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Sofia Frasz

Impacts of Censorship On Political Polarization

Abstract

Ideological and affective polarization across party lines has grown significantly in the United States in the past several decades. It has hit a high point in the years since President Donald Trump's election. At the same time, citizens who identify as conservative, Republican, or libertarian have expressed concerns over a perceived increase in social media censorship of their ideas. Whether real or perceived, the fear of censorship has directly contributed to a vicious cycle of political antagonism: those who feel censored (most likely to identify as right-leaning) blame members of the other party (who are often assumed to be left-leaning) for suppressing them, which angers those people and causes even further antagonism between more extreme members of each side. By examining ten case studies in three countries, this paper will demonstrate that governments and other entities which engage in censorship cause an increase in political polarization between their citizens.

Introduction

Democrats and Republicans have become increasingly polarized along party lines in recent decades. This polarization is both ideological and affective: both parties disagree on policy approaches and have become more hostile toward one another. Political polarization is not always a negative thing, because people should feel comfortable with holding and understanding a wide array of opinions. Diversity of thought and civil discourse should be encouraged in any society. However, much of the polarization in the United States is negative. Americans attack,

insult, and ostracize each other for holding different opinions, which drives rifts between families, coworkers, and friends (Dimock et al., 2014). Our society is becoming less tolerant of differing opinions, and many Americans seek to silence opinions with which they disagree. This threatens the quality of our democracy; according to Ziblatt and Levitsky (2018), if people view members of a different political party as enemies, then they will be more willing to ignore the rules of democratic governance, such as mutual tolerance and forbearance. Consequently, members of our government will be more willing to cheat the rules of our democracy in order to prevent the “enemy” from taking power, instead of engaging in civil discourse and respecting the regular peaceful exchanges of power. Affective polarization threatens both the quality of life of individual citizens, and the quality of our democratic political system.

The controversies surrounding election fraud, government policies on COVID-19, and even the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic have only exacerbated the problem, as partisans express distinct views on these topics. Republicans and others on the right have claimed that Big Tech (Google, Facebook, Amazon, Twitter, and Apple) has been censoring their opinions on these subjects by shadowbanning (deliberately hiding tags, search results, and posts) their social media posts, banning them outright from social media platforms for failing to follow vaguely-defined community guidelines, and fact-checking their posts, all without shadowbanning, banning, or fact-checking an equal proportion of posts by left-leaning users. These concerns peaked after Twitter and various other social media platforms banned President Trump’s accounts, and after Apple, Amazon, and Google removed the conservative-dominated social media app Parler from their stores.

My research will argue that government policies which encourage censorship, either implicitly or explicitly, will exacerbate political polarization (both ideological and affective) in

the United States because they will lead the right-leaning objects of censorship to resent those on the left. This is known as the backlash effect: when people's ideas are countered either by censorship or by conflicting information, they may double down on their current beliefs and feel more hostility toward the opposing side (Klein, 2018). Even though the majority of Democrats and leftists in the United States are not engaging in direct censorship of right-leaning voices, the most influential voices of progressivism (Big Tech corporations) are the loudest. This makes the average progressive a target for right-leaning resentment and creates a feedback loop of hostility between the left and the right. As a result, policies which support political censorship will worsen political polarization in the United States. Many proponents of censorship argue that it is sometimes necessary in order to prevent the spread of fake news and misinformation which could inhibit the functioning of our democracy by polarizing voters. However, evidence shows that the spread of fake news generally polarizes only strong partisans and has little impact on the majority of voters (Barbera, 2020). Moreover, exposure to fake news has been shown to merely strengthen voters' existing partisan alignments and has no effect on their intended vote choices (Guess et al., 2020). Therefore, censorship is an unnecessary overreaction to a problem with a very limited impact.

I will begin my paper by providing background information on partisan polarization in the US, explaining how government policies have led a few large technology corporations to dominate the market, and linking polarization with corporate censorship of right-leaning voices. President Trump's bans from major social media platforms and companies' attempts to remove Parler from their stores raise important questions. Is Big Tech engaging in censorship, even if these companies are not official government actors? Then, if these companies are censoring

right-leaning viewpoints, how will that impact political discourse in the United States? Will it worsen partisan and affective polarization between Republicans and Democrats?

In order to support my central argument regarding the perils of censorship, I will argue that these companies are indeed engaging in censorship, because they are not entirely private; and this is problematic for the state of political polarization in the US. All of these companies receive enormous tax breaks and other privileges from state and federal governments, which give them an unfair advantage over smaller companies who do not receive the same government assistance. This allows Big Tech to dominate the market, particularly in the area of social media. As a result, people who use platforms such as Facebook, YouTube (which is owned by Google) and Twitter have very few alternatives if they are banned from speaking on these platforms. When conservative and libertarian Twitter users tried to leave and join Parler instead, Google, Apple, and Amazon removed Parler from their stores. This raises important questions about freedom of speech, which is a cornerstone of a democratic society. Because state and federal governments have conferred unfair advantages upon Parler's competitors, these companies were able to grow powerful enough to exclude Parler, as well as the conservatives and libertarians who are more likely to choose Parler over Twitter, from the market. Thus, the members of Big Tech can no longer be considered truly private companies, so their banning, shadowbanning, and hostility toward right-leaning users counts as censorship which has been enabled by government action.

Next, using general political theory and case studies from three countries, including China, Russia, and the United States during World War I and the era of McCarthyism, I will demonstrate that policies supporting political censorship consistently worsen ideological and affective polarization. I will use polling data, legislation, historical narratives (including

first-hand accounts), and media reports to analyze the impacts of censorship policies on social and political behavior. From here, I will search for evidence of government persecution of specific political viewpoints, as well as social ostracism or violent retaliation against people who express certain political opinions, in order to demonstrate deepening ideological and affective polarization. In the end, I will conclude that the implementation of policies which reduce restrictions on speech and expression, whether those restrictions result from explicit governmental actions or actions by government-sponsored corporations, will be the first step toward fostering healthier political discourse between parties and reducing polarization.

Though the legal implications of Big Tech censorship are still relatively unknown, my research makes the political implications clear. The legal status of many Big Tech companies, as to whether they should be treated as public or private corporations under the law, is under debate in Congress. However, it is indisputable that Big Tech companies' censorship and labeling of information has led to intense political divisions between right-leaning and left-leaning users. Right-leaning users find themselves accused and sanctioned by these companies (and many right-leaning users believe that these companies lean to the political left) for "spreading misinformation," so they develop animosity toward left-leaning users and companies which encourage those measures. Because people who have strong political opinions tend to be emotionally attached to those opinions, left-leaning users feel attacked by right-leaning users who argue with them, so they attempt to suppress right-wing opinions. This creates a vicious cycle of affective polarization as arguments become more emotionally charged, and of ideological polarization as neither side is willing to compromise its beliefs or agree on any truths. My research will show that this cycle of political vitriol has been replicated many times throughout history in the United States and in countries with a more obvious history of political

copyright. There is a clear historical basis for the pattern that copyright creates, even though the legal implications of these corporations' actions are still unclear.

Normative Issues Related to Copyright

In *Farmers Educational & Coop. Union v. WDAY, Inc.* (1959), The US Supreme Court defined copyright as “any examination of thought or expression in order to prevent publication of 'objectionable' material” (Vile, 2009). This definition of copyright implies that both private and public entities can copyright material, and therefore potentially infringe upon individual rights to freedom of speech.

There are many supposed benefits of copyright. Many argue that copyright will curb the spread of fake news, reduce political extremism, and prevent people from falling into online echo chambers (spaces in which people are only exposed to viewpoints like their own, and never encounter any countervailing viewpoints). Some would argue that the costs of fake news outweigh the costs of copyright. Sunstein (2020) argues that fake news causes reputational harm to public figures and institutions. It can lead consumers of that fake news to distrust certain public figures and institutions, and low levels of public trust can harm a democracy by making it easier for people to label each other as “enemies.” When people automatically assume that others have bad intentions, they are less willing to work with each other to find common ground and solve problems. Furthermore, some fake news can go as far as becoming libelous, which causes legal issues for the parties involved. Deepfakes and doctored videos can also dangerously mislead the public and cause them to act on erroneous information. Sunstein (2020) writes that deepfakes can damage people's reputations by showing them committing crimes which they did not commit, or showing them endorsing an idea or a party which they do not support. In this

way, deepfakes can be used to manipulate the public into distrusting people and institutions who should be trusted to maintain democratic resilience. Needless violence, protests, hysteria, and unrest can erupt when people are led to act on false information. For these reasons, many argue that fake news must be identified and censored.

