When Parties Divide

Trace the causes and consequences of political polarization.

9-12.US2.48 "Evaluate the causes and impact of increasing political polarization on American politics."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline three forces that can deepen political division, then number each force and an effect it helps explain with the same number. Circle one possible benefit and two costs of polarization.

Why Cooperation Gets Harder

1. In 1994, Congress passed a major crime bill with votes from both parties. Today, lawmakers still cooperate on some bills, but party-line votes have become more common on major disputes. Political polarization means that the parties move farther apart in their policy positions and their views of one another. One cause is party sorting: conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans have become less common in Congress. As the parties become more internally alike, lawmakers have fewer colleagues across the aisle who share their policy goals. This shift does not mean all voters agree with their party on every issue.

2. Election rules and media can intensify that distance. In districts where one party usually wins, a lawmaker may worry more about a challenge in that party's primary than about the general election. Appealing to highly committed primary voters can then seem safer than bargaining with the other party. Meanwhile, news outlets and social media feeds can repeatedly show people messages that confirm existing beliefs or portray opponents as threats. These messages do not affect everyone alike, and they did not create all political disagreements. Still, they can raise suspicion and make a compromise look like betrayal rather than problem solving.

3. Polarization has mixed effects. Clear differences between parties can help voters identify which candidates support their priorities. Yet when lawmakers fear punishment for working with opponents, Congress may struggle to pass budgets or address problems that require lasting agreements. In 2013, a fight over federal spending and health policy contributed to a 16-day partial government shutdown. Public services were disrupted, showing that gridlock can reach beyond Washington. Divided parties can still negotiate, so a shutdown is not inevitable. To evaluate polarization, ask which forces create division, who gains a clearer choice, and who bears the costs when cooperation fails.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How can party sorting make cooperation in Congress harder?

2. Why might a lawmaker in a district where one party usually wins avoid bargaining with the other party?

3. How can repeated messages portraying opponents as threats affect attempts to compromise?

4. What does the 2013 shutdown show about a cost of polarization, and what does it not prove?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine a congressional district where one party usually wins. Propose one change to its election or media environment that might reduce polarization, and explain a likely benefit and a limitation using causes and effects from the passage. Include an example of an issue Congress might face that the passage does not name.

ANSWER KEY

When Parties Divide

HIGH SCHOOL · 9-12.US2.48

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline three forces that can deepen political division, then number each force and an effect it helps explain with the same number. Circle one possible benefit and two costs of polarization. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How can party sorting make cooperation in Congress harder?	**As each party becomes more internally alike, lawmakers have fewer colleagues in the other party who share their policy goals.**
2	Why might a lawmaker in a district where one party usually wins avoid bargaining with the other party?	**The lawmaker may fear a primary challenge and decide that appealing to committed primary voters is safer than bargaining.**
3	How can repeated messages portraying opponents as threats affect attempts to compromise?	**They can increase suspicion and make compromise seem like betrayal rather than problem solving.**
4	What does the 2013 shutdown show about a cost of polarization, and what does it not prove?	**It shows that a political dispute can disrupt public services. It does not prove that divided parties must always reach a shutdown, because they can still negotiate.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

A local news station could host a forum where candidates from both parties explain their plans for disaster relief and answer the same questions. Hearing their actual positions might counter messages that portray opponents as threats. Voters might then be less likely to punish lawmakers for working together on disaster relief funding after a major flood. However, candidates in a district where one party usually wins might still fear a primary challenge, so a forum alone would not remove the pressure to avoid compromise.

Accept other changes if the response explains how they could affect a cause of polarization named in the passage, identifies a plausible benefit and limitation, and applies them to an issue not named in the passage. Do not require students to claim that any one change would end polarization.