

Collegiate Social Science Review

The Robert Morris University Journal of Social Sciences



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Editor's note:

This collection of undergraduate research papers, honors theses and senior theses represents the best works of our students in the 2024-2025 academic year. The journal includes but it is not limited to works in political science, history and economics, which are the core fields of social sciences at Robert Morris University. In addition, we also have students' works from education, psychology and health science fields as well.

The student authors of the works published in this volume worked with a faculty mentor to finalize their papers. Special thanks to Dr. Justin DePlato, Professor of Political Science worked with Joshua David Kearns and Steven Sullivan, Dr. Judit Trunkos, Assistant Professor of Political Science who worked with Chelasea Coleman, Zoe Gologram and Liam McCullough. Dr. Alicia Ricketts for mentoring Rianna Morris, Dr. Daria Crawley for mentoring Kamden Miller, Dr. Mary Hansen for mentoring Amunah Harp as well as to Dr. Heather Pinson, Department Chair of the Department of Social Sciences, who supported the journal's publication.

Dr. Judit Trunkos

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Editor: Dr. Judit Trunkos

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Social Media's Effect on College Athletes' Mental Health/Suicidal Thoughts

Chelsea Coleman
Robert Morris University

Abstract

Athletes deal with a variety of different pressures in and out of their sport on a day-to-day basis, making athletes more at risk when it comes to mental health diagnoses compared to the average person. This study examines how the freedom of speech and press when used in social media can increase suicidal thoughts and mental health behaviors within collegiate and professional athletes. The persistent pursuit of perfection in athletes and outside pressures of fans and adversaries on social media has allowed for suicide to be the second leading cause of death in college athletes (Whelan, B, 2024). The paper will explore the role social media plays in allowing cyberbullying and harassment of athletes, which plays a factor in the increasing rates of student athlete suicide rates and mental health diagnoses in the past 20 years. The research will examine the usage of social media within college athletes, as well as look at the rates of suicide and mental health diagnoses among this population. The study will also look to examine athletes' experience in college athletics, and the factors that went into increasing their mental health struggles.

Introduction

Mental health can be defined as “A state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community” (World Health Organization, 2022). The key component of this definition of mental health is that it is the ability of someone to cope with the stresses of life while in a state of mental well-being.

A population of people where this definition could be challenged is collegiate athletes. College athletes are expected to perform at the highest level on the field and in the classroom. Athletes are thought to be some of the healthiest people in the world. They have to maintain their health in order to perform to the best of their ability. But athletes' health, specifically mental health, is a growing epidemic among collegiate athletes. The research question of this paper is how has the use of social media impacted the increasing rates of mental health and suicidal thoughts/behaviors among collegiate athletes? Suicide is now the second most common cause of death for college athletes, almost doubling in the past two decades (Rogers, K., 2024). Social media puts athletes on a pedestal with their large followings on all different social media platforms which allows for praise and harassment. The freedom of speech and press gives the public the opportunity to cyberbully, harass, and psychologically abuse collegiate athletes. This freedom has added another pressure among athletes' mental health, and has contributed to the rising mental health concerns and increased suicide rates.

Collegiate Student Athletes Mental Health

Student Athletes have to keep up their physical health in order to reduce their risk of injury and enhance their performance. But mental health often gets put on the back burner even though the mind and body both affect one another. Problems with an athlete's physical body such as injury can have psychological problems, and athletes that have depression are more at risk of getting injured (Thompson & Sherman, 2007). But even with an athlete's busy schedule of trying to balance the demands of school, social life, physical health, and performance, they have little time

to be thinking about getting help for their mental health. They don't want to talk about their mental health problems because they don't want the possibility of getting rejected by their teammates and their coaches (Carr, Davidson, 2014). The relationship a student athlete has with their coaches can greatly affect their mental health. A deficient coach/student athlete relationship could lead to athletes experiencing mental health symptoms and diagnoses (Smith, 2021).

Anxiety disorders are something that many college athletes experience on a daily basis, and it can even affect the way they perform. Young adults have reported an increased rate of anxiety more than any other age group (Sanfilippo, 2023). In a study done of 792 Division 1 collegiate athletes that took The Generalized Anxiety Disorder test, the results showed that there were consistent levels of anxiety. Female athletes had higher levels of both anxiety and depression than their male counterparts (Sanfilippo, 2023). Research from the NCAA shows that almost 85% of certified athletic trainers say that anxiety disorders are an issue with the student athletes on their campus (Goldman, 2014). Specifically, performance anxiety is prevalent among adolescents and early adults because they are considered to be in the "risk period" to develop this type of disorder (Ströhle, 2019). Athletes who deal with preseason anxiety are more at risk of getting injured during their season. In a study done on 958 enrolled athletes, 389 of them sustained a total of 597 injuries. During the preseason, 276 of those athletes were reported having anxiety symptoms, making them have a significantly higher injury incidence rate compared to the athletes without any anxiety symptoms (Hongmei, 2017).

Depression and mood disorders are also very prevalent among college athletes. Clinical depression symptoms appear to be prevalent in both collegiate athletes and in the general student population (Rao & Hong, 2016). Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among the college athlete population following other deaths such as traumatic accidents, cardiovascular, and homicide (Rao, Hong, 2015). In a study done over a 20-year period, suicide increased in male and female collegiate athletic population, meaning the NCAA needs to start to conduct more suicide prevention efforts (Whelan, B, 2024). Female student athletes reported having more depressive symptoms but wouldn't commit suicide, while male and African American college athletes are more at risk of committing suicide (Rao, Hong, 2015). In a survey that was conducted of five college athletes who took their own lives, they all had five factors that were common among them. The first was that there was considerable success before their injury, then they suffered a serious injury that required surgery, next the rehab process was long with restricted play, then they were not able to return to the level of play they were at before surgery, and then finally they were replaced by a teammate (Putukian, 2016).

Along with depression and suicide, student athletes are more at risk for substance abuse issues. The rates of alcohol use among college athletes are much higher than the general population. Female athletes use 93% compared to the general population's use of 71%, while male athletes use 93% while their general population uses about 75% (McDuff, 2005). Alcohol is the most negative substance when it comes to overall performance and health, yet athletes are more likely to binge drink and abuse alcohol which is related to suicidal impulsivity and depressive behavior (Rao, Hong, 2015). Student athletes are also more at risk to get eating disorders than the general population. Many athletes and coaches have the mindset that the less weight that the scale says, the better the athletic performance (Thompson, Sherman, 1999). An eating disorder can also be a reaction to a sports related injury. Athletes who get hurt often feel like since they are not playing that they do not deserve to eat, causing restrictive and disordered eating (Putukian, 2016). When an athlete gets injured, the psychological response can trigger or reveal mental health issues that were not at the surface of the athlete before. These mental health

issues could include anxiety, eating disorders, substance use and or abuse, suicidal thoughts/actions, and depression (Putukian,2016). Athletes often feel like they have to push through things like injuries, so some athletes might not have developed healthy coping behaviors when it comes to getting and treating an injury. (Putukian,2016). An injury amplifies all of the stressors that athletes might be dealing with on a day-to-day basis.

Aaron Taylor is a living testament to mental health in collegiate athletics. Taylor was an offensive lineman at the University of Notre Dame. He has won countless awards such as a first team All-American selection in 1992 and 1993, as well as the Lombardi Award in 1993 for being the most outstanding lineman of the year. Even through all of the wins, he still struggled with mental health. He explains how in a sport such as football, toughness is something that is celebrated and anything seen as weak is despised (Taylor, 2014). Taylor said that he battled depression as much as he was tackling people, which was every day. The opponents that they faced on the field were easier to deal with than the ones going on inside his mind (Taylor, 2014).

Collegiate Student Athletes Social Media Usage

Collegiate athletes experience a variety of different stressors because of the different social, academic, athletic, and potentially financial dedication that they have to their sport. This can make it hard to detect these stressors because college institutions have been more focused on the athlete's performance than their state of their mental health, making it feel like this is a full-time job for these athletes (Cutler & Dwyer, 2020). While student athletes have been seen to be a highly protected group on their campuses', the growing statistics on mental health diagnoses tell a different story. Student athletes tend to experience things such as eating disorders, depression, anxiety, binge drinking, and athlete suicides have become publicized in the past couple years (Cutler & Dwyer, 2020). This makes student athletes a vulnerable population that could be at risk to suffer from things like social isolation because of the demands of their schedule (Etzel, 2010).

Social media has had a monumental effect on society because of cellular technology advancements, people are now able to access social media from wherever they are (Brougham, 2021). In 2021, a research study was done by the Pew Research Center in order to show how much college students used certain social media platforms. The study looked at ages as old as 65+ to as young as 18. The youngest group was 18–24-year-olds, which is the typical age of college students. This population said that they used snapchat 75%, Instagram 76%, and Tik Tok 55%. These statistics correlate that the 18–29-year-old said that only half said they use Tik Tok, while the rest of them said they either use Instagram or Tik Tok (Auxier, 2021). Another study done in 2021 found that it makes student athletes feel vulnerable. They feel like using platforms such as Instagram opens the door of comparison and judgement, making athletes feel pressured to be more successful so it can be shown on social media (Brougham, 2021). Student athletes at the Division I and II levels were reported using social media around 4 to 8 hours every week. (Snyder, 2013). This shows that student athletes are on social media a good amount not only throughout their day, but throughout their week.

Social media has now been seen as a source of income among athletes. Athletes that have a significant following on social media platforms can get sponsorships, endorsements, partnerships, and some have even become social media influencers (Grotkamp, L, 2023). This has encouraged athletes to grow their following on social media because athletes with a larger following are more likely to get sponsorships/endorsements which would mean they would continue to have to be active on social media (Grotkamp, L, 2023). Social media has also affected athletes' mental health because some coaches chose to restrict their use of it during their

season. May enhance feelings of loneliness or frustration, which would undermine their mental health. As much as there is a need to control social media, there should be a balance in regard to the athletes' needs for personal contact and access to psychological aid (Lebreton, J, 2018).

Social Media's effects on Mental Health

Social media has been able to connect people on all platforms from all around the world. Social media can have a positive impact on student athletes. The Pew Research Center stated that 69% of adults, and 81% of teens in the United States have been reported to use social media (McLean Hospital, 2024). It allows for them to stay connected with friends and family, which could help improve their mental health struggles (Kaur, R., 2015). Social media can have a positive impact on student athletes by allowing them to exchange ideas outside of their learning environment, which could help with school that tends to be a stressor for college athletes (Kaur, R., 2015). In a study done by Harvard in 2020, it was found that having a routine use in social media improves an individual's well-being, improves their mental health, and increases their self-rated health (Sheung, L, 2020). Another study was conducted in 2022 to figure out how social media could be a positive influence on mental health in young people (Vaingankar, J, 2022). The results showed that by connecting with friends, community, engaging with online content, and using social media as a place of expression, it benefited mental health in five different ways. It created positive relations and social capital, helped with coping, benefited self-concept, and helped improve things like personal growth (Vaingankar, J, 2022).

Social media also has negative effects on an individual's mental health. When someone uses social media, dopamine or the "feed good chemical is released (McLean Hospital, 2024). But when that individual is not being rewarded by social media anymore, it can have negative effects on their mental health. Now that social media is being used by almost 90% of young adults, there can be some negative consequences with it (Steers, M, 2016). Social media can not only influence college student addictive behaviors, but can also highlight substance use. These addictive behaviors can include continuing to engage in activities such as heavy drinking because they see and post pro-alcohol content. This can be a vicious cycle that they are displaying and viewing posts that promote the unhealthy use of substances (Steers, M., 2016). Social media can also cause a phenomenon known as "Facebook Depression." This is when people get depressed from not being on social media, making them more at risk of social isolation (Kaur, R. 2015). Humans need to stay connected to people in person and need a sense of companionship, so social isolation can make mental health struggles worse (Karim, 2020).

Social media opens up a whole new window of bullying and harassment. Cyberbullying has been known to make mental health issues worse in people. The individuals that are doing the cyberbullying have been shown to have severe levels of aggression, depressive symptoms, and suicidal thoughts (Lam, 2022). A study found that the constant use of social media develops a relationship between social anxiety, social comparison, and cyberbullying (Lam, 2022). A study found that depressive symptoms increased 70% in the group of individuals that were regularly using social media (Karim, 2020). The idea that social media is putting out the best and fakest versions of one's self can impact individuals' mental health by not showing peoples struggles on a deep level, so from the outside people think others' lives are perfect (Karim, 2020). This can make individuals start to become vulnerable in the digital world because they can start to experience a fear of missing out or they start to search for a validating connection online rather than in person (McLean Hospital, 2024). Young adults are in a vulnerable spot when using

platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook because of the fake and filtered photos people post. This puts unrealistic expectations on what a perfect body should look like because of airbrushing, teeth whitening, and altered photos of models. This can cause the younger population using social media to be mentally and physically affected by this (McLean Hospital, 2024).

Gap in the Literature

While there were many texts and studies that provided great insight on the topic of athletes and social media usage, there are some gaps within the literature that will hope to be identified in this research paper. The first one is that there are no recent studies of athlete's mental health. The most recent one is one that the NCAA put out in 2016 does not account for the athletes that have come in and graduated college athletics within the past eight years. The next gap is that the majority of the studies that were found on athlete's social media usage was just social media usage based off of a population of young adults in the age range of college. There was not a variety of data that showed social media usage specific to athletes.

Theory

This study will focus on how the how freedom of speech when used in social media has impacted the increasing rates of mental health and suicidal thoughts/behaviors among colligate athletes. Since people are given the freedom to openly say whatever they please on social media, these words can be harmful to the athletes that are receiving them. Athletes have to deal with their performance being put in the public eye, and the words of others can affect how an athlete views/feels about themselves, so constant negative comments being received can increase an athletes struggle with mental health issues, and can sometimes even lead to suicidal thoughts/behaviors.

Methods

In order to understand the correlation between social media usage and mental health struggles in student athletes, a randomized survey was sent out to a population of NCAA division 1,2, and 3 athletes. This survey was designed for this research specifically, and received an IRB approval from Robert Morris University. It will be to collect both descriptive and inferential data in order to find out if social media usage increases, then the rate of mental health struggles will increase. The target audience for this survey is current student athletes that are 18 or older. Participants were randomly chosen and the survey was sent out using social media platforms such as Instagram and Gmail. The survey will also be sent out to known individuals on college teams around the NCAA for them to share with their teams to take. The sample size of this survey was around 34 collegiate athletes. The sample size is that because the survey was sent out and the student athletes that choose to take it can if they choose to.

The survey was made to measure the relationship between student athlete's social media usage and the mental health issues they do or do not have. The survey will ask a total of fifteen questions. The survey will include close-ended questions such as multiple choice and scaled, and open-ended questions in order to collect qualitative data within the survey. The survey will first start out with asking demographic questions. This is things like gender, grade level, and sports team that they are on. The main questions of the survey will mostly ask the participants multiple choice and scale questions in order to assess the social media usage and many different questions based on mental health. All survey questions can be found in appendix A. There are two open

ended questions which would give the participants a detailed answer that is possibly based on personal experiences. The survey will be completed through Google Forms to ensure easy accessibility for all participants. The participants will be asked to check a box of consent so they acknowledge the purpose of the study and that their answers will be used in the data. Participants will also be given an estimated time that it will take to complete the survey. Once the surveys are completed, the data will be analyzed through the use of Google Forms and Microsoft Excel. After the data is analyzed, it will then be interpreted and a conclusion will be drawn from the data. With everything figured out, the survey will have to be approved through an ethics committee at Robert Morris University in order to ensure the participants' privacy. The participants will also be allowed to not finish the survey at any time without anything happening, and they will be reminded that their response in the survey is being used for research purposes only.

Research Design

When deciding on what research approach to use, the best method was a mixed method approach. This combines the use of both qualitative and quantitative research. Qualitative methods help to provide deeper insight into the research, and helps to provide a deeper understanding in the case of this research athletes' mental health and social media usage. The literature that was provided in the review for this research paper gave a more complete understanding on different mental health struggles athletes deal with, how much college athletes use social media, and the effects that social media has on mental health.

While the qualitative gave good insight into the topic that is being researched, the quantitative method was the bulk of the research in this paper. Since there was a gap in the literature with there being no recent studies of athlete's mental health, and no statistics on social media usage just based off of the student athlete population, a survey was created to evaluate that. This survey will be a randomized survey that will evaluate the correlation between social media usage and mental health struggles in student athletes, a randomized survey was sent out to NCAA division 1, 2, and 3 athletes. The survey was made in Google Forms and is composed of 15 questions that will collect the data needed to test the relationship that is as social media usage increases the rate of mental health struggles and suicidal thoughts among athletes will increase.

The first question the survey will ask is "are you male or female?" This question is necessary because the literature review talks about male and female athletes both struggling with depression but they act on it in different ways. This question is needed because the data needs to be separated to show the difference in mental health struggles and social media usage between male and female NCAA athletes. The next question is "what grade are you currently in?" This would help to see if there is a correlation between mental health struggles and athletes in a certain grade. The third question that is being asked in the survey is "what division sport do you play?" The purpose of this question is to see if there is a difference in social media usage/mental health struggles between the different division sports in the NCAA. The fourth question being asked is "what sport do you play?" The purpose is to see if there is a sport that is experiencing more mental health struggles than another.

The fifth and sixth questions are related because if you answer 'yes' to number five, you have to answer question six. The fifth question is "have you ever had to stop playing your sport for a period of time due to an injury?" Question six is "If answered 'yes', having an injury has affected my mental health in a negative way." The reason for asking questions related to injury is because the literature explained that athletes that are injured are more likely to have depression, eating disorders, and committing suicide. This survey will see of the athletes that took the survey,

how many of them have been injured and have either been affected by it in a negative way or not. The next question is “what social media platforms do you currently use? (Select all that apply).” Question seven was “out of all of the social media platforms you choose from, which one do you spend the most time on?” Both of these questions will show what media platforms athletes are using, and which one are they on the most. This would help to see if there is a correlation between which apps are being used the most, and if people are having mental health struggles at the same time. The next question on the survey asks “how much time do you roughly spend on social media daily?” This question is important for the research hypothesis because it will show if athletes that are using social media are having the amount of mental health struggles that the research question is hypothesizing that they are. The next question is “social media has had a negative impact on my mental health.” This is important as an opinionated question because it gives an answer on how much athletes in every division have an opinion of if social media does have a negative impact on their mental health.

The next question that is asked on the survey is “criticism athletes receive on social media based on athletic performances has had a negative effect on their mental health?” This is a scale-based question where athletes can choose anything from strongly agree to strongly disagree. This question will help test the theory of this research paper on whether or not athletes think people being able to say whatever they want online is affecting athletes’ mental health. Question number thirteen asks “Do you have/have had any of the following mental health struggles (select all that apply).” This is one of the most important questions on the survey because it will measure the amount of mental health struggles that college athletes are dealing with, and the data can then be compared to their social media usage that they recorded in previous questions. The last two questions of the survey ask the individuals being surveyed to explain why social media can have a positive and a negative impact on mental health. Even though the research question is seeing the negative impact social media has on athletes’ mental health, it is also important to see how social media can have a positive effect on athlete’s mental health. The survey will be completely anonymous because the questions that are being asked are a sensitive subject that people are not open to always share. The balance of the mixed methods approach helps provide descriptive insight into athlete’s mental health struggles and social media usage through the use of a survey, but also through literature to give a deeper contextual understanding of the topic.

Survey Results

At the end of the data collection through a survey, it tallied a total of 34 responses from current collegiate student athletes. With these responses, the results of the survey can be examined. The sample was 82.4% female, and 17.6% male. The grades of these athletes were close to being evenly split with 32.4% freshman, 20.6% sophomores, 23.5% juniors, and 23.5% were seniors. Out of the 34 individuals that participated, 76.5% of them were Division 1, 14.7% of them played Division 2, and 8.8.% percent played Division 3. 85.3% of survey takers were lacrosse players, 8.82% were football players, 2.9% were on track and field, and 2.9% were field hockey players. From the individuals that took the survey, 88.2% of them had to stop playing their sport due to injury. 32.3% of them strongly agreed that their injury had a negative effect on their mental health, while 48.4% of them agreed. But on the other hand, 3.2% of survey takers disagreed and 3.2% of them strongly disagreed with the statement.

The social media platforms that were used the most by survey takers was Instagram and Snapchat both being at 97.1%. But out of all of the platforms used 50.1% spent the most time on

TikTok, 29.4% spent the most time on Instagram. 50% of all survey takers spend around 3-4 hours on social media a day, 29.4% spend 1-2 hours on social media a day, and 14.7% of survey takers spend 5-6 hours on social media a day. The majority of social media users compared themselves to others when they used social media (Agreed with 70.6%). 17.6% of them strongly agreed that they compared themselves to others.

When asking the question “Criticism athletes receive on social media based on athletic performance has a negative effect on their mental health.” Its data was arguably the most important because the theory is based on if people are given too much freedom on the internet, they can say things about athletes based on the way that they perform. 44.1% of survey takers strongly agree that the criticism athletes receive have a negative effect on their mental health, and 44.1% of them agree. Another important question that was asked was if the collegiate athletes that took the survey had any mental health issues. 50% of them have/have had performance anxiety, 44.1% of them have/had general anxiety disorder, 41.2% of them have/have had body image (body dysmorphia), 23.5% have/had depression, 17.6% of them have had/have an eating disorder, 8.8% of them have/had suicidal thoughts or feelings, and 29.4% of the survey takers don’t deal with any of the mental health issues above.

The last two questions of the survey were free responses asking the survey takers how social media can have a positive and negative impact on an athlete’s mental health. Some of the responses for positive impact were things like “It can spread awareness and show how other athletes handle mental health which can be important to someone who is struggling” or “Can provide the more real image of being an athlete, and when people see the normal experience of athletes in any division, we can find some comfort knowing our experience is not unique, and that many athletes feel the same as we do.” Survey takers also said that it can “Motivate an athlete” and “there are times where people see gratification there if they are posted for accomplishments.” People think that social media can give athletes “a community and can help support and uplift you when you’re going through any kind of adversity” and help you to “learn many things that you cannot learn in a classroom.”

On the other hand, people think social media has a negative impact on athlete’s mental health because it is “thought to see others hating on people trying to improve” and it can “make people feel worse about themselves.” Most responses think that “there is a lot of comparison or cyber bullying” and “comparisons or negative comments about performance.” Others said that “people only post the highlights of their life on social media so it’s easy to get upset that other people are happier or doing better than you. For athletes that have a large fan following for their team/sport (like football or basketball), there can also be a lot of criticism from random people that can be really hurtful. Doom scrolling is also just a general issue and can really put a damper on your mood.” There were responses that think “people are very quick to hate or judge actions or plays during a game, I couldn’t imagine my every move being watched by millions” and “Criticism of top athletes is a major problem. Many people speak their mind online with no care about how it will be perceived. Many people say hurtful things because they are behind a screen and won’t have consequences.” The overall consensus was that social media “makes you think of a false reality.”

Analysis of Results

The research question of this paper is how has the use of social media impacted the increasing rates of mental health and suicidal thoughts/behaviors among collegiate athletes? The best of the results can be found in appendix B, but there are four main data sets that can really help to evaluate the research question. The first being “roughly how many hours do you spend on social media daily? The results are very important to evaluating the research question because the question is looking at the correlation between social media use and mental health struggles. It can be seen here that out of the 34 college athletes that took the survey, all but one of them are on social media daily. This can now be seen as a factor that could impact their mental health because it is something that they have in their daily lives. Even in their busy student athlete life, 50% of them spend 3-4 hours on social media a day. 14.7% of them spend 5-6 hours on social media a day. This establishes a baseline whether it be good or bad, social media has an influence in these collegiate student athletes’ lives (see Figure 1).

How much time do you roughly spend on social media daily?

34 responses

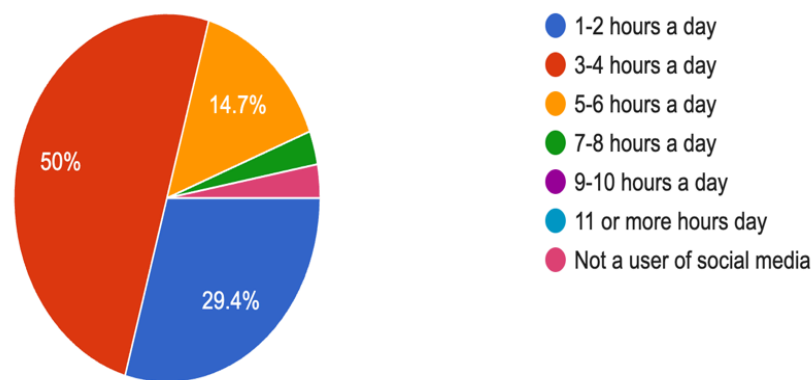


Figure 1: How much time do you roughly spend on social media daily?

Now that it has been determined that these athletes spend a significant time on their devices, what needs to be established next is what social media platforms are in use. By seeing what platforms student athletes use, it can start to show what social media platforms could have an impact on their mental health. When analyzing the graph, it can be concluded that Instagram and Snapchat were the top two social media platforms used (see Figure 2).

What social media platforms do you currently use? (Select all that apply)

34 responses

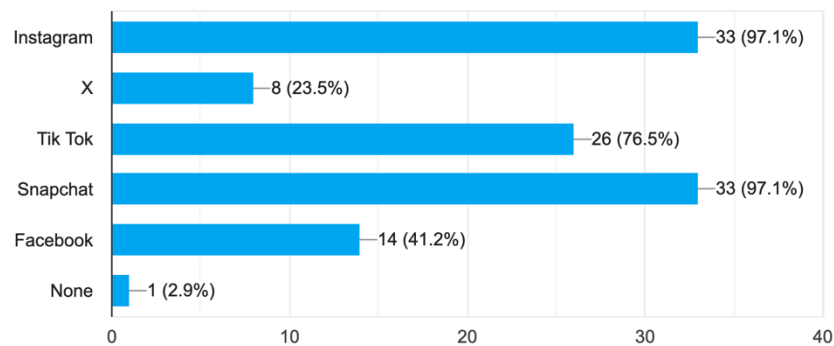


Figure 2: What social media platforms do you currently use? (Select all that apply).

Instagram and Snapchat are both image-based platforms. Instagram is an app where people can scroll and look at pictures of the people that they are friends with. It often emphasizes physical appearances, lifestyles, and individuals' best pictures/videos. Snapchat is sending videos or pictures back and forth to people. What can be concluded from these two social media platforms being the top two used is that there could be athletes that deal with things like body image issues or comparison (see Figure 3).

When I use social media, I compare myself to others

34 responses

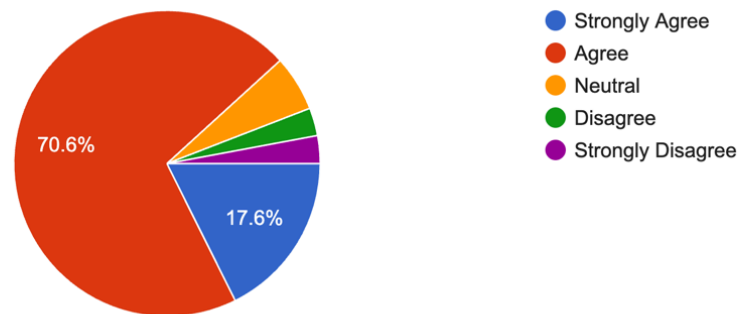


Figure 3: When I use social media, I compare myself to others

This comparison during social media usage can be seen in Figure 3 above. Majority of student athletes that use social media compare themselves to others. A combined 88.2% of these athletes either strongly agreed or agreed with comparing themselves to others. This data set shows that comparison is something that happens the majority of the time when athletes use platforms such as Instagram or snapchat. Comparison can heighten already existing mental health issues or even start new ones. Since comparison can lead to bigger mental health issues

and is connected to using social media, it can start to be concluded that the majority of athletes that use social media compare themselves to others.

Now that it has been concluded that athletes compare themselves when they use social media, the negative impact that social media has on their mental health also needs to be seen how it can support or refute the research question. It can be found that the majority (52.9%) of student athletes found that they were neutral on the situation. 11.8% of athletes strongly agree that social media has a negative impact on their mental health, and 26.5% of them agree on the topic. As it can also be seen in Figure 4, there is a population of 8.8% of athletes that took the survey that disagree or strongly disagree that social media has a negative effect on their mental health. From this it can be concluded that there is a majority population that are neutral meaning they don't agree or disagree that social media has a negative effect on their mental health, and there is a decent population of survey takers that strongly agree/agree that social media has a negative effect on their mental health. It can be concluded that the research question is somewhat proved right because there was a population that agreed social media made mental health worse, but the neutral population is greater.

