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Reaching a Compromise Between Left and Right-Wing Parties

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Reaching a Compromise Between Left and Right-Wing Parties

Honors Research Project

Department of Political Science

The University of Akron

Claire Jimerson

Introduction

With each new day that arises, it seems that so too does a new headline declaring the monstrosities of one political party or another. Whether it be through these headlines or in simple day-to-day interactions with others, it has become increasingly clear that there is a worrying level of polarization coupled with an equally dangerous resistance to compromise. Though it may seem like a trivial issue to have, the reality of this resistance has far larger implications on American politics, and in turn, the lives of the American people. In any context, compromise is a vital factor in progress. From a young age, it is taught that there can be little progress without some willingness to bend. When there is a dispute between siblings as to which T.V. show to watch, for example, a parent will most likely suggest and encourage a compromise, i.e., a third show that satisfies each party as best as possible. As one grows older, these situations become more and more important. If one were to find themselves in a job where they begin feeling unfulfilled, there must be a consideration of all other factors in an attempt to create the best possible outcome, rather than the immediate urge to quit the job completely. Even in fields other than politics, compromise is an integral part of progress. For example, an employer may want to pay his employees a lower rate, but must also consider the reality of the situation, and compromise on a reasonable rate to keep his employees happy. Nowhere else, however, does compromise seem less likely at face value, but more important for the future of America, than in politics. In a democratic society in particular, “little change can happen...” “...without some compromise, and almost no major change can happen without major compromise” (Gutmann & Thompson 2010). The question, then, is why would change always be necessary? After all, America is supposed to have a tried-and-true system of governance that ensures a safe and fair

democracy for all. This way of thinking stifles change for the good, however. Researchers document that “the best leaders have a general philosophy that things can always be better” (Rahschulte 2019). Claiming that the status quo is good enough never enables us to become better, nor does it equate to achieving new goals. It was with these realities in mind that I conducted the research presented in this paper. Though I took many different approaches to do so, I ultimately set out to answer one question: how can individuals with extreme political views find common ground? To fully understand the nuances of such a question, I had to ask myself a few other questions, the results of which I have compiled in this paper. First, I set out to find existing research surrounding the current state of polarizing views in American politics, in an attempt to lay the groundwork for the rest of my research. Similarly, I analyzed the current state of willingness to compromise. I then took a deeper look into the issues with the lack of compromise on these polarized views, again using existing research. In this, I also sought to find more information on how this affects both the everyday life of the American people, as well as the future of American politics as a whole. I next searched for any research indicating where this reluctance to compromise may stem from, and in doing so, sought to uncover whether or not there may be more common ground in American politics than we may initially think. Finally, I attempted to compile a realistic approach to finding more common ground in the future and projected what that could mean for the future of American Democratic politics, as well as the impact of such change on Americans’ everyday lives.

Literature Review

Current Trends

Before any conclusions or suggestions can be appropriately made, we must establish the current state of both the level of polarization in America, as well as the level of resistance to

compromising on this polarization. The majority of existing research suggests that there is a continuing increase in political polarization in America, both among citizens and elected officials alike. Research suggests that Americans now are more divided among party lines than at any point over the last two decades (Pew 2021 para. 1). In fact, this polarization has grown in America at a rate higher than in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, or Germany, over the last forty years (Boxell et al 2020 para. 3). This conclusion, reached by Levi Boxell, a professor of economics at Stanford University, came after an extensive analysis of data from four decades of public opinion surveys conducted in these countries (Boxell et al 2020 para. 3). Boxell and his colleagues took this data and rated attitudes on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 reflected no negative feelings towards the other party (Boxell et al 2020 para. 10). Specifically, the researchers found that in 1978, the average American rated members of their affiliated political party 27 points higher than the members of the other major political party on the scale Boxell outlined (Boxell et al 2020 para. 1). Interestingly, the researchers found that by 2016, this number had grown to 45.9 points (Boxell et al 2020 para. 1).

Similarly, the much research suggests that political division is greatest among those who are most engaged and active in the political process (Pew 2021 para. 6). Using data from a survey of 10,000 American adults, Pew researchers found that the overall share of Americans who express either consistently liberal or consistently conservative opinions has more than doubled over the past two decades from 10% to 21% (Pew 2021 para. 9). As a result, today, a whopping 92% of Republicans are to the right of the median Democrat, and a similar 94% of Democrats are to the left of the median Republican (Pew 2021 para. 9). Among the politically engaged, this trend is even more pronounced. Today, 38% of self-described politically engaged Democrats are consistent liberals, a number that was at just 8% in 1994 (Pew 2021 para. 8).

Similarly, Republicans who are politically engaged have seen a 10% increase among consistently conservative attitudes, increasing from 23% in 1994 to 33% today (Pew 2021 para. 8).

There are also strong trends seen between uncontrollable, innate features of an individual and their political tendencies. For example, there is a phenomenon researchers refer to as the gender gap in American voting behaviors (Gender Gap n.d. para. 1). Rutgers' Center for American Women and Politics defines this phenomenon as "the difference in the percentage of women and the percentage of men voting for a given candidate or supporting a particular party, officeholder, or issue" (Gender Gap n.d. para. 1). Courtney Weaver of The Financial Times notes that in every presidential election since 1980, with the exception of the 2016 election and 1996 election, the gender gap has ranged between four and ten percentage points (Weaver 2020 para. 8). Other research highlights a similar trend. NBC News' combined 2010 polls, "Republicans held a 9-point advantage among men in congressional preference, and Democrats held a 7-point edge among women, producing a 16-point gender gap" (Todd et. al 2022 para. 5).

These disparities do not just occur among gender lines. Researchers at The Hill conducted a joint poll with HarrisX to analyze the relationship between age and party affiliation. The poll found that four in ten registered voters ages 18 to 34 identified as liberal "on both social and economic issues" (The Hill 2022 para. 2). However, the same research finds that just 18% of those polled aged 65 and up report considering themselves a social liberal, and just 22% of respondents age 65 and older identify as economic liberals (The Hill 2022 para. 4).

Though these trends are undeniably concerning, most research has found that Americans at the very least express a desire to bridge this gap. For example, Daniel Cox of the American Enterprise Institute compiled research that concluded that an overall 59% of Americans claim that when people have differing views about politics, it "does not generally indicate how much

they will or will not agree on other topics” (Cox 2019 para. 1). This number is greater across generations as well as religious groups. For example, his research suggests that 44% of 18 to 29-year-olds say that political disagreement signals some sort of wider differences in one’s worldview, while just 24% of age 65 and older Americans share this view (Cox 2019 para. 3). Further, 68% of non-white protestants believe that politics is a struggle between good and evil, and this number transforms to 45%, 37%, and 33% of Catholics, white mainline protestants, and religiously unaffiliated Americans respectively (Cox 2019 para. 6).

This trend persists across other research. A joint poll conducted by NPR, PBS, NewsHour, and Marist concluded that 63% of Americans polled said that they prefer officials who would make compromises with people with whom they disagree (Sparks 2019 para. 4). In practice, however, Americans do not seem to stick to their desire. In 2015, when a bill was passed after Speaker of the House John Boehner announced that he would be stepping down and allowing funding for Planned Parenthood, around one-third of Americans said that they supported a budget agreement that eliminated Planned Parenthood funding while 60% wanted to maintain the funding (Sparks 2019 para. 6). Furthermore, the majority of those who supported keeping Planned Parenthood said it was unacceptable to pass anything that cut Planned Parenthood (Sparks 2019 para. 7). Similarly, among those who wanted to eliminate all funding for Planned Parenthood, two-thirds said that they “wouldn’t budge” (Sparks 2019 para. 7).

Other research reaches the same worrying conclusion regarding the tendency to claim to value compromise versus the tendency to pursue this goal in practice. Gutmann and Thompson outlined two mindsets concerning this issue. First, they noted that the compromising mindset encompasses what is known as principled prudence, i.e. adapting one’s principles, as well as mutual respect, i.e. valuing one’s opponents (Gutmann & Thompson 2014 para. 6). The

uncompromising mindset, on the other hand, includes a principled tenacity, i.e. standing on principle, coupled with mutual mistrust, i.e. suspecting opponents (Gutmann & Thompson 2014 para. 6). To understand the practicality of each factor, the researchers looked to the Tax Reform Act of 1986, introduced by President Reagan, as well as the Affordable Care Act under the Obama administration. To accomplish the respective goals of each -- tax and healthcare reform, respectively -- each side had to give up something of value to them (Gutmann & Thompson 2014 paras. 12 & 17). Supporters of the Tax Reform Act and the Affordable Care Act believed that the compromises involved would improve the status quo overall, but even these individuals resisted any compromise on their side (Gutmann & Thompson 2014 paras. 12 & 17). Each resolution came about only when the principled positions that these reformers sought -- a simple and transparent tax code or universal healthcare -- did not survive in the process that produced the final legislative outcome (Gutmann & Thompson 2014 paras. 12 & 17). Though the mistrust generated had to be put on hold temporarily, the researchers continue, this only lasted briefly, and the uncompromising mindset outlined nearly prevailed (Gutmann & Thompson 2014 paras. 12 & 17).

While these statistics are undoubtedly disheartening, one could argue that they are not shocking. This mindset, though, ignores the extent to which a lack of compromise affects American politics as a whole. Cox furthers his research by asserting that the main reason to be concerned about a lack of willingness to compromise politically is that the greater the resistance to compromise, the greater the bias is in favor of the status quo (Cox 2019). This does not mean, he furthers, that nothing changes, but it means that politicians allow outside forces such as the market, expiring agreements, and social movements to inspire the change (Cox 2019).

