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COLORADO POLITICAL SCIENCE REVIEW

About the Colorado Political Science Review

The Colorado Political Science Review (CPSR) is a student-written and student-edited journal bringing political science perspectives to important issues of the day. The opinions and perspectives in the *CPSR* are those of the individual authors. We seek to generate thoughtful discussion and analysis rooted in social science theory and supported by research and data. The *CPSR* is housed in the Political Science Department at the University of Colorado Boulder and is supported by the American Politics Research Lab and the LeRoy Keller Center for the Study of the First Amendment.



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The Importance of Well-Being with Increasing Political Divide in the United States

12/2/2025 • By Avery Awn

Current Considerations

Political polarization in the United States continues to deepen. After the longest government shutdown in U.S. history, which lasted 41 days, it remains fundamental to reflect on one's well-being. Political events can evoke a variety of feelings, including stress. As research has indicated increasing polarization within recent years, there is potent importance in learning to navigate political discourse and maintain well-being (Chatterjee, Hasan, & Manfredonia, 2025).

Within the last year, the United States has undergone many changes. Obtaining a different presidential administration can be a substantial shift, and in January 2025, the U.S. entered this change following the 2024 presidential election. As with any ideological shift in political representation, constituents across the states express their thoughts and emotions, which can range from positive to negative. These differences in reactions, beliefs, and values can evoke hostility, which leads to heightened polarization (Chatterjee, Hasan, & Manfredonia, 2025). Polarization refers to the internally perceived distance between an individual and individuals who hold opposing opinions or identify with a different political party (Bar-On et al. 2024).

Current events, both nationally and globally, may contribute to increases in both stress and polarization. As an example, the recent U.S. government shutdown was a significant political event that brought stress across the nation. During this time, many federal employees were laid off, including staff for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (Brumfiel and Chatterjee, 2025; O'Brien, 2025). Concerns over activity with federal departments, international relations, judicial precedents, government funding and programs, and more may be common political stressors. Smith (2022) classified politics as a chronic source of stress. Stress is known to produce adverse effects on health at both the psychological and physical levels (Abrams & Ford, 2024). Scholarly research and reputable media sources have provided paramount considerations for the intricate intersection of mental health and political polarization. Much recent insight on this topic is illustrated in the Stress in America™ 2024 study by the American Psychological Association.

Political matters make complex stressors, as the term “politics” encompasses a vast array of topics. Dr. Brett Ford, an associate professor at the University of Toronto, described how the complicated nature of politics can cause a range of emotions, including sadness, frustration, worry, and anger (Abrams & Ford, 2024). Such emotions may prompt stress, which can be disruptive to daily tasks and routines. Research has suggested political anxiety is separate from generalized anxiety, even though the two can overlap (Abrams & Ford, 2024; Weinschenk & Smith, 2024). Therefore, anyone, regardless of mental health conditions, may experience political anxiety.



Polarization

Research has identified that polarization can occur within various categories, including political, social, cultural, geographic, affective, and economic (Bar-On et al., 2024). Affective polarization is aversion and distrust of others with differing opinions (Bar-On et al. 2024). It may deter social connection (Fraser et al., 2022). Moreover, scholars propose that polarization can occur at an individual or group level. Collective polarization considers the affective distance between groups or communities resulting from hostility due to ideological differences; individual polarization is the same, but between an individual and groups (Bar-On et al., 2024).

Groups may not only differ based on ideology, but also on primary stressors. Sources of stress may differ for each political party, though main areas of concern include the economy, violence and crime, health care, the environment, global conflict, and gun laws (Stress in America™ 2024, APA). Other research has shown that some adults blame political stress for causing losses of sleep or temper, and around 25% reported considering moving because of politics (Smith, 2022). Polarization may also have broader implications on policymaking and governance, in addition to raising public health concerns (Fraser et al., 2022). However, Hatton et al. (2023) found bipartisan support for addressing social health determinants with federal policy. Therefore, there might be more overlap across the parties on certain issues than is often perceived.

Political Engagement and Elections

Keeping up to date with local and global current events can also be an anxiety-inducing task. In a survey from the American Psychological Association, 72% of U.S. adults stated that they believe that checks and balances are not working (Stress in America™ 2024, APA). Generally, top political concerns reported include the nation's future, the economy, and the presidential election (Stress in America™ 2024, APA).

There are psychological strategies to reframe emotions surrounding political engagement, although one study found participants who reframed or distracted themselves from politics were also less likely to be politically engaged (Abrams and Ford, 2024). However, Dr. Ford noted that both negative and positive emotions toward politics can motivate action (Abrams and Ford, 2024).

Notably, research has indicated links between mental health and politics surrounding elections. As a political event, an election can induce stress. According to the American Psychological Association, 69% of adults in the United States reported the 2024 presidential election to be a significant stressor, with 72% being concerned that the results could prompt violent action (Stress in America™ 2024, APA). The most common election stressors indicated by survey responses included election impacts on constituent lives and democracy, potential violence, candidate quality, and political party division (Stress in America™ 2024, APA).

A principal concern with elections is the potential to gain or lose representation (Chatterjee, Hasan, and Manfredonia, 2025). Another survey by Forbes Health found that political tension negatively impacted social relationships, with 44% of respondents reporting anxiety toward holiday season social interactions (Prendergast, 2024). In a different study, participants reported worse physical health while experiencing increased election anxiety (Abrams and Ford, 2024).

Interestingly, some studies found that anxious and depressive symptoms fade in the weeks following an election (Abrams and Ford, 2024). Psychologists have described that feeling stressed in the time

surrounding elections is typical, and that it is important to acknowledge related feelings (Chatterjee, 2024). Heightened anxiety leading up to a major event is a valid, common occurrence.

Positive Indications

Importantly, there are positive findings from research on mental health and political polarization. According to the Stress in America™ 2024 study by the American Psychological Association, 62% of adults reported that they believe that their votes hold meaning. Future civic engagement may increase, as there was a 6% increase in respondents saying they volunteered or supported causes that are important to them from 2020 to 2024 (Stress in America™ 2024, APA). Additionally, the Forbes Health survey found that when it comes to discussing politics, 42% of respondents reported being able to share opinions with friends, 31% with partners, and 23% with parents (Prendergast, 2024). As communication is fundamental, the ability to comfortably engage in political discourse with others, even when there might be disagreement, may provide an opportunity for intellectual growth and connection.

Moving Forward

What can be done concerning the intersection of mental health and political polarization? There are a variety of avenues through which action can be taken by any political actor to both bridge divisive polarization and expand mental health awareness. On structural and institutional levels, Foley (2024) thoroughly discusses a list of suggestions for decreasing U.S. political polarization. Socially and personally, Chatterjee (2024) suggested stress management through staying connected, acknowledging uncertainty, limiting media consumption, and practicing meaningful, healthy activities.

Furthermore, finding methods to engage in respectful discourse and acknowledge disagreements as opportunities to learn can expand perspectives. Organizations like the National Public Radio (NPR) provide insight into navigating political events. When it comes to discussing differences in opinion, Aubrey (2024) describes that listening, acknowledging others' thoughts, and then asking to share your perspective is an effective approach offered by Braver Angels. Speaking up and advocating for one's beliefs is one method to disseminate awareness and information on political matters. Building and practicing empathy is key (Aubrey, 2024).

At any point in time, but particularly while polarization is heightened, it remains imperative to prioritize well-being. Health organizations and popular news outlets, including the National Alliance on Mental Illness and BetterHelp, have published many support resources and recommendations for self-care (Brant, 2025; *Shutdown Resources*, 2025). Colleges and universities may also be critical sources that offer these suggestions. For instance, Syracuse professor Afton Kapuscinski noted that political divides provide opportunities to think critically, internally reflect, and expand empathy (Lovell, 2025).

Inevitably, the sharp divisiveness of political polarization brings a myriad of considerable consequences for both psychological and physical health. Implications from various studies implore the importance of well-being during times of divided politics (Fraser et al., 2022; Nayak et al., 2021; Prendergast, 2024; Smith, 2022). Empathy is an underutilized social power. By taking a step back to acknowledge and consider diverse perspectives, positive interactions may be socially cultivated. In times of divide, discovering ways to care for oneself and connect with others is of utmost importance.

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Tensions are Rising Between the United States Government and Mexican Cartels. Why?

12/2/2025 • By **Regan Bishop**

Though the relationship between the United States and Mexico has rarely been perfect, recent tensions have only seemed to increase between the two countries as a whole, as well as between the United States government and the cartels in Mexico. But how did we get here? Cartels like MS-13, the Sinaloa Cartel, and Jalisco New Generation Cartel are some of the biggest and most dangerous drug cartels to currently come from Mexico; their offshoots to other countries after being caught and deported by the US have only made things worse. This article will seek to dive into the causes of these tense relationships and what this means for future relations.

The first major area where conflict has arisen is the crackdown on drugs in the United States. By 2007 in the US, Mexican Cartels “controlled an estimated 90% of the cocaine entering the US,” and in 2017, “Americans spent \$53 billion on illegal drugs, including cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine” (CFR.org Editors, 2025). The cartels depend on the American citizens for their livelihood, and when they lose access to 90% of their clientele, they are not exactly going to be happy with that. The cartels have also begun to bring in more synthetic opioids, mostly fentanyl, which has greatly contributed to the United States’ ongoing fentanyl crisis, an issue that President Trump has also promised to crack down on (Trump, 2025). This also increased conflict across North America by including Canada. The cartels’ main influx comes from selling drugs, and taking away a major avenue for them to do so would be expected to come with a lot of anger and disapproval, leading to threats against American tourists and increased violence in Mexico.

A second reason that can be credited for increased conflict and anger among the cartels is the mass deportation that has been occurring on the US-Mexico border. Though the history of the US-Mexico immigration relationship spans back to 1810, this specific conflict began at the start of President Trump's first term in 2016. President Trump’s campaign ran on the promise of building the wall to stop undocumented immigrants from crossing the border, as well as by ending the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which led to threats of tariffs from both sides (*Council on Foreign Relations*, 2025). Though a trade war was avoided, this started to push disapproval of President Trump in Mexico, especially among the cartels, who would be greatly impacted by the control a wall would have over the US Southern border.

Mass deportation throughout President Trump’s second term can largely be attributed to the growing anger as well. In February, just over a month after his second term began, Mexico and the United States made a deal to export 29 cartel members from Mexico to the United States so that they could be tried for drug trafficking and other crimes committed in the US (Dienst et al., 2025). It is well known that President Trump ran his second campaign based on a promise to secure the border even



more than he carried out in his first term, which would greatly decrease the avenues for the cartels to go across the Southern US border.