Social media has had a negative impact on my mental health

34 responses

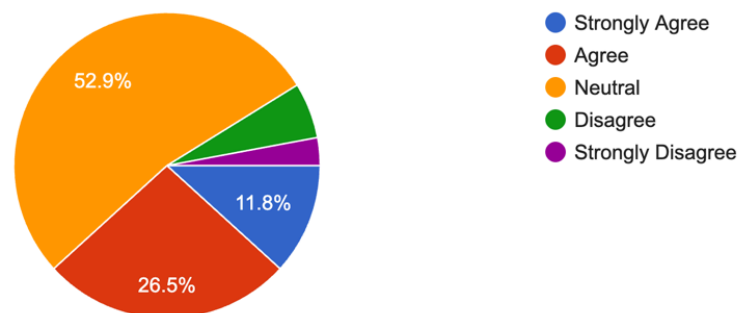


Figure 4: Social media has had a negative impact on my mental health

Whether or not athletes had mental health struggles, mainly suicidal thoughts/feelings were the driving factor of this research question. The three main mental health issues that the student athletes that took the survey deal with are performance anxiety (50%), general anxiety disorder (44.1%), and body image/body dysmorphia (41.2%). The research question was that an increase of social media usage makes mental health and suicidal thoughts/feelings increase.

Do you have/have had any of the following mental health issues? (Select all that apply)

34 responses

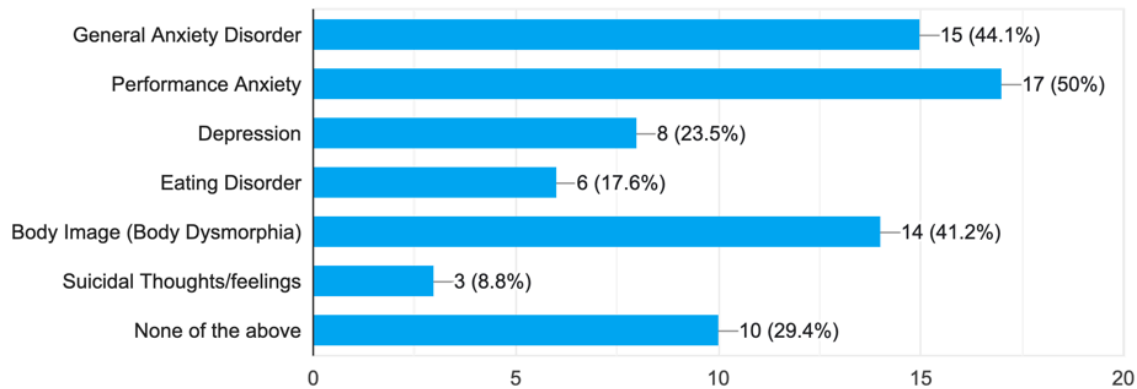


Figure 5: Do you have/have had any of the following mental health issues? (Select all that apply)

While it can be seen from Figure 5 that the most athletes that took the survey have/currently have mental health struggles, the lowest mental health struggle was suicidal thoughts/feelings (8.8%). This was one of the main points of the research question, so from the data presented, there is a significant number of athletes that deal with mental health struggles while spending multiple hours on social media, but suicidal thoughts/feelings is not one of the main mental health issues among this population.

Conclusion

The research question of this study was if the use of social media increases, mental health struggles within the collegiate student athlete population would have increased. From the qualitative data throughout the literature review, it can be concluded that social media is a significant stressor that negatively affects athletes' mental health. Factors like physical injury, academic pressures, and relationships with coaches or teammates have also been shown to be contributing factors. But social media poses a new stressor in athlete's lives. The nature of social media is always being out in the public view, comparison, and always having to keep up with a social image. The nature of social media has depended on feelings of anxiety, depression, and isolation to keep their platforms going. The added stress of balancing private life against the pressures of public expectation and the increase of commentary from both supporters and haters creates a complex psychological climate for a collegiate athlete. Although no quantitative data has been collected from the survey yet, the data will be integral in either supporting or refuting the hypothesis that as social media usage increases, mental health struggles among college athletes will also increase.

The quantitative data from the survey results show that mental health struggles tend to be prevalent among the student athlete population who use social media for different hours daily. But suicidal thoughts/feelings among this population of student athletes that took the survey showed only a small amount of the athletes that use social media have had these thoughts and feelings. It can be concluded that even if you use social media regularly and for hours on end, it

doesn't mean that majority of student athletes have an increase in suicidal thoughts and feelings. When analyzing figure 4 it is shown that the majority of student athletes are neutral about social media negatively affecting their mental health. The neutral response could mean a number of things from this athlete population. Some athletes might not think that social media has a completely negative impact or completely positive impact on their mental health. So, it can be concluded that athletes picked the neutral stance on if social media has a negative impact on their mental health because at some points of using it has, and at other times it hasn't. When using the quantitative data to conclude if this study evaluates the use of if social media increases, mental health struggles within the collegiate student athlete population will also increase, the data showed that athletes that use social media regularly do have mental struggles, but suicidal thoughts/feelings are not a main struggle.

Future Research/Policy Implications

When looking into the future, there needs to be policies and research put in place in order to better student athletes' mental health. First, the NCAA needs to conduct research at least every four years on athletes and their mental health. By conducting research every four years, it gives insight on almost all NCAA college athletes since the normal span of an athlete's career in the NCAA is four years. Next, there needs to be more research done on how athletes' injuries can affect their mental health. It can be seen in the survey conducted that the majority of athletes that were injured believe that it had a negative effect on their mental health (appendix b). Future research on a larger population size needs to be conducted so that a conclusion can be found, and the best course of action can be taken on how to help these injured athletes. The next future policy that should be enacted is that social media companies need to find a way to filter out hateful comments while not compromising individual rights. By filtering out hateful and crude comments, it will help with athletes comparing themselves and dwelling on hateful things people say about them. Lastly there needs to be accessible resources for student athletes that are struggling with mental health. The NCAA needs to start providing programs and things that athletes can easily access on their campuses or through the NCAA if they are struggling mentally.

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Reading and Its Relationship to Undergraduate Academic Performance

Aminah Harp
Robert Morris University

Abstract

The purpose of this thesis was to investigate the relationship between undergraduate students' academic, leisure, and internet reading habits and their academic success measured by overall grade point average. A questionnaire was distributed to undergraduate students at Robert Morris University, and it received 103 complete responses. Analysis of the quantitative data was completed using an Inverse Gaussian Regression due to the skewed GPA. The results showed that there was a significant negative relationship between internet reading hours and GPA, meaning that those who participate more in internet reading have lower academic performance. Academic and leisure reading hours were positively associated with GPA but lacked statistical significance. Students indicated that lack of time due to other academic work was the main barrier to academic and leisure reading. Wikipedia, social media, and messaging apps were rated as low-quality internet reading sources and had negative relationships with GPA. Students in the future could emphasize making time for leisure and academic reading while reducing their time spent on internet reading.

Introduction

A wide range of research has been conducted on undergraduate college students' academic, leisure, and internet reading habits. Academic reading has been associated with improved comprehension and knowledge skills, but many students have negative views on this type of reading and do not participate (Chang et al., 2023; Alsaeedi et al., 2021; Baier et al., 2011; Berry et al., 2010). In comparison, leisure reading shows favorable relationships to students' attitudes and mental health, but again, sources suggest that students often do not find the time to participate (Gilbert & Fister, 2011; Levine et al., 2022).

The transition to college and widened access and reliance on technology may play roles in determining the reading habits of undergraduate students. Many students read less in college because of coursework and the usage of more online forms of entertainment (Burgess & Jones, 2010; Camp, 2007; Jolliffe & Harl, 2008).

Professors also play a crucial role in encouraging reading. The use of technology and class activities with textbooks can allow students to have more positive views on reading (Del Principe & Ihara, 2016; Kerr & Frese, 2017). Since both academic and leisure reading can contribute to students' academic performance and overall well-being, it is important to understand more about college students' reading habits.

Problem Statement

Reading is a valuable hobby that has the unique ability to educate and entertain. However, many college students do not read as undergraduates, and they may be missing out on possible benefits from this activity (Gallick, 1999).

Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the relationship between undergraduate students' academic, leisure, and internet reading habits and their academic performance measured by overall grade point average. By collecting data through cross-sectional survey research conducted at Robert Morris University and analyzing the data using the programming language R, patterns and correlations will be examined to better understand the relationship between reading behaviors and academic performance. These data will offer insights for students to help improve their reading habits and strategies.

Research Questions

The main research questions this study aims to answer are:

1. What are the academic, leisure, and internet reading habits of undergraduate students?
2. Do academic, leisure, and internet reading relate to academic performance?
3. Can academic performance be predicted by reading habits? The complete questionnaire can be found in Appendix A.

Significance of the Study

This study provides an analysis of undergraduate students' reading habits and their relationship to academic success. By including questions on academic, leisure, and internet reading habits in a single questionnaire, this research examines these habits and how they differ or are the same to past studies. The findings give insight to students on how different reading types may affect their academic performance.

Overview of the Methods

A questionnaire was distributed electronically using the SurveyMonkey package to undergraduate students at RMU and had 103 complete responses. Data on academic, leisure, and Internet reading was collected and analyzed in RStudio to find relationships and patterns within the responses.

Literature Review

Throughout the literature, common themes appear that give context on the current opinions of researchers who have studied reading behaviors in college students. Frequently, themes relating to academic reading and how researchers have observed students' reactions to it appear in the literature (Abid et al., 2023; Alsaeedi et al., 2021; Baier et al., 2011). Also, leisure reading and its impacts on mental health and grade point average (GPA) have been discussed at length (Gilbert & Fister, 2011; Levine et al., 2022). Some researchers have even examined how professors' attitudes toward reading in the classroom can influence students (Del Principe & Ihara, 2016; Kerr & Frese, 2017). Finally, changes in reading habits due to the college environment and technology are analyzed throughout the literature (Camp, 2007; Jolliffe & Harl, 2008). The review that follows addresses these topics from the literature in greater detail.

Academic Reading

Academic reading is most commonly referring to literature that is read for the purpose of gaining knowledge and may be assigned in a learning environment (Alsaeedi et al., 2021). This definition is consistent with most of the literature on academic reading (Abid et al., 2023; Alsaeedi et al., 2021; Baier et al., 2011; Berry et al., 2010; Falk-Ross, 2002; Gorzycki et al., 2020). In relation to academic reading, benefits such as an increase in comprehension skills have been seen in college students (Falk-Ross, 2002). However, many students only read their textbooks to study and feel that they could pass classes without reading (Alsaeedi et al., 2021; Baier et al., 2011; Berry et al., 2010). For example, Alsaeedi et al. (2021) notes that many students read only if they need to study and have a lack of interest in reading overall.

Furthermore, research conducted by Baier et al. (2011) indicated that 62.4% of students spent one hour or less on academic reading assignments and did not find them important. Berry et al.'s (2010) research asserts similar claims about the length of reading through their research and adds that the majority felt they could pass without reading the textbook. These authors' similar findings indicate students have a generally disinterested attitude toward academic reading and do not find it necessary for academic achievement.

In other research, however, authors note that students' attitudes toward reading were more complex (Gorzycki et al., 2020; Nadelson et al., 2013). For instance, Gorzycki et al. (2020) and Chang et al. (2023) both describe a paradox where the majority of students report that reading is important, yet they do not participate in academic reading. Similarly, Nadelson et al. (2013) describes this oppositional way of thinking through students' habit of using technology more than reading but perceiving reading as more important. Also, it is important to note a gap in the literature when directly connecting GPA and academic reading hours. Many studies use students' opinions rather than actual academic performance data to assert their claims (Alsaeedi et al., 2021; Baier et al., 2011; Berry et al., 2010). Besides academic reading, leisure reading is another literature type that has been researched in relation to its correlation with academic performance (Gallick, 1999; Scorcu et al., 2023).

Leisure Reading

Leisure reading, also referred to as recreational or pleasure reading, is defined as reading that has not been assigned for a class (Gallick, 1999). Gallick (1999) surveyed college students on hours of leisure reading per week, hours of leisure reading on breaks, GPA, reading mediums, and more. Through analysis of the data, a direct correlation to students reading during breaks and higher GPA was found (Gallick, 1999). Although this correlation was stronger than GPA and reading outside of breaks, other survey questions revealed students would read more if they had the time (Gallick, 1999). Again, there is a gap in the research relating academic reading directly to GPA, but Gallick's work provides a background for this to be filled. Other authors also speak positively about students' attitude toward leisure reading and its effects on mental health (Gilbert & Fister, 2011; Levine et al., 2022). For example, Gilbert and Fister (2011) surveyed undergraduate students at Gustavus Adolphus College on their reading habits and attitudes. They found that students wanted to read in their free time, but 77.1% of respondents determined they already had too much to read for school and did not have the time (Gilbert & Fister, 2011). When students can participate in leisure reading, it may improve their mental health and thereby improve other aspects of their life (Levine et al., 2022). For example, Levine et al. (2022) surveyed undergraduate students on their reading goals for the year and had them rate their

depression and anxiety. This study found that the students who read more in their free time had lower scores of depression and anxiety as well as higher motivation (Levine et al. 2022). In comparison with academic reading, students overall seem to have a more favorable outlook on its benefits even if they are not able to participate.

In contrast with previous findings, Scorcu et al. (2023) found a negative relationship between leisure reading and academic performance. This is important to note as this deviates from what Gallick (1999) found in research that occurred more than twenty years ago. Even though the results differ, the idea that students may not participate in leisure reading because they are focused on school was reiterated in Scorcu et al.'s (2023) research. Another aspect of leisure reading research was the differences in habits between males and females. Most authors have found through their research that females tend to participate in leisure reading more often than males (Dorji, 2020; Poole, 2019; Scorcu et al., 2023; Sheikh & Loan, 2010). Overall, there is a consistent theme that academic reading is related to leisure reading despite differing results and gender differences. Changes among the academic and leisure reading habits of college students have occurred over the years (Camp, 2007).

Change in Reading Habits

When students attend college, researchers have noticed a specific decline in academic and leisure reading habits overall (Camp, 2007; Jolliffe & Harl, 2008). Specifically, Camp (2007) noticed a decline in leisure reading through surveying age groups from first grade through graduate school. Furthermore, the research from Camp (2007) concluded that developing reading habits when students are younger can help them carry on these habits to adulthood. Another important aspect of the evolution in reading habits is the specific transition between high school and college. Jolliffe and Harl (2008) observe this transition by using their own survey data as well as comparing their work to research conducted by Gallick (1999). Jolliffe and Harl's (2008) work showed college students find themselves overwhelmed by academic work and feel that they have less time to read overall during the transition to college.

The decline in reading habits in the transition from high school to college is a small part of a wider trend of reading habits decreasing over time. This start of this phenomenon in the twentieth century is described by Hendel and Harold (2004). They note a decrease in leisure reading starting in the 1970s and a rise in students using the internet as a reading source and way of getting information (Hendel & Harold, 2004). This change is reflective of the rise of technology in academics and in leisure reading, which has continued to change how students and professors consume literature even after this study was conducted.

Impact of Professors and Reading Attitudes

Another common theme throughout the literature is how professors can affect students' reading habits. When teachers have more classroom discussions and assignments using the book, it can have more positive outcomes with engaging students. (Del Principe & Ihara, 2016; Kerr & Frese, 2017; Lei et al., 2010; Mason & Warmington, 2024). Specifically, Del Principe and Ihara (2016) suggest that teachers use textbook based activities to actively encourage student participation. Kerr and Frese (2017) have similar sentiments and add that incorporating online reading assignments and activities may appeal more to the new generation. Lei et al. (2010) and Mason and Warmington (2024) both agree that teachers must take a more active role in outlining academic reading techniques and emphasizing reading assignments to increase students'

participation. For example, Lei et al. (2010) discusses how mapping out important topics can help students comprehend what they read better.

In addition to teachers taking a more active role in encouraging students to read, Nathanson et al. (2008) argues that teachers themselves must be active readers to positively affect their students' habits. This concept is referred to as the "Peter Effect" and argues that teachers cannot help students better their reading habits if they do not have this ability themselves (Nathanson et al., 2008, p. 315). Based on this idea, teachers also may pass on negative attitudes toward reading if they show their lack of enthusiasm toward it with students. In general, teachers should approach reading, both academic and leisure, with enthusiasm to help their students succeed. Technology also should be integrated in these approaches as it has become more relevant to students' and teachers' lives (Burgess & Jones, 2010; Khatri, 2021).

Reading and Technology

As technology and social media have become a source of entertainment for students, they have also become a new format of reading (Burgess & Jones, 2010; Khatri, 2021; Obaidullah & Rahman, 2018). However, some authors like Burgess & Jones (2010) express concern because the digital form of reading, whether on social media or for online literature, has started to overtake other forms of reading. Similarly, Khatri (2021) discusses students using Wikipedia and messaging apps more often to complete academic work compared to textbooks and other academic materials. Furthermore, Obaidullah & Rahman (2018) assert that students prefer to use the internet to read at their leisure compared to other formats.

Though some authors have expressed concern over the rise of technology, Mokhtari et al. (2009) has a more positive outlook. The research conducted by Mokhtari et al. (2009) did show that students read the most on the internet, however internet reading did not affect the levels at which they read for leisure and academic purposes. Also, it is important to note that this research by Mokhtari et al. (2009) is often cited by other authors in the field. Because of this, internet usage is often thought of as a separate category of reading type and measurement. Overall, technology is an important type of reading among students and research should reflect this concept.

Research Methods

This study utilizes cross-sectional survey research to examine the relationship between reading hours and academic performance. Analysis was performed using RStudio. The design, procedures, and instruments created for this survey underwent IRB approval and followed the appropriate guidelines (Appendix B).

Design

This study used cross-sectional survey research to collect and analyze data related to the reading habits of undergraduate students. This self-constructed questionnaire was administered through SurveyMonkey and collected information related to student demographics, GPA, academic reading habits, leisure reading habits, internet reading habits, and reading habit changes. Item level descriptive statistics and correlations were examined, and a regression analysis was examined to determine if GPA could be predicted by reading habits. A consent form at the start of the questionnaire explained the contents and rules regarding participation in the

study, and students were assured that the information collected was anonymous and would be stored on a password protected RMU account..

Site

The location of the thesis research was on RMU's campus. All participants were students at RMU. Flyers were distributed on campus and all emails containing the survey were sent through a school account. The exact distribution numbers are unknown.

Results

Sample

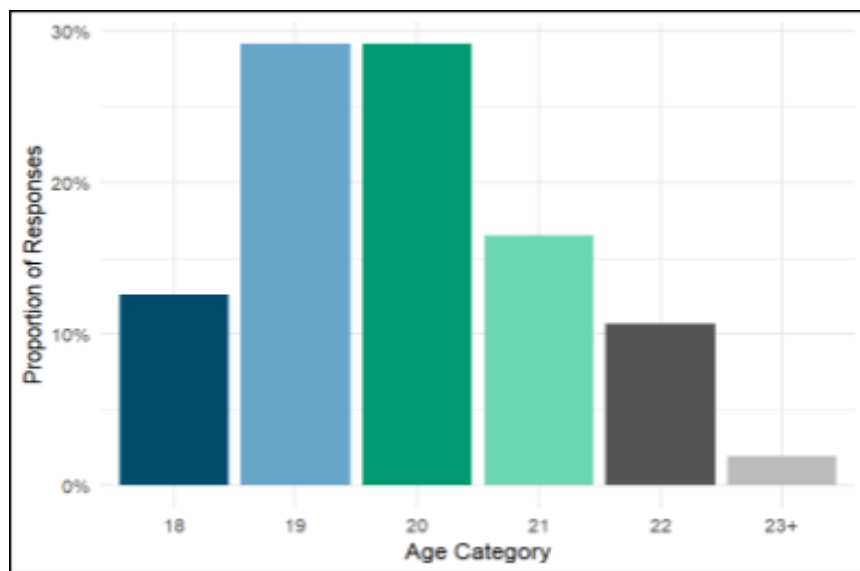


Figure 1. Age Distribution of Questionnaire Respondents

A total of 117 students started the questionnaire. After responses with mostly incomplete answers were removed, the final number of participants was $n=103$. Demographic information was collected from the survey to have a better understanding of the sample. Females comprised the majority of the data at 68%, while males made up 26% and individuals reporting Non-Binary/Prefer not to answer made up 6%. The most common ages among the respondents were 19 and 20, making up 58% of the data. Figure 1 displays the age distribution in more detail.

Also, 77% of the participants were involved in Robert Morris University's Honors program. This majority is likely because the survey was directly sent to all Honors students. Finally, respondents were asked for their respective majors. Since a large variety of majors were reported, the data for this demographic information was reported in terms of school distinction. Figure 2 shows that the most common schools that respondents belonged to were the School of Data Intelligence and Technology and the School of Education and Social Sciences.

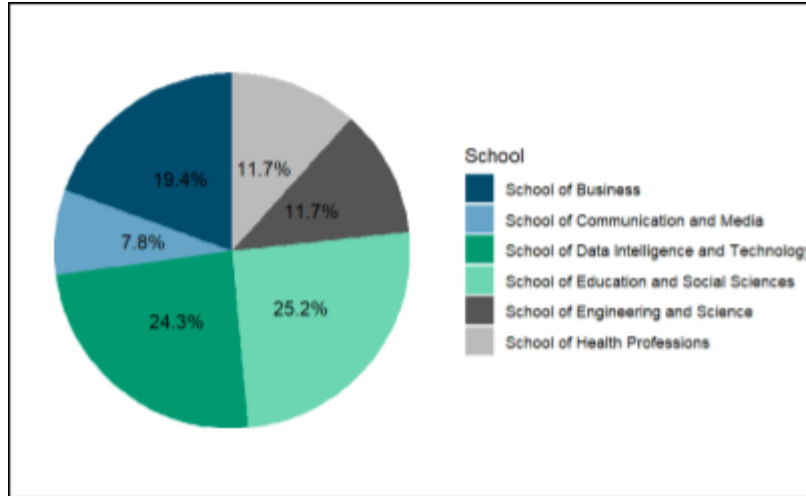


Figure 2. School Distribution of Questionnaire Respondents

The main sources of bias in the sample may include the unequal representation among gender and Honors distinction. However, the sample was large enough to conduct thorough analysis on the survey data collected.

Analysis

The relevant numeric data collected in the survey included GPA, academic reading hours, leisure reading hours, and internet reading hours. It is important to note that two observations for academic hours were Not Answered (NA) and one observation from leisure hours was designated as NA due to having an illogical number. The means and standard deviations of these variables are included in Table 1.

	GPA	Academic Hours	Leisure Hours	Internet Hours
M	3.78	5.0	3.1	7.0
SD	.29	4.47	5.43	9.72

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Numerical Variables

The correlations between the hours and GPA were also calculated using Pearson correlation coefficients to describe the relationships among the variables. These values and their significance are included in Table 2.

	Academic Hours	Leisure Hours	Internet Hours
Correlation with GPA (r)	.127	.063	-.37
p-value	.21	.54	.0001

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Coefficients and Significance

The only significant relationship with GPA is Internet Hours which had a moderate negative relationship ($r = -.37$, $p < .05$). However, a different method needed to be used to further analyze the relationships since the distribution of GPA was skewed.

The method used to identify possible relationships between the reading hours and GPA was an Inverse Gaussian Regression. The distribution of GPA shown in Figure 3 was left-skewed and resistant to normal transformations.

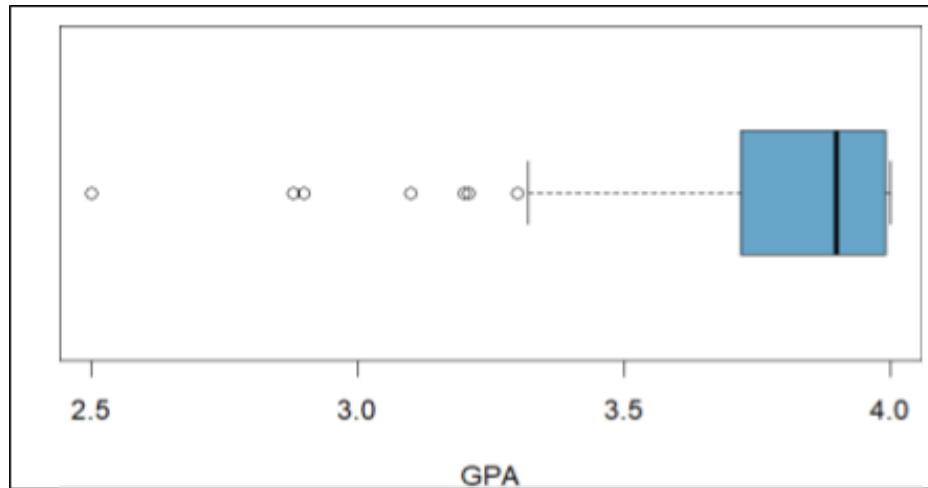


Figure 3. GPA Distribution Boxplot

Inverse Gaussian Regressions account for right-skewed dependent variables, so GPA was transformed using $1/\text{GPA}$ to meet the necessary assumptions. The output of the regression completed in R is shown in Table 3.

	Estimate	Std. Error	T value	P Value
(Intercept)	-1.331	0.014	-97.371	< .0001
Internet Hours	0.004	0.0009	3.901	0.000178 ***
Academic Hours	-0.002	0.002	-1.123	0.264049
Leisure Hours	-0.002	0.0016	-1.774	0.079154 .

Note. Significance codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Table 3. Inverse Gaussian Output

Inverse Gaussian Regression Output

Internet Hours were shown to have significance ($p < .0001$). The positive coefficient estimate indicated a negative relationship between GPA and Internet Hours or a positive relationship between $1 / \text{GPA}$ and Internet Hours. This means that the more time a student spent reading on the internet, the lower their GPA was. Academic Hours and Leisure Hours were not significant. However, both their coefficient estimates indicated a positive relationship with GPA. This means that students who spend more time on academic or leisure reading have higher GPAs, but again, these relationships were not statistically significant. In terms of model fit and predictive power, the Pseudo R^2 was calculated to be 19.3%, indicating the model is moderately effective. Though Academic and Leisure Hours did not have significance like Internet Hours, these variables were analyzed further through additional questionnaire items to understand students' views on the different types of reading.

Academic Reading Analysis

To further analyze academic reading, students were asked about their opinions on the subject, their completion of assigned readings, the importance of different academic materials, and barriers that may prevent them from participating in academic reading. These questions provided context to the relationship between Academic Reading and GPA, which was not found to be statistically significant. However, the positive coefficient may suggest a beneficial but non-significant effect on academic performance.

When students were asked if participating in academic reading helps improve their grades, over half of participants (55.3%) believe academic reading contributes to their academic success, as 38.8% agreed and 16.5% strongly agreed. On the other hand, 13.6% disagreed, 5.8% strongly disagreed, and 25.2% were neutral. These figures show that while a small majority of students attributed a positive relationship between academic reading and academic success, there was still a considerable proportion that disagreed or were unsure about the relationship. This aligns with the previous finding that the relationship between Academic Reading Hours was not statistically significant, but the overall coefficient estimate was positive. Students were also asked how often they participated in assigned readings. For this item, 32.0% responded Always, 31.1 % responded Often, 26.2 % responded Sometimes, and 10.7 % responded Rarely. While this shows that a majority of students complete assigned reading regularly (63.1%), the lack of significance between academic reading and GPA shows that there may be other aspects of academic reading that better relate to GPA. For example, reading comprehension skills, note-taking strategies, or studying skills may be more explanatory than completing assigned reading. Further research could be done to analyze this aspect.

Students were asked to rate the degree of importance of reading different academic materials. The results of this question are displayed in Table 4.

Rate the degree of importance each of the following types of reading has on your academic success:

	Not at all	A small degree	A moderate degree	A high degree
Textbooks	2.9%	36.9%	42.7%	17.5%
Academic journals provided by professor	20.4%	47.6%	24.3%	7.8%
Academic journals found through the RMU library	42.7%	35.0%	18.4%	3.9%
Academic journals found through internet searches	23.3%	33.0%	35.0%	8.7%
Academic trade books	51.5%	33.0%	12.6%	2.9%

Table 4. Academic Reading Importance by Material Type

Notably, textbooks were deemed the most important material by students with 42.7% saying they had moderate importance and 17.5% a high degree of importance. Approximately one-third of respondents (32.1%) reported reading academic journals importance as having a moderate or high degree of importance on their academic success, while a combined 43.7% of students rated journals found through internet searches as having a moderate or high degree of importance.

Academic trade books were by far the least favorable material with 51.5% of students rating them as having no importance in relation to academic success. Finally, students were asked about any barriers that they face when it comes to the amount of time they spend academic reading (Figure 4).

