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Political Polarization Over The Course Of The Last Fifty Years

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POLITICAL POLARIZATION OVER THE COURSE OF THE LAST FIFTY YEARS

By

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ABSTRACT

Why has political polarization increased? This capstone project will conduct research upon the severely increasing topic of polarization in parties and in the representation of the people and why this has happened. Specifically, I will examine polarization over the course of the last fifty years and what this says about our government and our representation. Political polarization can be defined as “the divergence of political attitudes to ideological extremes. Polarization is a situation in which two groups create each other through demarcation of the frontier between them. The dominant political frontier creates a point of identification and confrontation in the political system, where consensus is found only within the political camps themselves” (ECPS, 2020). With this being said, political polarization is a result of a heavily divided set of attitudes in regards to political issues, policies, etc. Due to the difference in attitudes and the set division, the mass polarization causes a threat to the nation.

Despite our representation being either Democratic or Republican, many individuals in today’s society obtain ideals that fall in the middle of these parties. Even though we do not operate solely on one side, the representatives citizens have voted for have become increasingly polarized over the years. Therefore, I will examine what this says about our representation. Through researching academic works on polarization over this specific period of time, I will demonstrate the importance of political polarization.

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BEGINNING OF CAPSTONE

Have you ever thought about how the way you view the world affects how you make choices? As political polarization continues to increase in our world, it is important to take the time to understand why and how this takes a toll on our world. Political polarization can be defined as the opposition of political opinions to the extent that opposition increases. The article, “Political Polarization,” published by the European Center for Populism Studies explains this issue. Emilia Palonen, a political scientist who specializes in polarization, states that since political polarization stems from the two-party system “it is a totalizing system, as it aims to dominate the existing systems of differences and identities. Similar logic can be found in other polarized contexts, such as those in the USA. The situation constitutes a problem for democracy insofar as democracy is seen as the articulation, combination and promotion of political values, demands and preferences that direct policies and seek to find a ground beyond the political elites, not mere regular elections” (ECPS, 2020).

Over the last fifty years, there has been an increased amount of polarization among representatives. Despite our representation being either Democratic or Republican, many individuals in today’s society obtain ideals that fall in the middle of these parties. Even though we do not operate solely on one side, the people citizens have voted for have become increasingly polarized over the years. However, this is not just an American issue, but rather a global one as well. In other words, political polarization is the distinct opinions one may have. Here, these individuals only look at topics or ideals through one point of view, theirs. These individuals are also not willing to negotiate.

Specifically, I will examine the lack of polarization in the people they are to represent. Due to the act of viewing the world in one's only point of view, it has a deep effect on the way our government operates along with laws created and enforced.

SIGNIFICANCE

To further explain, "this polarization is focused around not the science of the issue but perspectives on the policy instrument and the economic implications of the implementation of such an instrument" (Fisher, 2012). Due to this, there is a significant impact in regards to our government as well as representation of our people. This project is needed in order to explain how political polarization has an effect on us, as the mass population. Due to it increasing, candidates no longer represent individuals as a whole due to their one sided beliefs. It also has an effect on repression and equality as "repression alters group identities, changing the perceived distance between groups and ultimately shaping the level of affective and preference polarization between them through differentiation processes" (Nugent, 2020). Furthermore, polarization affects inequality as "two groups must agree to policy change; their preferences over the policy differ. The greater the differences between the two groups, and the greater the uncertainty about the other group, the larger are the gains to stubbornness, or continued disagreement about collective decisions" (Keefer, 2002).

Therefore, due to polarization increasing, we are no longer being represented to the full extent we should. Due to this, as political polarization also affects ideology, candidates are more likely to only vote for policies that align with their beliefs based on where they lie on the political spectrum and not the beliefs of the mass population.

BACKGROUND

In order to understand how political polarization has changed over the course of the last fifty years, we must first understand how the voting political parties in the United States vote, what their ideals are, etc. In the United States, we have two main voting parties: the Democratic and the Republican party. When an individual considers themselves Democratic, this individual believes in a system of government that is upheld by the people or citizens. In other words, the Democratic party rules by the majority and believes in equality in terms of rights. On the other hand, the Republican party believes that power in the United States is held by the representatives elected or the people.



