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# United We Stood, Divided We Fall: The 21st Century Paradigm of Inequality and Polarization in the United States

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*An ethnographic case study examining how changing societal conditions have led to socio-economic inequities and a paradigm of polarization affecting social, political, and economic spheres of American society.*



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[https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2019-02-21/poll-most-americans-think-country-is-divided-have-u\\_nfavorable-view-of-trump](https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2019-02-21/poll-most-americans-think-country-is-divided-have-unfavorable-view-of-trump)

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## Abstract

Polarization as defined by the Merriam-Webster (2020) dictionary is “a state in which the opinions, beliefs, or interests of a group or society no longer range along a continuum but become concentrated at opposing extremes.” In theory, polarization is a static condition which can impact a particular group. In this thesis, it is argued that polarization is more dynamic than previously implied and that the intricate bonds which shape communities consist of various preconditions including socio-economic and sociopolitical factors. The case of the United States has become particularly relevant in recent decades as political polarization has become widely discussed in academic and public sources alike. Globalization and its impacts are discussed as a baseline for the pervasive conditions of economic inequality in the United States. These themes are interrelated to changing sociological frameworks including the decline of socio-economic mobility, the erosion of social networks (social capital), and cohesion of communities.

Discussed separately, these conditions hold independent arguments; however, in culmination, impacts arising from imbalanced socio-economic disparities have led to divisions in class structures, divergent cultural and social norms, and eventually, a deterioration of mutual trust and reciprocity leading to polarization. Social and economic polarity have fostered political reactions such as the rise of populism, increasing political partisanship, and the erosion of traditional American institutions. In this thesis, existing literature and theory are evaluated followed by an online survey of seventy randomized adult Americans. The intent of this survey is to assess how demographic identities correlate with perception of others, the economy, local communities, and political ideology. Responses are then analysed and discussed in an effort to understand how a growing paradigm of polarization is impacting the population as well as the fundamental frameworks and institutions which Americans rely upon.

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## Prologue

If a curious individual were to approach a scholar of social sciences and pose the question of how they would choose to define the study of development, how would the scholar respond? The study of development is ambiguous, although a common interpretation may include the following: The multidisciplinary field of development studies are focused on the evolutionary processes of a nation or group ranging from inception to a state of what is perceived to be developed (Sumner and Tribe, 2008, p. 12). While the particular criteria for a nation to attain a ‘developed’ status may differ over time, the majority of contemporary development studies are focused on countries and regions throughout the world which are currently undergoing the process of developing (Sumner and Tribe, 2008, pp. 15-18). Therefore, it would be a rare occurrence for an academic definition of development studies to be centered around any country which has already surpassed the mark of what is widely considered to be ‘developed’.

Development addresses the circumstances either aiding or inhibiting the advancements of a nation’s economic, social, and political spheres (Sumner and Tribe, 2008, pp. 13-14). Pervasive socioeconomic inequality, divergent social conditions, and the breakdown of political institutions arguably represent a trifecta of conditions commonly inhibiting a nation’s development. When a nation initiates a structural transformation, that nation may enable or expedite its development progress with the ultimate aim of achieving societal advancement (Sumner and Tribe, 2008, p. 12). This contemporary conceptualization of development presents a dichotomy between wealth and poverty, growth and contraction, success and failure, ‘developed’ and ‘developing.’ An important consideration notwithstanding, does this ‘black and white’ portrayal accurately represent the complex realities of economic development in the 21st century?

Developed nations are susceptible to the same existential challenges as their developing counterparts. Despite taking place at different stages of development, ubiquitous economic inequities, a loss of social capital or mobility, and widespread socio-political conflicts can lead to a series of undesirable themes including polarization; permeating throughout the institutional foundations of society, potentially altering the course of a nation’s future (Galtung et al., 1980).

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Problematization

All development must ultimately reach a climax or peak. A fundamental dilemma of focusing solely on under-developed economies is that their developed counterparts may be perceived to be immune from experiencing similar endogenous challenges. As a nation grows, not only do its institutions become larger, they also become more intricate. Thus, it may become widely presumed that larger, wealthy countries are less vulnerable to the internal threats which make less institutionally capable states ‘fragile’ (Sumner and Tribe, 2008, p. 18). Countries which are considered to be fully developed feature advanced, industrialized economies of scale and robust institutions which enable a high degree of social mobility as well as prolonged periods of geo-political stability (Sumner and Tribe, 2008, pp. 19-21). Given these inherent advantages, what could possibly threaten a nation which has attained such an advanced level of development?

The advent of globalization has significantly altered how countries interact with each other. This novel model of interlinking people and markets has resulted in shifting paradigms between wealthy, prosperous economies and their rapidly developing counterparts. For some nations, globalization has led to an unprecedented new wave of growth and for others, it has resulted in a variety of challenges ranging from economic stagnation to institutional collapse (Milanovic, 2016, p. 2). The interconnected nature of the global economy has led to a balancing act involving every nation on earth.

Globalization has become an economic force majeure which ultimately results in ‘winners and losers’ (Milanovic 2016, p. 20). While these outcomes are generally attached to a particular country or region, they are concurrently playing out on a community and even individual level. The aims of this research are not intended to argue a stance on the pros or cons of globalization. The rise of globalization serves as a point of departure; a broad yet pervasive

condition which has led to a significant divergence of outcomes for national economies since the dawn of the 21st century.

In this thesis, it will be argued that the negative effects of globalization on the U.S. economy combined with policy initiatives favoring the welfare of the wealthiest Americans have provoked a number of unsustainable social and economic imbalances giving rise to a plethora of consequences. Chiefly among those consequences, a rising paradigm of polarization throughout modern American society has emerged (Alwin and Tufis, 2016). This paradigm has the potential to become extremely detrimental to long-term political stability, social cohesion, and perhaps, the economic destiny of the United States.

## **1.2 Aim of the Study**

This thesis seeks to analyse the relationship between recent decades of American economic history and polarization. Once these relationships are established, quantifying the severity and extent of polarization will be the central aspect of research. Utilizing economic indicators, social demographics, and political data, this thesis may serve as a contribution to the field of research surrounding development studies, economic history, and the ongoing paradigm of polarization taking place in the United States. It is hypothesized that imbalanced economic growth in a country causes critical divisions within society. These divisions, in turn, are likely to result in political reactions to the perceived demands of various cohorts of the population. Should these cohorts become too starkly divided, they could potentially lead to a breakdown of society.

The following research questions will be posed:

*How has the rise of globalization exacerbated socio-economic inequality throughout the United States and to which degree have these changing norms advanced polarization in society?*

*Has the trend of polarization led to a decline in social capital, political partisanship, and the erosion of institutions? Why are economic inequities a driving force behind this paradigm?*

The first research question is intended to address whether the advent of globalization has given rise to the unique economic conditions which have exacerbated socio-economic divisions

within the United States. The predominant economic aspect of this report is to understand how socio-economic pressures have fostered household income inequality. The analysis of statistics and demographic data surrounding these divisions will be crucial for understanding the normative foundations of polarization throughout society. By evaluating the extent of socioeconomic divisions, correlations between income inequality and the degree of polarization in society can be investigated.

The second research question expands the scope of polarization from its economic origins to associated social and political causal relationships. While it is argued that the most significant contributing factors to the rising trend of polarization in the United States are economic; polarization as a paradigm encompasses outcomes for various spheres of society. The level of cohesion and well being of a community are leading indicators of the social capital within a cohort of the overall population. Social capital can be influenced by a range of conditions including community-level economic conditions, technology, access to public institutions, as well as individual cooperation (Fukuyama, 2001).

Social capital varies from region to region based on these preconditions. However, when the social capital of a particular group declines dramatically or diverges in a significant way from neighboring communities, a result could be the transition from social or cultural conflicts to a broader, politically motivated coalition (Alwin and Tufis, 2016). Polarization, particularly in regards to rising partisanship, has become widely discussed in American political discourse. Political partisanship is born from social divergence and fueled by disaffected communities (Bafumi and Shapiro, 2009). Arising from a culmination of the aforementioned economic, social, and political concerns is the long-term stability of institutional frameworks.

### **1.3 Outline of the Thesis**

The outline of the thesis will be as follows: The body of the thesis features eight main sections. Certain sections are divided into subsections.

1. The *introduction* orients the reader with the point of departure for the thesis: the advent of globalization and how widespread economic inequities have led to a rising paradigm

of polarization in the United States. The aims and scope of the study are identified in the introduction. Two research questions are presented and the relationships between economic, social, and political challenges are discussed.

2. The *background and significance* section summarizes the challenges associated with evaluating polarization. This section highlights the need for further research on the contemporary situation in the United States and how it may worsen if left unaddressed.
3. The *literature review* section is dedicated to an in-depth discussion of existing studies of the foundational preconditions leading to a polarized society. This is divided into economic, social, and political subsections.
4. The *theoretical framework* section presents the theory behind the topics presented in the literature review. Branko Milanovic, Robert Putnam, and others ground the theory behind economic inequality, social capital, and the divisions in American politics. Individually, their arguments represent independent challenges. Cumulatively, they become central in creating the dangerous precedent of a polarized society.
5. The *methods and data* section presents the data and methodologies utilized in the thesis. A description of which methods and procedures most effectively evaluate the data in the thesis. This includes assessing the validity and potential limitations of the study.
6. The *analysis* section triangulates the data into results based on how the theories presented are applied to the research.
7. The *discussion of findings* section is dedicated to evaluating the findings of the thesis, suggesting how these findings may contribute to academic discourse, and presenting potential solutions to improve conditions in the future.
8. The *concluding remarks* will comprise the final statements in the closing of the thesis. These remarks will summarize whether the research and its findings have led to any significant implications, revised interpretations, or need for further study.

## 2. Background and Significance

Once a baseline of evidence has been established linking globalization to various domestic socio-economic challenges, investigating its correlation between social and political aspects of society is paramount in creating a comprehensive understanding of how polarization forms and spreads. At present, the study of polarization in relation to inequality is arguably inadequate. Most accounts of polarization are studied in direct connection with a specific societal problem, rather than being addressed as a multidisciplinary paradigm.

Polarization has been defined by social scientists in unique ways. Within each field there are different perspectives representing what polarization is and how it impacts society. In an economic sense, exogenous forces such as globalization and technological change have the potential to give rise to socio-economic divisions in class structures resulting in increasingly polarized subsets of the population (Milanovic, 2016, pp. 214-215). Rising income and wealth inequality can be divisive as communities and nations are segregated based on class structures. The decline of the ‘middle class’ in western nations such as the United States exemplifies this paradigm as it has also manifested into a socio-political challenge (Milanovic, 2016, p. 28, 164).

Polarization as defined by a sociologist may encompass the divergence of societal norms and values (Fine, 2002, pp. 25-28). In particular, the role of social networks and socio-economic mobility within a community are considered determinant factors in the degree of social cohesion (Fukuyama, 2001). According to a political science definition, “it (polarization) can manifest as a bimodal distribution of ideologies, rather than as a left-to-right continuum, or as the decline of deliberation between people on opposite sides, which may in part be due to the declining prevalence of centrists who can forge a middle ground between extreme ideological camps” (Epstein and Graham, 2007). While a field-specific definition of polarization may differ, a common theme is that societal polarization is represented by the culmination of various economic, social, and political conditions leading to divergent groups composed of opposing attitudes or systems of understanding within a society (Alwin and Tufis, 2016).

While existing academic literature addresses polarization in a broader context, it is important to consider three points.

