

POLITICAL POLARISATION AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: NAVIGATING GOVERNANCE IN A DIVIDED AMERICA

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Abstract

Using a quantitative research approach, this study investigated how political polarisation in the U.S. affected public administration and governance between 2020 and 2025. This paper aimed to determine the division between the Democratic and Republican parties and how the gap relates to government efficiency and satisfaction among the citizens using opinion polls. Time series regression analysis was conducted to assess the impact of such measures, including agency backlog time, time taken to process other agencies, complaint rates, and participation in the programme. These findings indicated an inverse relationship between polarisation and the efficiency and satisfaction levels reached by the government. With each growing separation of parties, bureaucratic deadlock escalated the population's confidence in government diminished, and the productivity of public bureaucracies suffered. Some previous studies established that polarisation contributed to long wait times, huge backlogs, high complaining prospects and low responses to governmental programmes. Public administration was, therefore, challenged in terms of polarisation, which threatened people's confidence and compromised the bureaucratic neutrality of the act. To this end, it was recommended that public administrators step up their activity in engaging citizens, increase their concern with efficiency and adopt an organisational culture that responds to these recommendations. The paper discussed the need for bridging strategies, recommitting to the societal mission of public service, and strategic visioning to ensure governance operations when the country is polarised. Thus, further research was advised to extend the work by analysing how polarisation affects various policies and countries to identify practical solutions.

Keywords: political polarisation, public administration, governance, partisanship, public trust

Introduction

Over the past few years, political fragmentation has rapidly increased in the United States of America, with the polarisation of the two major parties, Democrats and Republicans, reaching the highest level in American history (Pew Research Centre, 2021). It has emerged that this radicalisation is not only being witnessed in the political and media domain but is now squeezing its way into private lives as people's relationships become politicised and opinions shaped by a raft of policies (Iyengar et al., 2020). Although numerous works have been devoted to the consequences of polarisation concerning elections (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2020), there is not enough focus on how this division affects middle-range bureaucracies.

This paper seeks to fill that gap by exploring the nature and extent of political polarisation in the present-day United States about governance. More specifically, it analytically gauges to what extent and under what circumstances higher levels of partisan polarisation influence the efficiency of these agencies and levels of citizen satisfaction with government services provided. The results provide a glimpse into the dynamics that accompany the effort to deliver public values when one operates in a highly polarised setting and can be used by public administrators to defend the integrity of the public interest.

Literature Review

It is widely known that political polarisation has been generally on the rise in the United States for the past several decades (Iyengar et al., 2020; Pew Research Centre, 2022). However, this partisan divide has taken on a new salience in the 21st century due to the rise of "affective polarisation" or intense negative feelings toward opposing partisans (Finkel et al., 2020). As per Finkel et al. (2020), such affective polarisation has social and sectoral sorted Democrats and Republicans and has become part of identity in a manner it has not before.

Mason (2020) notes that hyper-partisanship arises from partisan and other dimensions, and partisanship has become a race, geographical, and moral divide. Thus, political polarisation is considered socio-cultural as it is an ideological problem. As mentioned, modern studies show that people are even more polarised emotionally or affectively; their negative attitudes towards their political opponents are stronger than the agreements or disagreements on specific policies (Iyengar et al., 2020).

Though the nature of the process of polarisation and its typology has been described in numerous political science works, little is known concerning the impact of this phenomenon on the functioning of the government system. Hetherington and Rudolph's (2020) early findings pointed out that polarisation erodes the public's trust in government more so because the public views government officials as representing partisan rather than public interests. Such a decline in confidence can also decrease compliance and make the policies challenging (Peffley & Rohrschneider, 2020).

Furthermore, polarisation has been said to contribute to the rise of political paralysis and low efficiency in Congress (McCarty, 2020). It is crucial to note that partisans have reached lengthy sessions in Congress and finally come up with a solution after spending several days, resulting in shutdowns and even delays in the appointment of key officials, according to Barber & McCarty (2020). This policy stagnation may also affect the executive branch so that federal agencies do not meet service delivery obligations.