This is an image that illustrates the differences between the Democratic and the Republican voting parties. PHOTO: THE BALANCE/ JULIE BANG

With this being said, both parties have certain characteristics that align with their specific party ideals. The democratic party is left-leaning, or liberal. On the other hand, the Republican party is conservative and right-leaning. Let's begin with the Democratic party and their views. Democrats have many economic ideas such as minimum wage and progressive taxation. In other words, progressive taxation is where individuals who are within higher income brackets are charged a higher tax rate. Moreover, Democrats are not in favor of an increased military budget. Rather, they believe that there should be a decrease in the amount of military spending in the United States. In terms of gay marriage, the Democratic party is in support of it. In terms of gay marriage, the Democratic party is in support of it. Along with gay marriage rights, Democrats are also in support of abortion, which is why Roe vs Wade was created. Furthermore, the Democratic Party is in support of healthcare that is universal and is in support of programs such as Medicare. Moreover, the Democratic party is also in favor of immigration.

On the other hand, the Republican Party is quite the opposite. The Republican party believes that there should not be an increase in the amount of taxes individual's pay, despite their amount of wealth or not. Moreover, they believe that wages should be set free. As a result, they do not believe in taxing the wealthy. Moreover, they believe in an increased amount of military spending in the United States. They are not in support of gay marriage and do not think the fundamental human right of abortions should be legal. In terms of healthcare, they believe that it is the responsibility of private companies to provide and are in opposition of healthcare systems like Obamacare. Lastly, the Republican party believes that undocumented immigrants are not welcomed in the United States and should indeed not be allowed in. Both, the Democratic and

The Republican party has significantly different ideals. As a result, it affects the way that polarization has changed.

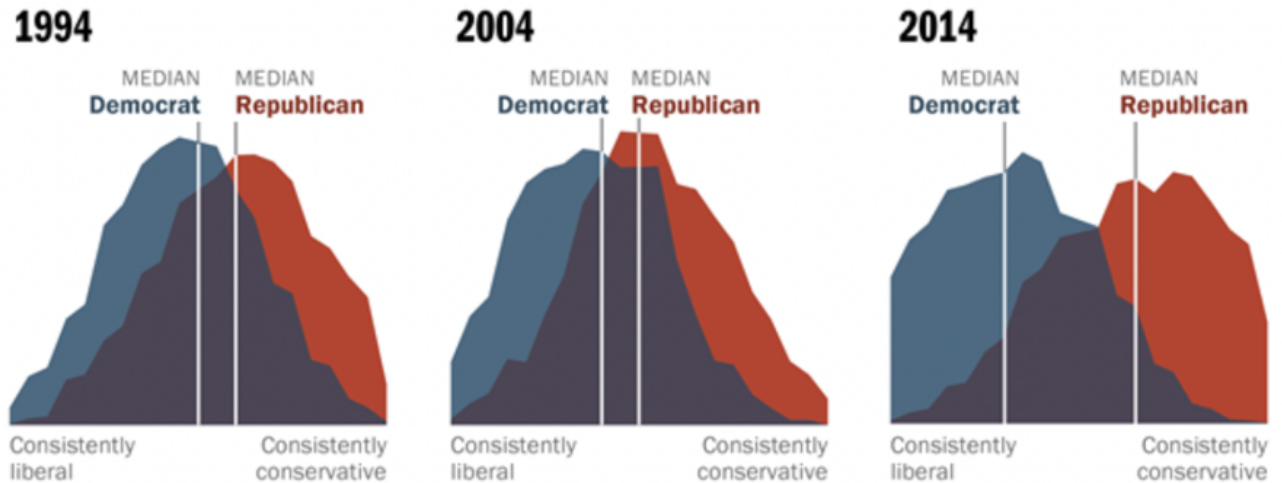
As Republicans and Democrats are divided up based on their ideologies, it has a significant impact on political life and decisions being made. According to a study conducted by Pew Research Center in 2014, Democrats as well as republicans have been ideologically divided in the past. According to the image below, it demonstrates the distribution of Democrats and Republicans on a 10-item scale of political values. In the study, the blue area illustrates the ideological distribution of Democrats, the red of Republicans, and lastly purple being the overlap of these two distributions.

