

Political Partisanship, Extreme Polarization and Youth Voter Turnout in 2020

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Abstract — The 2010s saw a rapid increase in political partisanship and subsequent extreme polarization in the United States and its political institutions and systems. Additionally, political apathy among young adult and teenage voters has long been beleaguered as a source of low voter turnout in the United States, at least comparatively when considering other developed democracies. Considering these points, this research paper seeks to identify whether rising political partisanship and extreme polarization affect the disillusionment of teenage voters in the political process of voting; do these phenomena discourage eligible teenagers from exercising their right to vote? Previous research on the effect of extreme polarization and partisanship on voting trends focuses on the voting eligible population (VEP) as a whole, with no studies concerning the teenage (18-19) voting demographic specifically. The vast majority of such studies have concluded that increases in the aforementioned phenomena are correlated with higher voter turnout, suggesting possible causation. In conducting subject interviews with fifteen eligible teenagers who voted in the 2020 presidential election, content and correlational analyses were used to identify whether this trend was similarly present among youth voters. The resulting study found that, in line with the VEP as a whole, teenage voters cited an increased likelihood to vote as a result of increasing partisanship and polarization within the political climate, suggesting a positive correlation. Positive statistical correlations were noted between the perceived levels of polarization and the phenomenon's influence on the likelihood to vote, as well as between partisanship and the same effect. The results of this research imply that voter turnout efforts have no cause to especially focus on youth voters in regard to polarization. Instead, charged political climates will increase youth turnout as they do with the VEP as a whole, suggesting that as polarization persists in the United States, there will be a concurrent increased political engagement among youth voters.

Keywords — Political Partisanship, Polarization, Voter Turnout, Political Engagement, Youth

Introduction and Literature Review

Political polarization and partisan politics have existed since the founding of the United States of America nearly 250 years ago. However, many scholars believe there was a marked increase in polarization and mass partisanship which can be generally identified. Although most scholars view polarization as a political trend which has been occurring since the founding of the United States, many of these same scholars point to the Reagan presidency as the previously mentioned turning point towards the heightened political partisanship of the modern day.¹ This identification of the Reagan presidency is based on the observation of party realignment in both camps. On the right, a gradual ideological realignment of the party elite—initiated by Reagan as an effect of his economic and social programs—has been noted. This initially gradual process was radically accelerated by a group of extremely conservative Republicans from the South who subsequently replaced the formerly moderate wing of the Republican Party.² Simultaneously, the collapse of the Democratic Party in the South led to the party's image shifting towards a more liberal stance despite the fact that, in reality, the Democrats were pursuing traditional, centrist policy agendas. These dual dynamics led to the decline of bipartisanship, and an increase of partisan politics in Congress³ while also contributing to the further polarization of party members⁴ and the public.

Although there is some contestation over the specific point of interest regarding the increase in political partisanship, there is a general agreement based on a large body of evidence, that the two political parties in Congress, Democrats and Republicans, are found to be in opposition with each other more frequently and more consistently.⁵ This is evidenced through the percentage of roll-call votes which see a majority of one political camp opposing the majority of the other having risen significantly since the late 20th century and early 21st.⁶ Moreover, interest groups with

¹ Baldassarri, Delia, and Peter Bearman. "Dynamics of Political Polarization." *American Sociological Review* 72, no. 5 (October 2007): 784-811. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240707200507>.

² Wilcox, Clyde. *The Latest American Revolution: The 1994 Elections and Their Implications for Governance*. New York, NY: St. Martin's, 1997.

³ Poole, Keith T., and Howard Rosenthal. *Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll Call Voting*. Oxford, UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000.

⁴ Saunders, Kyle L., and Alan I. Abramowitz. "Ideological Realignment and Active Partisans in the American Electorate." *American Politics Research* 32, no. 3 (May 2004): 285–309. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X03259195>.

⁵ Prior, Markus, Media and Political Polarization (May 2013). *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 16, pp. 101-127. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-100711-135242>.

⁶ Bond, Jon R., and Richard Fleisher. "Partisanship and the President's Quest for Votes on the Floor of Congress." Essay. In *Polarized Politics: Congress and the President in a Partisan Era*, 154–85.

political involvement have rated members of Congress as more ideologically split.⁷ Based on the extent to which opposition along party lines is reflective of ideology, roll-call votes have shown growing ideological divergence in the last three decades. Moreover, the relation between party identification and voting tendencies has reached its highest level in the last 50 years, after the era of partisan dealignment of the 1960s and 1970s⁸ highlighting a current peak of partisanship and polarization.

Meanwhile, as political polarization and partisan politics have undeniably taken to new heights since the late 20th century, voter turnout of the voter-eligible population (VEP), that is the voting-age population (VAP) that is legally able to cast a vote in a US election, has generally remained relatively low. According to the United States Census Bureau, in 2016, there was only 55.7% VAP turnout for the presidential election⁹ placing the country behind the large majority of its peers within the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) at 30th out of 35 total nations. Moreover, the United States turnout rates have remained moderately consistent over the past several decades with VAP turnout falling strictly within an 8.5% range from just under 50% in Bill Clinton's 1996 reelection to 58% in Obama's 2008 inaugural election.¹⁰

In analyses by age, the demographic which consistently sees the lowest turnout in United States elections is that of youth voters. Youth voters, defined by the US Census Bureau as voters aged 18-29, have composed the smallest portion of American voters in every presidential election since 1988, never reaching above even 19% of all voters who cast ballots.¹¹ Meanwhile, when considering solely voter turnout rates by age among selected age groups, those from 18-24 have repeatedly remained below their peak in 2008 of a mere 45%.¹² Teenage voters' (18-19), who fall into the aforementioned age groups, consistently low voter turnout has earned them the widely held perception

Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2004; Rohde, David W. *Parties and Leaders in the Postreform House*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

⁷ Ibid., 154-85.

⁸ Bafumi, Joseph. "The Stubborn American Voter." (2004); Bartels, Larry M. "Electoral Continuity and Change, 1868-1996." *Electoral Studies* 17 (1998): 301-326. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-3794\(98\)00035-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-3794(98)00035-3); Hetherington, Marc J. "Resurgent Mass Partisanship: The Role of Elite Polarization." *The American Political Science Review* 95, no. 3 (2001): 619-31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3118237>.

⁹ DeSilver, Drew. "In Past Elections, U.S. Trailed Most Developed Countries in Voter Turnout." Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center, May 28, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/03/in-past-elections-u-s-trailed-most-developed-countries-in-voter-turnout/>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ File, Thom. Rep. *Characteristics of Voters in the Presidential Election of 2016*. United States Census Bureau, 2018.