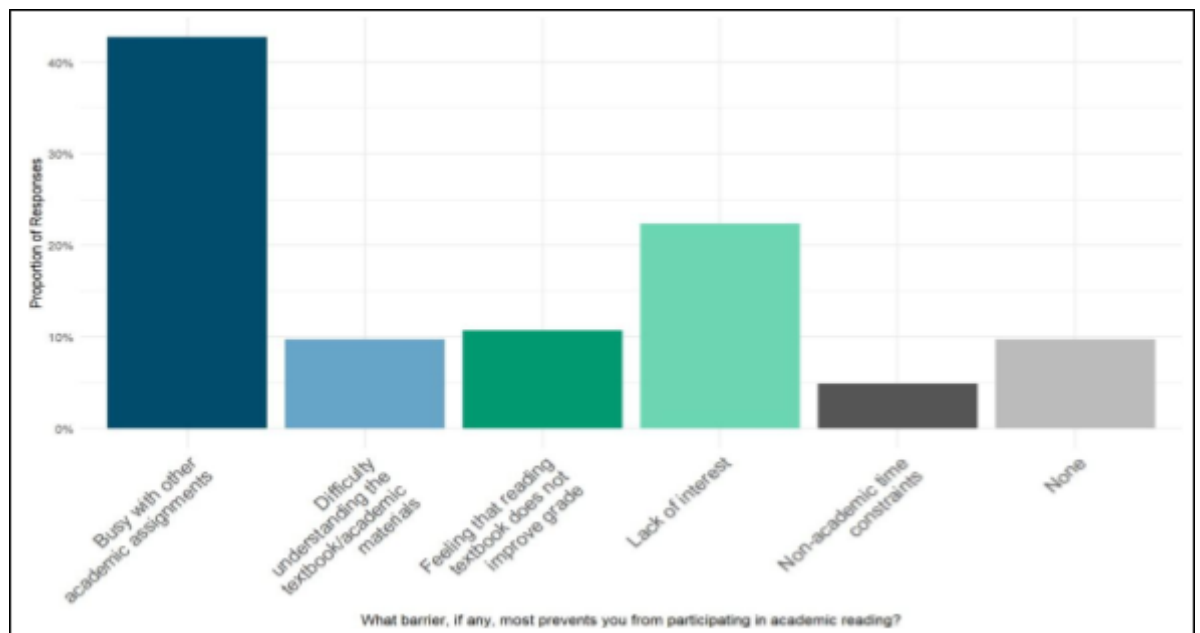


Figure 4. Barriers to Academic Reading

The most common barrier at 42.7% was students being busy with other academic assignments, such as homework or projects. Other responses included lack of interest at 22.3% and the feeling that reading academically does not improve grades at 10.7%. These responses showcase the reoccurring feeling among some students that they might be skeptical about the benefits of reading academically and other activities take priority. Because of this, when students do read academically, it may not be in a productive way that translates to higher academic achievement.

Leisure Reading Analysis

Students were surveyed on their opinions on leisure reading, the possible barriers, the desire to read more, and the relation between leisure reading and mental health. These questions give background supporting the lack of significance between GPA and Leisure Reading Hours in the Inverse Gaussian Regression.

When students were asked if they believe leisure reading helped them obtain higher grades, just under a majority (44.7%) indicated a neutral response, and this uncertainty among students may explain the lack of significance between GPA and leisure reading. Students were also asked what barriers they have faced when it comes to participating in leisure reading (Figure 5). The majority (65.0%) indicated

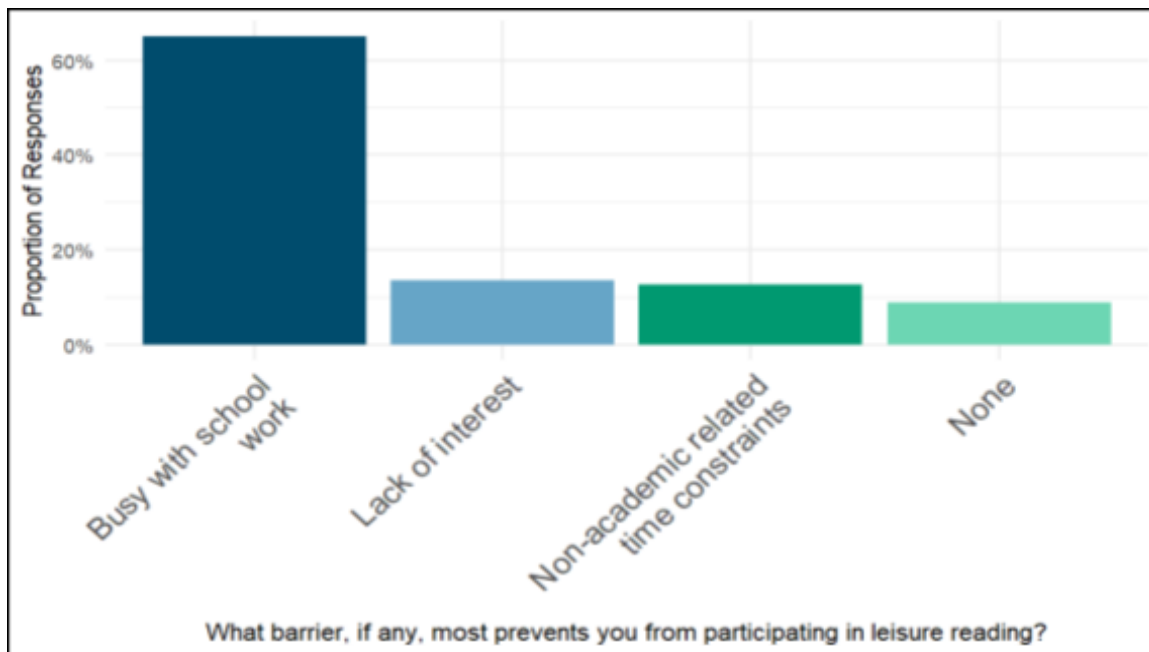


Figure 5. Barriers to Leisure Reading

that being busy with schoolwork was the main reason they did not participate in leisure reading. Preoccupation with academic work was also a commonly reported reason students did not participate in academic reading. This may account for the lack of significance for both Academic and Leisure Reading Hours with GPA. Less commonly reported barriers included lack of interest (13.6%) and non-academic-related time constraints (12.6%). Other unique barriers added by students included medical related barriers or preference with other forms of

entertainment.

Another question posed to students was how often they felt leisure reading improved their mental health. A combined 70.8% of respondents indicated that leisure reading Always (35.9%) or Usually (34.9%) improved their mental health while approximately one-third reported responses including Sometimes (17.5%), Rarely (6.8%), and Never (4.9%). These statistics show the importance that leisure reading can have in areas like mental health, which may indirectly affect academic performance. Finally, participants were asked if they would like to read more in the future. A resounding 79.6% indicated that they would like to read more, while 11.7% were unsure and 8.7% said no. Though it may not have direct significance in relation to academic success, leisure reading reportedly had a positive impact on the undergraduate students surveyed. This may account for the positive coefficient estimated in the regression between Leisure Reading Hours and GPA.

Internet Reading Analysis

Internet reading was analyzed in more depth by asking students about their thoughts on the relation between online materials and academic success, how often they used internet reading for assignments, and which materials they used the most. Internet reading had a significant and negative relationship with GPA.

When students were asked if they thought internet reading helped them obtain higher grades, the plurality (45.6%) neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. Other results were fairly evenly split between agree (5.8% strongly agreed, 22.3% agreed) and disagree (6.8% strongly disagreed, and 19.4% disagreed). Another question asked students how often they use the internet as a primary source for completing academic assignments. Most students responded that they use the internet: Always (22.3%) , Usually (44.7%), or Sometimes (20.4%). Only 8.7% responded Rarely and 3.9% responded Never. This shows that students do rely heavily on internet usage for their classes. The type of material used may be more crucial to determining how it affects academic success. In Table 5, the different materials used by students to complete assignments are shown along with their usage percentages.

	How often do you use these internet sources to complete assignments?				
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Wikipedia	48.5%	31.1%	9.7%	9.7%	1.0%
Messaging Apps	52.4%	23.3%	12.6%	8.7%	2.9%
Social Media	47.6%	26.2%	13.6%	9.7%	2.9%
News Sources	10.7%	9.7%	25.2%	43.7%	10.7%
AI	33.0%	16.5%	33.0%	12.6%	4.9%

Table 5. Internet Sources by Usage

Based on results in Table 5, students mainly reject the usage of Wikipedia, messaging apps, and social media for assignments. The proportions for Never and Rarely combined are over 70% for these three sources. The students who indicated that they always use Wikipedia, messaging apps, and social media had significantly lower GPAs on average. For example, those who selected Always for social media had an average GPA of 3.14 compared to Never at 3.87, Often at 3.68, Rarely at 3.80, and Sometimes at 3.66.

Students accept the usage of news sources and AI more often than Wikipedia, messaging apps, and social media. News sources are used Often or Always by 54.4%, and AI tools are used Sometimes or more by 50.5%. Though many participants used AI tools, 33.0% indicated they never used AI on assignments. This shows that while students lean toward credible or technologically advanced sources for assignments, there are still some with doubts about using AI to complete work. There were no significant GPA average differences among News Sources and AI, so the negative relationship with GPA is mainly coming from those who use Wikipedia, messaging apps, and social media.

Other

Students were also asked questions about the transition from high school to college and how professors encourage reading. While the majority indicated that their reading Increased (39.8%) in college, Decreased (33.0%) and Stayed the same (27.2%) were not extremely far behind. Students were asked about professors to determine if they have any impact on how much a student reads. Figure 6 illustrates the responses to this question. Just over one-third of students reported that professors encourage academic reading a moderate amount (35.9%), followed by a lot (22.3%) and a little (21.4%). A smaller proportion indicated that professors encouraged it a great deal (18.4%) and only 1.9% said none at all. This shows that the majority of students feel that professors show at least some encouragement, though very strong encouragement is less common than moderate and slight levels.

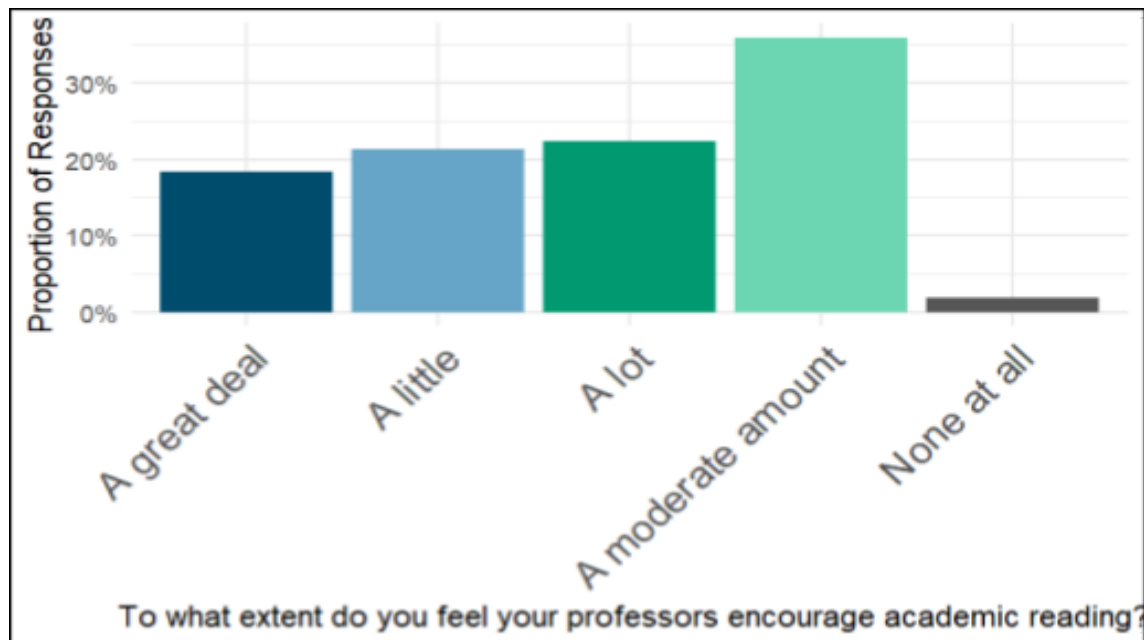


Figure 6. *Professors Encouraging Academic Reading*

Results For Research Question 1

The first question asked: What are the academic, leisure, and internet reading habits of undergraduate students? Overall, academic reading was viewed as helpful in improving grades with 55.3% of agreeing or strongly agreeing with this idea. Most students completed assigned reading regularly and textbooks were rated as the most important academic material. Leisure reading was viewed positively with 70.8% agreeing that it improved their mental health and 79.6% expressing interest in reading more for leisure. However, many students were unsure about its effect on academic performance. The main barrier for both academic and leisure reading was time constraints due to schoolwork. Internet reading was popular among students with 66.9% indicated they Always or Usually used internet sources for academic work. However, Wikipedia, messaging apps, and social media were rated lower and students who did use these sources had lower average GPAs.

Results For Research Question 2

The second question asked: Do academic, leisure, and internet reading relate to academic performance? The Pearson correlation coefficient shows a weak, positive correlation between Academic Hours and GPA ($r = .127, p = .21$). The positive relation was not statistically significant and can be seen in Figure 7.

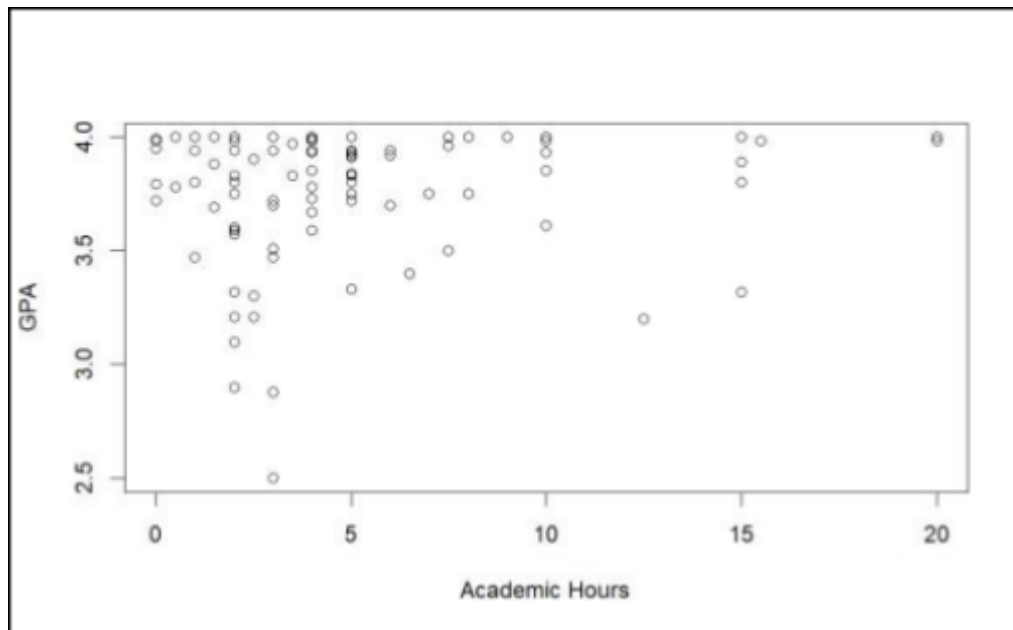


Figure 7. Scatterplot of GPA vs Academic Hours

The Pearson correlation coefficient between Leisure Reading Hours and GPA was not significant ($r = .063$, $p = .54$). Figure 8 shows the relationship between Leisure Hours and GPA.

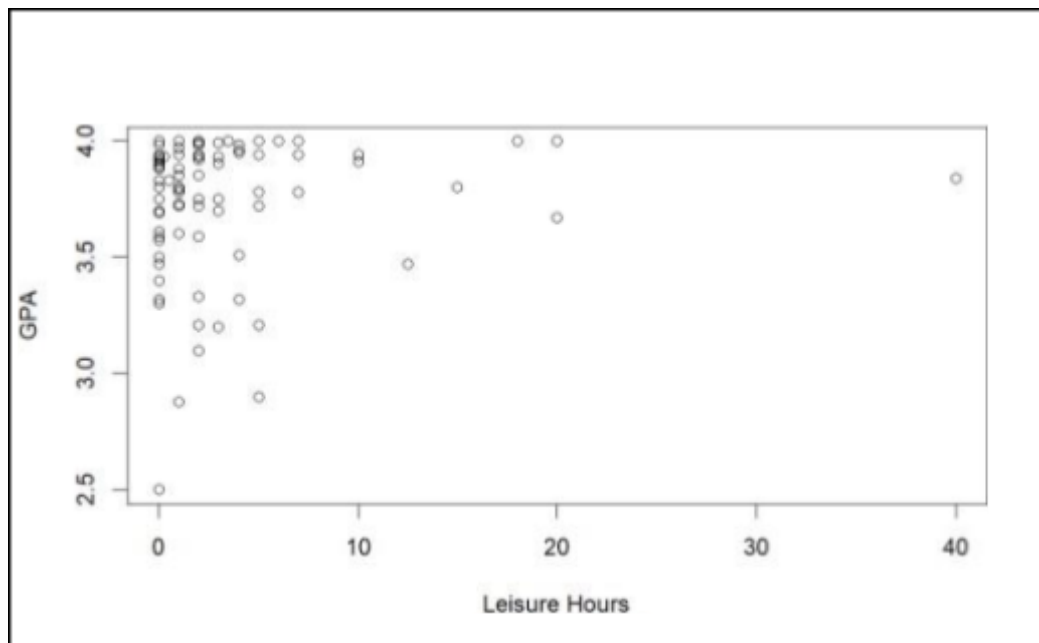


Figure 8. Scatterplot of GPA vs Leisure Hours

The Pearson correlation coefficient between Internet Hours and GPA is $r = -.37$ and $p < .001$, which means there is a significant negative relationship. The scatterplot of the relationship between Internet Hours and GPA is shown in Figure 9.

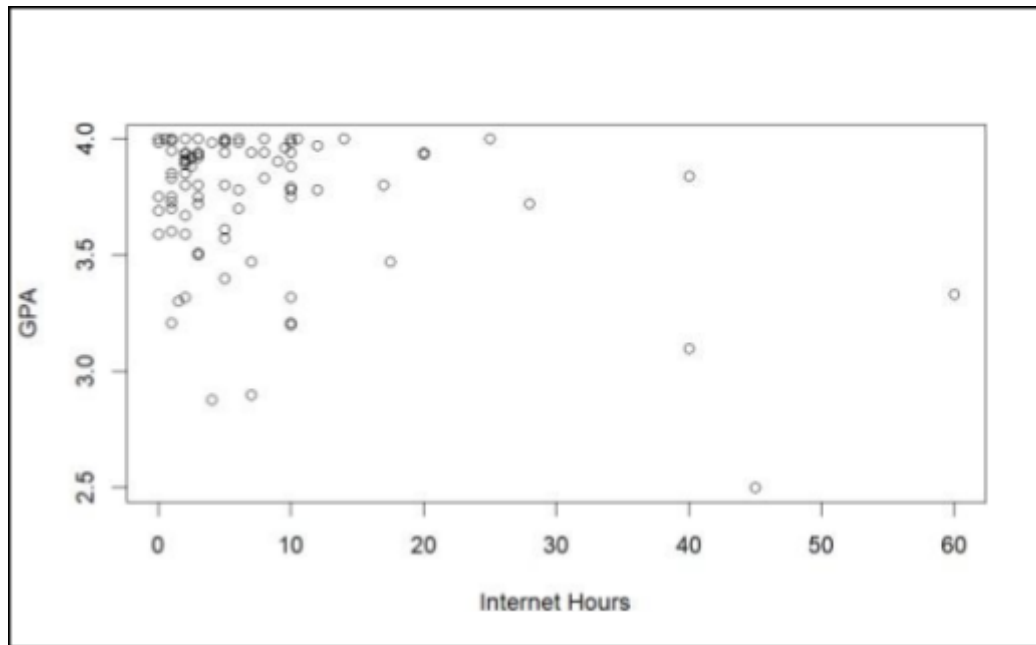


Figure 9. Scatterplot of GPA vs Internet Hours

Results For Research Question 3

The final question asked: Can academic performance be predicted by reading habits? To answer this question, an Inverse Gaussian model was created. GPA was transformed into $1/\text{GPA}$ since a right skewed distribution is required for this model. The results showed that Internet Hours had a negative but significant relationship with GPA. Leisure Hours and Academic Hours had a positive but non-significant relationship with GPA. To assess the model fit, the Pseudo R^2 was calculated to be 19.3%, meaning the model is moderately effective at predicting GPA.

Discussion

Overall, this study aimed to better understand how academic, leisure and internet reading relate to undergraduate students' academic success. The main findings were that internet reading hours had a statistically significant negative relationship with GPA, while academic and leisure reading hours showed positive but non-significant relationships. The results for internet reading align with research from Burgess & Jones (2010) and Khatri (2021) who found that internet reading took up an increasing proportion of students' reading habits and that this may have negative effects. This current study gives support to this claim as it was shown that those who always used Wikipedia, messaging apps, and social media for academic work and had lower GPAs on average.

In contrast, past research found that academic reading was important for academic performance (Alsaeedi et al., 2021; Falk-Ross, 2002), but the current study did not find a significant relationship between academic reading hours and GPA. This may lend to ideas by Gorzycki et al. (2020) and Nadelson et al. (2013) that students feel there is value in academic reading but do not participate in a meaningful way. For leisure reading, Gallick (1999) and Levine et al. (2022) found leisure reading had positive effects on GPA and mental health, but this study found no significant relationship.

A common barrier to both academic and leisure reading was found to be academic related time constraints. Internet reading, especially from low-quality sources, can have a negative effect on academic success. Implications of this research show that students could make more time for meaningful academic and leisure reading while lessening their time with internet reading. Awareness of the results of this study could help students improve their academic performance in the future.

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Differing Interpretations of the Second Amendment Between Democrats and Republicans Since April 20, 1999

Zoe Gologram
Robert Morris University

Abstract

The research question of this piece of literature is: What is the difference in the interpretation of the Second Amendment between Republicans and Democrats since April 20, 1999? The Second Amendment is a very polarizing topic in the United States between each party. This study includes mixed method research to find out how differently each party sees the Second Amendment, especially since the Columbine School Shooting in 1999. This research will look at political rhetoric, the amount of gun laws passed since 2000, and other writings about the polarizing opinions on firearms. This topic is very important to the citizens of America because the Second Amendment is a very important topic in politics and is a major right that is stated in the Constitution of the United States. This study aims to find how much each side has changed and which direction the parties have gone. A total of 87 participants completed the survey, gauging Americans who are of legal age to vote. The results of this data are reflected in the literature below.

Introduction

Have you owned a gun? Have you known a victim of a mass shooting? The right to bear arms in the United States seems to be a very polarizing topic between the Democrats and Republicans. Differing opinions involving firearms have been a topic of discussion for decades, but in the past 25 years, polarization has taken a turn for the worse. The topic of the different opinions on the Second Amendment is very important because it creates a rift between the parties and citizens in the United States. This research will not only be looking at how interpretations differ, but also why we as a nation have become so divided and what we as a people can do to become more unified when it comes to the topic of firearms and the Second Amendment. The Second Amendment is one of the most important amendments of the Constitution. Gun violence has increased in the United States during this time of increased polarization. This has obviously increased the call for gun control and has severely divided our nation. This study will look specifically at the mass shooting of Columbine High School that took place on April 20, 1999. This was the first mass shooting in the United States with 24-hour news coverage. Columbine also dramatically pushed the movement for more gun control along and created a greater “call to action”.

The Constitution does not exactly spell out the rights of citizens when it comes to owning firearms, and it is often left up to the interpretation of the reader. The Second Amendment is very vague, and this research is to show that more regulation will lead to an infringement upon the rights of the citizens of the United States of America. With groups such as the NRA, and many lobbyists against gun control, the movement to “get rid of guns” has been in almost a stalemate. The Second Amendment is stated as “A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed” (The Constitution of the United States, 2024). This amendment may not always seem clear. Democrats typically regard this as the ownership of guns is allowed in the military and that they should have regulations unless used for a militia. However, Republicans believe that the Second Amendment

interpretation is that the right to bear arms and own guns should not be infringed or regulated. The research done in this study is designed to answer the question of how differently each political party interprets this amendment.

Defining Terms

This study has multiple defining factors. Democrats and Republicans will both be used as the independent variable. The Democrats will be defined as the party on the left side of the political scale who are in favor of more government intervention and are considered “liberal.” The Republicans will be defined as individuals or the party on the right side of the scale that fight for less government intervention and are “conservative.” These are the authors own definitions and will be used as such throughout this piece of literature. The Second Amendment of the Constitution of the United States will be used as the dependent variable in this study and will be defined as the right of citizens to keep and bear arms that shall not be infringed.

Two Schools of Thought: Collective View and Standard Model

One school of thought in terms of the Second Amendment is the collective view. This is detailed as the collective right for states to create their own militia or military (Hardy, 1987). This emphasizes the first portion of the amendment where it is written that a well-regulated militia is necessary to a free state. This thought does not necessarily attribute the right to a militia to the right for free citizens to own firearms. This school of thought often aligns with the liberal or Democratic Party. The opposing school of thought relates the Second Amendment to the individual right of citizens to own or possess firearms (Hardy, 1987). This interpretation is most aligned with the conservative or Republican Party.

In a Tennessee Law Review, Reynolds states that many people do not necessarily understand the Second Amendment. Many people pose questions of “what is a militia? What does it mean when it says, ‘well regulated’, what does it mean to keep and bear arms”, and this could be generally confusing as the language of the text when it was written is vastly different from the language we use today (Reynolds, 1995). The individual right to keep and bear arms under the standard model shows to main sources, the Second Amendment itself, and its historical context. The text of the full amendment is seen as straightforward because it is explained that denying the rights that are protected is enforceable by individuals. The rights of people in the first amendment are denoted as the rights of individuals, but this can be confusing in the Second Amendment. The Second Amendment used “the people” in two different contexts. First, it uses “the people” as an individual right, then it is used as the right of the assembly, then a few words later the text goes back to the meaning of individuals (Reynolds, 1995). The Standard model is said to protect individual rights in the same manner as the First Amendment. Standard model is most aligned with Republican or Conservative beliefs. Under the Standard Model’s interpretation, a “well-regulated militia” is not a limitation on the right of people (individuals) to keep and bear arms, but it is an extension of that. The framers of this amendment intended to write that a militia composed of the people and their individually owned arms is necessary to the protection of a state (Reynolds, 1995).

Republican/Conservatives and the Second Amendment

In the United States, political polarization has rapidly become a growing issue. It appears there are more and more “extremists” on either side of the political spectrum since the beginning of the 21st century. Conservatives, or Republicans, often take a narrow perspective of individual rights in the Constitution, but not when it comes to the Second Amendment (Chemerinsky, 2004). Conservatives in America believe that the Second Amendment is about protecting individual

rights and believe in the ability to use firearms to protect themselves and their property without being regulated. It is common knowledge that the majority of individuals who do not support gun control are Republican and right leaning on the political scale. Republicans are also the most likely party to use guns for hunting and sport, while Democrats typically abhor hunting. This is a big contributor to the reason that conservatives are so “pro” Second Amendment (Callahan, 2017). In my experience, Republicans have the mindset of “guns don’t kill people, people kill people.”

The Pennsylvania Senate has recently passed a Republican bill that proposes armed security in schools. This was a 12-year process and a great step to securing our schools and protecting our children. State funding is being produced for this bill in order to assist schools in hiring armed guards. This is a great win for Republicans as many believe this is a great step in the long journey it has been of reducing the amount of school shootings (P.T., 2024).

Democrats/Liberals and the Second Amendment

When it comes to the Second Amendment, Democrats often take the opposite approach of the party that is assessed above. Democrats typically look at the rights given to us by the Constitution in a broader perspective, except for when it comes to the Second Amendment (Chemerinsky, 2004). Democrats in America often look at the number of shootings and gun violence that occurs and believe the only way to stop this is for the government to intervene and create more laws to restrict ownership. Democrats are typically non-hunters and don’t shoot firearms for sport. This contributes to their long and large call for gun control and legislation. The Democrats believe that that guns and people kill people. Democrats have called for more gun control and believe that there is a different spin on the Second Amendment, especially since school shootings have become more frequent in recent years. In order to prevent or decrease gun violence in the United States, Democrats are bringing forth policies that expand background checks and for those who want to purchase a firearm. They believe that we should ensure guns don’t fall into the hands of terrorists (whether domestic or foreign), domestic abusers and other violent criminals who are dangers to themselves and society (Democrats, 2019).

