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Are We the Ones to Blame?: Ideological Polarization and Voter Choice

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Are We the Ones to Blame?: Ideological Polarization and Voter Choice

by

Robert Williamson

A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degrees of
Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of Political Science
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Abstract

Political polarization is the social process by which the ideas and values of a politically moderate majority are slowly replaced by an uncompromising political ideology. In the American context, the term ‘polarization’ is meant to conjure an image of Americans moving from the moderate center to the uncompromising ideologies of modern conservatism or liberalism. This study examined whether a group’s level of political polarization can be a reliable predictor for its voting patterns. To do so, a two-part questionnaire was disseminated to a sample of undergraduate students at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM). The first section determined if a participant possessed strong ideological convictions and the second part was a hypothetical election that had five political candidates running for a Congressional seat. Unbeknownst to the participant, however, each nominee represented a particular position on the political ideological spectrum. The survey results showed that the sample did not hold a polarizing stance on any of the political issues outlined in the first section and the two candidates that possessed strong ideological convictions received the least number of votes in the Congressional election. The survey data was run through SPSS software to create a political summary index that could rank survey takers on the degree of their ideological convictions. A difference in proportions test was then used to compare these rankings to the corresponding votes. The outcome showed that there is a statistically significant correlation between a group’s level of political polarization and its preferred voting choice.

Key Words: political polarization, voter behavior, ideological convictions, elections

Dedication

To Mom, Dad, Rachel, and Gordie:

Thank you so much for your steadfast support and love.

I do not know where I would be today without my crazy and amazing family.

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I first would like to thank my thesis adviser, Dr. Troy Gibson, for taking the time out of his busy schedule to mentor me during the completion of my Honors thesis. I would have not had access to such a deep level of statistical analysis if it were not for his expertise with SPSS software. He also needs to be commended for having insurmountable patience with me, as well as being willing to explain the same statistical concepts to me over and over until I could sufficiently understand it. I also want to thank my Jedi master (i.e. Dr. Marek Steedman) for always steering me in the right direction and challenging me to be the best scholar that I can possibly be. The academic teachings of both these men will stay with me long after I depart from the University of Southern Mississippi and venture off into the next stage of my life.

Additionally, I must pay tribute to the USM Honors College itself. Under the careful instruction of the staff and faculty at this esteemed institution, I have blossomed into a true scholar and gained friendships and skills that will benefit me for the rest of my days. I know I made the right choice when I joined USM, because this thesis was only possible through the generosity and guidance that I received at this particular campus.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Political polarization is the social process by which the ideas and values of a politically moderate majority are slowly replaced by an uncompromising political ideology. While it is largely used to describe the magnitude of ideological divergence within a nation, political polarization can also transpire among civic organizations, societal institutions, and political parties. In the American context, the term ‘polarization’ is meant to conjure an image of Americans moving from the moderate center to the uncompromising ideologies of modern conservatism or liberalism (Abramowitz 2010, 1-2). This phenomenon can also be further broken down into elite and mass polarization. The former occurs when influential members of American society, such as politicians, party advocates, members of the media, and policy analysts, become more entrenched in their respective ideological convictions. The latter consists of political polarization that affects the non-elite portion of the American citizenry. While there is an academic consensus that a schism began to occur among the political elite in the latter half of the 1970s, a debate among political scientists is still ongoing over whether political polarization is currently present amongst the general public as a whole (Poole & Rosenthal 2007; Abramowitz 2013, 5-6).

For most of the 20th century, the conventional wisdom was that the greater part of the American populace was temperate in their political leanings and respected different beliefs and opinions, if not at least tolerated them. This particular assumption about the American political consciousness was challenged in the 1990s as many members of the news media began to claim that the American people were becoming increasingly

politically polarized (Nivola & Brady 2006). Even in the beginning of the 21st century, there remains an unsettling paradox of what American elites claim is the current political disposition of the American electorate. When a close election takes place or a contentious issue is being debated by the country as a whole, political commentators decry that America's politics have become far too polarized and rancorous. However, these same individuals simultaneously argue that the mass public is moderate at heart and willing to work with each other when a national tragedy has occurred or a piece of major legislation has received bipartisan support in Congress. This preceding inconsistency illustrates the fact that many Americans, regardless of their social stature or other demographic factors, engage in cognitive contradictions when attempting to gauge the national perception toward the American political process and specific political issues (Baldassarri & Bearman 2007). For example, a cognitive incongruity of this nature would occur if a particular person does not support the current political gridlock in Congress, yet still defends the entrenched political stance of his or her elected representative that contributed to the overall legislative standstill.

As mentioned before, numerous research inquiries demonstrate that elite polarization is currently present in Congress; however, studies have yet to definitively confirm or disprove the existence of mass polarization in America (Nivola & Brady 2006; Abramowitz 2013, 5-7). Also, elite polarization has been proven to be one of several additives that have created the currently hostile political environment in Congress but has yet to be conclusively identified as its main cause. While time and energy have been spent on the preceding topic, scarce academic research has been conducted on the premise that mass political polarization is one of the main causes for the current

ideological divisions in Congress (Layman & Carsey 2002). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to evaluate whether a correlation might exist between the degree of political polarization present in a sample of college students at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) and their preferred candidate in a hypothetical Congressional election. Although the target sample of this Honors thesis does not exactly mirror the general electorate in terms of population or political values, its methodology could be used on a much larger scale to examine whether a politically polarized electorate is directly responsible for a polarized Congress.

My personal motivation for addressing this specific research question and carrying out an academic examination on the topic of political polarization is twofold. First, I have been appalled at the present degree of partisanship and gridlock within Congress. Second, many families, such as mine, include relatives with extremely strong ideological convictions. These same individuals possess beliefs that would be considered immoderate and located on the fringe end of the political spectrum. I have always wondered how willing this specific kind of people, as well as politically polarized families, is to vote for political candidates that better reflected their own uncompromising political ideology. While the topic of political polarization may appear as an academic abstraction that only exists in a vacuum, my personal observations of basic family dynamics have led me to believe that this phenomenon both indirectly and directly affects everyone. For example, Congress is one of the three main branches of the American federal government and its primary purpose is to create legislation that addresses the ills of the citizenry. However, political scientists have discovered that over the last several decades, members of Congress have become increasingly divided and polarized on what used to be considered

bipartisan issues, such as the raising of the debt ceiling or the passage of the annual farm bill. This fact has led to the 112th Congress being called the most unproductive American legislative body since the 1940s (Snowe 2013).

America's governmental system of separation of powers and parliamentary procedures purposely makes it difficult for lawmakers to create and pass legislation. However, political polarization only exacerbates the number of stumbling blocks by making members of Congress much less likely to reach across the aisle and seek some sort of grand bargain. Political gridlock such as this affects all Americans, because Congress must formulate tax policies and apportion funds for numerous uses, such as national defense, student loans, entitlements, aging infrastructures, higher education, et cetera. The preceding items require deliberation and compromise to be implemented effectively. Elite polarization threatens this legislative process by making lawmakers more concerned with following a strict political philosophy than governance through the means of cooperation. It even jeopardizes the confidence of US voters and international investors in America's representative democracy and market economy. Constant threats of a government shutdown or a possible default on America's credit create uncertainty in the economy and discourage much needed financial investments. It also creates social unrest and the perception that American policy makers are simply incapable of solving immediate, as well as long-term, quandaries. Therefore, political polarization is not a simple problem that only affects those who are interested in political science. This topic should concern all who live within the United States or the numerous countries that are directly affected by the United States' domestic or foreign policies.

So far, it should be clear that this Honors thesis does not view political polarization as a force that has a positive impact on American society, let alone any culture or social order. However, this belief is not unanimous within the field of political science and some scholars contend that this polarization improves democracy by creating a more responsible and consistent party system, in addition to more informed voters and increased participation in politics. This argument is explained in much more detail in the literature review section of this composition.

This study examines the magnitude to which the sample of USM undergraduates possesses uncompromising ideological principles and whether these same political attitudes can serve as a reliable predictor for their preferred voting choice. The research question is addressed and evaluated by administering a two-part survey questionnaire to undergraduates at USM and determining if the sample, as a whole, is politically polarized, as well as if the participants would vote for a political candidate that shared their beliefs. The data is then analyzed by SPSS software to see if the sample is politically polarized and also detect any possible patterns between a survey taker's demographic information and political convictions. Whatever the outcome to the questionnaire may be, the conclusion derived of the data will be compared to the existing literature on mass polarization, as well as serve as a possible predictor for what would occur if this specific experiment was conducted on a much larger scale. If the group of survey takers at USM is deemed as politically polarized and votes for a political candidate that mirrors their alleged uncompromising ideology, these results could possibly foreshadow high levels of political polarization among the general American electorate.

Chapter II: Literature Review

It should be noted that although this literature review contains a plethora of academic sources, it does spend a significant portion of its focus on the academic works and arguments of Dr. Alan Abramowitz and Dr. Morris Fiorina. The reason for this is because these two scholars represent opposite sides in the current debate over the existence of mass polarization in America and this topic directly pertains to my research query. While there are other superb political scientists, such as Dr. Keith Poole and Dr. Matthew Levendusky, conducting research in the subfield of political polarization, their investigations deal more with elite polarization and party sorting respectively. Therefore, the prioritization and prevalence of certain sources in this section reflect its similarity and relevance to my own research. The organization of my literature review is also reinforced by the fact that Dr. Abramowitz and Dr. Fiorina's texts and articles are prominently cited in other sources included in this Honors thesis.

While there is an academic consensus that political polarization has occurred among the political elite, members of the political science community are divided over whether the general American electorate has been polarized as well (Garner & Palmer 2011). The idea of a deeply polarized America has been an idea that has gained significant traction since the 2000 elections and is best embodied by Republican Presidential candidate Pat Buchanan when he said the following at the 1992 Republican convention: "There is a religious war going on in this country, a cultural war as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself, for this war is for the soul of America" (Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope 2011, 1).

