Polarization in United States Media: From Barry Goldwater's 1964 Nomination to NBC's *Parks and Recreation*.

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ABSTRACT

The social sorting taking place in the US is the division of social identities, such as race and religion, between the Democratic and Republican Party, thereby creating radically different political parties both in beliefs and social identity. This sorting fuels affective polarization, measured by the amount of dislike and hatred towards out-groups compared to in-groups. Hostilities and animosities between partisans due to affective polarization are increasingly visible in political and social relationships today. As a result, partisans dislike and mistrust members of the other party, change their behavior, fostering government gridlocks, and threatening democratic institutions by eroding democratic norms essential to its survival. This master's thesis is divided into two parts. Part one employs a comparative analysis to explore a crucial moment in the process of social sorting among American voters, specifically the extent to which the African American newspapers addressed Goldwater's 1964 nomination for Republican presidential candidate through the lens of civil rights in ways that mainstream and conservative newspapers did not. All while shining light on the social sorting taking place and how attitudes on civil rights aided the transformation of the party system. The second chapter addresses a notable gap in the literature by examining the largely unexplored relationship between comedy and affective polarization. Using examples of the sit-com *Parks and Recreation,* I argue comedy can mitigate affective polarization by changing perceptions of party members by providing the right conditions to decrease the misperceptions that increase animosity towards members of the other party.

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Introduction

Polarization is increasingly visible in American daily life, especially around elections. As a foreigner in the United States (US) leading up to the November 2020 presidential election, I became increasingly aware of tensions between strangers, neighbors, and family members. I would see my American Facebook friends in a heated argument with strangers about presidential candidates, neighbors placing signs in their front yards indicating which presidential candidate they support and in extreme cases protecting these signs from vandalism with barbed wire out of suspicion of a disagreeing neighbor. The dinner table among American families is also not safe from these hostilities, many Thanksgiving dinners suffered if politics were brought up. This feeling of tension might sound familiar, this hostility results from a phenomenon called polarization. Polarization is a hypernym used to describe a division of society into two or more groups that contrast deeply in opinions or beliefs. Different methodological approaches to measure polarization have created a variety of different definitions of polarization. This project focuses on social sorting of Americans into political parties and affective polarization.

With social sorting in this context, I refer to the division of social identities, such as race and religion, between the Democratic and Republican Party, thereby creating radically different political parties both in beliefs and social identity. Affective polarization is the difference between the positive feelings one has towards their own political party contrasted to the negative feelings one has towards the opposing party. These feelings are expressed through dislike and hatred towards members of the opposing party as

could be observed in the 2020 elections and will become increasingly visible as we enter the 2024 election season. Social sorting, in turn, amplifies affective polarization largely by creating misperceptions and stereotypes of party members which generate negative biases. This portfolio is a combination of two papers that address different aspects of social sorting of the American party system and affective polarization that is influenced by this phenomenon. The first paper, chapter one, takes a historical approach to explore the origins of social sorting we see today, its visibility in the media at the time, and the development of the contemporary American party system. The second paper, chapter two, investigates how comedy can be used to mitigate affective polarization while highlighting the connections between social sorting, stereotypes, and misperceptions it creates, and affective polarization.

Chapter one explores social sorting among American voters and how the nomination of conservative Republican candidate Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election aided the creation of the party system as we know it today. Prior to the 1965 Civil Rights Act, the two parties were internally heterogeneous. Meaning, both parties had both liberal and conservative members, who often voted together in Congress along ideological lines. After the 1964 election a party system emerged where the Republican Party aligned itself with conservatism, increasingly appealing to white southerners, while African Americans increasingly supported the Democratic Party which aligned with liberal ideologies. In the 1964 election, President and Democratic nominee Lyndon Johnson helped create and pass the Civil Rights Act while Goldwater opposed it, marking the Democratic party as the party of civil rights and the Republican

Party as preserving the party of second class citizenship for Blacks, Republicans thereby abandoning previous support for civil rights.[1] This chapter explores the role of civil rights in the African American media compared to mainstream and conservative newspaper coverage of Goldwater's nomination for the 1964 election, all while shining light on the social sorting that took place as a result of the changing political attitudes towards civil rights and the drastic changes in partisan alignment.

Chapter two investigates mechanisms through which comedy has the potential to mitigate affective polarization using the example of American sit-com *Parks and Recreation*. The common theme in the mechanism through which comedy can mitigate affective polarization is by correcting misperceptions and discouraging the use of stereotypes for understanding partisan affiliation. Social sorting creates misperceptions within parties as well as the partisans of the other party. These misperceptions overestimate the differences between the in-group and out-group demographics through stereotypes, which increases affective polarization.[2] In this chapter, I argue that comedy can mitigate affective polarization by altering individuals' perceptions of both the in-group and the out-group by providing the right conditions to decrease the misperceptions that increase animosity towards members of the other party.

Drawing from a wide range of sources across disciplines, the findings in this paper contribute to the study of polarization, particularly social sorting and affective

[1] Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018). 138-139.
[2] Douglas J. Ahler and Gaurav Sood, "The Parties in Our Heads: Misperceptions about Party Composition and Their Consequences," The Journal of Politics 80, no. 3 (2018): 972.

polarization. Chapter one portrays the close reading from the reactions to Goldwater's nomination and his stance on civil rights that fueled the social sorting within the American party, shedding light on the role of civil rights issues within this change. Furthermore, social sorting and polarization changes partisan behavior and increasingly threatens democracy by causing political gridlocks on mutually beneficial policies, decreasing trust in the government and erosion of democratic norms essential to a well-functioning democracy, risking democratic backsliding or even collapse of the democratic system.[3] Understanding the roots of social sorting and finding ways to mitigate polarization is crucial to the survival of the US democracy. Chapter two builds on theories of political science on antidotes for affective polarization as well as theories from psychology, philosophy, and media studies to explore the different mechanisms through which comedy impacts its audience and thereby could be used as a tool to mitigate affective polarization.

[3] Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer, "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Politics," in *Four Threats: The Recurring Crises of American Democracy,* by Suzanne Mettler and Robert C. Lieberman (Oxford University Press, 2020), 123-152; Matthew H. Graham and Milan. W. Svolik, "Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 2 (2020): 392–409.

Civil Rights Issues in the 1964 Election: Response to Barry Goldwater's Extremism

The nomination of Arizona senator Barry Goldwater as the Republican presidential candidate for the 1964 election generated very different responses in the United States (US) conservative, mainstream, and African American press, depending not only on their politics in general, but also specifying their racial politics. These responses echoed the changing dynamics of the American party system. The businessman turned Arizona senator was elected in 1953 and reelected in 1958 as a conservative Republican. Goldwater advocated for limited government involvement and thought that state and local governments should handle issues related to desegregation and civil rights. Dr. Martin Luther King, the then leading voice in the civil rights movement, broke from his usual stance of staying neutral in elected politics; he referred to Goldwater's candidacy as "unfortunate" and potentially "disastrous."[4] King urged both Black and white Americans to unite against Goldwater's candidacy.[5] Like King, writers for African American newspapers addressed Goldwater's nomination through the urgent lens of the ongoing civil rights movement. This was a stark contrast to both the mainstream and conservative press, which did not prioritize civil rights as the main issue. Mainstream newspapers at the time mentioned civil rights usually as one issue among many at stake in the election. Similarly, conservative newspapers tended to focus more on Goldwater's positions as a whole, often more concerned with other pressing issues at the time. The varied responses to Goldwater's nomination reflect the social sorting of

[4] Martin Luther King, Jr. "Goldwater's nomination." *New York Amsterdam News*, August 1, 1964. 18.
[5] King, "Goldwater's nomination."

multiple identities taking place among American voters at the time, particularly the sorting of white southerners to the Republican Party and Black voters to the Democratic Party. Social sorting refers the separation of specific social identities, such as religion, race, and even gender, among into the Democratic or Republican Party. Rendering political parties constituted of very different demographics.

My research explores the role of civil rights in the media coverage of the Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater in the 1964 election. By examining newspaper articles from across the political spectrum, including African American newspapers, mainstream publications, and conservative outlets, I analyze how civil rights issues were addressed in the media during this crucial period. In particular, to what extent did African American newspapers address Goldwater's nomination through the lens of civil rights in ways that mainstream and conservative newspapers did not? Moreover, the different portrayals of civil rights concerns showcase the sorting of American voters not just into conservative and liberal factions but also along other social identities such as race. More broadly, this comparative analysis will provide valuable insights into the narratives, perspectives, and discourse surrounding civil rights in the United States at the time of the 1964 election and the creation of the party system we know today, where social identities are increasingly aligned with one party over the other.

The nomination of Barry Goldwater as the Republican presidential candidate in the 1964 election marked a drastic and decisive turn for the American party system, specifically regarding issues of race and civil rights. The Republican Party, historically the party of “Lincoln and Emancipation” turned to embrace opposition to government

involvement in resolving racial inequality while the Democratic Party, which had roots as the party of slavery and then segregation in the past, came to represent desegregation and support for the Civil Rights struggle. This switch had detrimental consequences for the Republican party's long-existing relationship with Black voters who had historically voted for the Republican party, although that had begun changing with Franklin Roosevelt's presidency. President Roosevelt's New Deal established federal support to Black Americans, and by his reelection in 1936 most Black voters had forsaken their traditional affiliation with the Republican Party by casting their votes in favor of the Democratic Party with 71 percent of Black voters casting their vote for the Democrat.[6] Although Black voters would continue to support the Republican party in large numbers hereafter, the 1964 election marked a significant point in history regarding American party politics.

Not only did the transition of the parties' stance on civil rights damage the relationship between the Republican Party and Black voters, but it also fueled racial alignment between the Republican and Democratic Party.[7] The alignment of Black voters to the Democratic Party accelerated the process of social sorting of the American electorate which in the next decades moved beyond race onto religion, ethnicity, and other social identities, leaving the electorate increasingly polarized. The increasing divide of social identities of the electorate along partisan lines provides challenges to

[6] Edward Carmines and James Stimson, *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 32.
[7] Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies*. 170-172.

the US democracy, including intensifying hostility and intolerance between opposing party members.[8]

After Reconstruction ended in 1877, the further development of Black rights were stifled and civil rights of Black Americans were no longer considered a national political issue in the national political agenda, rather, they were left in the hands of state governments.[9] Instead, after Reconstruction government institutions often aided the white supremacist order instead of weakening its power.[10] Not until the presidency of Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt did racial issues reach the national agenda again, this time in the form of 150 civil rights bills concerning lynching, protection of voting rights, the anti-poll-tax, and other forms of racial discrimination. But these did not pass through congress due to a lack of public support from the president himself.[11] Two executive orders President Roosevelt did enact concerned nondiscriminatory employment practices but lacked mechanisms of reinforcement.