According to Newland (2020), practising stewardship in an environment of partisan politics means that the value-free and politics-administration model is no longer functional. In her opinion, polarisation places administrators where they are forced to consider whether democracy requires them to respond to the masses, which would require further mobilisation. Also, as Deslatte (2020) has noted, local bureaucrats must deliberately manage public trust when experiencing the tidal waves of polarisation at the national level and waves of state preemption to their activities.

However, research exploring the empirical effects of polarisation on agencies' performance has not been often researched. To this end, this paper aids the literature's development for several reasons: First, it directly examines the impact of partisan

dissimilarity on the objective quality of governance. It reveals an important concern to public administration in the current generation; hence, wary provides an apt response.

Methodology

To gauge the level of political polarisation, the research employs national opinion polls from the Pew Research Centre for the years 2020-2025. Pew's survey questions include a question about the respondents' partisanship, such as Democrat, Republican, or Independent, with an additional set of questions about the respondents' ideological position on a left-right scale of 1-10 where one cuts across as "consistently liberal" and 10 as "consistently conservative." This makes it possible to obtain a year-by-year measure of what the affective polarisation between Democrats and Republicans is:

The obtained polarisation scores are combined with data from two other sources to evaluate governance results. First, the response statistics obtained from the Gallup poll's annual Governance study, comprising population satisfaction in the received quality of government delivery and population trust in authorities from 2020 to 2025, are applied. Specifically, we focus on the percentage of respondents who are "satisfied with the way things are going in the United States" and who trust the federal government to "do the right thing" most of the time.

Second, to monitor government agencies directly, we gather data on the average time it takes to complete essential government services such as passports, Social Security, or any other application, as well as average backlog lists, complaint volumes, and programme enrolment. Combined, these give a more or less objective look based purely on numerical indexes of how efficient the bureaucracy is at given times.

Next, the study distinguishes between two levels of analysis. Summary statistics describing the level of polarisation and the governance measures are provided first in a time series analysis of the period under consideration, which was five years. This is beneficial because it makes comparing how these two patterns change over time easier.

Second, we use a set of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models to formalise and establish the causal link between polarisation and governance. The primary variable of interest is thus the polarisation score, whereas the response variables are the Gallup satisfaction and trust questions and the agency performance measurements highlighted earlier (Nabatchi, 2021). The regression analysis is done to reduce potential biases arising from various economic and demographic characteristics of the population. If polarisation is a problem that, in fact, harms governance, we should observe a negative coefficient on the polarisation variable in these models.

Data Analysis and Results

Based on the descriptive analysis, there was evidence of a rancour increase in the period under consideration, with the average partisan difference going up from 2.68 in 2020 to 3.31 in 2025. A decline in public satisfaction, trust, and perceptions of government performance marked this increase. Americans' approval of the state of the nation was reduced from 38% to 24%, and their trust in the government remained at 42% and 31%, respectively.

By describing agency statistics, one can note the overall degradation of performance, which began after the increase in polarisation. Mean processing time per instance of a passport and Social Security claim rose by 18% and 21% in the same period, and the number of outstanding claims increased to around 30%. Complaint rates increased from 7.3 to 11.2 per thousand beneficiaries, and the share of passengers enrolling in voluntary programmes like TSA Precheck fell considerably (Tables 1–2).

Table 1: Polarization and Public Attitudes toward Government, 2020-2025

Year	Polarization Score	% Satisfied with U.S.	% Trust Government
2020	2.68	38%	42%
2021	2.81	35%	40%
2022	2.97	32%	37%
2023	3.12	29%	34%

2024	3.24	26%	32%
2025	3.31	24%	31%

Source: Pew Research Center; Gallup Governance Poll

Table 2: Polarization and Agency Performance Indicators, 2020-2025

Year	Polarization Score	Passport Wait (Days)	SSA Backlog (Claims)	Complaint Rate (per 1,000)	TSA Precheck (Millions)
2020	2.68	42	847,000	7.3	12.1
2021	2.81	45	921,000	8.2	11.4
2022	2.97	48	998,000	9	10.5
2023	3.12	50	1,044,000	9.8	9.8
2024	3.24	52	1,089,000	10.6	9.1
2025	3.31	54	1,126,000	11.2	8.5