However, some scholars vehemently argue that the majority of Americans are not divided and are, in fact, quite moderate in their political values (Wolfe 1998, 15-16). According to these same researchers, the false idea of mass polarization is based upon misinterpreted election results, a lack of accurate public opinion data, misrepresentations by fringe party activists, and a news media that is more concerned with ratings than reporting the whole story (Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope 2011). Political scientist Morris Fiorina and his researchers argue that “the simple truth is that there is no culture war in the United States- no battle for the soul of America rages, at least none that most Americans are aware of. Many of the activists in the political parties and the various cause groups do, in fact, hate each other and regard themselves as combatants in a war. But their hatred and battles are not shared by the great mass of the American people” (Brewer & Stonecash 2007, 17). These preceding scholars fully acknowledge that elite polarization has taken place in America but claim that it is the political choices offered in recent elections that have become more extreme, not the political positions of non-elite Americans. Therefore, the public officials in this particular explanation no longer represent the views of the majority but that of a polarized minority that faithfully shows up for every political primary and general election (Baldassarri & Bearman 2007).

Skeptics of mass polarization also admit that all Presidential elections from 1996 to 2004 were very close in terms of the popular vote, but they contend that these election results do not indicate that the American people are politically polarized. Instead, the electoral returns just show that the general public is closely divided during these elections but not deeply divided. The electorate is just composed of a majority of people who are not polarized but also contain a small number of vocal, extreme party activists who are

actually the minute portion of the American citizenry that is actually deeply divided (Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope 2011). These party advocates make up a fair amount of the political elite in the United States, but scholars that disagree with the theory of mass polarization claim that most Americans are not all like this preceding group. The main reason why they are not politically polarized as a whole is because they are too busy working at their jobs and raising their families. Because of the limited time that the majority of Americans have left over after fulfilling their many obligations, they do not usually use it to become well-informed about politics and public policy (Wolfe 1998, 313, 320-322). According to mass polarization skeptics, this limited time and knowledge leads most Americans to not have strong, uncompromising views on political issues or be ideological in nature (Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope 2011).

Some scholars argue that the myth of mass polarization has taken a foothold in the American psyche because of its constant perpetuation by members of the news media. Americans view numerous instances of elite polarization through the prism of local, state, and national media. This fact gradually forces many people to falsely conclude that all of America must be as deeply divided as it is portrayed by these individual newsmen (Baum & Groeling 2008). Journalists who must cover the realm of American politics do not spend as much time with regular Americans but instead listen and attempt to talk to members of the polarized political elite. Doing this same activity for years can cause reporters to begin to believe that the elite political class is a representative microcosm of non-elite Americans. Even when journalists travel to various parts of the country while covering campaign rallies or other political events, they usually only interact with people who attend these gatherings. Americans present at political rallies are usually part of the

small portion of the general electorate that is politically polarized. Unfortunately, reporters believe that the majority of these attendees are individuals that serve as an accurate representation of the American people (Fiorina, Abrams & Pope 2011). They then mention this false assumption on their news shows or their newspaper columns and a false, circular narrative of this phenomenon is presented to the general public.

However, the media's role with political polarization does not end at this point. Many media organizations have abandoned traditional, neutral forms of presenting the news and have replaced it with a format that implicitly or explicitly embraces partisanship and biased reporting. Since all prominent journalists and pundits are considered a part of the political elite, it is evident that a large number of this group has fallen to elite polarization. Many of these same news people now frame most, if not all, stories in a light that favors their preferred political party or ideological beliefs (Baum & Groeling 2008). Incivility often runs rampant when those who possess opposing opinions are allowed on a certain news program to debate with the polarized host. Given that these events often end in shouting matches, certain academics contend that these partisan theatrics advance the false narrative that most Americans are just as politically divided as political pundits on television (Nivola & Brady 2006).

While the previously mentioned argument espouses the nonexistence of mass polarization, other political scientists insist that the American public has become just as polarized as the political elite. While the United States currently holds three main political blocs (Republicans, Democrats, and Independents) as it has for decades, attributes of classic party identifiers have changed significantly. Political scientists Poole and Rosenthal argue that "the end result is that the Democrat and Republican parties have

become more homogeneous” (2007, 107). A person must have stronger and less compromising beliefs on issues from the economy to social issues to conform to either the Republican or Democratic Party. Given that in 2006, 62 percent of Americans identified with one of the two previously mentioned parties, these same individuals will have to partly reform their own political beliefs to remain ideologically homogenous with their preferred political party (Nivola & Brady 2006). For scholars who argue that mass polarization has occurred among the citizenry, they claim that this is one of the main ways in which such polarization comes about. Hence, they believe that one of the greatest indicators of mass polarization is the actual distance between the respective sets of ideological convictions that represents the Republican and Democratic Party (Nivola & Brady 2006; Abramowitz 2013, 42-45). Personally, I contend that the increasing ideological divergence between the Republicans and Democrats is a clear sign of elite polarization, but I also argue that further academic studies are needed to examine whether mass polarization can be attributed as a cause of this ever widening political chasm as well.

Another aspect of the argument is made known by looking at the results of Presidential elections and exit polling data. For example, statistical differences were found in excess of 20 percentage points on many issues when examining 2004 election exit polls (Abramowitz 2010, 40-42). Some of the questions asked included items such as church attendance, gun ownership, abortion, and fiscal policies. When looking at the margins of victory for recent Presidential elections on a state by state basis, they have only increased as time has passed. In 1988 there were only fifteen states in which George H. W. Bush won with a popular vote greater than 5 percent above the national average,

and only nine states in which the vote for Bush Senior was five percent under the national average. By contrast, his son George W. Bush won reelection in 2004 while winning twenty states with a vote five percent higher than the national average for this particular election (Nivola & Brady 2006). In twelve states the vote for Bush Junior was 5 percent under the national average (Abramowitz 2010, 98-102).

Proponents of the existence of mass polarization argue that when compared, these two previous elections indicate that the American people have become more polarized as a whole and demonstrate this fact through their stronger vote for or against these two preceding candidates (Abramowitz & Saunders 2008). When comparing the 2004 election to the 1960 election between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, certain researchers argue that this comparison shows an even greater indicator of gradual mass political polarization over time. The election of 1960 produced a near tie in the popular vote between Nixon and Kennedy, yet this electoral event produced thirty-seven states that were within the five percent mark of the national margin. In 2004, only eighteen states produced that same electoral result (Nivola & Brady 2006). Therefore, when comparing the election of 1960 and 2004, there was a more than double number of states that overwhelmingly went for one candidate over another. Political scientists who make a case for the existence of mass polarization say that these particular elections are definitive proof that over this preceding time period, Americans, as a collective group, have become politically polarized.

Political scientists that specialize in the study of voting behavior have long held that American citizens receive intangible psychological rewards from the act of voting itself. They came to this conclusion by arguing that Americans primarily vote to satisfy a

sense of civic duty. This intrinsic obligation was supposedly instilled in today's middle aged and elderly Americans during the 1950s and 1960s and the belief was that voting was a fundamental obligation of American citizenship. Political scientists that advocate for the current presence of mass polarization, such as Dr. Alan Abramowitz, contend that the difference between the preceding rationale for voting and the predominant one used in the 21st century indicates that the American electorate is politically polarized. He claims that the preponderance of Americans no longer vote out of a sense of civic duty but because of naked and unabashed partisanship. This contention means that individuals vote more out of opposition to the other party's candidate than support for their own party's nominee or platform. Abramowitz argues that this preceding fact shows that the American people have become as polarized as the political elite (2010, 84-87).

While some would argue that it is obvious that most individuals taking the survey questionnaire for this Honors thesis or voting in an actual election would select the political candidate that reflects his or her beliefs, I contend that these situations will not be the case all of the time. The main rationale for this reasoning is that Americans are much more likely to agree with politically polarized statements when they are expressed in an abstract manner. However, these same individuals are much less likely to support these same political stances if they are specific in nature (Achen & Bartels 2009). It is for this same reason that most politicians explain their policy proposals in broad terms to the American people. For example, the preponderance of Americans favor the vague idea of cutting government spending, yet support for this proposed action drastically drops when specific government entities (i.e. military, Medicare, and Social Security) are named as potential targets for spending cuts (Achen & Bartels 2009). Therefore, the stances of the

political candidates described in the second part of the survey questionnaire are much more specific than the abstract statements presented in the first section. Supporting the argument of Dr. Morris Fiorina when applied on the national level, the first facet of my hypothesis asserts that the sample of USM students participating in the survey will not be deemed as politically polarized in the first section of the questionnaire.

While political polarization is mostly seen as a negative effect that can poison a national dialogue and impede the democratic process, there are a small number of intellectuals that see the preceding phenomena as a positive force that has the potential to significantly aid society. To these same individuals, political polarization causes political parties to adopt more rigid stances on a plethora of political issues. In an American context, this action accentuates the differences between the Republican and Democratic Party, thus creating a more discernible choice for voters to choose from when they cast their vote. Given that the majority of Americans identify themselves as members of one of the two preceding parties, this polarization will also make it easier for public officials to represent the general public, because their individual political ideologies will be more cohesive and easier to predict. Basically, the argument is that political polarization creates mass ideological consistency among the American public and dispels elements of ambiguity that allow certain politicians to enact legislation in the name of the public when such an action would actually be unpopular (Levendusky 2010, 111-112, 124-126).

Certain political scientists also credit political polarization with reversing the decline of voter turnout in American politics during the latter half of the twentieth century (Dodson 2010, 444). In the context of this literature review, amplified involvement in the electoral process is seen as a positive attribute of a functional and

thriving representative democracy. After the 1960 Presidential election, the amount of democratic participation in national elections began to significantly drop. This trend continued until after the 1988 Presidential election when voter turnout rebounded and continued to climb for more than a decade. The 2004 Presidential election culminated in voting levels that mirrored average Presidential elections before 1960 (Dodson 2010, 443). Some scholars of voter behavior look at these preceding elections and contend that elite polarization is largely responsible for the return to normal voter turnout levels, because political scientists have determined that this specific kind of political polarization has substantially increased since the 1970s. Elite polarization has supposedly erased the decline in electoral participation by making Americans more interested in politics, more aware of the differences between the major political parties, and much more emotionally invested in the outcome of not only elections but the legislation that eventually emerges from the voter mandate that accompanies most national elections (Dodson 2010, 447-448).