- Polarization is not easy to identify, explain, or eradicate. Polarization originates from an intricate set of preconditions. Understanding the origin of polarization is only the first piece of the puzzle. Quantifying the severity of a paradigm takes time, insights, and research. This is a significant motivation for further research and analysis of the topic.
- While the trend of growing polarization has been identified and reported on by various media outlets, causes of associated socioeconomic and political divergences are disputed. Media sources have offered anecdotal accounts of polarization and how it impacts society, however, this information is not considered viable in academia, unless studying the media's impacts on the perception of a population (Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016).
- Finally, it is important to recognize that despite the United States holding the title of the world's largest economy and having surpassed most development thresholds over a century ago, many empires have historically collapsed due to internal conflicts (Galtung et al., 1980). Social unrest stemming from polarization can be dangerous, leading to radical political movements, deepening economic challenges, and widespread conflicts in society. In a historical context, severe internal conflicts have threatened the stability and longevity of the world's most prominent civilisations (Galtung et al., 1980).

Analysing the economic history of a country is crucial when one seeks to understand a paradigm shift in the global economy. In the case of the United States, the previous 50 years have come under scrutiny as a period in which global economic developments have unjustly benefitted certain groups and the expense of others (Horowitz et al., 2020). While there have been countless studies discussing globalization and the impacts of economic inequities in the U.S., relatively few studies have interlinked these conditions with the underlying divisions which have led to a polarized populace. This may be due to the challenges associated with empirically assessing polarization. As it cannot be observed, only the study of its causes and effects can be quantified. This thesis will triangulate these conditions to formulate a comprehensive prognosis.

### 3. Previous Literature

#### 3.1 Globalization and 21st Century Inequality

Globalization is a complex and arguably misunderstood topic. Economies have always interacted with each other, the primary distinction is that in a globalized world, the degree to which national boundaries play a role has arguably diminished in an economic context (O'Meara et al., 2000, pp. 101-103). In centuries past, when a nation suffered from an economic crisis, it would likely coincide with a significant impact on neighboring countries in the region which either traded with or relied on goods and services originating from the crisis country (Maddison, 1977).

While an economic meltdown had the potential to wreak havoc on a regional level in the 18th century; in the globalized economy of the 21st century, economic impacts are instantaneous and are capable of rippling everywhere. For example, a variety of unexpected world events can rapidly and drastically alter economic outcomes in a globalized economy. These events may include terrorism, the convergence or divergence of economic unions, international armed conflicts, natural disasters, and other forms of socio-political or ideological unrest (Milanovic, 2016, pp. 163-164). Most countries arguably no longer have control of their economic destiny.

The United States has prevailed as the world's largest economy throughout the 20th century. Rapid industrial expansion, diversified factor endowments, the rise of innovative technologies, and competitive manufacturing advantages enabled the United States to surpass European and Asian counterparts by the late 19th century (Gordon, 1999). Despite a series of economic downturns, two world wars, and rival nations vying to thwart American economic momentum; by the mid 20th century the U.S. featured the world's largest GDP figures by a significant margin (Gordon, 1999). However, since the beginning of the 21st century, the economic outlook for the United States appears very different. The geopolitical and economic rise of China (P.R.C.), a weakening comparative advantage of American goods, and global trade conflicts have challenged the U.S.-centric economic prospectus (Qui and Wei, 2019).

Imbalanced distribution of incomes, class-oriented allocations of capital, and the prioritization of welfare for the wealthy over the prosperity of the masses arguably threaten the social fabric of the United States. Over the past 20 years, despite a consistently rising cost of living, wages have stagnated in most cases. In certain periods, average wages have declined (Bivens et al., 2014). Concurrently, the number of hours worked on average has increased for a significant portion of the workforce (EPI, 2019). How is it possible that in the world's wealthiest nation, the average citizen is getting paid less for more work? Has the economy faltered? One of the most significant indicators explaining this trend is an expanding 'income gap'.

According to a 2019 study by the Economic Policy Institute, between 1948-1979 productivity rose by 108.1% and wages rose 93.2% (EPI, 2019). While this figure doesn't represent a perfect convergence, it also doesn't indicate asymmetrical growth. Between 1979-2018, productivity rose 69.6% whilst wages only went up 11.6% on average (EPI, 2019). The EPI data suggests the onset of a disparity between overall economic productivity and wages. Productivity has risen six times as much as the average hourly wage. This has become known as 'the productivity-pay gap' (EPI, 2019). Where has the capital gone? With a sixfold gain of productivity and stagnating pay, surely someone must be a beneficiary (see Appendix Figure 1).

Data from the Pew Research Center shows that when income distribution is examined by quintile of the population, it becomes apparent that since the early 1980s, annual incomes have risen substantially faster for the highest-earning fifth of the population than for the rest of the population (Horowitz et al., 2020). The share of median household income in the U.S. has diverged sharply in the same period. While the upper-income cohort of the population has expanded their share of aggregate wealth from 60 to 79 percent, the middle-income share of capital has declined sharply from 32 to 17 percent. At the same time, low income earning households has declined from 7 to only 4 percent of the aggregate wealth in the United States (Horowitz et al., 2020).

In simple terms, the American middle class has been shrinking rapidly since the 1980s and the wealthiest Americans are getting wealthier at the expense of lower and middle-income workers. "The wealth gap between America's richest and poorer families more than doubled

from 1989 to 2016. In 1989, the richest 5% of families had 114 times as much wealth as families in the second quintile, \$2.3 million compared with \$20,300. By 2016, this ratio had increased to 248, a much sharper rise than the widening gap in income” (Horowitz et al., 2020). While the phenomenon of income inequality is not unique to the American economy, the United States has the highest Gini coefficient (higher Gini figures represent more unequal capital distribution) among G-7 economies (Horowitz et al., 2020).

Despite the overwhelming evidence that income inequality has reached epidemic levels in the United States, only “61 percent of Americans say there is too much inequality in the country” at present levels and “fewer than half see economic inequality as a very big problem” in comparison to other political issues (Horowitz et al., 2020). The American public’s perception of inequality in the United States arguably does not align with its severity according to economic data. A series of essays authored by the Center for Household Financial Stability, a department of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, examines how patterns of wealth in the United States have diverged based on various demographic indicators.

Economic disparities based on racial origin are prevalent in the United States. A parallel between the ‘winners and losers’ of globalization are the ‘thrivers and strugglers’ within the American economy (Boshara et al., 2015a). Those defined as ‘thrivers’ are most commonly represented by white (caucasian) or Asian, middle-aged, college-educated, financially conservative individuals earning above-average incomes. Despite only accounting for approximately a quarter of American households, they hold two-thirds of all American wealth (Boshara et al., 2015a). Across all racial and ethnic groups, education represents a consistent factor in median family incomes. The higher the level of educational attainment, the higher the average level of income (Boshara et al., 2015b).

The remaining three-quarters of the American population are defined as ‘strugglers.’ Characterized by little to no wealth accumulation, strugglers are commonly younger, earn lower incomes, and comprise of majority-black or Hispanic families with low educational attainment (Boshara et al., 2015a). When comparing income relative to the white population, Hispanic and black families earned approximately 40 percent less income in 2013 US dollars. Asian families,

however, have grown their median family incomes faster than white families between 1989 and 2013 (Boshara et al., 2015a).

A 2019 poll conducted by the Cato Institute found that younger Americans were more likely to resent the wealthy whereas most older Americans did not share the same sentiments. Younger Americans generally agreed that wealthier Americans had earned their capital through exploitative means and wealth should be redistributed proportionately. Conversely, older respondents felt that wealth was duly earned and should not be punitively taxed (Ekins, 2019). The elderly may have less negative sentiments toward wealth because on average, they have the greatest share of it. Between 1989 and 2013, those over 62 years old grew their median wealth by 40 percent from (US)\$149,728 to \$209,590. Conversely, middle-aged (40-61) and young (under 40) Americans both experienced reductions of median household wealth by 31 percent for middle-aged and 28.3 percent for young Americans respectively (Boshara et al., 2015c).

Contrary to the presumption that older generations as a whole have a greater share of capital, economic inequality has proven just as pervasive among the elderly as with younger Americans. A 2019 report by the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) on retirement security offers supplementary evidence that economic inequities are also affecting elderly populations. The GAO found that the overall share of older Americans has expanded significantly in recent decades and is expected to continue growing as the ‘baby boomer’ generation retires. Between 1989 and 2016, households represented by older Americans (aged 55 and above), experienced an overall rise in household wealth. However, within this demographic, the top 20 percent expanded their wealth disproportionately (Jeszeck et al., 2019).

Elderly populations have experienced wealth inequality post-retirement. “Households in the top quintile of the population had, on average, \$6.1 million in assets, about 272 times as much as the bottom quintile, which had estimated assets of, on average, \$22,000” (Jeszeck et al., 2019). At the same time, average life expectancy continues to rise as government funding has been reduced for programmes such as social security (the U.S. public pension system). Those in the lower cohorts of the elderly population rely heavily on social security and pensions as they have little to no accumulated wealth (Jeszeck et al., 2019).

### **3.2 Origins and Decline of Social Capital**

In 1971, U.S. President Richard Nixon once remarked, “I think of what happened to Greece and Rome, and you see what is left — only the pillars. What has happened, of course, is that the great civilizations of the past, as they have become wealthy, as they have lost their will to live, to improve, they then have become subject to decadence that eventually destroys the civilization. The U.S. is now reaching that period.” (Galtung et al., 1980).

The historical record confirms that nations large and small ultimately reach an apogee (Galtung et al., 1980). Based on what we know as of 2020, the late 20th century could be argued to be the apogee of American economic and political influence. Economic or political conditions are often in focus when analysing the rise and fall of empires. Wars, capital mismanagement, the collapse of governing institutions are all widely discussed as contributing factors in the context of a nation’s or empire’s demise (Galtung et al., 1980). However, arguably one of the most important and often overlooked causes of a fracturing country are the social bonds that hold it together. In Richard Nixon’s quote, he pessimistically compares the economic demise of ancient Greek and Roman empires with the preconditions of America’s looming societal crisis of exuberance and affluenza. President Nixon urged caution that an overabundance of wealth can lead to stagnation and social decline. This is an optimal example of social capital.

Social capital is defined by Robert Putnam, a leading scholar on the subject as “connections among individuals - social networks and the norms of reciprocity & trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, 2000, pp. 18-19). A sense of community and strong social bonds is characteristic of social capital. Social capital implies a synergy between social sciences and economics. Social capital may be considered an ambiguous term as it presents the study of social structures, norms, and values as a form of intangible capital, interpreted as the symbolic currency of social cohesion (Fine, 2002, pp. 25-28).

The critical importance of social capital in a functional society cannot be understated. Civic engagement and cooperation within a population ultimately dictate the social mobility and economic prosperity of a community (Fukuyama, 2001). The United States has a rich history of

social capital. In the 1830s, a French aristocrat, Alexis de Tocqueville came to America to analyse what distinguished European and American society. Tocqueville found that the foundation of America's civic strength was rooted in community assembly. In particular, Tocqueville remarked on the formation of associations; "Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of dispositions are forever forming associations... wherein France you would find the government or in England some territorial magnate, in the United States you are sure to find an association" (Putnam, 2004, p. 103). The United States in the 1830s was expanding its democratic ideals through community-based organization and the formation of voluntary associations. This movement continued throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, an era of expanding social capital.

The prevalence of labor unions in the early to mid 20th century took place alongside the mechanization of the industrial sector. Mass production of goods and standardization of products was a driving force behind unionization. Unions were another form of association, in this case an organization focused on solidarity and benefits for the workforce (Dinlersoz and Greenwood, 2012). An equilibrium between the interests of businesses and the interests of the worker on a community-level were sought. The early to mid 20th century was defined by collectivism. After the allied victory of World War II and throughout the 1950s, community involvement continued to be a mainstay of the American experience. However by the 1960s, community cohesiveness was challenged by social movements in the form of protests and activism. "Civic-mindedness was already being transformed into self-interestedness" (Putnam, 2004, p. 59).