At the same time, some research suggests that there are situations in which polarization may seem to be the morally superior choice. Gordon Heltzel and Kristin Laurin of the National Library of Medicine's National Center for Biotechnology Information point to the example of if half of a society begins to embrace objectively morally abhorrent ideas such as white supremacy or neo-Nazi ideologies, the other half may be justified in polarizing away from them, and even refusing to engage with or even consider their views (Heltzel & Laurin 2020 para. 6). However, this research further says that when polarization inspires revulsion, democracies run the risk of breaking down. For example, Americans are now finding themselves accepting smaller paychecks to avoid listening to opposing partisans, moving to new places to surround themselves with ideologically similar residents, and rejecting potential romantic partners with whom they disagree politically (Heltzel & Laurin 2020 para. 7). However, other research concludes that online daters usually do not advertise their political preferences, which would seem inconsistent with the idea posed by Heltzel and Laurin that people actively select partners based on this information. Research conducted by the two found that polarized Americans are now more willing to exclude people with opposing political beliefs than to exclude people of other races--a jarring comparison considering the prevalence of race-based exclusion (Heltzel & Laurin 2020).

Consequences

Political polarization and a subsequent lack of compromise have consequences beyond the political world. Shanto Iyengar, in a report published in the Annual Review of Political Science, looks at longitudinal survey data that shows that people even self-report being less comfortable with social relationships with opposing partisans (Iyengar et al. 2018 para. 33). Iyengar furthers that the percentage of Americans who would be either somewhat or very unhappy if their child married someone of the opposite political party has increased by 35

percentage points over the last 50 years (Iyengar et al. 2018 para. 33). Further, data shows that over 80% of married couples share a party identification (Iyengar et al. 2018 para. 34). Similarly, Iyengar analyzed Facebook data that showed that the median proportion of friendship groups that are ideologically discordant on the app is only about 20% (Iyengar et al. 2018 para. 37).

Research surrounding the tendency to reside in an area composed of like-minded individuals is not as uniform, though. For example, James Gimpel and Iris Hui of the University of Maryland and Stanford University respectively, using survey data they collected, suggest that people tend to self-report a desire to move to locations with fellow partisans (Gimpel & Hui 2015). A similar conclusion was reached by Jonathan Mummolo and Clayton Nall of the University of Chicago Journals. For example, data from a survey the two conducted which combined the responses with zip-code-level data on community traits showed that large portions of Americans hoped to move to more politically compatible neighborhoods (Mummolo & Nall 2017 para. 4).

Even so, research analyzing the actual moving data of partisan individuals contradicts these self-reports. Philip Klinkner, in the journal *The Forum*, concluded that residential sorting by political ideologies has not increased significantly over the past few decades, particularly when analyzing party registration data instead of presidential vote returns (Klinkner 2004). Even Mummolo and Nall admit that the self-reported desire to surround oneself with politically compatible people diverges from the actual place of residence for many of these partisans (Mummolo & Nall 2017 para. 5). They found that both Republicans and Democrats have been increasingly moving to more Republican communities on average (Mummolo & Nall 2017 para. 5). A possible explanation for this trend, they find through their survey, is that movers tend to relocate to communities similar to their current residence (Mummolo & Nall 2017 para. 5).

Thus, while partisans may express strong disdain or even hatred for the other party, their attitudes and preferences are insufficient to drive residential sorting.

Research also suggests another consequence of this reluctance to compromise may lie in a concept psychologists call “blue lies”. Jeremy Adam Smith of the University of California Berkeley’s Greater Good Magazine explains that blue lies fall somewhere between generous white lies and selfish black lies (Smith 2017 para. 7). Smith notes, “you can tell a blue lie against another group” which makes it simultaneously selfless and self-serving (Smith 2017 para. 7). For example, he says that you can lie about your team cheating in a game, which is antisocial, but it helps your team overall (Smith 2017 para. 7). These blue lies fall into their own category, as they are simultaneously selfish and beneficial to others -- but only to those who belong in your group (Smith 2017 para. 10). Smith notes while known black lies drive people apart and white lies draw them together, blue lies, by their very nature, do both (Smith 2017 para. 12). They help bring some people together by deceiving and driving apart those in another group. Lee looks to George Edwards, one of America’s leading scholars of the presidency, who is quoted as saying “people condone lying against enemy nations, and since many people now see those on the other side of American politics as enemies, they may feel that lies, when they recognize them, are appropriate means of warfare” (Smith 2017 para. 16).

Potential Origins

These phenomena tend to prompt us to examine where exactly this resistance to compromise stems from. The instinctual assumption is that one’s level of willingness to compromise is determined by the value the individual places on the issue in question. However, research by Tom Jacobs of the Pacific Standard suggests that the unwillingness to compromise is best predicted by “the extremism of one’s position, and -- less obviously -- whether one believes

the issue is related to fundamental principles of right and wrong” (Jacobs 2016 para. 3). Timothy Ryan of the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill notes “moralized attitudes lead citizens to oppose compromises, punish compromising politicians, and forsake material gains” (Ryan 2016 para. 1). He furthers that these patterns can be seen across a variety of issues, and identify a “psychological phenomenon that contributes to intractable political disputes” (Ryan 2016 para. 1).

Ryan conducted a series of studies published in the *American Journal of Political Science*. The first study included sixteen hundred participants who were asked about their attitudes toward five different political issues and were asked whether they preferred a liberal or conservative solution for each (Ryan 2016 para. 5). Preferences for one approach or another were noted on a seven-point scale (Ryan 2016 para. 5). Each person was also asked how important each issue was to them on a personal level, and to what extent the issue directly affects them, and they then indicated the degree to which their positions reflected their core moral beliefs and convictions (Ryan 2016 para. 7). This research found “extreme attitudes predicted opposition to compromise” (Ryan 2016 para. 7). Similarly, it found that when looking at the issue from a moral perspective, the support for compromise grew substantially, whether the attitudes were extreme or not (Ryan 2016 para. 8).

These results then lead one to question how the moral basis is established for different people. Professor of psychology Jonathan Haidt established five moral pillars for individuals: harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, in-group loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity (Haidt 2010 para. 2). Haidt’s research found that political liberals tend to emphasize the first two -- preventing harm and ensuring fairness -- but feel less strongly about the other three (Haidt 2010 para. 39). Unsurprisingly, conservatives tend to feel strongly about those three -- loyalty,

authority, and purity, while emphasizing the other two less (Haidt 2010 para. 39). Essayist Will Wilkinson analyzes Haidt's findings by comparing one's moral base to "five adjustable slides on a stereo equalizer that can be turned up or down to produce different balances of sound" (Wilkinson 2019 para. 14). Just as a preset like 'show tunes' will turn down the base and hip hop will turn it up, but neither turns it off, he says, so do certain cultures place more emphasis on certain moral foundations (Wilkinson 2019 para. 14).

Jacobs looks at two letters written to the editor of Ventura Breeze who had been following a story about a 19th-century cemetery that was slowly falling into disrepair and had been used as a dog park since the 1960s (Jacobs 2009 para. 48). One resident referred to the park as "this holy ground" and told city officials "your values and judgment need some serious realignment" (Jacobs 2009 para. 49). Still, a second resident noted that public funds were limited at the time, and added that "the park is full of life now, and I'm sorry if this sounds harsh, but life is for the living" (Jacobs 2009 para. 49). He notes that both arguments are centered around strict moral beliefs, yet the first resident valued the purity/sanctity moral base much more than the second (Jacobs 2009 para. 50). Jacobs furthers that Haidt's data suggests that purity/sanctity is the foundation that best predicts one's attitude toward things like abortion and gay marriage (Jacobs 2009 para. 51). Haidt notes that "if you think society is made up of individuals, and each individual has the right to do what he or she wants if they aren't hurting anybody, it's unfathomable why anyone would oppose gay marriage," furthering "liberals assume opponents must be homophobic" (Haidt 2010 para. 10). Finally, Haidt conducted an experiment where both liberals and conservatives answered questions the way they believed their political opposite would respond and found that conservatives understand liberals a lot better than liberals understand conservatives (Haidt 2010 para. 40). In response, he noted that liberals tend to be

uncomfortable about punishment, whether it be of their own children, criminals, or anyone else, while conservatives are much more restrictive and uncreative (Haidt 2010 para. 40). Through the experiment, Haidt further found that when it comes to the moral foundation of authority, the liberal mindset makes it difficult for liberal organizations to function (Haidt 2010 para. 40). Republicans, on the other hand, take the authority to the other extreme, and, according to Haidt, tend to blindly follow their leader (Haidt 2010 para. 40).

Much of the research surrounding the origins of political polarization refers to what researchers call negative partisanship. The University of Arizona's Alexis Blue refers to negative partisanship as "the tendency to support a political party or candidate based primarily on dislike for the other side" (Blue 2020 para. 4). The University of Arizona's College of Social and Behavioral Sciences Chris Weber explains the growing rate of negative partisanship seen in the last few decades in America. Weber notes that while the concept of negative partisanship is not new, it has in fact intensified as American politics have become more polarized over the last few decades (Blue 2020 para. 7). Weber furthers that "since the early '90s or so, political parties started to grow really polarized, meaning the Republican Party grew more conservative and the Democratic Party grew more liberal" (Blue 2020 para. 8). To illustrate how this trend has become so prominent, Weber uses what political scientists call a feeling thermometer, where voters are asked how warm they feel toward a political party on a scale of zero to 100 (Blue 2020 para. 10). He admits that those who remain identifying as Republicans report being about as warm towards their fellow Republicans as they were 30 or 40 years ago, and so do the Democrats (Blue 2020 para. 10). However, there has been a striking change in feelings towards the opposing party over that same period, and as Weber notes, "Democrats are much colder toward Republicans and Republicans are much colder toward Democrats" (Blue 2020 para. 10).