Along with this, the United States Republican representatives have been fighting to assert new offenses as deportable through legislation, such as H.R.30, H.R.875, and H.R.6057 (*H.R.30 - 119th Congress (2025-2026): Preventing Violence against Women by Illegal Aliens Act*, 2025). Mass deportation of immigrants greatly limits the routes available for drug distribution, assistance in migrating to the US, etc. The increased deportation, along with no end in sight, makes a profound impact on the danger these cartels can bring to the United States, which brings along hostility and violence from already notoriously violent groups. Although cartel members are getting arrested and deported from the US, their threat to American soil does not stop. Groups like MS-13 have found ways to become transnational threats because those who have been deported develop offshoots overseas with others who will harbor them (Nahal T., 2025). Members of the cartel know that neither the US nor Mexican government will allow them to leave peacefully and continue to take part in the cartel's activities, so developing offshoot relationships is crucial to keep the cartels going, and is crucial for the US and Mexico to learn how to shut them down.

One attempt to counteract these new relationships is to label Mexican cartels as terrorist groups, which has only brought up more violence. For example, following the arrest of Ismael Zambada in August of 2024, the leader of the Sinaloa cartel, one of the most violent in Mexico, violence erupted throughout Sinaloa (AlJazeera Staff, 2025). Citizens of Sinaloa have also increasingly gone missing since his arrest, but violence is not an uncommon response to the arrests of major cartel leaders (AlJazeera Staff, 2025). In August of 2025, and continuously since then, the United States Department of State has issued a Level 2 travel warning over Mexico as a country and has now labeled certain cities and their associated cartels as terrorist organizations (*Mexico Travel Advisory | Travel.State.gov*, 2025). Designating these cartels as terrorist organizations “provides US law enforcement and the military more legal tools to go after cartels and others affiliated with them” (Nahal T., 2025). This means the United States can go after the cartels in a new set of ways, but some of those ideal actions are being denied by Mexico's President Sheinbaum, making it seem as though the US is the only one to be carrying out legal action against the cartels. This depiction of the US's “war” on the cartels will only continue to decrease tensions when the cartels see the US as the sole bad guy. President Sheinbaum heavily rejected President Trump's offer to begin military strikes on Mexican cities to kill the cartel members, which has only added to the cartel's anger and violence towards the United States (*Mexican President Rejects Trump's Offer of Military Intervention against Cartels*, 2025). The offer of military strikes is violent and especially threatening, meaning the cartel members likely take it as such. This is why the new threats by cartels towards American tourists are equally concerning, because if the United States is willing to threaten with violence, the cartels are willing to threaten back.

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How Previous Prolonged Shutdowns Have Affected the Federal Workforce

12/2/2025 • By **Jackson Deville**

October 1st, 2025, the government shutdown left thousands of federal employees furloughed and uncertain about when their next paycheck would be. Understanding the level of impact federal workers face from these shutdowns could help provide clues on how to alleviate their struggles and what the future of the federal workforce looks like. This paper seeks to identify the level of impact federal employees are facing from shutdowns by comparing the effects of previous prolonged shutdowns on federal employees. To do so, this paper will look at workload strains, employee turnover, and agencies affected. Further, there will be an evaluation of the individual impact of the shutdown by looking at employee morale and retention. By comparing the effects of previous extensive shutdowns, the government can identify common issues that arise from government shutdowns and take proactive steps to avoid such conditions in future shutdowns. The paper will utilize the 1995 and 2018 shutdowns as case studies of previous shutdowns to compare the impacts of the previous shutdowns.

On December 16th, 1995, the government shutdown after a continuing resolution expired and negotiations over the budget failed. This led to 284,000 federal workers being furloughed, with another 465,000 continuing to work under no pay status (Congressional Research Service, 2023, p. 20). Two pay periods were missed in the 21-day partial shutdown. Due to this being the first prolonged shutdown, federal services were not prepared and faced severe strain due to the shutdown. One example of this was the Social Security Administration (SSA). The SSA quickly realized they did not have enough staff to answer phone calls, issue social security cards, process claims, and approve changes of address. This combination of factors led the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to make an exception and allow over 49,000 workers to return to work (Congressional Research Service, 2023, pp. 39-40).

Unfortunately, the case of the Social Security Administration was not an exception. Several more agencies were disrupted and unprepared. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) did not take new patients, and calls were not answered. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) stopped surveillance of diseases. 368 National Park Service Sites closed, with an estimated loss of 7 million visitors. Visas and passports went unprocessed, with 20,000 to 30,000 applications by foreigners going unprocessed each day. Over 200,000 US applications for passports went unprocessed. Federal contractors lost \$3.7 billion in contracts, over 20% of the total worth of Federal contracts in DC (Brass, 2011, p. 17).

As the economic costs reached hundreds of millions and major federal service disruptions took place, all parties were forced to come to the negotiating table. This led Republicans to accept President Clinton's concessions on the budget rather than continue to hold out for larger spending cuts. The



shutdown officially ended January 6th, 1996, lasting 21 days. The final budget negotiations for the fiscal year of 1996 were completed shortly afterwards.

December 22nd, 2018, the government shut down as President Trump and Democratic leadership could not agree on a continuing resolution due to an impasse over providing funding for the building of a border wall. This led to over 380,000 federal workers being furloughed, and 420,000 continuing to work under no pay status (Congressional Budget Office, 2019, p. 4). In a study conducted by the Office of Personnel Management, 46% of respondents reported being impacted by the partial shutdown. Of these respondents, the most common reported impact was large delays at work (67%) and reduced customer service in federal services (48%). Some other common complaints included missed deadlines (46%), unmanageable workload (30%), and cutbacks on in-progress projects (25%) (Office of Personnel Management, 2019, p. 15).

The 2018 shutdown affected more agencies than the 1995-96 shutdown, but it hit scientific agencies particularly hard. NASA had to furlough 95% of its workforce, and the sudden halt of projects and inspections led to \$1 million in damages on in-progress projects (American Oversight, 2020). The United States Geological Survey (USGS) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) also report that most of their activities were suspended, with nearly every scientific research project indefinitely suspended. Additionally, USGS and NOAA reported difficulties hiring and retaining employees due to concerns about work pauses from the shutdown.

The aviation industry was also hit hard by the 2018 shutdown. In a survey conducted by Professional Aviation Safety Specialists, they found that most air traffic controllers reported large decreases in morale and felt “unappreciated and expendable.” Following the shutdown, the aviation industry hit a 30-year low in hiring new air traffic controllers in 2019 (The Partnership for Public Service, 2019, p. 11). The aviation industry does not share these concerns alone; the majority of federal agencies report concerns that prolonged shutdowns would dissuade young professionals from joining the federal workforce.

Transportation Security Administration (TSA) workers began to not come to work, and travel disruptions ensued. Immigration courts faced record levels in backlog cases (Transaction Records Access Clearinghouse, 2019). Polling showed the public blamed the Trump administration for the shutdown. Further, 800,000 federal employees were on the verge of missing their third paycheck in a row. These factors led to the Trump administration making an agreement on a short-term funding measure without funding for the building of the wall. The government officially reopened on January 25, 2019, marking a 35-day shutdown.

The two previous extensive shutdowns have demonstrated that the effects of shutdowns are not evenly distributed amongst federal agencies and employees. The most common issue federal workers face during a shutdown is the backlog of work, and the subsequent spike in workload when the government suddenly reopens. Additionally, prolonged delays in paychecks leave federal employees increasingly disgruntled, often driving them to pursue other employment. The 2018 shutdown was distinct from the 1995 shutdown, as it involved a larger and more complex federal system. This led to adverse effects across all federal agencies, but scientific agencies (NOAA, NASA, USGS) faced large amounts of furlough (up to 95%) and project delays/cancellations. Further, studies have shown that within agencies, federal personnel are affected differently based on seniority and peer preference.

In a study conducted by William G. Resh at Georgia State University, they sought to understand the level of impact the 2018 shutdown had on the federal workforce. Specifically, they wanted to evaluate the connection between furlough rates and separation rates of the federal workforce. In conducting this study, Resh found that the shutdown led to a 19% increase in separations, with quit rates rising by 17%. (Resh, Ahn, Wang, & Lee, 2025). However, in this study, there is no simple relationship between the percentage of furloughed employees and separation rates. Instead, the findings suggested that the shutdown's effect on turnover may also depend on factors such as peer status, performance, and perceived job insecurity. Employees with 10 or more years of service separations only increased by 9%. Meanwhile, employees with less than 10 years of service saw quitting rates rise by 22% and firings increased by a staggering 48%.

This leads to the finding that the federal workforce is likely to feel worse effects from the 2025 shutdown than previous shutdowns. Analyzing the previous shutdowns revealed that the shutdown in 2018 had greater adverse effects since the federal government had grown in scope and size since 1995. Additionally, federal agencies are still dealing with post-COVID backlogs, staffing shortages, and high retirement rates, and now face the spike in workload since the government reopened in November. The TSA staffing shortages became a national issue in 2018, and they became a national issue again in 2025 when flights began to be cancelled or delayed. The data shows that workers under 30 are disadvantaged in federal jobs during shutdowns and, as a result, are turning away from the federal sector. In 2019, 6% of federal employees were under 30, a decline from 9% in 2010 (The Partnership for Public Service, 2019, p. 6). If the two previous prolonged shutdowns have taught us anything, the federal workforce will feel the effects of the record-breaking 2025 shutdown for months, and its employee retention, recruitment, and workload may take even longer to recover.

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The Impacts of the Federal Surge on the D.C. Court System

12/2/2025 • By **Kate Huntington**

On August 11, 2025, President Donald Trump declared a crime emergency in Washington, D.C., deploying hundreds of National Guardsmen to occupy the city's streets. Despite violent crime hitting a 30-year low in 2024, the National Guard now meets residents and visitors at nearly all metro stops and everywhere in between (United States Attorney's Office, 2025). Between August 7th and September 5th, 1,669 people have been arrested in the District, leading to immense stress on the D.C. Court System (Lucas, 2025).

Strain on Attorneys

Meanwhile, in the basement of the D.C. Superior Court in room C-10, attorneys frequently stay past 1:00 am as over 100 individuals appear before them to hear the crimes they are accused of. This is roughly double the pre-surge number. The crimes that move through C-10 range from minor misdemeanors to serious felonies. It is here where prosecutors decide which cases they will pursue and which they will dismiss. In recent years, around half of the cases have been "no-papered" (Golden, 2025), meaning the US Attorney's Office declined to prosecute them, typically because the evidence against the defendant is unreliable or weak (Polantz & Rabinowitz, 2025). Not only is the number of individuals on the lockup list increasing, but the number being prosecuted is increasing as well. The Trump Administration has "reportedly ordered federal prosecutors in DC to be more aggressive in pursuing criminal cases against those arrested during this crime crackdown" (WUSA9, 2025). Offenses that would typically be mere citations are now resulting in criminal charges. Under the leadership of US Attorney Jeanine Pirro, a Trump appointee, the US Attorney's Office is allowing cases to play out in court, regardless of the case's weakness. She has also instructed her office to "charge the highest crime that is supported by the law and the evidence" (Polantz & Rabinowitz, 2025).

This means there is a higher demand for public defenders and attorneys on the Criminal Justice Act (CJA) Panel, who take on an overwhelming majority of cases. The more cases being added to their workload, the less effective they can be. "We run the risk of falling short of our constitutional obligation to provide effective assistance of counsel", a source told CNN (Polantz et al., 2025). This could potentially reduce the quality of representation and ultimately put more defendants behind bars.