Throughout this literature review, the information provided so far has indicated that the existing texts on the subject of political polarization is largely comprised of an academic, absolutist debate over the existence of mass polarization. However, certain political scientists argue that neither of these ‘all or nothing’ theories aptly describes the degree to which the mass electorate is politically polarized. Layman and Carsey (2002) contend that the conflict extension theory correctly describes the current state of the American public. This theory states that there has been a moderate reaction among the general public to the growth of elite-level political polarization. However, they claim that the two factors that determined if a group or organization was affected by the elite

polarization are the following: “the strength of individuals’ party affiliations and the degree to which they are aware of the polarization of the Democratic and Republican parties on multiple issue agendas” (Layman & Casey 2002, 788). Thusly, they asserted that a certain segment of the American citizenry has become more politically polarized, yet this group is mostly comprised of the party activists that are already members of a political party and are knowledgeable about current issues.

In summary of this literature review, my hypothesis consists of two parts. Supporting the view of Dr. Morris Fiorina when applied on the national level, the first facet of my hypothesis asserts that the sample of USM students participating in the survey will not be considered politically polarized in the first section of the questionnaire. The second facet of my hypothesis is that the majority of undergraduates who take part in the survey will not ‘vote’ for a political candidate that has extremely strong ideological convictions. The results for this Honors thesis have been collected and analyzed using SPSS software and the conclusions will be compared to my two part hypothesis. The purpose of doing so would be to see if my earlier predictions for the conclusion of this Honors thesis were correct or incorrect.

Chapter III: Methodology

The goal of this Honors thesis is to evaluate whether a correlation might exist between the degree of political polarization present in a sample of college students at USM and their preferred candidate in a hypothetical Congressional election. It is hoped that the results from this research project could inspire another researcher or a political scientist to replicate the same experiment on a much grander scale to investigate whether mass polarization exists in America, as well as if it is a determining cause of the current gridlock in Washington. To obtain results for this study, willing participants took a two-part survey questionnaire that was featured on an online survey website called SurveyMonkey.com. I created the political declarations and candidate descriptions in the online assessment and my thesis adviser Dr. Troy Gibson reviewed them for accuracy and fairness before the overall assessment was implemented online. Given that it would take an enormous amount of time and money to survey every single individual that makes up the American public, this survey was administered to a small sample and this group had the potential to possibly foreshadow the conclusion that could result from the survey questionnaire being disseminated on a national level. The focus on a representative subset means that the experimental phase of this Honors thesis is considered a cross-sectional study. Given that each subject responded to pre-determined cues from an online survey rather than direct inquiries by the actual researcher or the questionnaire being piloted, the data gathered by this online assessment consists of empirical research.

The first section determined if the research subject was uncompromising in terms of his or her own personal political beliefs. It contained twenty-five political statements

that varied across the entire ideological spectrum. These assertions were either classified as extremely conservative, moderate, or extremely liberal, but this fact was not revealed to the survey taker. Ten declarations were extremely conservative, ten were extremely liberal, and five were moderate. The temperate assertions were meant to prevent the participant from perceiving a pattern between the political declarations. The danger of such an event happening is that the participants could casually gloss over the rest of the opinionated sentences and not give their most accurate input if they should detect such a predictable arrangement. The hope was that the moderate statements served as a control variable and kept the survey taker attentive to possible ideological differences between the political stances. After reading each statement, the subject indicated to what degree he or she agrees or disagrees with the previously mentioned political stance. A Likert scale was located underneath each assertion and the subject marked strongly disagree, disagree, slightly disagree, no opinion or neutral, slightly agree, agree, or strongly agree. If the participant selected agree or strongly agree as the majority of his or her answers in response to the polarizing declarations, I argue that the preceding survey taker has extremely strong ideological principles. However, the conditions for moderate statements to contribute toward an individual's chances of being labeled as possessing uncompromising beliefs were different from the prior rules used for polarizing stances. If the participant selected disagree or strongly disagree for those particular moderate contentions, his or her chance of being considered as possessing strong ideological principles would increase.

Regardless of what answers are chosen, the subject immediately moved on to the second section of the survey once he or she finished the first portion. This part featured a

scenario in which five different candidates were running for a Congressional seat. To eliminate as many biases as possible, the political contenders were identified numerically: Candidate #1, Candidate #2, et cetera. The purpose for doing so was to keep the survey taker from selecting a political candidate solely for their race, gender, or political identification. The hope is that the participant ‘voted’ for his or her preferred candidate because of their political ideology and platform and not for any other factor that could dilute the final conclusion of this Honors thesis.

Each aspiring politician had his or her own profile and it featured a paragraph long summary indicating the candidate’s stance on economic, social, and foreign policy issues. Unbeknownst to the survey taker, however, each of the five candidates represented one of the following political philosophies: extremely liberal, liberal, moderate, conservative, extremely conservative. The subject’s task was to select the candidate that he or she was most willing to vote for if an actual Congressional election occurred that mirrored these preceding conditions. If the majority of survey respondents were deemed as possessing extremely strong ideological convictions after finishing the first section, as well as hypothetically voting for the extremely conservative or extremely liberal candidate, it was assumed that there is possibly some sort of relationship between how much someone adheres to uncompromising political beliefs and whether he or she is willing to send to Congress a politician that will contribute to the current gridlock in Washington. However, a final conclusion would not be made until the data was also analyzed through SPSS software.

The final results from the survey questionnaire were scrutinized in two different ways. First, I conducted a simple analysis where all of the survey responses were

expressed in percentages. By doing so, I could quickly determine my sample's preferred political candidate; in addition to knowing if the research subjects were politically polarized as a whole or just polarized toward a minority of specific political issues. While this method was useful for exploring the demographic information and collective voting choice of my sample, it did not sufficiently answer my main research question of whether there is a statistical correlation between a group's level of political polarization and its voting patterns. To delve deeper into the information and detect possible statistical patterns, I entered my entire data set into a SPSS computer program. Within the parameters of this software, I used a summation index to individually and collectively measure my sample's level of political polarization on a scale from 0-30, in addition to linking the results of this index to other factors such as voting choice, party identification, and self-professed ideological leanings. According to Johnson and Reynolds, "a summation index is a method of accumulating scores on individual items to form a composite measure of a complex phenomenon" (2012, 150). It is usually constructed by assigning a range of numerical scores to a set of corresponding responses for a pre-determined question. During the actual analysis phase, the scores for each observation are combined and the resulting sum is the measurement for the phenomenon that is being measured (Johnson & Reynolds 2012).

The specific summation index for this experiment was created by assigning numerical values to all of the responses that constituted a Likert scale in the first section of the survey, as well as several queries in the portion of the questionnaire that asked for demographic information, such as self-professed levels of party identification and political ideology. For example, the extremely conservative statement "The US

government should not tax its citizens more than the bare minimum needed to maintain order and safety” would have values of the following manner: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), slightly disagree (3), no opinion or neutral (4), slightly agree (5), agree (6), strongly agree (7). Using the preceding index, the SPSS software was supposed to assign a value of 0 to 30 to each participant and it was based on an average of the survey taker’s responses to the twenty-five political statements in the first section of the questionnaire. This particular interval was chosen because it provided three cut points (i.e. thirds) when analyzing the distribution of the sample.

Just as the ideological trinity of American politics is composed of conservatives, moderates, and liberals, the three sections are meant to organize survey takers on the basis of below average, average, and above average levels of ideological convictions. An individual with an overall index of less than 12 would be considered in this experiment as possessing a below average amount of ideological convictions. Someone with a score of 12-15 would be labeled as having an average amount of ideological convictions for an American voter, while anyone higher than 15 would have above average ideological convictions. The main reason that 10 or any other value other than 12-15 on a 30-point scale was not considered the average level of a survey taker’s ideological convictions is because of the normal distribution’s tails being excluded by the cut points. To assess whether there is a correlation between a group’s level of ideological convictions and its voting patterns, a difference in proportions test was used to compare the results of the political summary index to the sample’s voting patterns and level of party identification. The purpose of this particular test is to determine if there is a statistically significant

difference between two variables that are extracted from a number of independent samples.

The target sample size for this study was a minimum of one hundred responses and a maximum of two hundred and fifty. The end result of the experimentation phase of this project was that 161 willing participants finished the entire questionnaire. Given that this survey requires a basic knowledge of American government and current political issues, the experiment was not suitable to be administered to anyone under the age of 18. The logic behind this age cutoff is that American citizens gain the right to vote at eighteen years of age and are presumed to have the wisdom and mental capacity at this point in time to make educated decisions about their voting choices. The age of the target population for this Honors thesis was basically anyone eighteen or older and the subjects were college students at USM.

As stated before, the only criteria for taking my survey was reaching a certain age and being a USM student. I reached out to my test subjects by administering the survey in several political science and business classes, as well as sending it to interested participants via e-mail. The survey had an electronic version of the oral presentation attached to it, but the consent form was a physical sheet of paper that had to be signed and dated prior to participating in the actual experiment. The main reason for not incorporating the consent form into an electronic format was that this particular document must include the signature of the individual taking the survey questionnaire to comply with IRB regulations. Anonymity is a condition that was honored during this entire experiment and having an electronic consent form in the same questionnaire would allow me to theoretically tie a particular person's results to their consent form, thereby

potentially destroying any sense that an individual's responses are purely confidential and cannot be traced back to them. Each participant was not able to take the survey questionnaire until he or she signed the consent form and read the oral presentation.

Dr. Marija Bekafigo, Dr. Troy Gibson, Dr. Marek Steedman, Dr. Steven Stelk, Mr. Allen Ryan, and Dr. Joseph Weinberg all graciously allowed me to enter their respective classes and proctor my survey questionnaire to their students. My rationale for randomly selecting students from both the USM political science and finance departments was that the different undergraduates provide a counterbalance to each other in terms of political beliefs and the strength of their ideological convictions. I argue that political science majors have stronger ideological stances than finance majors, because they are constantly exposed to American politics and are usually more well-informed on specific political issues. Therefore, they are more likely to have strong opinions on controversial topics that are currently being debated within Congress and other political institutions.

If a student did not wish to participate in the experiment, he or she had the option to read their textbook or work on some other schoolwork while the consenting undergraduates finished the survey. The classes used to administer the survey questionnaire took place during the 2013 summer and fall semesters at the University of Southern Mississippi. Another advantage of doing the experiment on a college campus was that this environment is much more likely to have diverse representations of various ethnic, religious, ideological, and socioeconomic backgrounds than the typical environment in South Mississippi.