Blue and Weber are not alone in their analysis of negative partisanship. Researchers at The Pew Research Center surveyed American adults from June 27 to July 4, 2022, on their views of members of the opposing political party (Pew 2022). They found that in 2016, 47% of Republicans and 35% of Democrats said that those in the other political party were either a lot or somewhat more immoral than other Americans (Pew 2022 para. 2). However, by 2022, 72% of Republicans and 63% of Democrats regard their political counterparts as immoral (Pew 2022 para. 2). Morality is not the only factor Americans believe their political opponents lack, though. In fact, the Pew researchers further found that just six years ago, in 2016, less than half of both Republicans and Democrats viewed the other party as more dishonest than other Americans (Pew 2022 para. 3). However, in 2022, 72% of Republicans and 64% of Democrats said the same thing (Pew 2022 para. 3).

Another possible source of this tension is the role of media and news in forming one's opinion of an opposing party. Will Friedman and David Schliefer of Public Agenda compiled a report concluding their studies for an initiative they created called the Hidden Common Ground Initiative. In their research, the men found that a third of self-identified Republicans and a quarter of self-identified Democrats say that they do not have an adequate method of understanding the views of the opposing political party (Friedman & Schleifer 2019 para. 6). Even then, among those interviewed who noted that they do have ways to understand the opposing party, 27 percent of Republicans and 21 percent of Democrats say that they rely most on personal relationships to understand the views of the opposing party (Friedman & Schleifer 2019 para. 6). Further, 25 percent of Democrats say that they rely most on the news media to understand the views of Republicans, and 15 percent of Republicans say the same about their take on this method (Friedman & Schleifer 2019 para. 6).

Other research suggests that exposure to opposing views via social media increases polarization. Nine researchers at the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, PNAS, focused on the tendency of social media to create what are called “echo chambers” amongst its consumers (Bail et al. 2018 para. 1). Echo chambers were defined by the researchers as “patterns of information sharing that reinforce pre-existing political beliefs by limiting exposure to opposing political views” (Bail et al. 2018 para. 4). The PNAS researchers conducted an experiment in which large samples of both Democrats and Republicans who report using Twitter at least three times a week were surveyed about multiple social policy issues (Bail et al. 2018 para. 5). A week later, the researchers randomly assigned the participants to a treatment condition that offered monetary incentives to follow a Twitter bot for one month which would expose them to messages from those with opposing ideologies (Bail et al. 2018 para. 5). Then, at the end of the month, the researchers surveyed the participants once more and found that Republicans who followed a liberal Twitter bot became “substantially more conservative posttreatment” (Bail et al. 2018 para. 1). Similarly, Democrats showed “slight increases in liberal attitudes” after following a conservative bot, though they note that these results were not statistically significant (Bail et al. 2018 para. 2).

On a broader scale, research suggests that this tendency towards political polarization and resistance to compromise in America goes back decades. Drew Desilver of the Pew Research Center conducted an analysis of America’s history of polarization. He used a method called DW-NOMINATE to find his results, which uses lawmakers’ roll-call votes to place them into a two-dimensional ideological space (DeSilver 2022 para. 6). His analysis focuses on the first dimension, which he notes is essentially the economic and governmental aspects of the familiar left-right spectrum and ranges from 1, which is most conservative, to -1, which is most liberal

(DeSilver 2022 para. 6). Desilver notes that this trend of increased polarization began to show itself more during the 92nd Congress of 1971-72 (DeSilver 2022 para. 7). For example, he notes that House Democrats moved from about -0.31 on their scale to -0.38 over the period, meaning over time they have become more liberal on average (DeSilver 2022 para. 7). Even more extreme have been the Republican trends, with Desilver noting a change in polarization from 0.25 to 0.51 over the same period (DeSilver 2022 para. 7). One potential cause of this, Desilver notes, may have been the increase in geographic and subsequent demographic shifts in the parties' compositions (DeSilver 2022 para. 12). He notes that in 1971-72, "representatives from the eleven former Confederate states made up nearly a third -- 31.4% -- of all the House Democrats that served in Congress" (DeSilver 2022 para. 13). Interestingly, those Southern representatives were "notably less liberal" than Democrats from elsewhere in the country (DeSilver 2022). The average DW-NOMINATE score of these Southern representatives was -0.144 versus -0.388 for non-Southern House Democrats (DeSilver 2022 para. 13). Over time, Desilver notes that Southern Democrats became both less common and more liberal to where they are today where they account for only 22% of House Democrats but are "ideologically almost indistinguishable" from their non-Southern colleagues (DeSilver 2022 para. 14).

Another possible explanation for these trends, according to Desilver, could be the racial and ethnic makeup of both parties' Southern lawmakers, which has changed considerably since the 1970s (DeSilver 2022 para. 15). Desilver looks at House records which show that only 12 African Americans in 1971-1972 served in the House and just one in the Senate, and none were from the South (DeSilver 2022 para. 15). In the current Congress, however, 24 of the 50 House Democrats from the South are African American, and one of the four Democratic senators from the South is African American (DeSilver 2022 para. 15). Contrastingly, only one of the 91

Southern House Republicans is Black, and just one of the 18 Southern Republican senators is Black (DeSilver 2022 para. 17).

Existing Room for Compromise

Through extensive research, I have found that there exists more common ground between political parties than is often admitted. One of Friedman and Schliefer's most interesting findings showed that three in four Americans interviewed believe that there is more common ground among the American people than the news media and political leaders typically portray (Friedman & Schleifer 2019 para. 3). Further, Friedman and Schliefer found that a majority of Americans interviewed believe that things such as hurtful communication and a growing fear of speaking one's mind are equally a problem or more of a problem than differences in opinion (Friedman & Schleifer 2019 para. 4). They found that although 69% of Americans "think our country deals with disagreements in a destructive way," 43% worry more about "Americans not knowing how to talk about their disagreements and conflicts in constructive ways," while only 10% worry that "fundamental disagreements and conflicting values are a more pressing issue" (Friedman & Schleifer 2019 para. 23). The survey also found that on average, both Republicans and Democrats alike think that about half of the people in the other political party are "misguided but worth trying to find common ground with" (Friedman & Schleifer 2019 para. 24). However, Friedman and Schliefer's research also found that "both Republicans and Democrats say that a little over a quarter of their fellow party members are 'so extreme that they can't imagine finding common ground with them'" (Friedman & Schleifer 2019 para. 25). Interestingly, the men also found that 55 percent of Republicans and a similar 51 percent of Democrats reported that they did not know whether they would still vote for their own party's candidate if he or she were running a divisive campaign (Friedman & Schleifer 2019 para. 47).

This underlying level of misunderstanding about partisanship and room for compromise is further theorized by researchers at More In Common who have done extensive research surrounding a phenomenon they call America's "Perception Gap" (The Perception Gap n.d. para. 1). These researchers found that both self-identified Democrats and Republicans believe that almost two times as many of the members of the other political party as reality hold views they consider extreme (The Perception Gap n.d. para. 1). Unsurprisingly, these researchers reach similar conclusions to those of Jacobs, Ryan, Friedman, and Schleifer when they conclude that the widest level of perception gap exists at the political extremes (The Perception Gap n.d. para. 1). In their research, individuals at More In Common identified seven political "tribes", including progressive activists, traditional liberals, passive liberals, politically disengaged, moderates, traditional conservatives, and devoted conservatives (The Perception Gap n.d. para. 1). As one could reasonably assume, they found that the two groups with the highest level of perception gaps were the Progressive Activists and the Devoted Conservatives -- the most ideologically committed groups of the seven (The Perception Gap n.d. para. 1). Interestingly, the researchers further found that the politically disengaged group showed the lowest level of perception gap, meaning that they held the most accurate views of outside members out of any of the seven groups (The Perception Gap n.d. para. 1). In fact, they found that these individuals were three times more accurate in their estimates of political opponents than members of the two extreme groups (The Perception Gap n.d. para. 1).

The researchers at the Hidden Common Ground Initiative outlined several examples of where there exists more common ground than is often perceived. The researchers analyzed one of the most seemingly polarizing issues in the United States--racism and policy reform (America's Hidden Common Ground 2020). Through the research, the Initiative found that over

half of all Americans, regardless of their political identification, reported wanting at least some change to policing or law enforcement (America's Hidden Common Ground 2020 para. 1).

Further, the researchers found that 91% of Democrats, 77% of Republicans, and 70% of Independents support enforcing a requirement for all officers to participate in de-escalation training in order to avoid the use of unnecessary force (America's Hidden Common Ground 2020 para. 16).

Further, research by Philip M. Fernbach and Leaf Van Boven suggests that there exists a high level of what they call false polarization in American politics (Fernbach & Van Boven 2021). The men suggest that this false polarization manifests itself in the form of an extreme overestimation of the magnitude of polarization in American politics (Fernbach & Van Boven 2021). The researchers show that while there does exist real, concerning partisan gaps, individuals tend to dramatically overestimate the magnitude of such gaps as well as overestimate others' ideological consistency (Fernbach & Van Boven 2021).

Possible Solutions

I have also come across existing research which proposes potential approaches we can take to mitigate some of this divisiveness. Leading researchers Amy Gutmann and Dennis F. Thompson of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences emphasize the importance of thinking realistically about the feasibility of compromise. Gutmann and Thompson suggest turning the focus away from common ground agreements and instead focusing on what they call the classic compromise -- a situation in which all sides gain balance but also sacrifice something valuable to their opponents (Gutmann & Thompson 2013 para. 1). Gutmann and Thompson support this proposal by referring to what philosophers call overlapping consensus (Gutmann & Thompson 2013 para. 8). In such a phenomenon, individuals with fundamentally different views are able to

agree on relevant principles, though for different reasons drawn from opposing perspectives (Gutmann & Thompson 2013 para. 8).