Echo chambers are often believed to present a similar problem by facilitating the spread of false information. In general, people tend to consume media that makes them psychologically comfortable and reinforces their current beliefs; on the internet, they can easily opt out of consuming political information that makes them uncomfortable and fall into echo chambers (Prior, 2005). According to Sunstein (2017), echo chambers can endanger democracy by spreading false information, preventing bipartisan cooperation on important policy initiatives, and affectively polarize partisans. At their worst, echo chambers and the consumption of fake news could lead to a large portion of the population developing false beliefs that motivate them to act on violent extremism. Thus, it may be argued that censorship is sometimes necessary to prevent people from consuming media that draws them toward extremism.

However, there is little empirical evidence to support the idea that these issues with fake news, echo chambers, and extremism are much of a problem in the first place. As a result, it does not make sense for social media platforms to censor users' posts. According to Barbera (2020), it is not even clear whether or not social media creates echo chambers. Some users may be able to use social media algorithms to their advantage and completely cut themselves off from any information that contradicts their worldviews, while others may be exposed to a significant amount of cross-cutting information through friends or other users who express a variety of political views. Then, according to Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), social media does not spread fake news in significantly harmful capacities (most people only saw around one to three fake

news stories on social media during the 2016 election cycle), and when people do encounter fake news, they are generally less likely to believe it than they are to believe real news; most people who encounter fake news are able to distinguish it from real news. As a result, censorship on social media attempts to fix a problem that does not really exist. In fact, there are reasons to believe that censorship creates more problems than it solves. Limiting the spread of fake news and misinformation when there is no compelling reason to do so can be harmful to democracy, because people believe that this form of censorship is an attack on their right to freedom of expression (Guess et al., 2020).

Today, with technology and social media platforms becoming an ubiquitous part of everyday life for individuals, businesses, and other entities, it is worth considering whether the technology and social media companies that comprise Big Tech can now be considered public utilities (like radio stations) or if they can still be considered privately-owned. The answer appears to lie somewhere in between these two options. These companies are owned by private individuals, not by members of government. However, virtually all of them receive copious amounts of funding from state governments, and benefit from tax breaks and other incentives which grant them an advantage over their smaller competitors. Therefore, although the Big Tech companies are technically privately-owned, they maintain their dominance over the technology market with a significant amount of help from government entities and special policies, so they cannot truly be considered private businesses. The significant amount of government investment in the Big Tech companies grants them a status that lies somewhere between that of a private company and a public utility; like public utilities, these platforms provide a service to the general public (Wex Definitions Team, 2020) and receive some public (taxpayer/government) funding, but they are privately-owned at the same time. As a result, because these companies have some

characteristics of public utilities, their censorship of “misinformation” is worrisome because it excludes people who hold certain political beliefs from services which their taxpayer dollars fund. Thus, Big Tech censorship is akin to government censorship because these companies deplatform users while accepting subsidies and incentives from governments.

Big Tech censorship is of particular concern at this moment because millions of individuals and businesses have come to rely on these large platforms to gain an audience, to advertise, and to monetize their work. If these platforms prevent people from accessing utilities which their taxpayer dollars fund, it raises serious questions about whether government-funded entities should have the power to decide who gets to use other taxpayer-funded services, and it prevents people from using crucial public resources that their customers and audience members use to learn about their products and follow their work. Big Tech censorship matters because it can completely disconnect individuals and businesses from the people who fund their livelihoods. Entire businesses built on platforms like YouTube and Instagram can be destroyed overnight if Big Tech companies decide that they disagree with a business’s message or ideals. Once again, because Big Tech companies receive significant government subsidies, this is akin to the government paying one of its branches to decide which beliefs, messages, and ideals are acceptable to disseminate, which raises serious implications for users’ First Amendment rights to freedom of expression.

The Big Tech Oligopoly: Where It Came From and Why It Matters

Over the past century, the consolidation of media ownership has led to our current debates over censorship. Media consolidation causes concerns over censorship because it limits viewers’ choices with regards to the viewpoints they consume, and with regards to the

viewpoints they wish to express. Opinions which differ from those approved by the six companies (GE, NewsCorp, Disney, Viacom, Time Warner, and CBS) that own nearly all media outlets in the United States may be excluded entirely. By contrast, if viewers and users had more media choices than those owned by the six major companies, they would be able to see and express a wider variety of viewpoints. When people feel limited with regards to the ideas that they can consume and express, they begin to feel marginalized and even disliked by those who are in charge of the moderation of ideas, because they are emotionally attached to their beliefs and do not want to feel like their beliefs are being attacked (Klein, 2018). This causes people to double down on their beliefs and develop feelings of resentment toward the people who are perceived to be blocking or attacking their beliefs. This process results in affective polarization because it leads one side to believe the other side is marginalizing it.

A specific timeline of policies has led to the extreme media consolidation that we see today. It is important to understand the history of media consolidation so that we can identify the root causes of our current issues with censorship. We cannot solve our current issues without understanding how they came to be in the first place. If we understand the root causes of media consolidation in the United States, then we can address those root causes directly and purposefully. This will enable us to solve these problems more efficiently than if we merely attacked the social and political symptoms resulting from media consolidation. Addressing the symptoms without addressing the causes may lead us to short-term solutions, but will not generate any meaningful, lasting changes.

The foundations for media consolidation were laid in 1927 when Congress passed the Radio Act, which empowered the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) to regulate radio broadcasts. The FRC could now issue and deny licenses to radio operators, which prompted concerns about

radio operators' First Amendment rights. Essentially, the federal government could now determine who could and could not use a specific type of public forum to spread a message. Specific radio frequencies were reserved for specific licensed broadcasters, to be used for a specific purpose (Hazlett, 2018).

In 1934, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) replaced the FRC. The FCC's control expanded beyond that of the FRC and narrowed the market of communications technologies that were allowed to compete with each other. Conventional wisdom holds that such regulation became necessary due to a market failure inherent to the radio industry. It is often said that there were too many competing channels which led to harmful static interferences and other negative externalities. People worried about the industry drowning itself in a storm of competition for space on the radio waves, and that regulation was necessary in order to ensure the proper allocation of resources among these competitors (Hazlett, 2018).

By 1952, these policies enabled a few major networks to control 95 percent of all radio stations in the United States (Matzko, 2021). As radio broadcasts declined in popularity, these major networks began to shift their capital investments to television. This left some openings in the radio industry for independent broadcasters, many of whom leaned strongly to the political right. A new generation of radio broadcasters deemed the Radio Right emerged rapidly and began attacking left-leaning Americans as communists and traitors during and shortly after the McCarthy Red Scare. As the Radio Right grew more popular in the early 1960s, the FCC began to enforce a set of rules known as the Fairness Doctrine, which stipulated that in order to keep their licenses, radio broadcasters needed to give equal attention to opposing viewpoints on their programs. As a result, direct criticism of Democrats, particularly the Democratic politicians in power at the time of the Fairness Doctrine's implementation, became riskier and costlier to

members of the Radio Right. Many radio station owners outright dropped conservative broadcasters because those broadcasters jeopardized their ability to maintain their licenses.

Over the next several decades, the Fairness Doctrine was gradually dismantled and conservative broadcasters made a comeback (Matzko, 2021). However, the Telecommunications Act of 1996 ushered in a new era of even more advanced media consolidation. Corcoran (2016) writes, “In 1983, 50 companies owned 90% U.S. media. Since the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the act that reduced the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulations on cross ownership, 90% of US media, is owned by 6 companies.” The Telecommunications Act of 1996 eliminated the cap on the number of media companies that a parent company can own, which allowed larger companies to buy up hundreds of smaller ones. This law is intended to be an amendment to the Communications Act of 1934, which initially created the FCC to regulate media companies and radio broadcasting.