The roots of the transformation of the American party system can be traced back to 1944, around the time of Roosevelt's second reelection, marking the beginning of his third term as president. The Democratic Party began changing their stance by beginning to express some support for civil rights, while the Republicans maintained their historical support. According to political scientists Edward Carmines and James Stimson, with a

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[8] Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die,* 170-172.
[9] Carmines and Stimson, *Issue Evolution Race and the Transformation of American Politics*, 33-35.
[10] Desmond King and Stephen Tuck. "De-centring the South: America's nationwide white supremacist order after Reconstruction." *Past and present* 194, no. 1 (2007): 213-253.
[11] Carmines and Stimson, *Issue Evolution Race and the Transformation of American Politics*, 33-35.

growing Black population in northern cities and an increasing reliance on their votes, and civil rights issues brought to the national agenda again, the Democratic Party was forced to confront racial issues.[12] Democratic President Harry S. Truman established a Civil Rights Committee in 1948 and for the first time since Reconstruction sent civil legislation to congress creating discomfort among southern Democrats. For the first time, both parties had established a stance on civil rights.

Throughout the next two decades both parties adopted moderate approaches to civil rights. The mid 1950s and 1960s marked the culmination of the civil rights movement. With racial tensions in the country both the Democratic and Republican party took progressive and almost indistinguishable stances on civil rights issues in the election of 1960. President John F. Kennedy did not initially take much action towards establishing civil rights. In the last year of his presidential term in 1963 after the tragic events of Birmingham, Alabama, where nonviolent civil rights demonstrations were met violently by dogs, clubs, and fire hoses, Kennedy's reversed his inaction with a powerful speech that year and a civil rights bill proposal that called for the protection of voting rights, Civil Rights Commission expansion and desegregation of public schools.[13] After Kennedy's assassination at the end of that year, President Lyndon Johnson resumed this commitment and the Civil Rights Act was passed in Congress in 1964. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 bars discrimination on the grounds of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Including provisions that specifically outlaw gender-based discrimination.

[12] Carmines and Stimson, *Issue Evolution Race and the Transformation of American Politics*, 33-35.
[13] "Civil Rights Act of 1963 draft, 13 June 1963," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

Particularly discrimination in employment, public accommodation, and programs subject to federal funding. In addition, the Act bolstered the enforcement of voting rights and the integration of schools.[14]

Goldwater's nomination for the Republican presidential candidate in the 1964 election and his subsequent campaign marked a decisive point in American party politics. The nomination fueled the social sorting of identities among the two parties, particularly racial party affiliation. As the Democratic Party shifted towards a more liberal democratic stance, leaving a void in its alignment with southern Democrats, Goldwater, a conservative, emerged as a notable figure. His belief in a minimal role of government and the idea that civil rights and desegregation matters should be left to state and local government's control resonated with a significant portion of white southerners who felt marginalized in the evolving political landscape.[15] Southern whites felt abandoned by the Democratic party that traditionally reinforced the racist order of things.

On the other hand, Black Republicans had felt abandoned by their party by Goldwater's nomination. The existing literature on the Goldwater-Johnson presidential election and race remains limited. The main scholar's work on the subject is focused on the responses to the rise and nomination of Goldwater by Black Republicans. This has been explored extensively by Joshua Farrington and Leah Wright Rigueur.[16] Both

[14] "Civil Rights Act of 1964." Civil Rights Act of 1964, August 1, 2017.
[15] Carmines and Stimson, *Issue Evolution Race and the Transformation of American Politics*, 51-52.
[16] Joshua D. Farrington, "Fighting with the enemy within: Black Republicans in the Wake of Goldwater" in *Black Republicans and the transformation of the GOP*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Joshua D. Farrington, "Evicted from the party: Black Republicans and the 1964 Election," *Journal of Arizona History (61),1* (March 25, 2020); Leah Wright Rigueur, *The Loneliness of the Black Republican: Pragmatic Politics and the Pursuit of Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

authors discuss how many Black Republicans abandoned the Republican party as a result of Goldwater's nomination and how alternate political platforms were sought to advance their interests or to reconstruct the Republican Party. In the article "Evicted from the party: Black Republicans and the 1964 Election" Farrington describes the experiences and resistance of elite party members, Black Republicans directly involved within the party, to Goldwater and to the development of segregationist ideas within the party.[17] In the book *Black Republicans and the Transformation of the GOP,* Farrington describes how Goldwater's landslide loss left the party fragmented regarding the future of the party.[18] Rigueur discusses the development of the National Negro Republican Assembly in response to Goldwater's nomination. The National Negro Republican Assembly sought to reconstruct the Republican party and demanded the inclusion of Black Republicans and racial equality within the party.[19]

In addition, research on polarization emphasizes the role of the 1964 election on partisan realignment that has occurred since. The civil rights movement, more specifically the stance taken by Democrats and Republicans on civil rights in the 1964 election and later the passing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, triggered the realignment of the American voters into parties divided not just along a liberal and conservative divide but also increasingly along racial, social, religious, and cultural lines.[20]

I explore the responses to Goldwater's nomination and his positions on civil rights more generally and the extent to which civil rights played a pivotal role in the 1964

[17] Farrington, "Evicted from the party: Black Republicans and the 1964 Election."
[18] Farrington, *Fighting with the Enemy Within.* 126.
[19] Rigueur, *The Loneliness of the Black*. 56-66.
[20] Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die.* 169-170

election in both, African American, mainstream, and conservative press and editorials. My work on this paper complements existing research on Black Republican reactions, whose interests were almost entirely disregarded with the nomination of Goldwater as the Republican presidential candidate who did not support civil rights or desegregation of the public space. Furthermore, by exploring the varied coverage of Goldwater and his stance on civil rights, this historical approach adds to the literature on the racial realignment of the American electorate by illuminating the drastic different responses to political stances on civil rights among contrasting media platforms.

Rise of Goldwater and Appeal to the South

On November 18, 1961, Goldwater made his goal with the Republican party clear. As he spoke at a Republican conference in Atlanta, a city with large Black support for the Republican Party, intentions of abandoning interests of Black voters and attempt to win Southern white votes were made clear: “We’re not going to get the Negro vote as a bloc in the 1964 and 1968, so we ought to go hunting where the ducks are.”[21] The *New York Times covered* this convention, particularly Goldwater’s opinion on the “watering down” of the Republican party’s civil rights position and how this widely appealed to southern segregationists.[22] It appears that the most important element of this convention to this particular newspaper was the conservative Republicans’ hope to put an end to the “one-party rule” of the south by the Democratic party, as this region has historically been won

[21] David Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street* (Nashville, 1971), 179–80.
[22] Claude Sitton, "G.O.P. Parley Charts Campaign for a 2-Party System in South: Atlanta Conference Plans Strategy for the 1962 Congressional Elections - Regional Gains Held Crucial." *New York Times*, November 19, 1964; "Goldwater Solicits G.O.P. Votes from Southern Segregationists." *New York Times*, November 19, 1961.

by the Democratic party. Particularly, Senator Goldwater's active role herein, and his opinion on other related issues to gauge his political stance and what it could mean for the party's future as it is brought to the audience's attention that Goldwater is a potential presidential candidate for the 1964 election.

Although mostly focusing on the possible switch of a Democratic south to a two-party south, it is made clear this development had significant impacts on the Black vote by including Goldwater's answer to the question "whether he was giving up the Negro vote in the South" and that he did not seek to "out promise the Democrats."[23] Furthermore, indicating that Goldwater had "little apparent backing among Southern Negroes" referencing Black Republican leader George W. Lee's opposition to this strategy and how he believes the party "will never regain the White House if it listens to Mr. Goldwater's counsel to let the Negro vote go."[24] By including concerns regarding the disregard of Black votes of the Republican party with their new strategy in the article, it becomes apparent that this was a concern in the mainstream media.

A brief article in the African American Newspaper the *Chicago Defender* frames the convention as part of the continuing struggle for equal rights by beginning the article with the recent Democratic push to bar Blacks from attending a dinner in Atlanta with the Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, and following this story with a contrasting and more hopeful one. The presence of "fifty Negroes at a [Republican] political dinner," which in the context of the Democrats' actions a week earlier puts the Democrats to

[23] "Goldwater Solicits G.O.P. Votes from Southern Segregationists." *New York Times*, November 19, 1961.
[24] Claude Sitton, "G.O.P. Parley Charts Campaign for a 2-Party System in South: Atlanta Conference Plans Strategy for the 1962 Congressional Elections -- Regional Gains Held Crucial." *New York Times,* November 19, 1961.

shame.[25] And that, although Black people were included in the Atlanta Republican Convention, according to the article, Goldwater slashed this hope by continuing the Southern Democrats' schemes of mistreating Blacks at the Republican convention by "appealing to the prejudices of Southern segregationists" and his wish to "water down the civil rights position adopted by the Republican party last year."[26]

What becomes apparent is that at this time in 1961 it was not clear if this new strategy to appeal to Southern segregationists would be utilized or be a successful new take the Republican party would embrace as many moderate Republicans maintained their positions on civil rights as it had been established the previous year. African American newspapers did not cover this convention in the same urgent way as after Goldwater's nomination, when a Goldwater presidency becomes a threat to the fight for equality and civil rights. One article of the *Chicago Defender* in particular expressed significant skepticism, labeling Goldwater's motivation for the 1964 presidential nomination "no more than a dream… that has a little more substance since [New York] Governor Nelson Rockefeller committed a political faux pas," by announcing his divorce a few days earlier.[27] This skepticism might be a product of the disbelief that something as drastic as the abandonment of Black voters of the Republican party might occur, particularly as it seemed in the previous decades that both the Republican and Democratic party had been moving in the right direction by taking promising positions on civil rights. Would a few extremists really be able to reverse this progress? Claude Stitton from the *New York Times,* however*,* seemed less skeptical and wrote "the

[25] "Right-wing leadership." *Chicago Daily Defender*, December 12, 1961.
[26] "Right-wing leadership."
[27] "Right-wing leadership."

Republicans have Presidential possibility who already has captured the loyalty of many segregationists" due to his stance on civil rights,[28] indicating that the appeal of Goldwater in the south was stemmed largely from his stance on civil rights.