Common Ground Between Democrats and Republicans

From 2020-2021, there were 93 school shootings. Democrats and Republicans have been at arms with each other in the ways to approach this issue (Center for Gun Violence Solutions, 2022). Although there is a heavy debate on the topic, both sides have come together to agree that something needs to be done. Contrary to popular belief, the Democrats and Republicans have some similarities between how they would like to end gun violence. Most Republicans in my experience are not completely opposed to the idea of more in depth background checks. Armed security in schools is a common ground that most officials agree with on both sides of the aisle. This, however, is slightly contradictory to the first school of thought. Most Democrats also believe that there is an individual right to own firearms as the Second Amendment states, however, most believe there should be a cap or restriction on the type of firearms and how many each person can own.

History of the Second Amendment

The Second Amendment was almost completely ignored for the first two centuries of its existence, and it has only become more prevalent now that there has been more of an increase in gun violence (Reynolds, 1995). Not just since Columbine, but for the past 80 or so years. Guns have been prevalent in American society since before the Revolutionary war, as explained in the article by Churchill, “Gun Regulation, the Police Power, and the Right to Keep Arms in Early

America: The Legal Context of the Second Amendment”. This article explains the thoughts and context of the Second Amendment in early America and helps readers to understand why the amendment was brought to fruition. The Second Amendment is so unique in that no other Constitutional provision has had such a looming presence, with how small it actually is (Bogus, 1998).

The individual right view of the Second Amendment is often known as the “collective right” interpretation (Dorf, 2000). The history of the Second Amendment is really rooted in the conflicts between the King and his people in England. It revolves around a standing army and its relationships with the militias (Finkelman, 2000). James Madison authored the Second Amendment, and he had the motive of the right to self-preservation. The framers of the Constitution wanted militant checks on a standing army; this in turn would share military power between the people’s militia and the army (Augustine, 2019). However, this did not exactly play out how it was intended, as we can see in the political climate today.

The phrase “right to bear arms” does not necessarily mean the same thing today as the founders intended. The research of Akhil Amar states that in order to interpret the Second Amendment, then you must also look at the first and third, more specifically, how they are structured (Amar, 2001). Amar looks deeper into the grammar of the Second Amendment as a whole and refers to how this aligns with the Fifth, Sixth, and Tenth Amendments. This is an interesting way of discussing the Second Amendment that not many others have approached. This gives the people a different understanding of how the Bill of Rights was written and how the language relates to the other amendments to the Constitution. This author also related the Federal Constitution to state Constitutions and addresses the different grammar and languages that these documents produce. This literature also dives into what the language suggests about the authors’ opinions when writing the amendment. This piece largely dives into calling out the NRA ideology. Amar (2001) suggests that the founders were not in favor of the individual right to own and bear arms in all manners.

Columbine School Shooting

The Columbine High School shooting happened on April 20, 1999. This shooting had a massive influence on the public when it comes to youth social problems and juvenile delinquency (Muschert, 2009). This mass shooting is so prevalent in today’s society because of the news coverage that it received. This shooting took place in Littleton, Colorado and was the most covered shooting in history at the time. Eric David Harris and Dylan Bennet Klebold killed 12 students and one teacher at Columbine before committing suicide. The two also wounded 24 others (Kleck, 2009). According to Statista, the Columbine shooting is the 5th deadliest mass shooting in United States History (Statista, 2024). The number one spot for the deadliest school shooting in the United States is the Virginia Tech Massacre in 2007, which left 32 dead and another 23 injured. With the Columbine High school shooting being the first with the most news coverage, it sparked the debate and call for more gun control. This was the shooting that proved such an attack was possible. Before these shootings, an attack on children seemed unfathomable (Muschert, 2019).

Firearms in Mass Shootings

According to Statista (2024) handguns are the most commonly used weapon in mass shootings. 167 different handguns were used in 117 incidents between 1982 and September 2024. This means that handguns were used in 78 percent of mass shootings that were reported. There has been a total of 65 mass shootings involving rifles since 1982, and most rifles were semi-automatic (Statista, 2024). It is often a quote to say that AR-15s are the weapon of choice during a mass shooting, however, clearly this is a common misconception according to the data displayed above. Rifles, however, do play a major role in mass shootings. 71 rifles were used in 66 incidents or mass shootings from 1982- September 2024 (Statista, 2024). Shotguns are the least used weapon in mass shootings with 32 different used in 30 separate incidents. Semi-automatic weapons are the center of the gun control debate; however, a slim majority believe that gun control measures and legislation will do very little to stop the amount of mass shootings and gun violence in the United States. It should be noted that of the data above, multiple semi-automatic rifles were excluded because of the 2017 Las Vegas Massacre, which is the worst mass shooting in the United States. This massacre killed 58 and wounded 546 (Statista, 2024). Mass shootings are important factors in addressing the interpretation of the Second Amendment and how far each side has come from the middle.

The firearms that were used in Columbine were an array of different types. The Columbine shooters sawed off the barrel of a Savage 67H, a 12-gauge pump action shotgun. They also carried a Savage 311D, another 12-gauge shotgun. Another firearm used in this shooting was an Intratec Handgun. This is typically a paramilitary gun known as a TEC-DC9, which is a 9mm handgun and has a 32-round magazine. This weapon is illegal as it is one of 19 listed on the 1994 federal assault weapons ban list. The Columbine killers secured these guns illegally for \$500 from a friend who purchased it at a gun show. A Hi-Point Carbine, a rifle that was purchased through a friend, was also used (5280 Publishing Inc., 2020).

In Australia, there are very strict gun laws, and this has in turn reduced the frequency and severity of mass shootings. However, Americans still remain divided on the issue because of our rights written into the Constitution.

Firearm Deaths

From 2019-2022, firearms have killed more children from the ages of 1-17, than any other cause including cancer and car accidents. In 2022, 48,204 people died from gunshots in the U.S. 27,032 of these deaths were suicides (Alfonseca, 2024). Gun violence does not always come from those who are shooting at others. A lot of deaths that children face regarding firearms come from unsafe storing practices. Houses with children and no safe storing practices are accidents waiting to happen. "Easy access to unsecured firearms increases the risk of unintentional injury and death by firearm. Children are often impacted by unintentional firearm injuries by gaining access to an unsecured firearm owned by a parent. In fact, every six days a child under the age of 10 is killed by an unintentional shooting" (Center for Gun Violence, 2022).

As of September 5, 2024, at least 11,598 people have died from gun violence this year, this is an average of around 47 deaths per day. This does not include suicides because the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have not released this data (Alfonseca, 2024).

Theory

The theory of this research is that Republicans and Democrats have become more polarized in their differing opinions. Instead of more Americans wishing for increased gun laws, each side is hunkering down in their position on the matter of interpreting the Second Amendment. The

Democrats seem to have moved away from their pre-Columbine views than Republicans have. Now more than ever, the American population is polarized in their views on more than just the Second Amendment. It seems that citizens on either side of the spectrum don't like or respect their opposers in the debate on gun control and the Second Amendment. There is a misinterpretation on both sides of the aisle that allows for animosity towards each other.

Addressing the Gap

Although there has been much research done on each side and how the parties differ on each stance in the great debate on firearms in the United States, there isn't much research on the difference in the switch and how differently each side thinks on the topic of the Second Amendment after the Columbine School Shooting. When researching, the findings became very clear that each source has gone into detail about one party's beliefs, however, most of these researchers do not compare the two and why or how each party thinks this way. The research done in this article intends to explain or represent why or how each party has come so far from the original belief system since school shootings have become more prevalent and televised.

Through the research that has been conducted, there is not a lot on the two schools of thought after the late 1900s and early 2000s. More research needs to be done on the switch in mindset since the 2000s. In addition to this, there has not been much research on how Columbine has affected the views of the Second Amendment. This will also be an area of study in this article.

Research Methods

The research method of this study will exemplify the explanatory sequential design. In this study, quantitative data was collected from statistics on the number of guns in the United States. In addition, data comparing the number of gun owners in red states and blue states has been noted. More specifically, data was presented that represents the number of firearms owned in each state, not just gun owners. This data ranges from the years of 1999 to 2024 to test whether there is an increase or decrease in gun ownership in the United States since the shock event in 1999. Data has been collected on the number of laws that have been passed for more gun regulation since the Columbine High School shooting in 1999. This ranges from April 20, 1999, to December 31, 2024. All survey questions can be found in appendix A.

More data, both qualitative and quantitative, arose from a survey this author created and sent to individuals who are citizens of the United States that are 18 years or older. The survey was open from February 26, 2025, to April 1, 2025. The purpose of this study is to gauge potential voters' viewpoints on gun control and the Second Amendment. It would be counterintuitive to obtain the opinions of individuals who are not of legal age to own a firearm or vote. The link to the survey will be mass emailed to students with the help of a faculty administrator or advisor. The link will also be posted on personal social media in order to gauge voters outside of the realm of Robert Morris University. This qualitative data will be used to explain the quantitative data. The laws and gun ownership are a direct reflection of the opinions of Americans in most cases because we are a democracy, and our elected officials are typically voices for the people. This survey served as both quantitative and qualitative data because there are open-ended questions as well as multiple choice and slider scale questions.

The survey includes different types of questions to gauge opinions, such as open-ended responses, Likert scales, and multiple-choice questions. To begin the survey, it will ask each participant if they are associated with a political party, Democrat, Republican, or Independent. The participants are then asked what state they have permanent residency in, as this will be

important for questions later in the survey about processes in certain states. The next question asks the participants if they are gun owners, then they are asked about age. Age is being identified through groupings of 18-24, 25-32, 33-40, 41-50, and 50+. Certain identifying characters are needed to gauge the range and mindset of the participants. Education levels will be declared as well.

To get into the brunt of the survey, there is an open-ended question stating, “what is your interpretation of the Second Amendment”? Then, “Do you feel that your interpretation of the Second Amendment has changed since school shootings have become more frequent”? This will be answered by a “yes”, “no”, or “maybe”. A Likert scale will be used to address how in favor the participant is for more gun control, with one being “no more legislation” and five being “most in favor”. Next, “if there are more laws regulating ownership of firearms, do you believe that mass shootings will decrease in the United States?” This is a multiple-choice question with “yes”, “no”, or “unsure”. The next question is “one a scale from one to five, how is the process of purchasing a firearm in your state”, with one being very easy and five being very difficult. There has been a question set up similarly to the previous, regarding the process of obtaining a license to carry or concealed carry permit. The final question is “What do you believe would help decrease the presence of mass shootings in the United States”. This is an open-ended question and designed to help create an understanding of what each side of the political spectrum would like to see created in legislation.

The dates that the survey has been sent are as follows: February 26, 2025 via snapchat and Instagram sent from personal Instagram, Facebook on March 20, 2025, and Instagram stories again via another account on March 20, 2025. An athletics staff member from RMU sent out this survey to student athletes on March 27, 2025.

Survey Results

The survey closed on April 1, 2025, at 12:00AM. There were a total of 87 responses. Going through some of the data collected about identifiers, in Figure 1 below, 51 (58.6%) of respondents were Republicans, 18 (20.7%) were Independents, and another 18 (20.7%) were Democrats.

Are you associated with a political party? If yes, which one? (Please choose the party that you are registered with)

87 responses

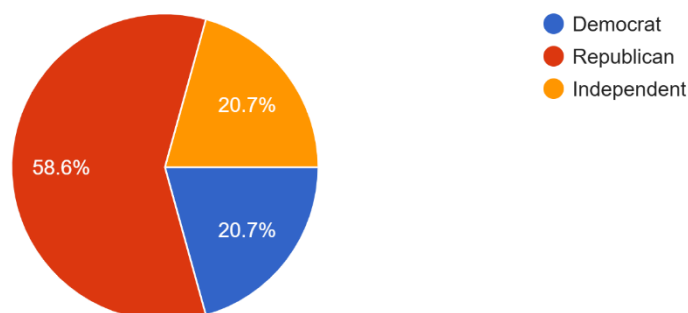


Figure 1.

The data shown in Figure 1 was collected from a variety of states, 11 to be exact, with most coming from Pennsylvania (63 or 72.4%). 52 (59.8%) respondents claimed that they are gun owners. The goal of this survey was not to target a certain age group, however, with the methods of releasing the survey, more younger adults were counted participating. Figure 2 Below shows the largest age group that took this survey was 18-24 years with 43 participants. The age group with the lowest amount of participation was 33-40, with only three participants.

What is your age?

87 responses

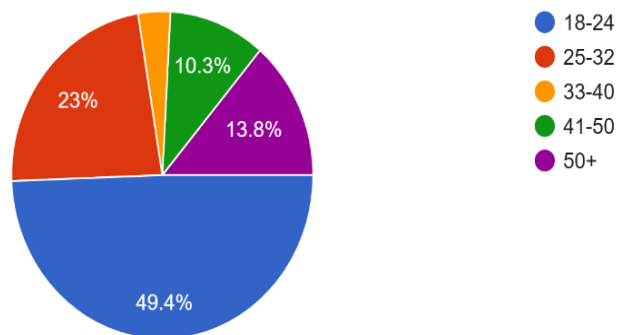


Figure 2.

There was a large majority of male participants, with 54 (62.1%). Most participants have completed some college (29 responses or 33.3%).

The open-ended questions will be put into categories to group similar responses. An overwhelming majority of the participants believe that the second amendment exclusively gives individuals the right to bear arms. 77 responses showed the following phrases: “the right to bear arms”, “the right to own firearms”, or “the right to protect myself or property with firearms”. It should be noted that most who wrote those phrases in the response were either Republicans or Independents. Only 5 responses feel different than the majority. One response that should be noted from a Democrat says “I believe this amendment needs changed. When this amendment was written the weapons used at the time were nowhere near the caliber of the weapons we have in the modern world. Weaponry is going to evolve further and be more dangerous, so this amendment needs to be changed”. Another who disagrees with the majority believes that firearms should only be used by law enforcement and military personnel only. There were two responses that said it is the right to protect from a tyrannical government. Three responses showed being unhelpful or not explanatory.

The goal of the survey was to gauge the interpretations of the amendment, gun laws, and general opinions on how citizens feel about the strictness of firearm use in the US, specifically in relation to the rise of mass shootings and gun violence in the United States. With that being said, participants were asked if their interpretation has changed since the frequency of school shootings has risen. 58 or 66.7% said no, 25 (28.7%) said yes, and 4 (4.6%) said maybe (Shown in Figure 3). It is unclear how the interpretation has changed for those who responded with yes answers.

Do you feel that your interpretation of the second amendment has changed since school shootings have become more frequent?

87 responses

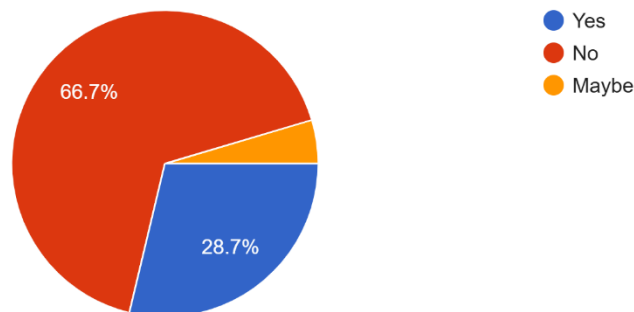


Figure 3.

When asked how in favor of more gun control respondents are, there are very mixed responses. 26 participants wish for no more gun control, and 12 wish for strict laws. 9 Democrats, 1 Republican, and 2 Independents want the strictest gun control. 20 Republicans responded with a 1 (meaning no more restrictions) as well as 5 Independents. There was not a single Democrat that wished for no more restrictions. Diving further into the results, 11 Republicans wished for about 25% more restrictions, along with five Independents and two Democrats. The developing theme is that the majority of Democrats that took the survey wished for at least 50% more restrictions on guns or firearms in the United States. In contrast, the majority of Republicans wish for 25% or less restrictions. The results are shown in Figure 4 below.

One a scale from one to five, how in favor are you for more gun control?

87 responses

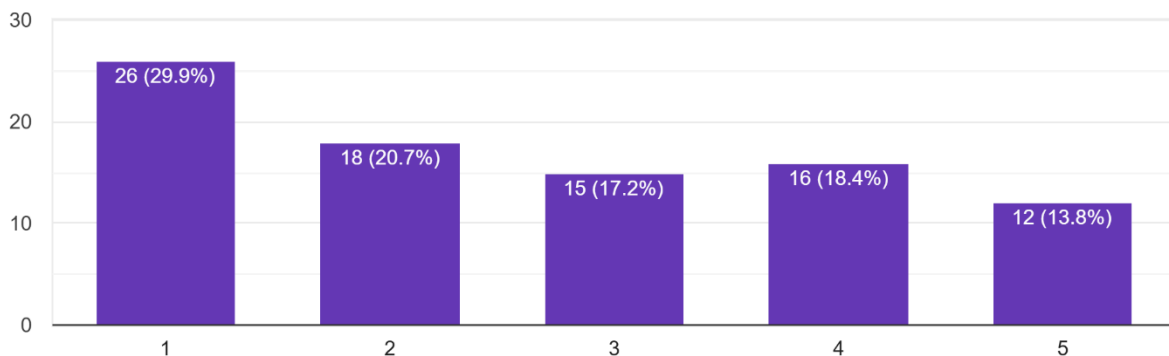


Figure 4

When asked if there are more laws regulating ownership and use, would there be less shootings, 45 Republicans said no. 9 Independents and three Democrats also said no. A mix of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents said they were unsure. The precise number is 9 (10.3%).

Participants were asked how easy it is to purchase a firearm in their state. In Pennsylvania, 8 Republicans, 3 Democrats, and 1 Independent reported that it was very easy. Pennsylvania is a Democrat run state, so this may come as a bit of a surprise. In my experience it has also been extremely easy to purchase a firearm. The most popular response for Pennsylvanians was 3 on a scale of 1-5 difficulty. These results were made of 14 Republicans, 5 Independents, and 6 Democrats. The next highest was 2, with a total of 23 responses. Every response from Ohio was Republican, this is also a Republican run state. 4 responders said 2 on a scale of difficulty, 1 said 1, 1 said 3, and 1 said 5. The table below, Figure 5, represents these data.

One a scale from one to five, how is the process of purchasing a firearm in your state?

87 responses

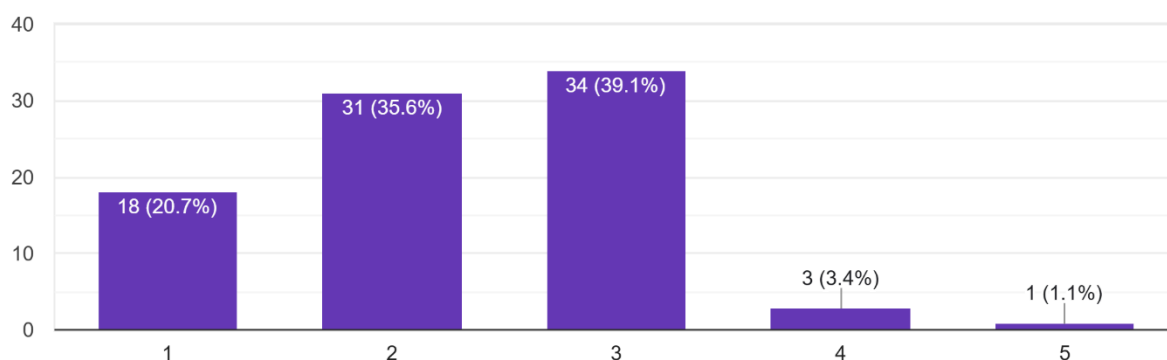


Figure 5.

The next question asked the difficulty level of obtaining a concealed carry permit in the respective state, on a scale from 1 to 5. Shown in Figure 6, Out of the 63 Pennsylvanians that took this survey, 24 reported that obtaining a concealed carry permit is somewhat difficult, or a 3 on the scale. This was composed of 15 Republicans, 5 Democrats, and 4 Independents. 21 reported that it is not difficult, or a 2 on the scale. This was 12 Republicans, 6 Democrats, and 4 Independents. 12 Republicans said that it is very easy (1 on the scale), 2 Democrats and 2 Independents agreed. 3 Ohioans believe that it is very easy (1) to obtain a concealed carry permit. 3 believe it is not difficult (2), and one believes that it is very difficult (5).

The final question of the survey asked the participants what they thought would decrease the presence of mass shootings in the United States. Surprisingly, many people gave thought out responses that are similar to each other. Many of these data in the following are from individuals who gave more than one point in their responses. 39 individuals mentioned mental health in their responses. 8 of which were Democrats, 23 Republicans, and 8 Independents. School security was

On a scale of one to five, how is the process of obtaining a concealed carry permit in your state?

87 responses

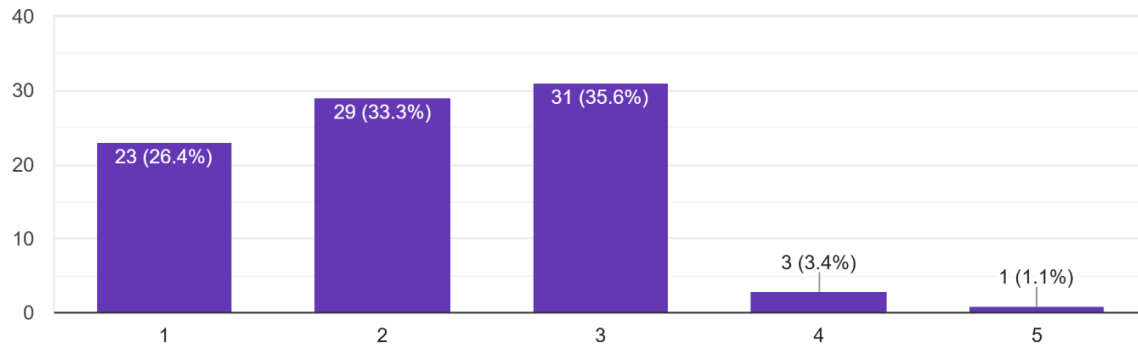


Figure 6.

mentioned by 9 Republicans, 2 Independents, and 2 Democrats. Increased background checks were mentioned by 7 Democrats, 6 Republicans, and 1 Independent. Proper storage was brought to attention by 5 Republicans and 1 Democrat. Mandating gun safety training was mentioned by 4 Democrats, 6 Republicans, and 4 Independents. 2 Republicans and 3 Independents believe that nothing will help. Better parenting was mentioned by 7 Republicans and 3 Independents. 1 Republican and 2 Democrats mention requiring a cooling off period when purchasing a gun so that someone who is mentally ill or going through a crisis cannot walk out of a store with a mindset of wanting to hurt themselves or others. 4 Democrats mentioned banning certain weapons such as assault rifles. 9 responses included getting the criminals off the streets and stopping the inflow of illegally smuggled firearms.

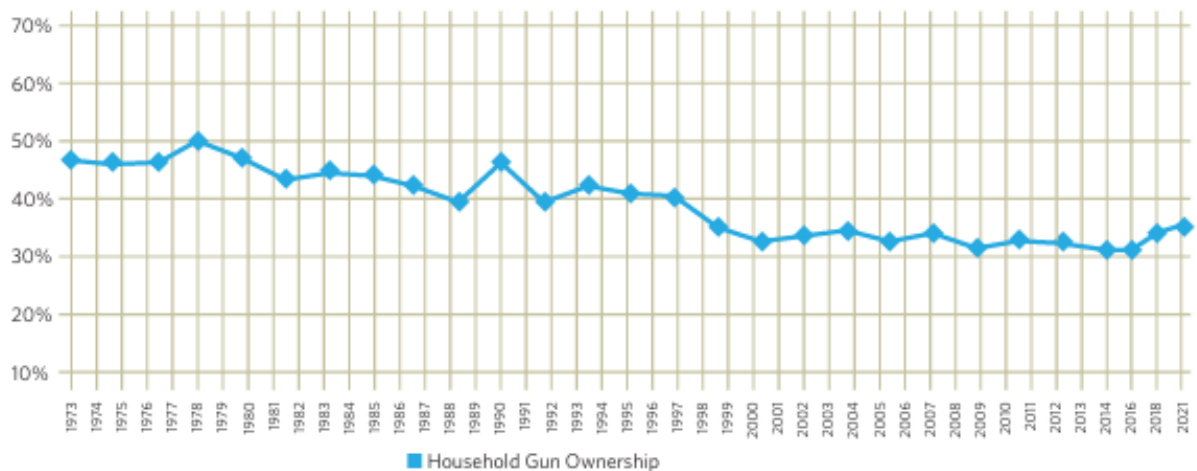
It is clear by the above data that many of the individuals that took this survey want better mental health resources, psych evaluations, and to take guns away from mentally ill individuals. This seems to be the common theme among responses. Mental health causes a massive rift in America and almost all of the individuals who have been the assailant in a mass or school shooting have had at least one mental health disorder. Additional background checks is also highly thought of responses. Purchasing a firearm does require a background check, however, many who took this survey believe that the checks should be more extensive. Democrats and Republicans typically agree with each other on the issues that were brought to attention in this survey. However, where they differ is the banning of certain weapons. Republicans believe they should be allowed to own any type of firearm they like because it does not specifically say in the Constitution that they cannot own certain ones. Democrats believe that assault rifles and automatic weapons are the problem when it comes to mass shootings and school shootings.

Laws and Statistics from Across the States

Looking at the United States as a whole, it seems that Montana has the highest percentage of gun ownership with 66.3% of adults owning. This state has some of the most relaxed gun control laws in America. No permit is required to own any type of firearm. Montana has been known to vote red in all Presidential elections but two since 1952. Wyoming comes in second place with 66.2%. It should be noted that this is a red state. Moving to Pennsylvania and Ohio, which was the home of most respondents in the survey, Pennsylvania has a 40.7% adult ownership rate. Ohio is just below, with 40.0%. The state with the lowest ownership rate is Massachusetts, with

only 14.7% (Venditti, 2025). The US has nearly 400 million guns just in civilian possession. That means there are more firearms than people. Pennsylvania, a frequent blue state, has the 5th highest number of registered guns, with 348,167 in 2021. Texas ranks number 1 with 1,006,555 registered firearms. It is known that Texas is a consistent red state. Ohio is 9th with 208,661. Texas has the most paid hunting licenses with 1,170,316. Pennsylvania comes close with 953,903. This is important to note because hunters are likely to own multiple firearms and are not buying firearms simply for protection (Vroman, 2024).

Studies have shown that since 2000, the percentage of adults in households with guns has decreased from 36.5% to 35.2% in 2021. Figure 7 below was used from the Violence Policy Center (2022) to represent the decline and trends of gun ownership in the home. These numbers have fluctuated over the years; however, they seem to be on decline (Violence Policy Center,



2022).

Figure 7

In contrast, from the years of 2000 to 2021, the percentage of overall personal ownership has increased from 22.3% to 24.5%. This data is represented in Figure 8, from the Violence Policy Center. This is represented by a separate line graph for males and females, however, both are declining. Men seem to have more of a decline than women.

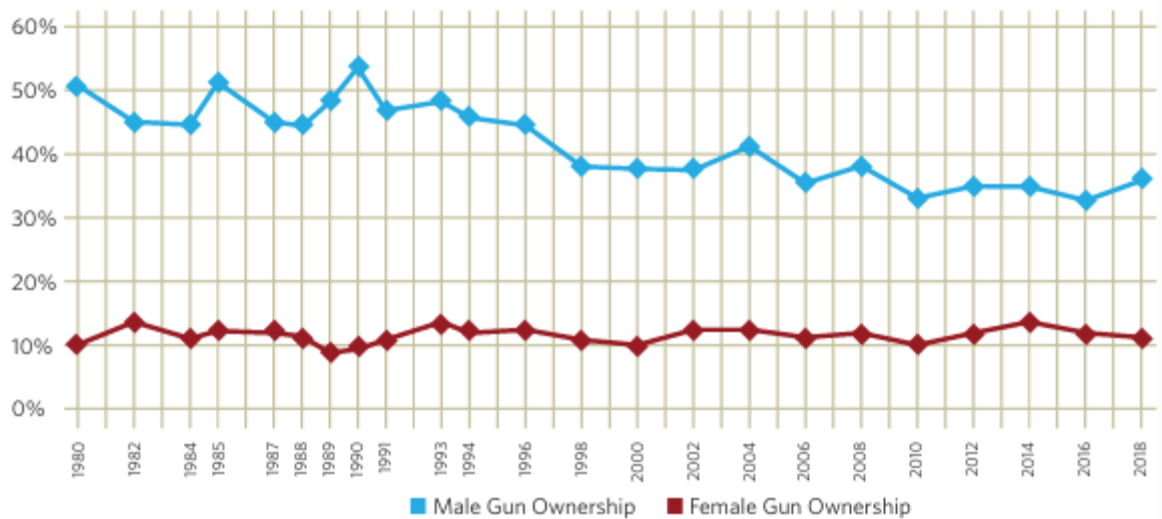


Figure 8.