¹² O'Neill, Aaron. "Voter Turnout in U.S. Presidential Elections by Age 1964-2020." Statista, January 18, 2022. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1096299/voter-turnout-presidential-elections-by-age-historical/>.

that their demographic, as a whole, is politically apathetic, yet as their turnout has declined, polarization and partisanship have undoubtedly increased.

This begs the question that is the subject of this research paper: *How does political partisanship, and consequent extreme polarization, affect the disillusionment of teenage voters in 2020 in regard to the political process of voting?*

There have been substantial amounts of research done on the relationship between levels of polarization and voter turnout but none which focus specifically on VEP under 20 years old. Furthermore, these sources usually attempt to identify this polarization as a cause of a sociopolitical factor indirectly related to voter turnout.

Years in which presidential candidates are ideologically similar, there is relatively less turnout of both the voter-age population (VAP) and the voter-eligible population (VEP). However, there exists a *possibility* that when candidates are more ideologically diverse, and more polarization exists because of these differences, voter turnout is higher in ideologues, while moderate voter turnout in comparison drops off due to the increased polarization.¹³ But it has been found that self-identified moderates and non-ideologues have not been turned off by the increasing polarization of political elites. In fact, in more ideologically opposed campaigns, liberal, conservatives, and non-ideologue/moderate voter turnout all increase. Overall, since 1996 as the two parties have become increasingly polarized, VAP-based turnout has increased—though not much—while VEP-based turnout has surged over the three elections from 1996 to 2004. Despite these fears regarding voter turnout, voters as a whole have begun to participate more, not less, as political elites have polarized.¹⁴

Furthermore, it is clear that polarization of the political elite has led to an increased cognizance of party differences as well as a heightened voter investment in the outcome of elections.¹⁵ Previous research has found that American voters prefer public officials to cooperate to solve nationwide problems and that they do not appreciate political polarization. As stated above, some hypothesize that moderate voters are especially likely to be disillusioned by partisan politics, extreme polarization, and subsequent gridlock. In terms of moderate voters, who exist as the plurality of the VEP at 36% of the voting population¹⁶, many scholars believe “participation, trust in government, and other democratic “goods” will decline as voters increasingly see

¹³ Brady, David W., and Pietro S. Nivola. *Red and Blue Nation? Consequences and Correction of America's Polarized Politics*. Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, Stanford University, 2008.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Fiorina, Morris P., and Samuel J. Abrams. “Political Polarization in the American Public.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 11, no. 1 (2008): 563–88.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.053106.153836>.

¹⁶ Saad, Lydia. “U.S. Conservatism down since Start of 2020.” Gallup.com. Gallup, January 11, 2022.
<https://news.gallup.com/poll/316094/conservatism-down-start-2020.aspx>.

politics as ideological self-expression rather than an effort to solve problems important to them.”¹⁷ However, there is little evidence that supports this prevailing thought. General perceptions of government efficacy have risen as national polarization has undeniably increased and even moderates have shown no signs of losing faith in government efficacy and political processes. In particular, there exist substantiated arguments that the polarized 2004 election produced record numbers of “active citizens.”¹⁸ Whether this is entirely accurate is unclear, however, there is no evidence of significant demobilization of the VAP because of the polarization of politics.¹⁹ This once again demonstrates the motivating nature of polarization on the VAP as a whole. Yet youth voters specifically still produce dismal turnout despite increasing polarization, presenting a disconnect.

Further research shows that there is a positive correlation between voter turnout and the number of parties which “goes against established wisdom that voter turnout is depressed by multipartyism.”²⁰ And furthermore, an increasingly diverse political landscape as a result of ideological splits between political parties increases voters’ exposure to relevant issues. This increased exposure consequently increases voter’s abilities to align themselves ideologically and therefore increases the chance these same voters turnout to vote.²¹

According to a study published in the *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion, and Parties*, “an increase in one standard deviation in elite polarization increases turnout—measured as a percentage of registered voters—by about 7 percentage points. This effect increases to 9 percentage points when turnout is measured as a percentage of the voting age population,”²² demonstrating that increased political polarization actually increases voter turnout instead of encouraging disillusionment. Specifically, polarization not only mobilizes voters by making clear the costs and benefits of turning out to vote

¹⁷ Fiorina, Morris P., and Samuel J. Abrams. “Political Polarization in the American Public.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 11, no. 1 (2008): 563–88.

<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.053106.153836>.

¹⁸ Abramowitz, Alan I., and Kyle L. Saunders. “Exploring the Bases of Partisanship in the American Electorate: Social Identity vs. Ideology.” *Political Research Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (June 2006): 175–87. <https://doi.org/10.1177/106591290605900201>.

¹⁹ Fiorina, Morris P., and Samuel J. Abrams. “Political Polarization in the American Public.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 11, no. 1 (2008): 563–88.

<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.053106.153836>.

²⁰ Crepaz, Markus M. L. “The impact of party polarization and postmaterialism on voter turnout.” *European Journal of Political Research* 18 (1990): 183-205. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.1990.tb00228.x>

²¹ *Ibid.*, 183-205.

²² Béjar, Sergio, Juan Andrés Moraes and Santiago López-Cariboni. “Elite polarization and voting turnout in Latin America, 1993–2010.” *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 30 (2018): 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2018.1545775>

but also clarifies the effects, both policy-wise and ideologically, of voters' choices while also generating increased party loyalty, which in turn increases turnout.²³

Ultimately, the existing research on the effects of political partisanship and extreme polarization on voter turnout currently fails to explore the connection between these political phenomena and teenage voter turnout in the 2020 presidential election specifically. All available published research focuses on the voting-age population as a whole prior to the 2020 presidential election between Joseph Biden and incumbent Donald Trump, suggesting a gap exists in research on teenage voting patterns in 2020.

Hypothesis

To answer the research question—*how does political partisanship, and consequent extreme polarization, affect the disillusionment of teenage voters in 2020 in regard to the political process of voting*—previous research and studies were analyzed to guide hypotheses. The research conducted by Béjar, Moraes, and López-Cariboni (2018) regarding elite polarization and voter turnout²⁴ was quite authoritative on the subject: Political polarization raises the stakes in both local and national elections and thus increases mobilization of voters.

Although youth are commonly beleaguered as being politically apathetic, I predicted that, in line with noted trends, there would be a positive correlation between high levels of perceived polarization/partisanship and voter turnout among the demographic.

Methodology

In order to analyze the relationship between the extreme political partisanship, the consequent polarization that is widely recognized to exist in the United States of America as of 2020, and youth voter turnout it is necessary to conduct a number of interviews that will elucidate the effects of the political landscape on United States' youth voting habits and tendencies.