In summary, this timeline establishes how consolidation began with the FRC and FCC being created to determine who is allowed to use certain communications technologies, and was most recently solidified through the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Due to this chain of events, six companies now own 90 percent of American media companies, and those companies (along with the Big Tech members) receive copious subsidies from state and federal governments. State and federal subsidies grant Big Tech and the six major owners an advantage over the media market, which enables them to unfairly maintain dominance over their competitors. This presents a problem for users because their options for media consumption and social media platforms are all funded and controlled by the same sources, so those options are extremely limited and homogeneous. If users are dissatisfied with or banned from using a certain

platform, moving to another platform is not always a legitimate option because that platform is likely controlled and moderated by the same parent company.

Therefore, once again, there are practical consequences for the quality of our democracy regardless of whether or not these corporations' behavior is legal. For much of our history, the government was the only entity that was powerful enough to engage in large-scale censorship. Now, due to media consolidation, the members of Big Tech also have that power, and it is clearly leading to a self-feeding cycle of political polarization. It may or may not be legal for these companies to have some of the same powers as the government, and it may or may not be legal for them to censor, label, and ban users from their platforms based on users' political opinions, but the consequences are obvious. The same behavior in which governments engaged throughout the 20th century led to the same polarization issues that we see now in the 21st-century United States; only this time, the polarization is a result of corporate action and is not explicitly sponsored by the government. When compared to historical accounts, the consequences for our social and political lives are the same as they would have been if an authoritarian state rather than a corporation engaged in mass censorship. That is why this issue demands our full attention.

Case Studies

The following case studies from various time periods in China, Russia, and the United States demonstrate that censorship can take many forms, but it generally impacts people in the same way no matter its form. Censorship exacerbates affective polarization in every case studied in this section, and leads to ideological polarization in some notable cases. Affective polarization is denoted by instances of violence, coercion, and other negative behaviors towards the targets of

editorial. Ideological polarization is denoted by an increasing ideological divide between the targets and the perpetrators of censorship, and an inability to agree on basic truths.

I. China

Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution began in 1966, with the intention of eliminating capitalism and traditional Chinese culture, and replacing those systems with the Maoist ideology (Lamb, 2005). Chairman Mao wanted to implement communism in its purest form, as he believed that pure communism would enable the proletariat revolutionaries to thrive without oppression from a wealthy ruling class. His regime encouraged members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to identify class enemies, who were vaguely-defined as those who expressed anti-revolutionary sentiments or who were simply not fervent enough in their support of Maoism; however, there was no official protocol by which the CCP sought out and eliminated dissenters. This led to infighting among CCP members who accused each other of being class traitors, and violence erupted between coworkers, friends, neighbors, and family members as they struggled to prove their loyalty. Newspapers encouraged unions of workers and peasants to overthrow authority figures who lacked enthusiasm for the revolutionary cause. Millions were sentenced to years of labor in reeducation camps so they could be molded into proper Maoists.

The Mao regime's encouragement of censorship led to highly combative, accusatory political discourse. One young student, Rae Yang, recounts the impact of her revolutionary fervor in her memoir, *Spider Eaters* (1997). She explains that Chairman Mao's ideology delivered a message of empowerment: people who are traditionally expected to submit to authority, such as students and children, were strongly encouraged to defy orders from teachers and parents who did not appear to support the revolutionary cause. Consequently, when the opportunity arose to

accuse her schoolteacher of simply lacking enthusiasm for the revolution, she rallied her classmates. They searched her home for evidence of dissent and posted a dazibao (a poster expressing dissatisfaction with an authority figure (Kluver, 2021) on the teacher's bedroom wall in order to shame her into changing her thinking.

In another memoir, *Under The Red Sun* (1968), Fan Cao describes her conflicts with her parents as a teenager who also felt empowered by Maoist rhetoric. During the Cultural Revolution, people were led to believe that Chairman Mao was a god who would lead them to save the world and liberate humanity from the oppression of the capitalist class. Children were taught to worship Mao, even if it meant defying their parents. Fan Cao's parents were university administrators, and thus part of the privileged intellectual class that was automatically anti-revolutionary. As the daughter of so-called class enemies, she became a target of relentless bullying and abuse by her classmates and other fervent revolutionaries. Desperate to prove her loyalty to the Maoist ideology, she wrote a dazibao and publicly denounced her parents.

When people are automatically guilty until proven innocent, they go to extremes to distance themselves from any implication of guilt. The Mao regime gave a somewhat vague criteria for guilt; while it included some specific categories of people (intellectuals, the wealthy, and pro-establishment, anti-revolutionary authority figures), people's loyalty could be questioned for a crime as small as failing to display adequate enthusiasm for the regime. Thus, all citizens had a positive duty to be as expressive as possible, and an easy way to confirm one's loyalty in the absence of any definite measures was to compare oneself to people who could be proven less enthusiastic. As the cases of Rae Yang and Fan Cao demonstrate, children and teenagers became desperate to prove their loyalty to the revolutionary cause primarily when pressured by their peers. They are galvanized into action when their status among their peers is threatened. If Rae

Yang had not joined her classmates in denouncing their teacher, her classmates would likely have turned on her and accused her of sympathizing with a class enemy. Likewise, if Fan Cao had not denounced her parents, her classmates' bullying would have continued. In this way, the Mao regime fostered aggressive, accusatory political discourse by encouraging people to attack those who expressed either the wrong opinions or failed to express the right ones. These anecdotes also demonstrate that privately-enforced censorship can be every bit as destructive to a society as government-enforced censorship, especially when a government supports the censorship efforts of private entities.

In the 21st century, China seems to have come a long way from attacking citizens who express dissatisfaction with their government. However, it is arguable that the Chinese government has simply gotten better at hiding its censorship efforts from the public. Censorship manifests in many complex ways in present-day China. Xu and Albert (2017) report that the Chinese government uses subtler tactics such as libel lawsuits alongside more blatant tools such as arrests and blocking sites in order to prevent citizens from accessing and spreading potentially "dangerous" information. Even though China's constitution supposedly protects citizens' rights to freedom of expression, the Chinese government frequently punishes citizens for endangering the country by exposing state secrets, for which there is no official definition. The Chinese government employs over a dozen different departments that control the flow of information through the country, along with over two million public opinion analysts who monitor people's internet posts and searches. The government also uses a variety of tactics to suppress journalists, such as "dismissals and demotions, libel lawsuits, fines, arrests, and forced television confessions" (Xu and Albert, 2017).

In 2009, The Guardian reported that Chinese journalist Liu Xiaobo had been sentenced to eleven years in prison after publishing Charter 08, an appeal for political liberalization and an end to the CCP's dominance. During a two-hour trial, Liu was accused of subverting the government through his calls for a constitutional amendment, separation of powers in the government, republican governance, and free and fair elections. Most Chinese citizens were unaware of his arrest and of the publication of Charter 08, because various government agencies blocked access to subversive information. When Liu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010, the Chinese government arrested any journalists, writers, and other citizens who celebrated his achievement or expressed anger at his imprisonment (Reporters Without Borders, 2010).

In 2010, the Chinese government arrested another journalist, Tan Zuoren, for "criticizing the Chinese Communist Party and the government through his articles and diaries posted on-line and on overseas websites concerning the authorities' handling of the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989" (Amnesty International, 2010). Tan's arrest incited angry reactions from human rights defenders worldwide, and his trial was reported to be grossly unfair. His lawyers were prevented from presenting their witnesses, the evidence they had prepared, and their defense. Journalists from both China and Hong Kong were threatened, detained, and barred from covering the trial. The court sentenced Tan to five years in prison after delaying his trial for four months without any explanation.

During Mao Zedong's regime, the Chinese Communist Party relied more on citizens to police each other's speech than on direct government censorship. This has changed over the past several decades, as the CCP now prefers to police citizens itself. What has not changed, though, is the rhetoric that the CCP uses to justify censorship; in the 1960s and the 2010s, the CCP justified its censorship by claiming that dissenting opinions put others in danger. The Maoist

ideology pushed the narrative that people who did not support the Cultural Revolution sympathized with oppressive establishment authority figures. Their lack of enthusiasm was said to betray their desire to continue profiting off the oppression of the proletariat class. In recent years, the CCP has changed its narrative to argue that dissenting opinions threaten China's national security. People who question the government are accused of endangering state secrets and other sensitive national security information, albeit in the absence of any formal definition of what constitutes a state secret. Thus, the CCP has given itself free reign to label any information it dislikes as a threat to national security, because the definition of a state secret cannot be formally challenged.