Tocqueville was impressed by his observations of American cooperation, although he remained wary of individualism, in a sense, the antithesis of a community-centered society (Realo and Allik, 2009). The rise of contemporary neoliberalism throughout the latter portion of the 20th century was defined by individual achievement and capital accumulation (Ferragina and Arrigoni, 2017). This wave of individualism led to a gradual decline of social capital, symbolically characterized by Robert Putnam in his (2000) book 'Bowling Alone.' Once commonplace social groups such as bowling leagues had diverged into solitary activities (Putnam, 2000: pp. 27-28).

Social capital has been steadily eroding since the mid 20th century and arguably depreciated even faster in the early 21st century. Rising economic inequities have been correlated with the decline of social capital (Ferragina and Arrigoni, 2017). Individual gains have been increasingly prioritized over collective welfare. Divergent socio-economic conditions have been mounting throughout American society for decades. In the shadow of these events, there have been meager investments in social capital and community-focused development (Temin, 2018). Instead, much of the financial capital accumulated from the productivity in the country has been redistributed to the wealthiest cohorts of the population (Horowitz et al., 2020).

Reduced cooperation and an absence of community are far more detrimental to a country than simply being less socially active. The level of trust within and between communities has systematically deteriorated since the 1970s. Along with it a decline in voluntary association has resulted in diminishing confidence in neighbors, peers, and public institutions alike (Jones, 2019, pp. 73, 80). A panel on social capital was established by the Joint Economic Committee in 2017 as a method of addressing these challenges (JEC, 2020). Tocqueville once prophetically stated, “if men are to remain civilized, or to become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve, in the same ratio in which the equality of conditions is increased” (De Tocqueville, 1899: p. 598).

### **3.3 Fracturing Political Systems: A Tale of Two Americas**

America’s political landscape has altered significantly in recent decades, overlapping with the rise of income inequality and depreciation of social capital. Political partisanship represents the biased orientation of a particular group toward a political party or cause. Partisanship has the potential to become more pervasive in a country like the United States as it features a ‘two-party political’ system (Levendusky, 2018). The American electorate has grown significantly more divided since the mid-1990s. These political reactions are arguably in response to an increasingly polarized social climate which continues to grow more divided based on demographic and economic factors (Horowitz et al., 2020 and Boshara et al., 2015, a,b,c).

Ideologically, the Democratic and Republican parties have become polarized compared to previous decades. In 1994, approximately 64 percent of Republicans identified as consistently conservative. In 2004, 70 percent, and in 2017, 95 percent of those who identified as Republicans were more conservative than a median Democrat voter (Kiley, 2017). The same phenomenon has taken place in the Democratic party. In 1994, 70 percent of Democrats held consistently liberal positions in contrast to the median Republican voter. By 2017, 97 percent of Democrats were considered more liberal than their Republican counterparts (Kiley, 2017). This data (see Appendix Figure 2) represents a departure from political centrism with very few members of either party sharing commonality on their ideological positions.

Changing dynamics within political parties and their constituencies have resulted in a shift toward party orientation as the defining factor of voter identity (Doherty, 2017). Democrats and Republicans have diverged on a variety of positions including how active the US should be in foreign affairs, the role of the government in helping bridge socio-economic gaps, and whether or not hard work alone can lead to economic success (Doherty, 2017). The predominant views on American involvement in foreign affairs have reversed course in each party. In 2004, 53 percent of Republicans supported American involvement in foreign affairs. By 2017, only 39 percent held the same views. Among Democrats, 37 percent supported active foreign affairs in 2004 compared to 56 percent in 2017 (Doherty, 2017).

Views on economic inequality are substantially split alongside political party lines. According to a Pew Research study on economic inequality, “two-thirds of Democrats – compared with just 19% of Republicans say inequality is a very big problem in the country today” (Horowitz et al., 2020). Furthermore, the study found that while Democrats were largely focused on structural problems in society and lack of government intervention as a cause for inequality while Republicans focused on personal responsibility and individual work ethic. Republicans on average were more reluctant to increase taxes and had less confidence in most proposed solutions to mitigate economic inequities. Democrats and Republicans fundamentally disagreed on the role of government to provide public services with most Democrats overwhelmingly supportive of government-sponsored healthcare, education, and retirement

benefits. More than half of all Republicans were opposed to government-funded public services, particularly in regards to healthcare (Horowitz et al., 2020).

Communities of similar demographic compositions throughout the country were found to hold corresponding ideological values linked to a particular political party in both the 2012 and 2016 elections (Gentzkow, 2017). The growing distinction between the demographics of urban and rural communities has also led to the polarization of the electorate. Those residing in urban and suburban areas tend to experience a higher degree of socioeconomic mobility in comparison to rural residents (Parker et al., 2018). A majority of Republican voters were found to reside in rural communities and a higher concentration of Democrats reside in urban areas. Rural communities were typically less racially diverse, comprising of 21 percent nonwhite residents; urban areas, by contrast, were 56 percent nonwhite (Parker et al., 2018). Among Republicans, those residing in urban and suburban areas had less favorable views of President Donald Trump compared to rural voters. Democrats in all regions remained overwhelmingly opposed to Trump (Parker et al., 2018).

The preconditions of rising economic inequality combined with declining social capital have arguably led to and empowered the rise of radical and fringe political movements (Gentzkow, 2017). Traditional political parties are having to contend with anti-establishment movements occurring in various countries around the world (Rodrik, 2018). Political populism has propagated as a result of globalization and its underlying economic consequences for national economies (Milanovic, 2016, pp. 191-192). Populism describes a wide gamut of political movements, typically sharing a message of anti-establishment ideals and opposition to the contemporary global economic system (Rodrik, 2018). Examples of rising populism can be found in different regions of the world. In a Latin American context, far left-wing populist movements have taken shape in countries impacted by recurrent financial crises, economic policies imposed by the IMF, and predatory foreign investment practices (Rodrik, 2018).

In contrast, a greater number of right-wing populist political movements have taken shape in Western European countries and the United States. Right-wing nationalist parties throughout Western Europe have gained prominence by adopting nationalist, anti-globalization

stances. Their support has likely originated from ethnocultural conflicts and shifts in immigration patterns stemming from globalization (Rodrik, 2018). The Brexit vote in the United Kingdom (to leave the European Union) and the 2016 election of Donald Trump in the United States are recent examples of right-wing populism (Rodrik, 2018). One could argue that left-wing populism stems from financial crises and right-wing populism stems from ethnocultural roots. However, in both cases, globalization represents the source of changing economic conditions, rising inequality in some nations, and social unrest due to concerns of national sovereignty, xenophobic tendencies, and the growing division of social class structures (Rodrik, 2018).

The 2016 election represented a radical departure from ‘traditional’ Democrat and Republican party candidates with the rise of populist candidates. The Democratic field featured Hillary Clinton, a career politician sparring against Bernie Sanders, “a 74-year-old self-proclaimed democratic socialist” (Fukuyama, 2016). Clinton represented the centrist, establishment political agenda of the Democratic base. In stark contrast, Sanders ran a ‘grassroots’ campaign based on small donations and promised controversial reforms to restore economic mobility to the lower-income and working classes of America (Fukuyama, 2016).

In the Republican field, Donald Trump was widely considered to be a political ‘outsider’ and initially perceived to have little chance of surviving the rigor of debating several seasoned politicians including establishment candidates such as Jeb Bush and others (Fukuyama, 2016). The Trump campaign shared several common characteristics with populist right-wing European political movements (Rodrik, 2018). Trump’s platform was staunchly anti-immigration and took a hardline against foreign trading practices. Trump went on to win the Republican nomination and eventually, the presidency (Rodrik, 2018). Trump and Sanders both ran on an anti-establishment platform aimed at the lower and middle classes of America, each proposing radical solutions to their followers. The 2016 election was indicative of American democracy “finally responding to the economic stagnation of most of the population” (Fukuyama, 2016).

## 4. Theoretical Framework

### 4.1 Milanovic's Winners and Losers

Branko Milanovic is arguably one of the most reliable academic sources for research on global inequality. Milanovic obtained his Ph.D. in economics from the University of Belgrade in 1987 and has since served as the lead economist in the World Bank's Research Department specializing in the economic history of inequality, globalization, and macroeconomics (Stone Center, 2020). With such extensive coverage within these key areas of our research along with his tenure with the World Bank and other leading institutions, his previous works serve the thesis's theoretical framework well.

The relationship between economic inequality and societal polarization is a focal point of concern in this study. In 'Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization', Branko Milanovic highlights how the 'winners and losers' of globalization have been a determinant factor in how a nation's economic development influences societal conditions. Milanovic offers a comprehensive background on the contemporary outcomes of globalization taking place within the American economy and also hypothesizes the potential for future consequences if we continue on the current path (Milanovic, 2016: pp. 199-203). Economic inequality is arguably the most important precondition for polarization to take place in society.

A key argument of postmodern economic theory is that economic development does *not* create an equal playing field for all participants. There will always be 'winners and losers' in the context of economic prosperity (Milanovic, 2016, pp. 19-20). The question is, how deep is the divide between those who benefit and those who fall behind? In the United States, globalization, conflicting interests between the public and policymakers, as well as broader misconceptions surrounding the fable of an 'American dream' have all played a role in this saga (Milanovic, 2016, p. 21). According to Milanovic (2016), those who are deemed to be "the great winners have been the Asian poor and middle classes; the great losers, the lower middle classes of the rich world" (Milanovic, 2016, p. 20).

In the research questions, the driving force behind all of these concepts arguably stems from the broader themes of globalization leading to significant changes to the structure and dynamics of economics throughout the developed and developing world alike. One of the most relevant theories behind this was presented in ‘Global Inequality.’ In his book, Milanovic argues that globalization has altered the dynamics of how citizens participate and interact with the economy both on a regional and global level. The share of capital in the developed world has largely gone towards the top 1 percent of income earners. As a result, the middle class and the poor have been forced to carry the burden of economic inequities (Milanovic, 2016, pp. 37-44).

The rise of the middle class in East Asia, particularly in China as well as the rapid social and economic growth of developing countries has changed the role of developed countries such as the United States (Milanovic, 2016, pp. 32-35). However, when compared with most developed western European nations, the United States exhibits a particularly troubling trend of socio-economic inequality. Downward pressure on wages, weakened unions, and technological advances have all played roles in the changing economy (Milanovic, 2016, pp. 74-75). Rising inequality in the 21st century is the greatest risk to the dwindling middle class of America (Milanovic, 2016, pp. 191-192). A focus on how to improve capital distribution is a paramount focus throughout Milanovic’s arguments. Structural changes in education, trade, and legislation all have the potential to level the playing field. The arguments and determinant theories Milanovic presents will be central to the broader theoretical basis of polarization.

## **4.2 The (New) American Experience: An Erosion of Social Capital**

In exploring the societal impacts of polarization, one should consider the value of social capital in modern society. Arguably one of the most important academic voices advocating for societal cohesion and highlighting the importance of social capital is Robert Putnam. Many of the theories which Milanovic presents in his book are interconnected to those presented by Putnam. The key distinction is that Milanovic is focused on the socio-economic aspects of a globalized marketplace while Putnam’s predominant aims are to examine the intricate social and

cultural challenges associated with altered norms. Both of their theories correlate toward the rising imbalances originating from social and economic disparities and ultimately, polarization.

Putnam's works include 'Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community' which discusses America's challenges associated with the steady decline of social capital since the 1950s (Putnam, 2000). 'Bowling Alone' in addition to Putnam's previous essays on 'social capital' have argued that eroding social norms are systematically leading to decreased societal cohesion and civic engagement. Putnam's more recent works include 'Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis' which discusses how the growing inequality gap in the United States has led to reduced upward mobility for the American population, specifically youth (Putnam, 2015).