To this end, fifteen interviewees were chosen at random on a voluntary basis. Interviews sought to collect information including, but not limited to age, gender identity, voter registration, political affiliation, political activity/involvement, voting habits, perception of levels of polarization in the United States, perception of the effects of polarization, influence of polarization on political activity, level of aforementioned influence, and the influence of partisanship on polarization. The quantitative data was statistically analyzed and aggregated in a number of ways to

²³ Ibid., 1-21.

²⁴ Ibid., 1-21.

calculate multiple correlation coefficients (r^2) and compile findings which are displayed and discussed below.

Through in-depth interviews, not only can statistical connections be made, but there exist opportunities for follow-up questions, deeper probing, and increased flexibility. This versatility allows for a more holistic understanding of attitudes, perceptions, and motivations of the interviewees. The consequential qualitative data obtained from interviews will be employed to illuminate trends that exist between political polarization, extreme partisanship and teenage voting habits. Additionally, this data will be employed to identify valuable investigative findings that provide greater insight into the aforementioned areas of inquiry.

Interviewees were interviewed through virtual platforms for accessibility and convenience purposes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, including Apple FaceTime and Zoom Video Communications. Interviews occurred over an approximately 1-to-2-week period in late January to early February of 2021, roughly 3 months after the November 3, 2020 general election. No names or other personal information of interviewees will be discussed in this research paper, and to protect anonymity volunteers will be labeled by letter i.e., Subject A, B, C, and so on. Verbal consent to draw data from interviews was also obtained from each subject prior to questioning.

To effectively analyze the qualitative data garnered from the fifteen interviews, several steps were taken. Interview audio was recorded using Apple Voice Memos and remained accessible only to myself to protect the anonymity of subjects. The audio from each interview was similarly transcribed by myself and these transcriptions were organized by assigned subject designation labels (Subject A, B, C, etc.). Transcripts were then annotated for qualitative correlations between the answers to various questions asked including, but not limited to, political activity; political affiliation; perception of levels of polarization and partisanship, respectively; personal opinions on the prevalence and effect of polarization and partisanship; voting behaviors and habits; and explanations and elaborations of beliefs. Annotations were completed by coding each question based on subject answer. Employing *thematic content analysis* of the transcript annotations and coding, overarching impressions present in the data and common themes and patterns were identified. In order to align and conceptualize these data patterns, codes were grouped into categories and subcategories, followed by the segmentation of this data which described the connections between the data groups. These data segments were then analyzed for relative importance and relevance to the research subject matter at hand. This analysis was then used to answer the research question—*how does political partisanship, and consequent extreme polarization, affect the disillusionment of teenage voters in 2020 in regard to the political process of voting*—and related queries.

Results

A total of fifteen (15) subjects were interviewed regarding their perceptions of extreme polarization, political partisanship, and their voting behaviors—among other things. These subjects are referred to as Subjects A-O. No special consideration was given to maintaining an equal number of each gender identity among subjects but nonetheless seven female, seven male, and one non-binary persons were interviewed. No special consideration was given to maintaining an equal number of each age in the age range of study (18-19 years of age) and twelve 18-year-olds were interviewed while three 19-year-olds were similarly interviewed. *Figure 1* displays this demographic data.

Figure 1. Subjects A-O demographics, age and gender

Subject	Age	Gender
A	18	Female
B	18	Male
C	18	Male
D	18	Female
E	19	Male
F	18	Female
G	18	Female
H	18	Non-binary
I	19	Male
J	18	Female
K	18	Female
L	18	Female
M	18	Female
N	19	Male
O	18	Male

Moreover, it is important to note that out of all fifteen subjects interviewed 100% of participants were registered to vote at the time of the 2020 presidential election. Similarly, all fifteen (100%) of respondents answered as to having voted in the 2020 presidential election.

Another demographic question which was posed to respondents regarded their registered party affiliation—an additional data point. Out of the fifteen participants, eight were registered Democrats (53.33%), five were registered independents (33.33%), and two were registered Republicans (13.33%).

All the data discussed so far has been strictly objective in nature whereas the results in the following paragraphs of section IV of this paper are data points that deal with respondents' subjective opinions, perceptions, and ratings. Moreover, the bulk of

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the data below will be qualitative in nature, analyzed through *thematic content analysis* with ancillary quantitative data included throughout.

In terms of the interview questions asked to respondents, there were four major recurring questions that were asked of each respondent. *Figure 2* displays these questions. As seen in *Figure 2* the questions dealt with respondents' personal motivations for voting; their opinions on the negative effects of polarization; their perception of the extent of the existence of political partisanship; and their opinion on the extent to which political partisanship and extreme polarization are connected.

Figure 2. Recurring questions

Question Number	Question
#R1	In your own words could you explain what your motivation was for voting in the 2020 presidential election?
#R2	To what extent do you think that polarization has negative effects on the US? This could be in terms of government efficiency or how polarization trickles down into the population or any other effects you may identify.
#R3	Could you elaborate on why you chose the number you did to represent the extent extreme partisanship is present in our political system (on a scale of 1-20)? Are there specific examples or instances that stand out to you?
#R4	Could you elaborate on why you chose the number you did in terms of the extent to which extreme partisanship contributes to the polarization we previously discussed (on a scale of 1-20)? Are there specific examples or instances that stand out to you?

The segmentation of this data requires the identification of common themes among respondents' elaborations on the four questions asked of them in *Figure 2*. The number of common themes were determined by a lack of substantial novelty; that is, one or more respondent's responses included said theme which varied by question. The number of times a theme was verbalized was recorded and the basis for each

unique reference was determined based on extensive and repeated reviews of the audio file of each interviewee. This data can be viewed in *Figure A* in the appendix.

The first recurring question (#R1) asked of respondents dealt with their personal motivations to vote (see *Figure 2*); answer length and depth varied. The themes that emerged in the answers gathered from the fifteen respondents are displayed in *Figure 3* below. Five central themes emerged.