The study conducted showed that over the last two decades, those who obtain conservative or liberal beliefs have indeed doubled. The number of these Americans demonstrated a shocking increase of ten percent to an overall twenty one percent. This conveys how, in the past, ideological thinking has corresponded to partisanship. Due to this, “today 92% of Republicans are to the right of the median Democrat, and 94% of Democrats are to the left of the median Republican” (Pew Research Center, 2014). Moreover, the research showed that there has been a doubled percentage, going from 10% to 21% simply over the last two decades.

PRIOR RESEARCH

Democrats and Republicans More Ideologically Divided than in the Past

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

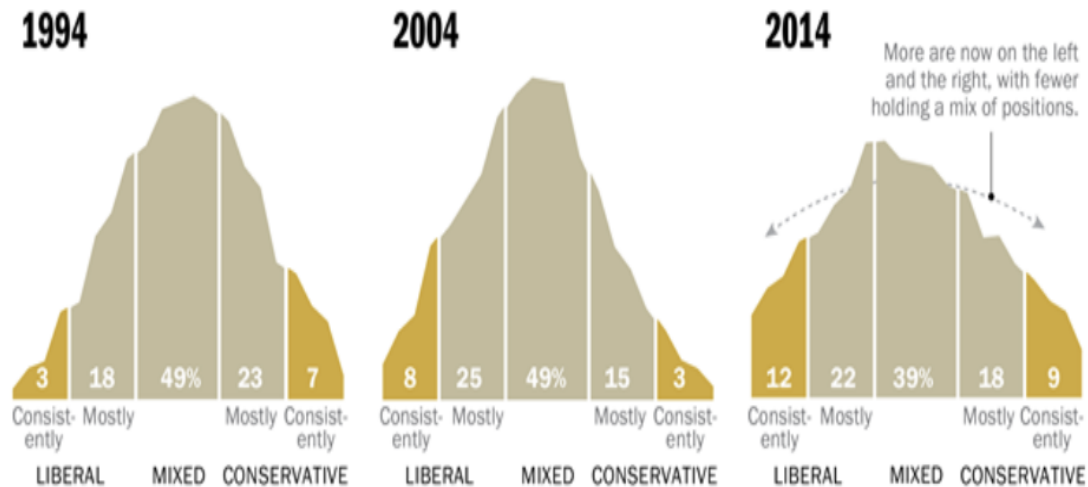


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Previously, Pew Research Center conducted research by creating a survey that identified political typology. The purpose of this was to explore the divide between the candidates who identify more on the left and the others who identify more on the right. It was a multi-part series based on 10,013 adults nationwide. The survey was conducted starting on January 23rd, 2014 to March 16th, 2014 by the Pew Research Center. This survey was more in a quiz form that asked individuals their opinions on political issues and our government system. There have been many different research studies conducted on the topic of political polarization. The graph above demonstrates “ the extent to which members of both parties have become more ideologically consistent and, as a result, further from one another. When responses to 10 questions are scaled together to create a measure of ideological consistency, the median (middle) Republican is now more conservative than nearly all Democrats (94%), and the median Democrat is more liberal than 92% of Republicans” (Pew Research Center, 2014).

Growing Minority Holds Consistent Ideological Views

On a 10-item scale of political values, % who are...



Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public

Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions. (See Appendix A for details on how the scale is constructed and how scores are grouped.)

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

According to the Pew Research Center, this table illustrates how “the ideological consolidation nationwide has happened on both the left and the right of the political spectrum, but the long-term shift among Democrats stands out as particularly noteworthy. The share of Democrats who are liberal on all or most value dimensions has nearly doubled from just 30% in 1994 to 56% today. The share who are *consistently* liberal has quadrupled from just 5% to 23% over the past 20 years” (Pew Research Center, 2014).

For example, data collected from a study that researched climate change in terms of political polarization stated that “there are rarely just two polar-opposite sides, but rather a spectrum of potential outcomes” (Fisher, 2012). Moreover, research has shown that, in terms of participation, “those who do not organize their political thinking in an ideological manner appear

to be turned on, not off, by today's ideologically charged environment" (Fisher, 2008.)

