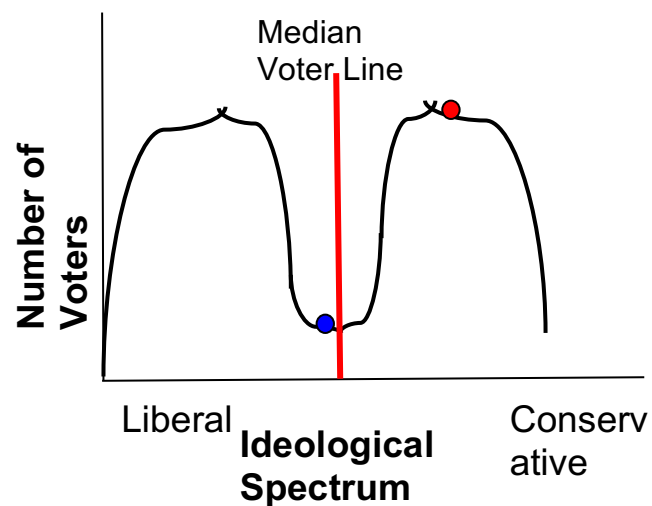


Polarization, Populism, and Bernie Sanders Jenny Loomis

It seems that as the 21st century unfolds, polarization increases within the American political system. Today, the median ideological position in both parties is significantly further from the center of the political spectrum than they were in the Reagan and Clinton years, despite each President's clear partisanship. The stark divisions in party ideology are present in congress and mirrored in the American public, where political party identification is infiltrating our everyday lives and creating social divisions. The reason for this polarization is widely debated and most likely a consequence of several coexisting factors, including increasing levels of social media-driven misinformation, polarized media sources, and gerrymandering. The increase in intense polarization in the United States has coincided with the rise of the far-left candidate Bernie Sanders and the far-right candidate Donald Trump, who have drawn more and more public attention and reached unexpected levels of success on the US political stage. I will evaluate a central question associated with these patterns in American Politics: Is the rise of Bernie Sanders, democratic socialism, and far-left populism a product or a cause of present polarization?

The spatial theory of elections, pictured below, given that there are only two parties within a system, suggests that Presidential candidates have an incentive to appeal towards the median American voter in general elections.

Candidates are expected to gain the support of their own party and attempt to capture the majority of independent voters, rather than leave median voters to a more moderate candidate on the other side. The blue point on the model represents the ideal point through this logic. Issues with this model arise in primary elections, when candidates need to beat out members of their own party. This inevitably drives their platforms away from the American average and towards the party average. The red point on the model represents the optimal ideological stance in a political primary, where candidates are seeking votes from the more moderate and extreme voters within their party. Therefore, far-left and far-right candidates incentivize more moderate candidates to skew their ideology towards the extremes. Bernie Sanders' and Donald Trump's ability to capture such a large and dedicated following have made this shift a reality in American politics.



Even more than just a singular candidate swaying party averages, an introduction of a third political party can significantly impact political polarization. Although he is not an official member, Bernie Sanders' political ideals align with the democratic socialist party, whose beliefs reflect far-left policies like free higher education, workers' rights, and anti-capitalism. Alongside the rise of polarization, democratic socialism has exploded over the last decade, the DSA's membership growing from [6,000 in 2016](#) to [over 94,000 in 2021](#).

The crumbling of the U.S. economy in 2008 left many Americans looking for alternatives to the capitalist system that had failed them. The Occupy Wall Street movement, a nationwide protest

pushing for regulations on capitalist greed, spurred from the financial crisis but eventually grew to address larger left-wing issues. *Generation Occupy*, a 2021 book on the legacy of the movement, argues that Bernie Sanders was able to capitalize on the movement in ways other politicians didn't. Author Michael Levitin claims the Occupy Movement, "ushered in Bernie Sanders's campaigns for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2016 and 2020, [moving the party's center leftward and exerting pressure on the putatively moderate nominee Joe Biden](#)". The Occupy movement popularized leftist goals that Bernie had been supporting for decades, setting the stage for his successful presidential campaign.

While the rise of Sanders was aided by an ongoing liberal shift within the public, the populist rhetoric in his 2016 campaign speeches is likely what caused extreme polarization rather than just a leftward shift of the democratic party median. Bernie Sanders is viewed as somewhat of an "outsider" politician, due to his far-left position on the political spectrum and his unconventional early life. He titled his book on his political campaign, "Our Revolution," representing the outsider approach that his campaign took. In his 2016 presidential campaign, his speeches included lines such as: "We need a political revolution in this country involving millions of people who are prepared to stand up and say enough is enough, and I want to lead that," and, "I think I'm the only candidate who's prepared to take on the billionaire class which now controls our economy and [increasingly controls the political life of this country](#)". These excerpts represent populist rhetoric which employs an "us vs. them" strategy. Bernie's ability to play the victim, or at least relate to people who perceive themselves as victims, resonated with the average American while feeding the division between the two sides. A study analyzing the speech in Sanders' 2016 campaign found parallels between his campaign rhetoric and Donald Trump's, and also found that about half of Bernie's populist rhetoric was categorized as Popular Demand, [meaning that it referenced issues like class divide, which excite his base](#). While these tactics are effective in exciting voters and encouraging turnout, they are bound to drive them towards political extremes.

The surge of polarization in the U.S. in the 21st century may have stemmed from a lost trust in capitalism on the left and a loss in trust of government on the right, but populist rhetoric has created not only a division but animosity towards the "other group." Polarization does not seem to be the cause of populism, rather the increase in populist sentiment on our political extremes is part of the reason America's divisions are becoming increasingly severe.