When significant divisions of economic prosperity in society become sufficiently widespread, it is argued that social norms begin to unravel. The norms of a society are established and upheld through the promotion of civic engagement, mutual trust, and cooperation (Marschall, 2016). The continued decline of social capital creates a segue from localized socio-economic disparities to the systemic erosion of cooperation within communities. Social capital arguably represents so much more than solely the cohesion between individuals, it is an indicator of the overall health and mobility of a community (Putnam, 2000, pp. 27-28).

The implication of reduced social capital on the micro (individual or interpersonal) level can lead to macro (institutional and society-wide) consequences (Putnam, 2004, pp. 6-8). In the case of the United States, the vast distinctions between communities in differing geographic, demographic, and socioeconomic cohorts represent a great degree of variance of social mobility and capital. Uneven distribution of social capital between diverse urban centers and homogenous rural regions, arguably represent a key precondition in the formation of polarization in America (Putnam, 2000, pp. 318-320). As these regions feature stark economic and social differences, communities from each demographic are less likely to perceive commonalities with their counterparts (Parker et al., 2018).

When evaluating the consequences of reduced social capital, Putnam highlights five primary areas of concern: “child welfare and education, public safety and neighborhood organization, labor-market outcomes and economic performance, health and happiness, and democracy and democracy values” (Marschall, 2016). When a community prospers, so does a larger cohort of its residents. If that same community becomes less focused on the wellbeing of the community at large, the quality of public institutions and the services they provide will inevitably decline as well (Putnam, 2000, pp. 27-28). Access to healthcare, education, and various other essential services cannot function effectively without public support, funding, and most importantly, trust (Marschall, 2016).

Consequently, the combined effects of declining civic engagement and mutual trust have the potential to threaten the foundational elements of a democratic system (Putnam, 2004, pp. 6, 9). The aforementioned circumstances are optimal preconditions for the rise of a wide range of political responses to the growing trend of economic and social inequities. Political developments are deeply rooted in underlying economic and social conditions. As these conditions become more divergent, political identities are likely to also become more polarized as a result (DiMaggio et al., 1996).

### **4.3 A House Divided: Politics and Polarization**

While Milanovic’s theories connect the advent of globalization to the expanding American model of economic inequality and Putnam conceptualizes how deteriorating social capital has become detrimental to the American experience, the evidence behind the study of political polarization is evident in various socio-political studies. Alwin and Tufis (2016) highlight how class structures and socio-economic status has impacted the political identities of Americans and led to a polarized political climate.

In a 2004 book by Thomas Frank titled ‘What’s the Matter with Kansas?’, a novel theory surrounding the changing spectrum of political orientation in the predominantly rural, midwestern state of Kansas, examined how a new form of populist conservatism was taking over the traditional base of the conservative electorate in the 2000 US presidential election. Instead of

focusing on socially and fiscally conservative principles, this new wave of conservatism was largely centered around controversial cultural issues and right-wing populist agendas. This phenomenon has become known as the Kansas hypothesis (Alwin and Tufis, 2016). One of the most intriguing aspects of the Kansas hypothesis is that a significant portion of the electorate chose to “vote against their traditional economic interests and align themselves with the neoconservative cultural themes articulated during that campaign by the Republican Party” (Alwin and Tufis, 2016).

Political partisanship has arguably become an impediment to the advancement of American society. Without the multilateral cooperation of government representatives toward achieving policy objectives, the stagnation of governance takes place (Epstein and Graham, 2007). Through the comprehensive analysis of the networks of US Senators and Representatives since 1973. It was found that in the 1970s and 1980s, Republicans and Democrats while mostly collaborating within their respective political parties did occasionally interact in a bipartisan way (Neal, 2020).

Efforts such as passing legislation or other bilateral agreements are critical elements of any government, particularly in a representative democracy. By contrast, the level of cooperation ‘across the aisle’ between political parties between the 1990s and 2010s has become increasingly rare to almost nonexistent (Neal, 2020). Polarization is not only enabled under such circumstances, it can spread rapidly throughout society, reducing levels of cooperation and efficiency. With few exceptions, the US political system has become extremely polarized.

Various studies have led to evidence that not only is the absence of cooperation and party-centered ‘us and them’ style political polarization taking place; another form of polarization referred to as ‘us versus them’ has concurrently amplified since the 1990s (Neal, 2020). These divisions have taken place regardless of which political party holds the majority in Congress or the office of President of the United States (Neal, 2020). It can be inferred that partisanship in US politics has also led to the rise of political polarization. However, political parties alone have not been the only forces leading to this phenomenon.

As previously discussed in the literature review, the role of populism in the intensification of polarization cannot be understated. Populism in an American context has taken root in a variety of ways in recent decades. As the ‘Kansas hypothesis’ alludes to, changes in the political ethos of the Republican party have shifted rhetoric away from socio-economic concerns to align with ethnocultural issues (Alwin and Tufis, 2016). While there have always been dissenting ideas within US political parties, the nature of changing the core focus of what a political party represents has led to various party offshoots such as the Tea Party in the early 2010s, which sought to reduce domestic debt and alleviate tax burdens (Savage, 2012).

Initially seeking to become an independent political party, the Tea Party movement coalesced into the Republican Party (Savage, 2012). Since then, novel offshoots from the political base of both the Democrat and Republican parties have manifested coinciding with the right-wing rise of Donald Trump as well as the growing chasm between Democrat centrists and their self-proclaimed Social Democrat counterparts, who supported Bernie Sanders in the 2016 (and 2020) presidential elections (Fukuyama, 2016). In both instances, populist candidates and their significant followings represented a radical departure from the traditional policy positions of each party. Particularly, in the case of the 2016 presidential election, while many conservatives initially rebuked Trump and his supporters, they later joined forces and went on to win the election, despite the controversial implications of Trump’s candidacy (Oliver and Rahn, 2016).

Rather than diverge into an independent political party, ‘Trumpism’ instead altered the Republican Party’s ideological allegiances through conveying a message of nationalism, anti-elitism, and collectivism aimed toward groups perceived to be under-represented by the traditional establishment of the party (Oliver and Rahn, 2016). Common themes among populist candidates have been a series of proposals and rhetoric centered around the reversal of social and economic policies based on tenets of globalization (Rodrik, 2018). These positions arguably exhibit a political reaction to polarization as well as various socio-economic and socio-political deficiencies manifesting throughout the country. The aforementioned conditions are crucial in decoding the paradigm shift toward polarization in America.

## 5. Methods and Data

### 5.1 Methods

The topic of polarization is difficult to quantify without supporting evidence. Therefore, an exploratory approach is applied to decode the intricate origins and outcomes of polarization. Utilizing a qualitative framework is arguably the best-suited methodology to address these challenges (Creswell, 2014, pp. 232-235). While the thesis is largely based on existing literature and theory, the thesis aims to build a more comprehensive understanding of the multidisciplinary nature of polarization in American society. In the case of evaluating distinct demographic and social groups within the United States, implementing an ethnographic research tradition presents an opportunity to further investigate the links between communities and their respective socio-economic and political positions (Creswell, 2014, p. 256)

One of the preferred options to address this type of social research is a case study as it involves a specific phenomenon occurring within a particular region (the United States). The paradigm being evaluated is both contemporary and evolutionary. Therefore an analysis of demographic data and socio-economic trends in the United States are employed to establish a baseline for the preconditions leading to evolving challenges surrounding various societal manifestations of polarization. The objective of this analysis is to expand the interpretation of polarization from static to a dynamically evolving paradigm (Creswell, 2014, pp. 171-173).

The evaluation of existing data on socio-economic inequality in the United States will contribute to the basis of the case study. Not only will this process provide a point of departure for understanding polarization; it also offers new insight into socio-economic challenges in the US. The study also links these preconditions with concurrent societal and political divisions taking place through evaluating academic studies of socio-political trends in the United States. Rather than evaluate social and political themes as one condition, addressing them individually allows for a deeper study of the relationship between the fields of economic history, sociology, and political science. This ethnographic case study is intended to evaluate polarization as a comprehensive societal paradigm, not a phenomenon solely occurring in one field or another.

## **5.2 Data Collection**

The approach of the data collection portion of the thesis was to conduct an online survey with aims to assess individual socio-economic circumstances, political affiliations, and the level of social capital within a particular community. This is supplementary to the information already gathered in the literature review as well as theoretical framework sections. The collection of novel randomized data serves to validate (or invalidate) the themes of recurrent polarization proposed throughout the thesis (Bryman, 2012, pp. 388-391). In combination with the evaluation of previous studies interlinking economic, social, and political conditions; it can be identified whether (or not) a recurring theme of polarization has taken place in the United States.

Some questions relating to the basis of data collection include: how do prior evaluations of this unique paradigm hold up to the current climate? Do the views of individuals match the information obtained from the existing literature? Considering the gap of research on the multidisciplinary interpretation of polarization, data was gathered from each field for analysis. Based on this information, several questions targeted toward an adult, American audience were formulated. These questions can be found in the *appendix* of the thesis. The initial five questions are demographic in nature. The subsequent questions address economic, social, and political perceptions as well as media usage, trust,

The rationale for using online surveying instead of in-person interviews is a practical one. Given the study is intended to assess distinctions between cohorts of people in the United States, it wouldn't be financially viable nor logically practical to set up in-person interviews. Furthermore, an online questionnaire or survey allows for a greater contingent of individuals to participate. A brief survey on how demographics and perceptions of socio-economic class structures, political ideology, and the social cohesiveness of individuals impacts society are used as a measurement of polarization to assess causality (Bryman, 2012, pp. 174-176).

*The questionnaire and its details can be found in the Appendix section of the thesis (Church, 2020).*

Survey questions are used as a baseline to identify how themes of polarization in the United States are linked to socioeconomic inequities, social capital, political affiliation or action, and the prevailing trends of cohesion or divisions within a particular community. Utilizing the previous literature in combination with a thorough evaluation of the questionnaires from randomized respondents will contribute to the validity of the thesis. The sample size of participants was intended to be between 50 and 100 participants and was capped at 70 responses. The period of the questionnaire took place between April 30, 2020 to May 11, 2020. The questionnaire was composed of a total of 20 questions.

The triangulation of the responses will be largely based on an ethnographic interpretation. Through understanding the dynamics within various cohorts of the population, it will not only serve to answer the research question(s), it will also allow the study to identify the correlation between the key elements of development: economics, politics, and society. The responses from the questionnaire are expected to lead to the triangulation of the key problems leading to polarization in the United States and identify associated factors (Bryman, 2012, p. 392). To what degree is there common ground between people on both an individual and community-level? And to what degree is there an exacerbating trend of division?

### **5.3 Limitations**

Some challenges of potential for bias include personal bias from the researcher (me), previous literature (either inconsistent or biased), and the bias of the questionnaire participant (sample bias or false answers). The ambiguity of the subject matter as well as inherent challenges of quantifying how polarization and its impacts affect communities has the potential to introduce further biases to the research. To prevent these biases, community-level assessment is kept broad and general rather than specifically based on a particular region or group of people. Bias from participants is mitigated through multiple direct questions with multiple choice answers (Creswell, 2014, p. 241). The relatively small sample size of the survey is an inherent limitation to the study. As funding and scope of this evaluation are limited, the sample serves as an exploratory cohort assessed to understand whether or not the themes presented in the literature and theory sections are confirmed or challenged by the perceptions of Americans. The sample of

the survey may inadvertently lack certain elements of diversity such as gender, age, or race (Bryman, 2012, pp. 422-424). These deficiencies will be pointed out in the analysis section so that the reader can understand which groups were surveyed. Furthermore, any personal, identifying data will not be collected to comply with legal and ethical standards as well as to obtain the most accurate, unabridged information possible.