The survey questionnaire was almost entirely administered at USM and the obvious weakness of doing so was that my results only covered the political polarization, or lack thereof, among a sample of college students and not the general populace. It was for this fact that this Honors thesis did not attempt to find the existence of mass polarization amongst the American electorate, as well as link it to current elite polarization in Congress. Instead, scholars with much more resources and time should use this study as a springboard into examining the preceding items. However, this sample still included variations of several important demographics, such as ethnicity, political ideology, gender, and religion. Unfortunately, the final results did not reflect a diverse reflection of Americans in terms of age. The actual administering of the survey did not take very long, because I asked the professors ahead of time to tell their students to bring their own electronic devices, so they could log onto SurveyMonkey.com and take the questionnaire as quickly as possible. On average, it just took participants fifteen to twenty minutes to read, comprehend, and answer the questions posed by the survey.

As for the manner in which the survey is conducted, it was mostly done in a classroom setting. In such a situation, the consent form was in a print format and needed to be completed before an individual would be allowed to take the survey. However, I would read the oral presentation in this particular circumstance, which is unlike when the survey was disseminated via e-mail. When a person was partaking in this experiment via e-mail, he or she signed a consent form beforehand and then guided himself or herself through the questionnaire at his or her own time and leisure. If there was ever a legitimate reason that prevented students from taking the survey in their respective classrooms or if every student did not have an electronic device capable of accessing the Internet, they

would have taken it in the computer lab in the USM Liberal Arts Building or the equivalent in Joseph Greene Hall. The questionnaire itself had detailed enough instructions that any subject would be able to do it on his or her own, but for the majority of the testing done for this Honors thesis, I was physically there to answer any questions. While I and the survey itself were very specific on how to properly answer the questions asked, I would only reveal the title of the thesis and not the specific purpose of this study to the survey takers until they had completely finished it. The reason for this rule was because doing so would likely influence their answers to both sections of the survey. If participants knew that they were being partly tested for the presence of political polarization, they might falsely alter their answers to ensure that they were deemed as moderate, middle of the road citizens.

Although the majority of students in a given classroom would be glad to participate in a survey instead of continuing class, there are some individuals who will refuse to take a questionnaire on grounds of privacy issues or for some other reason. There were really no physical risks or meaningful inconveniences in participating in the survey. The only psychological or emotional risk that someone could experience from being in a class where data for this experiment was being collected is the feeling of loneliness or peer pressure. If one person did not want to answer the questionnaire, he or she could be too afraid to voice his or her concern because of the fear that everyone else in the class would think of them as being paranoid or strange. To prevent this possibility from occurring, I strongly stressed that this survey was not mandatory and would not affect their academic standing in a specific class. If someone was not comfortable taking it, he or she could have worked on some other assignment or preoccupied themselves with their phones, so

this individual did not feel isolated from his or her fellow students during the administering of the survey questionnaire.

Conditions in which a subject would be terminated from the study before its completion would be if a participant lied about his or her age, as well as if this person was being unruly and distracting to other survey takers. As previously stipulated, anyone seventeen or younger would not be allowed to contribute to this Honors thesis. If a subject lied about his or her age and turned out to be underage, they would have been immediately expelled from the study and their survey responses would be tossed out of the results pool.

As for any formal experiment involving human beings, anonymity is an ideal that must be upheld at all costs. To do so, the survey that subjects answered did not ask for their name outside of the separate consent form but instead allowed them to list their demographic characteristics such as age, race, level of political affiliation, gender, as well as religion. Confidentiality of data was maintained, because the raw statistics and questionnaire answers were held online on SurveyMonkey.com. I alone knew the username and password that accessed this data and even when my thesis adviser Dr. Troy Gibson helped me analyze the information, he did not have admittance to the records without me physically being at his side. Once the information has been analyzed and the final version of this Honors thesis has been submitted to the Honors College, I will permanently delete all survey data from my account at SurveyMonkey.com. This action shall be done to ensure that all statistics obtained for this Honors thesis will never fall into the wrong hands or be used in an improper way.

Chapter IV: Results

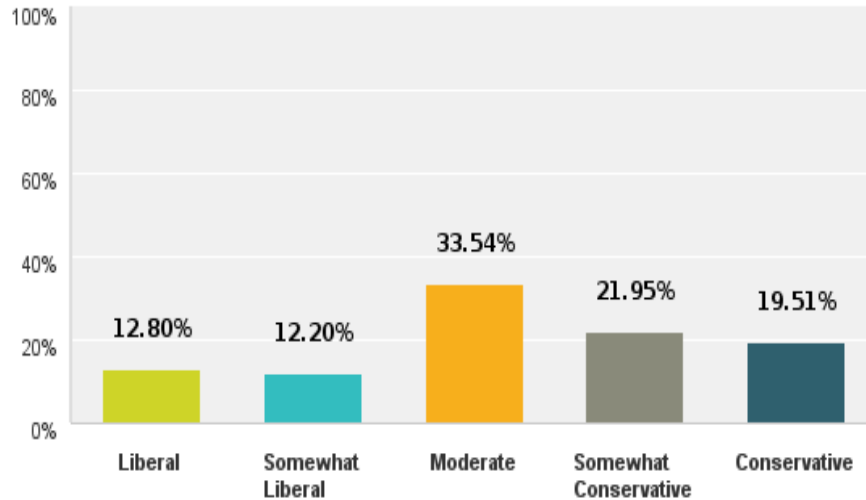
This chapter contains all of the results from the administering of my survey questionnaire to USM undergraduates. Most of the data is expressed in some sort of graphical representation such as charts, tables, and histograms. Specifically, the content of this section is organized in the following manner: demographics of the sample, strength of the sample's party identification with regard to self-professed ideological leanings, sample voting patterns with regard to self-professed ideological leanings, and findings from using SPSS analysis, a political summary index, and a difference in proportions test.

My pool of willing participants ended up being 46.34% female and 53.66% male. One hundred and sixty-three people started the survey but only one hundred and sixty-one individuals finished it. Not surprisingly, 85.37% of the survey takers fell into the 18-24 age group and 8.54% were categorized into the 25-34 age range. The rest of the individuals were older than these two preceding groups and constituted 5.50% of the overall sample. As for the issue of race, 60.98% of my sample was Caucasian, 31.71% was African-American, and 3.05% was Hispanic. The remaining racial groups, such as Asian-American, Native Hawaiian, and Native American, each respectively constituted a little over 1% of the entire survey pool. 81.71% of the respondents considered themselves Christian while 15.24% of them claimed to be secular or not religious. The relatively normal distribution of the sample's self-professed political ideology is of the following:

Illustration #1: Sample's Political Ideology

Q4 Which of the following best describes your political ideology?

Answered: 164 Skipped: 0



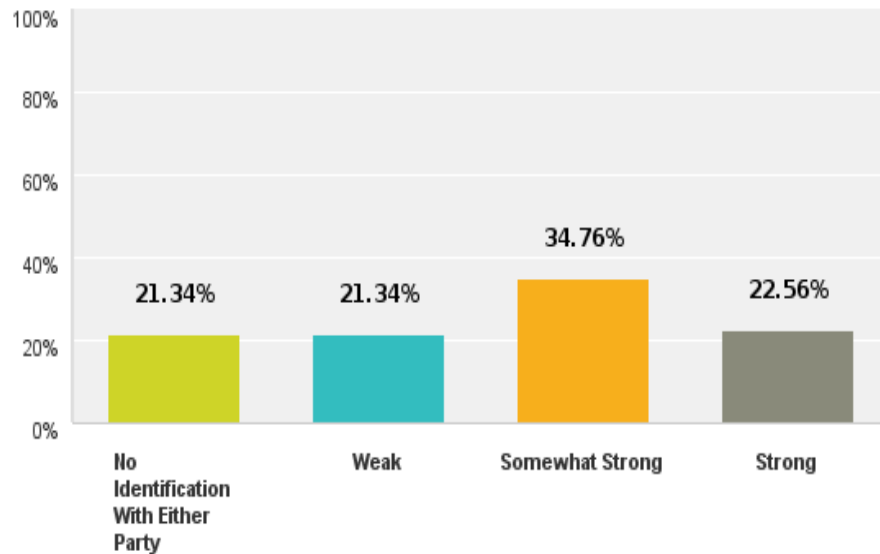
While no particular position on the political ideological spectrum can claim a majority in this sample, political moderates (33.54%) outnumber everyone else in the data pool and individuals that self-identify as ‘somewhat conservative’ make up 21.95% of the survey takers. The results from this specific question are not surprising, considering both the political environment of Mississippi and the political predispositions of college students that are usually in their early twenties. Mississippi is one of the most conservative states in the United States and this fact is reflected in the chart above because of significantly higher numbers of people who identify as ‘conservative’ over those who identify as ‘liberal.’ However, the vast majority of college students are young

adults that have not formed their concrete political beliefs and even if they have done so, they are more likely to be moderate or somewhat liberal during this portion of their lives.

Illustration #2: Sample’s Level of Identification with Either Republicans or Democrats

Q5 How strong is your identification with either the Republican or Democratic Party?

Answered: 164 Skipped: 0



57.32% of participants claimed to have a ‘somewhat strong’ or a ‘strong’ identification with one of the two main political parties in the United States. The statistics of this particular question do not pertain to the second half of the survey questionnaire, because the hypothetical Congressional election did not include details that could potentially distract ‘voters’ from solely selecting a candidate on the basis of their political platform. However, knowing an individual’s level of party identification is an excellent way to predict their voting patterns, as well as the degree of their ideological convictions.