Overcrowded Prisons

A little over one week after the surge began, the population of the DC jail grew by over 100. On August 20, the Central Detention Facility (CDF) reached 1,491 detainees, the highest since 2017. The CDF is not equipped to handle this capacity. Just months prior, the DC Auditor released a publication calling for the "Urgent Need for New D.C. Jail." Deaths in the D.C. jail occur at three times the U.S. average, and the overdose deaths are ten times the national average, signaling serious health and safety concerns. There have been at least 1,595 maintenance reports "posing immediate risks to health and safety," including but not limited to vermin, parasites, and mold. There are also extreme staff



shortages, which have resulted in 30 million dollars of overtime pay to employees (Patterson, 2025). Several staff members have also been charged with bringing contraband into the facility. Additionally, female inmates, who are housed in the Correctional Treatment Facility (“CTF”), have also suffered from the surge since there has been a 25% increase in the number of females detained (*CCE Analysis Shows Rising Population at the D. C. Jail since Federal Law Enforcement Surge*, 2025).

Racial Disparities

According to court records, 90% of individuals on the lock-up list were black and around 75% were male. D.C. has long suffered from stark racial disparities in detainment, with black residents making up over 80% of arrests in each of the last two years. The occupation of federal agents will only exacerbate this. D.C. Federal Affairs reporter, Olivia George, analyzed over 1,200 arrest records this year between August 11 and September 10. She discovered that arrests associated with federal agents “were concentrated in the city’s poorest, least white, and most crime-ridden neighborhoods.” She also noted that other clusters of arrests were centered in low-crime areas near the National Mall, offering nothing but a spectacle for tourists’ amusement (Ciammachilli & Sinnenberg, 2025).

The Jurisdiction of the Guard

The Posse Comitatus Act was passed in 1878 after the end of Reconstruction with the purpose of ensuring that the military could not interfere in the establishment of a Jim Crow South (Nunn, 2025). The Act essentially prohibits the federal military from intervening in civilian law enforcement activities, unless Congress authorizes it. However, there are multiple loopholes. One of which is the concept of Title 32 Status. Under this, Guardsmen are compensated with federal funds and are at the beck and call of the president, while remaining under state command and control. Because the Guardsmen were activated under Title 32, they have a *hybrid* status that grants them the jurisdiction to complete searches and arrests (Nunn, 2025). Despite this, it is not the intended purpose for troops to make arrests in DC, but to act as a crime deterrent. Nonetheless, National Guardsmen *have* been detaining people (Vergun, 2025). This is extremely troubling given that they are neither trained nor adequately equipped to do this. They lack the body-worn cameras that police officers wear, meaning any sort of brutality or conflict would not be recorded, endangering all parties. Further, attorneys and the Court rely heavily on body-worn camera footage to assess probable cause and to confirm the defendants were properly advised, making its absence a threat to due process.

Prior to the deployment, attorneys in the D.C. court system were already overburdened, jails were overcrowded and in need of repair, and arrests were marked by racial disparities. The surge only exacerbated these issues, emphasizing the urgent need to reform an already damaged D.C. criminal justice system.

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Wrestling with Appearances: Why the Modern Republican Party Embraces the Showmanship of Professional Wrestling

4/2/2025 • By **Deven Kukreja**

Introduction

In contemporary American politics, one of the few things that both sides of the political spectrum can agree on is that politics has become increasingly polarized since the mid-2010s. Long gone are the days of John McCain defending Barack Obama from false claims about his citizenship, and of the 1984 presidential candidates joking about their ages. Nowadays, the political divide in the United States is almost impossible to cross, as increased levels of political polarization are reflected both within the politicians and the constituents that they serve. Both Democrats and Republicans in Congress have moved further from the ideological center in the previous few decades (DeSilver, 2022), and eight out of every 10 American voters believe that Democratic and Republican voters cannot even agree on basic facts (Shearer, 2025). There have been various proposed causes for this polarization, ranging from Putnam's theory of social capital to the effects of social media. However, the fact remains that this polarization—especially on the political right—has been taken further by a handful of highly influential figures who have taken it upon themselves to actively personify their movements.

The trend of American right-wing politics adopting larger-than-life personas who fight every day for their cause finds its roots within the showmanship of professional wrestling. Mixing the athleticism of real, Olympic-style wrestling with the scripted theatrics of a Broadway production, professional wrestling has become a mainstay in American popular culture. The biggest and most well-known professional wrestling company is World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), as it grew from a regional company in the 1950s to a multi-billion-dollar organization in the 2020s. Much of that growth can be attributed to the highly controversial Vince McMahon, who led the company for decades before stepping down when faced with a federal lawsuit from a former WWE employee who accused McMahon of sexual misconduct and abuse (The Associated Press, 2024). Behind the scenes, McMahon led the company as its CEO, but on-screen, he played the character of “Mr. McMahon.” McMahon portrayed the villainous heel for the heroic faces like Terry ‘Hulk Hogan’ Bollea, ‘Stone Cold’ Steve Austin, and John Cena. McMahon often blended reality and fiction—otherwise known as kayfabe—in his performances, as the more authentic the product felt, the more that McMahon could control his audience (Rehn, 2025). This control was what all professional wrestlers seek, as the ability to be a successful heel or a face hinged on the cult of personality that they could cultivate.

The ability to elicit either positive or negative emotions in an audience is necessary in the world of professional wrestling, and this ability is becoming increasingly needed in the world of American politics. Evolving from the uneventful, policy-driven discussions with the occasional flare-up of the past, modern politics require aggressive and theatrical performances to gain support for one side while disparaging the other. Common ground has all but disappeared, as the “us-versus-them” mentality



common in professional wrestling storylines has become the political standard. Figures like Donald Trump and Charlie Kirk have not offered much respect for their ideological opponents, as that would tarnish the image that they have built up. The MAGA movement and Turning Point USA are reflections of these performances, as people have bought into their performances. Like the character of “Mr. McMahon,” Trump and Kirk both have adopted larger-than-life personas and have embraced the showmanship popularized by professional wrestling. American politics has become a wrestling ring, with voters taking the role of the fans cheering them on.

Donald Trump and the MAGA Movement

President Trump is no stranger to the world of professional wrestling, as he has been closely associated with the McMahon family for decades and has appeared several times on WWE programming. Having a background in reality television with his show *The Apprentice*, Trump came into the world of politics already knowing how to make himself appear as a charismatic and powerful individual in front of a camera. However, his experiences in professional wrestling gave him valuable insights on how to capitalize on the anti-establishment sentiment integral to his 2015 presidential campaign. In 2015, he set himself apart from the rest of the Republican base by using the tactics of a heel to draw all the attention to himself. Unlike other, more moderate candidates like Jeb Bush, Ben Carson, and Carly Fiorina, Trump went on the offensive, attacking them for their familial associations, religious beliefs, and even physical appearances (Rappeport, 2015). These are all common tactics within professional wrestling, as such offensive remarks are used by heels to polarize their audience. It is within that polarization that Trump has thrived, as the results of the 2015 primary elections and 2016 presidential elections demonstrated that Republicans were tired of the moderate, party-centric candidates that have been the norm since the period of Reagan.

Furthermore, Trump has utilized such rhetoric in each of his presidential campaigns to prop himself up as an outsider and anti-establishment populist who would bring massive change to Washington. Unlike the broad, “up-down” populism utilized by politicians like Bernie Sanders, Trump utilizes a right-wing populist approach where the dynamic is still the people against the elites, but “the people” are taken advantage of by the elites for the benefit of outsiders like Muslim immigrants (Kazin, 2016). The populist approach was not necessarily unique to American politics in 2015, as major political figures in the past, such as Sanders and, to a lesser extent, Barack Obama, have utilized populist rhetoric and have achieved political success (Pew Research Center, 2015). However, Trump’s scapegoating of immigrants, combined with the oratory skills he developed and refined in the WWE, led to what many perceived as an upset victory in the 2016 election. In the primaries and the presidential debates, Trump dominated the microphone using a populist approach, regardless of whether his words were politically offensive or divisive (Hofstra, 2024). Trump’s goal was to appeal to a base that was desperate for a figure that spoke to their feelings and beliefs, and, using the tactics employed by the likes of Hulk Hogan and The Rock, he played that role masterfully.

On the campaign trail and throughout both of his presidencies, Trump has continued to build and rely on his cult of personality. The Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement is centered around Trump himself, not his ideologies. Whether it be Trump’s foray into cryptocurrency, appearing on various podcasts and Fox News, or dedicating a section of the Oval Office to his branded apparel, some of which state in bold letters that “TRUMP WAS RIGHT ABOUT EVERYTHING,” the MAGA movement is centered on the concept of an all-important, infallible man (Mills & Wu, 2025). Especially in his second presidency, where political drama is the norm, Trump has consistently kept himself at the center of attention for the media and voters alike. The goal of a showman is to control one’s audience, and Trump has done so for over a decade in American politics. However, as Trump’s

time in office will presumably be coming to a close in 2028, the MAGA movement is searching for someone to take the mantle. As is common within professional wrestling, there are always opportunities for surprise returns and a passing of the torch. Yet, there is no major frontrunner; the MAGA brand is inextricably tied to Donald Trump himself, and no one has been able to capture Trump's unique charisma and appeal that have defined his political career.

Charlie Kirk and Turning Point USA

In recent years, one of the few right-wing American political figures who embodied levels of charisma and popular appeal close to that of Trump was Charlie Kirk. Kirk, similarly to Trump, utilized a unique style of discourse that made him the center of attention wherever he went. This was best exemplified by his college debate series, where Kirk would travel to various campuses across the country to debate with students. Kirk was a skilled orator and knew how to control a conversation, as many of the clips from his debates would go viral. As crowds gathered around him, Kirk, using only a microphone and a camera, positioned himself as someone who embodied the next generation of conservatives. Much like Trump and the MAGA movement, Kirk also embodied his own movement with Turning Point USA (TPUSA). Kirk was a co-founder of TPUSA in 2012 when he was just 18 years old, and he led the group for over a decade in spreading conservative viewpoints on high school and college campuses. Kirk was often theatrical and controversial in his media appearances, as he consistently polarized those around him to either be with him or against him. Like Trump and other professional wrestlers, Kirk maintained a polarizing persona that allowed him to become a national phenomenon, as people who both supported and disagreed with him still flocked in droves to his events. Even the most skilled wrestlers would find it a nearly impossible task to gain the support that Kirk amassed in just a few short years as a media personality and leader of TPUSA.