## 6. Analysis

### **Survey Analysis (Source: Church, 2020)**

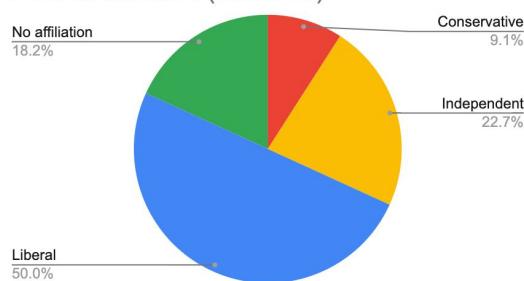
The questionnaire produced various outcomes, some of which confirm the growing societal challenges associated with polarization, as well as some which contradict it. The sample consisted of approximately 70 randomized participants. The first five questions were intended to discern the demographics of the sample to further assess if (or how) these variables impacted the outcomes of the survey. The sample featured diversified community settings, with approximately half residing in a suburban setting and approximately a quarter living in rural and urban areas respectively. Ages varied, although most participants were younger with 62.9 percent of those surveyed under the age of 30. A majority of participants were female (71.4%) and a minority were male (28.6%). While income levels within the sample were proportional to a diversified group of individuals, the ethnicity of participants was majority (90%) white / caucasian origin, with the remaining 10 percent comprised by other ethnicities.

Perceptions of the economy on a community-level were mostly positive with 30 percent considering it ‘very prosperous’, 60 percent ‘somewhat prosperous’, and only 10 percent finding their communities ‘not prosperous.’ However, when taking into account individual household conditions, fewer respondents held the same degree of optimism regarding economic prosperity. Approximately half said they found the current economy either ‘very favorable’ or ‘favorable.’ Approximately a quarter of those surveyed were ‘neutral’ and a quarter found the economy either ‘unfavorable’ or ‘very unfavorable.’

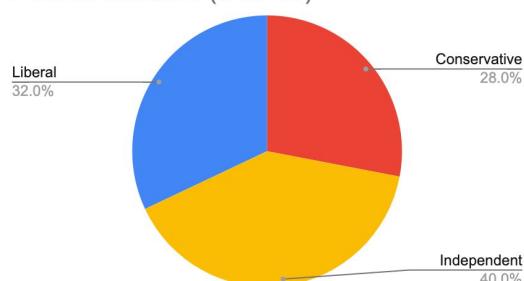
The subsequent questions related to social capital and community cohesion. A minority of those surveyed (14.3%) considered their communities not prosperous in a social context. However, participation in community events wasn't as frequent with 31.4 percent saying they 'rarely' participate in community events and 8.6 percent 'never' participating in community events. This is arguably indicative of weakening social capital which Robert Putnam (2000) assessed in 'Bowling Alone.' A majority of respondents however maintained close ties with their family and friends with approximately 73 percent 'often' spending time with family as opposed to 24 percent 'occasionally' and 3 percent 'rarely' spending time with friends and family.

Political affiliation and ideology are important in the evaluation of how polarized the population is on a sociopolitical level. It was found that most of those surveyed identified as 'liberal' (44.3%) followed by 'independents' (28.6%), 'conservatives' (15.7%), and finally those not aligned with any political ideology (11.4%). It was found that age plays a significant role in political affiliation with only nine percent of those under 30 years old identifying as conservative as opposed to 28 percent of those aged 30 and above. Furthermore, those under 30 were more likely to trend liberal or not identify with any political affiliation. Those over age 30 did more frequently trend independent however it is not clear what their particular political positions are.

Political affiliation (Under 30)



Political affiliation (Over 30)



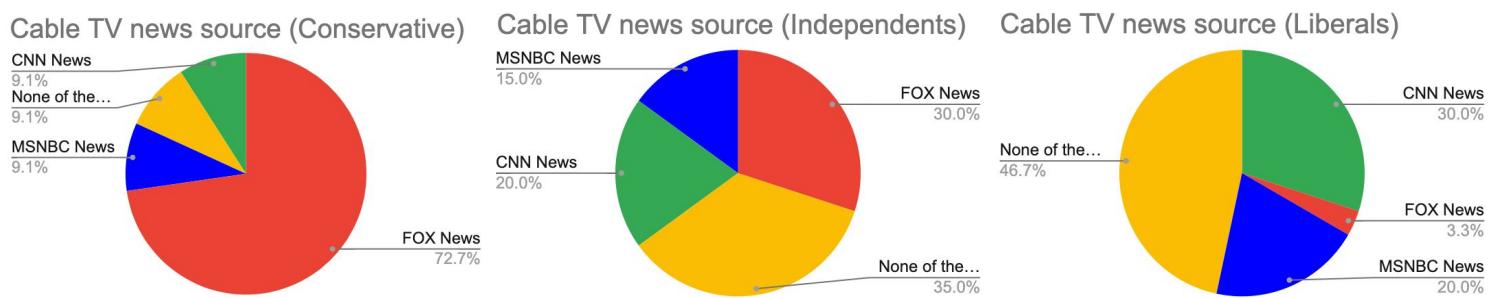
(Source: Church, 2020)

Before assessing political and ideological conditions, a question of religious backgrounds was posed to investigate whether religion played a significant role in political affiliations. It was found that a greater number of liberals did not consider themselves religious compared to conservatives. Overall, religious and political affiliation didn't have any significant correlation.

A common thread between theories of political polarization and the devaluation of social capital is that reduced interaction between individuals leads to less ideological commonality. Fewer people tend to interact with others who hold dissimilar views (Davis Jr., 2011). In the survey, most people answered that within their group of family and friends, either ‘most’ (40%) or ‘some’ (44.3%) shared their ideological and political orientation compared with 11.4 percent answering ‘few.’ Less than 4 percent answered ‘all’ or ‘none’ shared their views.

The questions after the political orientation questions were about which cable TV news source was watched most frequently. Three major 24-hour news networks were selected on the basis that MSNBC news follows a more liberal orientation, CNN news is considered centrist, and FOX news is considered to be conservative-oriented (Martin and Yurukoglu, 2017). CNN and FOX were evenly split at 23.2% each with MSNBC trailing behind at 14.5% and 39.1% considered ‘none of the above.’

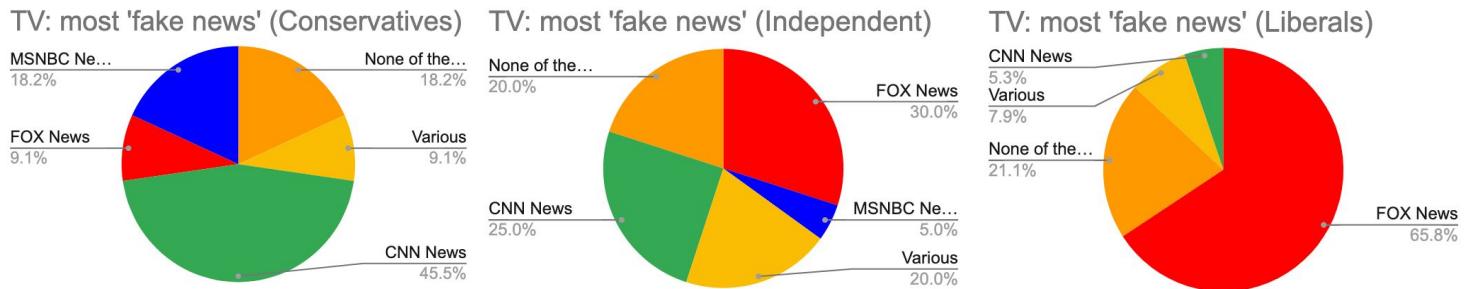
When political orientation is considered, a divergence is found in which cable television news networks are most viewed. Conservatives overwhelmingly view FOX over all others (72.7%), independents still watch FOX more than other networks however at a modest 30% compared to 20% viewing CNN, 15% viewing MSNBC, and 35% answering ‘none of the above.’ Liberals mostly watched ‘none of the above’ major TV news networks, presumably preferring other forms of news sources. Liberal viewers preferred CNN (30%) followed by MSNBC (20%) with only 3.3% choosing FOX News. This finding is alarming as it displays a radical divergence in how individuals obtain information and news based on their preexisting ideological orientations. These implications will be elaborated upon in the discussion section.



(Source: Church, 2020)

A question was posed, do Americans feel there is a significant amount of false information or ‘fake news’ being propagated on TV networks and online media? According to the survey, nine out of ten answered ‘yes.’ Bias and a lack of oversight in the delivery of information may be a contributing factor toward polarization (Martin and Yurukoglu, 2017). The majority of those who participated in the survey felt that FOX News (46.4%) was the most significant source of fake news. However, when one accounts for political orientations, the data paints a very different picture. Conservatives overwhelmingly felt CNN (45.5%) featured the most ‘fake news’ followed MSNBC (18.2%) and various others. Conservatives largely held FOX news in high regard with only nine percent suggesting it spread the most ‘fake news.’

Independents held a more diverse range of opinions with 30 percent suggesting FOX spread the most false information followed closely by CNN (25%), ‘none of the above’ (20%), ‘various’ sources (20%), and MSNBC (5%). Liberals held nearly polar opposite views from conservatives on the issue of which cable TV network spread the most ‘fake news’ with FOX news dominant at 65.8 percent. Liberals did not even mention MSNBC as a potential source of ‘fake news’ and chose ‘none of the above’ (21.1%) and ‘various’ (7.9%) ahead of CNN (5.3%) suggesting a high level of confidence in MSNBC and CNN respectively. The notion that their ideological counterparts and the ‘news’ networks each cohort relies on to obtain vital information are so divergent is an indicator of increasing polarization on a sociopolitical scale. A lack of unbiased information sources combined with distrust for opposing views is a precondition of sociopolitical polarization (Martin and Yurukoglu, 2017).



(Source: Church, 2020)

The perception of elected officials was overall negative based on how they are perceived to have impacted the wellbeing of the community over the past year with a 64 percent disapproval rate and a 36 percent approval rate. Conservatives are split on the issue with roughly the same approval to disapproval ratio while approximately two-thirds of liberals disapprove. There was no significant difference in opinions based on age or gender. Perceptions of the trajectory of the American economy were mostly filled with concern. More than half of respondents were ‘very’ concerned and with the exception of three percent ‘not at all’ concerned, the remaining 44.3 percent were ‘somewhat’ concerned. Fewer people however felt that foreign competition was threatening the US economy with most (55.7%) ‘somewhat’ concerned, 27.1 percent ‘not at all’ concerned, and a minority of 17.1 percent ‘very’ concerned.

The final question arguably represents the public’s perception of polarization directly; ‘Based on your independent observation, do you believe the country has become more divided or unified in the past decade?’ The answer was a resounding yes with more than half (57.1%) answering ‘very divided’ followed by (38.6%) ‘somewhat more divided.’ Only three survey participants out of seventy (4.3%) felt that we had become somewhat more unified. This response arguably suggests a strong perception of societal polarization.

There was a correlation between socio-economic class and associated political affiliations. Those in lower-income tiers were more likely to either trend ‘liberal’ or did not associate with any political party while those in higher-income tiers (making more than 50,000 USD per annum) identified as ‘conservative’ or ‘independent’ with greater frequency. Those making under 30,000 USD annually were also less active socially with family and friends compared to those making over 30,000 USD. The same trend was evident on the community-level with lower-income tiers (under 30,000 USD) ‘frequently’ participating in community events around 8 percent of the time compared to those in the middle and higher-income tiers (above 30,000 USD) ‘frequently’ participating in community events 26.3 percent of the time.