Gun laws across the states vary based on who is in office, and whether it is mainly Democrat or Republican run. California is ranked as the #1 state in the nation for its gun safety laws, it also comes with lower rates of gun death and gun ownership. It is known that California is a highly liberal state. Texas and Florida, ranked 31st and 24th in gun law strength, had gun violence mortality rates of over 1.5 times that of California (Crofts-Pelayo, 2024). After the Columbine shooting in 1999, some laws have been passed, and measurements have been taken to potentially prevent school shootings and gun violence. On May 20, 1999, just a month after Columbine, the U.S. Senate passed a bill that requires trigger locks on all newly manufactured handguns and extends waiting period and background check requirements to the sales of firearms, specifically at gun shows. On September 13, 2004, Congress allowed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1995 to expire. This lifted the ban on 19 types of assault weapons. California banned the .50-caliber BMG, in January 2005. In January 2008, President Bush signed the National Instant Criminal Background Check Improvement Act, which requires background checks to screen for declared mentally ill individuals, who are not eligible to buy firearms. In December 2013, the Undetectable Firearms Act of 1988 was extended to 2035, and requires that all guns contain enough metal to be detected by metal detectors. In June of 2022, President Biden passed the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, which provides more funding for mental health services and school security, expands criminal background checks for some gun buyers, bars larger groups of domestic violence offenders from purchasing, and funds programs that allows police to service guns from troubled individuals (Longley, 2023).

Combined analysis of results

The interpretations of the Second Amendment are in fact different between Democrats and Republicans. Democrats seem to believe that the Second Amendment protects them from a tyrannical government, however this does not explicitly give individuals or citizens of the United States the right to privately own firearms. Although, based on the data from the survey, many Democrats and Republicans share the same opinion on the Second Amendment. It is an individual right to own a firearm in America. Comparing the survey results to laws and statistics on firearms, gun control, and the increased rate of possession, led to multiple discoveries. Some

gun safety laws have been passed in the United States since the Columbine school shooting on April 20th, 1999. However, gun violence has only increased. Many researchers believe that it is because there are not enough states participating in the increase of gun safety laws. It was mentioned above that California has the strongest gun safety laws in the United States and has one of the lowest rates of gun violence mortality. However, not all states that have strong gun safety laws have the same trend of low gun violence rates. When the survey participants were asked what could be done to prevent further mass shootings, more Republicans than Democrats mentioned mental health programs and watchlists.

The data collected on gun ownership in the survey was slightly different from the data collected through research. The survey had many more participants claim that they were gun owners, it is believed that this has an effect on the results and responses in the open-ended questions. Many more Republicans than Democrats responded with “yes” when asked if they are a gun owner. Being a heavily republican swayed survey, it was predicted that many participants would be against more gun control, as this is a historically republican take. The democratic viewpoints from the survey do explain the increase in gun safety laws in California. Democrats are very pro-gun control and gun safety. This heavily shows in California where there are the strongest gun laws in the country. From the survey, in terms of Pennsylvanians, the participants do not want more gun control, believe that the Second Amendment speaks to individual rights to bear arms, and are very in favor of stronger security in schools, and more mental health checks before purchasing a firearm. This lines with President Joe Biden's bipartisan safer communities act, which provides more funding for security in schools and more mental health programs. The most important question in this survey was the differing interpretations of the Second Amendment. This was the heart of the research, and it gave deep insight into the way that each individual American thinks about their rights in accordance with the Constitution. This also proved the two schools of thought for the Second Amendment, to be true.

Policy Implications and Suggestions

Although the findings of this research are still in progress, at this time there are suggestions and implications that could be provided to decrease the gap between beliefs and create more common ground for Democrats and Republicans. Based on previous literature, it could be suggested that the slim majority of Americans are in favor of further and more in-depth background checks. Another point to note is that many Americans believe that arming schools could potentially reduce the risk and occurrences of school shootings. In my opinion, there are many ways to go about seeking the end of gun violence and helping to bridge the divide between Democrats and Republicans. There are many ways that legislation can be passed without banning certain firearms or intruding on each citizen's individual freedoms.

Conclusion

There is a great divide in our country regarding the Second Amendment. The question this article seeks to answer is: What is the difference in the interpretation of the Second Amendment between Republicans and Democrats since April 20, 1999? This topic is very important to the citizens of America because the Second Amendment is a very important topic in politics and is a major right that is stated in the Constitution of the United States. This study aims to find how each party differs in their opinions and interpretations of the Second Amendment along with finding middle ground between each to where we are able to bring our country closer together. This research has looked at many different articles addressing the different variables and causes of the divide in the nation. There are typically two different schools of thought revolving around

the Second Amendment. The first school of thought is widely thought of as the first half of the constitution, where it explains the well-regulated militia being necessary to a free state. They believe that this allows a state the right to bear arms when wanting to create a militia, not necessarily meaning that the individuals in that state have a right. On the other hand, others focus on the second half of the constitution saying that an individual's right to bear arms shall not be infringed. In summary, these two schools of thought are almost opposite of each other, one is about a state's right and the other is an individual's right.

This research starts from April 20th, 1999, which is the day of the Columbine school shooting in Littleton, Colorado. This was a very important date in history because this mass shooting was the first to have 24-hour coverage. Because of the wide news coverage, a debate was sparked between ending gun violence and gun control. Democrats are typically pro-gun control and restricting access, while Republicans typically believe that any restriction is an infringement upon their rights. People often have a common misconception that AR-15 semi-automatic assault weapons are the gun of choice for mass shootings, however it is in fact handguns that cause the most harm in our society. People often believe that a semi-automatic and automatic assault weapon ban will result in less gun violence however based on the statistics found in this research that is not the case.

This research has found that there is not necessarily a drastic difference in the interpretations of the second amendment between Democrats and Republicans. There seems to be miscommunication between each side of the aisle. From the survey, many democrats and republicans believe that the second amendment relates to an individual right to bear arms. Naturally, there are some outliers that did not mention an individual right, but the majority of Americans that took this survey agree. Where these citizens disagree, is the topic of how to stop gun violence and mass shootings. This question showed a variety of responses, some saying that there should be more school security, more in-depth background checks, there is nothing that will help, and there should be gun safety training.

This research has opened up the topic of the second amendment for much more discussion. However, there is much more research that needs to be done. Researchers and politicians should find ways to bring both sides together and find a compromise. There are many different ways that the United States can come together to find a solution to gun violence, whether this means heavier gun laws, more school security, or gun safety training. America needs to put aside their differences to find a solution to gun violence that does not infringe on the second amendment rights of Americans. The second amendment is a highly interpreted text, but one theme is popular among the American people, that the second amendment gives individuals the right to keep and bear arms.

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Conformity and Authority: Exploring the Limits of Obedience in Modern Society

Rianna Morris
Robert Morris University

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between conformity and authority, highlighting how excessive obedience to authority can lead to harmful behaviors and suppress individual judgment. While some conformity is necessary for social function, blind obedience can undermine ethics and personal responsibility, as seen in studies like Milgram's and the Stanford Prison Experiment. The paper argues that authority figures often exploit conformity to maintain control, stifling critical thinking and moral action. It calls for fostering environments that encourage ethical decision-making, critical thinking, and resistance to blind obedience, ultimately advocating for a society that values diverse viewpoints and challenges harmful.

Introduction

Conformity and authority are two powerful forces that shape human behavior in profound ways, influencing how we interact with others and adhere to social norms. Conformity is the adjustment of one's opinions, judgments, or actions so that they become more consistent with the opinions, judgments, or actions of others (American Psychological Association, n.d.). This desire to conform can stem from the pressure to fit in or avoid conflict within social groups. Authority is the power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). While some degree of conformity is necessary for maintaining social order, excessive obedience to authority can have dangerous consequences, silencing individual judgment and leading people to act against their ethical beliefs. Understanding how and why people conform, especially to authority, is especially important today, as we live in a world where social pressures and power dynamics are constantly at play. Classic psychological studies, like Milgram's obedience experiment and the Stanford Prison Experiment, have shown how ordinary people, under certain circumstances, can engage in harmful or unethical behavior simply because they are following orders or yielding to authority. These studies reveal the power that authority figures hold over individuals and illustrate how quickly people can act in ways they might never have imagined. This paper explores how authority figures often exploit people's natural tendency to conform to maintain control, which can stifle critical thinking and moral decision-making. Through examining key psychological research and real-world examples, it discusses the ethical challenges that arise from blind obedience. The paper also advocates for creating environments that encourage ethical decision-making, critical thinking, and resistance to harmful conformity. Ultimately, it calls for a society that values diverse viewpoints and encourages individuals to question authority when necessary, ensuring a more responsible and just world for everyone.

The Psychology of Conformity and Obedience

Social psychology explores conformity and obedience as key elements of human behavior, focusing on how individuals adjust their actions, beliefs, or attitudes in response to social influences. Conformity refers to the act of aligning one's behavior with the group or social norms, often to fit in or avoid conflict. It can be driven by normative social influence, where individuals conform to be accepted or liked by others, or by informational social influence,

where people conform because they believe others possess more knowledge or a better understanding of how to behave. This can be seen when individuals follow the behavior of others in uncertain situations, assuming that the group is correct. A central concept related to conformity is social influence, which is the process by which people's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors are shaped by others (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). This influence can manifest in various ways, including both the subtle pressures that lead to conformity and the more direct demands that result in obedience. Obedience, on the other hand, involves following the direct commands of an authority figure, even when those instructions may conflict with personal values or ethics. Factors that influence obedience include the proximity to authority, with individuals more likely to obey when the authority figure is physically or emotionally close, and the legitimacy of authority, which increases compliance when the authority is perceived as credible or legitimate. Additionally, diffusion of responsibility can make obedience more likely in group settings, as individuals may feel less personally accountable for their actions. Compliance also plays a role here, referring to the act of changing one's behavior due to a request, as opposed to an authoritative command (Cialdini, 2009). While both conformity and obedience are forms of social influence, they differ in their origins. Conformity is typically driven by peer pressure and the desire for social acceptance, while obedience stems from following explicit commands from an authority figure. Both processes illustrate how individuals are shaped by the social and hierarchical structures within their environments.

The role of authority in human behavior is important in shaping social interactions and maintaining order. Authority is the legitimate power or right to make decisions, enforce obedience, and regulate behavior. Its presence is essential for the stability of society as it helps establish norms, resolve conflicts, and ensure that individuals adhere to social rules. In the absence of authority, societies risk descending into chaos, as there would be no clear mechanism for governing behavior or organizing collective efforts. Sociologists and political theorists have long argued that authority structures, such as governments and legal systems, are crucial for maintaining order and preventing disorder. Without authority, individuals or groups may act on their own self-interests, leading to conflicts, instability, and potential violence (Hobbes, 1651; Weber, 1947). People tend to comply with authority for various reasons, including fear of punishment, respect for established norms, or a sense of duty. When authority is perceived as legitimate, individuals are more likely to follow commands, even if they disagree with them. This is evident in different social settings, such as governments, educational institutions, and workplaces (Milgram, 1963). A key distinction in understanding authority is between legitimate authority and coercive authority. Legitimate authority is recognized and accepted by society as rightful and just. It derives from established laws, traditions, or social structures that people acknowledge as valid. For example, the authority of a police officer or an elected official is generally accepted because it is based on legal frameworks and societal consent (Weber, 1978). On the other hand, coercive authority relies on force, threats, or manipulation to ensure compliance. While coercive authority can elicit obedience in the short term, it often fosters resentment or resistance in the long term. This kind of authority may exist in authoritarian regimes, where compliance is often driven by fear or the threat of punishment. The main difference between the two lies in the source of power: legitimate authority garners respect and compliance through fairness and social consensus, while coercive authority demands obedience through fear and control. Social theories are essential for understanding how authority is built and sustained. Stinchcombe (2005) explains that these theories offer a way to make sense of the complexities of human behavior, especially when it comes to the dynamics of authority. He

points out that social structures, including systems of authority, are shaped not just by individual actions but also by larger social contexts and historical forces. This idea supports the notion that legitimate authority often arises from collective agreements within society, while coercive authority tends to emerge from power imbalances and institutional practices (Stinchcombe, 2005).

Cognitive and emotional factors play a significant role in human obedience to authority figures, influencing how individuals respond to commands or expectations within social settings. One of the key factors is the inherent human tendency to follow authority figures, which has deep roots in both evolutionary and social psychology. Humans have evolved in hierarchical societies where obedience to leaders was essential for survival and group cohesion. This instinct to follow authority is often reinforced through social conditioning and is present in many aspects of everyday life, such as in schools, workplaces, and government institutions (Stinchcombe, 2005). Fear, social pressure, and the desire for acceptance are powerful emotional drivers behind obedience. People often fear the consequences of defying authority, whether those consequences involve punishment, social exclusion, or other forms of retribution. This fear can be exacerbated by the emotional pressure to conform, especially in group settings where deviation from the norm can result in alienation or disapproval. The desire for acceptance further complicates the decision-making process, as individuals may comply with authority figures simply to fit in or avoid conflict. This emotional pull can be so strong that it overrides personal judgment, as seen in numerous social psychology experiments, such as Stanley Milgram's obedience studies, where participants followed orders despite feeling discomfort or moral conflict. The balance between personal morals and social expectations is often a delicate one when it comes to obedience. Individuals frequently find themselves at a crossroads between following their own ethical beliefs and adhering to the commands of authority figures or societal norms. This internal conflict becomes even more pronounced when orders from authority contradict personal values (Milgram, 1963). In these situations, some individuals may choose to comply with authority in order to avoid negative consequences, while others may resist or challenge authority in defense of their moral beliefs. The tension between personal morals and social expectations highlights the complex nature of obedience, revealing that it is not just a matter of blind conformity but a negotiation between internal and external pressures.

Landmark Studies on Obedience

Stanley Milgram's famous obedience experiment, conducted in the early 1960s, was designed to explore just how far people would go in following orders from an authority figure, even when those orders conflicted with their personal moral values. The study, carried out at Yale University, involved 40 male participants who thought they were taking part in an experiment on memory and learning. The participants were assigned the role of "teacher," while an accomplice (who was part of the experiment) played the role of the "learner." The teacher was instructed to administer increasingly severe electric shocks to the learner whenever they made an error on a memory test. Although the shocks were fake, the teacher believed they were real. The experiment was designed to test how much people would obey authority, even when it meant causing harm to someone else. The results of the experiment were startling. Despite clear moral conflict, 65% of participants continued to administer shocks up to 450 volts, the highest level on the shock generator, despite believing they were causing harm or even killing the learner. This voltage was well beyond the threshold for severe pain and could be potentially fatal, making their actions deeply troubling. This suggested that people might be more willing to obey

authority than we typically assume, even when it contradicts their moral beliefs. Many of the participants showed signs of distress, such as sweating and hesitation, but continued because the experimenter insisted. This outcome raised important questions about human behavior, especially in contexts like the military, law enforcement, and bureaucratic systems, where authority figures sometimes push individuals to perform morally questionable actions. To explain why so many participants obeyed despite the moral conflict, several theories have been proposed. Milgram himself argued that participants shifted into what he called an "agentic state," where they saw themselves as mere agents of the authority figure, rather than responsible for their actions. This helped alleviate the tension between their personal morals and the actions they were carrying out. Another theory is the "foot-in-the-door" technique, which suggests that once people agree to a small request, they are more likely to comply with larger ones. In Milgram's study, participants began by giving mild shocks, and as they continued, it became easier for them to justify administering stronger shocks. Social and cultural factors also played a role; the structured setting at Yale, along with the perceived legitimacy of the experiment, may have influenced participants to follow orders more easily. The physical distance between the teacher and learner, who were in separate rooms, may have also made it easier for participants to ignore the emotional impact of their actions (Milgram 1963). In the end, Milgram's obedience study revealed just how powerful authority can be in shaping human behavior.

The Stanford Prison Experiment, conducted by psychologist Philip Zimbardo in 1971, aimed to examine the psychological effects of power dynamics in a simulated prison environment. Zimbardo, along with his research team, recruited 24 male college students to participate in a two-week study at Stanford University. The participants were randomly assigned to the roles of "guards" or "prisoners." The prison was set up in the basement of the university's psychology building, and the "prisoners" were arrested at their homes by real police officers, blindfolded, and taken to the mock prison. The "guards" were given uniforms, batons, and sunglasses, and instructed to maintain order in the prison. The study was designed to explore how individuals would behave when given absolute power (guards) or subjected to the complete loss of control (prisoners). However, it was cut short after only six days due to the extreme psychological and emotional consequences on the participants. The outcomes of the Stanford Prison Experiment were alarming. The "guards" quickly began to exert excessive power, becoming increasingly sadistic and abusive toward the "prisoners." They used intimidation, humiliation, and harsh physical punishment, despite no direct orders to do so. On the other hand, the "prisoners" showed signs of extreme stress, anxiety, and emotional breakdowns. Some even began to exhibit signs of learned helplessness, a psychological condition where people feel powerless to change their circumstances, which caused them to comply with the guards' orders even when they were humiliating or abusive. The rapid transformation of behavior demonstrated the powerful effects that situational factors and assigned roles can have on an individual's actions, revealing how ordinary people can engage in extreme behaviors when placed in environments that foster a sense of authority or power imbalance. However, the study raised serious ethical concerns. One of the primary issues was the harm caused to the participants. Many of the "prisoners" experienced severe emotional distress, with some showing signs of trauma that persisted even after the experiment was concluded. Additionally, the "guards" became so abusive that they crossed ethical boundaries, demonstrating a lack of regard for the well-being of the participants. Another ethical issue was the lack of informed consent. While the participants had agreed to take part in the study, they were not fully aware of the extent to which they would be psychologically affected or the degree of harm they would experience. Zimbardo

himself, who acted as the prison superintendent, became too involved in the role, which compromised his ability to intervene and stop the abuse in a timely manner. These ethical concerns ultimately led to a reevaluation of the standards for research involving human subjects (Zimbardo, 2007). In conclusion, the Stanford Prison Experiment revealed the powerful influence of social roles and authority, while also highlighting the risks of unethical research practices. The extreme behavior of both guards and prisoners showed how quickly individuals can conform to abusive roles, emphasizing the need to prioritize participant safety and ethical standards in research.

The Role of Authority in Society

Authority in institutional settings like schools, the military, law enforcement, and corporations plays a major role in shaping behavior and decision-making. These institutions often rely on hierarchical structures where power and influence are divided among different levels. For example, in schools, teachers and administrators have authority over students, setting rules and guiding their education. In the military and law enforcement, a clear chain of command exists, where lower-ranking individuals are expected to follow orders from those above them, especially in high-stakes situations. In the corporate world, authority flows from executives down to employees, influencing decisions at every level. The way authority works in these institutions affects how decisions are made. People in lower positions often defer to those in higher positions out of respect or a sense of duty, which can sometimes limit their ability to act independently. On the flip side, those in authority may make decisions based on institutional goals or policies, even if it goes against personal or ethical beliefs. This can lead to positive results, like clear direction and efficiency, but also negative ones, such as stifling disagreement or enabling unethical behavior, as seen in Milgram's obedience studies. Overall, the way power is distributed in these settings deeply influences the decisions people make, for better or worse.

The concept of authority has been explored and debated for centuries, particularly in the context of the social contract. Historical perspectives, such as those presented by Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, offer foundational ideas on the relationship between citizens and authority. Hobbes, in his work *Leviathan* (1651), argued that in a natural state without authority, life would be 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short' (Hobbes, 1651, ch. 13). For Hobbes, people entered into a social contract, agreeing to surrender some of their freedoms to a central authority—represented by a sovereign—in exchange for security and order. This authority, in Hobbes' view, should be absolute to maintain peace and prevent chaos. In contrast, Rousseau, in his work *The Social Contract* (1762), believed that legitimate authority arises from the collective will of the people. He argued that true authority exists when individuals come together to form a "general will," and that governance should reflect the shared desires of the citizens, not just the power of one sovereign ruler. In modern times, the notion of legitimate authority has evolved, particularly in democratic societies. Today, authority is largely seen as legitimate when it is based on the consent of the governed. This concept aligns with Rousseau's idea that power should derive from the collective will, where citizens grant authority through democratic processes such as voting and participation. Legitimate authority is thus seen as the product of a social contract in which citizens agree to follow laws and regulations in exchange for protection and the common good. On the other hand, authoritarian regimes challenge this view by asserting power through coercion rather than consent. In such systems, authority is often maintained through force, manipulation, or control rather than through the voluntary agreement of citizens. The legitimacy of authority in these contexts is less about the will of the people and

more about the ability of the ruling entity to maintain power and control.

Authority figures can often manipulate conformity for personal gain or societal control, using tactics like fear, persuasion, and propaganda to maintain power and suppress opposition. Throughout history, political regimes, corporate corruption, and military atrocities have shown how authority can be used to manipulate individuals and groups into doing things they otherwise might not. For example, in totalitarian regimes like Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, and North Korea, authority figures have controlled people through fear and manipulation. Hitler's Nazi regime used intense propaganda and the cult of his personality to convince many Germans to conform to harmful ideologies, including the persecution of Jews. Stalin in Soviet Russia similarly controlled the population through fear of purges and imprisonment, while also manipulating information to maintain his power. In North Korea, Kim Jong-un uses a combination of surveillance, propaganda, and harsh punishments to keep citizens obedient, ensuring the regime's survival through fear and ideological control. Corporate corruption also provides a clear example of authority figures manipulating conformity for their own benefit. Take the Enron scandal, where top executives like Kenneth Lay and Jeffrey Skilling manipulated employees and investors by promoting a false image of financial health. They used their authority to create a culture where employees were afraid to question the company's actions, ultimately leading to one of the largest corporate collapses in history. Military atrocities, such as the My Lai Massacre during the Vietnam War, also show how authority figures can manipulate people into committing horrible acts. U.S. military officers used their power to convince soldiers to carry out mass killings of Vietnamese civilians, with soldiers justifying their actions by believing they were simply following orders. This tragic event highlights how individuals can be coerced into harmful actions when they conform to authority.

The Ethics of Conformity and Obedience

Moral responsibility and personal accountability are key concepts in ethics, referring to the idea that individuals must make ethical decisions and be responsible for their actions. These concepts become especially challenging when outside pressures, like authority figures or societal expectations, influence our decisions. One classic dilemma is when people are forced to choose between sticking to their own moral beliefs and following authority, even if it goes against what they think is right. This tension was highlighted in Stanley Milgram's famous obedience experiments, where participants were told by an authority figure to administer increasingly severe electric shocks to someone. Despite seeing the victim's distress, many participants kept following orders, showing just how strong the influence of authority can be. The dilemma then is whether we should always obey authority, even when it clashes with our ethical values. Morals are often seen as intrinsic beliefs about right and wrong, while ethics are the external codes of conduct set by institutions or groups. One could argue that by following the authority figure's orders, participants were adhering to the ethical guidelines of their institution or group, even if it conflicted with their personal morals. Blind obedience, following commands without considering the moral implications, can deeply affect how we make ethical choices. It can lead people to stop questioning the morality of their actions and avoid taking responsibility for the consequences. When this happens, harmful behaviors can go unchecked, especially when they're justified by authority. In some extreme cases, it can lead to dehumanizing others, where people fail to recognize the harm they're causing. This was tragically evident during the Holocaust, where many followed orders to commit atrocities without questioning the morality behind them. Social pressures and group dynamics often push people to conform, even when that conformity results

in unethical behavior (Brown, 2000). Ultimately, blind obedience can compromise our ethical decision-making, which is why it's crucial for individuals to stay accountable for their actions, even in situations of authority.

Conformity is the natural tendency for people to align their thoughts, behaviors, and beliefs with those around them, often at the expense of their own judgment and critical thinking. While fitting in with others can provide a sense of belonging, it can also suppress individual ethical reasoning. When people prioritize group acceptance over their personal values, they may make decisions that they wouldn't otherwise consider if thinking independently. This dynamic is especially problematic in situations where the group's actions are morally questionable, as individuals may go along with the crowd instead of challenging harmful behaviors or ideas. One major factor that enforces conformity is groupthink, a psychological phenomenon where the desire for group harmony leads to poor decision-making. In these situations, people are more focused on avoiding conflict or disagreement than on critically evaluating options, often leading them to overlook ethical concerns or consequences. Cognitive biases like the bandwagon effect (where people adopt beliefs or behaviors just because others do) further push individuals toward conformity. These biases can make people believe that the majority opinion must be right, even when it's not, which can cloud their judgment and prevent them from questioning actions that may not align with their morals (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004). In the end, the pressure to conform, combined with these cognitive shortcuts, can lead to unethical decisions, which is why it's so important to encourage critical thinking, especially in group settings, to ensure that individuals maintain their moral accountability.

Resistance to harmful authority has been a crucial part of history, with movements that have stood up to oppressive power and fought for justice. From the civil rights movement to more recent protests against authoritarian regimes, people have challenged harmful authorities to protect human rights and dignity. These movements remind us that sometimes the most important thing is having the courage to go against authority, especially when it's being misused. Resistance isn't about rebellion for the sake of rebellion; it's about standing firm in one's ethical beliefs, even when doing so is risky or unpopular. Dissent plays an important role in encouraging ethical behavior by making us question what's going on around us. When people push back against blindly following authority, they help prevent harmful actions from becoming the norm. Dissent forces us to stop and ask, 'Is this really the right thing to do?' But, dissent doesn't always come easily. People are more likely to speak out when they feel personally responsible for the consequences of an action and when their values clash with what authority is asking of them. It also helps when they have support from others, knowing that other people feel the same way can make it easier to stand up against authority. On the flip side, dissent tends to be less common when people feel powerless, isolated, or fear punishment. In environments where authority is strict or there's intense pressure to conform, people often hold back their concerns. Plus, if the consequences of following orders don't seem immediately harmful, people might not feel motivated to question authority.

Leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi showed us that standing up to unjust systems can lead to profound social change. Their nonviolent resistance was a form of dissent that helped challenge unethical authority and spark movements for justice. Critical reflection is essential for resisting harmful authority. Without it, people can easily slip into blindly following orders or going along with what's popular without considering the ethical implications. But when individuals take the time to reflect on their actions and the systems they're a part of, they can more clearly see when something is wrong and take a stand. This kind

of resistance, grounded in ethical thinking and personal accountability, is vital for keeping authority in check and ensuring that power is used responsibly (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2021).

The Dangers of Blind Obedience in Modern Society

Blind obedience is a powerful force, where people follow orders or go along with authority without questioning the ethics behind their actions. One of the most disturbing concepts that captures this behavior is the idea of the "banality of evil" introduced by Hannah Arendt. In her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), Arendt explored how ordinary people can commit horrific acts without any inherent malice. She argued that Adolf Eichmann, a key figure in orchestrating the Holocaust, wasn't some evil mastermind, but rather a bureaucrat who simply followed orders. This idea shows that evil actions can come from people who don't see themselves as evil, but who get caught up in the routine of authority and lose sight of the moral consequences of their actions. It's a sobering reminder of how blind obedience can lead to disastrous outcomes, even when people don't consciously intend to do harm. Another key psychological mechanism that explains blind obedience is cognitive dissonance. According to cognitive dissonance theory, when our actions conflict with our beliefs, it creates discomfort. To resolve that discomfort, people often justify their behavior, convincing themselves that what they're doing is acceptable, especially when they're following orders. In situations of blind obedience, this can mean rationalizing harmful actions by telling themselves they were just doing what they were told, or that they didn't have a choice. This helps them avoid confronting the ethical implications of their actions, letting them maintain a sense of self-respect even when they've acted unethically. The psychological forces behind blind obedience, whether it's the banality of evil or cognitive dissonance, show just how important it is for people to stay vigilant and think critically. It's easy to get swept up in following authority, but we have to make sure we maintain personal responsibility and question whether our actions are truly right.