Fernbach and Van Boven, on the other hand, suggest a much simpler approach to reaching political compromise (Fernbach & Van Boven 2021). The most obvious approach, they suggest, would be to emphasize efforts to ensure individuals are given accurate information about others' political attitudes (Fernbach & Van Boven 2021). The men looked to a study in which participants were either instructed to estimate the views of those in the opposing party or were explicitly told what those views were (Fernbach & Van Boven 2021). The results clearly showed that those who were given the actual, accurate data rated their own policies as far less extreme, suggesting that one's false beliefs about a politically divergent individual do in fact have a moderating effect (Fernbach & Van Boven 2021). In terms of feasible changes that could be made in governing, Fernbach and Van Boven suggest putting more focus on the consequences of a policy -- such as what the effect will be -- rather than the values surrounding the policy -- such as why people believe the way they do (Fernbach & Van Boven 2021).

In a comprehensive report with the collaboration of dozens of esteemed researchers and professors of political science, Elaine C. Kamarck suggests two methods of combating the effects of extreme political polarization on a governmental level. First, she and her colleagues suggest that governmental officials reform Congressional Primaries specifically in ways aimed to increase voter turnout (Kamarck 2015 para. 7). Kamarck posits that though low turnout is an issue in all primary elections when it comes to congressional primaries, turnout often does not even reach double digits (Kamarck 2015 para. 7). To make citizens more inclined to show up on primary days, Kamarck suggests two solutions -- getting rid of closed primaries altogether and mandating that all primaries be held on the same day for each political party (Kamarck 2015

para. 7). Kamarck suggests that although it cannot be assumed that politically motivated voters would no longer dominate the primaries, the possibility of expanding the voting pool in primaries would force candidates to look at the elections differently (Kamarck 2015 para. 8). Specifically, she notes that with the possibility that independents or even voters from the other party would vote in these primaries, the impact that these ideologically motivated voters have would be diluted and make it possible that moderation and compromise would be rewarded (Kamarck 2015 para. 8).

The second solution Kamarck and her colleagues suggest to mitigating the effects of resistance to compromise is through encouraging leaders to institute real redistricting reform. Kamarck looks at Bill Bishop's *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* which suggests that Americans have increasingly been voluntarily relocating into politically compatible areas (Kamarck 2015 para. 10). Thus, Kamarck posits that efforts to increase the usage of independent redistricting commissions would take the responsibility away from state legislatures who are politically motivated (Kamarck 2015 para. 10).

There are currently a few major gaps in the existing literature surrounding political polarization. Mainly, there is a lack of research on the source of this polarization and resistance to compromise. There does exist some research on the moral basis upon which many political views are built, like that of Haidt, for example. However, there is a lack of data surrounding the factors that may contribute to this polarization as a whole. Because of this, I will focus my research on the trends seen between major, innate factors of Americans and their views on certain political concepts.

Theory and Hypotheses

My hypotheses are as follows:

1. Older Americans will more consistently hold Conservative views, while younger Americans will more consistently hold Liberal views.

The poll conducted by The Hill and HarrisX stands out as one of the few pieces of literature objectively analyzing the relationship between age and political leanings. As mentioned, the poll found an undeniable relationship between one's age and their tendency to consider themselves socially or economically liberal (The Hill 2020 para. 1). With almost double the amount of respondents ages 18 to 34 considering themselves socially liberal compared to those ages 65 and up, and a similar trend when it comes to being economically liberal, I expect to see similar trends during my research.

2. Men will more consistently hold conservative views than women will.

There is extensive research examining the phenomenon of the gender gap in politics. Weaver's research suggests that there is as high as a 10 percentage point gender gap (Weaver 2020 para. 8). Further, Todd and his researchers, as mentioned, showed that even in 2010, men were voting as conservatives at a much higher rate than women, and women were voting as liberals at an equally high rate compared to men (Todd et al 2022 para. 6). Thus, I expect that this trend will persist throughout my research.

3. Republicans will more consistently hold conservative views than Democrats, and Democrats will more consistently hold liberal views than Republicans.

This hypothesis, though it may seem obvious, is still important to note. This trend is most strongly supported by Haidt's research on moral pillars (Haidt 2010 para. 2). Haidt's research, for example, supports the notion that across the different political issues, those supporting issues that focus more heavily on liberal morals such as preventing harm and ensuring fairness will likely also more often be self-identified Democrats (Haidt 2010 para. 2). Similarly, individuals

supporting issues that emphasize what Haidt sees as conservative moral pillars, such as authority, purity, and loyalty, will likely be those identifying as Republicans, if this theory is supported (Haidt 2010 para. 2).

Data and Methods

To properly analyze the relationship between the independent and dependent variables I will mention, I have gathered and analyzed data from the General Social Survey. The General Social Survey, or GSS, is a “nationally representative survey of adults in the United States conducted since 1972” (About the GSS n.d. para. 1). The goal of the GSS is to monitor and provide information on trends in American opinions and behaviors (About the GSS n.d. para. 1)

For my research, I looked at three different independent variables provided on the GSS Data Explorer. The first variable, age, was collected for each survey participant and simply asked the age of the respondent. The results show participants between the ages of 18 and 88, but for efficiency purposes, I have consolidated the ages of respondents into groups of 9, with the first group being aged 18-27, and so on. The second independent variable I utilized was the respondent’s sex. The question associated with this variable on the GSS simply asked what the respondent’s sex was. Again, for consolidation purposes, I have combined the responses into three sections: male, female, and other. My final independent variable is political party affiliation. In the GSS surveys, individuals responded to the question “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or what?”. My research shows these four options as possible responses.

In order to analyze the views of those surveyed, I looked at five different political issues presented as questions in the GSS. First, I analyzed the responses to the question “Are you for or against preferential hiring and promotion of blacks?”, and the subsequent question of the degree

to which one supports or does not support this practice, as provided for by the GSS Data Explorer. I condensed the data into two applicable responses: favor and oppose.

I then looked at whether or not conditions have improved for African Americans in America. The GSS question associated with this issue was “in the past few years, do you think conditions for black people have improved, gotten worse, or stayed about the same?”. I condensed the data into three possible response categories including improved, about the same, and gotten worse, and graphed accordingly.

Next, I analyzed GSS data surrounding one’s view on homosexual relations. The survey question associated with this asked “what about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex -- do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?”. To consolidate the data, I grouped the responses into two categories: always wrong / almost always wrong and sometimes wrong / not wrong at all.

There was much more data available for the issue regarding one’s view on gun permit laws compared to some of the other variables. This question asked, “would you favor or oppose a law which would require a person to obtain a police permit before he or she could buy a gun?”. As usual, I grouped the responses into two categories: favor and oppose.

The final issue I looked at was one’s view on whether the United States should increase its immigrant amount or not. The GSS question associated with this was, “do you think the number of immigrants from foreign countries who are permitted to come to the United States to live should be increased a lot, increased a little, left the same as it is now, decreased a little, or decreased a lot?”. I consolidated the responses into groups including increased a lot / increased a little, same as now, and decreased a little / decreased a lot.

As previously mentioned, the manner of the collection of responses from the GSS made it difficult to provide a proportional explanation of each variable. The General Social Survey is sent out each year, but not every variable is analyzed each year, and there are various sample sizes for each variable each year. Thus, I concluded that it would be most appropriate to display the data in the form of percentages, rather than raw numbers. I decided to use a percentage bar chart, which will show the proportion of responses for each category compared to the total number of responses in the form of a percentage. I have also included a data set below each graph that will show the raw numbers for each response.

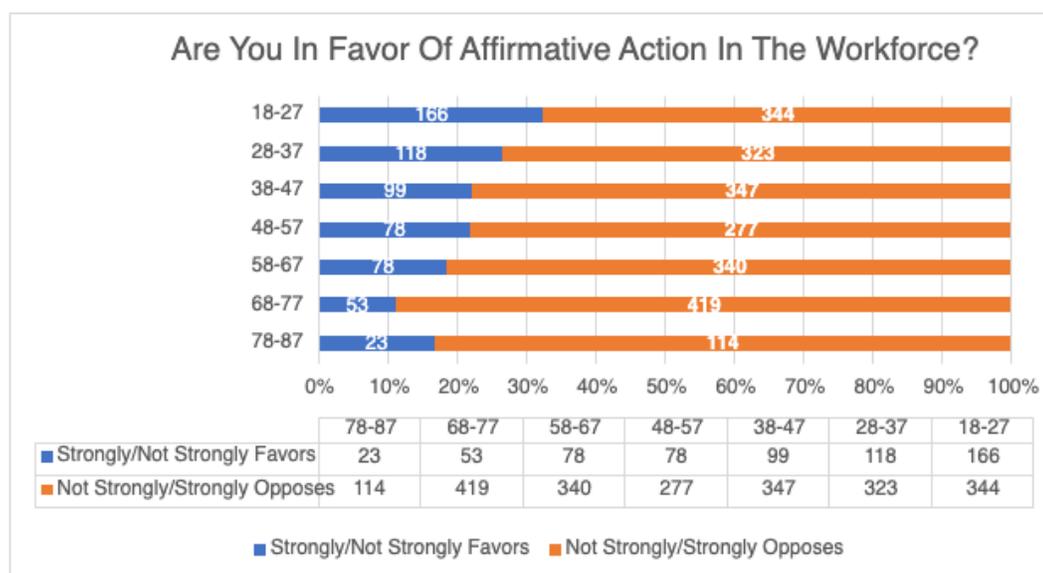
Variables

The independent variables that I will examine in my research are age, sex, and political party affiliation. To see what effect, if any, these variables have on the views of Americans, I utilized data collected from the General Social Survey results from 2021. My dependent variables will be liberal views and conservative views.