## 7. Discussion of Findings

### 7.1 Survey Findings (Source: Church, 2020)

The findings of the survey complement the existing literature and theory behind the growing paradigm of societal polarization. Despite a relatively small sample size, the results from the survey are profound. The relationship between socioeconomic and sociopolitical polarization can be found in the survey data. Those with lower incomes on average had diminished social networks and levels of civic engagement. They held less favorable views of the economy, yet they often viewed their communities as prosperous. Low income and younger participants were often associated with a liberal political ideology or a tendency to be apolitical.

Participation in community events was somewhat contradictory to the perception of community cohesion. While most respondents felt that their communities were strong and supportive, more than a quarter either ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ engaged in community activities. Reduced social capital is argued to be one of the key precursors to polarization throughout this study. Particularly among lower-income tiers, diminished social interaction within family units and amongst friends is a troubling trend that could result in broader long-term implications (Putnam, 2000, p. 62). The ideological divide of American politics discussed in the literature review and theoretical framework is confirmed by various socio-political indicators.

By asking participants to define their political affiliation on an ideological level (liberal, conservative, independent, etc.) rather than based on a particular party, the results were more representative as some individuals might choose not to identify with a specific political organization. Age was a significant variable in whether people trended liberal or conservative. Given that the sample did not have diverse ethnic backgrounds, testing political affiliation based on ethnicity was not practical. Gender also impacted political orientation as females were less likely to identify as conservative and more likely to identify as independent or not affiliated at all. Religious values were surprisingly not a significant determinant of ideological trends. However, the sources in which individuals obtain news and information were relevant.

Polarization between those with differing political ideologies was evident based on which sources of media each group relied on. Those who identified as conservatives were significantly more reliant on one network, in particular, FOX news. Independents held a balanced portfolio of sources and liberals largely relied on alternative sources or watched a combination of CNN and MSNBC. Interestingly, almost no liberals got their news from the sources which conservatives did and vice versa. Both liberals and conservatives overwhelmingly agreed that there is a significant amount of false information or ‘fake news’ being propagated in the media. However both groups were also highly distrustful of networks perceived to be oppositional in nature to their ideals (Martin and Yurukoglu, 2017). Liberals did not trust FOX, while conservatives did not trust CNN or MSNBC leading to polarized views and rivaling sources of information.

This lack of trust in institutions can have long term damaging effects on society (Putnam, 2000, pp. 24-26). Not only was the news media not generally trusted to provide accurate information; the performance of the political system, economy, and society as a whole was largely associated with permission and concern. An interesting data point is that conservatives are divided on the performance of elected officials while most liberals disapprove. While not specified in the survey, it can be deduced from the results, based on the prevailing political party being conservative at the time of authoring this thesis, that liberal dissent or disapproval should be expected under the circumstances. However, given the particularly polarized climate and controversial impetus of ‘Trump-era’ politics, these trends of disapproval may be exacerbated (Oliver and Rahn, 2016).

The final two questions were nearly unanimous. Almost all (97%) of participants in the survey were concerned with the future of the American economy at least to some degree and only three individuals out of the seventy who participated felt that the country had become more divided over the course of the past decade. While a survey can lead to various indicators, the associations between the theoretical themes and extensive academic literature in this thesis also feature unique outcomes. Individually, economic inequality, social capital, and political dissent hold their own value; however, when all of these themes are explored as a progressive narrative, they can lead to unique and novel conclusions.

## **7.2 Outcomes of Literature and Theory**

There is a notable lack of research on how interconnected themes of polarization are affecting long term development. Polarization has often been treated as a static condition occurring in one sphere or another of society. In this study, it is argued that polarization is a dynamic condition affecting various aspects of national development. Upon thoroughly examining existing literature, it was found that various conditions stemming from globalization have been adversely impacting US socio-economic frameworks. While productivity in the workplace has risen, wages have lagged, creating a ‘productivity-pay gap’ (EPI, 2019).

These changes have been particularly damaging to the American middle class (Milanovic, 2016, pp. 191-192), as the wealthiest five percent have outpaced everyone in terms of income and capital accumulation (Horowitz et al, 2020). When one takes into account how these economic changes have affected communities in different ways, it becomes clear that there are ‘winners and losers’ of globalization not only on a national level but also in terms of regional and local levels (Milanovic, 2016, pp. 24-26). Demographics and local conditions play a determinant role in how likely individuals are to be considered ‘winners and losers’ or ‘thrivers and strugglers’ as Boshara et al. (2015 a,b,c) allude to. Identifying key demographics became a useful tool in the survey to distinguish how gender, age, ethnicity, and other variables impacted community perceptions of socioeconomic and sociopolitical conditions.

Trust in the political system is intrinsically related to trust in a social conceptualization. “Therefore it is important to ask how the positive consequences of social capital—mutual support, cooperation, trust, institutional effectiveness—can be maximized and the negative manifestations—sectarianism, ethnocentrism, corruption—minimized” (Putnam, 2000, p. 22). Compared to the 1960s, Americans’ trust in the political system has declined. By the 1990s, “roughly three in four Americans *didn’t* trust the government to do what is right most of the time” (Putnam, 2000, p. 47). A large number of people, ranging from political leaders, scholars, and ordinary citizens, concur that a fundamental socio-political transformation has been taking place since the dawn of the 21st century (Putnam, 2004, p. 14).

## 8. Concluding Remarks

Based on the analysis of literature and theory as well as the contributions from the survey, it can be concluded that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that *globalization has impacted the socio-economic structure of incomes and wealth sufficiently to bring about significant alterations to the equilibrium of economic equity for many Americans. As a result, an erosion of mutual trust, social norms, and the absence of solutions to improve socio-economic conditions and societal cohesion have resulted in the onset of polarization, a paradigm which given its insidious nature, has largely pervaded into various spheres of society, and is presently a concern for various branches of social science ranging from economics to sociology to political science.*

*In lieu of addressing foundational socio-economic challenges, divergent class structures have led to disrupted social norms including reduced civic engagement, a deterioration of social capital, and the inception of subversive political reactions to a polarized public. Growing trends of political partisanship and the rise of populist political movements could be viewed as an inherent response to an overwhelmingly divided public. The erosion of institutional integrity follows in various forms. When the trust and public support of institutions deteriorate, it could cause potentially destabilizing outcomes. Undermining the integrity of institutions can lead to chasms of ethical considerations, bias, and maintaining independence from exogenous interests. Thus, political polarization grows from social polarization just as social polarization grows from economic polarization. Disequilibrium doesn't foster equilibrium.*

Economic prosperity arguably brings communities together. When inequality permeates into communities, regions, and eventually an entire nature, it will ultimately upset the balance of society. As people grow further apart and diverse social networks become more homogenous, common views become... less common. Various socio-political divisions causing political partisanship, the growth of extreme politicization throughout the United States, and the gradual yet insidious erosion of norms in society have the potential to lead to long term damage to a nation and its people.

## **Recommendations and Reflections**

Devising a solution to polarization could be considered the proverbial equivalent of ‘finding a needle in a haystack.’ While there are many possible remedies to mitigate the impacts of polarization, there is no ‘cure’ for the paradigm. As polarization in the United States continues to expand as a paradigm, the contemporary prospectus of the condition is likely to change over time as economic, social, and political theories and themes evolve (Milanovic, 2016, pp. 155-157). As the convergence of incomes throughout the ‘developing world’ continues, a focus on how to improve the balance of economic equality in developed nations such as the United States is a paramount concern. (Milanovic, 2016, pp. 161-164).

Improving social capital and cohesion between individuals and contrasting groups of people is a crucial first step. While the rise of social movements can have positive effects, it is important to weigh the consequences of agenda-driven groups that become hostile toward others (Putnam, 2000, pp. 168-170). Increasing the level of trust within communities while restoring the concept of reciprocity between different groups of people will likely lead to norms based on societal cohesion, thus decreasing social polarization. (Putnam et al., 1994, p. 172)

Another way of decreasing polarization and increasing trust is to remove the dynamic of money in American politics. By allowing investment in politics, special interest groups and wealthy donors often influence politicians and policies which inevitably benefit the rich at the expense of the poor and middle class (Milanovic, 2016, p. 189). Plutocratic governance has disastrous implications on the economic opportunity and mobility of most Americans leading to increased polarization (Milanovic, 2016, pp. 199-202). Finally, improving the way Americans perceive each other could be key to reducing affective socio-political polarization. Through priming national identity and assimilating groups with differing ideologies together, perhaps Americans will view each other as one rather than divided by opinion (Levendusky, 2018).

**Increased awareness of societal polarization and its causes will likely be a positive outcome from this research. Expectantly, an emphasis on the societal benefit of successive studies will follow.**

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# Appendix

## Relevant Figures and Charts From Literature

FIGURE 1: (Source: EPI, 2019 and Bivens et al., 2014)

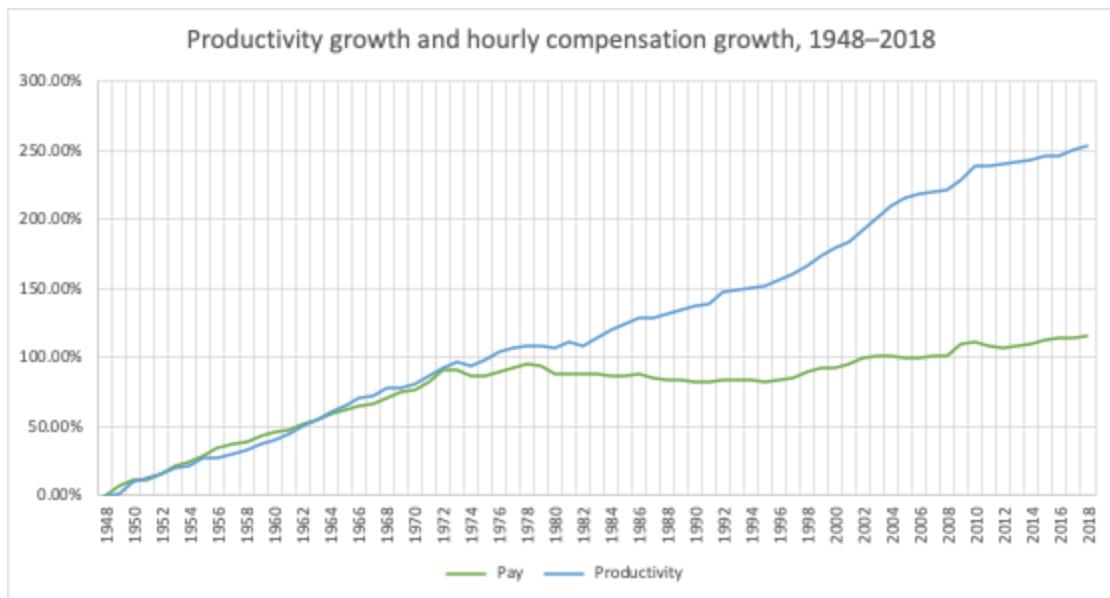
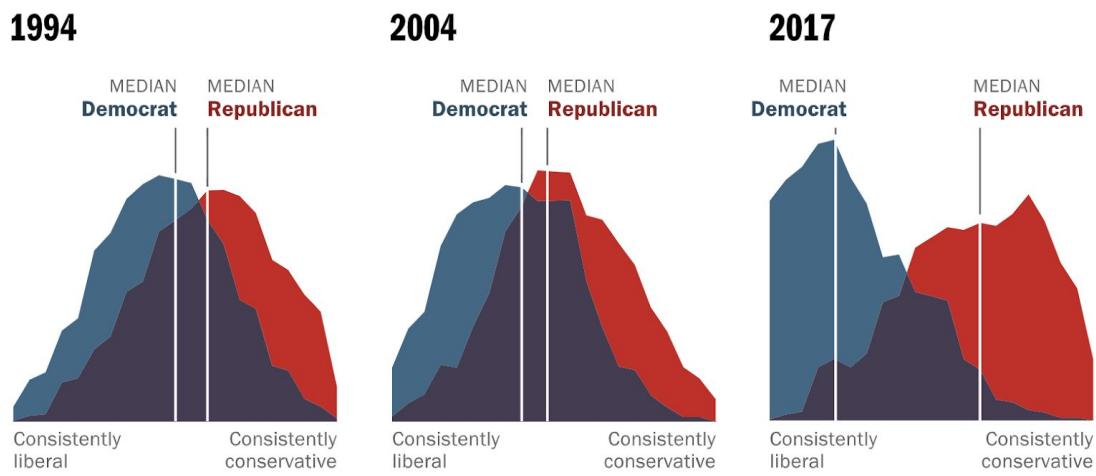


FIGURE 2: (Source: Kiley, 2017 / Pew Research Center)

### Democrats and Republicans more ideologically divided than in the past

*Distribution of Democrats and Republicans on a 10-item scale of political values*



Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see methodology). The blue area in this chart represents the ideological distribution of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents; the red area of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents. The overlap of these two distributions is shaded purple.