Looking at Atlanta's local African American press like the *Atlanta Daily World*, concerns are much higher, particularly among Black Republican leader Lieutenant George W. Lee of Tennessee. In Lee's of letter to the national party chairman Williams Miller, as covered in the *Atlanta Daily World*, Lee criticizes Goldwater's plan to "by-pass the Negro vote in the South" and "not out promise the Democrats for the Negroes' vote," arguing this disregards the party's heritage and the dangers of losing the Black vote to the Democrats who have already strategically chosen to appeal the Black vote as they "realized they would not win a national election without the Negro vote."[29] Indicating the importance of winning Black vote, something the Democrats had already realized as far back as Roosevelt's presidency. The concerns in the local southern African American press seem much higher as the threat would directly affect them as many southern Black voters still largely voted Republican.

The conservative press at this time seems more concerned with Rockefeller's divorce and Goldwater's critical comments on President Kennedy, and Democrats in general made at the convention.[30] There is minimal mention of the party's conservative members' drastic new plan to win white Southern votes, and what this might mean for

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[28] Sitton, "G.O.P. Parley Charts Campaign for a 2-Party System in South: Atlanta Conference Plans Strategy for the 1962 Congressional Elections -- Regional Gains Held Crucial," 72.
[29] "Lt. Lee Raps Republican Plan to by-Pass Negro Vote in the Deep South." *Atlanta Daily World*, December 10, 1961, 1.
[30] "Kennedy Hit By Goldwater For 'Inaction.'" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 19, 1961, 5.

the future of the party or Black voters. The days following the convention conservative newspapers covered Rockefeller's divorce and the damage done to his campaign, Goldwater's opinion on "the menace of communism" in his recently published book, indicating these topics are more important than Republicans' plan to win the southern states by appealing to white segregationist values.[31]

The minimal coverage of this convention demonstrates the perceived lack of urgency or importance of Goldwater's announcement, particularly in the African American and conservative Press. While framing the convention as part of the civil rights struggle, the African American press did not portray an urgency to the situation largely due to skepticism of the possibility of his election. Conservative press showcases alternative issues to be of more importance, particularly Goldwater's critique of Kennedy and did not mention civil rights. The mainstream press, while not concerned with what this strategy might mean for civil rights, conveys concern for Black voters and the appeal of Goldwater's standpoints on civil rights to southern segregationists, indicating these issues are of concern to their audience. Lack of concern regarding the civil rights issues at stake prior to Goldwater's nomination reflect the heterogeneous nature of both parties, they shared a stance on explosive issues such as civil rights, and a drastic switch of the Republican party to abandon this seemed unlikely as it would change the entire party system. But this is exactly what happened. Only when Goldwater's nomination became a reality did concerns of civil rights flood the media.

[31] Edwin Roberts, Jr."The Bookshelf: Goldwater Views the Red Threat and Decides the U.S. must Strive for Victory." *Wall Street Journal,* April 23, 1962.

Goldwater's nomination

Not until Goldwater's official nomination for Republican presidential candidate do the drastic implications of a possible Goldwater presidency seem to penetrate, particularly among the African American Press, but also within mainstream and conservative outlets. Concerns of his followers and the implications for extremists and calls for action become widespread. The article "Goldwater-A Nightmare" in *The Chicago Defender* describes a Goldwater in the white house would be a "nightmare from which the nation would not soon recover" indicating the undesirability of Goldwater in office.[32] The same article also addresses the tensions Goldwater's position on the Civil Rights Act has created, "the Senator ignited the fuse that is inching itself into the powder-keg of a racial explosion when he declared pontifically that the Civil Rights Act just legislated by Congress was unconstitutional."[33]

An article in the *New York Times* addresses his nomination on July 17th, 1964. Tom Wicker highlighted Goldwater's lack of mentioning civil rights in his acceptance speech, "Mr. Goldwater made no direct mention of the civil rights issue that at times divided this convention. Instead, he placed heavy emphasis on the sanctity of property and on the necessity for maintaining law and order."[34] It also shows what Goldwater prefers to mention instead, what seems to be more important to the Presidential candidate. However, looking at the article overall it becomes apparent that it is more concerned with the future of the Republican party, particularly the uncertain future of the

[32] "Goldwater-A Nightmare." *The Chicago Defender*, July 18, 1964, 8.
[33] "Goldwater-A Nightmare."
[34] Tom Wicker, "Convention Ends: Extremism In Defense of Liberty 'no Vice,' Arizonan Asserts Goldwater Sets Anti-Red Goals." *New York Times,* July 17, 1964, 1.

moderates that were defeated, not the civil rights issues that might be at risk. Acknowledgement of Goldwater's omission of Civil Rights highlights that an important factor people, particularly the audience of the *New York Times,* are interested in was missing.

In the *Chicago Tribune*, a conservative newspaper, Willard Edwards describes Goldwater's victory as "a miracle as extraordinary as the felling of Goliath by the Biblical David."[35] This comparison frames Goldwater's nomination almost as a form of divine intervention. Edwards portrayed Goldwater as David, who had no chance to win against the giant Goliath, or in this case, the threatening liberal wave that had infiltrated into the government through both the Democratic and Republican party. But the underdog David wins with the divine support of God, just as Goldwater won from the other moderate Republicans who represent a bigger threat to conservatives. Omission of civil rights issues in the context of Goldwater's nomination, as well as the neglect of Goldwater to mention civil rights in his speech by a multitude of conservative articles, unlike *New York Times*, highlights how his stance on civil rights was not a major concern at this moment. Instead, what mattered more was Goldwater's victory itself.

Another publication in the *New York Times* captures the responses of civil rights leaders to Goldwater's election and highlights the concerns of civil rights. It addresses that "civil rights leaders reacted with bitterness" to Goldwater's nomination.[36] This

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[35] Willard Edwards. "Return to Liberty: Barry 14,000 Applaud Fighting Speech By Goldwater Family Stands With him in Cow Palace 14,000 Cheer Goldwater in Grand Finale Family Stands With Him on Platform Republican Choice--Next Goal: The White House." *Chicago Tribune*, July 17, 1964, 1.

[36] "Negro Spokesmen Bitter on Goldwater Nomination, Saying it Will Aid Racists: Dr. King Assails Senator's Views some Delegates Will Refuse to Support the Arizonan -- Will Help Rest of Ticket." *New York Times,* July 17, 1964, 12.

particular wording is interesting. Using the word “bitterness” instead of ‘concern’ frames the leaders as resentful or disappointed at the loss of more moderate candidates instead of troubled by its possible implications. This article is one of very few that discusses civil rights in its entirety. Interestingly this is also one of very few that address Black reactions to Goldwater. The mainstream press addressed the concerns of Black citizens almost entirely through the perspective of Black leaders, not ordinary citizens. Mainstream papers, particularly the *New York Times*, make sure to include issues of civil rights, even portraying Goldwater’s election from the perspective of Black leaders, even though they usually address other issues at the same time, indicating civil rights is not the main issue area at stake.

The businessman and World War II veteran, Barry Goldwater was elected to the City Council in Phoenix, Arizona, as a nonpartisan in 1949. During this time, he voted for the desegregation in the city’s schools, Arizona National Guard, and restaurant in Phoenix’s airport and donated money to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) campaigns promoting the desegregation of public schools.[37] While strongly opposing national civil rights efforts, he frequently made public his aid for Blacks in Arizona, declaring that as a Phoenix City Council member in the 1950s he had done “more in Arizona for the Negro than any governor in the country.”[38] Even in 1961, and throughout his Presidential campaign, his personal stance as not

[37] Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm : Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*. 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001); Farrington, “Evicted from the party”
[38] Farrington, *Fighting with the Enemy Within: Black Republicans in the Wake of Goldwater.* 133.

being a segregationist nor racist is continuously expressed. Looking at his career as City Council member in Phoenix, Arizona, where he voted for the desegregation of public schools, as well as his votes for civil rights bills in the Senate, Goldwater's personal political stance was often defended in all angles of the media, including the African American press.

One example of Goldwater defending his viewpoints on civil rights is in an article in the conservative *Chicago Tribune,* discussing a meeting between Goldwater and former president Eisenhower. After receiving clarification on Goldwater's meaning of "extremism" the former president openly backed the Goldwater ticket,[39] although not his "personal choice" at first.[40] After defending his meaning with "extremism," a term brought up throughout his primary run, he defends his position on civil rights. Although he opposes "discrimination of all forms," and addresses the false accusations of him being called a "bigot," he continues by pointing out his career in Arizona and explains how if "these people would just sit down for five minutes with me and listen to my record in Arizona…" they would not accuse him of such things.[41] Goldwater hereby demonstrates his belief that his former career provides enough proof for himself not to be called a racist. Goldwater himself is not the only one who view his career as evidence he is not himself a segregationist, and this is reflected throughout publications.

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[39] "Ike to aid Barry's Drive: Ex-President Is Satisfied With Goldwater View Asks Extremism Statement to be Clarified Ike 'Glad to Help Goldwater's Drive." *Chicago Tribune,* July 19, 1964.
[40] "Ike Vows He's For Ticket Tho 'Not My Choice'." *Chicago Tribune*, July 17, 1964.
[41] "Ike to aid Barry's Drive: Ex-President Is Satisfied With Goldwater View Asks Extremism Statement to be Clarified Ike 'Glad to Help Goldwater's Drive." *Chicago Tribune,* July 19, 1964.

The Press and Civil rights leaders could therefore not identify Goldwater as a racist as by looking at his history as a public official he, indeed, had not voted like a racist or segregationist. Rather than being concerned of having an openly racist or segregationist as presidential candidate, what concerned them the most was the type of followers Goldwater attracted. Civil Rights Leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. also takes this approach:

> While not himself a racist, Mr. Goldwater articulates a philosophy which gives aid and comfort to racists. His candidacy and philosophy will serve as an umbrella under which extremists of all stripes will stand.[42]

The philosophy King is concerned about is Goldwater's belief that civil rights and issues of racial equality such as segregation, should be a state or local concern, not a national one. Other articles reflect King's stance on Goldwater's supporters and describe them as "his feeble-minded disciples."[43] Rosemarie Tyler Brooks takes a more extreme stance and compares Goldwater's supporters Nazi Germany in 1933. Particularly the Young Americans for Freedom, an organization for young conservatives, to the German Yough Core in Nazi Germany 1933.[44] The article on the civil rights leader's bitter reaction in the *New York Times* also indicates concern for the people that are attracted to Goldwater's philosophy. Director of the National Urban League, Whitney Young, saw Goldwater's ideas as the "an attempt to appeal to all of the fearful, the insecure,

[42] King, "Goldwater's nomination."
[43] "Goldwater-A Nightmare." *The Chicago Defender*, July 18, 1964.
[44] Rosemarie Tyler Brook, "GOP Convention, 1964 Recalls Germany, 1933." *The Chicago Defender*, July 18, 1964.

prejudiced people in our society"[45] These viewpoints establish strong opposition among African Americans to the supporters Goldwater attracted. Even though Goldwater himself might not be a racist, his political stance provided validation for extremists, racists and segregationists who would support and use Goldwater to try to advance their ideologies. These hostilities towards Goldwater's followers reflect how stances on the civil rights movement separated the American electorate based on their views on racial issues.