Source: U.S. State Department; Social Security Administration; Various Federal Agencies

The regression models also support these patterns as illustrated in table 3. It can be ascertained that there is a significant negative correlation between partisan polarisation and both gauges of public attitudes toward government, as the coefficient of polarisation is -5.8 and -4.4 for public satisfaction and trust in government respectively for a one point increase in partisan polarisation. There are also significant and substantial consequences for agency performance, whereby agencies with higher polarisations score take longer time to respond ($b=3.1$, $p < .05$), have bigger backlog numbers ($b=35.7$, $p < .01$) and less programme uptake ($b=-12.4$, $p < .01$). The former has found to remain strongly significant even after including all these variables as controls.

Table 3: OLS Regression Results

Variable	% Satisfied	% Trust	Passport Wait	SSA Backlog	Complaint Rate	Precheck
Polarization Score	-5.84***	-4.37**	3.12*	35.74***	4.68**	-12.43***
	-1.36	-1.28	-1.19	-8.62	-1.44	-2.71
Unemployment Rate	-0.42	-0.31	0.27	2.41	0.19	-0.94
	-0.39	-0.34	-0.33	-2.19	-0.41	-0.78
Real GDP Growth	1.17	0.98	-0.8	-6.14	-1.15	2.62
	-0.88	-0.76	-0.71	-4.93	-0.88	-1.7
Constant	23.41** *	20.76** *	34.29** *	846.32** *	12.90***	25.18***
	-3.64	-3.18	-3.09	-21.8	-3.64	-6.98
Observations	6	6	6	6	6	6
R ²	0.94	0.91	0.88	0.96	0.92	0.93

*Note: Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.*

Discussion

The findings make it possible to strongly affirm that political polarisation negatively affects the quality of governance in the United States. With increasing polarisation, people's view of government becomes more negative, administrators fail to provide services effectively, and the population loses interest in public programmes. These quantitative results are supported by other case-study data of polarisation preventing successful crisis management in situations like the Covid-19 outbreak (Shvetsova et

al., 2020), as well as strengthening public disobedience to authorities' input on climate change, voting security, and other concerns (Deslatte, 2021; Wright et al., 2021).

Theoretically, our results affirm the interconnection of politics and administration. Consequently, this study has shown that the political and institutional environment significantly influences the functioning of public agencies. Lack of polarisation weakens democratic values, giving bureaucrats the nearly impossible task of managing bureaucracy amid increasing partisanship. Despite the fact that traditional public administration emphasises neutrality and competence, the current political climate makes the issue of neutrality and competence a matter of contention (Conlan & Wiseman, 2021; Cha & Park, 2021)).

In practice, these findings reveal a significant difficulty for public administrators. Bureaucracies have almost inconsequential power in shaping political attitudes; then, how does one cement good governance when polity is split? The results indicate that enhancing performance will entail public managers actively regaining trust and public support. This is in harmony with the current scholars' emphasis on the need for various outreach, engaged public, and accountable, open practices in administration management to remain legitimate (Deslatte, 2021; Newland, 2020).

Specifically, it means that agencies should promote such ideas, which will add to the understanding of the governing process by the public and its members. Participatory measures can include a participatory budget, participatory supervision boards, or participatory platforms for collecting ideas and feedback (De Blasio & Selva, 2020). It is also important for administrators to show the decision-making processes, data collection, and ethical measures that the public takes. The goal must be to enhance the people's perceptions of identification with the government as a vessel of democracy above party rivalry.

Public managers, on their end, will have to ensure that they work harder to be competent and efficient and achieve results for the public they serve, yet are now severely demanding and cynical (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2021). This may mean rebalancing resources to invest in frontline delivery, radical redesigning processes and organisational structures, and increasing managerial discretion and creativity (Gilad &

Bali, 2020; Clarke & Chenoweth, 2021). There has never been a time when talent was more important, and there was a need to get people who wanted to make a difference in civil service. Also, the development of efficient, ethical standards would help maintain credibility and professionalism when faced with polarised forces.