Source: Survey conducted June 8-18, 2017.

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## **Survey / Questionnaire Details**

Questions are posed, followed by reasoning or comments on the structure and choice of question (in italics), followed by options and charts displaying survey outcomes).

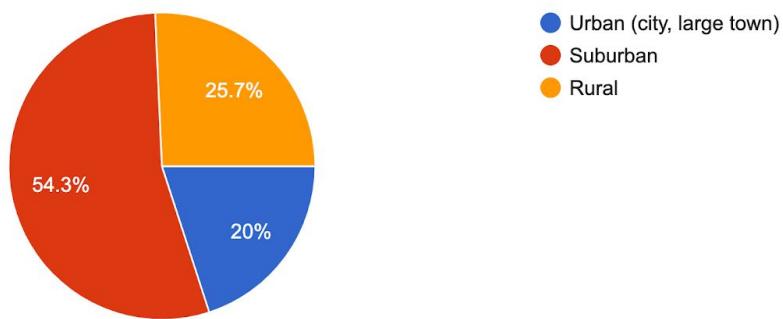
Question 1: Which best describes your place of residence?

*This demographic question was chosen as a method of understanding whether community composition has any impact or correlation on survey outcomes.*

- A. Urban (city, large town)
- B. Suburban
- C. Rural

**Which best describes your place of residence?**

70 responses



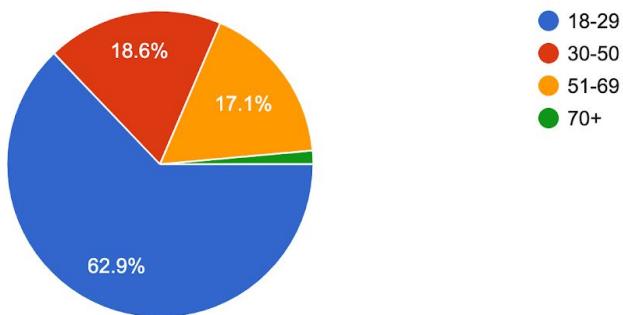
Question 2: Which age group are you?

*This general demographic question assesses which age cohorts have participated in the questionnaire.*

- A. 18-29
- B. 30-50
- C. 51-69
- D. 70+

### Which age group are you?

70 responses

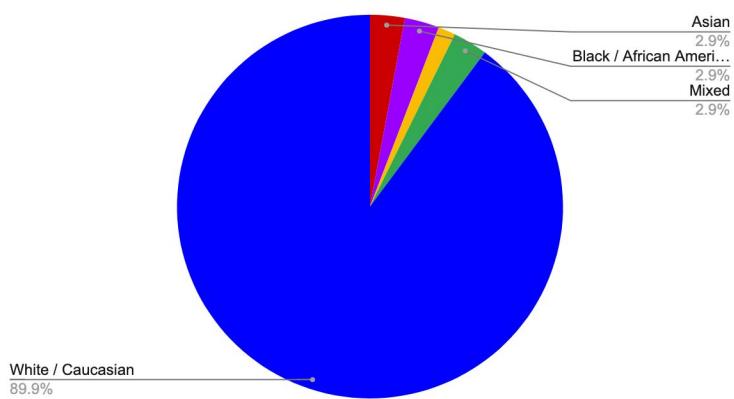


### Question 3: Which Ethnicity best describes you?

*Another general demographic question used to measure the racial / ethnic diversity of the sample.*

- A. White / Caucasian
- B. Black / African American
- C. Hispanic / Latino or Latina
- D. Asian
- E. Native / American Indian
- F. Mixed

### Which Ethnicity best describes you?



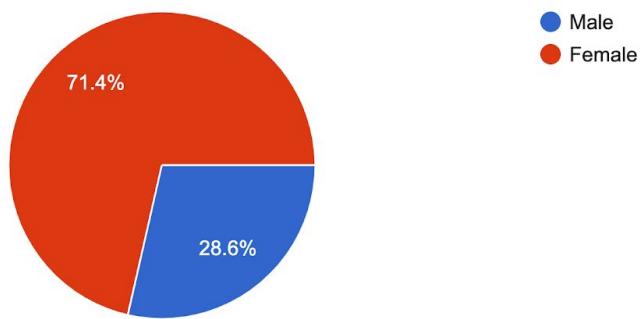
### Question 4: What is your gender?

*This demographic question was chosen to indicate the gender composition of the survey participants.*

- A. Male
- B. Female
- C. Other

What is your gender?

70 responses



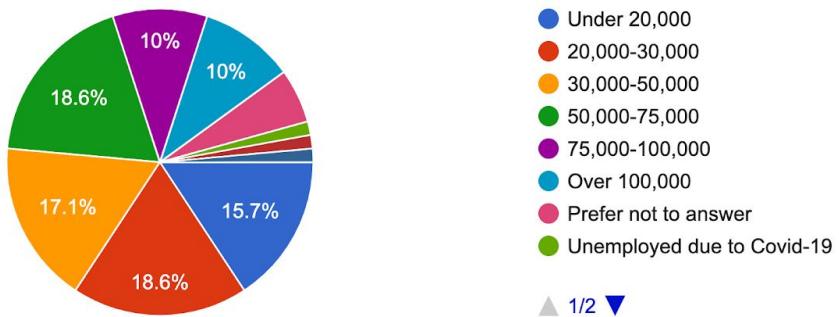
Question 5: What is your approximate annual income level (in US Dollars pre-tax)

*A general question of income levels are important in understanding if and how differing levels of income changed the perception of community conditions (prosperity, equality, etc.)*

- A. Under 20,000
- B. 20,000-30,000
- C. 30,000-50,000
- D. 50,000-75,000
- E. 75,000-100,000
- F. Prefer not to answer
- G. Other (incl. Unemployed, Retired, Student)

**What is your approximate annual income level? (in US Dollars pre-tax)**

70 responses



Question 6: Based on your household situation, how do you perceive the current economy?

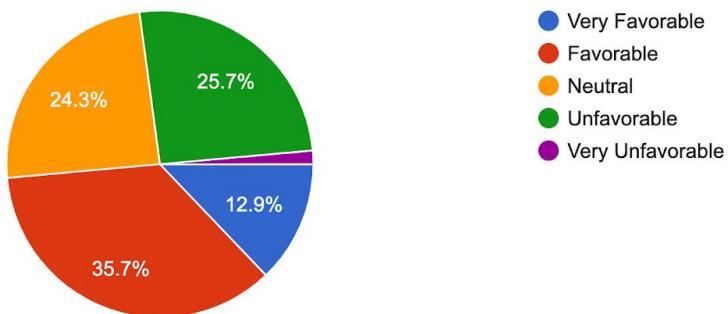
\*\*Pre-COVID19\*\*

*The perception of participants is an important indicator whether or not the existing literature matches up with individual perceptions. How healthy is the current economy overall based on household conditions?*

- A. Very Favorable
- B. Favorable
- C. Neutral
- D. Unfavorable
- E. Very Unfavorable

Based on your household situation, how do you perceive the current economy? \*\*Pre-COVID19\*\*

70 responses



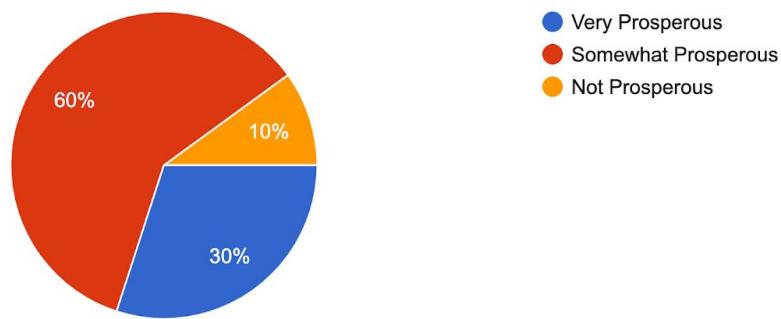
Question 7: Do you consider your local community to be prosperous in an economic context?

*This question is similar to question six, however it is intended to assess a broader community perception.*

- A. Very Prosperous
- B. Somewhat Prosperous
- C. Not Prosperous

**Do you consider your local community to be prosperous in an economic context?**

70 responses



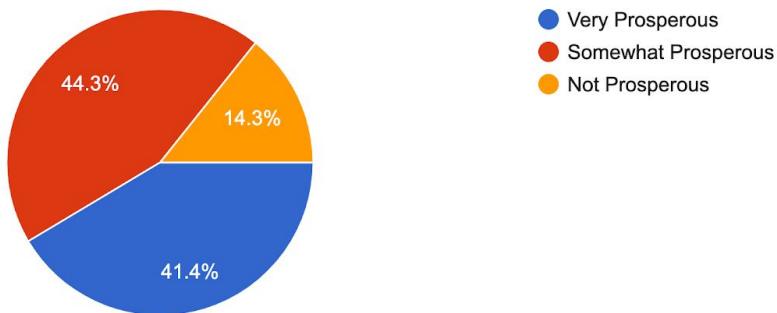
Question 8: Do you consider your local community to be prosperous in a social context? (strong and supportive community)

*Question eight is also similar to questions six and seven, however it focuses solely on the perception of community-level social conditions.*

- A. Very Prosperous
- B. Somewhat Prosperous
- C. Not Prosperous

Do you consider your community to be prosperous in a social context? (strong and supportive community)

70 responses



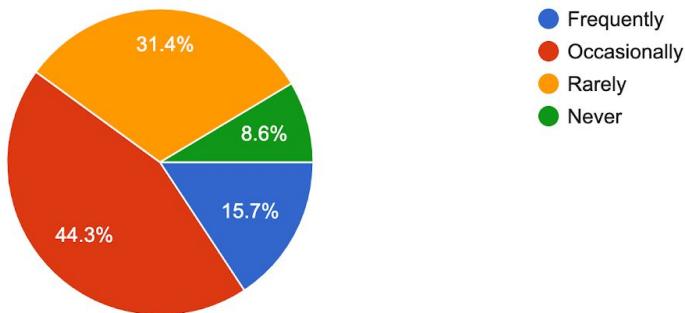
Question 9: How often do you participate in community events?

*This question is directly linked to the concept of social capital and civic engagement on a community-level*

- A. Frequently
- B. Occasionally
- C. Rarely
- D. Never

How often do you participate in community events?