Given the substantial reaction of the African American press and their commitment to civil rights as the reason for animosity to Goldwater's nomination, one might expect the conservative press to highlight civil rights as an important reason for support of conservative Goldwater. However, similar to mainstream newspapers, conservative newspapers focused more on Goldwater's positions as a whole. Rather than framing civil rights as a main issue, conservative newspapers like the *Chicago Tribune* and *Wall Street Journal* were more concerned with other pressing issues at the time. As a conservative Republican, Goldwater opposed arms control negotiations and advocated for tougher diplomatic measures against the USSR, and criticized the Democrats for their liberal approach as an example of other issues that frequently were addressed. The threat of communism also appears frequently.[46] When civil rights issues are mentioned, they are listed among other issues.

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[45] "Negro Spokesmen Bitter on Goldwater Nomination, Saying it Will Aid Racists: Dr. King Assails Senator's Views Some Delegates Will Refuse to Support the Arizonan -- Will Help Rest of Ticket."

[46] "The Bookshelf: Goldwater Views the Red Threat and Decides the U.S. must Strive for Victory." *Wall Street Journal,* April 23, 1962.

However, reporting on politicians and their support or opposition for Goldwater's ticket it becomes obvious that his stance on civil rights is a major reason behind their choice to support him. For example, an article covering Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus' opinion on Goldwater's chances to win the presidential election of 1964 shows that he thinks Goldwater's stance on Civil Rights is one of the main reasons for Goldwater's appeal to the public. It is reported that the Democratic governor of Arkansas believes Goldwater has a significant chance to win the election, "Faubus said the new Civil Rights law which Goldwater opposes is the main issue for, but is by no means the only reason, the southern revolt against national Democratic administration."[47] The article showcases how Goldwater's strategy to appeal to conservative democrats is working among elites by opposing the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Faubus supports Goldwater's stance on Civil Rights, "Other minority groups… have demonstrated, he said, that this is an open society with no lack of opportunity for those who have the will." To Faubus the civil rights movement seems unnecessary as the US has the mechanisms, equality of opportunity, for people of all races to thrive.[48] According to Faubus civil rights are an important factor for people to support Goldwater.

Alternatively, New York representative John Lindsay, one of the most liberal Republican members of the House of Representatives, expresses in an interview his disappointment in Goldwater in a *New York Times* publication. He is disappointed by Goldwater's refusal to acknowledge Republican traditional commitment to "equal protection laws" of the 14th amendment, and that this is one of the reasons he struggles

[47] Manly, Chesly. "Faubus Sees South Going for Goldwater: Barry can Win 10 States In South: Faubus Hints Goldwater may Beat Johnson." *Chicago Tribune,* August 7, 1964.
[48] Manly, "Faubus Sees South Going for Goldwater"

to support Goldwater.[49] Lindsay explained how Civil Rights issues were part of the reason he, and many others, had to search deeply within their conscience to support Goldwater.

Many similar publications around this time showcasing political figure's opinions of Goldwater and whether or not they will support him in the presidential election. Interestingly, for both these political figures, Goldwater's position on civil rights is a deciding factor on whether they will support him in the upcoming elections, suggesting civil rights issues are of utmost importance for political figures. Furthermore, these elite perspectives emphasize the diversity of the political parties at the time, with both liberal and conservative members in both parties. The endorsement of Democrat Faubus and opposition of Republican Lindsay as well as African American concerns over Goldwater's nomination foreshadow how the opposing views on civil rights would eventually aid the creation of two distinct parties divided by liberalism and conservatism as well as racial identity. Concerns about Goldwater's what his election would mean for civil rights soon led to calls to action among the African American press.

Calls to action

Goldwater's nomination sparked urgent calls for action throughout the African American press. In multiple articles, civil rights leader Martin Luther King addresses the people in an attempt to encourage political participation and mobilize essential Black votes for the upcoming presidential election. Two weeks after Goldwater's nomination, King writes to

[49] Lewis, Anthony. "Lindsay Ponders Bolt From Ticket: G.O.P. Liberal Says he Will Search His Conscience–Keating in Quandary Lindsay Searching Conscience; May Not Vote For Goldwater." *New York Times,* July 17, 1964.

the people in an article addressing Goldwater's nomination where after warning people about the presidential candidate's philosophy and the followers it attracts, he continues to call for political action:

> In the light of these facts and because of my love for America, I have no alternative but to urge every Negro and every white person of good will to vote against Mr. Goldwater and to withdraw support from any Republican candidates that does not publicly disassociate himself from Senator Goldwater and his philosophy.[50]

Here, for the first time, King breaks his policy of not endorsing political candidates because he feels that the possibility of Senator Goldwater as President of the United States "threatens the health, morality, and survival of our nation" so much so that he cannot "in good conscience fail to take a stand against what he represents."[51] Furthermore, in an October article King continues his plea for political action, "nothing could be more important" than to vote, and explains why voting is so important and that it is a matter of one's "life and destiny."[52] He also calls on the readers to spread this information with the community and neighborhood as that is part of political action. King thereby frames the 1964 election as a decisive turning point in the struggle for equality and civil rights.

Similarly, for the first time since its founding more than half a century ago, the NAACP openly opposed a presidential candidate by name and urged delegates to the

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[50] King, "Goldwater's nomination."
[51] King, "Goldwater's nomination."
[52] Martin Luther King Jr. "A Few Hours for Freedom." *New York Amsterdam News*, October 24, 1964.

Republican National Convention to refuse Goldwater the presidential candidacy less than a month before the end of the Republican primary.[53] Roy Wilkins, the executive secretary of the NAACP, explained Goldwater's votes against the passage of the civil rights bill and a moderate bill both parties had reached consensus on. In addition to "appealing to fear and bigotry" by using recent violent acts against civil rights workers in Mississippi as a means to gain support in the convention led the NAACP to make this appeal to the delegates. The willingness to break policies of no direct endorsement or opposition by both King and the NAACP showcased the gravity of the 1964 election on civil rights. The actions of the civil rights by leaders emphasized the importance of preventing Goldwater from becoming president of the United States.

Journalist Rosemary Tyler Brooks called for organized action to prevent Goldwater from becoming president because demonstrations with "no defined goals" are no solution to stop Goldwater.[54] She also urged for the readers to cast their vote in the upcoming elections, "In the coming election, the Negro vote will only be important if big city elections are close… and too many Northern Negroes do not vote. Furthermore, Black Republican leaders expressed their disapproval of Goldwater's nomination and conveyed their plans to not vote for him in the November election.[55] Their reasoning: their party has abandoned their historically "strong commitment to civil rights." However, the 1964 GOP platform on civil rights did not reflect this commitment, underscoring

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[53] M. S. Handler, "N.A.A.C.P. Opposes Goldwater's Bid: Urges Republican Delegates To Deny Him Nomination-- Rights Stand Cited N.A.A.C.P. Opposes Goldwater's Bid." *New York Times*, June 28, 1964.
[54] Rosemarie Tyler Brooks, Washington Correspondent. "Washington Round-Up: From San Francisco the Final Wrap-Up." *The Chicago Defender*, July 18, 1964.
[55] "Conn. Negro Leaders Angry; 'Won't Vote For Goldwater.'" *The Chicago Defender,* July 18, 1964.

reason for Republican leaders' opposition for Goldwater is due to his lack of commitment to civil rights.[56] Brooks, King, NAACP, and Black Republicans reactions to Goldwater's run for presidency provide evidence of black concern about Goldwater and his conservative stance on civil rights. The urgent calls to action of Black voters reflected in the election results, with a massive movement of the Black electorate who previously voted Republican to support the Democratic nominee.

Election results

On November 3, 1964, 61 percent of the popular vote went to President Johnson. Amongst Black voters this percentage surged at 94 percent nationwide casting a ballot for the Democrat. In Tennessee, 0.5 percent of Black votes went to Goldwater and in Washington D.C. only 1 percent of the votes in predominantly Black neighborhoods were cast to Goldwater.[57] With only 6 percent of Black votes for Goldwater, performed historically badly amongst black voters. Compared to Nixon in the 1960 elections who obtained 32 percent, Goldwater had lost 26 percent of the Black votes.[58] Goldwater did, however, gain 10 percent of the white votes by receiving 51 percent of the white voters while Nixon got 41 percent. Interestingly, when looking at geographic results of the election, Goldwater's campaign lost one percent of the popular votes in the South compared to Nixon in 1960.[59] These results show the drastic results

[56] "Conn. Negro Leaders Angry"
[57] "Election Result: Political Action for Rights in Dixie to Increase." *The Chicago Defender*, November 7, 1964.
[58] "Gallup Presidential Election Trial-Heat Trends, 1936–2008." *Gallup*, Inc.
[59] "Gallup Presidential Election Trial-Heat Trends, 1936–2008."

that occurred in the Republican party in the span of four years adopting a strategy to appeal to the segregationist south and abandoning Black voters.

According to an analysis of civil rights group Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Atlanta, Georgia, four states won by the Democrats would have been Republican if not for the Black votes cast for Johnson.[60] Furthermore, the states won by Republicans, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and South Carolina, possibly would have been won by Democrats if these states allowed Black voters on registration lists,[61] showing the continuing role of the suppression of Black votes. Voter registration among Black people surged, particularly in the Southern states won by Johnson, and least in the states that were won by Goldwater.[62] Throughout this analysis, the impact of Black voter registration and votes are highlighted by demonstrating its substantial impact on the presidential election results. The mass mobilization of Black voters nationwide, especially throughout the South, demonstrated the urgency expressed in the press was not only true on paper but also visible in the actions of Black political participation. These results reflect the drastic migration of Black voters to the Democratic Party and white southerners to the Republican Party, as a result of Goldwater's political stance on civil rights.

