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When I set out to write this paper, I wanted to include a few wisecracks about polarization; after all, there’s nothing wrong with making light of the way people’s opinions seem to collect at opposite ends of the spectrum. However, “Lord Google” failed me, yielding nothing but results that were either scientifically technical or too partisanly rude for mixed political company. Perhaps I was looking in the wrong places, but the fact that I kept finding polarized polarization jokes is pretty ironic. In the last ten years or so, political opinions have become divided along party lines, and those party lines have become firmly associated with particular regions and demographics. While such splits can be effective political tools, they also result in gridlock, incessant bickering, and alienation of moderates.

This paper is intended to examine the roots, causes, and potential solutions of what some might call “our broken system.” In so doing, I will first lay out the process of polarization, beginning in the 1930s with the start of the New Deal and continuing through the election reforms of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Then, with the help of campaign platforms, I will outline some recent developments in issue-based politics, focusing on education, the economy, and reproductive and marriage rights as points over which the two parties often contend. Finally, I will discuss a few potential solutions for congressional gridlock and the probability of their success.

According to Ken Burns’ recent documentary on the Roosevelt family, Franklin Roosevelt provided key changes to the American presidency.¹ He set up government programs in response to the Great Depression—some of them more effective than others—and consolidated power in the executive branch in a way that no president before him had done. Before the Depression, the prevailing attitude was that a person had to pull themselves up by the bootstraps

and make something of themselves, and that the condition of individual citizens was no concern of the government. FDR, on the other hand, was of the opinion that the federal government had a moral obligation to see to the wellbeing of all its citizens and structured programs like welfare, social security, and jobs programs with that agenda in mind.² There were, understandably, those who felt federal involvement was inappropriate and dangerous, and so the first seemingly unbreachable divide came into existence. This is not to say that moments of division were not visible at other moments in the history of both parties; the 1904 campaigns, for example, saw a notable difference in Republican and Democratic attitudes towards executive power.³ However, the inauguration of the New Deal is the first moment in which the approaches of the two parties appear diametrically opposed.

Further evidence of the new split comes from the 1932 campaign platforms. Roosevelt’s Democratic platform focused on the single issue of economic blight, promising federal aid to alleviate the worst conditions, as well the creation of federal jobs programs.⁴ The Hoover Platform, on the other hand, was not substantially different from the Republican platforms of the 1920s, except for the discussion of loans to support state and local charities, and mentions everything from foreign policy to balancing the government’s budgets. Of course, the fundamentals of what each party says are the same at the bottom—each claims to have the country’s best interests at heart and to be acting for the good of all concerned. However, one side favors increased federal control and more executive powers, while the other holds these expansions as “pre-totalitarian,” to quote the 1944 Republican platform. I would argue that the roots of the Liberal Democrat, Conservative Republican alignment emerge at this moment in

³ 1904 Democratic Platform. 1904 Republican Platform.
⁴ 1932 Democratic Platform.
history as well, given that the *laissez faire* form of government that the Republicans begin to demand in this period is, in fact, that which was practiced in the 1920s and which has its roots in the early 19th century, making it a conservative movement. This model for government continues to be promoted by many conservative politicians today, who still argue in favor of federal de-regulation.

The next period to consider in the formation of our polarized party system is the late 1960s and early 1970s, in which reforms in the candidate selection process combined with general cultural upheaval to create an issue-focused political climate. For most of U.S. history, candidates for president were selected at their party’s national convention by the professional politicians and bosses of their party. This system, known as the pragmatic party model, involved relatively little voter participation, but usually worked smoothly. However, in 1972, activists succeeded in establishing the primary system we have today, in which each state’s delegates are awarded based on the results of state-run mini-elections before the convention. The benefit, of course, was that voters had more of a say in the entire process, but the long-term result was a shift to the so-called “responsible party model,” driven by issues and activists rather than party machines, and it is this form of issue-focused politics that has led, by-and-large, to today’s divisions.

