggle to align and understand the more progressive ideals of their counterparts. While race and polarization are

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often associated as walking hand in hand, age is also an underpinning contribution to polarization in a scenario such as this one. However, it is not viewed as a contributing factor and subsequently not reported on as frequently.

### ***3. Social Media***

To say social media does not contribute to the way that various age groups perceive politics would simply just be untrue. As time has gone on, and specifically in the 21st century, social media has gained quite a bit of prevalence, specifically with youth populations in more city areas. While social media possesses many benefits such as being able to stay connected with friends, be able to have news right at your fingertips, and meet new people, the downsides are also immense and can be contributing factors. This rise of social media has caused new generations to largely abandon what we thought of as traditional media, which includes newspapers and television, and come to depend on social media as a source of political information and to decide how to align political beliefs (Faverio). All this to say, social media could be a possible cause for this generational shift.

#### **3.1 Social Media vs. Traditional Media**

The statistics are able to corroborate the emerging narrative that social media has made us more polarized as a nation. The Civic Education Research Lab at Georgetown University published an article on this exact phenomena. The research was conducted during 2015, 2016, 2018, and 2020. These are years that continued to produce more social media usage and in turn affected politics. The findings show that various age groups, Baby Boomers, Millennials, and Gen X, use different forms of media to gain knowledge about politics. For example, Baby Boomers still conform to traditionally thought of media outlets like newspapers and television while the other two groups are becoming more inclined to getting political information from

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social media such as Facebook or Twitter (Deng). What this highlights is that social media usage has increased throughout time and people have become more willingly to rely on it for political information. However, that is just one part of the picture because not only are people more willing to use social media as compared to traditional media, the rise in different age groups doing so leads to varying ideas as media is consumed in a different and even possibly more relatable and digestible way.

Phrases and names like “being red pillled”, “rage bait”, “Charlie Kirk”, and “Dean Withers” are all examples that probably sound mostly foreign to older generations. That is because they are popularized by the media. All these things represent a political discourse that has become hyper-online. It has shaped a generation by memes and desensitized people to real issues and the effects of political decisions. This digital culture creates a disconnect that makes older generations feel like this new way of looking at politics is foreign and impossible to reach. Different narratives are also pushed online and that is, in a sense, able to define the issues that people care about, identify with, and seek to see more of. In short, that is how “echo chambers” are created. “Echo chambers” are another generationally disconnecting phenomena that exists because of social media. They create political polarization through the creation of an inability to reach across the aisle and create any form of unity or compromise. An article published on the effects of echo chambers and the contributions to polarization explains how we are more apt to believing information that confirms our pre-existing ideas about various political topics. In addition to this, we are less skeptical and more likely to put too much value and belief into those ideas as well (Hobolt et. al).

Another reason behind why these “echo chambers” occur is exactly in the name. Echo chambers are strengthened and solidified when we are voicing opinions that are confirmed by

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those around us. Humans want to fit into a group and mirror the ideas and opinions of said group, and when a network, through social media, is created to confirm our ideas we feel like we fit in with that group. Social media makes it incredibly easy to find like minded people around you that will never attempt to challenge your values, beliefs, and especially, political opinions. That happens with only the scroll of your fingertips (Hobolt et. al). Now this is exactly how political polarization is made between two major parties via social media's help.

### **3.2 Connection Between Age and Media**

Connecting various media back to age relations requires the understanding that media consumption is a very standard and crucial way that people gain information about the world around them and the political crusades that will impact their life for better or for worse. As established, as various groups turn to the media for political information a clear gap emerges. In fact, we know this to be true because the divide is shown through further statistical analysis. For example, youth that live in more rural areas of the United States have been shown to have less access to and less use for new trending media like "TikTok" or "Instagram". Instead, they are found to often turn to traditional media sources as their primary way of obtaining information on the political climate and decision making that is taking place. Often, they do not utilize any media to educate themselves on political outlooks. Because of the lack of social media, their views actually tend to align significantly closer to that of older generations as opposed to their suburban living counterparts (Edwards et. al). Their views tend to be more conservative and often their communities are represented by older, white males. Because their media type aligns with that of older generations, so do their views. These results are a clear indication that media types play a role in shaping our outline of politics and it can amplify our beliefs without any regard for anyone else's.