The dangers of harmful obedience are not just theoretical; they have shaped some of the darkest moments in history. Take World War II, for example, where blind obedience to authoritarian regimes led to unimaginable human rights violations. Nazi soldiers, following orders from their superiors, participated in atrocities like the Holocaust, even when the actions they were carrying out were clearly horrific. This is a stark example of how authority can push ordinary people to commit unspeakable acts. Similar abuses of power have occurred throughout history, where individuals, instead of standing up for what's right, blindly followed orders that led to the oppression and suffering of vulnerable groups. Even in the world of business, we've seen how obedience to authority can lead to destruction. A perfect example is the Enron scandal in the early 2000s, where executives at the company deceived investors and the public about its financial health. Many employees knew something wasn't right but stayed silent, either out of fear of losing their jobs or because they felt they had to follow their superiors. This kind of harmful obedience, where ethical concerns are pushed aside for the sake of authority, can have devastating effects not just on the individuals involved, but on society as a whole. In modern times, we continue to see the consequences of harmful obedience. Police brutality is one example, with officers sometimes carrying out violent acts while following orders or policies that escalate situations unnecessarily. High-profile cases, like the killing of George Floyd in 2020, show how unchecked authority can lead to tragic outcomes. Corporate exploitation is another area where harmful obedience plays a role, as workers are often pressured to meet unrealistic demands or work under unsafe conditions, even when they know it's wrong, simply because they

fear the repercussions of speaking out. And then there's government overreach, where political leaders and state actors enforce unjust laws or suppress dissent, often under the guise of maintaining order. These examples, from wars to corporate scandals to police violence, highlight the deep impact harmful obedience can have on society. They serve as a reminder of the importance of questioning authority and acting in ways that align with our values, even when it's uncomfortable or risky. It's crucial to recognize that while obedience to authority is sometimes necessary, it can also lead to serious harm when left unchecked.

Obedience doesn't just come from individual decisions, it's also deeply influenced by the society we live in. From a young age, we are taught to follow rules, respect authority, and conform to the expectations of those around us. Social institutions, like schools, the workplace, and the media, play a big role in shaping our understanding of what's expected of us. For example, in schools, students are often taught to follow the rules set by teachers, administrators, and other authority figures, which is important for maintaining order. However, this can also set the stage for blind obedience, especially when students are taught to accept authority without questioning it. The media also reinforces these patterns, frequently portraying authority figures as always being right or just, which can create an implicit message that questioning authority is wrong or disruptive. Childhood education is particularly influential when it comes to obedience. From an early age, children are often taught to respect their teachers, parents, and other adults without much room for questioning. While this helps establish a sense of discipline, it can also lead to a passive acceptance of authority as they grow older. This is further reinforced by peer pressure, where children and adolescents may conform to the behavior and expectations of their peers in order to fit in or avoid being judged. Peer groups often emphasize conformity, making those who challenge norms feel isolated or ostracized. As people grow up, they often carry this social conditioning with them, adapting to societal norms and pressures that prioritize obedience and conformity over critical thinking. Societal norms also play a huge role in shaping our willingness to obey. Many social systems, whether in the workplace, government, or in broader societal structures, rely on the unquestioning obedience of individuals to maintain order and function. These norms can become so deeply ingrained in us that we don't even realize we're conforming. As a result, we may find ourselves going along with decisions or behaviors that we wouldn't normally agree with, simply because they are expected of us. Over time, what may have started as individual obedience can turn into a normalized behavior, where questioning authority feels uncomfortable or unnatural. In this way, socialization processes, including the influence of childhood education, peer pressure, and societal norms, contribute to the normalization of obedience.

Promoting Ethical Decision-Making and Critical Thinking

Creating a culture where resistance to harmful authority is not only possible but encouraged is vital for any healthy society. One of the best ways to nurture this culture is through educational initiatives that teach people to question authority and think critically. Instead of just accepting what they're told, students should be encouraged to analyze situations, understand different perspectives, and challenge authority when something doesn't feel right. Schools and universities have a powerful opportunity to help students learn about ethical decision-making, historical examples of resistance movements, and the importance of standing up for what's right. When people are taught to think for themselves and question the status quo, they're more likely to act when they see something wrong happening around them. But education alone isn't enough. Leaders also play a huge role in fostering a culture of resistance. Ethical leaders, whether in

politics, business, or communities, can set an example by demonstrating moral courage and standing up for what's right, even when it's difficult. When leaders encourage people to voice concerns and question unethical practices, they make it clear that dissent is not disobedience but a necessary part of creating positive change. Leaders who support their followers in doing what's right, rather than just what's easy, help create an environment where resistance is valued and not feared. Ultimately, building a culture of resistance takes work from both the educational system and leaders in all areas of society. By promoting critical thinking and showing that standing up for what's right is not only important but commendable, we can empower individuals to challenge unethical authority and contribute to a more just world.

Critical thinking is key to preventing blind obedience. It helps us pause and consider whether following orders or going along with what's being told to us is the right thing to do. Instead of just accepting things at face value, critical thinking encourages us to question the motives behind decisions, examine the evidence, and think about the long-term consequences of our actions. In situations where authority figures or social pressure try to push us in a certain direction, it's critical thinking that helps us step back and evaluate whether we're truly making an ethical decision or just going along with the crowd. To cultivate critical thinking in both social and professional settings, we can start by encouraging skepticism, not in the sense of distrust, but in the sense of healthy questioning. For example, in social settings, it can be as simple as asking, "Why do I believe this?" or "What's the evidence supporting this view?" In professional settings, creating a culture where questioning assumptions and proposing alternatives is welcomed can help foster independent judgment. Encouraging discussions where people feel comfortable challenging ideas and offering new perspectives can open the door to more thoughtful decision-making. Additionally, developing a habit of reflection, where we regularly take a moment to think about our actions and the ethics behind them, is also a powerful tool for strengthening critical thinking. Ultimately, by prioritizing critical thinking in our daily lives and workplaces, we can guard against blind obedience and make decisions that are more aligned with our values and the greater good.

Case Studies of Successful Resistance to Authority

Resistance to authority has long been essential in challenging unjust power structures and bringing about social change. The Civil Rights Movement in the United States is a prime example of how collective resistance can stand up to racial segregation and discrimination. Martin Luther King's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement laid the foundation for future generations to fight for equality, demonstrating how powerful collective action can be (Luther King Jr., 1963). The actions of individuals are also key in resisting authority. Leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela each exemplified how one person's commitment to justice can inspire and lead others to action. King's leadership during the American Civil Rights Movement, Gandhi's nonviolent approach in India's fight for independence, and Mandela's fight against apartheid in South Africa are all shining examples of how individual resistance can transform societies. Their unwavering conviction and moral clarity showed the world that resistance based on nonviolence could lead to lasting social and political change. Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolent resistance inspired movements worldwide, showing that the most powerful form of protest could be peaceful rather than violent (Gandhi, 1948). This connection between Gandhi's teachings and King's leadership exemplifies the impact of moral, nonviolent resistance on societal change.

Mass movements are particularly powerful because they challenge the legitimacy of

harmful authority. When people come together, whether through protests, marches, or other acts of resistance, they show that authority is not universally accepted and that the systems in place are flawed. For example, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (1963), where Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his iconic "I Have a Dream" speech, was a key moment in challenging segregation laws and advocating for racial equality (King Jr., 1963). The March showed how powerful it can be when people come together, and how unity can take on deep-rooted injustices. In more recent times, movements like #MeToo have similarly exposed systemic abuse and challenged the authority of powerful institutions (Miller, 2018). The success of the #MeToo movement in challenging workplace harassment shows how collective resistance to power structures can create widespread societal change, just as earlier movements did. These movements have undermined the credibility of those in power and helped push for greater accountability across societies. A more recent example of collective resistance comes from Iceland, where women went on strike in 1975 to protest unequal working conditions and gender pay disparity. The strike, known as "The Women's Day Off", saw women across the country walk out of their jobs, sending a powerful message about their essential role in society. Nearly 50 years later, in 2023, Icelandic women once again went on strike to demand action on gender inequality, particularly around the gender pay gap. This 2023 strike was the first full-day women's strike in Iceland in nearly half a century, showcasing the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the power of collective action. The strikes are a powerful example of how marginalized groups can challenge authority and push for systemic change (The Guardian, 2023). Icelandic women's persistent resistance shows how social movements focused on gender equality can effectively challenge authority, even after decades of progress.

Another effective method of resistance in today's world is nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience, which continue to be powerful tools for challenging authority without resorting to violence. Modern movements have adopted these methods to confront issues like racial injustice, climate change, and human rights violations. One notable example is the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which has organized peaceful protests and acts of civil disobedience to demand justice for victims of police brutality and racial discrimination. BLM's protests, such as those following the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, have garnered global attention, challenging not only local police departments but also national and international systems of racial inequality. Similarly, the Fridays for Future movement, initiated by Greta Thunberg, has seen young activists around the world engage in nonviolent civil disobedience to demand urgent action on climate change, with large-scale protests and school strikes drawing attention to the need for global environmental reforms. Another example is the Hong Kong protests in 2019, where citizens took to the streets to peacefully demand political reforms and democratic freedoms, despite the risk of violent repression by the government. These movements show that nonviolent resistance remains a potent tool for creating change by compelling authorities to engage with moral and ethical issues in ways that cannot be ignored. The legacy of nonviolent resistance continues to live on in modern-day activism, where individuals and groups use civil disobedience to challenge systems of power and push for meaningful reforms (Klein, 2020; Thunberg, 2019; Chan, 2019).

Conclusion

Conformity, authority, and obedience are powerful forces that shape our behavior, but they come with risks. While conformity can help maintain social harmony, excessive obedience to authority can lead people to make harmful choices and abandon their moral compass. Classic studies like

Milgram's obedience experiment and the Stanford Prison Experiment show how easily authority can influence individuals to act against their values. This highlights the importance of fostering ethical decision-making and critical thinking, ensuring that people can make informed, moral choices even when under pressure from authority figures. For society to thrive, we need to promote autonomy, critical thinking, and ethical behavior. Institutions, whether schools, workplaces, or governments, should encourage people to think independently and question authority when it's necessary. By creating environments that foster these qualities, we can build communities where individuals are empowered to make ethical decisions, hold authority accountable, and challenge harmful norms. A society that values independent thought is one that is more resilient and capable of addressing issues with greater fairness and understanding. To make these changes a reality, we need educational reforms that prioritize critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and the ability to question authority in a thoughtful way. It's also crucial that workplaces, schools, and communities embrace cultures where independent thinking is celebrated and ethical behavior is the standard. By nurturing these values from a young age and in every part of life, we can help create a world where individuals feel empowered to make responsible decisions and stand up for what's right. In the end, it's about building a society where people are not just followers but active, ethical participants in shaping a better future.

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Martin Van Buren. The Evolution of his Political Thoughts and Motivation Relating to the Election of 1848

Joshua David Kerns
Robert Morris University

Abstract

The motives behind Martin Van Buren's 1848 run for the White House have always been one of the least understood and least appreciated aspects of his long political career. This paper will also attempt to dissect Van Buren's motivations surrounding his 1848 campaign. In trying to form a more complete picture of his political, moral, and ethical changes leading up to the election, this paper will give examples from throughout Van Buren's career that are relevant to his final decision to run and will help flesh out and better put into context his mindset and his stances on these issues. The issues discussed will be as follows: political revenge, suffrage, party unity, slavery and its associated issues, the South, the Nullification Crisis, removal of Native Americans, the Amistad case, the annexation of Texas, the Barnburners, and finally the election of 1848. In researching this topic, a wide range of sources had to be used to get a clearer picture of the subject; James M. Bradley's work was instrumental, but it was also supplemented by several other works such as Marcus Rediker's comprehensive account of the Amistad rebellion and Martin Van Buren's own autobiography, among others. As more research was done, the conclusion was reached that one of the main, under-reported reasons for Martin Van Buren's 1848 campaign was his long standing animosity towards those who he perceived as "elites." His anti-elitism is a thread that connects nearly every aspect of his political thought and the decisions he made leading up to the election. These findings can help historians and students better understand one of the most underrated and obscure political minds of the antebellum era and better represent his political metamorphosis as it truly was in his own time and understand its impact.

Introduction

Martin Van Buren is one of the most influential men in the history of American politics, yet his legacy is that of a middling Presidency and a final failed run for office at the twilight of his career. Reducing Van Buren to the mediocrity of his Presidency is a disservice to both his legacy and efforts as well as to American History itself. Without Martin Van Buren, the modern Democratic Party would not exist, and neither would the modern Republican Party, for that matter. Van Buren, known by some in Washington as the "Little Magician", would have his hands in the creation of not just one, but *both* major American modern political parties. His impact on the country can be best exemplified by his 1848 run for the White House.

The main question that historians who have studied either the election of 1848 or Martin Van Buren specifically have come to is simple: "why did he run?". Though the question is simple, the answer is anything but. Van Buren was a man of many contradictions, ever-evolving political stances, and sometimes abject hypocrisy. It is, perhaps, unsurprising that a man with a career as long and storied as Van Buren's would have a lengthy record of shifting stances on the day's issues, but Van Buren's political metamorphosis on one particular issue, slavery, is entirely as whiplash-inducing today as it was in his own time and to those around him. To dissect the question of "why?", it must be established that Martin Van Buren's political life came to a sort of

culmination in 1848; all the lessons he had learned in the New York state house, the plots of revenge against rivals like DeWitt Clinton, the moral conundrums of the Amistad rebellion, Indian Removal, and slavery in general all reached their crescendo in November of 1848. Was it a genuine moral shift on the issue of slavery? Revenge against the South? Each of the reasons must be examined fully to best establish a motive for Van Buren's fourth and final attempt at the White House, and to dissect someone's motivations, especially from a historic perspective, one must understand the past that lead them to make those decisions, but one main reason kept coming to the surface above all others was *Anti-Elitism*; it was also the underlying motivation behind many of the *other* reasons often cited as his motivations. Put simply, Van Buren was a staunch anti-elitist. This fact often gets overlooked when talking about Van Buren's broad political ideals and motivations.

It must also be shown where and when the evolutions and shifts in Van Buren's thinking occurred on the issues to demonstrate that it was not so much a calculated political shift but a real, internalized, slow-moving change in his thinking. The time and event that began to change Van Buren's mind on a multitude of issues was the question of annexing Texas. That issue, more than all the others, perfectly embodied the intersection of most historians' cited reasons and anti-elitism. He felt a deep sense of betrayal over the matter from the South, he began for the first time to see (or rather, to stop ignoring) the grasp that the big-money elites and the slaveholding aristocracy had on his party. He then saw the party he built being overtaken by radicals motivated by said aristocrats' money. Before Texas, however, it must be established *what* Van Buren's stances on the issues that would later be relevant were, and their slow ebbing and flowing towards their eventual reversal. It must be remembered that Van Buren's political career began at the dawn of the nineteenth century, and his final moral shift would occur in the leadup to 1848, so charting his moral trajectory will not be a simple or fast task. After all, Van Buren's change in opinions took nearly half a century to come to fruition. Like the majority of what Van Buren did, his moral changes were well thought out, verbose, paced, and relentlessly overthought.

Anti-Elitism and Anti-Federalism

While Martin Van Buren's political stances were fluid and ever-shifting, there were two distinct principles that he adhered to throughout his long career. The first was that one *must* take a side, whatever it may be. In the days of James Monroe's Presidency, Van Buren saw the country begin to form a sort of bipartisan, fusion government. This was an affront to Van Buren's ideals; where others saw bipartisanship and good will, he saw "antipathy", capitulation, and "Federalism's rebirth"(Bradley, 2024, p. 332). Van Buren viewed distinct and thriving political parties as a force for good and change in a healthy democracy; he believed that a system in which parties ebbed and flowed would put a check on the rich and powerful as well as hold politicians accountable for their actions and votes (Bradley, 2024, p. 4). Van Buren viewed the core job of a politician to be that of furthering democracy(Bradley, 2024, p. 5). Rather than "The Era of Good Feelings", Van Buren called this time "The Monroe Heresy".(Bradley, 2024 p. 133) He would extend this accusation of anti-partisanship to future president John Quincy Adams as well when he attacked "the baneful weed of party strife"(Bradley, 2024, p. 158) in his inaugural address. "We must always have party distinctions"(Bradley, 2024, p. 185). Van Buren once wrote during the beginning of the Jacksonian/Anti-Jacksonian party rift. The second principle was that everything he did in politics, in his mind but perhaps sometimes less so in his actions, were for the greater good of the yeomanry and to the detriment of the landed, monied elites he believed had too much pull in both politics and civil society.

Van Buren's anti-elitist sentiments can be traced to his formative days after the Revolution. Growing up in the vibrant Dutch immigrant community of Kinderhook, New York, Martin Van Buren is the only President to speak English as a second language, his first was Dutch. He was keenly aware of his immigrant heritage even at a young age. He would work at his father Abraham's popular tavern in town, where locals and those just passing through would meet, drink, and talk endlessly; thus lively, sometimes rowdy, and often drunken political debate was never too far away from young Martin. He was largely formally uneducated, mainly because of his semi-rural location and his family's necessitous finances; comparing him to DeWitt Clinton, historian James M. Bradley would call him a "bumpkin" (Bradley, 2024, p. 77). As he learned English in the tavern, he also learned what the non-Dutch passers-through thought of his kin; "Dutch boors [are] grossly ignorant and rude who could neither write or read nor speak English" (Bradley, 2024, p. 20) said one Cadwallader Colden, a two-time colonial Governor of New York. Martin Van Buren's first political idol, President Thomas Jefferson, sculpted Martin's views on classism and elitism at the outset of his career. Van Buren idealized the Jefferson administration's anti-elitist stances, he commended Jefferson for ignoring "empty ceremonies" and the "customs of monarchs" (Bradley, 2024, p. 41). He admired Jefferson's frugality, his fight against excessive taxation, and his adherence to a system that he believed served free institutions and a republican nation. As Van Buren moved upwards in his law practice and early political endeavors, his Federalist opponents seized on his "low born status" (Bradley, 2024, p. 46) and lack of schooling to attack his capabilities in both arenas. The Federalists' view of Van Buren's upbringing was that his father's work as a tavern owner was shameful and barely a step up from owning a brothel. The relentless classism experienced by Van Buren early in his life and career doubtlessly contributed to his growing animosity towards the elites that continually disparaged himself and his family.

Van Buren's record as a lawyer shows him engaged in a long battle with landlords and other wealthy elites (Bradley, 2024, p. 59). One of the most ostentatious examples of his fight with the old aristocracy of New York was the case against the Livingston manor. In the early 19th century, the Livingston family operated a sort of neo-feudalist system in which they owned a large estate and functioned essentially as lords to anyone who lived there, including a group of farmers whom Van Buren would represent. He eagerly took up the farmers' case, seeking to strike a blow at the heart of such an old landed family like the Livingstons. Van Buren persuaded the farmers not to sue the Livingstons directly as to avoid the New York Supreme Court, which he knew had a strong conservative, pro-landlord lean. He instead decided to create a petition directly to the state legislature, which would be much more pliable to Van Buren's arguments (Bradley, 2024, p. 59). He targeted the nearly one hundred and fifty year old land grant that the Livingstons used to justify their rights to the manor. His case exceeded one hundred pages of facts, deeds, and testimony showing that the Livingston family had engaged in extensive fraud over the years and illegally enlarged their land holdings by deceiving the courts and altering historic maps. Van Buren sent his evidence to the press, and the story reached the State's Attorney General who began to pursue legal action against the Livingstons. Despite his efforts, the case was eventually struck down by the Chief Justice of the New York Supreme Court. The Livingston manor remained intact for the time being and Van Buren was smeared by the Federalist press. They would call the episode "The Manor Conspiracy" (Bradley, 2024, p. 62), even accusing Van Buren of inflaming mob violence against the Livingstons. Though he lost the case, Van Buren would forever be solidified in the minds of New Yorkers as a sort of humble warrior for the cause of the renters being oppressed by the landed aristocracy.

Despite Martin Van Buren's legal career centering on defending the most downtrodden, who were often heavily indebted to those in the upper echelons of New York society, he would occasionally turn to a callous method of self-enrichment at their expense. He would buy land that his clients had to forfeit to creditors for pennies on the dollar. He would also use his political pull to support legislation that would lead to *more* forfeitures. He heartily supported the 1811 trade embargo with Great Britain which he knew would cause insolvencies for some farmers' mortgages, which Van Buren would go on to assume for himself, increasing his own land holdings (Bradley, 2024, p. 58). Federalists would use this hypocrisy when they went on the offensive in support of the Livingstons, accusing Van Buren of seeking only to make himself richer through his clients' legal fees. That would normally be a valid accusation given Van Buren's ethical dubiousness in some previous cases, but Van Buren refused any payment from the plaintiffs in the Livingston case (Bradley, 2024, p. 59). This was most likely a calculated loss, he knew that the goodwill he could accumulate for representing the farmers pro-bono would help solidify his anti-elite reputation.

Van Buren went further to cement his reputation as the years went on. When war broke out with Great Britain in 1812, America needed to be ready to conscript men to the state's militia if necessary. Van Buren introduced a piece of legislation that became incredibly controversial: "*The Classification Law*". This bill would enable the state to draft white men of *all* backgrounds - wealthy, landed families included. (Bradley, 2024, p. 83) Despite fierce opposition from the Federalists and even some Democratic-Republicans, the bill became law. Though in the end, conscription was never pursued during this war. The legislation impressed those who sympathized with Van Buren's stand against the elite's history of draft-avoidance, namely General Winfield Scott. Scott passed the idea to Secretary of War James Monroe, who planned to use it as a framework for federal legislation (Bradley, 2024, p. 84). It was in this period of Van Buren's career where his most idealistic and ambitious ideas flourished. He would throw his weight into the fight to abolish debtors' prisons. He struck a blow against the institution as a State Senator turned appointed judge in the case of *Barry v. Mandell*, for which he wrote the majority decision: "placing debtors in the dreary walls of prison... for the misfortune of being poor was fundamentally wrong" (Bradley, 2024, p. 86). The case of *Barry v. Mandell* set an important precedent in the eventual end to debtors' prisons. During his brief time as Governor in 1829, Van Buren would also sign the "*Safety Fund*" into law. This was essentially a state-level precursor to the Federal Deposit Insurance Commission (FDIC). It required large banks to have a separate fund to cover potential losses due to potential bank failures (Bradley, 2024, p. 216).

This targeting of big-money powers would later align Van Buren with some of Andrew Jackson's many hatreds; namely Jackson's deep-rooted loathing of the banks and creditors (Bradley, 2024, p. 182). As would also be the case nearly two decades later, Van Buren would be willing to put nearly any political differences aside for the common cause of fighting an aristocracy. A strange contradiction emerged in Van Buren's thinking. While he acknowledged the danger of cults of personalities in politics, he also believed that a party functioned best with a "guiding personality" at its helm. That person for Van Buren's party - a return to Jeffersonian ideals - was General Andrew Jackson. Van Buren recognized the importance of strong, steady leadership for both a party and a country; he often became frustrated with those whom he thought were lacking in this trait, such as when he served under the first two years of DeWitt Clinton's governorship. He also lamented when a politician would hire or appoint others based on personal loyalty rather than merit, or worse, when a politician would punish those simply for being *personally* disloyal - both of which were offenses he would later dabble in.

Later in his career, as the Federalists and Anti-Federalists gradually faded into the Whigs and Democrats, the divide between the perceived “elites” and non-elites grew starker. Whigs and Democrats, like the two major parties of today, rarely agreed on much, and they especially disagreed on the meaning and interpretation of America’s past and its future (Pearson, 2020, pg. 9). Adherents to Jefferson’s agrarian dream made up the bulk of the Democratic party at the time, and the urban cohorts and more traditionally educated men made up the Whigs’ ranks. This divide in upbringing shaped the discourse of the time. Whigs looked towards the future with optimism and had a more utopian vision for America’s future. Democrats tended to fear social change happening too quickly. They had largely grown up in rural America, unaffected by the politics and business in big cities, so the prospect of those unfamiliar city-dwellers legislating for them and charting the course for America’s future was unacceptable. In the South, the wedge of slavery was also inserted into this divide. Southern Democrats took their fear of change further to *also* mean a fear of the northern “elites” meddling in their way of life and culture. Historian Joseph W. Pearson (2020) observed that “Democrats looked to defend the best of what they felt was slipping away, doubting all the while that the future meant *better*”(p. 9) in his book charting the political thought of the Whigs. So, as Democrats rationalized it at the time, their stalwart defense of slavery as an institution and, more broadly, of “white, male equality” was justified by their fight against their political rivals who they believed “combined money and power to oppress them”(Pearson, 2020, p. 9). As it can be seen, Van Buren’s Democrats routinely framed their struggle, no matter what it was, as class-centric.

A Taste for Revenge

Martin Van Buren perfected the role of the American political mastermind; he was an adept tactician as well as an efficient manager of men. In 1804 - Van Buren’s political infancy - Vice President Aaron Burr decided to run for Governor of New York. In his first real test of shrewdness, Van Buren instead threw his support behind Morgan Lewis, a New York State Supreme Court Justice. This decision proved pivotal in Van Buren’s career as a test of just how cunning he would need to be to excel in the political arena. By backing Lewis, Van Buren was spurning the Van Ness family, loyal Burr supporters to whom Van Buren was apprentice to in his early days in Albany (Bradley, 2024, p. 41). This first betrayal of his career was necessary to sustain it, as Van Buren knew that Burr was destined to lose. According to historian and Van Buren biographer Joseph M. Bradley (2024), his decision was “pragmatic and unsentimental” (p. 42).

Van Buren was usually very cordial with his political rivals. While he would debate and launch incendiary rhetoric at them, he thought of most of them as friendly rivals. Once, while on a tour of the Midwest, he met a young Whig congressman, Abraham Lincoln, in a tavern and had an hours-long lively, if a little drunken political debate with the man of the opposite party, echoing his time at his fathers’ tavern. Van Buren was generally a very agreeable man, not the most chatty or extraverted unless the specific occasion arose, but hardly ever did he resort to anger or vitriol outside of the political arena. However, when someone crossed Van Buren in a particular, disrespectful, personally offensive or otherwise odious way, Van Buren’s penchant for political revenge was unmatched in antebellum American politics. He was consistently able to maneuver, recruit, and form coalitions to execute his political plans (Bradley, 2024, p. 27).

Despite his fierce loyalty to the party, this principle like so many others of Van Buren’s could be pliable if under the right amount of stress – or if he believed that the results of breaking a principle could result in a personal windfall deemed enticing enough to offset the moral distress. When DeWitt Clinton had become a political liability to Van Buren, he orchestrated a

plot to deny him another term as Governor. To conduct this plot, he conspired to keep one of his old political rivals Rufus King in the Senate. Van Buren had previously battled King's appointment to the Senate in years past, decrying him as a "crypto-Federalist." (Bradley, 2024, p. 109) There was no greater insult Van Buren could levy on a rival at this point in his career than "Federalist." Van Buren despised the Federalist party, he saw them as pro-big government, pro-elitism, and essentially a continuation of British Imperial rule. Though he may have exaggerated King's "crypto-Federalism" for political purposes, the fact that he would ally himself with someone of that nature shows the lengths he would go to get his way. He assembled a coalition called the "Bucktails" in opposition to the Clintonians, though both were technically still under the umbrella of the Democratic-Republican Party. The Bucktails - or as journalist Thurlow Weed unceremoniously called them "Van Buren's pimps" (Bradley, 2024, p. 146) - had now been positioned as a sizable opposition faction to Clinton in State government (Bradley, 2024, p. 118).

Even though Van Buren didn't succeed in ousting Clinton in 1820, his Bucktail candidates outperformed in the down-ballot races, giving his faction a majority in the State Senate. Van Buren moved swiftly to consolidate his own power within the Bucktails. In a staggering display of hypocrisy for the sake of revenge, Van Buren would use his new State Senate majority to effectively purge the state government of those perceived as loyal to Governor Clinton, an act which Van Buren would lambast Clinton for doing earlier. In just two days, Van Buren's faction would fire a stunning 724 officials appointed by Clinton or other administrations and in the coming weeks and months thousands more would also be fired (Bradley, 2024, p. 120). Van Buren used his power to weaponize the state government against its Governor in a stunning feat of partisan infighting (Bradley, 2024, p. 125). By the time Van Buren had finished with him, Clinton had been reduced to a figurehead with no real power, so the Governor chose not to seek re-election in 1822. In the next gubernatorial election, Van Buren's preferred candidate, Judge Joseph C. Yates, won in a landslide against Clinton's pick, Solomon Southwick. Yates would win a staggering 97.79% of the vote. This impressive victory in addition to Clinton's waning influence allowed Van Buren and the Bucktails to have near total control of the state's government after 1822, ushering in what would be known as "The Albany Regency" (Bradley, 2024, p. 143).