II. Soviet Union/Russia

One of the defining features of Soviet-era communist censorship was its relentless persecution of artists who expressed disagreement with government decisions. Early on in the 1930s, Stalin's regime set guidelines for distinguishing acceptable art from unacceptable art (Wallach, 1991). Artists and other creatives who did anything other than worship Stalin through their work were imprisoned or killed. Thus, much like citizens under Maoist China, artists in the Soviet Union had a positive duty to glorify their leadership, and could not create any works that expressed disagreement with Stalin's regime or that depicted neutral subject matter. If artists did not encourage blind Stalin worship, they were considered enemies of the state, even if their work was not subversive or political. Especially in the early years of the Soviet Union, censorship was used as a tool to control the culture of the public and prevent ideological clashes from destabilizing the new communist regime (Markwick, 1935). The Bolsheviks could not afford to lose any revolutionary progress to dissenting political opinions.

Author and World War II veteran Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was arrested in 1945 for “criticizing Stalin in private correspondence” and sentenced to eight years of hard labor, followed by permanent exile (The Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn Center, 2021). These experiences motivated him to write a three-volume series titled *The Gulag Archipelago*, which describes his and other prisoners’ experiences in Soviet labor camps (Pearce, 2011). Even before its publication, the text was heavily censored, and needed to be hidden carefully from the KGB (the Russian Committee For State Security). When the KGB found out about Solzhenitsyn’s work in progress in 1965, they confiscated the text, determined to keep the truth about the communist regime hidden from public view. Solzhenitsyn and his friend Arnold Susi worked together in secret to make copies of the text. Susi and his daughter held the master copy in Estonia, away from the KGB, until the fall of the Soviet Union, while Solzhenitsyn smuggled a microfilmed copy into France. The text was first published in France in 1973, and translations in other languages followed soon after in 1974. In the decades since its publication, *The Gulag Archipelago* has been heralded as a literary masterpiece that gave a voice to those oppressed under communism (Wheatcroft, 1996). Malia (1977) writes that *The Gulag Archipelago* revealed the truth about Soviet labor camps to the West, and confirmed many Americans’ and Western Europeans’ suspicions about the ills of communism.

Another writer, Osip Mandelstam, was arrested and exiled to Cherdyn for writing a poem titled “Stalin Epigram” in 1934 (Mandelstam, 1971). The poem describes Stalin and his supporters in an unflattering manner, and emphasizes the ways in which Stalin delighted in using fear and harsh punishments to control the population. Notably, Mandelstam only read this poem to a few close friends at private gatherings--it was not formally published. He was arrested by NKVD (the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs) officers in the months after he presented

this poem, which arouses suspicions that people at these gatherings may have informed the NKVD about his heretical works (Shentalinsky, 1995). Given the climate of social and political tension that Mandelstam describes in his poem, as well as the harsh punishments (exile, hard labor, and execution) imposed upon political dissenters, it would not be unreasonable to suspect that those who attended Mandelstam's gatherings feared punishment for being complicit in an expression of disloyalty.

Stalin's regime, and the subsequent iterations of communist rule in the USSR, relied much more heavily on direct state censorship than on citizens censoring each other. If a person was suspected to be a class enemy or a counterrevolutionary, state actors would subject that person to a formal punishment such as arrest, exile, torture, hard labor, or execution (Alexopoulos, 2008). Like the Maoists, the Bolsheviks placed a strong emphasis on class alignment in their society. However, this focus on class expressed itself differently from the way it presented in China. Those who were most loyal to the proletariat cause became Communist Party leaders, and they were entrusted with the responsibility of rounding up those who were deemed class enemies (often wealthier landowners, capitalists, and intellectuals). Ordinary citizens who lacked political influence were not expected to dole out punishments in the same way that they were in China. However, ordinary citizens still tended to refrain from expressing counterrevolutionary sentiments even amongst themselves, because the Bolsheviks punished entire families for the actions of one person. Both Osip Mandelstam and his wife Nadezhda Mandelstam were punished for the former's presentation of poetry that insulted Stalin, even though Nadezhda had not participated in the poem's creation.

In 2021, Russia is no longer strictly communist, but the nation still engages in heavy censorship efforts. In recent years, the Russian government has dramatically increased its

ensorship of the internet. Internet service providers are required to install software that allows the government to block certain types of content in Russia (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Internet users who purchase VPNs (virtual private networks) are subjected to harsh fines, since VPNs allow users to access blocked content. Telecommunications and internet companies are encouraged to store information about their users and track their private messages in order to preemptively catch terrorists. In the same way that the Chinese government justifies censorship by arguing that dissenting opinions threaten China's national security, the Russian government justifies censorship by arguing that mass surveillance is needed to protect state secrets and, ironically, "the privacy of Russian users" (Human Rights Watch, 2019). The Russian government's overarching goal is to pass legislation that places internet access completely under government control, which would cut Russian internet access off from the outside world.

On November 1, 2019, the "sovereign internet law" went into effect in Russia (German Council On Foreign Relations, 2020). This "law" is actually a series of amendments to existing laws governing communications, and dramatically expands the Russian government's authority to monitor citizens' internet use and block their access to certain websites. The first of these amendments requires all internet service providers to install technical equipment that restricts citizens' access to certain websites and information that could potentially threaten Russia's national security. The second of these amendments allows the media regulator Roskomnadzor to take control of the internet in an "emergency." The third amendment creates a Russian national Domain Name System (DNS), which "would segregate Russian websites from the international DNS, making them unavailable in all other parts of the world" (German Council On Foreign Relations, 2020). Human rights groups fear that these amendments could be used to identify, track, and persecute dissenters, especially because Russia has a long history of persecuting

journalists (Kennedy, 2019). These groups point out that these amendments give the Russian government immense power over people's access to information, which would limit their ability to understand and express dissenting opinions.

Additionally, in its efforts to prevent the spread of "dangerous" information, the Russian government has reportedly murdered 27 journalists since 2002 (Aliaksandrau, 2014). The Committee To Protect Journalists (CPJ) (2009) reports that there is considerable evidence to support the idea that the Russian government ordered the murder of Natalya Estemirova in 2009. She was a regular contributor to two independent newspapers, *Novaya Gazeta* and *Kavazsky Uzel*, and a strong advocate for the "Moscow-based human rights group Memorial and a consultant for the New York-based international rights group Human Rights Watch" (CPJ, 2009). She frequently reported on human rights abuses such as extrajudicial killings, concentration camps, and punitive arsons committed by local governments, and was the fifth journalist who investigated these events to be killed since 2000. Her daughter, Lana Estemirova, writes that in the decade since her mother's death, the human rights movement in Chechnya has been forced into hiding, and local authorities are bolder than ever in their violent persecution of human rights activists (2019). Natalya Estemirova's murderers have still not been revealed or indicted.

Though the Russian constitution explicitly guarantees "the right to privacy... freedom of opinion and the right to freely search, receive, transmit, produce, and disseminate information" (Human Rights Watch, 2019), the Russian government routinely finds ways around these provisions. As evidenced in the case of Natalya Estemirova's efforts, the Russian government's continued persecution of those with dissenting opinions has pushed various movements underground. Human rights and anti-war activists are forced to conduct their operations in secret, which heightens tensions between the government and its citizens. On this front, the effects of

current Russian policies differ very little from the effects of those which the USSR implemented. During the Soviet era, people were also forced to express their opinions underground, but even that carried a significant risk. The Soviet government harshly punished those who were suspected of being complicit in anti-communist activities, so people often reported each other to avoid being punished for associating with anti-communists, as the Mandelstams' story demonstrates.

III. United States

Americans like to believe that the US Constitution's protection of free expression under the Bill Of Rights adequately sets the United States apart from countries which openly silence dissent, such as Russia or China. However, the United States also has a long history of censoring dissenting opinions. In 1918, the US had recently entered World War I, and many Americans disapproved of the war and the military draft (Boyd, 2009). President Woodrow Wilson wanted to prevent anti-war activists from dividing the country on the issue of the war when he believed it was best for the country to stay united. Therefore, the act outlawed any speech or expression that could be considered an incitement of disloyalty to the military, government, and the Constitution, as well as speech or expression in support of the United States' adversaries in the war. The penalties for violating the Sedition Act were fines of up to \$10,000 and up to twenty years in prison.