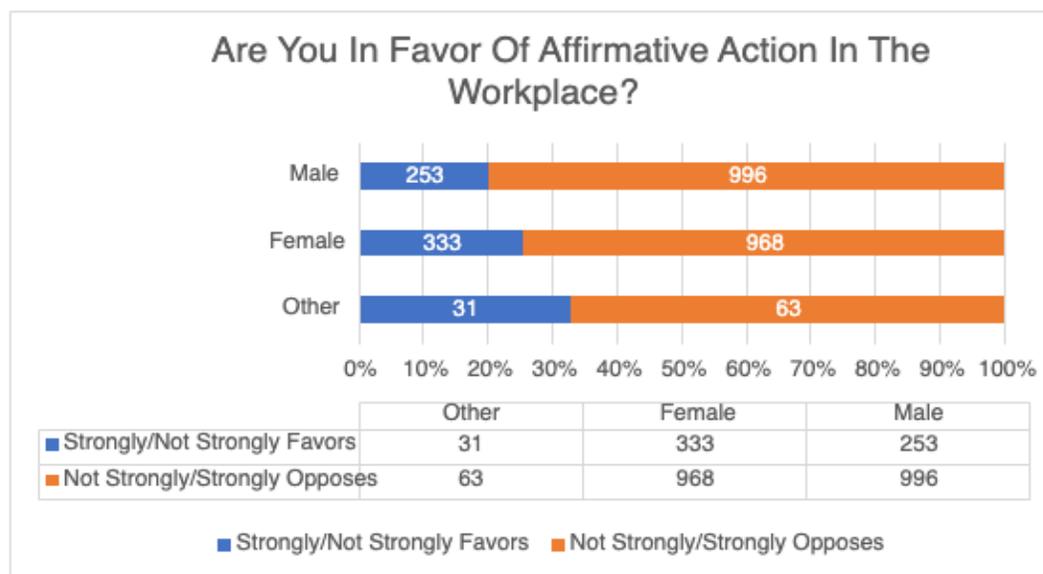
In my research, I have considered five different political issues to use in order to establish what exactly liberal views and conservative views are, all of which I have described above. I will look at support for affirmative action programs, opinion on the current conditions for African Americans, view on homosexual relations, support for the requirement of a permit to own a gun, and views on immigration in my consideration. Though politics is not purely black or white, liberal or conservative, for the sake of creating uniform, clear research, I will group certain responses to the questions as generally liberal views, and certain responses as generally conservative. In my findings, I will consider support for affirmative action a liberal view, and a lack of support a conservative view. I have considered the belief that conditions have improved for African Americans as a conservative view, and a disagreement with the statement as a liberal

view. For the question on homosexual relations, I will consider a response seeing homosexuality as morally wrong a conservative one, and a response supporting the concept as liberal. Next, I will consider the support of a gun permit requirement as a liberal view, and resistance to it as conservative. Finally, I will consider the view that the United States should increase its immigrant amount as a liberal response, and the view that it should be decreased as a conservative response.

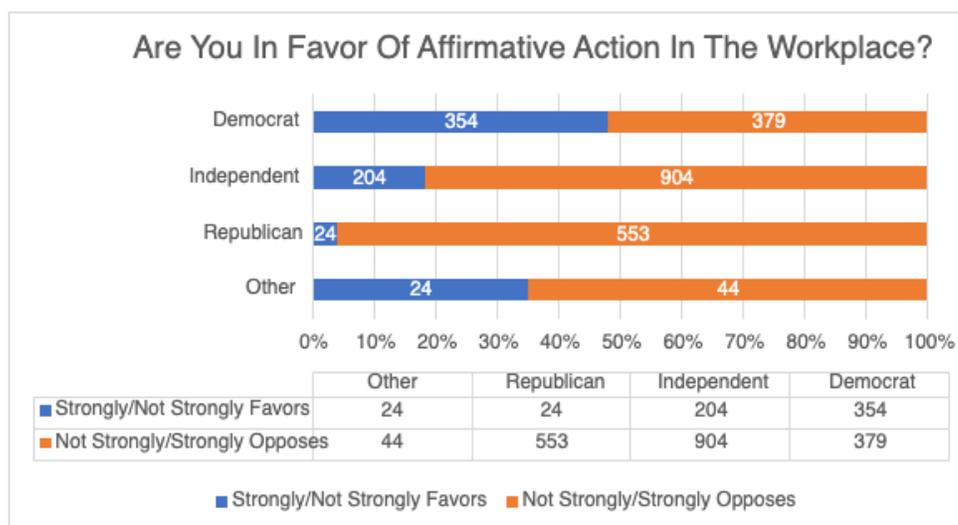
Results



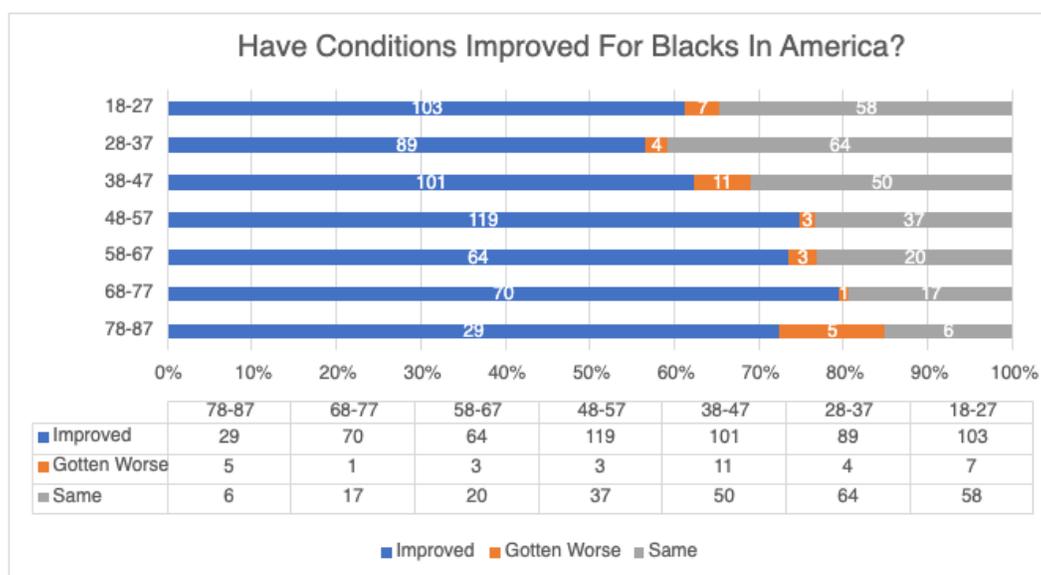
The first issue I looked was support for affirmative action programs. I found that among 18 to 27-year-olds, around 33% of respondents stated that they either were strongly in favor or not strongly in favor of affirmative action policies, while 67% reported being either not strongly opposed or strongly opposed. As the graph shows, the older groups supported affirmative action even less. The highest age group, the 78 to 87-year-olds, reported around 17% of respondents being in favor of affirmative action policies, compared to 83% being opposed.



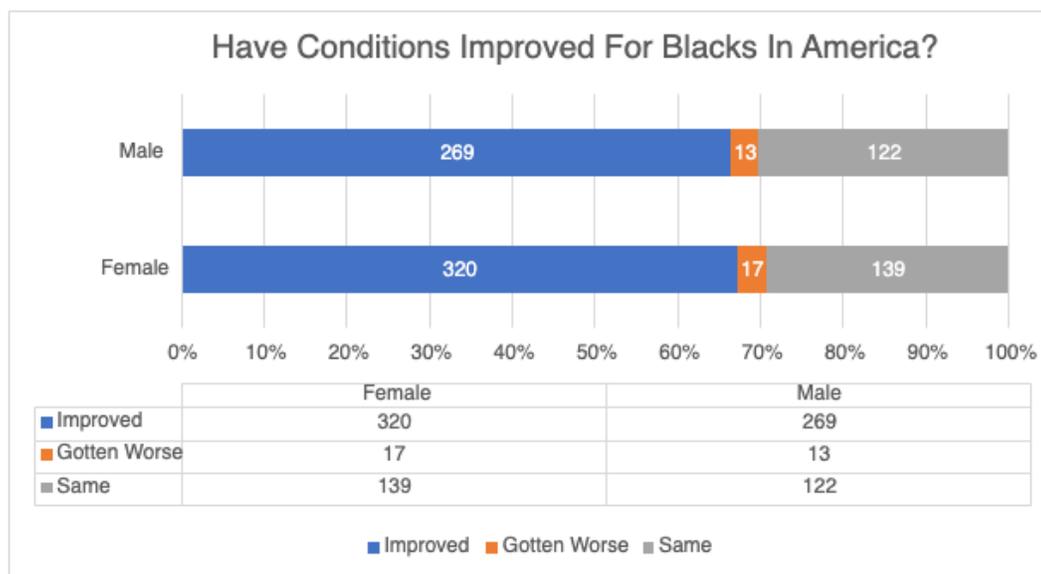
20% of male respondents stated that they were in favor of affirmative action policies in the workforce, and 80% responded no. This was the general number I had expected to see among men. What I did not expect, however, is that a similar 26% of women said that they were in favor of affirmative action in the workforce, and 74% reported not being in favor.