Such election results sparked important questions on the role of political participation in the fight for civil rights. As shown in an article in the *Chicago Defender* two months after the election, King highlights the power of political mobilization the

[60] Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. "The Negro Vote: an Analysis," *Civil Rights Movement Archive*, (1964). https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64snccva.htm
[61] Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, "The Negro Vote: an Analysis."
[62] Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, "The Negro Vote: an Analysis."

elections results have demonstrated. “In the recent election, the American people made a choice… Not only was Goldwater defeated, but the liberal forces of this nation worked together to deal a telling blow to the whole notion of Goldwaterism,” displaying relief of Goldwater’s defeat and optimism of the power of political participation.[63] He points out that the political participation provoked for the 1964 election should continue to achieve civil rights goals, and takes advantage of the wide political involvement in the recent election and urges people to carry on for the sake of the civil rights struggle**, “**this is a time for every person of good will to be involved in the Civil Rights struggle… If we are to have a great society, the people of good will in this nation must work to make it possible.”[64] Furthermore, according to Roy Wilkins, the executive director of the NAACP, the election results might encourage the younger generation to recognize the power of voting, which might “discourage civil rights extremists.”[65] Not only did the mobilization of Black voters impact the national election result but recognition of its effectiveness generated optimism and alternative methods for civil and equal rights.

In contrast, conservative press after the 1964 election were not as hopeful, with little coverage of the election results besides what the results suggest for future campaigns and strategies. There is no mention of civil rights in the context of the election results. The few articles addressing the national election result focus on future campaign strategies and the future of the Republican party. Two concentrate on the “lessons of 64,” particularly what can be learned from the election where Goldwater lost

[63] Martin Luther King, Jr. “A Choice and a Promise,” *New York Amsterdam News*. December 5, 1964, 10.
[64] King, “A Choice and a Promise.”
[65] “Election Result: Political Action for Rights in Dixie to Increase." *The Chicago Defender*, November 7, 1964, 1.

by a landslide.[66] The analysis stressed the increased cost of political campaigning and television's role in reducing this cost, as well as Goldwater's failure to "state his political philosophy with sufficient coherence."[67] The future of the Republican party is also of concern. Alan Otten discusses plans to abandon "its crusading conservatism to a more middle-road course" for the next presidential elections,[68] and perhaps giving moderate Rockefeller another try.[69] Indeed, the Republican party abandoned Goldwater's extreme conservative approach by adopting a seemingly more moderate approach in the elections following that of 1964. Seemingly, because while not explicitly announcing their opposition to civil rights issues, Republican presidential nominees, particularly Reagan, continued to share Goldwater's racial views.[70] Similar to African American newspapers discussing the election results, the conservative press focused largely on the future and the changes that need to be made. However, unlike African American publications, these do not focus on civil rights issues as a reason for Goldwater's landslide defeat.

Similar to African American newspapers, the mainstream media was littered with articles focusing on President Johnson's "landslide win," however, with little discussion

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[66] "Some Lessons of '64." *Wall Street Journal,* Nov 04, 1964.; Louis Kohlmeier. "Left Vs. Right Wing Broadcasting Battle Likely to Continue Long Past Election Day." *Wall Street Journal,* November 4, 1964.
[67] Kohlmeier, "Left Vs. Right Wing Broadcasting Battle Likely to Continue Long Past Election Day."
[68] Alan Otten. "Whither the GOP?: Republican Party seen Shifting to Middle Road After Fierce in-Fighting Summit Session may be Held to Adopt New, Moderate 'Statement of Principles' Roles of Romney, Scranton Whither the GOP? Shift to Middle Road is seen After Fierce in-Fighting." *Wall Street Journal,* November 05, 1964.
[69] Otten, "Whither the GOP?"
[70] Carmines and Stimson, *Issue Evolution Race and the Transformation of American Politics*, 54.

of civil rights as part of this victory.[71] Like the conservative press, mainstream media also includes coverage of the possible changes to the Republican party in the future and the maintenance of Republicans' seats in government at the state and local level elections.[72] Furthermore, reversal of voting patterns of the southern states are underscored.[73] These new voting patterns are still visible today, Republican supporters are dominantly white southern Christians while the Black electorate predominantly favors the Democratic party.

Conclusion

Not until the time of Goldwater's nomination for Republican presidential candidate did the drastic implications of a possible Goldwater presidency on the Civil Rights Movement seem to penetrate, particularly among the African American Press. Throughout the election campaign period, mainstream media addressed civil rights almost entirely along other issues at stake in the election. They usually addressed other issues at the same time, indicating civil rights was not the only issue area at stake in their view. Repeated mention of civil rights and the abandonment of Black voters by the Republican party, calls to attention how civil rights issues were a concern in the

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[71] Robert J. Donovan. "President Sweeps all Sections of Country Excepting Deep South: Johnson Elected In Landslide Vote." *Los Angeles Times*, November 04, 1964.; Richard Bergholz. "LBJ Landslide!: Prop.14, Murphy win in Calif. Ex-Actor, Senator in Close Race Despite President's Triumph California Vote." *Los Angeles Times*, November 4, 1964.

[72] Richard Bergholz. "LBJ Landslide!: Prop.14, Murphy win in Calif. Ex-Actor, Senator in Close Race Despite President's Triumph California Vote."

[73] John Herbers. "South Reverses Voting Patterns: Goldwater Makes Inroads, But More Electoral Votes Go to The President South Reverses Voting Patterns." *New York Times*, November 4, 1964.

mainstream media. Similarly, conservative newspapers tend to focus more on Goldwater's positions as a whole. Rather than framing civil rights as a main issue**,** conservative newspapers like the *Chicago Tribune* and *Wall Street Journal* were more concerned with other pressing issues at the time. On the occasion civil rights issues are mentioned, they are listed among other issues or in the context of elite support or opposition to Goldwater.

African American newspapers, however, addressed Goldwater's election almost exclusively through the lens of the ongoing battle for civil rights, highlighting the urgency of preventing a Goldwater presidency as this would gravely affect the progress made in the past years. The African American press was especially concerned with the type of followers Goldwater's campaign attracted, and with mobilizing their audience to vote in the upcoming election to try to prevent Goldwater from winning the presidency. An event that would prevent the civil rights issues to be addressed in the future or at worse, undo what has already been accomplished. Concerns on Goldwater's followers emphasize the drastic differences between the supporters of both presidential candidates, white southerners supporting Goldwater and Black voters flocking to support the Democratic candidate, President Johnson. Moreover, the animus towards Goldwater and his followers from the African American press reflect the polarizing partisan identities developing at the time. The urgency evidently reflects how this would drastically affect both the writers of the publications and their readers due to their race, highlighting motivations behind the movement of the Black electorate to the Democratic party. Even after the election, coverage of the results reflected the same coverage of civil rights across different news outlets.

These different reactions to Goldwater and his conservative political stance on civil rights reveal the importance or unimportance of civil rights in the press across the political spectrum. The contrasting responses in the press, especially between African American press and that of mainstream and conservative platforms illuminate the media's role not only as a distributer of information but also as a reflection of the interests and concerns of its readers. Not to mention, also pointing to the disparity between the conservative and mainstream interests and concerns compared to that of African Americans surrounding the 1964 election. Thereby accentuating the polarized nature of the American electorate divided by race and racial issues at the time.

This paper is limited in its scope by focusing largely on well-established newspapers. Looking at smaller and local publishers and coverage of Goldwater's campaign would add an interesting dimension by exploring how reactions to Goldwater differed depending on geographical locations. Furthermore, an analysis of the influence of the media coverage and calls to action on political participation in the 1964 election would add insights to the power of the media in the civil rights movement. In addition, while illuminating the presence of the social sorting phenomenon among Black and white southern Americans in the media, additional research is necessary to identify the media's potential role in fueling the movement of social identities towards political parties.

The 1964 election had lasting effects on American politics and race relations and American politics. After his landslide defeat of Goldwater, President Johnson continued advocating for civil rights and passed the Voting Rights Bill in 1965 which drastically increased southern Black registration, and another addressing housing discrimination in

1968.[74] Political changes also occurred, Democratic presidential candidates no longer won white southern votes in numbers as before the election. The Republican party would also not regain the Black votes they historically received. As reflected by the news coverage by the conservative press at the time who largely focused on the future of the Republican party, the strategy of the Republican party changed by taking a more moderate approach. Future candidates would continue taking conservative approaches to racial issues even if not to the degree of Goldwater, although employing more covert ways of expressing these concerns. As a result, the nomination of Barry Goldwater as presidential candidate in the 1964 election and his subsequent campaign marked a decisive point in American party politics, marking the acceleration of social sorting that is still visible today.

Realignment of American voters along social demographics beyond liberal and conservative ideologies poses a threat to democracy by increasing hostility and animosity between partisans and when taken to extreme eroding democratic norms essential to the functioning of a democracy.[75] The 2016 election of a president with a lack of care for democratic norms in a time where the electorate is divided on multiple social identities, reflects how American democracy is not immune to threats to its democracy.[76] Understanding why the American people are socially sorted is key to uncovering strategies to combat threats to American democracy. This paper throws light on the role of civil rights within the creation of this division.

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[74] Carmines and Stimson, *Issue Evolution Race and the Transformation of American Politics*, 48.
[75] Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 170-172.
[76] Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 8-9.

In conclusion, the study addresses a crucial moment in the civil rights movement where conservative Barry Goldwater threatened progress with his conservative outlook on civil rights in the 1964 presidential campaign, specifically the different role of civil rights issues in the media coverage by comparing the African American, conservative, and mainstream press and ultimately revealing the different priorities for different demographics. Moreso, the drastically different roles of civil rights as a concern of the election reveals the centrality of the civil rights movement in the social sorting phenomenon that took place during and after the 1964 election.

Parks and Recreation and the Potential for Comedy to Tackle Affective Polarization

In season two, episode 23 of *Parks and Recreation* "The Master Plan," it is time for the City of Pawnee's yearly Budget and Planning proposal. Deputy Director of the Parks and Recreation department, Leslie Knope, calls their budget proposal "The Master Plan."[77] Leslie is beyond excited and because she loves her job as public official so much, she even made the extra effort to "spice it up a little" with quotes predominantly from American novelist Jack London, because the plan is otherwise "mostly filled with boring, bureaucratic language."[78] Her boss, Director Ron Swanson, on the other hand, calls this Budget and Planning meeting "philosophically horrifying" because in this meeting it is announced "what they intend to waste taxpayer money on" and because "they skimp out on the snacks."[79] When it is announced in the meeting that all planning and spending are postponed indefinitely "due to crippling gridlock in city council" and that state auditors will be coming to try to resolve the issue, Leslie and Ron have an argument. Ron mocks the government and compares it to a "big, fat, angry slob spending money it does not have on crap it does not need." Leslie defensively responds with "that's what the government does Ron, it provides services!" This episode perfectly captures the ideological differences between the two *Parks and Recreation* employees. And the animosity in their conversation highlights a prevalent issue in the United States today.