Keith (2001) writes that many Americans believed that World War I was primarily fought on the home front, not in terms of fighting foreign enemies, but in terms of the division which the war and the ensuing Sedition Act stoked between Americans. The draft was immensely unpopular among Americans, with almost 4 million men refusing to register. Almost 340,000 men deserted the army. Opposition to the draft was especially strong in the American South, and

it reached such tremendous heights that governors in the Southern states requested federal troops to help them arrest bands of armed deserters. Both white and black southerners opposed the war for ideological reasons, believing that the war supported economic interests that conflicted with their own and that they should not be forced to support the war effort for that reason.

Furthermore, southern draft boards frequently selected poor whites and black men for service, while middle to upper-class white men were largely able to avoid conscription. For this reason, the draft exacerbated race and class conflicts in the South, resulting in evasion, desertion, and violent conflicts.

The McCarthy Red Scare in the 1950s also led to a significant increase in political conflict. Gibson (1988) writes, “A host of actions against Communists was taken by the states, including disqualifying them from public employment (including from teaching positions in public schools); denying them access to the ballot as candidates, and prohibiting them from serving in public office even if legally elected; requiring Communists to register with the government; and outright bans on the Party.” Arkansas and Texas went as far as banning the Communist Party altogether and required all Communists to register themselves with the government. All of these measures eventually eliminated the Communist Party in the United States and caused over ten thousand employees to be fired from their jobs. About half of American university professors expressed anxiety over the prospect of being persecuted for their political beliefs.

The United States has a history of political persecution nearly as vicious as that of openly authoritarian governments such as China and Russia. The US Constitution supposedly protects Americans’ rights to free speech through the First Amendment, but federal and state governments have trampled on those rights on at least two major occasions, and certainly more.

Just as the Russian constitution does not appear to protect journalists from censorship despite forbidding direct government censorship, the US government has historically revoked its citizens' constitutionally-protected rights to political dissent. Though the United States has a very different form of government than China and Russia, it has still engaged in mass persecution of minority groups. Many Americans are reluctant to call their government's behavior authoritarian because they believe it could, and has, never happened on their soil, but the disturbing reality is that the US government has indeed engaged in authoritarian, even fascist behavior by partnering with private entities to suppress political dissent. My ensuing analysis will show that the line between Soviet, Chinese Communist Party, and US government persecution of political dissenters is in reality quite thin, despite many Americans' lofty perceptions of their republican government. Under the right conditions, and if citizens fail to remain vigilant, the United States could very easily slip into the same traps that Russia and China have.

In recent years, through President Trump's term and into President Biden's term, conservatives and libertarians have expressed increasing concern about the censorship of their ideas by the group of technology corporations known as Big Tech (mostly Facebook, Twitter, Apple, and Google). Critics argue that posts by Republicans are fact-checked, removed, or flagged as false much more often than are posts by Democrats; and indeed, some studies have shown that posts by Republicans are up to three times more likely to be fact-checked than are posts by Democrats (Conan, 2012). This perception that Democrats are censored less often angers Republicans and makes them resentful of Democrats. To further emphasize the extent to which Republicans believe that Big Tech and the mainstream media are stacked against them, according to a 2017 study by the Cato Institute, over half of Americans believe that most

mainstream news organizations have a liberal ideological bias (Ekins). Fox News was the only major media outlet that respondents perceived as having a strong conservative ideological bias.

Republicans' concerns over Big Tech censorship and liberal media bias peaked in January of 2021 when almost every major social media platform banned President Trump for "inciting violence" and when Apple and the Google Play store threatened to remove Parler from their platforms unless Parler developed a plan to monitor its (overwhelmingly Republican) users' speech. Thousands of conservatives and libertarians expressed outrage and concern over the immense power that these corporations demonstrated through their willingness to ban users for what these users perceived as differences in political ideology. To the Republicans who took offense at Trump's bans from major social media platforms and at Parler's removal from the Apple and Google Play stores, these events indicated that Big Tech has an anti-right agenda, especially considering the fact that Big Tech took very little action to censor calls for violent action among Black Lives Matter activists all through the summer of 2020.

Historical Analysis

I. Methods

For this study, I chose to analyze cases from China, Russia, and the United States because they are not commonly included in studies of censorship, especially when compared to countries with obvious authoritarian histories such as Cuba, Germany, and North Korea. Both older and younger Americans know very well the dangers that authoritarian censorship posed in those countries, but many younger Americans in particular are less familiar with the dangerous history

of censorship in China, Russia, and even in their home country, the United States. Americans like to wave their country's history of questionable censorship practices aside because freedom of speech is supposedly protected under the first amendment of the US Constitution. However, censorship has historically been, and currently is, very much an issue in the United States, though Americans like to believe their country's unique democratic-republic qualities protect them from this type of government overreach. Similarly, many Americans know that China is still authoritarian, but it has made such considerable progress since the 1960s that they underestimate the amount of censorship which government and citizen actors perpetuate. Lastly, academics tend not to give Russia's violently authoritarian history the attention it deserves, especially in recent years with the emerging popularity of Marxism-Leninism in academia. This study intends to reiterate the realities of Soviet censorship policies as they were experienced by real individuals who lived under that regime. Overall, these countries were selected for the study because their histories are at high risk of being romanticized or forgotten by newer generations.

Specific cases of censorship within these countries were selected based on the following criteria:

- Availability of firsthand accounts
- Availability of information about citizen and/or government reactions to censorship efforts, which could be perpetrated by either government or citizen actors
- Time period within a country's history
- Case can be clearly proven as an instance of censorship

For this study, I wanted to include two cases that came from a time period that was known to be repressive (the Mao regime in China, the Stalin regime in Russia, and World War I and the

McCarthy Red Scare in the United States), and two cases that came from a more recent time period (from 2000 to the present) in which ongoing repression tends to be overlooked and understated. I did not include two present-day cases from the United States because most present-day cases of censorship in the United States are highly disputed, and because one of the objectives of this paper is to create a set of criteria and expectations by which to evaluate present-day cases of censorship in the US and their impacts on American society.

The following chart (Figure A) summarizes each case presented in this study. The historical analysis section of this study will identify and analyze trends in each of these cases in order to determine the impact of different kinds of censorship efforts on political polarization.

Figure A

Country	Time Period	Event
China	Mao regime	Schoolteacher lacks enthusiasm for revolution
China	Mao regime	Girl abused by fervent revolutionaries for her parents' occupations
China	2000-present	Journalist arrested for exposing human rights abuses
China	2000-present	Journalist arrested for exposing human rights abuses
Russia	Stalin regime	Man arrested for criticizing government in private correspondence
Russia	Stalin regime	Man arrested for criticizing government in private correspondence
Russia	2000-present	Government passes law to restrict access to "bad" information on the internet

Russia	2000-present	Government murders a journalist
United States	World War I	Government passes law against criticizing a war
United States	McCarthy Red Scare	State governments pass laws targeting suspected communists

This historical analysis will count up instances (labeled “events” in the figure above and figures below) of censorship and political repression incited by government and citizen actors, and categorize citizens’ reactions to censorship efforts. In section II of this historical analysis, to determine the prevalence of affective polarization, reactions will be classified as “hostile to government,” “(citizens) hostile to citizens,” “not specified,” “positive to government,” or “(citizens) positive to citizens.” Citizens’ reactions are determined to be “hostile to government” and “hostile to citizens” if they express dissatisfaction with government or citizen actions either verbally or through their actions. For the purposes of this study, dissatisfaction with government or citizen actions includes participation in protests, violation of government or private property, verbal or physical assault, publication of countering viewpoints in media, and deliberately hiding one’s beliefs from government or citizen actors. Citizens’ reactions are determined to be “positive to government” or “positive to citizens” if they express support for government or citizen actions either verbally or through their actions. For the purposes of this study, support for government or citizen actions includes rallying in support of a cause or publication of praise in the media. Citizens’ reactions are determined to be “not specified” if a case study does not discuss the ways in which citizens reacted to censorship efforts by governments or by other citizens.