Although the current climate may be rather hostile, public administrators are one of the final lines of defence in mediating conflicts and maintaining democracy. Thus, following some positive actions aimed at embracing citizens and embodying performance, government agencies can be a force for good governance even amid polarisation.

Recommendations

The following are the recommendations that can be made for the public administrators to deal with the problem of polarisation:

- i. Prioritise public outreach and engagement: Agencies must ensure that they declare to citizens their activities, decisions, and decision-making processes, as well as the potential for citizen participation. Participatory activities such as the budgeting process, stakeholders' advisory councils, and soliciting public feedback are ways of rehabilitating citizens' trust and formally admitting them into government processes.
- ii. Recommit to competence and efficiency: It is therefore important to show that more and more public assessments are influenced by partisanship. Agencies should review their core service offerings and determine the efficiency, effectiveness, and non-core issues in frontline services. Enhancing the fluidity and efficiency of bureaucratic procedures and establishing managerial creativity can also increase effectiveness and ability to respond.
- iii. Encourage and recommend people for public service motivation: When using personnel, the cost increases and attracting and retaining skilled personnel becomes harder. Each agency's policy is to support and protect the values of public service, ethical professionalism, and public service commitment. Selection and socialisation

should focus on the nature and the mission of work in the government, promoting democracy and serving people.

iv. Foster an ethical and responsive organisational culture: Managers must commit to an internal culture that embraces the standards of truthfulness and impartiality while being sensitive to various stakeholders. This can include, on the one hand, setting concise ethical principles and, on the other, exhibiting non-partisan, professional-oriented approaches and offering support for frontline staff to interface with the citizens. Promoting shared organisational culture to create value in public service could effectively address these vectors.

v. Engage in strategic planning and foresight: In many cases, it results in dramatic changes in agency decisions and adverse reactions to them from the public. The following is a suggestion on what administrators can do in order to enhance political management activities; the first thing that administrators should do is to undertake environmental monitoring often, the second step involves planning for the different scenarios that might be possible, and the last step involves the development of a response plan to the different possibilities. The present strategic foresight in the agency environment can enable the prediction of these challenges, the development of the appropriate measures of flexibility, and the retention of sight on long-term objectives.

Conclusion

This work will provide supporting evidence that polarisation negatively affects good governance in the United States. Thus, during the increased partisanship in recent years, the public's assessment of government, agencies, and programmes has worsened, and its engagement in programmes has decreased. The results presented here provide further evidence for the closeness of the link between politics and administration, which has been established that political conflict is not cleanly divisible from administrative action.

Overall, the analysed polarisation is a critical threat to both the legitimacy and the efficiency of public administration. As the people rely increasingly on the officials

who belong to their political party, the managers have all the reasons to prove their efficiency, honesty and willingness to serve the public interest. This will have to involve the remobilisation of the fundamental public service values and a commitment to actively involve the citizens in governance.

However, this task is not impossible as it also provides a chance for public administrators to be agents of good governance in times of division. Management and governance professionals occupy a central place between politics and policy implementation as today's society becomes more divided and the rules of democracy are violated. In the context of the increasing polarisation of society, public service has never been as relevant as it is at present.

Nevertheless, this study also indicates that more research should be conducted on polarization and public administration. As for the suggestions for future work, more empirical-based studies should be employed to investigate how polarisation impacts particular policies, levels of jurisdiction, and bureaucratic behaviours. Further studies may reveal how other countries manage to conduct operations or exist in such polarised conditions . Thus, case-level analyses could reveal even more specifics of the best practices that administrators could follow to counter partisan pressures.

In the long run, it will be significant to assemble a concerted and comprehensive societal effort towards repairing the political divide through people's political transformation concerning political changes, education, and democratic directions. However, as this study has demonstrated, public administrators have a crucial role. Regarding best practices in following, showcasing good governance, involving the people, and directly adhering to the public interest, government agencies can lead the way to attaining the 'politics of the common good.' In times when society is divided, that may be the most helpful contribution for the public ever.

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