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[77] Parks and Recreation, season 2, episode 23, "The Master Plan," directed by Dean Holland, written by Michael Schur and Kate Dippold, aired May 13, 2010 on NBC, Peacock TV LLC, 2020, streaming, 0:02:58.
[78] "The Master Plan," 0:03:06.
[79] "The Master Plan," 0:04:55.

Over the last few decades, partisan affective polarization has increased in the US. Political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblat reveal that 60 percent of Americans view their partisan opponents as a threat to democracy, labeling them as enemies.[80] Affective polarization is a component under the umbrella term polarization.[81] Different methodological approaches to measure polarization, has created four distinct definitions: ideological consistency, ideological divergence, perceived polarization, and affective polarization.[82] This paper will focus on affective polarization. Affective polarization is the difference between the positive feelings one has of their own political party compared to the negative feelings towards the opposing party. This difference is expressed through dislike and, in extreme cases, hatred towards members of an out-group compared to the members in the in-group.

The increase of affective polarization does not come without consequences on both the individual level and institutional level. On the individual level, affective polarization changes partisan behavior and on the institutional level it prevents democratic governments from making decisions and creating gridlocks. Affective polarization increases partisan prejudice, creates a lack of trust of those from other parties, influences people to choose members of their own party when this choice is presented, and influences social relationships and influences whom one wants to

[80] Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, "The Crisis of American Democracy," *American Federation of Teachers*, 2020, accessed March 11, 2024, https://www.aft.org/ae/fall2020/levitsky_ziblatt.
[81] Yphtach Lelkes, "Mass Polarization: Manifestations and Measurements," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80 (2016): 392–410, 393.
[82] Lelkes, "Mass Polarization: Manifestations and Measurements."

cohabitate with, date, and marry.[83] Furthermore, on the institutional level as feelings of dislike become stronger, it can cause political gridlocks and inability to compromise on mutually beneficial policies, weakening trust in the government and support for democratic norms essential to a functioning democracy.[84] These consequences, when taken to the extreme, could be detrimental to democratic governments and even cause democratic backsliding or collapse of a democratic system, finding ways that could mitigate affective polarization is therefore crucial.

Numerous studies across various disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, and media studies, have delved into comedy's impact on individual thoughts and behavior, and its role in the context of democracy. However, how comedy influences affective polarization remains unexplored. This paper investigates potential avenues through which comedy can mitigate affective polarization by drawing on existing

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[83] Yphtach Lelkes and Sean J. Westwood, "The Limits of Partisan Prejudice," *The Journal of Politics* 79, no. 2 (2017): 485–498, 496-498; Ryan E. Carlin and Gregory J. Love, "Political Competition, Partisanship and Interpersonal Trust in Electoral Democracies," *British Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 1 (2018): 115–139; Shanto Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood, "Fearing and Loathing Across Party Lines: New Evidence of Group Polarization," *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 3 (2015): 690–707; Robert M. Shafranek, "Political Considerations in Non Political Decisions: A Conjoint Analysis of Roommate Choice," *Political Behavior* 43, no. 1 (2019): 271–300; Gregory A. Huber and Neil Malhotra, "Political Homophily in Social Relationships: Evidence from Online Dating Behavior," *The Journal of Politics* 79, no. 1 (2017): 269–283; Shanto Iyengar, Tobias Konitzer, and Kent Tedin, "The Home as a Political Fortress: Family Agreement in an Era of Polarization," *The Journal of Politics* 80, no. 4 (2018): 1326–1338.

[84] Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer, "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Politics," in *Four Threats: The Recurring Crises of American Democracy,* by Suzanne Mettler and Robert C. Lieberman (Oxford University Press, 2020), 123-152; Matthew H. Graham and Milan. W. Svolik, "Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 2 (2020): 392–409.

theories using the American sitcom *Parks and Recreation* as an illustrative example. I argue that comedy can mitigate affective polarization by altering individuals' perceptions of both the in-group and the out-group and by creating an environment fertile for correcting misperceptions, critical self-reflection, and recognition of similarities, comedy can reduce feelings of animosity towards members of the opposing party. Building on existing theories from multiple disciplines I formulate a new theory on comedy's possible effect on affective polarization. First, I point out how *Parks and Recreation* addresses polarization by using two drastically different characters and its active attempt to attract viewers from both sides of the political spectrum. Thereafter, pulling from existing theories I show how comedy can decrease affective polarization using examples of *Parks and Recreation*.

Polarization and *Parks and Recreation*

Parks and Recreation, a mockumentary style American sitcom, follows the lives of low-level bureaucrats of the Parks and Recreation department in a made-up city called Pawnee, Indiana. The sitcom premiered on April 9th, 2009, a few months after Obama's inauguration and played for seven seasons until February 24th, 2015. Like Obama's campaign rhetoric, emphasizing "hope over fear" and "unity over division," *Parks and Recreation* radiates optimism largely through Deputy Director Leslie Knope's positive outlook on government.[85] Since the late 1970s, affective polarization has

[85] Barker and Zeleny, as cited in Holladay, *Parks and Recreation,* Wayne State University Press, 2022.

increased dramatically.[86] Although affective polarization has continued its steady increase since the Pilot in 2009, the effects of polarization were already actively felt at the time.

According to Michael Schur, co-creator with Greg Daniels, the 2008 presidential election raised fundamental questions regarding how big the role of the government should be in different aspects of people's lives.[87] This question is a motif throughout the *Parks and Recreation* series and is depicted by the two main characters, Leslie Knope (played by Amy Poehler) and Ron Swanson (played by Nick Offerman). Leslie Knope is the Deputy Director of the Parks Department with endless enthusiasm about her job and has devoted her life to being a public servant. Director Ron Swanson, on the other hand, is ironically a libertarian working for the government who repeatedly expresses his opposition to government spending and involvement in people's lives. All while articulating his belief in the free market and capitalism to run the world and as "God's way of determining who is smart and who is poor."[88] In the first episode he expresses his beliefs that the government should be eliminated and that the parks system should be privatized and "run entirely for profit, like chuck-e-cheese."[89]

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[86] Joseph Phillips, "Affective Polarization: Over Time, Through the Generations, and During the Lifespan," *Political Behavior* 44, no. 3 (2022): 1483–1508, 1483)
[87] Ashley Burns and Chloe Schildhause, "You Go Big or You Go Home: An Oral History of the Creation and Evolution of 'Parks and Recreation'," *Uproxx,* 2015, accessed March 11, 2024, https://uproxx.com/feature/.
[88] *Parks and Recreation*, season 3, episode 1, "Go Big or Go Home," directed by Dean Holland, written by Michael Schur and Alan Yang, aired January 20, 2011 on NBC, Peacock TV LLC, 2020, streaming, 0:04:48.
[89] *Parks and Recreation*, season 1, episode 1, "Pilot," directed by Greg Daniels, written by Greg Daniels and Michael Schur, aired April 9, 2009 on NBC, Peacock TV LLC, 2020, streaming, 0:16:09.

Having two protagonists on the show, Leslie, and Ron, suggests there is no one correct view of what the role of government should be. English language scholar David Greven identifies a new genre, double-protagonist films. Within these films, such as *Auto Focus* by Paul Schrader and *Brokeback Mountain* by Ang Lee, the central conflict is a conflict of power between two protagonists who both have a "legitimate claim to narrative dominance."[90] By analyzing double-protagonists played by male characters in this analysis on masculinity, Greven argues that these Hollywood films express a split understanding of manhood and masculinity. Particularly, that there is not one correct way to be masculine and to represent manhood. Similarly, the presence of both Leslie and Ron as main protagonists in *Parks and Recreation* expresses there is not one correct way to interpret what the role of government should be. Although Leslie emerges as the main protagonist at the beginning of the series, and Ron merely as her unproductive boss that often disagrees with her, towards the end of season two Ron and Leslie's relationship develops and Ron becomes a major character whose life's developments are actively followed, a protagonist.

Furthermore, the sympathetic depiction of both Leslie and Ron throughout the series opens doors for a multitude of interpretations of the show through what John Fiske calls semiotic excess.[91] Semiotic excess is the surplus of meanings found in television which leads to myriad interpretations for different audiences, creating an

[90] David Greven, "Contemporary Hollywood Masculinity and the Double-Protagonist Film," *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 4 (Summer, 2009): 22-43, 22.
[91] Fiske, as cited in Holladay, *Parks and Recreation,* Wayne State University Press, 2022.

environment where not just one ideology can dominate.[92] This semiotic excess makes television shows polysemic, have many meanings, and the meaning of a show is interpreted differently by each viewer due to their different perspectives. Hence, there is no correct way to interpret the way characters are portrayed or what is being said.[93] Accordingly, which character receives sympathy from the audience depends on who is watching *Parks and Recreation*. Although overall the show can be seen as left leaning, with no correct way to interpret what the role of government should be, or which character is more favorable within the show, *Parks and Recreation* leaves room to attract an audience from across the political spectrum.