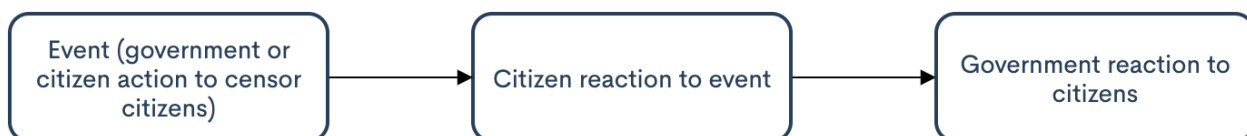
Then, governments' reactions to these citizen reactions to the inciting event will be categorized as "hostile to citizens," "not specified," or "positive to citizens." Government reactions are determined to be "hostile to citizens" if they use coercion, violence, or force to prevent citizens from expressing dissatisfaction with the actions of their governments or fellow citizens. For the purposes of this study, hostile government actions include legal prosecution, arrests, imprisonment, torture, execution, and murder. Government reactions are determined to be "positive to citizens" if they encourage citizens to express dissatisfaction with the actions of their governments or fellow citizens. For the purposes of this study, positive government reactions include passing legislation that upholds freedom of expression and publishing viewpoints in the media that encourage freedom of expression. Government reactions are determined to be "not specified" if a case study does not discuss the ways in which governments reacted to citizen reactions to an inciting event.

In section III of this historical analysis, to determine the prevalence of ideological polarization, citizen and government reactions will be classified as "repressive (citizens)," "repressive (government)," "resistant," "supportive (government)," "neutral," or "not specified." Citizen reactions to inciting events are determined to be repressive toward other citizens if they use coercion, violence, or force to prevent other citizens from expressing their opinions. For the purposes of this study, repressive actions toward other citizens include participation in protests, violation of private property, and verbal or physical assault. Government reactions to citizen reactions to inciting events are determined to be repressive toward citizens with the same criteria. For the purposes of this study, repressive government actions include legal prosecution, arrests, imprisonment, torture, execution, and murder. Citizen reactions to inciting events are determined to be resistant if they express disagreement either verbally or through their actions with

censorship that governments or other citizens impose upon them via the inciting event. For the purposes of this study, resistant actions toward governments or other citizens include participation in protests, violation of government or private property, verbal or physical assault, publication of countering viewpoints in media, and deliberately hiding one's beliefs from government or citizen actors. Citizens' reactions to inciting events, as well as governments' reactions to citizens' reactions, will be classified as neutral if a case study makes it clear that neither governments nor citizens preferred to take action in one way or another, or that they felt indifferent to the inciting event. Citizen and government reactions will be classified as "not specified" if a case study does not discuss their reactions.

The following chart (Figure B) outlines the basic formula that sections II and III of this historical analysis follow:

Figure B



Lastly, for each section on affective polarization and ideological polarization, this study will break down different categories of reactions as a percentage of total reactions studied. This will determine which categories of reactions to censorship are most common, given the presence of either affective or ideological polarization.

Section IV of this historical analysis will determine whether ideological and affective polarization overlap. This is important because it will help to reveal the nuances of the relationships between censorship and polarization. Identifying the type of polarization that results from different kinds of censorship efforts will help us understand how and why citizens

react in certain ways, and how censorship can damage citizens' relationships with one another and with their government.

Overall, results will be determined by the presence of government and citizen reactions, both to the inciting event and to each other's reactions to the inciting event, which lead to a vicious cycle of repression and resistance between governments and citizens. The main objective of the study is to demonstrate a cause and effect relationship between censorship and political polarization. I hypothesize that censorship efforts by either government or citizen actors will evoke hostile and resistant reactions from certain citizens, and that those hostile and resistant reactions will evoke even more hostility and repressive efforts from the inciting government and citizen actors. I will know my hypothesis is supported if I see citizens reacting with hostility and resistance to censorship efforts, and if I see governments reacting with hostility to those citizens' reactions.

II. Affective Polarization

Affective polarization is defined as partisan polarization that stems from negative feelings toward a different political group (Iyengar et al., 2019). The following table (Table A) categorizes the reactions of citizens and government actors as hostile to citizens, hostile to government, positive toward citizens, positive toward government, or not specified. This categorization makes it easier to see how the censorship events studied in China, Russia, and the United States impacted citizens' relationships with each other, as well as governments' relationships with citizens. By understanding how various censorship efforts impacted citizens' and governments' relationships, we can understand how censorship impacts affective

polarization. This table is intended to establish a relationship between the inciting event and the affectively-motivated reactions between governments and citizens.

Table A

Country	Event	Citizens' Reactions	Category of Reaction (Citizen)	Government's Reactions	Category of Reaction (Government)
China	Schoolteacher lacks enthusiasm for revolution	Shame teacher for beliefs	Hostile to other citizens	Not specified	Not specified
China	Girl abused by fervent revolutionaries for her parents' occupations	Shame parents for occupations	Hostile to other citizens	Not specified	Not specified
China	Journalist arrested for exposing human rights abuses	Not specified	Not specified	Continues persecution of journalists who spread "bad" information	Hostile to citizens
China	Journalist arrested for exposing human rights abuses	Outrage at injustice	Hostile to government	Doubles down on ideological dissenters	Hostile to citizens
Russia	Man arrested for criticizing government in private correspondence	Subtle continued resistance to government	Hostile to government	Doubles down on ideological dissenters	Hostile to citizens
Russia	Man arrested for criticizing government in private	Reported man to government	Hostile to other citizens	Doubles down on ideological dissenters	Hostile to citizens

	correspondence				
Russia	Government passes law to restrict access to “bad” information on the internet	Human rights groups react angrily	Hostile to government	Not specified	Not specified
Russia	Government murders a journalist	Human rights advocates are forced underground	Hostile to government	Doubles down on ideological dissenters	Hostile to citizens
United States	Government passes law against criticizing a war	Citizens desert the military, evade the draft, and protest the war	Hostile to government	Doubles down on ideological dissenters	Hostile to citizens
United States	State governments pass laws targeting suspected communists	Citizens discriminate against each other based on political beliefs	Hostile to other citizens	Doubles down on ideological dissenters	Hostile to citizens

According to Iyengar (2019), people form strongly emotional group identities based on the party or political group with which they identify. When another group expresses beliefs contrary to those of one’s own group, it feels threatening to a core part of a person’s identity. The person’s own political group becomes the in-group, and other political groups become out-groups. Affective divisions grow stronger the more a person identifies with his or her own group, because to identify emotionally with one group automatically means distancing oneself from opposing groups that do not offer the same emotional fulfillment.

This is clearly visible in Table A, which shows that when an opposing group takes hostile action toward a tightly-knit, highly emotionally-bonded political group, the latter group nearly always responds with hostility. The initial hostile action does not need to be particularly drastic in order to elicit a hostile response from the targeted party; the triggering events studied in this paper range from murder to a simple lack of expressed allegiance to a group. In most of the situations in Table A, an event, either a government or citizen action, causes harm or offense to an emotionally-bonded political group, then the group reacts negatively toward the government or other citizen groups, and then the government reacts by encouraging even more persecution of the offended group. This becomes a vicious cycle of suppression, resistance, and more suppression. Because we see this cycle represented in Table A, my hypothesis that censorship causes affective polarization is supported.

To understand these results, it is helpful to break down different kinds of affective reactions and how they result from different kinds of inciting events. The following table (Table B) shows the affective reactions of citizens and governments to various censorship efforts as a share of total government and citizen reactions studied (20 reactions). This gives us a sense of how prevalent different kinds of affective reactions to censorship are. The data in this table is a summation of the data from Table A.

Table B

Category of Reaction	Number of Instances	Total Number of Government and Citizen Reactions	Reaction as Percentage of Total Government and Citizen Reactions
(Citizens) Hostile to government	5	20	25%
(Government) Hostile to citizens	7	20	35%

(Citizens) Hostile to other citizens	4	20	20%
Not specified	4	20	20%
(Citizens) Positive to citizens	0	20	0%
(Government) Positive to citizens	0	20	0%
(Citizens) Positive to government	0	20	0%

III. Ideological Polarization

Ideological polarization is defined as the extent to which political beliefs differ among various groups (Dimock et al., 2014). Ideological polarization is more difficult to identify in these case studies, so the following table (Table C) will identify specific markers of increased ideological polarization (persecution on the basis of ideology or beliefs) that result from either citizen or government censorship efforts. This table will indicate whether government and citizen reactions to an event increased, decreased, did not affect ideological polarization, or whether the reaction was not specified (when it is unclear whether these reactions impacted ideological polarization). Citizen and government reactions to censorship efforts will be categorized as repressive (for governments and citizens repressing other citizens), resistant (for citizens resisting government imposition of an ideology), neutral, and supportive. This table is intended to establish a relationship between the inciting event and the ideologically-motivated reactions of citizens and governments.