Figure 3. Themes in respondent answers to recurring question one (#R1)

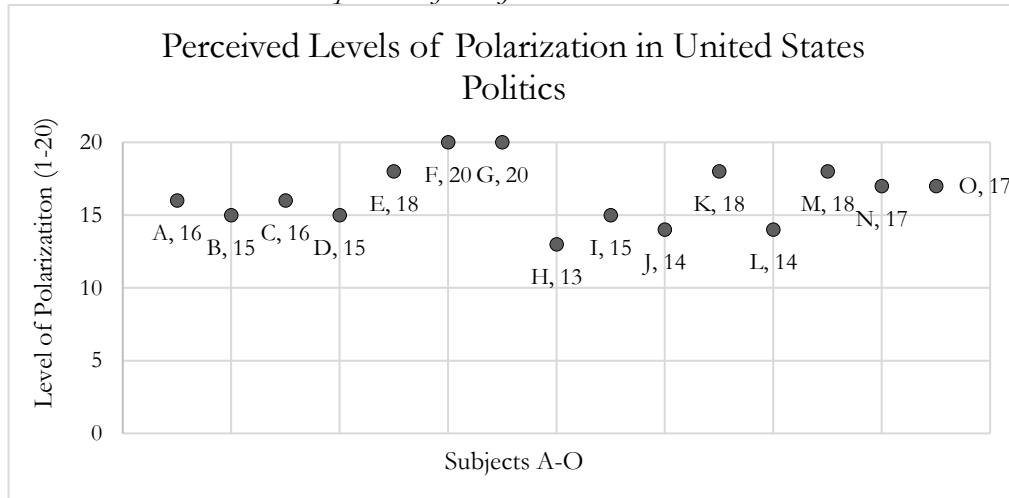
Question	Theme Demarcated by	Theme Description
#R1	R1.1	Changing prior circumstances; ousting President Trump; affecting wanted change in government
	R1.2	Passion for civic engagement
	R1.3	Ensuring respondent's voice be heard
	R1.4	Respondent's first year voting
	R1.5	Parents influenced respondent to vote

The first theme (R1.1) that appeared throughout recorded answers dealt with the altering of current political and societal circumstances of the United States (as of November 2020) by affecting desired change in the government and/or ousting former president and incumbent Donald Trump. This theme arose eleven total times across respondents for this specific question, the most of any of themes found present in #R1 answers. For example, Subject A said, "I knew that we needed a presidential candidate that would move forward and not have such disgusting views...I was just kind of fed up with our country." The other theme that had a relatively pronounced prevalence among respondent answers, appearing ten times, was theme R1.3, related to a desire to make one's voice heard. Subject F encapsulated this sentiment: "I know that's a really important part of American culture, to vote in an election."

The following question first introduced the idea of political polarization and asked subjects to rate how polarized they believe United States politics to be currently (as of November 2020) on a scale from one to twenty. The definition of political polarization provided to respondents was the following: a sorting of political convictions by either the mass public or ruling elites, or both, into roughly two

distinct camps: In the US this includes persons inclined to support the Democratic or the Republican parties' policies and candidates for elected office. The mean rating was 16.4 (from 1-20) and *Figure 4* displays the breadth of ratings given by each of the fifteen respondents with each point on the scatter plot representing a separate respondent, beginning with Subject A on the left-most side of the graph and ending with Subject O on the right-most side.

Figure 4. Perceived levels of polarization in United States politics on a scale of one to twenty, responses of Subjects A-O



The questions then returned to the second of four recurring elaborative questions asked of respondents (#R2). The second dealt with subjects' opinions of the negative effects that political polarization has on both the government and the United States at large (see *Figure 2*). Prompting was given for this question, encouraging respondents to discuss both of the previously mentioned points of interest but subjects were given the ability to discuss their thoughts freely. The themes that emerged in the answers gathered from the fifteen respondents are displayed in *Figure 5* below. Four central themes emerged.

Figure 5. Themes in respondent answers to recurring question two (#R2)

Question	Theme Demarcated by	Theme Description
#R2	R2.1	Use of the word, or synonym of, "divided"
	R2.2	References to assumptions made about the opposite party
	R2.3	References to extreme party loyalty and/or an

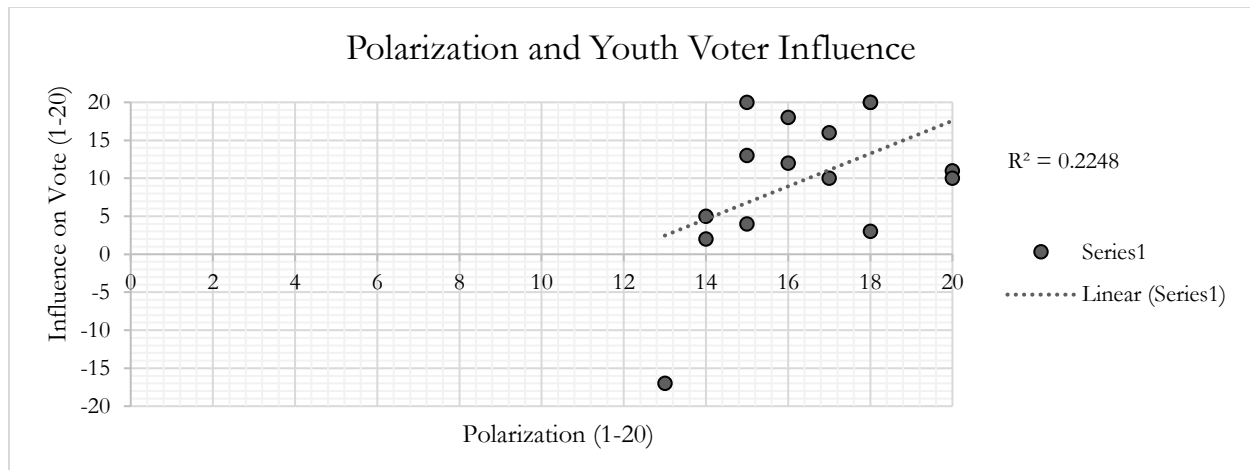
		unwillingness to listen to the other side
	R2.4	References to policy/political gridlock and inefficiency

Among the respondent answers to #R2, less themes appeared but appeared with greater average frequency than those of #R1. The first was the use of the word “divided” or a related synonym in respondents’ answers, with 19 occurrences recorded, or 1.266 uses on average by each respondent. Subject G is quoted saying, “[polarization] trickles down into society and it’s creating divide,” reflecting the sentiments of most respondents. Themes R2.3 and R2.4 were recorded 22 (1.466 average uses) and 20 (1.333 average uses) times, respectively. R2.3 denotes references to extreme party loyalty and/or an unwillingness to listen to the opposite party. This theme spans across responses to recurring questions two, three, and four. Subject M’s response to #R2 is an accurate depiction of theme R2.3, saying, “...you’re either on one side or you’re on the other...so I think we see a lot of extremism...” Alternatively, Subject K’s response fittingly displayed R2.4, “...no laws are passed...when you look at things like gun control...they’re not passing laws that are really simple like any background checks and it's a lot of common-sense policy that just doesn't get moved.”