Kirk seemed poised for a long career as a right-wing commentator and potentially as a politician, as more and more people were drawn to Kirk and his TPUSA movement. However, on September 10, 2025, Kirk was assassinated during a debate at Utah Valley University. Kirk's death was shocking, as figures across the political spectrum came together to condemn the assassination and mourn his death. However, even after his passing, he was still a polarizing figure. Kirk had been a longtime adversary of college professors, whom he viewed as pushing an overly leftist ideology at the expense of conservative students. In 2016, he created a "Professor Watchlist" to document such educators (Bunn & Kingkade, 2025); following his assassination, there were several controversial decisions where educators whose responses to the assassination were deemed inappropriate were either suspended or fired (Kingkade, 2025; Zaru & Jones, 2025). His supporters also banded together in response to his funeral, as his podcast and book sales all rose significantly in the wake of his assassination (Genovese, 2025). Kirk lived a life where he captivated polarized audiences online and in person, and even after his passing, people were still divided in how to respond and view his life.

Kirk's memorial service, held in his home state of Arizona, was not a typically calm, somber procession, but rather one reminiscent of a political rally. Erika Kirk, Charlie Kirk's widow, entered the arena with a fireworks display and addressed an eager crowd, saying she forgave his assassin because "it was what Christ did and what Charlie would do" (Landers & Adams, 2025). However, other figures who spoke at the event further fanned the flames of polarization. President Trump and White House Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller called for retribution against Kirk's political opponents, while describing Kirk as a martyr whose legacy would live on through the movement he created (Levinson-King, 2025). Even at a memorial service, the showman in Trump was still apparent, as he harkened back to the rhetoric he used on the campaign trail. After his assassination, TPUSA has found a new figure to lead it in Erika Kirk, as she has made several media appearances in the months

following her husband's assassination in September. Now that the movement has found someone to continue his work and thousands of people across the country want to join his movement (Rahman, 2025), Kirk's polarizing legacy will live on.

Conclusion

Professional wrestling has ebbed and flowed in popularity over the years, as there are those who continue to support the industry while others chastise it as nothing more than cheap entertainment. However, one aspect remains clear: the skills required to succeed in professional wrestling are becoming increasingly transferable to the polarized American political sphere. The ability to influence and speak to the hearts and minds of audiences on a global scale is something unique, suited to professional wrestling. If wrestlers cannot convince an audience and draw strong reactions, they eventually move down the card and are eventually let go from the company. Figures like Trump and Kirk understood this fact well when they built their respective movements, as neither figure played it down the middle or attempted to win over everyone. After 2016, the Republican Party took this under consideration and has leaned more and more toward polarizing their base further to the right and away from the left. The Republican Party is intertwined with wrestling because both entities believe the people need someone extraordinary and magnetic to lead the way, as both the moves and policies that they employ are secondary to what the audience feels.

The theatrics used by the Republican Party and its major figures have not been widely adopted by the Democratic Party, as Democrats have polarized their platform less than the Republicans and are still mostly party-centric. But with the wins of progressive populists like Zohran Mamdani in New York and Katie Wilson in Seattle—both of whom have polarized voters around themselves—this trend could change in the future. Regardless, with figures like Linda McMahon as head of the Department of Education and her son-in-law and WWE CCO Paul 'Triple H' Levesque recently visiting the White House (Treene & Feldscher, 2025), it seems like Trump and the Republican Party will continue to embrace professional wrestling.

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Polarization and Anti-Intellectual Sentiment in the United States

12/2/2025 • By **Rylie Jones**

Common sense has long been a running platform used in American government. The current administration claims that President Donald Trump is “restoring common sense to government,” and the President has used the phrase “common sense” in a multitude of speeches as well as executive orders (White House, 2025). The emphasis on common sense is a populist tactic used to unite an “us versus them” conflict. The easiest way to do this is to create a divide between the elite and the rest of the population. This not only increases polarization within the population on political and cultural topics but also leads to an anti-intellectual sentiment that defies proven fact in favor of political gain and animosity against opposers.

Political ignorance has long plagued American politics, which is consistent with the overstated and irrational confidence present in American media and culture. In politics specifically, ignorance is often displayed as a rejection of proven fact in favor of the opinion and beliefs already held. Anti-intellectualism is an attitude growing in the United States of mistrust and opposition to academia and education, often displayed as an outright rejection of facts or empirical evidence. This trend is mostly concentrated to the far right due to the perceived disdain by highly educated or elitist leftists (Baker, Detamble, and Marrietta, 2021, 40). This perception is largely due to the structure of the education system, where access to a quality, formal education is often associated with wealth (Luse, 2025, 8:02). While formal education is not the only way to receive practical knowledge, it is an invaluable opportunity to create a civically engaged population.

A study published by professors at American University investigating the prevalence of epistemic hubris—unchanging certitude in feelings toward policy despite a lack of evidence—discovered its presence on both sides of the American political spectrum (Baker, Detamble, and Marrietta, 2021, 40). Intellectualism on the left and anti-intellectualism on the right encourage an unwarranted certainty in opinions in both voters and policy makers that increases the polarization between the two parties. Polarization is a major issue currently faced by Americans in both the policymaking and voting populations. Not only does legislative gridlock make it harder to pass any legislation, but lawmakers and citizens are now less and less tolerant of dissenting opinions that are essential to democracy.

Media illiteracy is another factor that drives both anti-intellectualism and polarization. News is now seen as subjective and can come from a variety of unchecked and unfiltered sources. The central tenet of a democracy to find common ground is becoming increasingly uncommon with higher rates of government and voter polarization. Social media is a primary culprit, making it harder to tolerate those with opposing views. Algorithms and machine learning are taught to produce the type of content that the viewer is already seeking out, making the polarization worse (Bouygues, 2022). Poor media literacy



makes it easier to believe false or erroneous information, and in combination with the disengagement of those with dissenting views, it diminishes critical thinking skills and toleration of other opinions. In a society where unchanging beliefs without evidence are trending, debates devolve into clashes between parties rather than evidence-based disagreement and the willful ignorance of fact, proliferating anti-intellectual sentiment.

Although the rejection of education and information is dangerous in most aspects, there can be benefits to anti-intellectual attitudes. Economic policies formulated by the wealthy elite in a nation with such income inequality can often leave behind lower and middle classes and increase frustration with policymakers. This can be another major source of polarization for voters. However, if gone about correctly, anti-intellectualism can serve the left-behind communities and those who are unequally paying the costs of change and trade policies (Waters and Dionne, 2019). This is evident in the Populist movement of the 1880s, where reforms increased political opportunities and gave power to ordinary people through favoring common sense rather than formal education. This decreased the elitist detachment and pushed for a healthy skepticism of policymakers (Waters and Dionne, 2019).

However, this is the minority of anti-intellectual thought. Anti-intellectual attitudes can manifest either in impatience and frustration or outright opposition to facts. Frustration can lead to change; opposition to fact leads to a mistrust of institutions set up to encourage the engagement of citizens in a democracy (Waters and Dionne, 2019). Secondly, anti-intellectual thought within poor or undereducated communities isn't the major issue with the anti-intellectual trend. The present issue lies with the current administration's denial of truth and departure from facts that alienate voters from one another and undermine the institutions set forth to protect democracy. Not only does it harm the reputation of protective institutions, but the push toward anti-intellectualism and against elites is coming from wealthy, educated elites within the government, which increases the polarization between parties. This leads voters to make less informed decisions and rely on party lines that reject fact. The U.S. is experiencing an epidemic of illiteracy among young people, encouraged by "a culture that demonizes education" and is led by an elitist who "proudly proclaims his love for the uneducated" (Garriga, 2024).

With media illiteracy and undereducation on the rise, understanding anti-intellectual sentiment is essential to limiting polarization and keeping democracy healthy. Anti-intellectualism, promoted by the head of the nation, is an authoritarian move that could jeopardize democracy by further increasing the polarization within voters and policymakers, leading to a divided society.

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Digital *Leviathans*: The Politics of Artificial Community

12/2/2025 • By **Harrison Leonard**

Among the contributors to contemporary political philosophy, the sociologist Professor Robert Nisbet stands out in the American conversation, most notably in his 1953 work, *The Quest for Community*. Nisbet's analysis centers around his argument that the modern state's removal of the local community as an intermediary between the individual and their nation has had profound sociological consequences for American society. Nisbet contrasts the modern dynamic with the observations of the French writer and politician Alexis de Tocqueville, who, during his visit to America in 1831-32, appraised the nation's community-oriented values, labeling the "township democracy" as a fundamental element of the individual's relationship to democracy and wider society. Nisbet argues this "township democracy" has been eroded and removed, discussing how the modern state uses man's inherent desire for community as a driving force to consolidate power in a connection exclusively comprising the state and the individual.

Faced with no alternative, Nisbet argues that citizens of the modern state are subjected to a federally oriented bureaucracy holding no accountability to a once vibrant, community-based society. This dramatic shift in power dynamics in many aspects parallels the centralized authority found in Hobbes' *Leviathan*. Yet rather than this authority being created by one leader, modern authority is instead formed by fulfilling the individual's inherent desire for community, upon the removal of traditional communities as the intermediary between the individual and the state. Nisbet's findings present an important warning about the trajectory of modern democracy and political discourse. This article argues that the consequences of the communal breakdown shouldn't merely be confined to Nisbet's postwar vision of the individual and the state, though. Rather, his warnings against the erosion of community have evolved, taking on new life in today's world with profound sociological impacts continuing to shape us. The rise of the internet and social media has formed new "digital *Leviathans*" that have focused the individual's need for community into cyberspace, fostering dependency on the state whilst further diminishing the influence of Tocquevillian "township democracies."

To fully understand the individual's increasing dependency on these "digital *Leviathans*," Nisbet's argument surrounding the modern state's encroachment on the individual and community must be examined. *The Quest for Community* is a sociological analysis of communities and their role in societal order, morphing into an analysis of the state and community relationship, and finally concluding with a direct appeal for a new political and cultural *laissez-faire* operating for the prosperity of groups, associations, and communities against the umbrella of centralization. It is not a lament of the past or a plea to "undo" the modern state. Nisbet praises the advancements of a unified society and the post-1648 world in which the modern state was created and developed. It is the modern state's consequences, specifically surrounding the structures of authority and power, where Nisbet's concerns are directed. Nisbet asserts that the individual will always hunger "for a clear sense of cultural purpose, membership, status, and continuity". As the intermediary role of "township democracy" disappears,



this hunger draws the individual into a synthesized whole that spatially unifies but removes one's "meaningful proximity to the major ends and purposes of his culture."

Cultural isolation is indirectly imposed, structurally breaking down community attachments. For Nisbet, these attachments can be generally found in a wide array of communal pursuits: neighborhood parties, local associations, or even something as simple as a bowling league. Communities, though present, were not always politically charged or motivated by a civic duty to cultivate Tocquevillian democracy. Nonetheless, even the smallest bowling leagues helped to reinforce cultural bonds present in long-established communities and indirectly contributed to the pre-existing intermediary role that communities held for the individual. Shared moral and cultural values, as well as routine opportunities for interaction, allowed civil and political discourse to be debated and interacted with on a small-scale perspective that gave individuals the chance to directly shape their lives with the local organizations and associations of which they were integral parts. In this way, the individual's base need for continuity and fulfillment was met, and further participation in refining and promoting the everyday order in community life was encouraged. State insertion into the individual life wasn't nonexistent but heavily regulated by a community presence. As Nisbet argues, a harmonious balance is developed between the individual, the community, and the state that draws similarities to branches of power in the governments of liberal democracies.