At the same time as the primary election reforms, the parties themselves were beginning to realign based on their reactions to specific issues. For example, the civil rights movement led to a mass exodus of southern voters, previously staunch Democrats, to the Republican party, and increased support for the Democratic Party among women and people of color. To this day, 90%

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of black voters support the Democrats, while Republicans enjoy a comfortable margin among white voters, particularly white males. These differences—called the race gap and the gender gap—can be represented by the 2012 election, in which Obama won 93% of the black vote, two-thirds of the Latino vote, but only 39% of the white vote.⁷

If the late 60s and early 70s were times of reform and realignment, that fact is not immediately evident in the political platforms of 1964, 1968, and 1972. Democrats and Republicans continued to disagree on the role of the federal government in the lives of its citizens, but neither had clearly realigned along the conservative-liberal lines that we all know so well. In fact, several measures put forward by the Republican platform of 1968 would be considered liberal in today’s spectrum, most notably those involving health care. Additionally, Republican platforms during this era continued to make appeals to non-white constituents, an element conspicuously absent in later platforms. However, both parties devote between five and ten pages—approximately a third of their platform agendas—to sling mud at the opposition. In contrast, the 1924 and 1932 platforms spend less than a page on criticizing their opponents, if any overt criticism is even offered. This rise in political sniping, I would argue, is evidence that a real divide was forming between the Republican and Democratic Parties, one based on more than opposing approaches; the importance placed upon one’s own system appears to have grown.

Having now discussed the recent history of political polarization in the United States, we can turn our attention to elections within the last fifteen years or so. Remember, again, that, while there was evidence of a forming divide between the two parties by 1972, they had not yet crystallized into the Liberal Democrat and Conservative Republican camps that we are so familiar with. By 2004, the parties had coalesced, but they were still not so dramatically split as

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they are today, at least to judge from their campaign platforms. While they were divided, as we are accustomed, on how to encourage a thriving economy, they actually seemed in accord on such issues as No Child Left Behind and expanding Medicare and Medicaid coverage. Reproductive health issues and marriage equality, contentious issues today, were not mentioned in the platforms, though Democrats professed to support stem cell research\textsuperscript{8} while Republicans expressed an ethical opposition to it.\textsuperscript{9} The split over the role of executive power remained as clearly defined as ever.

Oddly enough, not a great deal changed between the 2004 and 2012 platforms. The issue of the economy was still divisive—the questions of to whom we give tax cuts and how much to regulate Wall Street were, predictably, split along party lines, with Democrats supporting middle-class tax cuts and federal regulation of Wall Street and Republicans supporting the opposite.\textsuperscript{10} However, the discussion of marriage equality and reproductive rights was, by 2012, exactly what we are currently witnessing in the media coverage of the 2016 political proceedings. For instance, the 2012 Republican platform established marriage as a union between a man and a woman intended for the rearing of children, and applauded those states who formalized the ideas of the Defense of Marriage Act in their own regulations.\textsuperscript{11} In complete contrast, however, the Democratic platform declared that it respected a woman’s right to choose and that it supported the equality of marriage. The values, as well as the approaches, had therefore become diametrically opposed, with no space for moderates. One could be either for or against marriage equality, for or against tax cuts, and for or against abortion. There was no allowance for middle ground.

\textsuperscript{8} 2004 Democratic Platform.
\textsuperscript{9} 2004 Republican Platform.
\textsuperscript{10} 2012 Democratic Platform.
\textsuperscript{11} 2012 Republican Platform.
Now, four years after the 2012 platforms were published, we sit once again in an election year. In ten months, most—if not all—of us will cast our votes for the candidate that we want to see in the Oval Office for the next four years. As I follow my variety of news outlets, it seems to me that the polarization we have been discussing this evening has reached new heights, at least in terms of the viciousness of the mudslinging. Health care, gun control, reproductive rights, marriage... no matter what side a candidate is on, there will be some amount of unrestrained character assassination around their choices, with no moderation to be found. Of course, the issue is not that there are political differences; in fact, I think we have established by now that certain things have been disagreed upon for decades. The problem comes when various factions refuse to compromise, because compromise is what makes our system work. As we have seen in the last few years, unwillingness to resolve conflict has resulted in unfortunate gridlocks and a general lack of productivity in Washington.