Van Buren finally put some of his New York grudges behind him – briefly - during the presidential election of 1824. At first, Van Buren looked towards Andrew Jackson, however he recoiled when he learned that DeWitt Clinton had endorsed him. He instead pivoted towards William H. Crawford (Bradley, 2024, p. 141). To Van Buren's credit, his initial endorsement of Crawford wasn't fully based on his hatred of Clinton's endorsement. He believed that, as an old-school Jeffersonian, Crawford could unite the Northern and the Southern factions of the Democratic-Republican party. Crawford would never gain popularity in New York, as he was viewed as too pro-South. Eventually, Van Buren grew to admire Andrew Jackson and defected from his support of Crawford despite Clinton's previous endorsement (Bradley, 2024, p. 171). Van Buren's vendettas would also sometimes backfire on him; which is exactly what happened during the House Speaker Race of 1821. Martin Van Buren refused to back the moderate New Yorker John W. Taylor. Even though Taylor was completely qualified and mostly aligned with Van Buren's personal interests and was much liked by his constituents back at home, he had not backed Van Buren's 1820 plot to dethrone DeWitt Clinton. Van Buren was so bent on personal revenge against Taylor that he backed an anti-tariff Southerner for the Speakership: Philip Barbour. In doing so, he actively undermined the people of New York and their pro-tariff

interests (Bradley, 2024, p. 136). By advancing Barbour's career, he also inadvertently planted the seeds of a plot against him nearly a decade later when Barbour went on to challenge Van Buren for the Vice Presidential nomination, which will be discussed in more depth later.

His New York political feuds would also hinder his reputation in Washington. President James Monroe refused to budge to Van Buren's protests as to the appointment of Solomon Van Rensselaer, a New York Federalist, as Postmaster General. Van Buren's fiery rhetoric inspired a mob of enraged Bucktails to descend on Van Rensselaer's home and set it ablaze, nobody was seriously hurt in the debacle (Bradley, 2024, p. 138). While Van Buren attempted some damage-control and distanced himself from the crime, it damaged his image amongst his peers. In an effort to course-correct and repair his lightly charred political reputation, he switched gears towards combating Federalists instead of engaging in internal squabbles that would further damage his party. He successfully got two speculative Supreme Court candidates scuttled due to their past Federalist ties. He somewhat successfully repaired his image as a kingmaker of sorts, one congressman called Van Buren "the greatest manager in the city" (Bradley, 2024, p. 139). Years later, during his stint as Secretary of State, he advised Andrew Jackson to veto the *Maysville Road Bill* under the guise of being fiscally conservative, but in reality the veto was a partisan attack against the bill's most beneficiary state, Kentucky, home of Jackson and Van Buren's rival Henry Clay (Bradley, 2024, p. 230).

Suffrage

Martin Van Buren's humble upbringings would not be forgotten by his political opponents. His 1804 endorsement of Aaron Burr's gubernatorial opponent angered Peter Van Schaack, a stalwart Burr supporter. When Martin went to vote in said election, Peter's son challenged the legality of Van Buren's suffrage. Van Schaack accused Van Buren of not meeting the freehold requirements needed to vote at the time. This infuriated and embarrassed Van Buren. The election inspectors forced him to take an oath to his freehold status on the spot, the compulsion to do so Van Buren would later call "an indignity" (Martin Van Buren, 1920, p. 15). This incident would influence Van Buren's views of suffrage, and especially his views of the freehold requirements, from that point onward. While in the New York State House, Van Buren immediately extended suffrage to all white men who served in the War of 1812 but did not otherwise meet the land ownership requirements. The Bucktails would call the "restriction of the elective franchise... an odious and aristocratic feature of the constitution" (Bradley, 2024, p. 125). They called for a state Constitutional Convention to change voting laws, among other things. Some reforms were proposed out of a legitimate feeling of injustice and some were done to punish DeWitt Clinton. This phrase "aristocratic" also speaks to the intersection of anti-elitism and suffrage within the Bucktails' thinking. They proposed a referendum be held to assemble the Convention. For demanding these reforms, Bucktails now postured themselves as "champions of democracy" (Bradley, 2024, p. 126). Nearly 75% of the electorate voted to call a Convention. Though he promised "temperate reform", Van Buren privately wrote that the convention would "pit the yeomanry of the state against a nefarious band of speculators" (Bradley, 2024, p. 126). He also often aligned with the more "extreme" positions in regards to expanding voting rights.

Van Buren's legal career also veered into the intersection of racial politics and suffrage. He once represented a voting inspector who was accused of denying a black man his voting rights on a "dubious technicality" (Bradley, 2024, p. 168) clearly showing his preference for one type of voters' rights as opposed to another's. Despite the Bucktails' outward push for greater suffrage, it was usually politically motivated. They wanted to enfranchise those who would vote *for them*. In 1777, free black men and white men were held to the same requirements for voting,

but the Democratic-Republicans had weakened the voting ability of free black men consistently in the decades after. What would now be considered poll taxes were a favored tactic. These included bills that erected barriers to black suffrage such as requiring black voters to first provide papers proving their free status in order to vote - which no *white* voter was required to do (Bradley, 2024, p. 127). In language similar to that of 1960's anti-civil rights conservatives, the conservative wing of the Bucktails would accuse black voters of being too lax with their votes, not taking the right seriously, prepared to "sell their votes to the highest bidder" (Bradley, 2024, p. 128), and generally not being intelligent enough to appreciate their own suffrage.

The conservative fringe of his party proposed a *total* ban on black suffrage in the new State Constitution, Van Buren opposed this. He could not in good conscience support disenfranchising tax-paying citizens, though he knew that if the new Constitution put the races as equals, it risked not passing, which would be a devastating political failure for him. So, to save his Convention and his reputation, he would support a proviso that required black voters to have a freehold of \$250 - which was the same requirement the Bucktails detested so much when it was applied to white voters (Bradley, 2024, p. 128). This new requirement would have drastically decreased the amount of enfranchised black voters in New York; as only about 100 free black men in the state could meet those requirements at the time. Van Buren would defend this restriction by saying that it would incentivize "inducements to industry", which was a similar argument to Federalists had made when imposing the same barriers to white voters (Bradley, 2024, p. 129). The proviso ended up failing, much to the "moderates'" dismay. Its failure to pass harmed Van Buren's standing amongst both moderates and radicals, who both now saw his promises as somewhat empty. "He certainly flinched upon the question of suffrage" wrote one member of the Convention about Van Buren (Bradley, 2024, p. 129). Despite that setback, the Convention was a success for the Bucktails and for Van Buren. Neither side got everything they had asked for, but compromise allowed for some modest progress to be made when it came to suffrage. Most advancements would only apply to white males, who would be instrumental in Democrats' future electoral successes (Bradley, 2024, p. 131). During his brief stint as Governor, Van Buren would change state election laws to, among other things, ban the practice of bribing voters (Bradley, 2024, p. 216).

The question of suffrage would essentially rest for two decades as the issue of white male voting rights had been mostly settled in the Nation. However, in his campaign for the Democratic Nomination in 1844, Van Buren would make a crucial break with his party on this issue, the first of many. The old colonial charters which had enabled men to vote only if they owned land had mostly been done away with by 1844, with the exception of in Rhode Island, and a rebellion there by one Thomas W. Dorr would lead to the formation of two opposing state governments. Martin Van Buren would stay surprisingly true to his previous stance of near-universal white male suffrage that he had taken during the New York Constitutional Convention two decades prior. He would fully support Dorr's rebellion. He would extend "most hearty sympathies [for] the principles of equal rights and democratic liberty which must ultimately prevail in Rhode Island, as elsewhere" (Bradley, 2024, p. 437). The innocuous end to the previous sentence "as elsewhere", may hold a deeper meaning in the shifting political mind of Martin Van Buren. He could surely see that an entire wing of his party led by John C. Calhoun had become openly hostile to direct democracy on the basis of slavery. Nearly all of Calhoun's factions' opposition to Dorr's demands hinged ultimately on slavery. They no doubt worried about the implications of full suffrage for whites, regardless of status, as it may be a "slippery slope" towards suffrage for *others*. Van Buren had held these same beliefs, or at least espoused them, earlier in his dissent

towards John Quincy Adams's Panama Congress - which will be discussed more below. But now, he had changed his tune. This shift may well be a prelude to his more profound changes in thought and growing dissatisfaction with what his party had become. Calhoun would disregard Dorr's demands of universal suffrage in his state, equating "the divine right to govern to the divine right of kings" (Bradley, 2024, p. 437). This almost Federalist position angered enough Democrats to cause Calhoun to exit the 1844 race. Van Buren, perhaps, at this point still believed that his party could revert back to its more egalitarian roots if given enough time and pressure. The exit of Calhoun from the race could've bolstered that belief.

Party Unity

It may seem strange to attest that Van Buren's unambiguous betrayal of the Democrats in 1848 was a display of party unity, but in some ways it was. He knew from *decades* of political service that an issue like slavery or expansionism could and would fracture a party beyond repair. He had seen factions and parties rise and fall, and his Democratic Party still stood, though now on ground he was very uncomfortable with. Van Buren reasoned that in order to save his party, he would have to temporarily hobble it - a painful course correction was necessary.

By the time Van Buren was stepping into his own as a political operative, he saw loyalty to the party as tantamount to all other values, a vast contradiction to what he would display nearly four decades later. Van Buren was disturbed by DeWitt Clinton's tendencies to put himself over his party during the Presidential election of 1812 (Bradley, 2024, p. 77). He felt that this was dangerous to the party, and that Clinton was being reckless, risking a sectional split or even a fusion with Federalists in the North. The prospect of a party system defined by slavery or sectionalism terrified Van Buren. During the 1828 race, he was keenly afraid of this possibility, so he advocated for the return of some form of a Federalist versus Anti-Federalist system. He wrote that, if that system did not return, one that was based on "geographical divisions founded on local interests or, what is worse, prejudices between free & slave holding states will inevitably take their place" (Bradley, 2024, p. 186). He wanted "planters of the South and plain Republicans of the North" (Bradley, 2024, p. 186) to come together and overcome the sectional divide to support Jackson that year, whom he thought would benefit both camps.

One of the main threads connecting the Democrats at that time was a deep distrust of monied powers. Democrats would routinely lambast the Whigs for orienting their political policies "toward protecting the affluence of the few at the expense of the many" (Bradley, 2024, p. 28). This hostility towards monied elites was perfectly displayed by Jackson - and by extension, Van Buren's - decade long war on the National Bank charter. At the twilight of Andrew Jackson's presidency, Martin Van Buren's political future became clearer. His party in New York, once the Bucktails, an offshoot of the Jeffersonian Democratic-Republicans, now referred to themselves simply as "Democrats" (Bradley, 2024, p. 258). Once a derisive term used against them because they "caved to public pressure" (Bradley, 2024, p. 258), Van Buren would reclaim the mantle. In the coming years, though, he would struggle to keep his new Democratic Party together. Any hint of a split terrified Van Buren. He worried that a sectional rift could be the "undoing" of the new party that he had worked so tirelessly to form (Bradley, 2024, p. 278).

As President, Van Buren would attempt to take the helm of the party he had created. Though a Democrat would spend a third consecutive term in the White House, Washington and the nation in general had grown tired from the Jackson years; their hostility and unpredictability had exhausted them thoroughly. Van Buren was to be a more traditional, diplomatic President. He hoped to steer the Democrats to "be about principles and not men," because, as a Senator wrote, "the nation sighs for political repose" (Bradley, 2024, p. 325). Keeping harmony in his

party would prove harder than he anticipated. Even after his defeat in the 1844 Democratic nomination contest to James K. Polk, Van Buren tried to reunify his broken party. He knew that its factions in New York, those who had previously expressed anger and exhaustion at continuing concessions made to the South, were the key to Polk's victory. Despite his previous streak of inter-partisan vengeance, Van Buren put aside his defeat and even his distaste for Polk's "imperialist" principles and set his machine to work once more to elect the Democrat. It worked. Polk won New York by just over five thousand votes, or about one percentage point, and Van Buren took some deserved personal credit for Polk's victory. In the end, he believed that Polk's "imperialism" and expansionism were preferable to anything Henry Clay could offer, showing that his devotion to party transcended *almost* any issue-based disagreement (Bradley, 2024, p. 446).

Introduction To Slavery

Historian James M. Bradley opined in his biography of the eighth President that "Van Buren... had little to say on the great moral cause of his era... slavery flummoxed him. He had no solution" (Bradley, 2024, p. 114).

It must be shown how and why the man who spent his early legal and political career fighting the richest of the rich in New York would become essentially a puppet to the biggest aristocracy in America: slavery. Martin Van Buren's first introduction to the "peculiar institution" came early in his life, as his mother and father owned six slaves. The Van Buren family were raised in a time when New York had not yet outlawed slavery; the slaves had been inherited from his mother Maria's family (Bradley, 2024, p. 11). Van Buren would eventually marry a woman named Hannah Hoes; she came from a somewhat notorious Kinderhook family; her father was one of the most fervent loyalists to the British Crown the town had ever produced. When Hannah's mother became a widow, she and the family's three slaves would raise her children (Bradley, 2024, p. 52). Later in his life, around 1814, Van Buren would come into possession of a slave himself. He briefly assumed ownership of a black man named "Tom" who then escaped to freedom in Massachusetts, where slavery had been illegal since 1783. About ten years later, a man from Berlin, New York would offer to buy "Tom" from Van Buren in exchange for "small compensation" due to the risk of venturing into Massachusetts to recapture the now free man (Bradley, 2024, p. 168). In reply, Van Buren callously wrote that "if he could get him without violence I would take \$50" (Bradley, 2024, p. 169). The fact that Van Buren owned a slave and was so nonchalantly willing to buy and sell a human being would severely undercut his later arguments against slavery, though his altogether noncommittal attitude towards it also speaks to his early lack of convictions on the issue.

One of Van Buren's earliest mentors, DeWitt Clinton, was a member of the New York Manumission Society. (Bradley, 2024, p. 114) Clinton was an idealist when it came to slavery, promoting full abolition nearly sixty years before it would come to pass nationwide (Bradley, 2024, p. 50). In fact, his views on most things were very progressive for their time; he wanted to fund public schools, rejected Jefferson's agrarian culture, wanted to extend rights to Catholics, and – most offbeat for Van Buren – supported large public works projects like the Erie Canal. Despite their differences in some areas of policy (especially slavery), Clinton's personality, charm, and momentary political expediency would be enough to cut through any trepidation Van Buren may have had on the issue (Bradley, 2024, p. 51). Though their relationship would later sour, the reason was *never* because of Clinton's progressive stance on slavery.

The Missouri Question

Martin Van Buren's first entanglement with slavery as a political question came in the 1819 gubernatorial election. As Van Buren schemed to remove DeWitt Clinton, the "Missouri Question" had begun to dominate public discourse. Van Buren desperately wanted to keep the issue far away from the New York race (Bradley, 2024, p. 113). This became impossible once fellow New York politician James Tallmadge introduced what would be known as the "*Tallmadge Amendment*" in Congress. He shocked the nation and New York politics by proposing a ban on slavery in the soon-to-be state of Missouri. The debate became fierce, with thinly veiled suggestions of political violence and disunion coming from Southern congressmen. "Let it come!" defiantly replied Tallmadge to the suggestions of civil war (Bradley, 2024, p. 114). With Van Buren trying exhaustively to avoid the issue, the Clintonians intended to fully take advantage of the situation and lambast Van Buren's silence, this criticism grew when Van Buren was conveniently "away on circuit duty" on the day of a public meeting about the Missouri question (Bradley, 2024, p. 115). When the Tallmadge Amendment finally came to his committee in Congress, Van Buren did not sign it (Bradley, 2024, p. 115). However, when the New York Legislature introduced a resolution to urge the Senate to approve the Amendment, he *did* sign it; adding yet another twist of inconsistency to Van Buren's career. He claimed that it was to disallow Clinton and his campaign from turning a "no" vote into "political capital" (Bradley, 2024, p. 115) against him. But, given his future stance on the practice of slavery, this may have been his *true* opinion creeping outwards. Despite his eventual quasi-support, the Tallmadge Amendment was defeated and Missouri was admitted to the Union as a slave state (Bradley, 2024, p. 117). Less than a decade later In the election of 1824, Van Buren would eventually throw his support behind Andrew Jackson, who owned ninety five slaves at the peak of his plantation career in 1829 (Bradley, 2024, p. 181).

The legality of slavery in post-revolution New York had been all but settled in 1799 with the *Gradual Abolition Law*, which would lead to eventual emancipation for the children of slaves in the state. In 1817, Van Buren, as a member of the New York legislature, would vote for the complete abolition of slavery in the state as per Governor Daniel D. Tompkins' request. It should be noted that Van Buren was not a "radical" outlier in this vote, as the vast majority of the state senate also voted in the affirmative (Bradley, 2024, p. 114). The official end to slavery in the state of New York would come on July 4th, 1827 (Bradley, 2024, p.119).

Early Capitulations To The South

Another of the main reasons for Van Buren's political metamorphosis was the deep sense of betrayal he felt from the American South. Van Buren almost always catered to the wishes of the Southern states, yet they rarely returned the favor with loyalty to him. The North-South rift that gradually formed alongside Van Buren's political career caused sectionalism to become a litmus test of sorts, despite his amenability to the South, he was from New York, and thus would never be *fully* trusted. One reason that the South always kept in its back pocket to distrust Van Buren was a singular piece of his wartime legislation package during the War of 1812. Van Buren had sponsored a bill that would create regiments of African American troops to fight in the war, and those who fought would be granted freedom after the conflict ended (Bradley, 2024, p. 79). This minor act of good will towards the African American population of New York was later used by the South as evidence of Van Buren's supposed *true* sympathies against them. Historian James M. Bradley would say that this proposal was "perhaps the most racially progressive measure of his career" (Bradley, 2024, p. 114).

By the time of the 1812 election, Van Buren was now a close confidant of Democratic-Republican/Federalist fusion candidate DeWitt Clinton. He had already realized what Clinton had not: they would need the support of the South to win against Madison (Bradley, 2024, p. 71). Always a party man, Van Buren feared that by splitting the vote between a Northerner (Clinton) who was a known opponent of slavery, and a Southerner and incumbent President (Madison) the party risked a fissure of sectionalism. His association with Clinton would also be a frequent target of consternation by the South for years to come. Van Buren had hoped that gradual emancipation, a relatively moderate position on the issue of slavery at the time, would become the law of the land, but he knew in reality that the South would never accept this outcome given their economic dependence on slavery (Bradley, 2024, p. 114). In his decision not to sign the Tallmadge Amendment, which would outlaw slavery in the new state of Missouri, Van Buren questioned the concept of attacking “politics of the slave states and the standing of their supporters in the free states... through inflammatory assaults on the institution of slavery” (Bradley, 2024, p. 115). This was clearly Van Buren coming to the moral defense of the South for political expediency. He had naively hoped that this capitulation would put an end to the Missouri situation – and the legislative question of slavery - once and for all. By the time Van Buren entered the Senate and went to Washington, the South’s political power was fading. After 1812, Northerners held a numerical advantage to Southerners in Congress (Bradley, 2024, p. 133). This fact, especially after the controversy over the admission of Missouri, made Southerners in Congress very nervous. They believed that public sentiment against slavery was growing, threatening their way of life (Bradley, 2024, p. 134). They worried that if the government was controlled by Northerners it could and would meddle in their institutions. “They can more propriety emancipate.” Claimed North Carolina Senator Nathaniel Macon on the prospect of having a Northern majority (Bradley, 2024, p. 134).

In 1821, Van Buren took his submission to Southern interests to a place that harmed his own state. In the fight for the House Speakership, Van Buren aligned with the Southern delegations in backing Philip Barbour. A staunch Southerner, Barbour opposed any and all restrictions of slavery. Barbour also argued in favor of possible secession and nullification (Bradley, 2024, p. 136). While praising Van Buren’s managerial skills, New Hampshire congressman William Plumer, Jr. said his “leaning was to the South” (Bradley, 2024, p. 139). Van Buren also began to grow affectionate with southern politicians, namely North Carolina’s Nathaniel Macon whom he called “Father Macon” (Bradley, 2024, p. 139). Van Buren exploited this relationship to be named head of the Judiciary Committee in the Senate. He once again joined the Southern states when he rose in opposition to President John Quincy Adams’ proposed participation in the Panama Congress of 1826. Organized by Simon Bolivar, the conference was meant to organize a league of Republics in the “New World”. Adams wanted to send an American delegation to the Congress to endorse their efforts at self-determination (Bradley, 2024, p. 166). Van Buren, however, vehemently opposed the incursion into South/Central American politics as an imperialist overreach. He was joined in opposition by a swath of mostly Southern senators. The speech Van Buren gave on the floor of the Senate attacked the Panama mission as being nothing more than an ill-defined attempt to abandon the “cherished principles of noninterference into foreign wars” (Bradley, 2024, p. 166). Van Buren refrained entirely from mentioning the issue of race in his oppositional statements, as was his usual nature. His Southern colleagues did not refrain, however. They argued that American legitimization of the Panama Congress would “antagonize the slave states, divide the country, and foment slave uprisings both at home and abroad” (Bradley, 2024, p. 167). This fear was based on the fact that America would

be negotiating on equal footing with those of non-white heritage. They pointed to the fact that some of the other leaders invited by Bolivar rose to power on the promise of universal suffrage for *all* races. Another point of contention was that Bolivar and many of his invitees regarded the Haitian Revolution – a massive slave rebellion that forced the French out of the island – as a positive development, and viewed Haiti as independent, not as a rebellious French colony (Bradley, 2024, p. 167). During the impassioned debates, Tennessee Senator Hugh Lawson White asked those supporting the Panama Congress: “can it be the desire of any prominent politician in the United States to divide us into parties based on the subject of slavery?”

The Election of 1832 & the Nullification Crisis

Martin Van Buren did defy the south somewhat in his eventual endorsement of Andrew Jackson in 1828, the Southern factions of the party initially saw Jackson as a liability, as a dangerous “wayward politician” (Bradley, 2024, p. 183). During his bid for the Vice Presidency in 1832, Van Buren was relentlessly attacked by Southern Democrats. Vice Presidential candidates rarely received so much attention at the time but after John C. Calhoun’s years long feud with Jackson and with sectionalism rising, the South was out for blood. They laid the blame for the *Tariff of 1828* (The Tariff of Abominations) on Van Buren because he had supported it in order to harm President Adams. Their exhaustive list of “betrayals” featured familiar jabs, namely Van Buren’s support for an all-black regiment during the War of 1812 and his previous political alliance with DeWitt Clinton. The Southern delegation to the 1832 Democratic Convention had already settled on an alternative for Vice President: Philip P. Barbour, the man who Van Buren had helped become Speaker of the House a decade earlier (Bradley, 2024, p. 271). This further indignity should have served as early proof to Van Buren that capitulation to the Southern interests would never be rewarded with political power or trust. Even when Van Buren essentially disregarded his home state’s priorities when endorsing Barbour for Speaker, the South would *still* deem him disloyal. He decided to go on the offensive to prove his loyalty. Newspapers run by Van Buren’s allies would laud his “attachment to the Rights of the States” (Bradley, 2024, p. 272) and many other platitudes in order to calm the unhappy Southern delegation. Serving as a spoiler like Van Buren would 16 years later, Barbour was positioning himself to deny Van Buren the majority of Electoral Votes needed to be elected Vice President on the same ticket as Jackson. Seven Southern states officially put Barbour’s name as Jackson’s running mate on their ballots. They hoped that a split Vice Presidential ticket would throw the Vice Presidency to the Senate, which was already unfriendly to Van Buren after denying his Ambassadorship earlier that year (the vote was a tie, broken in the negative by Calhoun) (Bradley, 2024, p. 272). Van Buren, however, believed he could still outmaneuver this plot. A campaign arose to pit Van Buren against Barbour in a series of questions that would be published in newspapers around the country, these became known as the “*Shocco Springs Resolutions*.” In them, Barbour would slightly soften his previous stance on nullification and secession, saying that they were a “last resort.” Van Buren would oppose both options outright (Bradley, 2024, p. 273), he would then reiterate that he was “a dedicated friend of the South.”

Barbour’s plan failed and Van Buren was elected Vice President. Current Vice President John C. Calhoun, however, would not go quietly. After years of being a thorn in the side of Jackson, Calhoun would abdicate the Vice Presidency early and be immediately appointed to the Senate by South Carolina. As a Senator, Calhoun would outright defy the Jackson administration and the United States. South Carolina’s new “Nullifier” government would try to invalidate a federal tariff that they viewed as unconstitutional and unfair to their state. Jackson blamed the impasse on “sour-grape cranks bent on revenge” (Bradley, 2024, p. 277), and he was partially

correct, as the man with the sourest of grapes in this situation was indeed Calhoun. Jackson had also partially miscalculated, and Van Buren knew it; the grievances of South Carolina had not sprung up overnight, nullification had been a threat raised for a long time and had only now been invoked. Jackson only made the situation worse in Van Buren's eyes when he published a scathing letter to the South Carolinians, calling their actions treasonous. Van Buren tried to lower the temperature with his own rather bland letter, but the damage had been done (Bradley, 2024, p. 279). Van Buren advised Jackson to exercise caution and moderation when it came to the Nullification Crisis, but the President had no appetite for it. Jackson called for "the modern doctrine of nullification & secession [to be] put down forever... the union *shall* be preserved" (Bradley, 2024, p. 280). Van Buren, always a hesitant fence-sitter, was rattled by Jackson's unflinching resolve in the face of this crisis. He searched for a solution that would antagonize the fewest of those involved as possible, but could not even convince his home state's legislature to pass a resolution to support Jackson in this crisis. Jackson's "*Force Bill*", which would compel a state to pay tariffs by force if necessary, was too inflammatory for Van Buren's regency to agree with, and some of them now saw the issue as a dispute over tariffs rather than one about secession and nullification (Bradley, 2024, p. 281).

The Election of 1836

The issue of Martin Van Buren's loyalty or disloyalty to the South would rear its head once every four years at this point in his political career. In 1836, Van Buren, now atop the Democratic ticket, once again had to reassure Southerners that he was not antagonistic towards slavery. No amount of guarantees could assuage their fears. Abel P. Upshur, a Nullifier from Virginia, unironically warned "if elected, [Van Buren] would free all the slaves in the South" (Bradley, 2024, p. 311). Van Buren found the entire situation to be maddening; he languished that he could never be seen in the correct light by any side. According to historian James M. Bradley, Van Buren was "a sellout to the North, [and] a stealth abolitionist to the South" (Bradley, 2024, p. 311).

Richard Mentor Johnson, a Representative and former Senator from Kentucky was selected as Van Buren's running mate. Van Buren was already worried that choosing a running mate without direct ties to the deep South would be detrimental to the balance of the ticket, but picking *this* man in particular was terrifying to Van Buren on an altogether new level. Johnson's "family" had become the topic of great controversy in Washington's social circles. Johnson would "marry" one of his over a hundred slaves: Julia Ann Chinn (Bradley, 2024, p. 305). Though her heritage was supposedly one-eighth black and she could "pass" as white, it was still widely known that she had been his slave. Not only is the issue of consent *very* dubious in any instance of "marrying" a slave, it becomes altogether more horrifying when taken into account that Johnson and Julia had their first child together when she was either fourteen or fifteen, *and* that Johnson would later have an "affair" with Julia's niece, also his slave (Bradley, 2024, p. 305). It was not, however, the issue of Julia's age or legal status which offended the South, it was that the "marriage" was interracial. Johnson and Chinn were ridiculed in the South, with caricatures depicting Julia using every racist stereotype of the time. Johnson would bring Julia and their children to public events, even segregated ones, and refused to comply with those laws. A Van Buren ally in Virginia worried that Johnson's candidacy meant "death to Van Burenism in some half dozen states" (Bradley, 2024, p. 306). Other prominent Democrats including James K. Polk warned Jackson and Van Buren of similar concerns. Van Buren, reminiscent of his other stances on racial issues at the time, was completely silent on the matter (Bradley, 2024, p. 306).

To ensure the South would back his bid for the Presidency, especially with Johnson as his running mate, Van Buren would sink to new lows of political chicanery to appease them. To assure the South that not *all* Northerners, not even a majority of them, were abolitionists, Van Buren urged his New York regency to take up arms against New York's growing abolitionist crowds. "A little mob discipline", Secretary of State John Forsyth suggested to him (Bradley, 2024, p. 312). Van Buren took this suggestion literally and ordered his loyalists to disrupt an abolitionist event in Utica, his men would invade the event and destroy literature and property. Not long after, the New York legislature proposed a bill that would outlaw abolitionist activities in the state and the state's Postmaster announced he would no longer allow the dissemination of abolitionist literature from New York into the South (Bradley, 2024, p. 313). The regency men would go so far as to ransack the offices of multiple newspapers that had endorsed Van Buren, but *also* endorsed abolition (Bradley, 2024, p. 312). Van Buren would then publicly decry "the continued attempts to prejudice my friends, as well as myself, in the estimation of the South in respect to the Slave Question" (Bradley, 2024, p. 313). Another hot-button issue in the campaign was whether or not slavery should be allowed in the District of Columbia. Van Buren, in his typical verbose fashion, penned a 3,000 word response, in part saying that he was "inflexible and uncompromising" when it came to the question. Even outright admitting that it was "against the wishes of the slave-holding States" (Bradley, 2024, p. 316). This shameful chapter in Van Buren's career highlights just how low he was prepared to go for power and to further his own political goals; and just how dramatic a change he would make in 12 years.