Considering the nuances of power and governance, it would be an oversimplification to describe the traditional community as "good" or "bad" when compared to the modern state. Neither can be considered perfect, and Nisbet doesn't waste time defending the old or heaping praise on progression. His careful, thoughtful arguments are produced around an understanding of the complexities associated with each concept and their various benefits and consequences. Taking up this manner of analysis, the origins of the state and erosion of community can provide an outline of the conditions needed for the introduction of online communities as an extension of the state-individual relationship, a relatively recent transformation. The state is defined by Nisbet as "a complex of ideas, symbols, and relationships" that today has become "the greatest refuge from the insecurities and frustrations of other spheres of life". It is the most dominant force of institution and authority in society and exists in varying degrees of prominence in the social spheres each of us inhabits, similar in manner to the all-encompassing authority of the Church during the medieval age. The state was born from war and conquest as an exclusively military organization, evolving across the centuries to dominate all aspects of life. To Nisbet, the modern state is "a process of permanent revolution," devouring the functions and powers invested in the local community.

The state possesses, in a myriad of structures, an unfathomable amount of control that has made leadership of the state "the greatest prize in modern struggles for power". The modern state's aggressively individualist doctrine and devoted commitment to dismantling communities is seen by Nisbet to have been largely proliferated upon the emergence of the French Revolution and mass adoption of Enlightenment values. To Hobbes and *Leviathan*, Nisbet credits the creation of an individualist society wherein the community is a superfluous product of man and has no prominence, entrusting completely the responsibilities of community to the state. In Rousseau lies the true creation of the modern state, with a purview that gleefully abandons formality in favor of the steady march of progress that further expands the state's powers and embraces individuality over community. This march remains ongoing. The restrictive ties of national borders are being politically and culturally dismantled as the postwar globalist economic order has settled into place, demanding productivity and efficiency that can only be achieved through greater unity. Localized communities have become an endangered species that no longer inhabit their intermediary roles; for many, a new form of

community has emerged as the dominant sphere of interaction and influence in the world of the individual: the internet.

Elements of Nisbet's definition of the state can be applied toward what we regard as the modern internet. When mentioning the digital *Leviathan*, I refer to the network of algorithms and online communities that function as quasi-authoritative structures organizing identity, attention, and cultivating belonging. More broadly, the internet is comprised of endless streams of content detailing our infinite sum of knowledge and creativity, and that it was produced in the modern world is made evident by the manner in which it is governed. There is no formal consolidation of internet law, practically speaking, and the individualistic anonymity provided in cyberspace is an unquestionably fundamental feature of online connectivity. Search engines provide unlimited possibilities of choice to users, and the most developed and popular social media platforms provide highly advanced algorithms designed to attract and maintain attention.

In this complex world, we can identify patterns that Nisbet presents to readers in *The Quest for Community* that solidify the internet as a continuation of the state's march of progress. It is the excess of choice (and absence of community), says Nisbet, which incites people to "seek escape from the freedom of impersonality, secularism, and individualism." In the same way that the individualist world of Hobbes and the anti-formality state of Rousseau have created a flat landscape of impersonality, cyberspace has been constructed upon the concepts of impersonality and anonymity. In each instance, society is left with the same hunger for community and connection it has always needed, and without the traditional community to ease that sensation, alternative means of fulfillment must be discovered. In our contemporary world, the internet has emerged as a strong arm for that fulfillment, made possible by the sheer power of connectivity that attaches the individual to a new variant of pseudo-community, built upon the globalized and hyperconnected masses. Attention garners profit, and so engagement becomes a priority for online platforms that generally use rapid, short-form content to generate a positive feedback loop that demands more engagement. As the individual becomes a disciplined consumer, their preferences and social identity are carefully examined and codified to produce consistency, and content soon begins to mimic the expressed preferences of the user, ultimately concluding with the introduction of that user into the digital community carefully selected to align with those preferences.

In the digital space, community is anything but Nisbet's bowling leagues and associations; these communities aren't bound by anything beyond a shared intrigue into a particular piece of content, which can quite literally be anything. Interaction occurs sparingly and is typically one-sided, while constant anonymity makes legitimate friendship rare and difficult to cultivate. One user can be tied into a hundred or a thousand different communities simultaneously, each for a specific interest, and each providing small amounts of necessary fulfillment. As Hobbes outlined the absolutist nature of the individual and state, we now interact in communities of this same absolutist nature between the user and the interest at hand: a digital *Leviathan* reproduced a thousandfold across cyberspace, appealing to all and constantly courting attention and engagement. While traditional community and digital *Leviathans* emerge from the same base desire for order and connection, beyond this, they have little in common. Political discourse, once exercised on the local level in "township democracy," is now confined largely to cyberspace and national-scale politics. The local park's renovations take a backseat to analyses of national elections or scrutiny of the federal government. Moreover, the abstract composition of each online community means each member of the collective varies widely in every aspect of identity.

The traditional community was always geographically based, neatly confined into counties or neighborhoods that had an exact population tally and produced similar ways of life for all residents, regardless of individual identity. Digital communities not only have anonymity and extreme variations in individual identity but also exponentially larger numbers of users that constantly fluctuate. The problem of disorganization and impersonality is compounded by a lack of personal accountability. This has, perhaps predictably, allowed political and cultural debate to be constantly corrupted by misinformation and emotion. Perhaps most importantly, though, the immense power of the internet solely lies in the hands of the modern state, which alone possesses the authority to enact regulations, censor dangerous content, and manipulate integral elements of cyberspace. Today's digital *Leviathans* can therefore be seen as a dangerous answer to the atomization of traditional community, operating indirectly at the behest of the state to reinforce the individualist foundations of modernity. The march of progress continues, and the individual gains "not only compensation for the frustrations and insecurities to which he is heir in mass society but also the intoxicating sense of collective freedom."

As our reliance on the digital world has expanded, so too have the dramatic repercussions of this binding attachment been slowly illuminated. For the first time, the youth are being educated and formed by a new age of technology that sees their individualism and personal sovereignty attain new heights. As the information age races ahead, the once extensive community bonds invigorated by the populous have slowed to a near halt. For most of the world, digital *Leviathans* have settled comfortably into the position of intermediaries between individual and state, whilst truly being committed to directly strengthening and legitimizing the state's expanding hold over authority. The full ramifications of this dynamic remain to be seen, but increasing dependence on digital *Leviathans* to find community fulfillment still produces the same alienation that Nisbet warns of in *The Quest for Community*. Regarding the communal upheaval impacting the modern individual, he writes, "the older, rationalist conception of stable, self-sufficing man has been replaced, in large measure, by a conception of man as unstable, inadequate, and insecure when he is cut off from the channels of social membership and clear belief". Anxieties and frustrations associated with the alienated individual have yet to fade in the digital realm and can even be exacerbated in echo chambers of doubt, fear, and obsession, culminating in dependency and moral decay. It's an oversimplification to view the internet as a simple mass of these echo chambers and digital *Leviathans*, however. There are certainly many vibrant communities and organizations aided by a digital presence, and as with the modern state, who can doubt that cyberspace has produced "some of the most important humanitarian gains and personal liberties in Western culture?" At the same time, who can doubt that this evolution of the modern state's revolutionary spirit has also formed "problems of balance of authority in society and problems of associative and personal freedom which are very nearly overwhelming at the present time?"

The Quest for Community is a sobering reflection on contemporary Western liberalism and the consequences of accelerating today's world without prudence. Nisbet is far from optimistic regarding modernity's impact on the community, but nonetheless, there is room left for hope. As the book's foreword observes, "it's possible for both liberal government and liberal economics to flourish without descending into tyranny, so long as they allow, encourage, and depend upon more natural forms of community." If the state fosters a supportive environment for enduring communities, it may be able to enact a reconciliation between technology and traditional communities. Nisbet himself envisions an alternate form of state where "its power will be limited by associations whose plurality of claims upon their members is the measure of their members' freedom from any monopoly of power in society." Despite the consequences of digital *Leviathans* and the atomization of community, Nisbet's insights still offer a path forward. His vision of a harmonized society actively cultivating an intermediary to check the growth of state power remains a compelling model for the contemporary



world, where society accommodates the constant need for community and opportunities for technological advancement.

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Can Institutions Save the Ongoing Water Crisis?

12/2/2025 • By **Christiana Markulis**

Research Question

In Jaroslav Tir and Douglas M Stinnett's article "Weathering climate change: Can institutions mitigate international water conflict," the authors explore the correlation between climate change and militarized conflict in relation to transboundary rivers as a causal mechanism. Rivers serve an important role for many countries and can be the most prominent resource depending on the geological location. Farmers use rivers for irrigation properties to water and sanitize crops, and different governmental agencies may even purify river water for drinking water. However, due to climate change, precipitation patterns have begun to drastically change; for many countries, this has been in the form of prolonged periods of drought and dry spells, especially during the summertime when water is most crucial. Tir and Stinnett hypothesize that with increased drought affecting these transboundary rivers, conflicts are bound to occur between different nations due to increased competition and resource scarcities. This is significant to research because with increased climate change and longer periods of drought in certain regions, militarized conflict may increase due to tensions over transboundary rivers.

Theory

Despite this, the authors argue that with a strong institutional presence in these areas, militarized conflict will not develop into something greater, such as a full-scale war. They claim that while climate change has been shown to increase conflict, due to conflict resolution and treaty enforcement (especially in the forms of river treaties), conflict has been reduced or subsidized before it can come to fruition. Tir and Stinnett theorize that this can occur through several different aspects that are associated with institutionalized presence (Tir & Stinnett, 2012, p.3). The first indication is that institutions present can act as an intervening factor between climate change and conflict. If climate change continues and the effects become more prominent, especially in relation to resource scarcity, the authors argue that strong international institutional presence may be able to elevate conflict, despite possible empirical evidence, revealing null findings. The second indication is increased policy response. While the effects of climate change are unpredictable, the aftermath of climate change can be devastating for communities. If studies prove that strong institutional presence, especially in the form of water scarcity, is present within a region, this may lead to more environmental policy change worldwide to alleviate militarized conflict. Because of this, they claim that institutions are extremely influential in mediating conflict and creating long-term solutions through policies and treaties.

Tir and Stinnett observe the connections between climate change, shared rivers, and international conflict. In their opinion, water is an important asset to many countries and can dictate their way of life: from agriculture, economic growth, and human migration. With an increase in global temperatures due to climate change, water scarcity may affect numerous socioeconomic factors. Climate change is already predicted to create prolonged dry spells during the summer when water is most crucial, and if

countries share transboundary rivers, lakes, or reservoirs, conflict may arise due to competition for resources (Tir & Stinnett, 2012, p.5). The authors are also concerned with the possibility that the value of water will increase politically and economically; therefore, heightening tensions further, as water is a necessity to thrive, which may increase conflict and tension in an economic aspect as well. In sum, their theory is that some aspects of climate change are unavoidable and creates water scarcity. However, with strong, institutionalized water treaties implemented, militarized conflict can be mitigated due to oversight, regulation, and mediation.