Therefore, polarization can be impacted through who votes, and simplify if they do or don't.

Research on this topic has been conducted in order to examine how and why political polarization occurs, and what effect political polarization has on issues we vote on as well as issues the president changes. The data of this survey showed that in 2012, "the partisan gap in opinions on more than 40 separate political values had nearly doubled over the previous quarter century" (Pew Research Center, 2014). The results of the survey found that political polarization has indeed increased over the last fifty years.

Moreover, Data has found that "today four-in ten- (38%) politically engaged democrats are consistent liberals, up from only 8% in 1994 and 20% in 2004. And the rise is also evident on the right: 33% of politically engaged Republicans are consistent conservatives, up from 23% in 1994, and just 10% in 2004" (Pew Research Center, 2014). Furthermore, "within both parties, 70% of the politically engaged now take positions that are mostly or consistently in line with the ideological bent of their party. By comparison, the equivalent positions were held by 58% of Republicans and 35% of Democrats in 1994 and 40% of Republicans and 59% of Democrats in 2004" (Pew Research Center, 2014).

WHY HAS POLARIZATION INCREASED?

There are many reasons that may explain why political polarization has increased over the last fifty years. Social media, economics, negative partisanship, and politicians themselves all explain why political polarization has increased.

Social Media:

The first reason I will discuss is social media and its effect on political polarization. As you know, social media has quite an influence on individuals. Through outlets such as Instagram, Tiktok, Facebook, Twitter, etc, these social media outlets can persuade individuals to believe certain political beliefs, which causes political polarization to increase. However, due to these many different social media outlets, misinformation is spread. According to Kubin and Sikorski, “rising political polarization is attributed to the fragmentation of news media and the spread of misinformation on social media” (Taylor & Francis, 2021). In the study that they conducted, they assessed how social media has shaped political polarization through the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The results of this study found that over the last ten years, pro-attitudinal media causes polarization to increase. This is due to the fact that “all experiments found that social media can further ideologically polarize people. Studies found that exposure to negative Tweets about candidates, uncivil Facebook comments, and counter-attitudinal Twitter posts, made people more ideologically polarized” (Taylor & Francis, 2021).

Moreover, another study found that “social media increases political polarization by creating online political echo chambers (i.e., exposing individuals to increasingly partisan and polarizing content over time due to selective exposure and fringe content sites). The number of Americans who consume highly polarized content online is dwarfed by the number who

consume more centrist media” (Science Direct, 2021). During this study, Americans were randomly assigned to deactivate their personal Facebook accounts for a short period of time. For four weeks prior to the 2018 United States election, individuals were not allowed to use this social media outlet. As a result, data found that by reducing the use of social media outlets, political polarization actually reduced the issue of policy preferences as by doing so, feelings about the opposing party were also reduced. Along with the use of social media outlets comes the issue of selective exposure. To further explain, as “media fragmentation and polarization create a situation where news users are confronted with an abundant choice of media outlets that have different ideological leanings, audiences may seek out media outlets that best fit their interests and preferences, thereby creating their own information cosmos tailored to their political predispositions and walling themselves off from any disagreement” (European Journal of Communication, 2021). As a result, selective exposure increases political polarization as individuals only tend to seek information from certain media outlets that align with their own personal beliefs. Due to this, these biased media outlets project misinformation and inhibit individuals from making unbiased and educated decisions in terms of their own political alignments.

As explained above, there is a divide between Republicans and Democrats in terms of political alignments and ideals. According to a study conducted, research proved that “social media sites exacerbate political polarization by creating “echo chambers” that prevent people from being exposed to information that contradicts their preexisting beliefs” (PNAS, 2018). Through this field study, a large group of Democrats as well as numerous Republicans were offered “financial compensation to follow bots that retweeted messages by elected officials and opinion leaders with opposing political views. Republican participants expressed substantially