Another way through which polarization is addressed in *Parks and Recreation*, it seems the creators made an active effort to include political figures from both sides, the Republican and Democratic party. This is done in two ways. First, particularly in season one, whenever the politically ambitious Leslie references real-life political figures at least two are named, one Republican and one Democrat. For example, in the fourth episode of season one, “Boy’s Club” Leslie is adamant about infiltrating a ‘boys club’ of guys who are drinking a beer in the courtyard to unwind after work.[94] After they run out of beer Leslie opens a gift basket from a construction company full of wine and cheese to try to fit in. As this gift was worth more than twenty-five dollars, government employees were not allowed to accept gifts for corruption reasons. Leslie was very clear about this

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[92] John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media,* ed. L. A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 30–49, 91-92.
[93] Hollis Holladay, *Parks and Recreation* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2022), 62.
[94] *Parks and Recreation*, season 1, episode 4, "Boy’s Club," directed by Micheal McCullers, written by Greg Daniels, Michael Schur, and Alan Yang, aired April 30, 2009 on NBC, Peacock TV LLC, 2020, streaming, 0:04:10.

rule prior to opening the gift. Desperate to keep the night going, Leslie brings out the basket and they enjoy it together. The next morning, as the ethical politician she aims to be, she records a public apology and lists both a Democrat and a Republican public official before the scene ends, and her list is cut off:

> I realize I have let down every female public official in America, and I would like to apologize to them right now, individually and in alphabetical order. Michelle Bachmann, Republican, Minnesota, I am sorry. Tammy Baldwin, Democrat, Wisconsin, I am so sorry Tammy.[95]

This is no coincidence as a similar situation occurs two more times in season one. In episode 5 “The Banquet,” Leslie talks with her mom, who is also a political figure in Pawnee, and suggests that they could be a “multigenerational dynasty,” and uses a simile to paint a picture of what this might look like using a Democratic dynasty example and a Republican one, “like the Kennedy’s or the Bushes. Minus the drinking problem… I mean no disrespect.”[96] Finally, in the next episode “Rock Show” when asking her mom what she should wear on a date, she again uses a similar simile, “like Laura Bush stylish or Michelle Obama stylish?” The presence of both Republicans and Democrats indicates Leslie’s indifference to partisan affiliation, she views both as valuable to politics.[97]

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[95] “Boy’s Club,” 0:06:55.
[96] *Parks and Recreation*, season 1, episode 5, "The Banquet," directed by Beth McCarthy-Miller, written by Greg Daniels, Michael Schur, and Tucker Cawley, aired May 7, 2009 on NBC, Peacock TV LLC, 2020, streaming, 0:01:28.
[97] *Parks and Recreation*, season 1, episode 6, "Rock Show," directed by Michael Schur, written by Greg Daniels, Michael Schur, and Norm Hiscock, aired May 14, 2009 on NBC, Peacock TV LLC, 2020, streaming, 0:05:03.

The second effort to include political figures from both sides is through cameo guest appearances. The series has had cameos by several real-life political figures, including then Vice President Joe Biden (Democrat) who appeared twice, his wife Jill Biden, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (Republican), Senator and Republican candidate in the 2000 and 2008 presidential election John McCain also appeared in two episodes. Also appearing were Michelle Obama, former Democratic Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, and Senators Barbara Boxer (Democrat), Olympia Snowe (Republican), Cory Booker (Democrat), Orrin Hatch (Republican), and Kristen Gillibrand (Democrat).

The inclusion of both Democrats and Republicans throughout the series in multiple ways was most likely done to try to appeal to the broadest possible audience, as more viewers can only be beneficial. However, if this worked and gained the views of both Republican and Democrats, an opportunity is created to reach both sides of the political spectrum, regardless of partisan affiliation. Making the reach of the sitcom a unique case to assess its possible impact on affective polarization. Furthermore, politicians are strategic about their public appearances and the fact that many high-level public figures and politicians from both Republican and Democratic affiliation appeared on the show, indicates that this show sends a positive message to the audience about politics, at least to some extent. No political figure would appear on a show that disproportionately attacks their ideology or political stance.

Partisan identification of Ron and Leslie are omitted within the sitcom. Perhaps purposefully to attract a wider audience and not scare off partisans not willing to watch an opposing party member on TV. A real phenomenon influenced by affective

polarization called selective exposure.[98] Although it becomes clear Ron is a libertarian in season two, episode 23 “The Master Plan,” and it can be assumed that Ron might identify with the Libertarian Party, this is not explicitly stated.[99] Similarly, although Leslie’s ideology seems to align more with the Democratic party, this is not made explicit. Even though Leslie and Ron’s dichotomy does not represent the Democrat versus Republican dynamic used to measure affective polarization, their relationship remains a valuable case to analyze comedy’s effect on affective polarization because of the recurring ideological conflicts that often cause animosity as well as the possible identification of both Democrats and Republicans with these characters.

Comedy and Affective Polarization

Political science scholars researching possible mitigation strategies of affective polarization highlight the lessening people’s strong dislike for others with different political views as a means to reduce affective polarization. Although using different mechanisms to achieve this, the approaches share similarities. They all suggest doing this by encouraging individuals to avoid thinking in stereotypes and instead finding shared interests and commonalities with partisans from the other party which requires educating partisans on the alternative viewpoints.[100] On a different note, theories on the effects of comedy on social change highlight the power of comedy as a tool for spreading new ideas, alternative views, especially for groups whose views are often

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[98] Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).
[99] “The Master Plan,” 0:05:58.
[100] James Druckman and Jeremy Levy, "Affective Polarization in the American Public," Northwestern Institute for Policy Research (n.d.).

marginalized.[101] Keeping in mind these key mechanisms, I argue that comedy can mitigate affective polarization by altering individuals' perceptions of both the in-group and the out-group by creating an environment fertile for parasocial relationships, self-reflection and correcting misperceptions, comedy can reduce feelings of animosity towards members of the opposing party. Comedy provides a flow of alternative views and introduces new values for an individual to examine and contemplate.[102] This is something *Parks and Rec* does consistently through parasocial relationships, presenting new critical information and perspectives by constantly viewing governmental issues through two lenses, Ron, and Leslie. Parasocial relationships are quasi-interpersonal relationships between characters and its audience, where the viewer feels like they know the television character.[103] Building on existing theories from multiple disciplines I formulate a new theory on comedy's effect on affective polarization.

Parasocial relationships and comedy

Sitcoms can be distinguished from other types of comedy as it follows characters and their stories throughout the episodes, establishing long-term relationships with its audience. According to media scholar James Shanahan and philosophy scholar Michael

[101] Sophie Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence* (United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Methuen, 2015); Michael Meier and Christina Schmitt, eds., *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand-up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Rebecca Krefting, *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).
[102] Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters,* 152.
[103] Arvind Singhal and Everett M. Rogers, *Entertainment-Education: A Communication Strategy for Social Change* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1999), 83.

Morgan, consistent media exposure to social issues influence the beliefs and attitudes of its audience over time.[104] Particularly, social modeling and parasocial relationships can have significant potential to influence its audience's perceptions.[105] Social modeling suggests individuals can learn new behaviors by watching and observing role models presented in the media and imitating the overt behavior.[106] Social modeling effect is magnified if there is a strong sense of connection between a viewer and the media personality, this can occur through parasocial relationships.[107]

Sociologists Arvind Singhal and Everett Rogers, argue the TV programs are not likely to influence social change by themselves.[108] However, the parasocial relationships created between viewers and TV personalities can motivate change in the viewers behavior. These relationships can affect how people think about a topic and encourage them to adjust their behaviors, especially if viewers connect the character's experiences to their own lives and identify with a media character.[109]

Can parasocial relationships influence partisan's thoughts and behavior and thereby reduce affective polarization? *Parks and Recreation* undoubtedly created parasocial relationships with its audience throughout its seven seasons. For example, Nick Offerman, the actor who played Ron Swanson, explains that on occasion he is approached by fans of the sitcom who wholeheartedly believe he shares the same

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[104] James G. Shanahan and Michael Morgan, *Television and Its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 132.
[105] Caty Chattoo, "A Funny Matter: Toward a Framework for Understanding the Function of Comedy in Social Change," *Humor* 32, no. 3 (2019): 499–523, 508.
[106] Singhal & Rogers, *Entertainment-Education*, 131.
[107] Singhal & Rogers, *Entertainment-Education*, 132.
[108] Singhal & Rogers, *Entertainment-Education*, 132.
[109] Singhal & Rogers, *Entertainment-Education*, 149-150.

libertarian beliefs as Ron.[110] This regular confusion amongst fans shows the relationship some viewers formed with the fictional character and the implausible connection made of Nick Offerman as the physical embodiment of this beloved TV character. Furthermore, Ron is often viewed as the embodiment of the libertarian ideology. For example, according to Holladay, the blog *Libertarian County* describes Ron as the "iconic compendium of many great Libertarian thinkers," showcasing how many libertarians identify with Ron.[111]

Although the characters in a sitcom are often over exaggerated for comedic effect, as is the case for all characters in *Parks and Rec*, viewers can identify themselves within elements of the characters. Through the presence of semiotic excess, which character this is depends on the viewer's interpretation. A non-libertarian can identify themselves with Ron's passion for red meat or his hatred of his ex-wives Tammy 1 and Tammy 2. Similarly, some viewers may share Leslie's ideological viewpoints on the role of government. If not, perhaps her love for sugary treats and waffles or her endless passion for friendships and gift giving. Parasocial relationships open the doors to possible behavioral changes within viewers who identify, at least in some respects, with Ron or Leslie, especially their strongly held ideologies. This means that observing Ron and Leslie interact in a civil manner despite their ideological differences and treating each other's viewpoints with respect instead of bashing them outright, can encourage viewers to do the same.

[110] Holladay, *Parks and Recreation*, 62-63.
[111] "Ron Swanson Quotes" as quoted in Holladay, *Parks and Recreation*, 63.

Parasocial relationships with characters viewers might not interact with often in real life decreases feelings of prejudice towards that group through frequent exposure.[112] As mentioned above, affective polarization decreases the likelihood of frequent interaction with individuals of the opposite party as people prefer to interact with co-partisans and increases partisan prejudice behavior. The development of parasocial relationships of people with different viewpoints on the basis of a shared identity other than their ideology can decrease feelings of prejudice, thereby reducing affective polarization. By forming a parasocial relationship with Ron due to a personal identification with his love for meaty breakfast foods, one might become more tolerant to his philosophical beliefs, despite disagreement with his ideology.

Their respect for each other despite their different philosophies is made clear throughout the series. For example, in a season three episode after Leslie surprises Ron with his perfect birthday present, a quiet steak dinner, Leslie reminisces about the past and asks Ron what he told her when she was offered another job in the rivalry town Eagleton. Ron repeated what he had said years ago, “I said that I thought we worked well together and that I might disagree with your philosophy, but I respected you.”[113] Clear phrases like these display outright the mutual respect Leslie and Ron have for each other despite their different ideologies throughout the series. In addition, if

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[112] Edward Schiappa, Peter Gregg, and D. Hewes, "The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis," *Communication Monographs* 72, no. 1 (2005): 92–115; Susan M. Smedema, D. Ebener, and V. Grist-Gordon, "The Impact of Humorous Media on Attitudes toward Persons with Disabilities," *Disability & Rehabilitation* 34, no. 17 (2012): 1431–1437.

[113] *Parks and Recreation*, season 3, episode 12, "Eagleton," directed by Nicole Holofcener, written by Greg Daniels, Michael Schur, and Emily Spivey, aired May 5, 2011 on NBC, Peacock TV LLC, 2020, streaming, 0:20:00.

a person develops a strong parasocial relationship with Leslie and observes her respect for both Republican and Democratic public figures, that respect can be matched by the viewer.

