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UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY
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MADN-SOC
MEMORANDUM FOR: SCUSA 73
SUBJECT: The American Model of Democracy

05 November 2022

1. **Purpose.** Political polarization, defined as the divergence of political attitudes towards ideological extremes, is eroding American democracy and the United States' position on the global stage.¹ This memorandum explores the impacts of polarization in the United States and offers recommendations to strengthen democratic institutions.

2. **Causes and Consequences of Polarization.**

a. Ideology becoming Identity. Political ideology has become a component of personal identity — akin to gender, sexuality, or race.² This shift has led to greater division and an unwillingness to compromise. Politicians and special interests exploit these identities to excite supporters, which exacerbate partisan divisions and fuels “zero-sum game” political rhetoric.

b. Media. The profit model that broadcast and social media companies use incentivizes sensationalization of politics, encourages the creation of media echo chambers, and desensitizes consumers to radical ideas. This model increases divisive media content that radicalizes consumers and demonizes opposing beliefs, polarizing the American polity. The widespread lack of media literacy among consumers leaves them vulnerable to radicalization by partisan media. This dearth of media literacy results in consumers who are unable to differentiate between partisan, divisive media and unbiased media sources. Scant accountability of social media companies allows them to manipulate content, resulting in bolstered and silenced speech as well as the creation of echo chambers.

c. American Political Structure. Existing political structure contributes to multiple troubling trends for democracy in the United States. As of January 2022, 46% of Americans identify as independent, a group whose views are not always captured by closed and partially closed primary elections.³ Closed primaries drive elections based on ideology as opposed to bringing the electorate together, intensifying polarization.⁴ Moreover, politicians at the poles of the political spectrum have more success in closed primary elections. Through recent years, voters have become more partisan and polarized. Only 32% of Americans feel pride in the American political system.

3. **Policy Recommendations.**

a. Introduce Early Civic Education to facilitate openness and understanding. A fifth-grade civic curriculum, incentivized by federal subsidies, is a strategy to encourage open and educational conversations about toleration, current events, and the rights and duties of citizenship at the local, state, and national level.

b. Establish Forums for Constructive Discourse to foster productive dialogue. The U.S. federal government could create and promote a social media app designed to produce constructive conversation about political issues. This has been effective in Taiwan, gaining popularity within a society that is deeply polarized.⁵ Algorithms on this

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platform would promote consensus over outrage. The platform could be advertised as a chance to gain government attention on hot-button issues. Furthermore, the federal government, in partnership with state and local governments and NGOs, could promote deliberative democracy forums at the local level.⁶ This initiative would bring people together to discuss local issues and combat political polarization.

c. FCC Fairness Doctrine Reform to allocate funding to media sources that meet viewership criteria and abide by the outlined regulations.⁷

d. Transform C-SPAN with increased funding to make non-partisan media more accessible, competitive, and attractive to younger consumers.

e. Reform the Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy Act to allocate funding that incentivizes private secondary schools to adopt the same curriculum proposed for public schools.⁸

f. Create a non-partisan “Commission for Algorithm Transparency” (CAT) that performs annual audits on social media companies’ algorithms to ensure compliance with the FCC Fairness Doctrine and publishes a public report on the results of the audit and the perceived intents and results of these algorithms.

h. The New Help America Vote Act of 2024 (NHAVA). Based on the 2002 of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), this act would create open primary elections for the presidency and Congress, reduce political polarization, and improve voting efficiency. Through the adoption of Nonpartisan Blanket Primaries, four candidates could move on from primary elections, which could foster the development of a multiple party system and allow all registered voters to vote for any candidate, regardless of political affiliation and without identification of political faith. Most importantly, the NHAVA would recognize the first Tuesday after the first Monday in July as “National Primary Voting Day” and encourage more Americans to use their Constitutional right to register to vote.

4. Implementation. These recommendations aim to strengthen our democratic institutions. Each requires specific resources – including collaboration between the private sector and the federal government, and support of Congress and the public – to become a reality. Every sector of society has a role to play in stabilizing American democracy.

5. The point of contact for this memorandum is CDT Seth P. Benson, seth.benson@westpoint.edu or (701) 936-5103.

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Endnotes:

¹ "Political Polarization - ECPS," accessed November 5, 2022, <https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/political-polarization/>; "Political Polarization in the American Public | Pew Research Center," accessed November 5, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>.

² "The Political Divide in America Goes Beyond Polarization and Tribalism," Kellogg Insight, October 29, 2020, <https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/political-divide-america-beyond-polarization-tribalism-secularism>.

³ Gallup Inc, "Party Affiliation," Gallup.com, September 20, 2007, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/15370/Party-Affiliation.aspx>.

⁴ Christian R. Grose, "Reducing Legislative Polarization: Top-Two and Open Primaries Are Associated with More Moderate Legislators," *Journal of Political Institutions and Political Economy* 1, no. 2 (2020): 267–87, <https://doi.org/10.1561/113.00000012>.

⁵ "How Taiwan's 'civic Hackers' Helped Find a New Way to Run the Country | Technology | The Guardian," accessed November 5, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/27/taiwan-civic-hackers-polis-consensus-social-media-platform>; "Inside Taiwan's New Digital Democracy | The Economist," accessed November 5, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/open-future/2019/03/12/inside-taiwans-new-digital-democracy>.

⁶ Selene Swanson, "By the People: The Role of Local Deliberative Forums in Combating Affective Political Polarization" (Project on International Peace and Security, 2021).

⁷ "Fairness Doctrine | History, Provisions, Repeal, & Facts | Britannica," accessed November 5, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fairness-Doctrine>.

⁸ "Text - H.R.4668 - 116th Congress (2019-2020): Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy Act | Congress.Gov | Library of Congress," accessed November 5, 2022, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/4668/text>.