The effect of political polarization on respondents’ decision to vote was also collected. *Figure 6* plots this effect (on a scale of 1-20) against the level of political polarization respondents identified exists in United States politics (on a scale of 1-20). The r^2 coefficient, relating these two data sets was equal to 0.2248 indicating a weak positive correlational relationship. The outlier data point in *Figure 6* is that of Subject H who in their responses to posed questions took a non-establishment approach, rebuking the two-party system and the political process of voting. The negative value attached to the subject’s scaled rating is due to the fact that, although they did vote, the level of polarization strongly influenced them to *not* vote, hence the negative value.

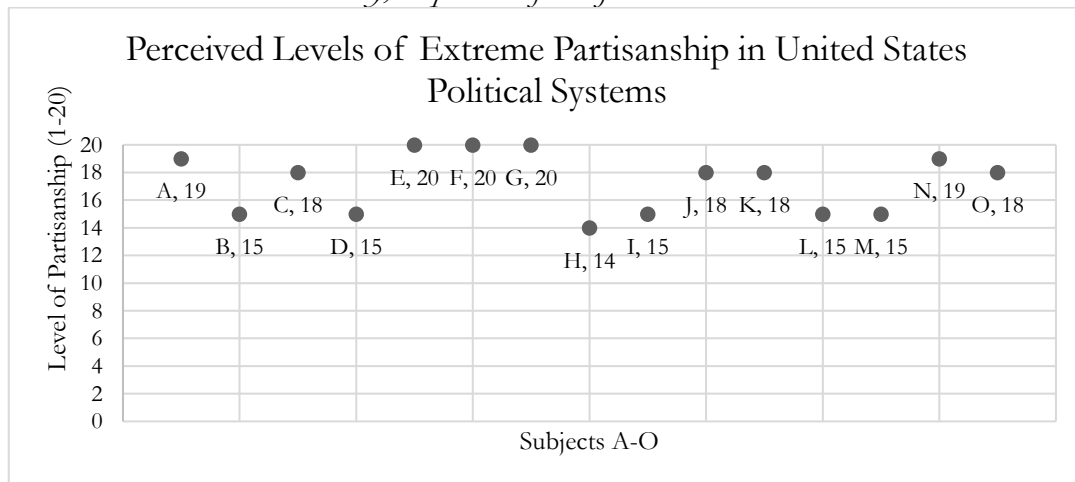
Figure 6. Perceived levels of polarization in United States politics on a scale of one to twenty in relation to the influence of polarization on respondents’ decision to vote on a scale of 1-20, responses of Subjects A-O

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The next question first introduced the idea of political partisanship and asked subjects to rate the extent to which extreme political partisanship is present in the United States political system on a scale from one to twenty. The definition of partisanship provided to respondents was the following: the quality or action of strongly supporting a person's principle or political party often without considering or judging the matter very carefully. The mean rating was 17.267 (from 1-20), higher than that of the presence of polarization by 0.867 points. *Figure 7* displays the breadth of ratings given by each of the fifteen respondents with each point on the scatter plot representing a separate respondent, beginning with Subject A on the left-most side of the graph and ending with Subject O on the right-most side.

Figure 7. Perceived levels of partisanship in United States political systems on a scale of one to twenty, responses of Subjects A-O



The questions then, once again, returned to the qualitative set with the third of four recurring elaborative questions (#R3). This question asked participants to elaborate on their answer to the previous quantitative question regarding their rating

of the level of extreme political partisanship present in United States political systems (see Figure 2). The themes that emerged in connection to responses to #R3 are listed in *Figure 8*. Six themes were identified.

Figure 8. Themes in respondent answers to recurring question three (#R3)

Question	Theme Demarcated by	Theme Description
#R3	R3.1	References to a lack of accountability for political candidates
	R3.2	Reference to the January 6, 2021 Capitol insurrection/riot
	R3.3	References to extreme party loyalty and/or an unwillingness to listen to the other side
	R3.4	References to cult-like behavior
	R3.5	References to social media
	R3.6	References to ousting former President Trump

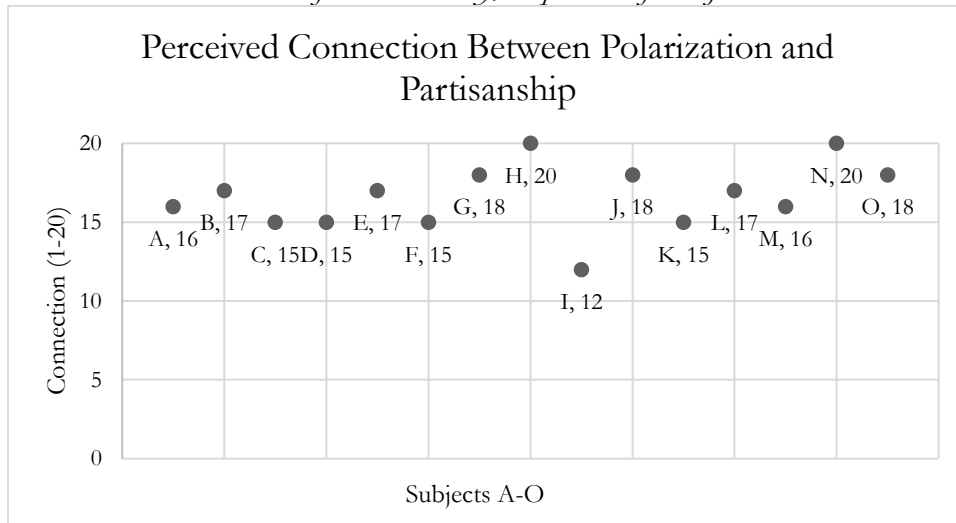
In response to this third question (#R3), more themes appeared but only two were of great significance as a measure of the frequency of verbalization. Theme R3.3 dealt with the same content as R2.3, denoting references to extreme party loyalty and/or an unwillingness to listen to the opposite party. This theme appears 32 times across response to #R3, an average of 2.133 times per subject. The second most prevalent theme was R3.6 which describes references to the ousting of former president and incumbent Donald Trump, appearing 22 times for an average of 1.467 references per subject. Subject I focused on this theme saying, “most people were just voting against Trump more than anything...and they didn’t really...I guess they cared...who’s the other one,” in his response.

The following question posed a connection between two phenomena on which this paper focuses: political partisanship and extreme polarization, asking respondents if they believed the two were connected. Specifically, respondents were asked if they believed political partisanship contributes to extreme polarization. All 15 (100%) subjects replied yes. Subjects were then asked to rate the extent to which they believed the two phenomena are connected on a scale of one to twenty. The mean response to this question was 16.6 (from 1-20). *Figure 9* displays the breadth of ratings given by each of the fifteen respondents with each point on the scatter plot representing a

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separate respondent, beginning with Subject A on the left-most side of the graph and ending with Subject O on the right-most side.