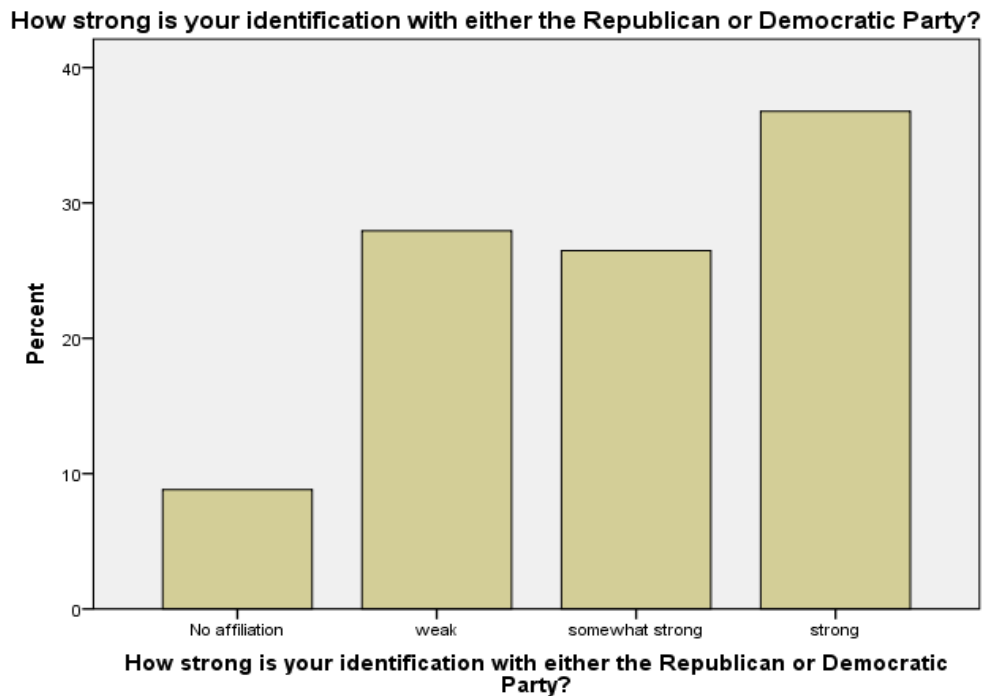
Using the SPSS software, the results from this question were organized by an individual's political ideology. By doing so, one can see to what degree conservatives, liberals, and moderates identify with a particular political party.

Table #1: How strong is the identification of conservatives with either the Republican or Democratic Party?

N	Valid	68
	Missing	0

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
No affiliation	6	8.8	8.8	8.8
weak	19	27.9	27.9	36.8
Valid somewhat strong	18	26.5	26.5	63.2
strong	25	36.8	36.8	100.0
Total	68	100.0	100.0	

Illustration #3: Degree to which Conservatives Identify with a Political Party



Sixty-eight of the overall survey takers described their political ideology as conservative and about 64% of this subgroup said that they had a ‘somewhat strong’ or ‘strong’ identification with the Republican or Democratic Party. It is likely that most, if not all, of these conservatives are referring to the Republican Party when they mention a substantial affiliation with a certain political party. However, it should be noted that a little over 35% of the conservatives in this sample have little or no personal identification with a political party. While it could not be determined using the present questions in the survey questionnaire, these ‘weak’ partisans are most likely a mix of people who identify as conservative but are willing to vote for political candidates of other parties or extremely conservative individuals who possess such strong ideological convictions that the Republican Party is simply not conservative enough for them.

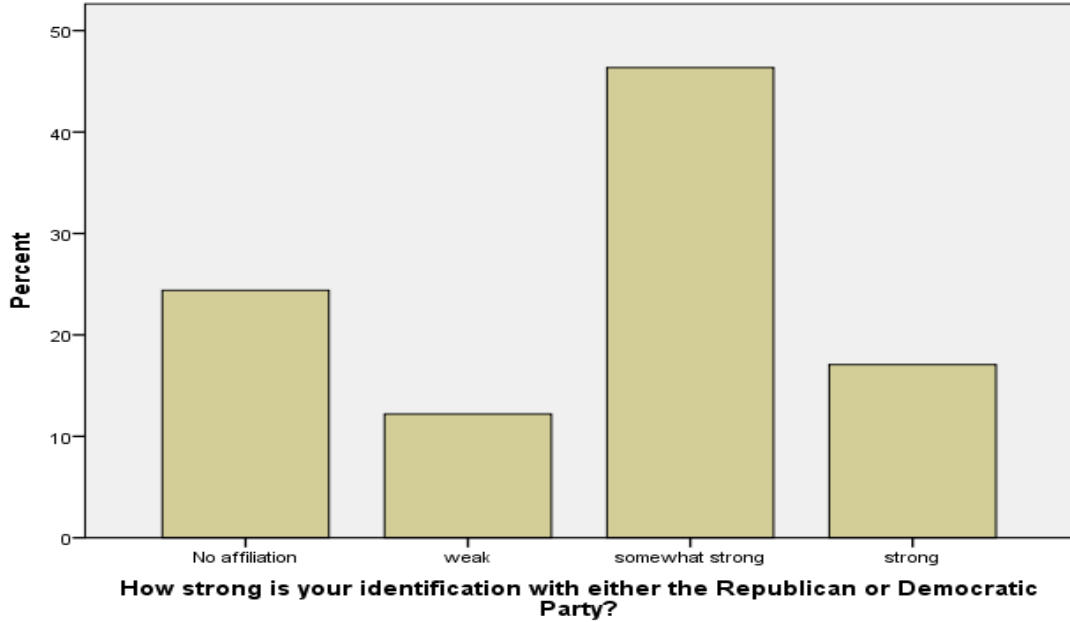
Table #2: How strong is the identification of liberals with either the Republican or Democratic Party?

N	Valid	41
	Missing	0

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
No affiliation	10	24.4	24.4	24.4
weak	5	12.2	12.2	36.6
Valid somewhat strong	19	46.3	46.3	82.9
strong	7	17.1	17.1	100.0
Total	41	100.0	100.0	

Illustration #4: Degree to which Liberals Identify with a Political Party

How strong is your identification with either the Republican or Democratic Party?



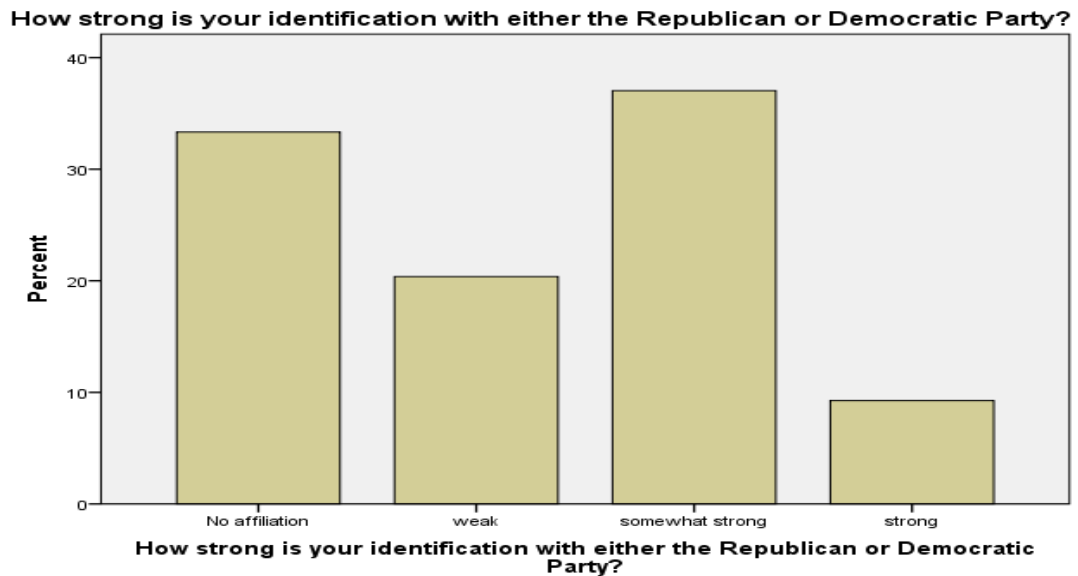
Forty-one willing participants considered themselves liberals and 63.4% of this subgroup had ‘somewhat strong’ or ‘strong’ associations with either the Republican or Democratic Party. Almost 50% of liberals claimed to have a ‘somewhat strong’ level of identification with a particular political party. It is likely that most, if not all, of these liberals are alluding to the Democratic Party when they claim to possess a substantial degree of party affiliation with a particular political party. Interestingly, there were more than a double amount of liberals in terms of percentages that had no party affiliation whatsoever than there were conservatives. Given that approximately 25% of all liberals in this study identified with no political party, one can reasonably argue that a significant minority of this subgroup claim no affiliation with the Democratic Party, because they feel it is not progressive enough in its policies and political platform.

Table #3: How strong is the identification of moderates with either the Republican or Democratic Party?

N	Valid	54
	Missing	0

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
No affiliation	18	33.3	33.3	33.3
weak	11	20.4	20.4	53.7
Valid somewhat strong	20	37.0	37.0	90.7
strong	5	9.3	9.3	100.0
Total	54	100.0	100.0	

Illustration #5: Degree to which Moderates Identify with a Political Party

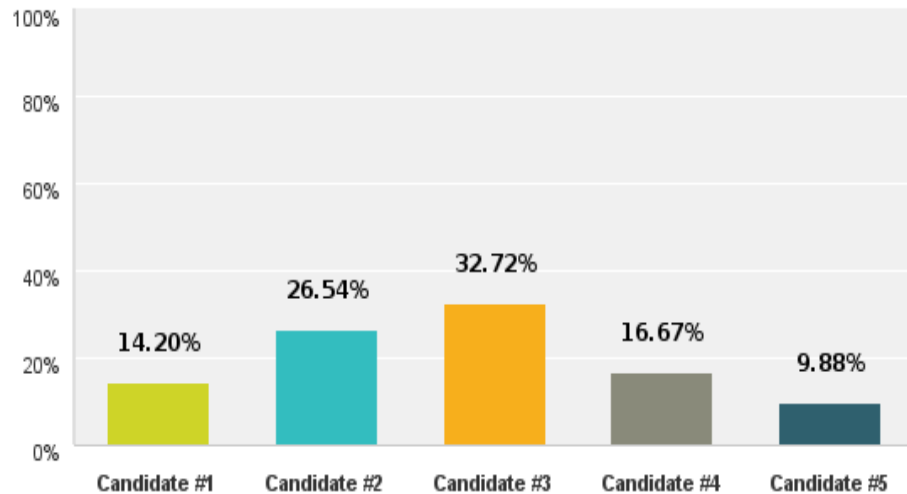


Unlike the conservatives and liberals in this study, the majority of moderates claimed to have ‘no affiliation’ or ‘weak’ party affiliation. However, out of all the choices that one could pick for this particular question, ‘somewhat strong’ was chosen the most with 37%. This result backs up existing literature on the connection between political ideology and voting behavior. Political moderates and independents that identify at least somewhat strong with a specific political party have been found to often have stronger ideological convictions than individuals who have a weak association with the Republican or Democratic Party.

Illustration #6: Overall Voting Patterns in Congressional Election

Q32 Which of the preceding political candidates will you vote for in this election?