more conservative views after following a liberal Twitter bot, whereas Democrats' attitudes became slightly more liberal after following a conservative Twitter bot" (PNAS, 2018). Specifically in the 2020 United States election, data has shown that the divide between Republicans and Democrats has actually increased during this time period. Here, "respondents were first asked if they heard of the source, then if so, whether they trust or distrust it for political and election news and whether they got political and election news there in the past week. The two examples below show one outlet (CBS News) that is heard of by the vast majority of U.S. adults and is also trusted by far more people than distrusted, and another outlet (Politico) that has been heard of by far fewer adults (44%) but is still trusted by more people than distrusted, even though just 13% of the public expresses trust" (Pew Research Center, 2020). Moreover, there are multiple media outlets, such as Fox News and CNN, that aids the increase of political polarization. For example, data proved that "about two-thirds (65%) of Republicans and Republican leaners say they trust Fox News as a source. Additionally, 60% say they got political or election news there in the past week. Among Democrats and Democratic leaners, CNN (67%) is about as trusted a source of information as Fox News is among Republicans. The cable network is also Democrats' most commonly turned to source for political and election news, with about half (53%) saying they got news there in the past week" (Pew Research Center, 2020). Due to the divide among different political ideals and different media outlets, individuals believe what they see from these outlets rather than exploring other options. As a result, this causes political polarization to increase.

Economics:

Economics also helps offer an explanation as to why political polarization has increased. Due to the different income inequalities, political polarization has increased. There are many factors that explain political attitudes towards social justice as explained by the PMC. These factors include homosexuality, prostitution, abortion, divorce, euthanasia, and suicide. Using these six variables, four of them represented the economic division that causes an increase in political polarization. This is due to the fact that it judged an individual's political attitudes towards social justice and democracy. Through these divides, polarization increased. Moreover, income inequality also plays a role in the increase of political polarization. The study proved that “the connection between income inequality and political polarization globally chimed with the general argument that the widening gap between the richest and poorest is closely tied to the emergence of polarization. Income inequality is growing rapidly and constitutes an important catalyst in driving political divisions” (PMC, 2022). Furthermore, income inequality causes harmful and detrimental consequences to economic growth and sustainable development. For example, the increase of income discrimination has damaging effects that include but are not limited to higher crime rates, terrorist acts, aggravated health conditions, limited access to education, continued social discrimination, and growing discontent among the working classes. However, these are not the only issues associated with income inequalities. The divide among income inequalities also has an effect on polarization and politics. This is due to the fact that “growing inequality could undermine social mobility, induce violent conflicts and generate political tensions. The “vicious cycle of poverty” and rising income inequality constitute an important cause of political polarization that threatens to divide and even destabilize a nation” (PMC, 2022). As political polarization refers to “the vast and growing gap of political attitudes

and identities among the public that undermine the pursuit of a common good, it is compounded by the rise of ideologically divided masses and radical political parties” (PMC, 2022). The study proved that “in recent decades, political polarization has intensified globally and has been a disruptive force in societies across the world due to factors such as the changes in socio-demographic cleavages, the suffering of economic hardship, the rise of identity politics, the design of political institutions, and the essential role of social media in shaping people’s ideologies” (PMC, 2022). With this being said, economics is also responsible for the increase of political polarization. However, it is not solely responsible as all of the factors listed above contribute to the increase

Negative Partisanship and Politicians:

Negative partisanship can also explain the increase of political polarization. Negative partisanship is “partisan behavior driven not by positive feelings towards the party you support but negative feelings towards the party you oppose” (Zakaria, CNN). After a study conducted, data proved that a 2016 Pew poll found that self-described independents who tended to vote for one party or the other were driven more by negative motivations. Majorities of both Republican and Democratic-leaning independents said a major reason for their lean was the other party’s policies were bad for the country” (Zakaria, CNN). This goes hand in hand with politicians themselves. According to data found “Republican elected officials have moved more to the right than Democratic officials have to the left. Democratic voters have shifted more to the left than Republican voters have to the right. 25% of Democrats thought of themselves as liberal and the same share—25%—called themselves conservative. A strong plurality of Democrats—48%—identified as moderate. By 2022, the second year of Joe Biden’s presidency,

the picture had entirely changed. An outright majority of Democrats—54%—now called themselves liberal, while the share of conservatives fell to just 10%. Moderates, who once outnumbered the party’s liberals by 23 percentage points, now trailed them by 18 points. In 1994, 58% of Republicans were conservative, a figure that rose to 72% in 2022” (Brookings, 2023). This data has proved that political polarization has been an issue for many years, with a surprising increase. With this being said, the way that politicians align with their beliefs causes individuals to do the same. When an individual is against one belief, negative partisanship comes into play, causing a political divide. Politicians aid this process as well, only increasing political polarization.