Figure 9. Perceived connection between extreme polarization and political partisanship on a scale of one to twenty, responses of Subjects A-O



Questioning continued with the last recurring elaborative question (#R4). This particular question asked respondents to elaborate on their rating of the extent to which they believe political partisanship contributes to extreme polarization (see *Figure 2*). The themes that emerged in response to question #R4 are listed in *Figure 10*. Three themes were identified.

Figure 10. Themes in respondent answers to recurring question four (#R4)

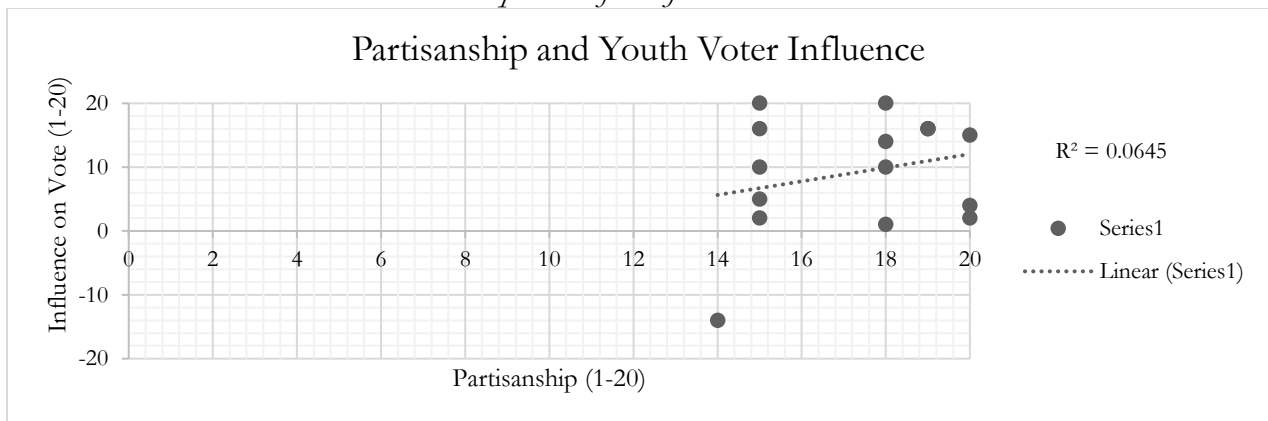
Question	Theme Demarcated by	Theme Description
#R4	R4.1	References to extreme party loyalty and/or an unwillingness to listen to the other side
	R4.2	Use of the word, or synonym of, “divided”
	R4.3	Equating of polarization and partisanship

Most significant was theme R4.1 which measured the same theme as R2.3 and R3.3: references to extreme party loyalty and/or an unwillingness to listen to the opposite party. This theme appeared 34 times (2.267 times per subject on average) in response to question #R4. Subject N, in response, replied, “the extreme right and extreme left...both just despise each other, and I think it adds to polarization a lot.”

Moreover, theme R4.2, the use of the word “divided”, or a related synonym was counted 14 times. Theme R4.3 in which respondents equated polarization and partisanship occurred 11 times.

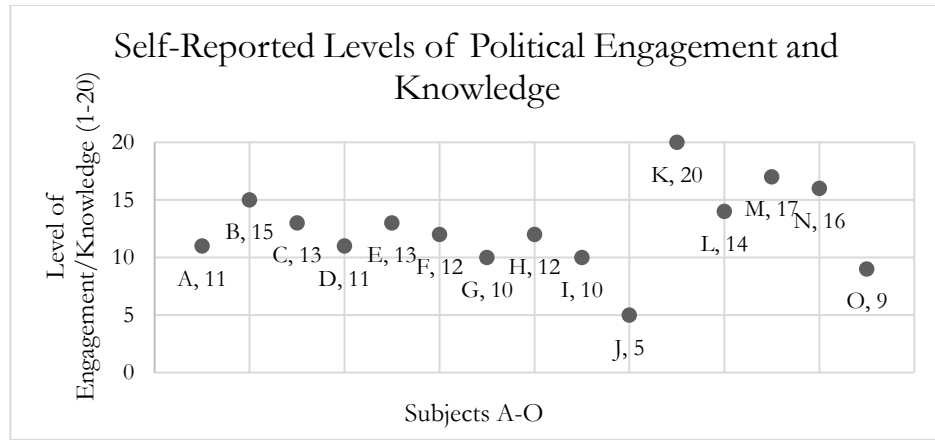
The effect of extreme political partisanship on respondents’ decision to vote was also collected in the same manner as was the influence of polarization. *Figure 11* plots this effect (on a scale of 1-20) against the level of political partisanship respondents identified exists in the United States (on a scale of 1-20). The r^2 coefficient, relating these two data sets was equal to 0.0645 indicating an extremely weak, or nonexistent, positive correlational relationship. The outlier data point in *Figure 11* is once again anti-establishment Subject H.

Figure 11. Perceived levels of partisanship in United States politics on a scale of one to twenty in relation to the influence of partisanship on respondents’ decision to vote on a scale of 1-20, responses of Subjects A-O



Lastly, respondents were asked to rate how engaged and informed they are on political issues on a scale of one to twenty. The mean response was 12.533 and *Figure 12* displays the breadth of ratings given by each of the fifteen respondents with each point on the scatter plot representing a separate respondent, beginning with Subject A on the left-most side of the graph and ending with Subject O on the right-most side.

Figure 12. Self-reported levels of political engagement and knowledge of topical political issues, responses of Subjects A-O



Discussion

Concerning the research question—*how does political partisanship, and consequent extreme polarization, affect the disillusionment of teenage voters in 2020 in regard to the political process of voting*—a number of conclusions have been drawn from the above results.

The perceived levels of political partisanship and extreme polarization, the main focus of this study, were skewed based on the condition of being affiliated with an established political party. On average, registered independents perceived higher levels of both phenomena than their counterparts who were either registered Republicans or Democrats. In fact, the average difference was over 1.2 points in both cases (*Figures 13 and 14*).