70 responses



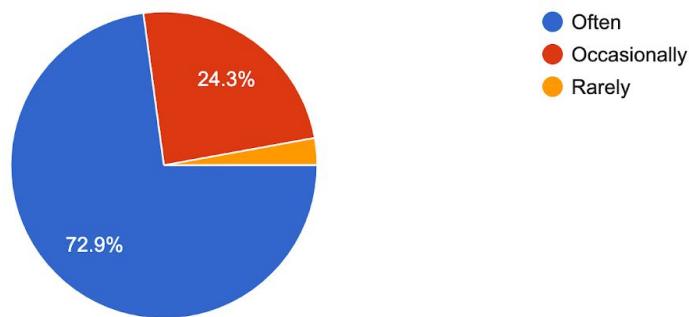
Question 10: How frequently do you spend time with friends and family?

*This question is also an indicator of social capital based on the degree of interpersonal social networks.*

- A. Often
- B. Occasionally
- C. Rarely

How frequently do you spend time with friends and family?

70 responses

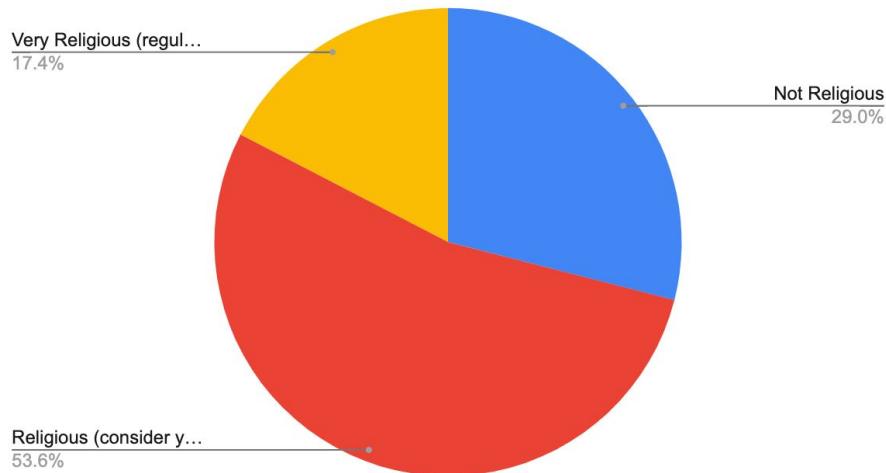


Question 11: Which best describes your religious background?

*Assesses whether or not religion correlates to social and economic perceptions*

- A. Very Religious (regularly attend place of worship)
- B. Religious (consider yourself religious but don't regularly attend services)
- C. Not Religious (Atheist, Agnostic, Other)

Which best describes your religious background?



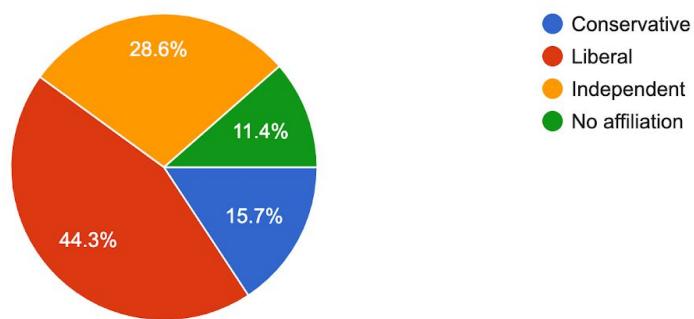
Question 12: Which of the following terms best identifies your political affiliation?

*This question is intended to attain information on the political or ideological affiliation of the sample.*

- A. Conservative
- B. Liberal
- C. Independent
- D. No affiliation

**Which of the following terms best identifies your political affiliation**

70 responses

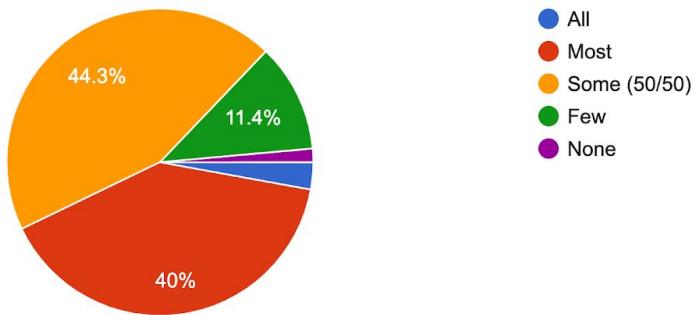


Question 13: Out of your friends and family, how many share your political or ideological or political orientation?

*Assessing the correlation between political or ideological orientation with social networks serves as an indicator of socio-political polarization within the sample.*

- A. All
- B. Most
- C. Some
- D. Few
- E. None

Out of your friends and family, how many share your ideological or political orientation?  
70 responses

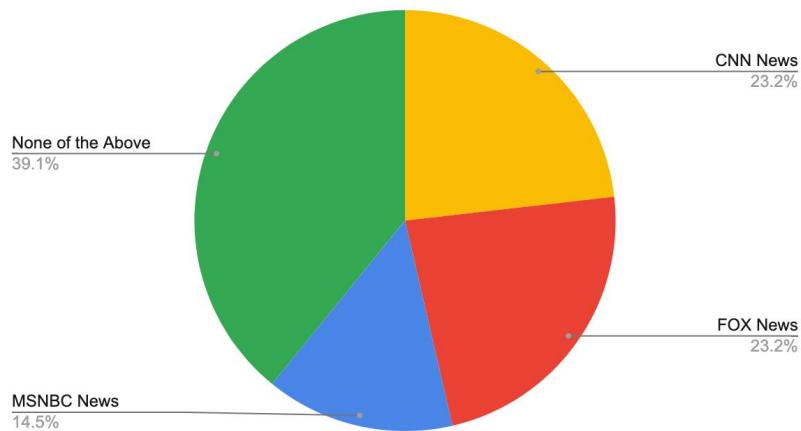


Question 14: Which cable TV news source do you watch most frequently? Please specify if not listed.

*With this question, a link between socio-political views and the political orientation of media is established*

- A. FOX News
- B. CNN News
- C. MSNBC News
- D. None of the Above

Which cable TV news source do you watch most frequently?



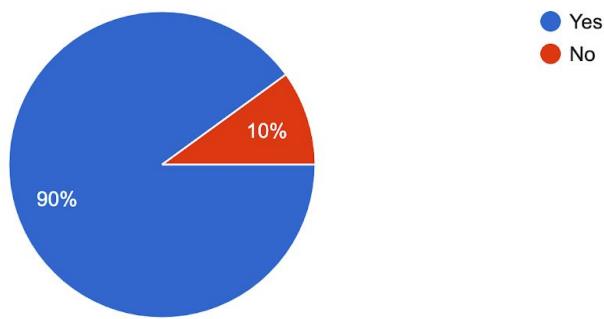
Question 15: Do you feel like there is a significant amount of false information or 'fake news' on other TV networks or internet media?

*This question is intended to determine perceptions of community trust in media and television networks*

- A. Yes
- B. No

Do you feel that there is a significant amount of false information or 'fake news' on other TV networks or internet media?

70 responses

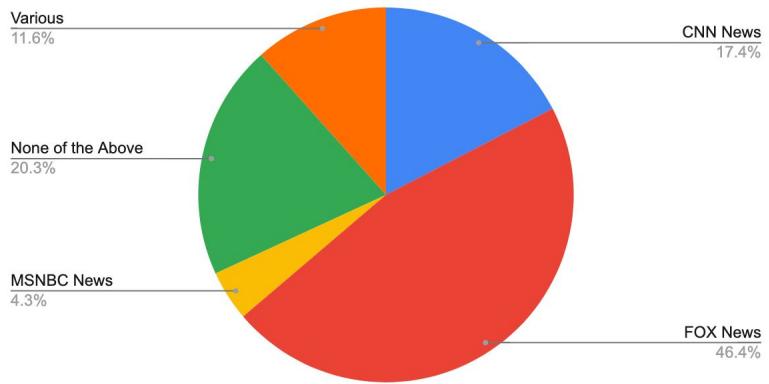


Question 16: If yes, which news source is spreading the most fake news? Please provide your answer below.

*This is an expansion on question 15 in regards to which networks are perceived to be least reliable.*

- A. FOX News
- B. CNN News
- C. MSNBC News
- D. None of the Above
- E. Various / Other

Count of If yes, which TV news source is spreading the most fake news? Please provide your answer below.



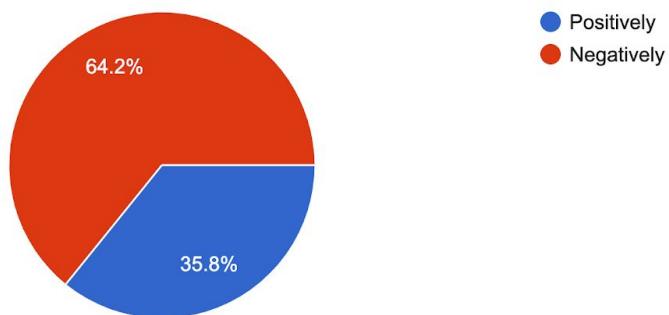
Question 17: In the past year, how have elected representatives impacted the wellbeing of the community?

*This question is intended to gauge perceptions of political action in relation to community wellbeing.*

- A. Positively
- B. Negatively

In the past year, how have elected representatives impacted the wellbeing of the community?

67 responses



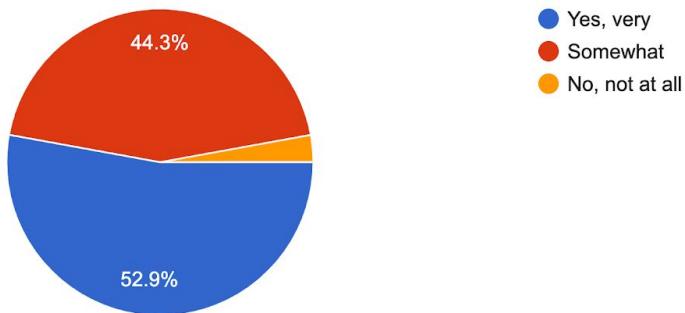
Question 18: Are you concerned about the future of the American economy?

*This question provides a general prospectus on how Americans view the future of the economy.*

- A. Yes, very
- B. Somewhat
- C. No, not at all

Are you concerned about the future of the American economy?

70 responses



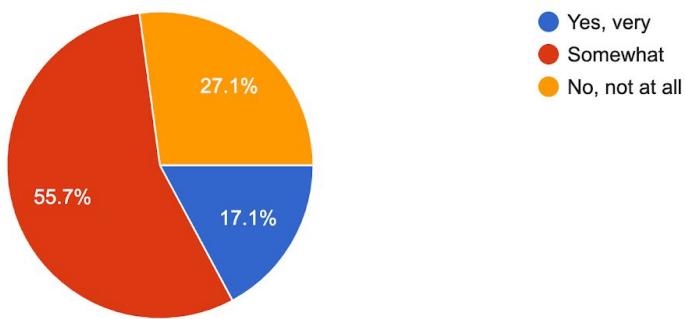
Question 19: Do you perceive foreign competition to be a threat to the prosperity of the U.S. economy?

*This question aims to discern whether or not American view exogenous forces as detrimental to the US.*

- A. Yes, very
- B. Somewhat
- C. No, not at all

Do you perceive foreign competition to be a threat to the prosperity of the U.S. economy?

70 responses



Question 20: Based on your independent observation, do you believe the country has become more divided or unified in the past decade?

*The final question is a direct question to assess whether or not Americans believe that polarization is taking place in the country. It serves as an indicator of how individual perceptions correlate with literature.*

- A. Yes, very divided
- B. Yes, somewhat more divided
- C. No, somewhat more unified
- D. No, very unified

Based on your independent observation, do you believe the country become more divided or unified in the past decade?

70 responses