So, how does one reform a chronically gridlocked system like the current Congress? John Jackson provides several solutions in his book, *The American Political Party System*, published in 2015. According to him, the most immediate and important solution is the abolition of the filibuster. According to the filibuster rule, an outnumbered minority can require that a measure receive sixty votes in order to be open for debate, thereby barring from the floor a bill that they do not want to be passed but cannot vote down. In the past, according to Jackson, the filibuster was a “rare and costly” political measure, to be used sparingly. However, in the last ten years or so, it has become a routine procedure when a vocal and strident minority simply wishes to stonewall debate. The 2013 shutdown over the debt ceiling is a noteworthy example of the

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practice.\textsuperscript{14} Since the filibuster is not a Constitutional provision, revision would require either 55 or 60 votes in the Senate in order to be approved\textsuperscript{15}—a tall order in the present climate, but not as difficult to achieve as a Constitutional amendment, which requires a two-thirds majority in the Senate and the House, as well as ratification by three-quarters of the states.

Jackson also advocates for the elimination of the midterm election, allowing congressional and presidential terms to coincide, and theoretically permitting both the legislative and executive branches to focus less on the constant cycle of re-election and more on making the sort of compromises necessary for the success of a democratic government.\textsuperscript{16} Furthermore, he also proposes that allowing primaries and caucuses to rotate on a regional basis—i.e. from Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Nevada in 2016 to Wisconsin, Massachusetts, Florida, and Arizona in 2020—would allow for a broader representation of opinion and reduce the ridiculous amounts of money spent on primary campaigns.\textsuperscript{17} While I’m not convinced that such a revision would curb campaign spending, the idea of a rotating primary does have its appeals and might serve to shake up the system.

In my opinion, each of these reforms is small enough to be effectively and universally implemented and all would have beneficial consequences for the system. However, I am skeptical of others’ willingness to agree to many of these changes. For instance, it is all very well to talk of banning the filibuster in favor of a simple majority, but if the minority filibusters the debate about banning filibusters, then it will all come to nothing. The elimination of the midterm election, however, is much more viable. A journalist in the 1920s once said that everything a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Jackson. \textit{The American Political Party System}. 203.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Jackson. \textit{The American Political Party System}. 203.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Jackson. \textit{The American Political Party System}. 204.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Jackson. \textit{The American Political Party System}. 207-211.
\end{itemize}
politician does is based on “his single and insatiable desire for a job,”18 a fact that has not changed much at all in the last ninety years. If the altruistic reason of bettering the country is not enough, then perhaps congressional delegates’ desire to maintain their offices for longer with less expenditure of campaign funds and energy will see to it that such a solution could be implemented. As for a rotating primary, I have no idea how such a practice could even be implemented, let alone how to get it done. However, it seems a great idea in theory.

 Regardless of one’s political alliances, it cannot be denied that our government is more polarized and less willing to compromise than at almost any other point in its history. The result of major political upheaval in the first half of the twentieth century, and intensely issue-based politics within the last thirty years, the present climate is almost certainly detrimental to our collective political future. Perhaps Abraham Lincoln, speaking in 1837, said it best when he declared that “as a nation of free men, we will live forever, or die by suicide.” While living forever is a purely romantic notion, Old Abe has a point. We will either compromise, sort out our differences, and carry on once again, as we have done repeatedly in the 230 years since the writing of our Constitution, or we will fall apart. This next presidential term, I think, will be critical in determining the future of the country.

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