Figure 13. Party affiliation and average perceived levels of extreme polarization in the US

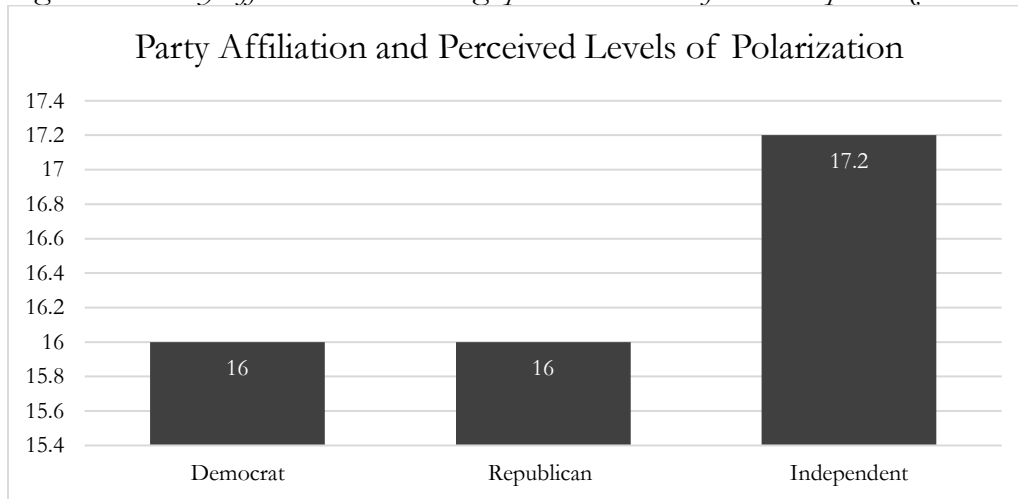
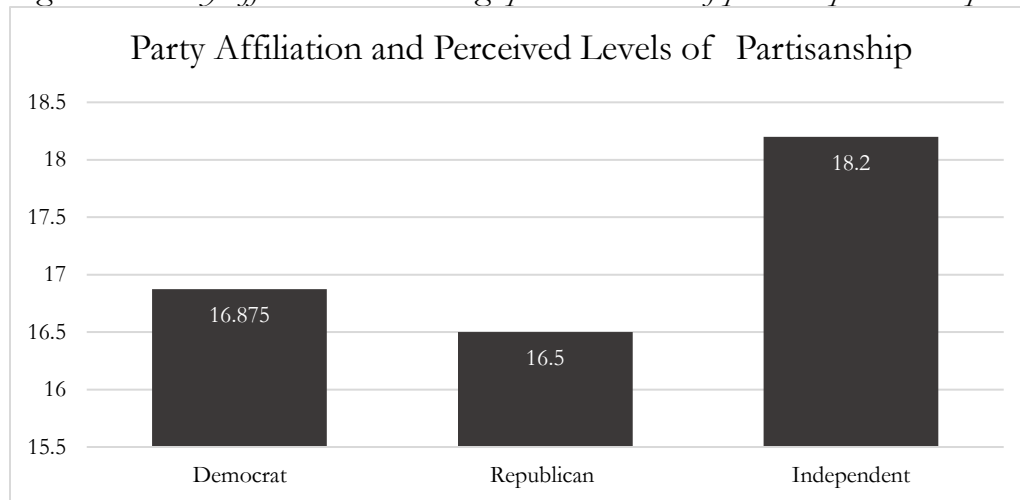


Figure 14. Party affiliation and average perceived levels of political partisanship in the US



The fact that all respondents voted in the 2020 presidential election irrespective of the levels of polarization and partisanship they identified is illuminating. The nature of the United States two-party system forces independents and moderates to align themselves with one party or another each election (supposing they do not vote for a third-party candidate) which, when candidates are so ideologically divergent, like in the 2020 presidential election, could serve as a force of disillusionment. However, despite independents registering a higher level of polarization and partisanship than their affiliated counterparts, they voted in the same proportion. Such a trend suggests that while independents are more politically aware and/or less biased, partisanship and polarization are not sources of disillusionment in the political process of voting across the spectrum of political affiliation at least.

With the fact that all respondents, Subjects A-O, voted, it is worth analyzing the perceived levels of both political partisanship and extreme polarization. In terms of the former, the average level of extreme partisanship out of 20 (Fig. 7) was determined to be 17.3 while in terms of the latter, the average level of political polarization out of 20 (Fig. 4) was determined to be 16.4. Objectively, these averages are quite high, falling in the upper 80% of the given range of answers. Since voting remained consistent—in that all respondents voted—in spite of these extremely high perceived levels of partisanship and polarization, it is valid to conclude from these data points alone that neither necessarily disillusioned youth voters in the 2020 presidential election.

Moreover, data collected from all respondents yielded that the average level of connection between polarization and partisanship out of 20 (Fig. 9) was determined to be 16.6, once again falling in the upper 80% of the possible answer range. Given that most respondents believe the two phenomena to be connected it can be surmised that either polarization begets partisanship, or more likely that partisanship begets polarization. The latter in fact *is* more likely based on respondent answers to various

follow-up questions such as unrepeatable questions #U5, #U7, and #U9 (see *Appendix Figure B*). With this finding, the conclusion can be made that partisanship is perceived by many to partially, or fully, cause polarization. It could be possible that high levels of polarization indirectly increase youth voter turnout in American presidential elections. However, further research would need to be conducted in order to solidify such a claim.

Political polarization and its effect on voting revealed that respondents who reported a higher influence of the phenomenon on their choice to vote also noted higher levels of political polarization in general. Those who noted a “higher” influence were respondents who reported the influence on their decision to vote higher than a 10 out of 20. This was 16 out of 20 respondents. On average these respondents noted an 8.8-point greater influence of polarization on their decision to vote which corresponded with a 2.2-point greater average perception of the presence of political polarization. This connection displays that the group of subjects which noted less polarization also noted the phenomenon had less of an influence on their decision to vote. Thus, the main conclusion drawn from such a data point is that higher perceived levels of polarization did *not* increase youth voter disillusionment but in fact propelled American youth to the voting booths in the 2020 presidential election.

A similar trend was noted when focusing on political partisanship: subjects who reported a higher influence of political partisanship on their decision to vote also noted higher average levels of the phenomenon in general. Those who noted a “higher” influence were those respondents which reported the influence on their decision to vote higher than a 10 out of 20. This was 15 out of 20 respondents. On average these subjects noted a 10.5534-point greater influence of partisanship on their decision to vote, corresponding with a, albeit less significant, but still present, .44-point greater average perception of the presence of extreme political partisanship. Although the connection is more tenuous in this instance, there is data that suggests higher levels of perceived political partisanship *also* did *not* increase American youth voter disillusionment but encouraged their participating in the political process of voting in the 2020 presidential election.