Answered: 162 Skipped: 2



From left to right, the political nominees are as follows: Candidate #1 (extremely liberal), Candidate #2 (liberal), Candidate #3 (moderate), Candidate #4 (conservative), and Candidate #5 (extremely conservative). The moderate candidate won the election with 32.72% of the vote, the liberal nominee came in second with 26.54% of the total tally, and the conservative contestant came in third with 16.67%. The two political candidates that had extremely strong ideological convictions (i.e. Candidate #1 and Candidate #5) received the least votes in the Congressional election. It is not surprising that the moderate candidate won the election, given the fact that the largest subgroup within the sample was comprised of political moderates. However, there were 9.75% more survey takers that identified as conservatives than moderates, yet the liberal candidate defeated the conservative nominee in the general election by a ten point spread.

Table #4: Voting Patterns of Conservatives in Congressional Election

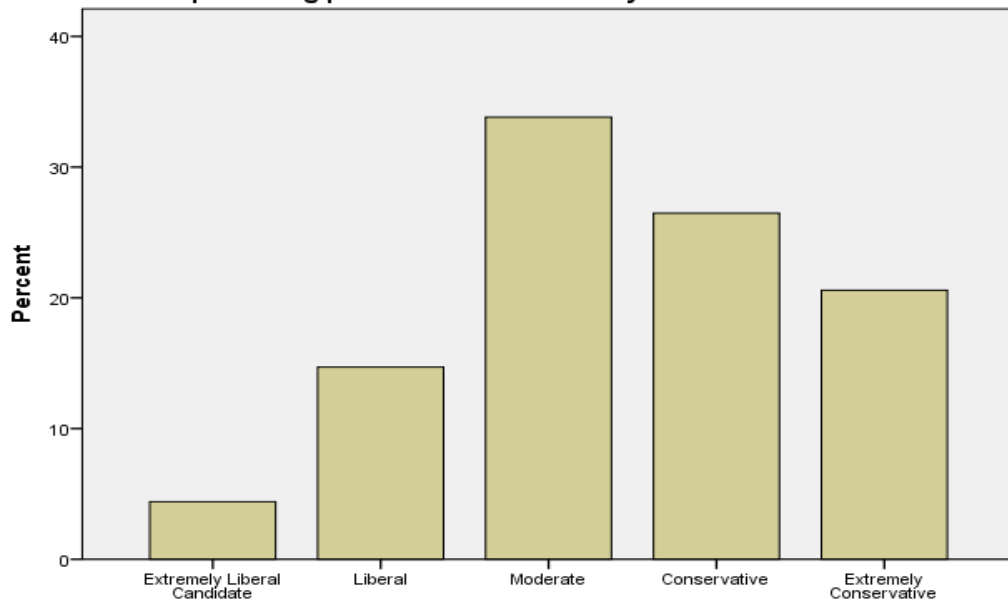
N	Valid	68
	Missing	0

Which of the preceding political candidates will you vote for in this election?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Extremely Liberal Candidate	3	4.4	4.4	4.4
Liberal	10	14.7	14.7	19.1
Moderate	23	33.8	33.8	52.9
Conservative	18	26.5	26.5	79.4
Extremely Conservative	14	20.6	20.6	100.0
Total	68	100.0	100.0	

Illustration #7: Conservative Voting Patterns in Congressional Election

Which of the preceding political candidates will you vote for in this election?



Which of the preceding political candidates will you vote for in this election?

Surprisingly, the conservative bloc of this experiment's overall sample most voted for the moderate political candidate. While only 33.8% of conservatives voted for this particular nominee, the conservative contender came in second with 26.5% of the vote. The extremely conservative candidate came in third amongst conservatives with 20.6%. The predictable portion of the preceding data was that conservatives casted the least votes for the liberal and extremely liberal nominees. However, it should still be noted that almost 20% of conservatives voted for liberal candidates in a hypothetical Congressional election. The overall results of the election amongst conservatives suggest that this particular group does not hold as much allegiance to a particular political party or ideology like they claimed to in an earlier section of the survey questionnaire.

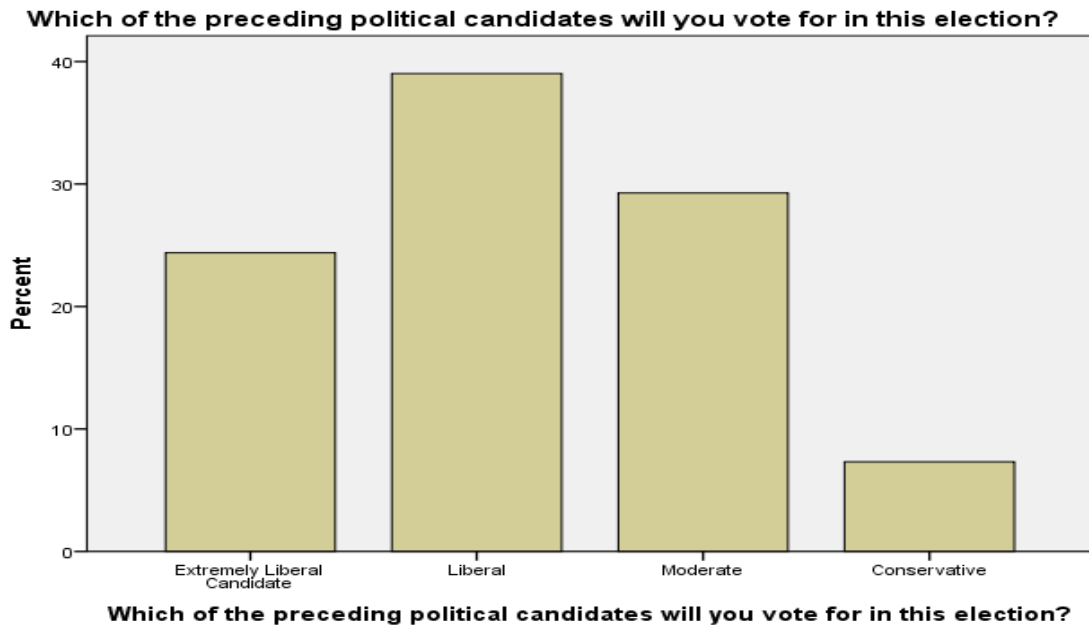
Table #5: Voting Patterns of Liberals in Congressional Election

N	Valid	41
	Missing	0

Which of the preceding political candidates will you vote for in this election?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Extremely Liberal Candidate	10	24.4	24.4	24.4
Liberal	16	39.0	39.0	63.4
Valid Moderate	12	29.3	29.3	92.7
Conservative	3	7.3	7.3	100.0
Total	41	100.0	100.0	

Illustration #8: Liberal Voting Patterns in Congressional Election



Unlike the conservatives, the liberals in this sample confirmed their own self-professed ideological leanings by casting the most ballots for the liberal candidate. This particular political contestant led the election among liberals with 39% of the vote and the moderate nominee came in second with 29.3%. The extremely conservative politician did not receive even one vote from this subgroup. Despite the group of liberals exemplifying more ideological consistency in their voting patterns than their conservative counterparts, the moderate candidate still received approximately five more percent of the vote among liberals than the extremely liberal nominee.

Table #6: Voting Patterns of Moderates in Congressional Election

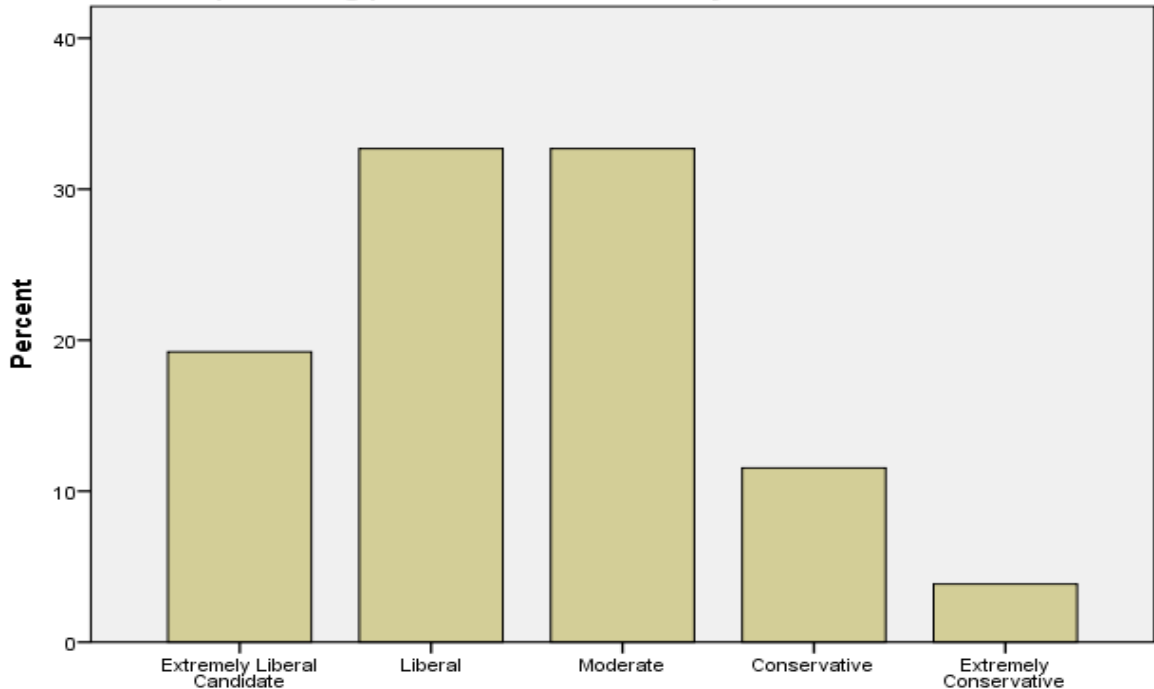
N	Valid	52
	Missing	2

Which of the preceding political candidates will you vote for in this election?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Extremely Liberal Candidate	10	18.5	19.2	19.2
	Liberal	17	31.5	32.7	51.9
	Moderate	17	31.5	32.7	84.6
	Conservative	6	11.1	11.5	96.2
	Extremely Conservative	2	3.7	3.8	100.0
	Total	52	96.3	100.0	
Missing	System	2	3.7		
Total		54	100.0		

Illustration #9: Moderate Voting Patterns in Congressional Election

Which of the preceding political candidates will you vote for in this election?