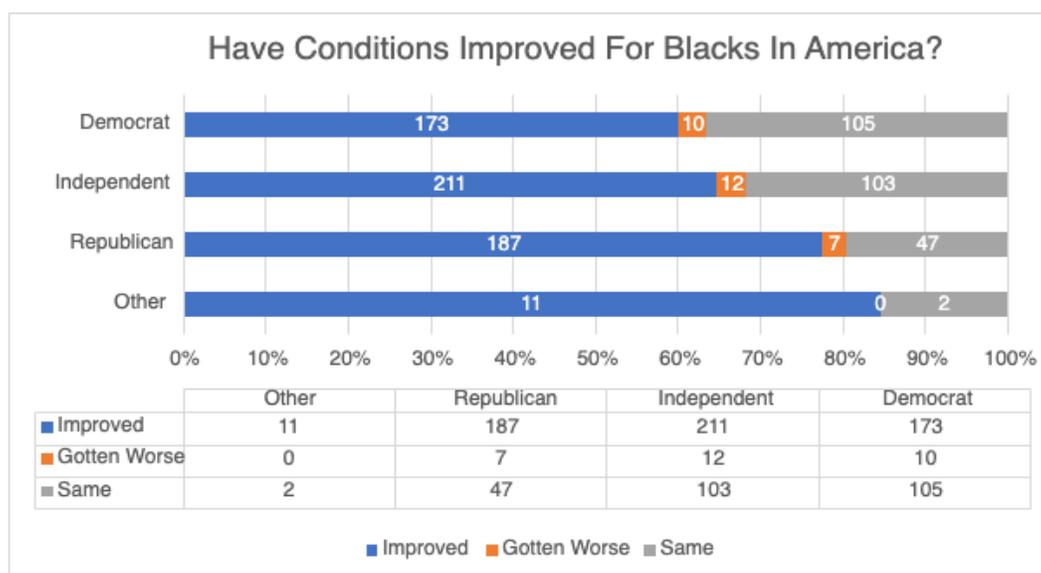
I found that around 48% of Democrats reported supporting affirmative action in the workplace, and 52% did not. Even more jarringly, 18% of Independents supported the policies, and 82% did not. Even more extreme, and consistent with my predictions, just 4% of Republicans supported the proposal, and around 96% did not.



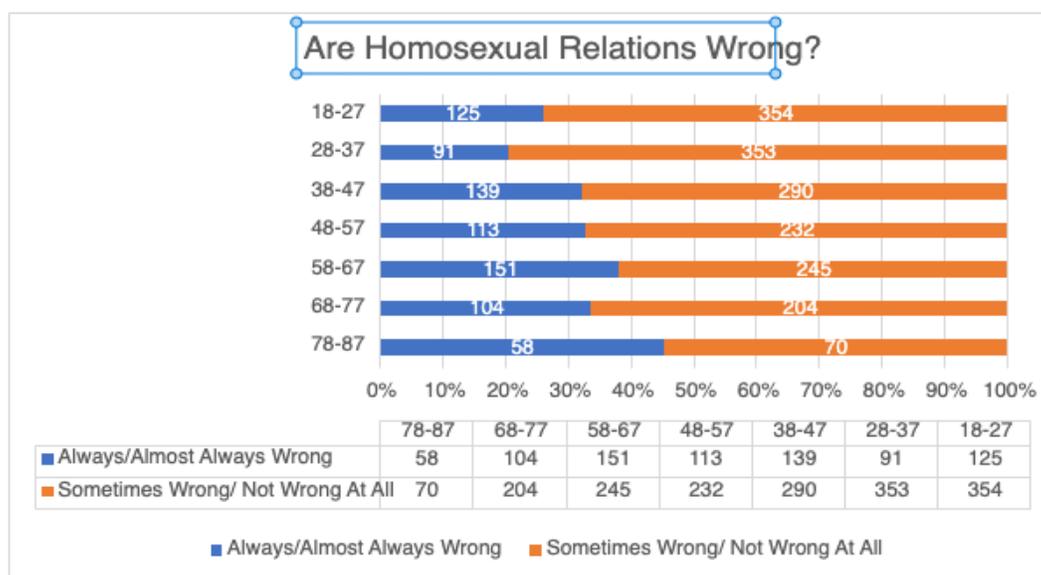
I then looked at the question of whether or not conditions have improved for African Americans in recent years. In the youngest group containing 18 to 27-year-olds, around 61% agree that conditions have improved for Blacks, 4% believe they have gotten worse, and about 35% believe they have remained the same. In the middle of the sample, the 48 to 57-year-old group saw 75% of the respondents agreeing that conditions have improved, 2% stating they have gotten worse, and 23% believing they have remained the same. Following this trend, 73% of 78 to 87-year-olds reported that conditions have improved for African Americans, 13% reported that they have gotten worse, and 15% reported that they have stayed the same.



I found that around 67% of men responded that conditions have improved for Blacks in America in recent years, 3% reported that they have gotten worse, and 30% reported that they have stayed about the same. The female group had a 67% rate of responses indicating conditions have improved, 4% believing they have gotten worse, and 29% believing they have stayed the same.

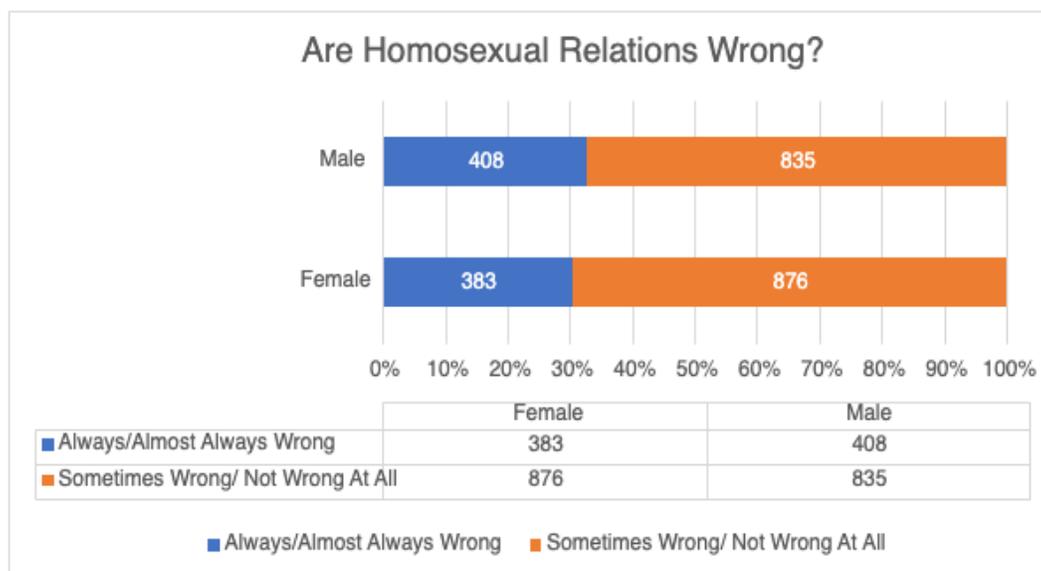


Around 63% of Democrats responded that conditions have improved for Blacks in America, 3% reported that they have worsened, and 36% believed they have stayed the same. Independents had a somewhat similar dataset, with their numbers being 65%, 4%, and 32% respectively. Republicans reported that conditions have improved 78% of the time, that they have gotten worse 3% of the time, and that they have stayed the same 20% of the time.

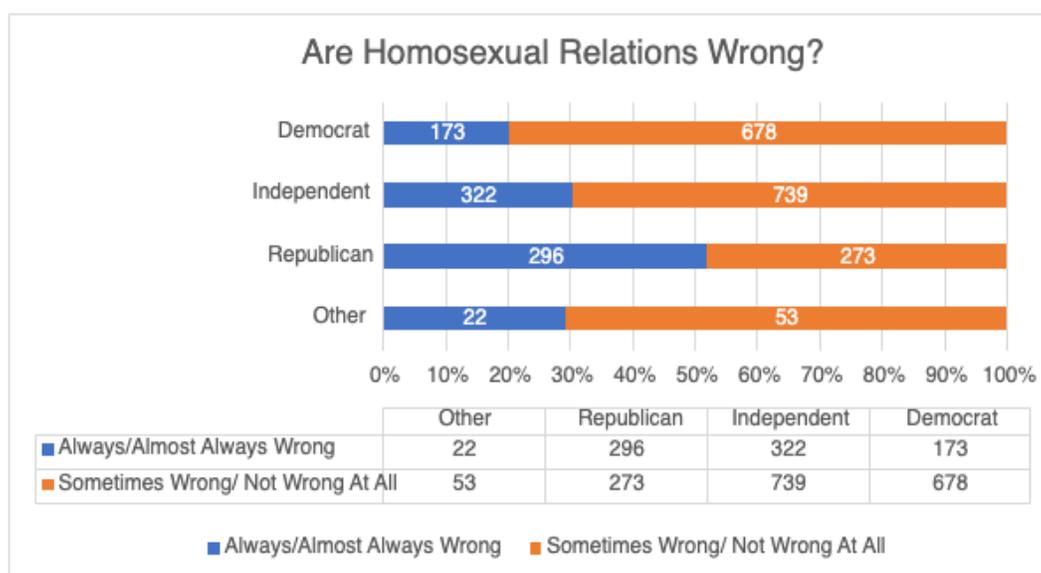


The next relationship I sought to analyze was that of age and view on homosexual relations. The youngest group of respondents, those aged 18 to 27 years old, consisted of 26% of respondents saying that homosexual relations were either always or almost always wrong, and 74% stating that they are only sometimes wrong or not wrong at all. For the most part, as the age of the respondents increased, the number of positive responses to homosexual relations decreased. There was a slight outlier in the 68 to 77-year-old group, where the number of responses stating that these relations were wrong dropped four percent from the previous group. However, this was a small dip in the data, and the oldest group, made up of 78 to 87-year-olds,