RESULTS

Over the past four decades, political polarization has increased. The ideological gap between both parties: the Democratic and Republican, has caused lack in representation and continuous conflict between both parties. According to the article, “American Politics Has Reached Peak Polarization” it was explained that “in order for congressional polarization to persist, both parties have to maintain tight enough discipline over their members and the political agenda to ensure consistent party voting. And in order for public polarization to persist, parties have to maintain tight enough message discipline among their elites to ensure that their voters only hear one main message” (VOX, 2016). Moreover, the increased polarization in 2016 caused conflict between both political party representatives. Trump and Biden supporters were rioting with one another as a result of the increase in political polarization.

As a result, when political polarization was not at an increase, political parties were less diverse as can be seen above. Due to this, power was delegated to these party leaders through Congress as everyone was in agreement with one another. However, due to being in agreement

and the lack of political polarization being present, it lacked efficiency as “after all, how can a party wage an effective campaign after supporting or collaborating with its opposition on public policy? Instead, parties in a competitive environment will want to amplify the differences voters perceive between themselves and their opposition. They will continually strive to give voters an answer to the key question: "Why should you support us instead of them?" Even when the parties do not disagree in substantive terms, they still have political motivations to actively seek and find reasons to oppose one another" (Vox, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Despite our representation being either Democratic or Republican, many individuals in today’s society obtain ideals that fall in the middle of these parties. Even though we do not operate solely on one side, the representatives citizens have voted for have become increasingly polarized over the last fifty years. Based on the research and data, it is prominent that political polarization has increased. Moreover, this paper also analyzed why political polarization obtains such significance, the results of political ideologies on political polarization, voter turnout, the effect on our representation, as well as our government implementing the laws that we do.

Political polarization has many benefits that come along with it. However, the largest reason that political polarization is significant is due to the amount of participation it brings. Moreover, it also allows for issues to be given the proper attention needed. Political polarization causes political issues and ideals to obtain a larger amount of significance. According to the article, “The Positives of Political Polarization” published by the Berkeley Political Review, it explained that “divisions have made political stances more important, so voters are encouraged to think about where they stand on these issues and express these views to combat a perceived lack of government action. More people are engaging in politics in some form. Almost one

quarter of Americans have contacted an elected official in the last year alone. By drawing more people into the political fold, polarization has vastly increased Americans' investment in election results, and thus increased the engagement that is so crucial to democracy" (Berkeley Political Review, 2023).

Moreover, political polarization affects political engagement as well. According to the article, "Turned Off or Turned On? How Polarization Affects Political Engagement," Marc J. Hetherington explains that political polarization actually affects voter turnout, our representatives, and the way policies are implemented. Hetherington states, "when a presidential election can be decided by 537 votes, as it was in 2000, more people ought to feel that their votes make a difference. Yet despite all the worry about turnout, voters have actually begun to participate more, not less, as political elites have polarized" (Brookings Institution Press, 2008).

According to Hetherington, this figure compares the traditional measure of turnout as "(the percentage of the voting-age population [VAP]) and an adjusted measure of turnout (the percent- age of the voting-eligible population [VEP]). The VAP decreased in nearly every election between 1960, when turnout reached 63 percent, and 1996, when it dropped below 50 percent. The only exceptions were a slight increase in 1984 and a bigger one in 1992. The general pattern of turnout decay coincided with a time when the parties at the elite level were uncommonly close ideologically. In 1976 presidential candidates Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter were very difficult to differentiate, and measures of congressional polarization (such as Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal's DW-nominate scores) show that the parties' ideological differences in the early 1970s represented the minimum in the twentieth century. Since 1996, as the parties have become increasingly polarized, VAP-based turnout has increased" (Brookings

Institution Press, 2008). In conclusion, political polarization has been prominently increasing over the last fifty years and along with it comes the effect on our representation and government.

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