Parasocial relationships have been studied from the perspective of entertainment- education which combines entertainment and education but lacks a focus on humor.[114] Can humor enhance this parasocial effect? I argue it can. Comedy operates through humor and jokes that are intended for entertainment. The implication that the new ideas presented in a comedy platform are "only a joke" allows someone's existing value to be set aside without a fear of being harmed, opening a door for alternative views.[115] Interestingly, when information is presented in a funny and entertaining way, people are less likely to develop arguments against it as they do not feel their values are being challenged.[116] This demonstrates the powerful way comedy can be used to convey alternative arguments. If a character in a sitcom with whom a viewer identifies deeply presents a new perspective, one the viewer would not agree with in a normal setting, the comedic tone of presenting the alternative can prevent counterarguments and encourage consideration of the argument.

For example, a recurring theme in *Parks and Recreation* is the tricky relationship between private corporations and politics. The season five episode "Soda Tax" addresses the pressing question regarding the role of the government in the

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[114] Singhal & Rogers, *Entertainment-Education*, 17.
[115] Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters,* 38.
[116] Emily Moyer-Guse, Chad Mahood, and Sarah Brookes, "Entertainment Education in the Context of Humor: Effects on Safer Sex Intentions and Risk Perceptions," *Health Communication* 26 (2011); Robin Nabi, Emily Moyer-Guse, and Sahara Byrne, "All Joking Aside: A Serious Investigation into the Persuasive Effect of Funny Social Issue Messages," *Communication Monographs* 74, no. 1 (2007).

management of private corporate actions. With Pawnee as the fourth most obese city in the US, Leslie tries to introduce a soda tax to try to encourage a healthier lifestyle in the city.[117] In season two episode 15, “Sweetumns,” a viewer sharing a view similar to Ron, that everyone is free to decide what they put in their body “and balloon up to 600lbs” might object to Leslie’s actions.[118] However, the over exaggeration of the unhealthy surroundings Pawnee citizens, including the option of a 512 ounce “child size” soda, might make the same viewer question whether that should be regulated without feeling like their existing opinions are interrogated.

Comedy and known mitigation mechanisms for affective polarization

As mentioned, theories on the reduction of affective polarization all share a similar strategy: to inform partisans on the opposing party members to prevent the use of stereotypes to shape opinions of the other party and recognizing shared interests between both parties.[119] These methods are widely used strategies for diminishing hostility between any two groups. There are multiple ways through which comedy can mobilize these mechanisms of mitigating affective polarization. Scholars across disciplines demonstrate that comedy provides a unique environment to shape viewers’ perceptions of themselves and others.

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[117] *Parks and Recreation*, season 5, episode 2, "Soda Tax," directed by Kyle Newacheck, written by Greg Daniels, Michael Schur, and Norm Hiscock, aired September 27, 2012 on NBC, Peacock TV LLC, 2020, streaming, 0:01:30.
[118] *Parks and Recreation*, season 2, episode 15, "Sweetums," directed by Dean Holland, written by Greg Daniels, Michael Schur, and Alan Yang, aired February 4, 2010 on NBC, Peacock TV LLC, 2020, streaming, 0:11:08.
[119] James Druckman and Jeremy Levy, "Affective Polarization in the American Public," Northwestern Institute for Policy Research (n.d.).

English scholar Abbey Morgan argues that comedy can utilize stereotypes to shape new narratives.[120] Using an example of 20th century stand-up comedian Jackie "Moms" Mabley, Morgan sketches out how she uses stereotypical portrayals of Black women to humorously provide alternative narratives to oppressive narratives as humor is perceived by its audience as harmless.[121] Showing the power of comedy in times of oppression and invisibility. Similarly, literary scholar Amanda Morris argues comedy may be used to criticize and confront damaging beliefs about groups.[122] One of the causes for the increase in affective polarization is through misperceptions of the opposing party which creates negative perceptual biases toward the out party and increases stereotyping.[123] Addressing these misperceptions reduces the use of stereotyping and negative biases.[124] Both these analyses showcase how using stereotypes in comedy can help challenge harmful biases about groups by creating an environment where critiques and other views are observed as harmless. By correcting misperceptions and by using exaggerated versions of stereotypes of opposing party members to reveal the audience's own damaging perceptions of the out-group,

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[120] Abbey Morgan, "'No Damn Mammy, Moms!': Rhetorical Re-invention in the Stand-up Comedy of Jackie 'Moms' Mabley," in *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand-up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change,* ed. by M. Meier and C. Schmitt (New York: Routledge, 2017), 40–56.
[121] Morgan, "'No Damn Mammy, Moms!'"
[122]Amanda Morris, "Teasing the Funny: Native American Stand-up Comedy in the Twenty-First Century," in *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand-up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change,* ed. by M. Meier and C. Schmitt (New York: Routledge, 2017), 111–124.
[123] Shanto Iyengar, Gaurav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes, "Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2012): 405–431, 964.
[124] Douglas J. Ahler and Gaurav Sood, "The Parties in Our Heads: Misperceptions about Party Composition and Their Consequences," *The Journal of Politics* 80, no. 3 (2018): 964–981.

animosity between in and out-group members can be reduced, thereby also affective polarization.

In addition, although *Parks and Rec* does not necessarily re-write oppressive narratives with regard to polarization. The sitcom's use of exaggerated stereotypes of political ideologies encourages its audience to question their own viewpoints. Psychologist Elizabeth Krumrei-Mancuso and Political Scientist Brian Newman, find that by making intellectual humility more prominent, affective feelings towards the out-group are reduced by becoming more politically tolerant to alternative views.[125] Intellectual humility is the ability to recognize the fallibility of one's own knowledge in a non-threatening way.[126] The ideological embodiment of Leslie and Ron is a magnification of moderate ideologies most individuals can identify with to some extent. Does the viewer care about individual liberty or the wellbeing of the community? Some are more concerned with liberty than the other, but most people will care about both to a certain degree. Illustrating extreme versions of one's ideology can expose the fallacies in that ideological argument. When done so in a comedic way, one can laugh at extreme versions of their own identity without feeling like their values are being challenged. That process can open the door to questioning one's view and the consideration of another. Furthermore, by using these stereotypical characters in the sitcom viewers who identify with these characters are shown that even exaggerated versions of oneself find common interest and form deep relationships despite their ideological differences.

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[125]Elizabeth J. Krumrei-Mancuso and Brian Newman, "Sociopolitical Intellectual Humility as a Predictor of Political Attitudes and Behavioral Intentions," *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 9, no. 1 (2021): 52–68.
[126] Krumrei-Mancuso and Newman, "Sociopolitical Intellectual Humility," 990.

Another way comedy can challenge an individual's perceptions of the out-group and in-group is by encouraging critical thinking. According to communication scholar Joanne Gilbert, humor found in comedy is a type of epistemological lens that provides critical perspective usually unavailable to mainstream audiences.[127] Similarly, political scientist and philosopher Peter Euben indicates comedy questions the status quo by making “fun of contemporary institutions, culture, and social practices in ways that might lead citizens to think differently and even act differently.”[128] Comedy introduces alternative views and values for an individual to examine and consider,[129] without the feeling of being lectured or interrogated but with enjoyment, if done right. Getting alternate viewpoints can not only enhance intellectual humility, but also creates an opportunity for individuals to consider alternative viewpoints, possibly reducing stereotyping and negative biases the viewer has of a group of people, decreasing animosity towards the out-group and reducing affective polarization. By presenting alternative beliefs of the role of government through Leslie and Ron’s views *Parks and Recreation* routinely provides fuel for self-reflection and reconsideration of one’s perceptions of individuals with alternative perspectives.

Conclusion

Through the inclusion of both multiple ideological perspectives throughout the series *Parks and Recreation* has the potential to attract an audience from across the political

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[127] Joanne Gilbert, "Laughing at Others: The Rhetoric of Marginalized Comic Identity," in *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand-up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change,* ed. by M. Meier and C. Schmitt (New York: Routledge, 2017), 57–69, 57.
[128] Peter Euben, "Platonic Noise," *Political Theory* 31, no. 1 (2003): 63–91, 78.
[129] Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters, 152.*

spectrum creating an opportunity to showcase the potential mitigation power of comedy in affective polarization. Using examples of the sitcom *Parks and Recreation* and existing theories on comedy's influence on the perception of its audience, as well as existing mechanisms to reduce affective polarization, this paper showed how comedy can mitigate affective polarization by altering individuals' perceptions of the standpoints of both their own party ideology and that of the opposite party. This is done by influencing partisans' thoughts and behavior through the development of parasocial relationships through which characters can act as role models that influence thoughts and behaviors of its audience. In addition, comedy's use of exaggerated stereotypes can correct misperceptions of out-groups and encourage critical self-reflection of the in-group's viewpoints and thereby increasing intellectual humility which are known mitigation mechanisms to reduce animosity towards members of the opposing party and thereby decreasing affective polarization. At the same time, comedy creates an environment which can heighten the chances of influencing partisan behavior and perceptions as information presented in a funny and entertaining way, decreases the likelihood of its audience to develop counter-arguments to the information presented due to its perceived harmless nature.

By using a mutli-disciplinary approach this paper adds important insights to the literature on affective polarization and the influence of comedy. Comedy's role as a mitigation tool of affective polarization raises important additional normative questions on the role of comedy in democracy, a philosophical debate dating back to ancient Greece. Comedy has the ability to influence affective polarization by altering individual's

perception of partisans, highlighting what a powerful tool it can be, raising questions on when or if it is appropriate to use such tools to alter people's thoughts and behavior.

I have established a framework on comedy's possible mechanism to mitigate affective polarization, however, whether or not the sitcom *Parks and Recreation* has indeed influenced its audience's perception of the opposite party remains indeterminate. Furthermore, comedy's ability to mitigate affective polarization also creates a possibility for exacerbating it, something that requires further investigation to fully understand the relationship between comedy and affective polarization. By improving our knowledge on the mechanisms through which comedy can influence social change and affective polarization**,** scholars can begin to grasp the power of comedy and how it can be used as a tool to foster democratic norms. Consequently, additional research and analysis on the effects of comedy on affective polarization is needed to fully understand its influence. Just as *Parks and Recreation* asserts an optimistic outlook on government, these findings show optimism in tackling affective polarization and its detrimental consequences to democracy.

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