Evidence

The research design encompassed in the article involves examination of 315 river treaties confirmed by the *International Freshwater Treaties Database*. They also solely examine dyads (two entities) because there are typically two actors or countries that share transboundary rivers, and militarized conflict is depicted between two actors. In addition, they chose a large-scale analysis in order to not only account for various regions, but to control for other factors that may influence the study (economy, political regime, etc.), as well as to not obtain data solely from higher profile cases. There are two main independent variables examined in this study - the river treaty institutionalization index and water availability. The river treaty institutionalization index is defined as a scale that has a set of features that define an institution, including monitoring, enforcement, conflict resolution, and international organization. Based on this information, a scale was used to determine the level of institutionalization a river treaty had. The number 0 represented no institutional features, 1 containing institutional features, etc., and 4 demonstrating that the river treaty encapsulated all four features listed above. Tir and Stinnett note that the first three components are variables recorded in the *International Freshwater Treaties Database*, and international organizations were accounted for in the comments, yet were still included in the number ranking. Additionally, water availability in a given dyad was accounted for by collecting data pertaining to renewable water per capita data through the *FAO Aquastat database* (Engelman, 2000).

For the dependent variable, Tir and Minette focused on militarized conflict. For data collection, they examined militarized conflict that occurred from riparians, defined as living or located on the bank of a natural watercourse (such as a river) or sometimes of a lake or a tidewater. Which, in this study, refers to a dyad. To identify militarized conflict, the researchers chose the Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) scale; each dyad-year analyzed is given a score of 1 if it experiences a MID and a zero if it does not.

A wide range of control factors were also accounted for in the study in order to achieve the most accurate results. A variety of factors, as explained by Tir and Stinnett, can result in or exacerbate river conflict between two dyads: upstream/downstream relationships between dyads (with or without treaties), the number of treaties in effect, trade interdependence, joint democracy, and economic development. These factors have been shown to have an impact on the power dynamics between two dyads, especially their involvement in signing/forming treaties. For example, if a country has the geologic advantage of being upstream, it can impose sanctions on the other country during times of prolonged drought and increased tension, such as economic and political sanctions. Additionally, Tir and Stinnett also examine variables relating to the realist theory. The different factors they account for in relation to the realist theory are relative power distribution, whether or not dyads were allies, and distance/proximity. For relative power distribution, the authors used the Correlates of War Material Capabilities composite index to compare the strength of one country to another in accordance with their capabilities. The variables of allies and distance/proximity were also included, because if the dyads/countries were allies, it was assumed they would be less likely to engage in conflict, and

distance/proximity has a large impact on whether or not a country engages in conflict. These were accounted for in the method of analysis and were measured through a binary time-series cross-section.

Evaluation

The first model of research was solely done by examining the control variables. While the variables applied from the realist theory (relative power distribution, allies, distance/proximity) were shown to be consistent with other research findings (countries who have disturbed power, are allies, and are further away from proximity to each other are less likely to go to war/create conflict), joint democracy was shown to have more significance from prior knowledge. This was due to trade interdependence having a significant relationship with joint democracy; when trade interdependence was removed from the first model, joint democracy became significant, proving that democratic nations, regardless of trade, are less likely to engage in conflict/war.

In Model 2, Tir and Stinnett add the independent variables of river treaty institutionalizations and water availability. Based on their data using the river treaty institutionalization index, the *International Freshwater Treaties Database*, and the numeric scale they formed, they found that the water availability coefficient was statistically significant. This means that the more freshwater there is in a region, the less likely conflict is to occur; on the contrary, this proves that water scarcity can promote militarized conflict due to competition for resources. The chance of militarized conflict also increases when two countries share the same water source. Due to the prominence of climate change, causing long periods of drought and dry spells, resulting in less water availability, this proves that climate change can inadvertently cause conflict. Additionally, the other independent variable of river treaty institutionalization shows that the more institutionalized a river treaty is, the less likely militarized conflict will occur between two countries (Tir & Stinnett, 2012, p.9). With highly institutionalized river treaties, Tir and Stinnett note that more provisions for monitoring, enforcement, and delegation of authority are more likely to be present, which can mitigate future militarized conflict.

Tir and Stinnett's conclusion, given the data, is that while climate change is unpredictable and there are some circumstances the population cannot control for, water scarcity is/has the ability to become an extremely prominent issue between countries that share transboundary rivers. Despite this, if strong institutionalized river treaties are implemented in the region, militarized conflict is less likely to occur. The authors also add that personal direction bias may occur in the future. However, it is important to note that institutionalized treaties may be formed in areas already experiencing militarized conflict and are unstable due to other factors outside of water scarcity, and therefore, treaties may appear to be less sufficient in combating conflict than they actually are. In order to promote institutionalized treaties and governance in these vulnerable areas, Tir and Stinnett conclude that institutions should opt into a non-regret strategy; even if the future effects of climate change are not as significant as approximated, withstanding river treaties can be designed to have less drawbacks.

Despite the extensive research and models depicting the data collected, various critiques and questions arise. Firstly, on page 8, Tir and Stinnett note that there are limitations using the MID data; The data from the index does not specify whether or not the militarized conflict was due to water or river relations. While it was under the assumption that water scarcity can impact various socioeconomic factors that may drive a force to engage in militarized conflict, their research is skewed if the MID data collected was generalized conflict rather than water-driven. Another question that arises from the research is how treaties will be enacted, especially in dyads with the upstream/downstream condition. In the paper, it mentions how countries or governments located upstream in a transboundary river may be able to allocate resources better, and can reduce flow to the region located downstream in the

form of dams, canals, etc. We have seen this erupt in current events with the Nile River; Ethiopia built a dam (located upstream of the Nile) that has cut off supply to both Sudan and Egypt. Because these regions are dry and arid, which has been exacerbated by climate change, these regions rely heavily on the Nile River, and conflict has begun to arise due to this. While Tir and Stinnett emphasize the importance of institutionalized river treaties, they do not take into account how this may be enacted. For example, would Ethiopia have more superiority in the treaty because it is located at the “base” of the river? Or would Sudan, due to their reliance on agriculture? And, therefore, water is considered a crucial asset in their way of life.

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The Implications of EU Immigration

12/2/2025 • By **Preston Meyer**

Since the first major wave of migrants in 2015, the European Union has been completely entrenched in the realm of immigration. Is immigration good for the EU? Is it bad? Is it both? Therefore, what is the net outcome? While the argument laid out is not comprehensive, it provides a foundational framework to better look at the issue through different lenses. Nevertheless, the argument proposed is that the benefits of immigration outweigh the drawbacks of immigration due to the economic advantages.

Costs of Immigration

So, what are the drawbacks of immigration? This article identifies 3 key costs of immigration. The first drawback is arguably the least backed and least important of the rest. The first con is that immigration imposes a burden on states, both fiscally and time-wise. Katharina Spiess shared in a DW News interview that “reports say we are not at the end of the integration process” (DW News, 2020). This implies that much of the time that the EU could have spent on other issues, such as the rising cost of housing, has failed to do so because immigration has become such a pressing issue that needs to be addressed. Moreover, the money that has been spent to mitigate the migration crisis could have very well been used for other issues that impact the citizens of the EU as well. In a documentary provided by the Council of the EU, we learn that the EU has provided Turkey with three billion euros to construct a refugee facility (EU Migration Crisis, 2016). This is money which could have been spent on cohesion policy funds to benefit the infrastructure within the EU.

The second drawback of immigration is the unfortunate correlation of an increase in an angry population, which leads to xenophobia and far-right parties coming into government. Government policies permitting open borders and increased immigration have led to heightened levels of xenophobia. CBC News reported that although Angela Merkel stated, “we can do this,” the people have said, “No, we cannot.” They continue by stating that in Germany, PEGIDA, an anti-Islam political movement, rose into popularity in part due to the influx of migrants into Germany. Moreover, AfD has also gained political traction due to this ideology, as they report (CBC News: The National, 2017). These, in particular, are all concerning for citizenship experience because it has allowed for the lowering of the “threshold for brutal language,” as Michael Sturmer remarked (CBC News: The National, 2017). The anger and rise of far-right parties permit more hatred and a less peaceful place for all.

The third con with immigration is closely related to the second. This drawback relates to the welfare state of the state. With an increase in angry citizens who vote for far-right parties, these parties are more in favor of policies which cut the welfare state. This means less government spending for citizens in areas like healthcare, pensions, education, and more. Unfortunately, when the social cohesion



deteriorates, so does the welfare state. This is concerning due to the fact that the welfare state evolved as a national security strategy (Derderyan).

Benefits of Immigration

The sources provided for this assignment frame one of the key benefits of immigration, not in economic terms but in moral ones. As stated by the Council of the EU, policy targeted towards immigration “started about saving lives” (EU Migration Crisis, 2016). Photos of Alan Kurdi, a child who was photographed lying face down on the shore after drowning at sea, struck a chord in many European hearts. Facilitating immigration into the EU was, in part, an emotional decision that made many citizens and policymakers feel better about themselves. In a quite sexist and snarky comment, made by Sturmer that has no foundation, Angela Merkel relied on her emotions to make a decision on opening borders because it made her and others feel better (CBC News: The National, 2017).

Our second benefit is more economically centered. The first benefit is that immigration mitigates the problem of labor shortages in the EU. This argument presents itself not as a good thing for the EU, but as one that argues immigration is necessary for the EU. As TDLR News reports, the EU suffers from a diminishing workforce (TLDR News, 2018). The declining population is bad for states because without enough workers, there is not enough to cover the costs of running the government. If there are less people in a state, then either more taxes need to be collected per person, or the services offered by the government need to be reduced. (TLDR News). Both of these options are wildly unpopular and will not reflect well on the parties in power who suggest these options come election time. The alternative option is to bring in a young workforce that is capable of filling the gaps in shortages and who can pay taxes that go towards welfare programs like pension funds. Pension funds are particularly important for the EU because, as reports have shown, in 2050, 26% of Europe's population will be over 65. In Germany, the ratio of worker to pensioner is set to fall to 2:1 (TLDR News, 2018). The solution is simple: more immigrants.

Moreover, the third benefit of immigration is also based on economic principles. Those who argue that immigrants are not necessary and that EU states can just borrow money to cover the economic gap that arises out of a declining workforce, omit one very important aspect of borrowing: Debt. TLDR reports that “EU countries have already been doing this [borrowing] and now their debt is nearly 90% of the continent's GDP” (TLDR News, 2018). It is not sustainable to continue to borrow from other countries and increase national debt. However, immigrants, once again, are the saviors for EU economies because they can be taxed, which can be used to lower the national debt on top of stimulating the economy.