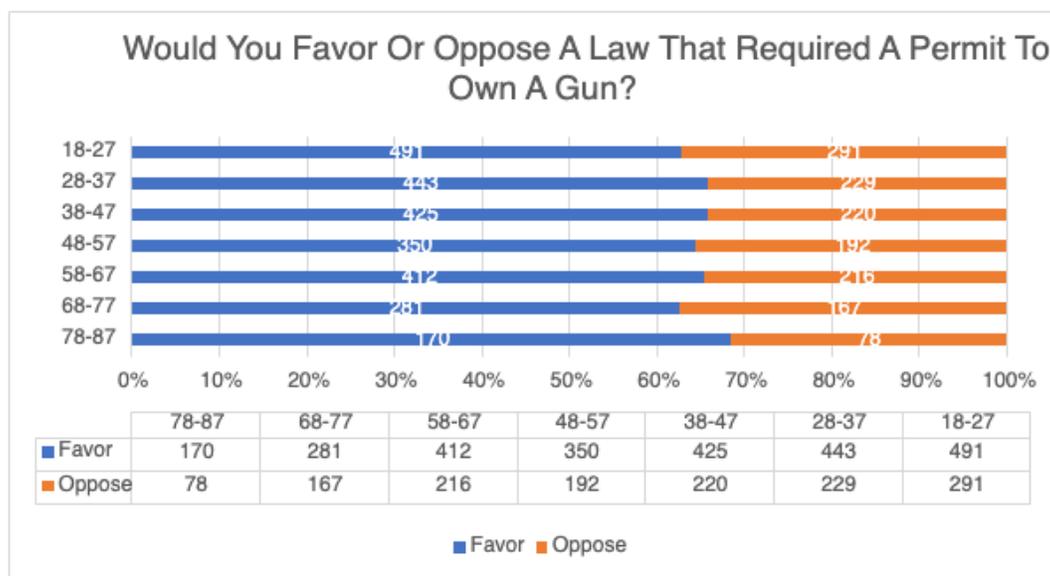
reported homosexual relations being wrong 45% of the time, and them being okay 55% of the time.



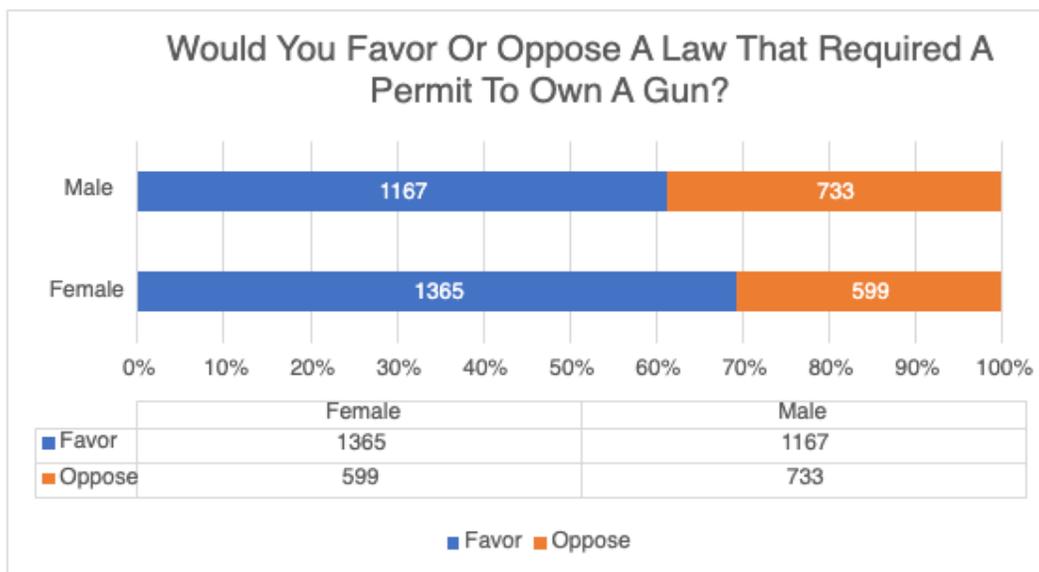
I have also analyzed the relationship between one's gender and their views on the morality of homosexual relations. Among the male respondents, about 33% said they viewed homosexual relations as either always wrong or almost always wrong, and just 67% stated that these relations were either sometimes wrong or not wrong at all. Though the difference was small, the women did have a lower rate of negative views on homosexual relations at 30% and viewed these as either sometimes wrong or not wrong at all 70% of the time.



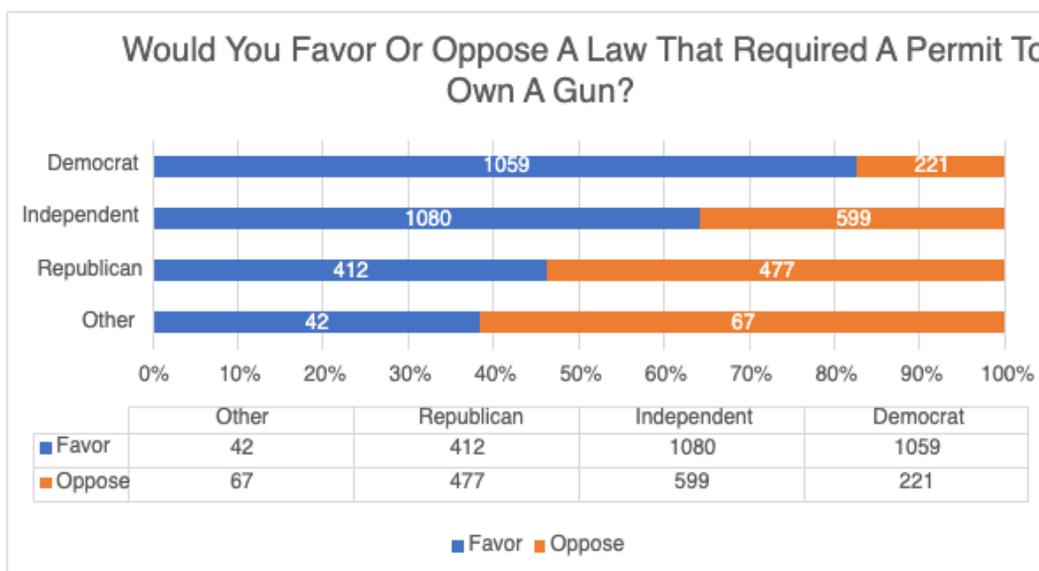
In my research, I found that 20% of Democrats viewed homosexual relations as either always wrong or almost always wrong, and 80% saw it as just sometimes wrong or not wrong at all. Independents reported this being wrong about 30% of the time, and not wrong about 70% of the time. 52% of self-reported Republicans stated that homosexual relations were wrong, and just 48% saw them as okay.



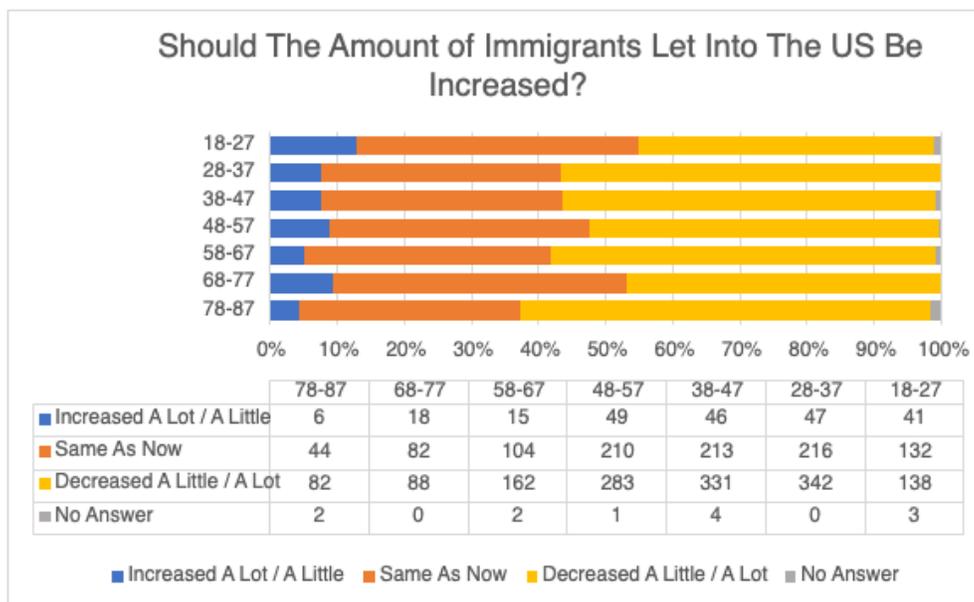
The next variable I analyzed was support for gun permit laws. I first compared one's age to their support for a law that would require a permit to own a gun. The youngest age group, made up of 18 to 27-year-olds, reported favoring a law to require a permit to possess a gun 63% of the time and opposing it 37% of the time. Among the age groups, these numbers remained relatively consistent. However, the oldest group, those 78 to 87 years old, reported favoring such a law even more often, at 69% of the time, and were opposed to it just 31% of the time.



I then looked at the relationship between gender and support for a gun permit law. I found that 61% of male respondents reported favoring such a law, and 39% opposed it. Women had a significantly higher rate of support for gun permit laws, at 70%, and opposed them 30% of the time.