This study has already established that youth voters believe political partisanship and extreme polarization to be connected, generally with the former causing the latter. However, the statistical analysis of perceived levels of each phenomenon and the correlated influence of the phenomena on subjects’ decision to vote demonstrates that they are not equal in influence. The mere .44-point difference in average levels of polarization perceived is correlated with a nearly 11-point difference in influence on voting habits suggesting that even slight differentiations in perceptions of the extent to which polarization is present can lead to much larger effects on youth voting behavior. Simply put, a 2.2-point average difference in polarization was connected with a four times as large difference in voter influence while a .44-point average difference in partisanship was connected with a nearly *twenty-*

four times as large difference in voter influence. This calls for further research with a more extensive population on the disconnect between polarization and partisanship and their related influences on voter turnout.

Data beyond statistical analysis also suggests that polarization and partisanship positively influenced American youth to vote in the 2020 presidential election. In answers to #R1, the theme of ousting former President Trump (R1.1) arose nearly 11 times, more than any other suggesting that loyalty to the Democratic Party was a major factor in subjects' decisions to vote: a clear demonstration of partisanship at the voter level. However, subjects' responses about the effects of Donald Trump's time in office, with respect to the same question, also show that the high levels of polarization he perpetuated within the United States' political systems was a motivation for voting. Coupled with the frequency the theme appeared, this data clearly indicates that both polarization and partisanship influenced youth voters *to* vote, not disillusioning them.

Recurring question 2 (#R2) dealt with the negative effects of polarization, namely inefficiency in government. The most common themes centered around extreme party loyalty and polarization (R2.3) and policy gridlock (R2.4), mentioned a combined total of 42 times. Given this data, it is possible that extreme party loyalty (extreme political partisanship) and its effects i.e., policy gridlock caused increased youth voter turnout. #R1 and #R2 established that subjects largely voted to remove Trump from office because they believe that he perpetuated polarization and partisanship that damaged the United States.

This trend continued with recurring question 3 (#R3) as subjects once again referenced themes such as extreme party loyalty and polarization (R3.3) and ousting former President Trump (R3.6). These themes were mentioned for a combined total of 54 times. Ousting the then current president being a significant theme of subject responses when asked to identify examples of partisanship clearly demonstrates that partisanship played a major role in voter turnout. Moreover, continued references to party loyalty show that youth voters recognize extremely high levels of political polarization to exist in the US while previous questions demonstrate that youth voters have connected this polarization with government inefficiency, of which rectifying was a key motivation for voting. This clearly displays polarization's indirect impact on affecting increased youth voter turnout.

Continuing with recurring question 4 (#R4) subjects again referenced the theme of extreme party loyalty and polarization (R4.1) as well as the equating of polarization and partisanship (R4.3). These themes were referenced for a combined total of 45 times with R4.1 mentioned 34 times alone. Given that polarization has previously been identified by subjects as a motivation for voting and a number of respondents even equated partisanship and polarization, the effect of partisanship on youth voting habits can also be deduced. Essentially the equating of the two phenomena in popular youth voter perception means that the explicit influence of one, as previously stated, signifies a similar implicit influence of the other.

Consequently, as a result of the frequency of theme R4.3 it is quite evident *both* extreme polarization and political partisanship are motivators for the youth population to vote.

In total, indirect references to extreme polarization and political partisanship in answer to the four recurring questions occurred 173 unique times. This is a clear indication of the relevance of polarization and partisanship in the political climate surrounding the 2020 presidential election. Given 100% of subjects voted, this points to the fact that youth voters were aware of such a climate but were *not* disillusioned by that same climate, at least to a point of withdrawal from the political system in choosing to not vote.

Although much of the evidence points to extreme polarization and political partisanship being non-factors in the disillusionment of the youth voting population there are some important limitations to the study which produced such results. To begin the population size only consisted of 15 youth voters due to time and population availability restraints, as well as limited resources. Such a small sample size has implications for the reliability of correlation coefficients as well as other statistical data presented. Finally, on average respondents rated themselves 12.3 out of 20 when asked how politically informed and engaged they were suggesting responses to interview questions and consequent quantitative and qualitative data may not be as valuable versus if the sample population were more informed/engaged on average.

The data clearly points to the fact that there is a positive correlation between high levels of extreme polarization/political partisanship and voter turnout. Thus, the data has confirmed the hypothesis that there is a positive correlation between high levels of perceived polarization/partisanship and voter turnout among teenagers. Youth voters were clearly aware of increased polarization and partisanship and yet still voted in spite of such a climate. In fact, not only does the data show that both phenomena did *not* disillusion youth voters but in fact *motivated* them to vote. Although more research would have to be conducted in order to prove such a causal relationship, the study demonstrates cursory evidence to such a conclusion.

In answer to the research question— *how does political partisanship, and consequent extreme polarization, affect the disillusionment of teenage voters in 2020 in regard to the political process of voting*—neither political partisanship nor extreme polarization disillusion the demographic and evidence suggests both positively influence youth voter turnout.

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Appendix

Figure A. Number of occurrences of each theme in respondent answers to recurring questions #R1-#R4

Question	Themes	No. Occurrences
#R1	R1.1	11
	R1.2	2
	R1.3	10
	R1.4	3
	R1.5	2
#R2	R2.1	19
	R2.2	10
	R2.3	22
	R2.4	20
#R3	R3.1	2
	R3.2	6
	R3.3	32
	R3.4	2
	R3.5 <i>refer to #U10</i>	5
	R3.6	22

#R4	R4.1 <i>refer to #U7</i>	34
	R4.2	14
	R4.3	11

Figure B. Unrepeated questions

Question Number	Question
#U1	Would you say that some media outlets are more conservative, and some are more liberal leaning? (In reference to #R5)
#U2	Are there any specific political events you would point to where this is pretty obvious? (In reference to #R4)
#U3	Would you say there is a much more divided public opinion? People were either right or left...there weren't many moderates this election? (In reference to #R3)
#U4	Would you say that partisanship had made the government inefficient in terms of passing legislation or anything like that (In reference to #R4)
#U5	So that facade of polarization that... where you're basically saying that elites create a kind of atmosphere of polarization that pits people, non-elites, against each other, correct? (In reference to #R2)
#U6	Would you say that media is a strong indicator of the level of partisanship in the country right now? (In reference to #R3)
#U7	In your opinion, would you say that people who are buying into the two-party system are also buying into extreme partisanship which essentially

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	precipitates polarization at a variety of levels? (In reference to #R4)
#U8	Would you say that new media, like social media, as well as traditional media like cable news networks both contributed to the level of polarization and partisanship? (In reference to #R5)
#U9	Would you say that extreme partisanship leads to people closing themselves off from the other party and that in turn creates polarization? (In reference to #R4)
#U10	Would you say that one of the candidates weaponized media in order to actually increase the level of polarization and partisanship in our country? (In reference to #R5)