Conclusion

The benefits of immigration, particularly the economic benefits of immigration, outweigh the costs of immigration. Far-right parties have become popular not just for immigration factors alone. The Liberal International Order has created winners and losers, and the losers tend to turn towards far-right parties because they offer a change to their economic situation. The issue of immigration only makes the problem worse, but the absence of immigration would not eliminate that far-right party from their extreme policy suggestions in whole. Moreover, the costs to the welfare state in terms of the particular funds that may be cut do not outweigh the benefits that immigration has to the welfare state. Moreover, it is apparent that EU leaders consider this an issue worth their time and money, despite there being other issues that are also pressing for EU citizens. It is because the economic benefits of immigration offset any negligence to other issues at this current moment.

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Young Voters: Why is Participation Higher in Some Countries than in Others?

12/2/2025 • By Alice Pomi

The Generational Gap in Voting Reveals the Many Faces of Democracy

In many Western democracies, young people are voting less and less — but not everywhere. The generational gap in voter participation is reshaping the very meaning of democratic citizenship. In recent years, we often hear that young people have stopped voting. In part, it's true, but we forget to take all democratized countries into account. In many northern European democracies, young people between the ages of 18 and 25 participate almost as much as adults. In others, however, such as Italy, France, and the United States, abstention among the same age group is much higher and more evident. According to the website “Our World in Data,” in the French elections, only 72% of young people voted compared to 92% of those over 50. In the 2024 United States presidential elections, a higher turnout was recorded compared to previous elections, but still very low at 47% (CIRCLE Tufts University). In the 2024 European elections, the FEPS Foundation reported a significantly lower figure compared to other age groups: only 36% of those under 25 took part in the vote.

Did you know?

In Belgium, youth turnout can exceed 90% because voting is compulsory.

Why such differences?

The main differences are certainly due to the methods used to get people to vote. In Belgium, for example, voting is mandatory for all adult citizens. In Sweden, however, the same system is not in place, but those who reside in the country are included in the automatic population register and receive a voting notice. On the contrary, in countries where registration on electoral lists is voluntary and voting is not considered an obligation, participation tends to be significantly lower. Among other influencing factors, we find the economy: in contexts of job insecurity or youth unemployment, many young people tend to abstain from voting, believing it would not lead to any real change. Finally, issues of political language have a strong impact: electoral campaigns often speak to adults, forgetting about young people.

The Paradox of Engaged but Absent Youth

Despite the actual decline in youth participation at the polls, young people are still very interested in politics — just in a different way. They actively participate in other forms: through demonstrations on issues like war and climate, local associations, and social media. This can certainly be interpreted as a new form of engagement: less tied to political parties and more focused on concrete issues.



What Does This Mean for Democracy?

Voting matters: if voter turnout decreases, it is a warning sign that traditional politics can no longer properly represent young people. However, in countries where governments have invested in civic education and digital access to voting, participation has increased. The challenge for governments is to make young people feel that they are part of the decision-making process.

Conclusions

Young people are not the “disinterested generation,” but the one that asks for a different way to participate. Comparing the differences between countries shows us that disengagement is not inevitable — it depends on how democracy adapts to those who will be the citizens of the future. Maybe the point isn’t that young people don’t care — maybe they just don’t feel seen. When politics feels distant or unrelatable, stepping back can feel easier than showing up. Yet, young people are still engaging in protests, communities, and conversations that matter to them. They haven’t stopped caring — they’re simply asking for a democracy that listens, includes, and evolves. If that happens, participation won’t be a struggle. It will feel natural — something worth showing up for.

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CU BOULDER STUDENT FEATURE**Applying Artificial Intelligence in Legislative Data Modeling:
A Case Study of Rep. Junie Joseph and Sustainable
Development in Colorado**

12/2/2025 • By **William Callahan**

**Introduction**

During my final semester at CU Boulder, I was lucky enough to be selected for a student internship with Rep. Junie Joseph, serving as the legislator for the same district where I have pursued my undergraduate education. The fundamental political science principles I memorized in class, notably “the law of the consent of the governed,” unfolded before me as I compiled constituent feedback data and aided her in the House chamber. This study will use my personal experiences in committee hearings, discussions with other representatives, and general attitudes I encountered while walking the state capitol to link and examine the impacts of polarization on sustainable and environmental legislation in Colorado. This project will focus on qualitative assessments and learned political science information to inform my discussion.

Additionally, I will include varying statistical analyses looking into constituency outreach received by the office to help visualize my conclusions. Joseph’s policy moves, common patterns of partisanship, and an observed feedback loop in Joseph’s legislative process will also be highlighted to outline the interconnectedness of regional politics with these broader themes. The final intended output of this



research will be to analyze the 2025 legislative session, taking Rep. Joseph as a case study, to weigh whether the evidence supports the idea that political polarization plays a significant role in Colorado's environmental policy momentum via party-line dynamics, stakeholder engagement, and/or constituency outreach.

Context

Even though they have little Republican support, the Democratic caucus continues to pass virtually every one of their environmental efforts. Throughout the 2023 and 2024 sessions, they preserved an overwhelming vote in both legislative bodies. Regardless, the Republicans do exist, even if their power in the state legislature is effectively zero; the active partisanship in the state aligns with the nationwide fault lines across the board. Although state legislatures are more bonded than the Fed with respect to policymaking, Colorado's tensions are increasing, mostly as a result of worries over the consumption of oil and gas. According to Woodruff (2024), there is a division in the prominent views toward the environment. Only ten percent of conservatives in Colorado feel worried about the impact of environmental degradation, in contrast to 80% of liberals. The remaining 10% is divided across some centrist and nonpartisan groups. "With few exceptions, Republicans in the Colorado General Assembly have continued in recent years to flatly deny the scientific consensus on human-caused climate change," said Chase Woodruff, a senior correspondent for Rocky Mountain PBS. Democrats, who won total control of state government in 2019 and have expanded their legislative majorities since then, broadly recognize the need to sharply reduce emissions but haven't always agreed on how to get there.

Boulder, a city that my professors refer to as their "living laboratory," considering the presence of the university, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the National Center for Atmospheric Research, and the National Institute of Standards and Technology. Representative Joseph has to balance their interests when it comes to climate legislation, as those prestigious institutions compose her district. Junie's election to the assembly in 2022 as the first Black member of the legislature makes her a historical symbol. Formerly, she served as a city councilor and even graduated with a law degree from CU Boulder. Therefore, there is no question about her experience as a leader educated in the needs of her people. Joseph isn't merely pushing forth bills by what she calculates will be most relatable, but rather leaning into conversations with constituents. Her aide, Breanna Miracle, confirmed that much in an interview that I had the chance to conduct, confirming that "Junie carefully listens to all of her constituents when she is determining the way she is going to vote on a bill," usually through interim advisory committee deliberation between sessions or in emails sent into the office.

At the very least, the vast majority of bill ideas she introduces, according to Breanna, are grounded both in scientific data and backed by the people of District 10. In times between sessions, Junie goes door to door, illustrating her leadership style that drives her policy-making process. As anticipated, during her first term in 2023, Governor Polis signed six of the bills that she had put forth into law, such as those that subsidized the price of electric vehicles as well as electric bicycles (Colorado General Assembly Database, 2025). She aimed to minimize carbon dioxide emissions and maximize rebates for renewable taxation in HB23-1272, one of her more all-encompassing legislative successes. The steps that she's taken have turned out to be to the benefit of the people that she's representing, with good pragmatic solutions to their issues of conservation. On a personal note, I found Representative Joseph to be a highly well-balanced, friendly, witty, and optimistic woman with a good head on her shoulders.

Methods

Research Design: This project was designed to be an informative case study combining personal experiences, current events reported in the media, and a quantitative data analysis of constituent emails, all of which were focused on Rep. Joseph's activity during the 2025 session.

Data Collection: During this research, I relied heavily on my first-hand knowledge and observations while sorting and categorizing constituent emails, attending committee hearings, and writing talking points for debate. I also monitored Joseph's environmental legislation progress from her past voting history and the bills she was the prime sponsor for. While assisting with legislative preparation, I observed some of the Energy and Environment Committee work that Rep. Joseph sits on. While attending those committee meetings, I took note of the argumentative styles, witness statements, and other recurring patterns of partisanship. In the following quantitative analysis, I utilized ChatGPT's data analysis feature to better visualize those patterns I observed. I trained the LLM to accurately display constituent sentiment by feeding the program *all* of the constituent emails sent to Rep. Joseph's office between January and the beginning of April and then having it account for emails only concerning environmental legislation. Additionally, AI was used to similarly code and produce a flow and web chart of the observations I made between Joseph and District 10. The broader web chart, depicting polarization trends dominating environmental debates this session, was generated from personal experience and why bills were either supported or opposed. For better context clues, I incorporated media coverage from this and past sessions to better analyze the scope of Joseph's progress as I finalized this research.

Partisan Debates and Rhetoric in Committee

My first-hand knowledge gained from attending committee sessions taught me essential skills in recognizing common arguments and clashing ideologies repeated over the course of the session. The arguments voiced against HB 25-1277, warning labels on fuel pumps, are a solid illustration of those clashes. This bill was first introduced on February 20th and has since passed the House on April 2nd (Fast Democracy Database, 2025). According to an opinion piece written by former Denver mayor Michael Hancock, he asserted that this is "an exercise in government overreach, a performative policy designed more to appease climate activists than to effect meaningful environmental change... Colorado lawmakers indulge in the fantasy that such paternalistic labeling will somehow alter consumer behavior." Hancock's stance aligns with the dominant conservative attitudes I observed in committee. The Democratic caucus maintained that this legislation would act as a catalyst to inform consumers of scientific findings about fossil fuels and the effects they have on climate change. Rep. Joseph additionally holds that this could be a potential way forward in stimulating positive attitudes towards cleaner modes of transportation.

Republicans are not on board with those ideas; I recall hearing common rebuttals citing economic strain on small businesses. For example, Republican Representative Ken DeGraaf is known for rebutting with, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions!" The utility and overall merit of legislation aimed at shifting attitudes toward oil and gas are consistently doubted by the GOP. They maintain that the Democrats aim to bully consumers and stigmatize petroleum rather than enact legislation to genuinely punch a measurable dent in emission levels. In my opinion, this argument is not necessarily fair, considering the content of the bill is stated to simply remind consumers of the direct correlation between fossil fuels and pollution, rather than require the use of alternatives. A blog post put out by the Colorado Chamber of Commerce adds context to this debate, saying that this requires labeling to be "directly affixed on fuel dispensing equipment or fuel containers and be replaced when not in 'excellent condition.'" A violation of this statute could lead to harsh civil penalties

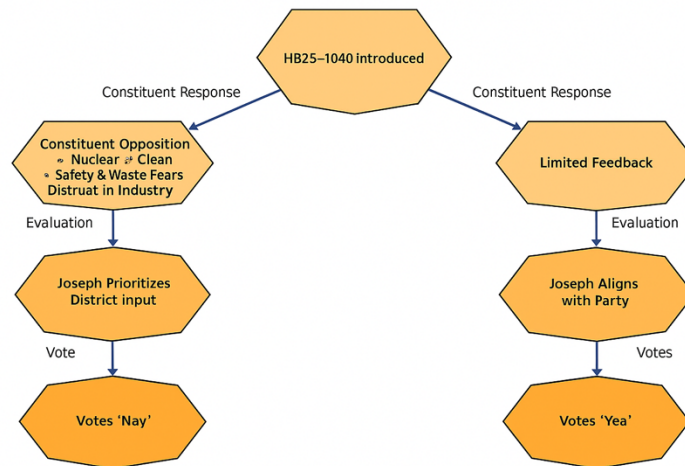
of up to \$20,000 and costly litigation” (Colorado Chamber of Commerce, 2025). The post concluded by saying, “HB-1277 and similar proposals will only create more costly litigation and regulations on the business community without making any significant progress towards cleaning our environment.” These contrasting attitudes toward environmental legislation continue to exemplify partisanship (see Figure 1).