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### ***4. Polarization at the Polls - 2020 Election***

A significant turning point for political polarization took place during the presidential election of 2020. During this election, Republican incumbent Donald Trump ran against the former Vice President, Democrat Joe Biden. The polarization associated did not arrive in a vacuum. During the years leading up to the election, during Donald Trump's first term in office, escalating polarization and growing social unrest were heightened by factors like the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic beginning, a growing awareness of racial injustice, the prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement, and eventually distrust in the electoral college and the democratic process of elections (Farifax, 331-356).

Age based political polarization was incredibly evident during this election. A big driving factor behind this was the phenomena that young voters, especially those of color, played a decisive role in the Democratic victory that was achieved in November of 2020. Youth voting turnout reached unprecedented levels in comparison to early years according to the Harvard Kennedy School's *PolicyCast*. Many view this turnout as a reflection of the issues that came to light at the tail end of Donald Trump's first term. Further, Millennials became the largest demographic of voters, surpassing Baby Boomers. This shift was consequential. Millennials and Baby Boomers tend to hold contrasting views and vote non-homogeneously, and this shift in population also largely contributed to a Democratic victory (Ganz et. al). This shift came with a price, though, and that price was a deepening of generational divides and a sharpening in the tone of what being polarized meant.

One of the most polarizing elements of the 2020 election was the necessity for mail in voting brought on by a global pandemic. Mail in ballots became the most popular form of voting especially for those that were immunocompromised, elderly, or conscious of the spread of

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Covid-19. Regardless of the reasoning, this change in election methodology led to distrust towards the government and the election process, specifically by Conservatives. Research found that 68% of in person Trump supporters were concerned about the prospects of mail in voting and the outcome it resulted in, Joe Biden winning the election. On the other hand, Biden supporters were almost twice as likely as Trump supporters to choose to vote by mail in ballot (Atske). Older, more conservative voters disproportionately questioned the integrity of the process and this difference in acceptance and faith in the way the 2020 election was conducted led to dire consequences including the Capitol insurrection on January 6th. The statistics back the fact that the disagreeing approval exacerbated polarization along both political and generational lines with effects that are still unfolding and present.

### *5. Real World Input*

#### **5.1 The Silence of Representation**

A valuable lens that examines age based political polarization comes from those on the frontlines— our elected officials. In preparation for this thesis, I reached out to countless members of the House of Representatives as well as the Senate. The response rate overall, though, was extremely minimal. While oftentimes Congress members prioritize helping their direct constituents, or those who reside in the area they are elected to represent, the lack of engagement I was met with from these members was rather shocking and telling. A deeper concern is underscored. Our representatives may not be able to find the time and even the willingness to engage with constituents beyond public outreach and campaigning. This definitely goes towards a larger critique to the democratic process of having the few represent the many. Yet, the many are supposed to be the true bestowers of power and influence on the political system. (Kuklinski, 222).

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This gap that exists between the people and the elected not only represents a logistical issue but also a matter of worsened polarization based on age. When older representatives cannot reach a hand out to the diverse represented population, the gap can worsen generational divides and ideological entrenchment. It is for this reason that I wanted to reach out directly to these representatives to investigate how polarization is made worse without the voice of the people shining through. I sent messages that sought an explanation as to why, in their eyes, political polarization has been impacted by age and what remedies they envision could be possible. I left voicemails and emails and was returned with not much more than radio silence. Nevertheless, the results that I did get were very insightful and allow a deeper look into what happens within the decision making process.