Table C

Country	Event	Citizens' Reactions	Category of Reaction	Government's Reactions	Category of Reaction
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			(Citizen)		(Government)
China	Schoolteacher lacks enthusiasm for revolution	Shame teacher for beliefs	Repressive	Not specified	Not specified
China	Girl abused by fervent revolutionaries for her parents' occupations	Shame parents for occupations	Repressive	Not specified	Not specified
China	Journalist arrested for exposing human rights abuses	Not specified	Not specified	Continues persecution of journalists who spread "bad" information	Repressive
China	Journalist arrested for exposing human rights abuses	Outrage at injustice	Resistant	Doubles down on ideological dissenters	Repressive
Russia	Man arrested for criticizing government in private correspondence	Subtle continued resistance to government	Resistant	Doubles down on ideological dissenters	Repressive
Russia	Man arrested for criticizing government in private correspondence	Reported man to government	Repressive	Doubles down on ideological dissenters	Repressive
Russia	Government passes law to restrict access to "bad" information	Human rights groups react angrily	Resistant	Not specified	Not specified

	on the internet				
Russia	Government murders a journalist	Human rights advocates are forced underground	Resistant	Doubles down on ideological dissenters	Repressive
United States	Government passes law against criticizing a war	Citizens desert the military, evade the draft, and protest the war	Resistant	Doubles down on ideological dissenters	Repressive
United States	State governments pass laws targeting suspected communists	Citizens discriminate against each other based on political beliefs	Repressive	Doubles down on ideological dissenters	Repressive

Here, we see a similar back-and-forth pattern between reactions to ideological conflict as was observed with affective conflict. When the government or citizens repress other citizens, and those citizens resist, the government and certain groups of citizens repress the resistant citizens. Because we see this pattern, my hypothesis with respect to ideological polarization is supported. This is also consistent with the findings of other studies on ideological polarization: ideological polarization leads to significant conflict in people's everyday lives. According to Dimock et al. (2014), people who are most involved in politics tend to display the highest degrees of ideological polarization, while people who are less involved tend not to be so ideologically polarized. Ideological extremists often view the other side as a direct threat to their community's or nation's well-being, going far beyond simple dislike of other opinions. In my study, journalists, writers, and political commentators experienced the most direct conflict with their

governments and with other citizens over ideological differences, but ideological polarization also made casualties out of ordinary citizens who did not necessarily want to be involved in politics. For instance, under Mao's regime, ideological extremists targeted teachers and schoolchildren specifically for being politically moderate. Thus, ideological polarization is not always a back-and-forth struggle between the most engaged political actors; they can drag moderates into their battles as well, either by scapegoating them or accusing them of political extremism.

In this way, the results of my study are not surprising at all. If ideological extremists (both citizen and government actors) view those who disagree with them as a threat to themselves and their communities, then it makes sense that they would fall into a vicious cycle of repression and resistance. In nearly all of these cases, citizens are being censored either by other citizens or by their governments, and they respond to that censorship negatively. Whether imposed by ideological extremists onto other ideological extremists, or by ideological extremists onto moderates, censorship motivates the repressed to continue resisting instead of changing their policy preferences. Similarly, resistance by the repressed group leads to even more repression by the opposing group. My study clearly demonstrates the backlash effect (Klein, 2018), which postulates that countering or censoring strong partisans' beliefs only motivates them to double down on their ideals.

As with affective polarization, it is helpful to break down different kinds of ideologically-motivated reactions and show how they result from different kinds of censorship efforts. The following table (Table D) shows the ideologically-based reactions of citizens and governments to various censorship efforts as a share of total government and citizen reactions

studied (20). This gives us a sense of how prevalent different kinds of ideologically-motivated reactions to censorship are. The data in this table is a summation of the data from Table C.

Table D

Category of Reaction	Number of Instances	Total Number of Government and Citizen Reactions	Reaction as Percentage of Total Government and Citizen Reactions
Repressive (Government)	7	20	35%
Repressive (Citizens)	4	20	20%
Resistant	5	20	25%
Neutral	0	20	0%
Supportive	0	20	0%
Not specified	4	20	20%

IV. Prevalence of Affective vs. Ideological Polarization

Lastly, in order to understand the nature of the polarization that results from censorship, we will determine where overlap exists between ideological and affective polarization in these cases. This will allow us to better diagnose censorship-related issues and generate policy solutions that address more specific problems instead of polarization in general. The following table (Table E) shows the total number of censorship events that are confirmed to have resulted in affective and/or ideological polarization in all countries studied. 4 events are studied in China, 4 in Russia, and 2 in the United States, which creates a total of 10 events. For each event, an “X” in a column will indicate whether that event resulted in ideological polarization, affective polarization, or both. This table is a composite of the data from all previous tables.

Table E

Country	Event	Ideological Polarization	Affective Polarization	Both
China	Schoolteacher lacks enthusiasm for revolution			X
China	Girl abused by fervent revolutionaries for her parents' occupations			X
China	Journalist arrested for exposing human rights abuses			X
China	Journalist arrested for exposing human rights abuses			X
Russia	Man arrested for criticizing government in private correspondence			X
Russia	Man arrested for criticizing government in private correspondence			X
Russia	Government passes law to restrict access to "bad" information on the internet			X
Russia	Government murders a journalist			X
United States	Government			X

	passes law against criticizing a war			
United States	State governments pass laws targeting suspected communists			X

According to this chart, ideological and affective polarization overlap in every case studied here. This might indicate a correlation between the two types of polarization. Iyengar et al. (2019) explains that strong partisans become emotionally attached to their political ideologies, because those ideologies represent the cultural and socioeconomic categories that impact every aspect of their lives. People tend to inherit their political ideologies from people with whom they have strong emotional attachments, such as their family members. For this reason, both political ideologies and emotional attachments to partisan groups tend to remain stable throughout a person's lifetime. Therefore, it makes sense that the triggering events in this chart generated both affective and ideologically-motivated responses, because people have strong affective attachments to their ideologies.

Policy Recommendations and Future Research

Even after reading this study, Americans may still wonder if there must be an arbiter of truth on the internet. The only truth that we know as humans is that our knowledge of the world is always changing; what may be flagged on Facebook as "false information" today might be discovered to be true tomorrow. Furthermore, who is to say that these arbiters of truth are not constructing the truth according to an agenda which they are paid to spread? Humans are

inherently biased, so as long as the arbiters of truth are human, there can be no objective decisions made on whether certain kinds of information are true or false.

Instead of creating a hierarchical system of information, it would be useful to look into possibilities that do not anger social media users or refuse to acknowledge the fact that what is currently deemed false may turn out to be true upon further investigation. Directly countering beliefs which hold a strong emotional significance for people will only breed more conflict, especially when there are gentler ways to persuade people to open their minds. Even if something is blatantly false, social media platforms will certainly cause more harm by pointing it out instead of letting the information circulate and either die a natural death, be embraced by people whose opinions are already strongly formed, or rejected by people of another political persuasion whose opinions are equally strong. The major issue with fact-checking is that fact-checkers tend to target posts which contain information about people's strongly-held beliefs. A fact-checking label or a false information warning label increases people's psychological reactance by directly telling them that their strongly-held beliefs, to which they have intense emotional attachments, are wrong. This angers social media users and increases their desire to resist being persuaded by an outside source. However, if social media platforms presented alternative sources of information more subtly, such as by offering users links to find out more about certain topics, social media users would be less likely to view this as a personal attack on their beliefs.

Social media platforms would do well to frame their fact-checking labels as benign attempts to provide users with more research sources instead of as open attacks on users' beliefs. This approach to "misinformation" also subtly acknowledges the possibility that the social media fact-checkers could be wrong, because it is not an attempt to push people's beliefs in a set

direction. Rather, this approach would give social media users additional sources to jumpstart further research into a topic, and present additional considerations without telling users that their beliefs are wrong. While this approach may reduce the animosity that fact-checking fosters between users who hold opposite political opinions, it will most likely not do anything to change users' opinions, especially if users are emotionally committed to the information they spread.