The Utility On-Bill Repayment Program, HB25-1268, also showed similar clashes. This program is aimed at assisting low-income families in purchasing new home renovations, such as insulation, solar panels, or heat pumps that they otherwise could not afford. The committee’s Republican members are concerned that this could lead to financial entanglement, wrongfully positioning utility companies such as Xcel Energy as formal lenders, considering that payments would be made within their monthly utility bills. What I saw Republicans push as an overreach, Democrats identified as an asset for aiding low-income communities. I observed both sides regularly at odds with one another, not exclusively within the goal of their agendas, but mainly on their deeply rooted core differences. An example of bipartisanship, though, can be seen in the case of HB23-1075: Wildfire Evacuation and Clearance Time Modeling. This bill outlined wildfire evacuations and how some Republicans joined the Democrats in their work to enact revised public safety laws. Regardless of this legislation being introduced by Rep. Joseph and predominantly featuring environmentalism, the driver for this cohesion is founded on the *framing* of public safety. Otherwise, Republicans regularly emphasized the right to property, immediate financial effects, burdens on small businesses, and/or other reservations about governmental duty to intervene on matters of environmental policy.

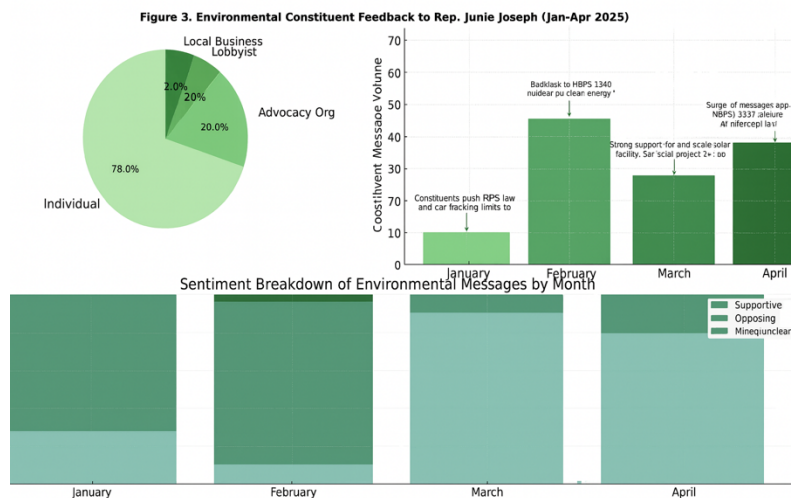
Constituent Communication and Decision Tree Analysis

I did observe that constituent outreach in Boulder does affect Rep. Joseph’s policymaking. Skimming environmental-priority emails sent to the office during the session, one can gauge by those who called or emailed us that there is resounding support for environmentalism echoed in District 10. However, Figure 3 illustrates that constituency opinion did in fact become exceedingly polarized on specific issues as a reaction to certain legislation. In February, constituents were concerned with the contents of HB25-1040, attempting to characterize nuclear power as a clean alternative energy source. I saw numerous negative messages flood into Joseph’s inbox while it was in committee. On ethical grounds, constituents did not agree with its objectives; these messages primarily vilified nuclear energy for being an expensive and dangerous method, diverting from true sustainable practices such as solar and wind. I spoke with Rep. Joseph about this bill, and in our conversation, she noted that while many Democrats supported nuclear energy, she broke from her coalition due to the significant influx of dissent from District 10. She said that while she often votes along party lines, she could not reasonably ignore her community, thus voting against HB25-1040. It is clear that Joseph cares more for her district and will ultimately override party sentiment given significant constituent responses (see Figure 2). Throughout those four months, almost all negative messages concerning the environment were dictated by that very single issue. The surge of opposition to HB25-1040 actually proves Boulder’s commitment to sustainability overall, considering the thoughtful and scientific rebuttals I read in those emails. The AI-generated decision tree, shown below, takes the events surrounding HB25-1040 and illustrates the causal relationship between District 10’s dissent towards the bill and Rep. Joseph’s ultimate ‘nay’ vote on the matter.

**Figure 2: HB25-1040 Decision Tree
Constituent Input and Legislative Behavior**



This chain of criticism was the exception to the rule. Almost three-quarters (74%) of the remaining emails sent in discussing environmental bills favored Joseph's stance. March and April both saw increased activity from constituent contacts as many poured in support. I skimmed over hundreds of messages to conserve ecosystems, ban glyphosate, or push for that labeling bill at fuel pumps. HB25-1277, which is the legislation designed to require warning labels on fuel pumps, elicited a surge of support. Some were against it, but the majority of messages were from environmentalists voicing support. I noticed that she made it her goal to clarify and make it clear that her job belongs to her constituency; Rep. Joseph proves that she acts on behalf of voiced opinions.



Environmental organizations were tapping into Boulder's engaged citizenry to swamp our inboxes with memos of support. While it appeared as though it was an individual emailing the office, these copy-and-paste messages, drafted by advocacy groups, spammed our inbox daily. For example, Joseph's aide said that during a contentious committee vote, she had seen more than 100 emails that morning alone attempting to influence her vote. This became a typical advocacy tactic, but it produced

little to no impact on a divided legislature: depending on the bill, supportive communications were delivered to Democratic offices, and negative ones were directed to Republican offices. The ultimate outcome was the fact that each legislator might hear a skewed choir of voices articulating the prejudices they held. For Rep. Joseph, to receive near-unanimous consent from her constituents worked well to bolster her resolve to forge onward and solidified her arguments after sorting out those more blast email types.

The Role of Large Language Models in Legislative Analysis

Although this project was largely qualitative in character, the use of large language models (LLMs) proved extremely valuable to this research. By training AI to code constituent emails both by sentiment and by specific issue, I was able to generate precise graphics (decision trees & web charts) that graphed patterns in feedback more clearly, much more efficiently than sorting by hand. Not merely was it easy to isolate high-volume issues—like pushback on HB25-1040—it also allowed for tracking the link between constituent dissatisfaction and Rep. Joseph’s voting decisions.

While I don’t contend that AI tools can or ought to replace traditional legislative analysis, I have found that they can complement it in meaningful ways. Large language models can scan dozens of messages in seconds, discern clusters of opinion, and organize communication thematically, enabling faster response and more responsive decision-making. I argue that employing artificial intelligence in this manner could become a direct catalyst for democracy, considering that more advanced deep learning has the potential to swiftly inform elected representatives of real-time data from their constituents. In an increasingly polarized setting, this would help legislators separate grassroots opinion from orchestrated campaigns.

This approach also opens new possibilities for scholars as well as public administrators: if ethically constructed and openly designed, LLM-based modeling can become an accessible methodology for measuring public sentiment in legislative bodies, most notably when email volume is high and resources for such tasks are limited. In a place like Colorado, where environmental politics mobilizes vast numbers of citizens, such an application could become an excellent cross between science-based policy agendas and short-term community concerns.

Discussion

I have watched Representative Joseph fight for actionable change and incorporate the opinions of her district into her decisions. The polarizing effects I studied are not necessarily a defining variable in constraining her legislative mobility. Rather, it is her discussions with key stakeholders and constituent outreach. For example, in her work with the On-Bill Financing program, she was not significantly hindered by her Republican counterparts, but more by her deliberations with industry leaders, like Xcel Energy, in her efforts to reform energy policy. The evidence, as I saw it, was ultimately the decisions made in Joseph’s office from January to April 2025. Considering that the feedback loops between District 10 and her office actually strengthen and insulate her progressivism. In the 2025 session, we saw a flood of emails on the subject of environmental policy, considering the varying proposals to build nuclear reactors and rely on them for “clean energy.” This instance was the primary culprit stimulating that spike in opposition; yet, it is arguable that this surge proves Boulder’s commitment to environmental stewardship, considering the harmful radioactive waste produced from nuclear fission. Most of the messages received during March and April were utilitarian in the sense that they were favorable with respect to robust environmental action: support for banning toxic chemicals, opposing further mining operations, and subsidizing climate education initiatives such as

HB25-1277. My access to these constituent contacts allowed me to accurately verify Rep. Joseph's commitment to her community.

The decision tree model, based on my observations, showcases a strong positive relationship between the district and the legislator. As she voted for and proposed more environmentally conscious legislation, more positive feedback was sent to the office. Although there was mixed dissent across the board, that percentage was not deemed representative enough of the district to change her stance on certain issues. This has policy implications in her pursuit and passage of sustainability policy. As observed in the other generated model (Figure 1), concerning predominant ideological disparities between the Democratic and Republican caucuses, Joseph is a fundamental catalyst for the observed contrast in Colorado politics. She has been the prime sponsor of several environmental bills during her relatively short time in the House, and in that time has contributed greatly to this polarization. This is not to say that her work is anything other than essential to a sustainable future, but it is important to note that, at least on the Democratic side of things, she weighs heavily on one side of the aisle.

Conclusion

In my final remarks, my experiences and observations have affirmed that the constituency does, in fact, shift their respective legislators' views. Regardless of commonly held beliefs that the average voter is helpless, I witnessed Rep. Joseph thoroughly listen to what her community was saying in their outreach. Supported by my generated data analysis and evidence from the HB25-1040 decision tree, there is evidence to argue that community attitudes contribute significantly to Rep. Joseph's decision-making. Representatives like Joseph act according to their constituents' feedback, while Republicans in more conservative seats react in their contrasting but similar way. Watching political philosophy naturally manifest as I participated in this session was astounding. It is clear from my observations, though, that legislation in Colorado is ultimately more constrained by concessions with stakeholders and primary actors a given bill will affect (e.g., Xcel Energy and on-bill financing). While polarization does affect bipartisanship, Colorado Democrats hold such a strong plurality and are secured by a liberal governor that collaboration with the GOP is not necessary or likely. I observed that environmental legislation made in the Boulder-Joseph feedback loop advanced exceptionally quickly, but other bills required greater consensus. District 10's enthusiasm for environmental stewardship adds to her rhetorical armor; she embodies the values of our community. Colorado is run by the Democrats; the continual roadblock of polarization that is seen on the national level is not nearly as troubling for her work.

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