### **5.2 An Insider's Take: Senator Mark Kelly on Navigating the Divide**

One standout name in the last year from the Senate floor is United States Senator Mark Kelly. Senator Kelly is the senior Democratic Senator for the state of Arizona which he has represented since December of 2020. Before he represented Arizona, he represented our country as an accomplished, decorated Navy pilot veteran and during his time with NASA (Website of Senator Mark Kelly). During his time in the Senate, Senator Kelly has become known for his advocacy for the furthering of government transparency and accountability for the people. In his contributions to this research, Senator Kelly was able to provide his valuable insight on age based political polarization and how his experience has been shaped not only by his time in the Senate and the government in general but also by his broader professional career. In response to questions posed about generational divides and possible remedies, the Senator said:

“Political polarization is one of the main reasons for the situation our country finds itself in today, where it feels like Congress can rarely agree on anything and solve the issues

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facing Americans everyday. Today's generation is growing up in a much more polarized environment than I did, and you're getting information from much more polarized sources. I'm fortunate that I also went on to serve in the Navy and at NASA, both organizations that place teamwork and completing the mission above nearly all else. Now, I bring that same commitment to teamwork with me everyday while I serve Arizonans in the Senate. Solving political polarization won't be easy, but it starts with understanding how much more we have in common than what divides us. I've found that one on one conversations where we can identify that common ground and build on it is the best place to start. But we need to elect people to office who are willing to do that, and be a better example for the rest of the country, including the generations that follow us." (Senator Kelly)

Senator Kelly's insight reinforces what this research outlines. Polarization is not just ideological or a party issue. It is generational. It is cultural. It is deeply personal. While other elected officials remained silent when given an opportunity to teach and speak on experience, Senator Kelly chose to engage and give insight that can foster potential change. His emphasis on teamwork and leaving no one behind is a lesson that underscores how we need to change our approach to the growing animosity between various age groups when political discourse arises. As communication and trust erode, especially between older and younger generations, polarization is only given the choice of deepening in the absence of effort and change.

An idea that was introduced early on in this thesis was the idea of our "algebra" shaping how we view and vote on political issues. Senator Kelly was able to include details of his "algebra" including his space exploration, naval contributions, and public service which all played a role in creating a Senator that is open, honest, and above all, a team player that wants

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the best for the people that put him in power. Instead of using his “algebra” to harden divisiveness within him, he uses it to find common ground and to “build on it” as opposed to using it as a source of division that does not stand a chance at compromise.

### ***6. Conclusion***

What is in front of you now, is a puzzle. Every single piece is in place— except for one, right in the middle. You know what the puzzle looks like. You know exactly what is being depicted in this puzzle, its message unmistakable. You do not need that last piece of the puzzle to figure it out. That puzzle represents political polarization in the United States. The missing piece? It represents age.

There may be a lack of research and statistical data on how age contributes to political polarization, but because of everything else known about this furtherance towards political extremes, age can be considered a driving factor. All issues that are researched, that are reported on have a linkage to age. Social media is used by younger age groups and creates “echo chambers”. This creates a disconnect between age groups and their ability to access this new type of media. This furthers political polarization.

The members of Congress are becoming further and further apart according to statistics. Our population has never lived to this age, incumbents are hard to unseat, and new and old members are further apart than ever. Age is certainly a factor. The people on the front lines, members of the government, are telling us that age is a factor and their experience as to why. All the pieces of the puzzle are there and based on the research and data that exists, age is the piece that connects all of it together.

But, why is that piece missing? It is missing because it is underreported. The data looks at all these factors but what exists specifically in terms of age is limited. Political polarization is a

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multi-faceted term and will always exist, but it has become a term that divides us largely because of the contributions various age groups have made to its existence. Looking at age and the role it plays may help us get a better look at the picture the puzzle is showing. It might help us see it in a whole new perspective and bridge the gap that this thesis exposes.

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