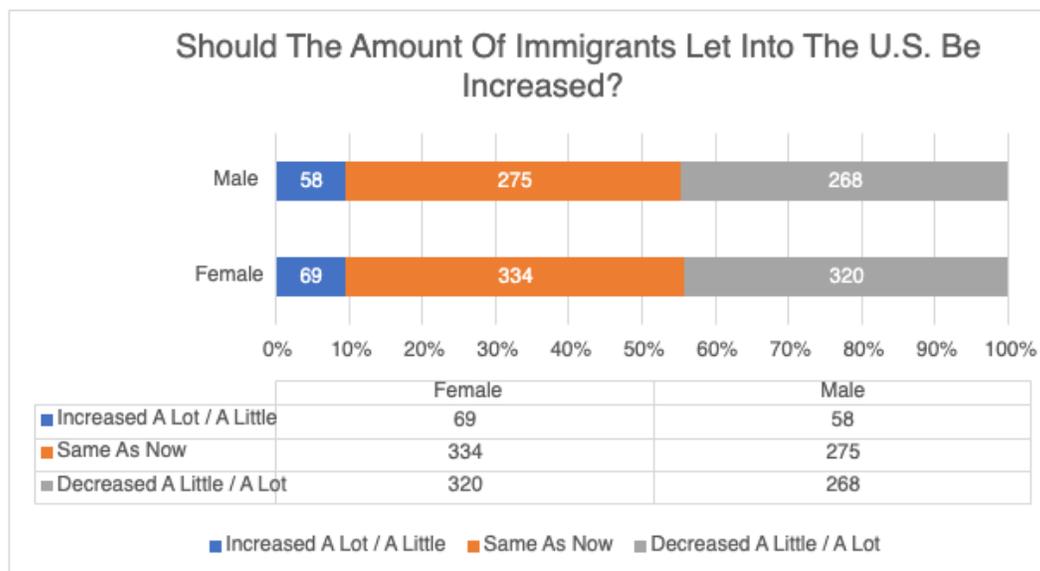


I found that Democrats reported favoring these laws 83% of the time, and opposed them 17% of the time. Independents were slightly less supportive, with 64% favoring gun permit laws, and 36% opposing them. The lowest level of support came from the Republicans who reported favoring gun permit laws 46% of the time and opposing them the other 54% of the time.

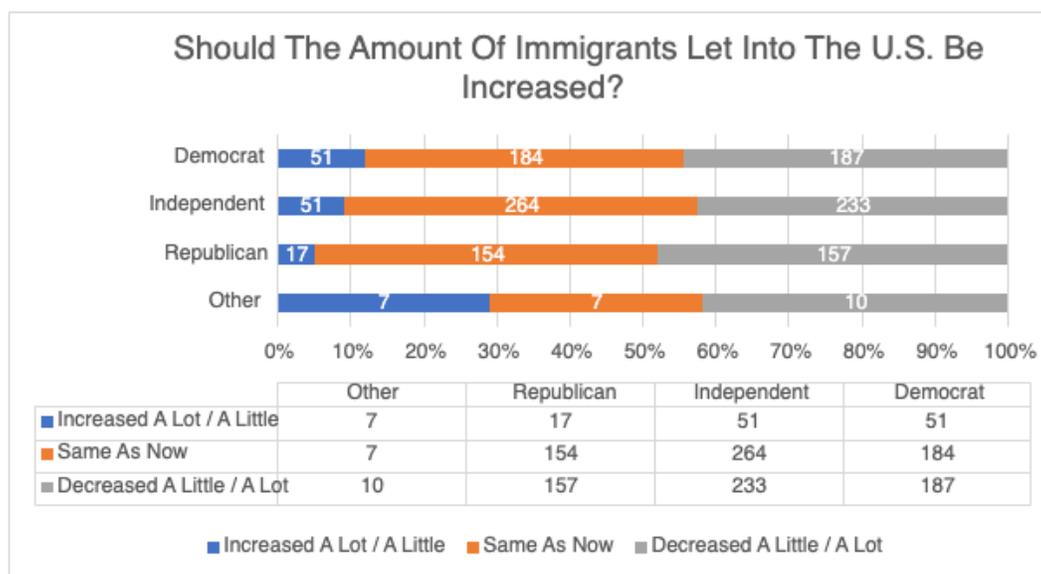


I then looked at the relationship between age and view on whether or not America should allow more immigrants in. The youngest group, containing the 18 to 27-year-olds, responded that the United States should increase the number of immigrants allowed to some degree 11% of the time. The same group had 50% of respondents wishing to keep the amount the same, and 38% seeking a reduction in immigrant amount. From there, the amount of support for increasing the immigrant amount varied, with the 58 to 67-year-old group reporting the second lowest amount of support for increasing the number, at just 5%, while reporting a desire to decrease the number of immigrants at a rate of 49%. The oldest group, those aged 78 to 87, did in fact have the lowest level of support for an immigrant quota increase at just 3%, and 48% of the respondents sought a decrease. Though it is true that the oldest group had a lower amount of support for allowing more

immigrants into the U.S. than the youngest group, this seems to be an outlier, as the groups closest to that age were almost as high as the youngest group.



10% of men responded that the United States should either increase the number of immigrants allowed in a lot or a little, 46% of men reported that it should stay the same, and 44% responded that the number should be decreased either a little or a lot. Women had virtually the same percentages for their responses, with responses of 10%, 46%, and 44% respectively.



The data shows that 12% of surveyed Democrats report a desire to increase the immigrant amount in the United States either by a little or a lot, while 44% of them think it should stay the same, and 44% believe it should be decreased by some amount. The Independents showed a slightly different opinion, reporting 9% of the time that the United States should increase its immigrant amount, and stating 43% of the time that it should be decreased. However, Republicans responded just 5% of the time that the amount should be increased, just 47% of the time that it should stay the same, and 48% of the time that it should be decreased.

Discussion

The first question I looked at, which surrounded support for affirmative action, generally yielded positive results for my hypotheses. I expected that the older groups would have a lower percentage of support for affirmative action than the younger groups, which I found to be supported by the GSS data. Similarly, I expected to see more women in support of affirmative action than men, and although the difference was not as extreme as I expected, the data did

ultimately support this theory. Finally, I expected to see more Democrats supporting affirmative action than Republicans, which was supported by the data.

The second question I analyzed looked at whether or not one believes conditions have improved for African Americans in recent years. Again, I considered the belief that they have improved as a more conservative view, and the belief that they had not improved or had gotten worse as a liberal view. I found less supportive results with this question. For example, the data did not seem to support my assumption that older individuals would have a higher percentage of responses agreeing that conditions have improved compared to younger groups. Similarly, the research did not support my expectation that men will more often agree that these conditions have improved compared to women. However, I did find that the data supported my expectation that more Republicans will state that conditions have improved for African Americans in recent years than Democrats.

The next question I looked at was whether or not one sees homosexual relations as wrong. I predicted that the older groups would less often show support for homosexual relations than the younger groups, which the data ultimately supported. I next theorized that women will have a higher response rate of agreeing that homosexuality is moral compared to men, which the data again supported. Finally, I expected that Republicans would more frequently say that homosexuality is morally wrong than Democrats, which was supported by the data.

Next, I looked at responses to the question surrounding support for gun permit laws, and considered support for these laws as a liberal view, and opposition as a conservative view. Thus, I expected to see older groups reporting a lower rate of support for these laws than the younger groups, a trend ultimately not supported by the data. I theorized that men would less often support gun permit laws than women, which the data did seem to support. I then expected to find

that less Republicans would support these laws than Democrats. Although I was surprised to see that Republicans still favor these laws a significant amount of the time, the data ultimately supported my assumption that they would have less support than Democrats.

Finally, I analyzed responses to the question of whether or not the United States should increase its immigrant amount. Again, I considered the view that America should allow more immigrants in a liberal view, and opposition to this a conservative view. I theorized that older groups would less often support increasing the United States' immigrant amount than younger groups. Though it is true that the oldest group had a lower amount of support for allowing more immigrants into the U.S. than did the youngest group, this seemed to be an outlier, as the groups closest to that age were almost as high as the youngest group. Thus, the data did not seem to support my expectation here. I also expected to see less men support increasing the amount of immigrants in the United States than women. However, the data I found showed virtually the same response rates as women for each answer choice. Thus, the data proved insufficient to support my prediction. Finally, I predicted that Democrats would show a higher rate of support for increasing the amount of immigrants in the United States than Republicans, an expectation which the data ultimately supported.

Conclusion

I cannot say that my hypothesis that older individuals would present more conservative views than younger individuals was supported by the research. Out of the five questions, the older groups only showed more conservative tendencies just twice. My second hypothesis, that men would present more conservative views than women, was generally supported by my research, though not as strongly as I had expected. I found that men showed overwhelmingly

conservative responses compared to women in three of the five questions. Finally, I hypothesized that Republicans would show more conservative views than Democrats. This hypothesis was strongly supported by my research, as I found that Republicans generally showed conservative responses in each of the five categories.

My research thus shows that, for the most part, important factors such as age, gender, and political party identification have a significant impact on the average American's views on a wide variety of issues. At the same time, I was both surprised and reassured to see that these trends were not as extreme as I expected them to be. Thus, I have significant reason to believe that there is in fact more common ground among Americans than is often portrayed or believed.

One potential flaw with my research is that some of the data I used from the General Social Survey is slightly outdated. As previously mentioned, I did only use the responses from the most recent edition of the survey, but this cut down significantly on the amount of responses and data available for each question.

As with any scientific question, there are virtually limitless other avenues for research on this topic. Ideally, researchers could find a way to 'strip down' these questions asked to Americans in a way where the participants could not implement their own preconceived notions about each answer. If that can be done, this would take us one step further towards understanding if, and how, we as a nation can acknowledge our moral, political, and cultural differences while still having enough empathy and understanding of others to create meaningful progress in American politics and daily life overall.

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