Which of the preceding political candidates will you vote for in this election?

The result of the Congressional election among political moderates was an exact tie between the moderate and liberal candidate. After using the valid percent statistics to account for two participants that identified as moderates but did not finish the entire survey, both of these political nominees received 32.7% of the vote and the extremely liberal candidate came in third with 19.2%. Interestingly enough, the self identified moderates of the overall sample only voted for the moderate candidate 3.4% more than the liberals did. This particular result suggests that a significant number of participants who identified as ‘moderate’ in this survey possess ideological convictions that are as stronger than the level usually attributed to a group of political moderates.

Table #7: Results of Political Summary Index

N	Valid	161
	Missing	2
Mean		15.4969
Median		15.0000
Std. Deviation		4.80771
Range		21.00
Percentiles	25	12.0000
	50	15.0000
	75	19.0000

Illustration #10: Histogram of Results of Political Summary Index

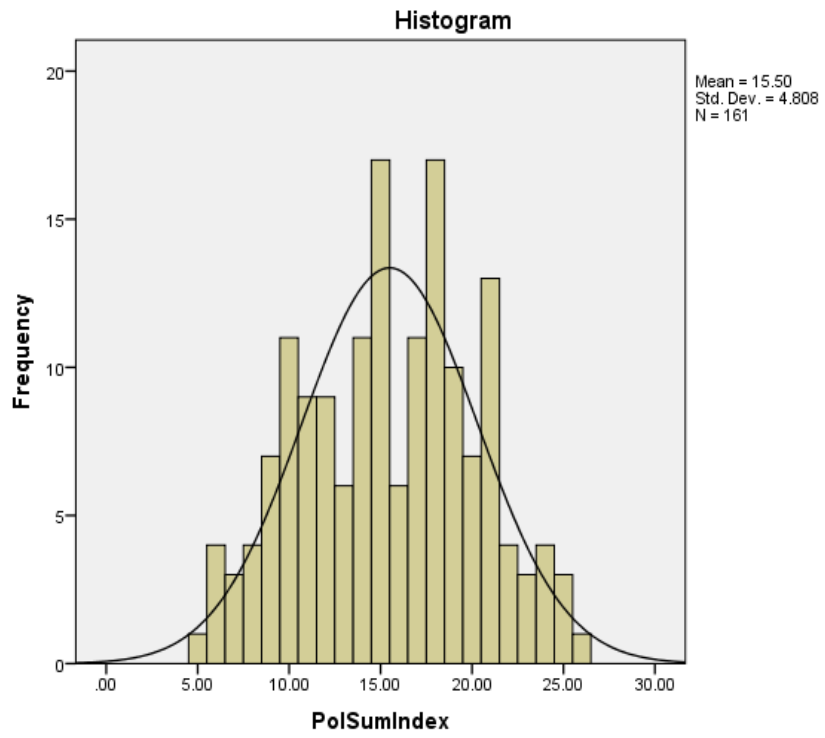


Table #7: Results of Political Summary Index (Continued)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
5.00	1	.6	.6	.6
6.00	4	2.5	2.5	3.1
7.00	3	1.8	1.9	5.0
8.00	4	2.5	2.5	7.5
9.00	7	4.3	4.3	11.8
10.00	11	6.7	6.8	18.6
11.00	9	5.5	5.6	24.2
12.00	9	5.5	5.6	29.8
13.00	6	3.7	3.7	33.5
14.00	11	6.7	6.8	40.4
15.00	17	10.4	10.6	50.9
Valid 16.00	6	3.7	3.7	54.7
17.00	11	6.7	6.8	61.5
18.00	17	10.4	10.6	72.0
19.00	10	6.1	6.2	78.3
20.00	7	4.3	4.3	82.6
21.00	13	8.0	8.1	90.7
22.00	4	2.5	2.5	93.2
23.00	3	1.8	1.9	95.0
24.00	4	2.5	2.5	97.5
25.00	3	1.8	1.9	99.4
26.00	1	.6	.6	100.0
Total	161	98.8	100.0	
Missing System	2	1.2		
Total	163	100.0		

The histogram reveals that the series of observations in Table #7 roughly mirrors a normal distribution. This fact not only validates that the results of the political summary index are normally distributed from the mean, but it also indicates that the random

variables (i.e. political polarization and voter choice) in this experiment can be used to determine if there is a correlation between a group's voting patterns and level of political polarization. One hundred and sixty-one of the survey takers were included in the political summary index and the mean of the overall results was 15.4969.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, an interval of 0 to 30 was used to measure each individual's level of ideological convictions in the sample and Table #7 groups the participants according to this standard. A person with a result of 'less than 12' would be considered as being very moderate in his or her political leanings and not maintaining many entrenched political positions, if any at all. However, the higher your overall score on the political summary index, the greater the degree of strong ideological convictions you are assumed to have. For example, if two participants receive a 10 and 11 respectively after their survey responses are analyzed, they are both categorized into the 'less than 12' group, but the person with the 11 would still be considered as having stronger ideological convictions than the survey taker that had a score of 10. Within the parameters of this experiment, anyone with a tally of '12 to 15' is an average person in terms of their political beliefs, because they have a mix of moderate and polarizing beliefs. The last group is '15 and up' and these individuals are assumed to have strong ideological convictions. Since the results from the political summary index were normally distributed, it is statistically permissible to connect the three preceding groups to their voting patterns and levels of party identification.

Table #8: Political Summary Index Results and Voting Patterns

Summary Index	Candidates	Extremely Liberal	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative	Extremely Conservative	Candidates Except Moderate
X<12		6%	40%	38%	15%	2%	63%*
12≤X≤15		24%	15%	35%	18%	9%	63%
X>15		15%	24%	28%	18%	15%	72%*

*Statistical significance of 0.05% on a difference in proportions test

Looking at the Congressional election results where the survey takers are grouped according to the political polarization rankings and linked to their voting records, the difference in proportions test shows that there is a statistical significance between my sample's level of political polarization and its voting patterns. This correlation exists because the significance level of Table #8 was below 0.05%, which was the benchmark in this experiment for determining whether a statistical correlation existed between two independent variables. 63% of the 'less than 12' group voted for a political nominee that was not the moderate candidate and the exact same percentage repeated itself with the '12 to 15' section. However, support for the moderate nominee decreased with the second group and the vote tally for the two candidates with strong ideological convictions increased by a substantial amount, especially the extremely liberal contender. The '15 and above' group exemplified the most polarization in their voting habits, because the percentage of votes for all of the political nominees except the moderate candidate increased from 63% to 72%. At the same time, the share of votes for the moderate

contestant decreased by 7% and these same ballots migrated to the liberal and extremely conservative candidates. To be sure that these findings were not just a statistical anomaly and that a correlation does exist between the random variables of political polarization and a group's voting patterns, the political summary index results were also compared to party identification to see if there was a similar relationship.

Table #9: Political Summary Index Results and Strength of Party Identification

Summary Index	Strength of Party Identification	None	Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong	Total (SS+S)
X<12		25%	25%	29%	21%	50%*
12≤X≤15		18%	32%	32%	18%	50%
X>15		19%	15%	41%	25%	66%*

* Statistical significance of 0.05% on a difference in proportions test

As when comparing the political summary data against the Congressional election results, the 'less than 12' and '12 to 15' groups had the same percentages after adding up the variables that are relevant in measuring each group's level of party identification. Nevertheless, the '12 to 15' grouping did have a stronger degree of party identification, because there was a 7% decrease in the number of survey takers that claimed to possess no party identification, as well as an increase in responses to the choices 'weak' and 'somewhat strong.' The '15 and above' grouping had a 16% increase of survey

respondents who claimed to having a ‘somewhat strong’ or ‘strong’ party identification to a specific political party. The significance level of 0.05% is again used as the standard in the difference in proportions test in Table #9 just as it was used in Table #8. The difference in proportions test shows that the significance level between the summary index results and strength of party identification was below 0.05%, so there is statistical significance between these two variables. This fact only reinforces my argument that there is a statistical correlation between a group’s level of political polarization and its voting patterns, as well as proves that the results in Table #8 were not a mere anomaly.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to evaluate whether a correlation might exist between the degree of political polarization present in a sample of college students at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) and their preferred candidate in a hypothetical Congressional election. The first facet of my hypothesis asserted that the sample of USM students participating in the survey will not be deemed as politically polarized in the first section of the questionnaire. This particular part of my premise was proven correct, because the majority of survey takers did not agree strongly enough with the polarizing statements in the first section of the questionnaire. Despite several extreme political declarations receiving strong approval from nearly 50% of the sample, none of them overcame the threshold that was required for the group to have strong ideological convictions on that particular issue.

The second facet of my hypothesis was that the majority of undergraduates who take part in the survey will not ‘vote’ for a political candidate that has extremely strong ideological convictions. The results from the questionnaire confirm this portion of my hypothesis as well, because only 24.08% of the willing participants voted for a political nominee that has a polarizing platform.

Using the SPSS software, it was possible to rank and group all of the survey participants by their personal levels of ideological convictions, in addition to connecting the rankings to their respective electoral actions. The difference in proportions test gave me the ability to test for a statistical significance between the variables of political polarization and voting choice. Doing so allowed me to answer the main question in this

Honors thesis. In most cases, political polarization can be used as a reliable predictor in predicting a group's voting patterns, but its effectiveness in doing so decreases when one is comparing a group with average levels of ideological convictions. A possible reason for this discrepancy is the fact that a significant amount of moderates claim to hold 'middle of the road' positions in their political values but still vote in a more partisan and consistent manner than ideologically weak Republicans and Democrats.

The most glaring limitation in this experiment is that the sample consists entirely of college students and most of them have lived in the American South for most, if not all, of their lives. Given that the South is currently a geographic bastion for the Republican Party and political conservatism in general, the survey takers in this Honors thesis are not representative of the overall American public in terms of age and political values. However, it was the best level of representation that could be achieved under the given amount of resources and time to work on this project. Another constraint was the number of people that comprised the sample. While 161 people did complete the survey, I would have preferred to have 250-300 people take the questionnaire.