Because users' opinions are unlikely to change regardless of the way social media platforms present alternative information, the next best thing they can do is foster civil discourse instead of rampant bullying. Instead of censoring "false information," it would be more productive to sanction users who bully and harass others, and to make it easier for users to anonymously report bullying and harassment. Many users take advantage of the anonymity social media affords to abuse users who hold different political opinions, and even users who choose not to stay anonymous have very little incentive to choose civil discourse over verbal abuse. Social media platforms' terms of use should be very clear about their policies on abuse and give examples of language that could qualify as abuse. The streaming platform Twitch has an automatic chat filter which identifies key words and phrases that could be abusive, and it blocks users from sending public messages which include those words and phrases. This kind of system would be very useful for Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to adopt, because it would force people to engage in discourse privately instead of verbally abusing each other in a public thread or comment section. Moderating the ways in which people talk to each other, instead of moderating what they talk about, could encourage people to explore their differences and controversial topics in more polite ways. Shutting down all conversation on certain topics has only widened the divide between more extreme members of each political party. Allowing more extreme members of each political party to engage in public discourse, which is only moderated

to prevent outright harassment, would encourage communication and open dialogue on important topics.

Though this type of policy is an important part of the solution, it still does not address the major root cause of online censorship. The biggest cause of online censorship is media consolidation, and it would hardly be possible for Big Tech to maintain its dominance over the market without millions of dollars in state and federal subsidies. Thus, the next step toward breaking up the Big Tech oligopoly is the revocation of the subsidies that grant them an unfair advantage over their competitors. This will be much more difficult than convincing them to modify their community standards and terms of use because these companies wield immense power and influence. Therefore, state and federal governments will be reluctant to revoke their subsidies because that would impose a highly visible, immediate cost on a powerful interest group. Legislators who support such measures may lose funding and support from Big Tech members, which would hurt their re-election chances. Reducing subsidies very gradually, until they hit a concrete expiration date, would be a more feasible strategy because it would obscure the connection between specific legislators and the gradual elimination of subsidies.

The elimination of Big Tech's monopolistic power over social media would make it easier for smaller social media companies to enter the market and compete. In turn, this would create more opportunities for social media users to find different platforms whose policies suit their needs, and who may attract more like-minded users (for instance, in the way that Rumble, a YouTube competitor, attracts conservatives who are banned from or dissatisfied with YouTube). If right-leaning Americans feel like they have a variety of platform options from which to choose, they may feel less targeted by the policies of Big Tech companies because they can simply switch to another platform. Over time, this may lead to less resentment from right-leaning

Americans because they will feel like there are places where their opinions are welcome, instead of feeling constantly under attack by policies which appear to favor left-leaning opinions. This will lead to less polarization overall, at least on social media.

Many other potential solutions to the censorship issue have been proposed. Hamburger and Morell (2021) explain that state antidiscrimination laws should be used to hold Big Tech accountable. Many states' civil rights statutes would prevent Big Tech companies from silencing users on the basis of political opinion; however, in order to remain constitutional, those laws would need to be drafted and enacted in such a way that they do not prevent the companies themselves from expressing their viewpoints. As long as the Big Tech companies remain publicly-accessible platforms and are not themselves silenced, a law that prevents them from discriminating against their users would most likely be constitutional. Hamburger and Morell go on to argue that the Big Tech companies currently function as "common carriers" which receive public funding; as such, the federal government has the authority to ban them from discriminating against users. The Big Tech companies benefit from market dominance, which leaves users with very few realistic alternatives, and they serve a public function while receiving public funding. Thus, they may constitutionally be subject to anti-discrimination regulations.

This solution takes a different approach to the censorship issue than the one I have proposed. Hamburger and Morell do not address media consolidation, but they do address the fact that the Big Tech companies function very differently in the marketplace than do other companies. As such, because the Big Tech companies function differently from purely private companies, they must be treated differently and subjected to a different set of regulations. Hamburger and Morell imply that while looser regulations work well for companies that are purely private, and in industries where customers have plenty of alternative choices, loose

regulations on companies that receive public funding, dominate the market, and provide a public service can cause issues for customers. By this logic, it may be possible to address the problems with censorship and polarization without directly addressing media consolidation. If government regulations begin to treat publicly-funded Big Tech companies as partially-public agencies and subject them to anti-discrimination regulations, users may feel more protected and less targeted. As a result, these regulations may help to break the vicious cycle of one side feeling silenced, becoming resentful, and becoming affectively polarized toward the other.

Mississippi senator Roger Wicker also supports anti-censorship legislation, but of a different kind than that proposed by Hamburger and Mortell. Wicker (2021) points out that federal law currently considers the Big Tech companies “neutral” platforms, which means that they cannot be held legally accountable for the content that users post. He believes that if this were changed so that these companies can be held accountable for users’ posts, they would allow users to post a wider variety of viewpoints. Consequently, Wicker has introduced legislation known as the Pro-Speech Act, which would “bar platforms from discriminating against users based on their ideology and would require them to be transparent in how they manage or censor content” (Wicker, 2021). Users would also be able to request that the Federal Trade Commission investigate accusations of bias.

Wicker argues that “this legislation strikes a good balance between respecting the rights of private companies and protecting free speech” (2021), but the Pro-Speech Act could easily run into constitutional issues if certain terms are not defined and understood. Wicker’s first mistake is in his argument that the Big Tech companies are private. This is incorrect, because a company which receives generous public funding and incentives cannot be considered fully private. Therefore, he is not completely addressing the issue at hand, which is that publicly-funded

companies are using certain government-granted privileges to censor users based on their ideologies. Next, this legislation implies that there will be increased government oversight of tech companies, particularly with regards to their messages and management practices. If a private platform wants to maintain a specific ideological commitment or send a certain message, the Pro-Speech Act may interfere with its First Amendment rights to freedom of expression. This legislation could become subject to the same pitfalls as the Fairness Doctrine if it prevents companies themselves from sending their own messages and maintaining commitments to specific values.

Conclusions and Implications

In summary, people are emotionally attached to their ideologies. Therefore, suppressing people's ability to express their beliefs intensifies conflict instead of convincing them to reconsider their positions. In every case in this study, the targets of censorship reacted negatively to being suppressed, which led the censors to fight even harder to suppress them and bred a cycle of conflict between the two parties. Klein's (2018) backlash effect is clearly vindicated by the results of this study.

Clearly, the solution to American society's growing concern with fake news is not to censor those who are believed to be spreading it. According to this study, those accused of spreading fake news will only fight back even harder if governments, corporations, or private entities attempt to censor them. This will intensify conflicts between the suppressors and the suppressed and make each side more emotionally attached to its message. Consequently, there are two important things to keep in mind when considering the impact of censorship and fake news on American society.

First, the fact still remains that fake news is not the massive problem that corporate news outlets make it out to be. As a result, governments and other entities are not justified in taking such a drastic measure as censorship to curb a non-issue. Though polarization is increasing in the United States, the majority of Americans are able to differentiate fake news from legitimate news. In general, fake news only influences strong partisans whose emotional attachments make it difficult to discern the facts (Guess et al., 2020). Its effect on voter turnout and voter preferences is negligible, because voters tend to use heuristics such as partisanship and demographic characteristics (race, socioeconomic status, gender, etc.) to make their decisions, and their preferences tend to be immovable regardless of current news. Therefore, fake news poses virtually no threat to American democracy. The miniscule benefits of censoring fake news most certainly do not justify the risk of exacerbating partisan conflict and political polarization.

Second, this study demonstrates that even if fake news eventually becomes a problem, censorship will only worsen the issue. The elements of human nature that determine people's responses to censorship will not change depending on the problems that fake news causes. The backlash effect will still cause people to double down on their beliefs if they are censored or challenged. As a result, the best thing that social media platforms can do at the moment is minimize overt bullying and harassment instead of targeting specific viewpoints as "fake news" and "misinformation," which will only anger users and lead to even more online abuse and polarization. The next step would be to subject all media platforms which receive public funding to federal anti-discrimination regulations. However, the most ideal solution would be to revoke subsidies and special privileges for large tech corporations, so they are forced to play by the same rules as their smaller competitors in the market. Though corporatism is deeply entrenched

in the American economy, it can be addressed with patience and intelligent policy design for the benefit of free speech and reduced polarization.

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