As for directions for future research, political scientists could use this study as a springboard for conducting a similar analysis on a national scale. By doing so, scholars could definitively answer the question of whether the American electorate is politically polarized, as well as whether this alleged mass polarization is directly responsible for the elite polarization that exists in Congress. Also, researchers with a much better understanding of SPSS and other statistical models should improve the methodology used in this experiment to rank a survey taker's level of ideological convictions. An improved method could possibly shed light on why the 'less than 12' and '12 to 15' subgroups had

such similar percentages after adding up their relevant responses. Last but not least, political scientists could conduct more research on the topic of political polarization to see if this divergence of political attitudes can be a reliable predictor for other political actions, such as the extent to which one volunteers for a political campaign or financially contributes to a specific political party.

Regardless of whether political polarization is a positive or negative phenomenon, researchers can agree that it has and will continue to have a significant impact on voter behavior and traditional political processes. This Honors thesis has attempted to explain its empirical trends, but further research must be done to determine its true effect on not only political society but the American electorate. I claim that political scientists must first possess a clear understanding of the experiential trends if they are to understand its true effect on American democracy.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The purpose of political science is to bring order and coherency to the chaotic practice that we know today as politics. One of the greatest ways that political scientists can contribute to the political process is by researching how individuals rationalize their electoral actions, as well as uncover demographic and ideological elements of an individual's identity that can serve as a predictor for his or her choice in an election. Doing so will be a great boon for political strategists, politicians, and anyone else who desires to correctly guess how a certain group will vote. Through a survey questionnaire, SPSS software, and the difference in proportions test, this Honors thesis has demonstrated that there is a statistically significant correlation between a group's level of political polarization and its voting patterns. If Dr. Alan Abramowitz is correct in his argument that the American electorate is becoming more polarized in its political beliefs and actions, the findings in this experiment will aid future inquiries into the voting behavior of specific groups.

The raw data from the survey questionnaire does support Dr. Morris Fiorina's assertion that the American people are as politically moderate as they always been, because the sample in this experiment was not considered politically polarized on any specific political issue and the candidates with strong ideological convictions in the Congressional election received the lowest number of votes. However, the issue of whether mass polarization exists amongst the American people will be debated until a detailed and encompassing study is done to gauge the actual political predispositions of the American electorate. If anything, this experiment proved that an individual's

ideological convictions, or lack thereof, significantly influence his or her choice in an election, in addition to confirming the conventional notion that human beings usually prefer representatives and leaders that represent their own political beliefs, regardless of whether the politician's actual actions hurt his or her supporters.

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Appendices

Appendix A: IRB Approval Form

(Note: The formal title of this Honors thesis was changed after receiving IRB approval.)



INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
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NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the "Adverse Effect Report Form".
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months.
Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 13040301
PROJECT TITLE: **Many Americans Complain about Their Politicians, but are we the Ones to Blame? An Examination of Whether the 113th Congress is the Direct Result of a Polarized American Electorate**
PROJECT TYPE: **Thesis**
RESEARCHER(S): **Robert Williamson, Ph.D.**
COLLEGE/DIVISION: **College of Arts & Letters**
DEPARTMENT: **Political Science**
FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: **N/A**
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: **Expedited Review Approval**
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: **05/13/2013 to 05/012/2014**

Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board

Appendix B: Political Polarization Survey Key

(Note: The simple key denoting how each political statement is grouped according to ideology was not present on the actual survey. The letters R, D, and M, did not appear besides the assertions in the actual survey as well. They are only meant to serve as a guide to anyone inspecting this survey for its quality and accuracy. Also, in the real test, there were seven ‘bubbles’ beneath each statement (Likert Scale), and the participant marked the one that best represented how much he or she agreed/disagreed with the political assertion.)

Key

R- Polarizing right-wing statement

D- Polarizing left-wing statement

M- Moderate political statement

Section I: Indicate to what degree you agree or disagree with the following statements:

R (1) The US government should not tax its citizens more than the bare minimum needed to maintain order and safety.

D (2) The national debt should be paid off primarily by raising taxes on the wealthy.

R (3) Taxes should never be raised under any circumstances.

D (4) In the long run, national budget deficits really do not matter.

R (5) No one is truly denied health care in the United States. If a person truly needs it, they can just go to the emergency room.

D (6) Basic healthcare is a human right that should be provided free of charge to all human beings.

R (7) Regardless of their personal circumstances, illegal immigrants are criminals and should be deported to their home country.

D (8) Complete amnesty should be offered to illegal immigrants who are willing to work and contribute to their community.

R (9) Abortion is an act of murder that results in the death of an unborn child.

D (10) Any restriction that mitigates a woman's access to an abortion is an infringement on a woman's right to do what she wishes with her body.

R (11) Same-sex marriage is a threat to the most essential social institution of any society, the natural family, and has the potential to lead to the acceptance of other types of immoral lifestyles, such as polygamy and bestiality.

D (12) Entitlement programs, such as Social Security and Medicare, must not be cut under any circumstance.

R (13) Any gun regulation or restriction is an infringement of the 2nd amendment.

D (14) The environment must be preserved at all costs, even if doing so harms the economy and drives up energy prices.

R (15) The government should not interfere with the private sector and let the free market determine wages, suitable working conditions, prices, et cetera.

D (16) The federal government has the Constitutional and moral authority to address economic injustices and poverty throughout the United States.

R (17) The US should always have the largest military in the world, so no one will consider attacking our country.

D (18) The United States should focus on nation-building at home and refrain from invading and occupying any other countries under any circumstance.

R (19) Welfare programs should not exist, because they reward laziness and provide an economic incentive for people to remain financially dependent.

D (20) Every worker should have the right and opportunity to join a union.

M (21) The deficit should be dealt through equal tax increases and spending cuts.

M (22) Both the Republican and Democratic Party have good and bad ideas about how to move our country forward.

M (23) A woman should have access to an abortion if the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest.

M (24) Our economy should be based upon a free market system, but the government needs to play a role as well.

M (25) America needs to deal with its immigration problem, but we are simply not going to deport millions of people and tear their families apart.

Section II: Read the hypothetical situation and select the political candidate that you would most likely vote for in an actual election.

You are an American voter that intends to vote in the upcoming midterm election. Your long-time Congressman has decided to retire from public office and five people have decided to run for the empty seat. After becoming knowledgeable with current issues and compiling information on where each candidate stands on the issues, you create a short summary of each aspiring politician. Now that all this work has been done, all you have to do is determine which political candidate you would want to go to Washington to represent your political beliefs and worldview. Following much deliberation, you decide to vote for:

Candidate #1: This aspiring politician believes that tax breaks for the wealthy, large amounts of government deregulation, unrestrained free trade, and cuts in entitlement programs are detrimental to the economy and to the United States as a whole. For example, this potential policymaker argues that all Americans who make more than \$250,000 annually should pay much more in taxes and that this following action would help greatly help the working poor and middle class. Also, the federal government has a moral obligation to fulfill the basic needs of Americans when they cannot do it themselves, such as healthcare, housing, and jobs. Although this person praises the idea of compromise on the campaign trail, he/she admits that it must not occur if it means betraying your principles. He/she is an unrelenting advocate for gay rights and a woman's access to abortion, regardless of the stage in the pregnancy and the circumstances. This political candidate argues that the United States should bring all of its troops home from

foreign countries and reallocate some of the military's budget to fund the nation's social safety net.

Candidate #2: This political candidate sees the free market as the primary mechanism of economic growth in the United States but also calls for the government to correct problems that are not addressed or solved by the 'invisible hand' of the capitalist system. Government cannot solve all people's problems, but it does have the competency and duty to focus on certain societal issues. This particular candidate would largely stick to the beliefs outlined in his/her political platform but would be willing to compromise on certain issues if equal concessions were made by the other political party. He/she is a strong supporter of gay marriage and views abortion as a medical procedure that should be "safe, rare, and legal." If elected to the Congressional seat, this individual would vote for the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and Iraq. However, the United States would still serve as an international leader in the world by collaborating with other nations.

Candidate #3: He/she is disgusted how both parties in Congress just seem to argue and are more concerned with what is the good for the party and not what is good for the American people. If elected, this aspiring politician would reach out to people on both sides of an issue and try to find some common ground. He/she does not understand how most elected officials in Washington would rather stick to an uncompromising principle than try to make a deal with someone you may not agree with on all issues. This Congressional candidate argues that capitalism is the best economic system in existence, but that the government should place smart regulations on certain economic activities to maintain economic stability. He/she contends that abortion should be legal, but there

should be many restrictions on this medical procedure, so it is only done when it is absolutely needed. While homosexuals should be able to get married and raise their own families, exceptions in future legislation need to be made to accommodate those who have religious objections to homosexuality. In the area of foreign policy, this political candidate believes that the United States has an integral and active role to play in the world. However, we should only invade or interfere with the actions of other countries when there is indisputable proof that doing so would be in our national interests.

Candidate #4: He/she believes that capitalism is the best economic model in the world and it thrives best when there is minimal governmental interference within the economy. The standard of living and prosperity improves the most under a system of competition and free markets, not a large government. To ensure a prosperous economy, both tax rates and government spending should be as low as possible. This particular candidate would largely stick to the beliefs outlined in his/her political platform but would be willing to compromise on certain issues if equal concessions were made by the other political party. He/she opposes gay marriage and is, instead, in favor of marriage only being between a man and a woman. However, he/she is open to the idea of homosexuals being able to form civil unions. Also, this aspiring politician opposes the practice of abortion except in cases of rape or incest. If elected to the Congressional seat, this person would support the war in Iraq and Afghanistan until military leaders felt that it was appropriate to leave these countries. The United States has a moral duty to serve as a leader in the international world and should always have the greatest military in the world.

Candidate #5: He/she argues that laissez faire capitalism is the best economic system that a society could adopt and that the smaller a government is in size and power, the more efficient and effective it will be. To ensure a prosperous economy, this Congressional candidate claims that the progressive tax system should be abolished and replaced with a flat tax of 9% for all income levels. Government only hinders economic growth with its actions, and job creators will not be able to grow their businesses as much when cumbersome regulations have to be met. Although this person praises the idea of compromise on the campaign trail, he/she admits that it must not occur if it means betraying your principles. He/she is a fierce opponent of gay marriage and abortion, arguing that same-sex marriage is in direct violation of the Judeo-Christian values that America was founded upon. Also, abortion is nothing more than murder and there are no situations whatsoever that constitute the ethical use of the termination of a pregnancy. This political contender says that the United States should always have the greatest military in the world and have the right to invade and occupy other countries if they pose a security threat to the American people.