For the time being, his moral submission to the South had paid off, Van Buren was elected President. He had won the Electoral Votes from the slave states Missouri, Arkansas, Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Virginia; eight out of thirteen of them in total. Van Buren would staff his cabinet with some of the most notorious Southern politicians, namely John Forsyth as his Secretary of State. Forsyth was a staunch supporter of Indian Removal of the Cherokees in the South as well as a diehard proponent of slavery and the South's right to continue and expand it (Bradley, 2024, p. 369).

Indian Removal

Though tragedies like the Trail of Tears are mostly associated with the Andrew Jackson administration, Van Buren played a far larger role than is usually attributed to him. His first task in the job of Indian Removal was to serve as a Whip to the New York Jacksonians. This proved incredibly difficult, despite Van Buren's still immense pull in his home state. Pro-Indian movements started by groups like the Quakers had become very popular in western New York (Bradley, 2024, p. 234). Van Buren met the challenge of persuading those whom, as he disparagingly remarked, were "ideologically inchoate" (Bradley, 2024, p. 234). One of Van Buren's fiercest critics on the matter of Indian removal was his niece Christina Cantine. The two would talk politics often, and on one occasion, Christina would erupt at her uncle. She would denounce the Jackson administration's treatment of both Indians in the South and those who supported them in the North. Her most stinging attack was "Uncle! I must say to you that it is my earnest wish that you may lose the election, as I believe that such a result ought to follow such acts!" (Bradley, 2024, p. 269). Van Buren was both saddened at his niece's sentiments, but he respected them. He also worried deeply that too many New Yorkers shared them and may vote accordingly. Van Buren's fears were unfounded, however, and he won New York in 1836 by just over nine points. This, it seems, justified Van Buren's dismissal of the Quakers and other pro-Indian groups' concerns. Historian James M. Bradley (2024) noted that not only did he

continue Jackson's harsh legacy of Indian Removal, but he expanded upon it. Indians' "expatriation from their ancestral homeland reached new levels of brutality during his presidency" (p. 366). Bradley (2024) also called what would come "one of the greatest humanitarian crimes in US history" (p. 367). The army, under Jackson and Van Buren's administrations, would inter thousands of Native Americans to await deportation westward. Treatment at these facilities was obscene. Death came for many of the imprisoned natives in the form of disease, violence, starvation, and just plain exhaustion from long marches in the Southern heat. On this issue like on most others, Martin Van Buren fell somewhere in the middle of his party's Overton Window. He did not align himself with the likes of John C. Calhoun in the radical, more nationalistic wing of his party, nor was he among the ranks of the Quakers or other pro-Indian groups in New York causing him so much headache. Van Buren generally favored Indian Removal for most of his career, but was essentially ambivalent towards it, carrying out Jackson's legacy without much thought. Whether he knew it or not (or cared), Van Buren had built his career by aligning himself with the most fervent and violent supporters of Indian Removal: William H. Crawford, John Forsyth, and Andrew Jackson (Bradley, 2024, p. 368).

Martin Van Buren would attempt to whitewash his own history with Indian Removal Policy in his autobiography, written nearly two decades after the fact. He would lament that the Indians had developed a "hopeless dependence upon the clemency and justice of the United States" (Bradley, 2024, p. 368). He expressed that, despite "untiring efforts" to live harmoniously with the Native Americans, it simply was not working (Bradley, 2024, p. 368). He framed the forced removal of the Native American tribes from the South into the West as "the only solution", and that he wanted the federal government to *assist* the Indians in forming their own government capable of protecting them from threats from within and without. "Removal had been the wisest, and best course for the Indians." Van Buren concluded (Van Buren, 1920, p. 276).

In what appears to be an attack of his own conscience, which apparently lay dormant for most of Van Buren's Indian Removal efforts, he would reverse course and defect to opposing the *Treaty of Buffalo Creek* in 1840. The Treaty would remove the Iroquois Confederacy aligned Indians from upstate New York and allow development on their resource-rich land. The treaty was forged like most Indian removal treaties of the time; the federal government would engage in negotiations with a small group within the larger tribe. The government would either promise them safety, protection, or simply bribes of alcohol. The Indians would usually agree, despite sometimes not even speaking or reading English, they would "sign" a document and be expelled soon thereafter. Van Buren saw that the Treaty of Buffalo Creek was an especially dubious document. He initially supported it, but asked the Senate to verify that the Iroquois Confederacy Indians had *actually* agreed to it, or if the usual tricks had been played on them (Bradley, 2024, p. 386). The Senate voted on the matter despite Van Buren's concerns over "irregularities" and budgetary concerns. The vote was a tie, and Vice President Richard M. Johnson broke the tie in the affirmative against Van Buren's wishes, ratifying the treaty (Bradley, 2024, p. 386).

The Amistad Case

While Martin Van Buren's presidency is usually considered somewhat uneventful, one major exception is the case of the Amistad Africans, which took national headlines and pop culture by storm in 1839. For some background; the Amistad Africans were a crew of captured West Africans who commandeered an illegal Spanish slaver ship at sea (*the Amistad*), killed some of its crew, and eventually ended up in New Haven, Connecticut. A judge was assigned to their case, as the remaining crew accused the captive men of murder and piracy, seeking to return

them to bondage in Cuba. A swath of abolitionists, including former President John Quincy Adams, rushed to the men's defense. They countered that because the men were *illegally* taken as slaves, violating multiple naval treaties between America and Great Britain, they were free men who acted in a totally legal manner by killing their captors. Before Judge Judson's verdict was even reached, however, Van Buren and Secretary of State John Forsyth would send another ship, *the Grampus*, to the Connecticut coast. Van Buren had so anticipated the verdict to be against the Africans that he had sent sealed orders to the *Grampus'* Captain John S. Paine to immediately take the Africans to Cuba the moment a verdict was announced, before the abolitionists could make an appeal (Rediker, 2012, p. 149). The hypocrisy of Van Buren to act in a way to deny even the possibility of an appeal while later launching an appeal himself shows his desperation to end this controversy in the favor of his Southern benefactors as quickly as possible. The Judge eventually ruled in the Amistad men's favor. He ruled that they were, indeed, legally free and should be allowed to return to Africa as they had expressed desire to do.

The case could have ended there, but Van Buren and his cabinet were not happy with the Judge's decision. They viewed the case not as one of international maritime law or mutiny, but as a slave uprising (Bradley, 2024, p. 400). A case whose potential implications could shatter the fragile peace between the free North and slaveholding South. Southern Democrats fretted that, if the ruling were to stand, it would empower slaves to revolt; setting a precedent that slaves had a "legal right" to kill those who enslaved them. So, Van Buren, no doubt under some amount of pressure by his Secretary of State John Forsyth, a slaveholder, appealed the verdict (Bradley, 2024, p. 400). The very fact that Van Buren would risk prolonging the ordeal, knowing how much national attention the case was attracting, shows just how deeply he was indebted to the "slaveocracy" of the South (Bradley, 2024, p. 400). He knew that to win reelection in 1840, the South's already wavering support was paramount, and he took the calculated political risk of dragging out the controversy to the detriment of national unity rather than allow the Northern abolitionists like Adams to have such a victory - he had to be seen as fighting for Southern interests. Van Buren would use his usual evasive logic to justify his decisions in the case, arguing in favor not of returning the men to bondage, but instead of honoring the wishes of the Spanish Crown, who likewise wanted the men returned to enslavement, but the latter part remained unsaid. Van Buren criticized Judge Judson's principles as "erroneous" (Bradley, 2024, p. 401). This intervention by Van Buren was something he would have once criticized as executive overreach over the judiciary, but it had, for the time being, satisfied the hardline Southerners in his party, especially John C. Calhoun (Bradley, 2024, p. 401). By disguising his support for the South as a thinly veiled act of loyalty towards Spain, Van Buren probably hoped to mitigate the appeal's negative impact on the North, and his critical home state of New York.

The case could not have come at a worse time for Van Buren, his candidacy was already in peril due to an economic downturn and a banking crisis. Racial tensions were the last thing he wanted. "Racial tensions", however, would be a far too conservative way to describe the reverberations of the Amistad Case, historian Marcus Rediker (2012) compared it to a mini-revolution, saying "the Amistad rebels rekindled the radical egalitarian hope of the American Revolution" (p. 10). This comparison may be apt, considering that the case of the Amistad essentially jump-started a debased and demoralized Abolitionist movement in America, especially and most intensely in the North. While Van Buren had worked to demolish and scatter the Abolitionist element in New York leading up to his election, the Amistad case would reinvigorate the cause. In 1837, the year just prior to the Amistad case, it is estimated that the *American Anti-Slavery Society* had 274 local chapters in New York alone, and a nationwide

membership of about 250,000 people. In a country with a population of only about 12.86 million (according to the 1830 census), that means at least 1.9% of the country was actively involved in the Anti-Slavery movement (Rediker, 2012, p. 105). In New York alone, the Amistad Case inspired art, literature, plays, and countless newspaper articles; New York was also home to one of the biggest anti-slavery publications in America, *"The Emancipator"* (Rediker, 2012, p. 106). The case had gotten far beyond the comfort level of the slave aristocracy in the South. According to Rediker (2012), "an abstract issue would now become concrete" (p. 120) when it came to slavery's impact on the North. Lithographs and portraits of the Amistad rebels, especially their leader, Cinque, would become a sort of "revolutionary symbol" (Rediker, 2012, p. 121). This terrified Van Buren and the South. The revolutionary fervor would cause a flyer called *"Common Sense"* to begin circulation. It posed the question "Is a Connecticut jail to be converted into a Bastille, and shall its doors not fly open?" (Rediker, 2012, p. 150). This evocation of the French Revolution likely only frightened the slaveholding aristocracy even more, bringing forth images of guillotines and armed slave uprisings.

In a particularly stinging barb, New York's *The Emancipator* asked of Van Buren: "why should this democratic functionary be so aggrieved at a decision in favor of liberty?" (Rediker, 2012, p. 153). This harkened back to the creation of Van Buren's Democratic Party earlier that decade, in which Van Buren would proudly hoist the mantle of champion of the people's will. The Abolitionists would refer to their opposition in the context of a "higher law", one above man's law that they believed to supersede it in both authority and morality (Rediker, 2012, p. 170). In a similar way to Van Buren's legal maneuvering in the case of the Livingston Manor earlier in his career, he knew that the Supreme Court was stacked with Southerners including Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, appointed by Jackson, who would later pen the infamous *Dred Scott* decision. The appeal showed "clear intent" (Rediker, 2012, p. 183). John Quincy Adams would be one of the Amistad rebels' lawyers in their Supreme Court case, he would attack Van Buren for his perceived overreach (Rediker, 2012, p. 190). The case ended with a verdict that shocked everyone involved: the Court decided seven to one that the Amistad rebels were, in fact, free man. Even notorious friend of slavery Taney voted in the majority, the lone dissenting vote came from Associate Justice Henry Baldwin, also appointed by Andrew Jackson (Rediker, 2012, p. 190).

Van Buren would squabble once more with Chief Justice Taney much later when he would pen his opinion on the infamous *Scott v. Sanford* decision. Van Buren would say that while he *agreed* that the founders never intended for slaves to be citizens, he lamented the decision as a "grievous mistake" (Niven, 1983, p. 606). He believed that the decision was political and partisan in nature and was not in line with a constitutional interpretation of the case. The decision also invalidated a previous Act of Congress; *the Missouri Compromise*, which Van Buren thought was inappropriate (Niven, 1983, p. 606).

The Texas Intersection

The issue of the annexation of Texas would prove to be Martin Van Buren's Achilles' heel on multiple occasions throughout his career. It perfectly intersected all the reasons for which Van Buren would later decide to run as a Free Soiler in 1848: Slavery, Party Unity, Anti-Elitism, and Morality. Texas proved to be an issue that Van Buren could not thread the needle with between his Northern residence and Southern sympathies (Bradley, 2024, p. 229). Andrew Jackson had wanted to annex the territory from Mexico during his administration for the reasons of national security and, more shrewdly, to increase the power of the Democratic Party with South and Westward expansion (Bradley, 2024, p. 229). Van Buren was "ambivalent" (Bradley, 2024, p.

229) to the entire issue at first. At Jackson's directive as Secretary of State, Van Buren attempted to negotiate for Texas with the Mexican government but this fell through. During his Presidential campaign in 1836, the Texas question would rise once again. Like most issues where race and slavery were even tangentially involved, he longed to keep it far away from him. Van Buren had foreseen the issues and "implications of admitting a vast slaveholding territory to the United States" (Bradley, 2024, p. 346). It wasn't that Martin Van Buren was morally against another slaveholding state entering the Union, at least not outwardly at that time in his career, but he could see as a party man the issue of Texas was liable to inflame tensions and sectionalism even more. He urged outgoing President Andrew Jackson to hold off on his much awaited public decision on whether or not to annex Texas until *after* the ballots had been cast in November, desperately trying to pass the political football as far away from himself as possible (Bradley, 2024, p. 347).

The first rift in the Democratic ranks became clear early on; his predecessor as Vice President, John C. Calhoun, was a fierce advocate for Texas' annexation as a boon to the power of the slave states in the Senate (Bradley, 2024, p. 349). In the early days of the Nation, Slave States held a numerical advantage over Free States, therefore they also held an advantage in the Senate, but ever since 1821, and with every state admitted subsequently to that point, the number of slave and free states were equal; thirteen each in 1837. Undoubtedly, Calhoun and his Southern colleagues were salivating over the potential for a vast new swath of potential slave land to be added to the Union, the Texas annexation and subsequent land purchases from Mexico would nearly double the size of the Nation, making it a continent-spanning power. Even with the 36°, 30° line of the Missouri Compromise, the promise of halting what they saw as a Northern abolitionist power-grab in the Senate gave Calhoun and his allies great hope for a continuance of their own power. In a stroke of luck, after Texas had applied to America for its annexation, Mexico offered Van Buren much needed respite when it was suggested that a third-party (The King of Prussia) play mediator on the issue (Bradley, 2024, p. 352). Van Buren agreed wholeheartedly with the plan that conveniently allowed him to pass said political football away once more.

Martin Van Buren's crushing electoral defeat in 1840 to William Henry Harrison initially forced him to retire from politics. However, after Harrison's early death and the disastrous administration of John Tyler, Van Buren saw an opening to return to the helm of his party and possibly the nation. When Van Buren floated his potential 1844 candidacy, he was an early favorite, as no other prominent Democrat had in the interim risen to his level of national name recognition. But, like it seemed to do every four years, the issue of slavery came up to spoil Van Buren's ambitions. The Texas question had not been resolved by this time as Van Buren probably hoped it would be, though John Tyler did expedite the process. Tyler tried and failed to annex Texas legislatively in mid-1844, the failure was due mostly to his hostile relationship with the legislative branch. This meant that the question of Texas would play a central role in the upcoming election.

The matter of Texas would boil over in Van Buren's career with the *Hammett Letter*. This letter was in reply to William Hammett, a fellow Democrat, who asked for Van Buren's final position on Texas. Van Buren unleashed his true feelings on the issue once and for all. In a lengthy eleven thousand word essay, Van Buren would draw out a comprehensive case against annexing Texas based on morality, anti-imperialism, and his own principles of anti-elitism. It is important to examine the key points of the Hammett Letter in order to ascertain where Van Buren stood on the issues that would propel him to torpedo his own party four years later. It is in this

letter that Van Buren's *true*, more idealistic feelings begin to show through. He would lambast efforts to annex Texas as imperialistic. He claimed that America had "a character among the nations of the earth to maintain" that "differently constituted governments" had tried to expand with conquest and war, but that America should not, and instead should be regulated by "reason and justice." He stated his belief that annexing Texas would create an American Empire, which he saw as antithetical to the Jeffersonian values of small government, which he had always tried to adhere to (Bradley, 2024, p. 441). Van Buren knew the risks of this letter, he had held his tongue many times for political expediency; but not now. What made this time different? Had Van Buren's tolerance for the South's demands finally been exceeded? Whatever the answer may be, the consequences of the letter were severe. His political momentum died, his campaign was effectively over. The most crushing blow was his old friend Andrew Jackson's rejection. Jackson was still ever passionate about Texas. Even after nearly a decade out of office, his presence still loomed over the party as its most popular figure even in retirement. When he was told of the Hammett Letter, Jackson "shed tears of regret" (Bradley, 2024, p. 442) after initially disbelieving his old friend could have actually written it. Jackson lamented that, had Van Buren consulted him prior to releasing the letter, he could have helped him ease the harshness of his prose against the South, making the declaration of nonsupport for Texas' annexation less crushing a blow to his political career. However, this was unlikely to ever have been possible. Van Buren, being a Northerner, had to adhere almost entirely to the South's interests to have even a chance within the party. A break as big as this one would have probably crushed Van Buren's candidacy no matter how softly the words were written. Jackson retaliated against Van Buren, saying that his nomination was now "impossible", that he had committed a "fatal error", comparing the prospect of rehabilitating Van Buren's image in the South to "turning the current of the Mississippi" (Bradley, 2024, p. 442).

John C. Calhoun knew that Van Buren's present weakness lay in his ambivalence towards Texas' annexation. But, by this time, Van Buren's ambivalence had become opposition. Calhoun mobilized the party against Van Buren, saying that his candidacy would be "fatal to the cause" of expansionism. He further argued that *any* Northern candidate would not be suitable (Bradley, 2024, p. 433). This, again, showed that Van Buren, or any Northerner for that matter could never appease the South no matter how hard they tried.

"The Rotten Portion Of The Party"

Martin Van Buren would later say in a letter to George Bancroft that he stood by the opinions he expressed in the Hammett Letter, and that he knew it would bring on a political firestorm, but he wanted to face those who opposed him on the issue. "I did it with my eyes fully open" Van Buren would say, in a moment of clarity of what his party had become (Bradley, 2024, p. 442). It had been brewing for a while, percolating in Van Buren's mind during his brief retirement in New York, where the state's Democrats had grown tired of "constantly kowtowing to the slaveocracy and to the expansionists – to the rotten portion of the party", as New York Governor Silas Wright wrote (Bradley, 2024, p. 442). Van Buren's chances dimmed as the Democratic Convention in Baltimore went on, with more of his supporters defecting to Lewis Cass and eventually to James K. Polk, who would go on to win the 1844 Democratic nomination and the Presidency. He would annex Texas and lead the Nation into the Mexican-American War (Bradley, 2024, p. 444). It appears that Van Buren had finally had enough in regards to sugarcoating his opinions to benefit his standing with the South, saying that his actions were "consistent with the respect which was due to the question, to the country & to my own position, but was also the one with which I preferred to meet the convention" (Bradley, 2024, p. 445).

In yet another slap to the face, Polk, now content with being a one-term President and accomplishing his goals of expansion, essentially ignored Van Buren's input when it came to his cabinet secretaries. It was a long-held tradition for the incoming administration to give deference in his cabinet selections to those who helped elect him, either by appointing the person himself or someone he recommended. Though Polk initially made an effort to grant Van Buren's New York faction a cabinet spot or two, the negotiations fell through and Polk staffed his cabinet with those who would advance only *his* agenda (Bradley, 2024, p. 448). This betrayal was both the final nail in the coffin for Van Buren's unconditional support for his party and for many Northerners who had grown tired of the South's constant threats of war, disunity, and secession. Historian James M. Bradley (2024) wrote that "For his entire political career in Washington, Van Buren had shown restraint and delicacy, even subservience, in handling the politics of slavery. The South had spurned his years of steadfast loyalty – all because he did not support the *immediate* annexation of Texas" (p. 469). After the Mexican-American War was over, it would be relayed to Van Buren that Polk and his cabinet had become almost singularly obsessed with the question of slavery; "[slavery] overrides the Mexican War & every other question... The slave power rules as tyrannically here as it can in Louisiana" (Bradley, 2024, p. 480). This reference to "the slave power" demonstrates that Van Buren's allies and contemporaries also knew about his deep-seeded hatred for the aristocratic classes and that this animosity may be used as a way to ingratiate themselves to him and eventually persuade him to run. "Slavery had become a test of fealty to the administration" wrote John M. Niles to Van Buren (Bradley, 2024, p. 480). What he long feared had come to pass, slavery had become the all-encompassing litmus test for the Democratic party, even more so than the war the administration had just carried out.

The Barnburners

The spark that would light the cannon of Martin Van Buren's 1848 campaign would come from David Wilmot, a Democratic House Representative from Pennsylvania. In 1846, he would upend the Democratic Party forever by introducing what would be known as the "Wilmot Proviso"; the bill would forbid slavery in all land gained by the U.S. from Mexico as a result of the Mexican-American War, which was one of the primary reasons James K. Polk and the Southern Democrats wanted to acquire Texas and associated territories in the first place. The Proviso would create a rift between the Northern and Southern Democrats that, in some ways, would never heal. It is important to clarify that the Wilmot Proviso did not *create* the Free Soil Party; it had existed beforehand, as did other abolitionist parties like the Liberty Party, but the Wilmot Proviso did propel the party to new heights. The group of disillusioned New York Democrats who coalesced under Wilmot became known as "Barnburners." This name was based on, aptly, a Dutch fable about a farmer who burned down his barn to rid it of rats. The metaphor was that the Democrats who had now defected would rather "burn the barn down" to rid it of rats than be "more ideologically flexible" on the issue of slavery (Bradley, 2024, p. 470). Governor Silas Wright, who had called the pro-slavery faction of the Democratic party "rotten" joined the new group's ranks along with other veterans of Tammany Hall. The opposition to the Barnburners were called the "Hunkers", a derogatory term meant to criticize their "hunkering" on their principles (Bradley, 2024, p. 471). They made up the remainder of the New York Democrats who stayed loyal to Polk and were firmly *against* Wilmot Proviso. The two sides had an uneasy alliance until incumbent Governor and prominent Barnburner Silas Wright lost his reelection campaign in 1846, which the Barnburners partially blamed the Hunkers for. The defeats of both Van Buren in 1844 and Wright in 1846 did not quell the Barnburners' political members, in fact, it made them fiery and ready for a real fight in 1848.

Barnburners never initially sought a full break with their party, but it became almost unavoidable when they insisted that the Wilmot Proviso be part of the official Democratic Platform in the next election. Their choice became even clearer when the next presumptive Democratic nominee was expected to be Michigan Senator Lewis Cass, whom Van Buren had encountered before; first in his early days as a lawyer, serving as a witness in a case against a court-martialed general, then as Jackson's Secretary of War, and then as the man who first unseated him as the presumptive nominee in 1844 before being denied by Polk. He was a proponent of "Popular Sovereignty", the concept that a new state entering the union should be able to vote on whether they wanted to become a slave state or a free state. Cass viewed the practice as the best way to keep the federal government from having to address the issue of slavery any further, and it was backed and largely supported by the likes of Stephen A. Douglas and Jefferson Davis himself (Bradley, 2024, p. 481). He also supported Polk's expansionist ideals and took them to new heights, saying that "almost unlimited expansion" should be America's goal under the pretense of "national security" (Bradley, 2024, p. 473). He didn't just want the territory already ceded to America by Mexico, he wanted all of Mexico itself. He argued that only by creating a "continental empire" would America be kept safe from the violent upheavals that had befallen Europe in the past decades. This is not to say that Lewis Cass was *explicitly* in favor of slavery as an institution. He admitted to another Senator that if the Wilmot Proviso made it to the Senate for a vote, he would have voted in the affirmative. Though he later reversed this stance, saying that he now viewed the Proviso as simply a "distraction" (Bradley, 2024, p. 473). This rhetoric only further alienated the Barnburners from Cass's already unpalatable campaign. The division only grew worse when the Hunkers main news publication *The Albany Argus* endorsed Cass's ideas of Popular Sovereignty. The Barnburners also partially blamed Cass, somewhat unfairly, for denying Van Buren the nomination in 1844. New York congressman George Rathbun scathingly called Cass "a traitor to the North who became a soldier under the black banner of Aggressive Slavery" (Bradley, 2024, p. 473). A common pejorative for Cass was "dough-face"; a term for a Northern politician with Southern sympathies, it would also be lobbed at future Democratic Presidents Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan - and could previously have been applicable to Van Buren himself (Bradley, 2024, p. 473). Barnburners who were disgusted by Cass could not, in good conscience, vote instead for the Whig candidate: General Zachary Taylor, a famed veteran of the Mexican-American War. He also owned a cotton plantation with somewhere in the range of three hundred slaves. He was a perfect candidate for the South: a war hero and a slave owner, but the latter was a deal-breaker for Northern Democrats who were already unhappy with Cass's slaveocracy ties.

Out of the schism, many Democrats (and some Whigs, for that matter) found themselves politically homeless. The new coalition that would be formed was from the shattered diaspora of "Unreconciled Barnburners and other Democrats, with Liberty Men and disaffected Whigs who saw opportunities to develop at the expense of major parties committed to slavery" (Fuller, 1960, p. 188). In addition, they were joined by a number of homesteaders in the Western frontier who didn't want their own prospective profits undercut or restricted by the presence of slave labor in that new land (Bradley, 2024, p. 470). In that, Martin Van Buren found some common ground. He was not a radical on the issue of slavery by *any* means, in fact could more aptly be described as a conservative. However, his long-held animus towards the landed elites and aristocracies gave him a shared interest. He now saw the slave aristocracy that had just denied him the Democratic nomination and the old landed gentry of New York and beyond as one and the same.

He had become class-reductionist in this way. This would go on to be a cornerstone in his decision to run for President in 1848.

In the upcoming statewide elections, the fracture in the party led to disaster for the Democrats; Whigs swept every major statewide race. However, the Barnburners were not disappointed by this outcome, as they had come to view it as a sort of punishment to their own wayward party for succumbing to the slave power's control. Martin Van Buren always kept up with politics even in retirement and was dismayed at the disunity of his party (Bradley, 2024, p. 479). The final push that propelled Martin Van Buren out of retirement came with the broad controversy over Popular Sovereignty, he possibly saw the Democrats' new zeal for the idea as a final straw, a position too heinous for him to ignore or hand-wave away. He would make his opinions about Popular Sovereignty clear when writing to Francis P. Blair: "the state and national Democratic Party had adopted an intolerable ideology." He would also ominously and somewhat prophetically state that he was "taking on the rogues and the mountain of "rotten" within the Democratic Party" (Bradley, 2024, p. 481). His use of the word "rotten" puts Van Buren's stance in clear view at this point and it appears to have come full circle. Van Buren quotes Silas Wright's derogatory descriptor for the Southern portion of the party, agreeing that the ideology was too far gone and that more drastic action would have to be taken. Van Buren would pen a "statement of principles" to assist the Barnburner faction in holding leverage in the upcoming Democratic National Convention in Baltimore as well as in assisting the New York legislature in coming to some sort of truce between the two warring factions within his party. Though Van Buren initially declined all offers of the nomination, saying unequivocally "I do not wish to have my name mixed up with this matter in any degree" (Bradley, 2024, p. 479), he would still side with Wilmot in the same letters. Van Buren would even say to another offer that, though he had sought the presidency before in his life, that was no longer of interest to him. The New York convention was a debacle. The two factions could not agree on anything of note and when the Hunkers flatly rejecting making the Wilmot Proviso a part of their official state party platform, the Barnburners staged a walkout in protest, they accused the Hunkers of being completely compromised by the South and the Slave Aristocracy (Bradley, 2024, p. 478).

The Democratic National Convention was no less of a disaster than the state convention. Since no agreement was reached between the factions about what the state party's platform would be, and the rift no closer to being remedied, both factions were left out of the gathering entirely. New York had zero representation in the selection of a nominee that year. Lewis Cass easily won on the fourth ballot and William O. Butler was chosen as his running mate, another staunch opponent of the Wilmot Proviso. The Barnburners held their own competing convention in Herkimer. In it, John Van Buren would lay out a similar argument to his father's eventual one in regards to slavery, he would say that slavery was one of America's "original sins", and that the founders had always anticipated its gradual demise (Bradley, 2024, p. 478). Martin, above all else, was a doting father, and he no doubt watched his son's political activity closely and with pride. John would echo his father's anti-elitist sentiment when he said that slavery had been turning "America into what it had once rebelled against: a nation of aristocrats subverting democracy and choking its pioneering, entrepreneurial spirit" (Bradley, 2024, p. 479). The only option for the Barnburners was to find a candidate of their own, one that was familiar enough to the New York Democratic scene to command respect and, most importantly, votes. Some initial suggestions included Silas Wright, Senator John P. Hale, Justice John McLean, and Silas Wright quickly rose as the frontrunner for the nomination. Wright had an impressive résumé, having been New York's Governor, Senator, State Senator, Comptroller, and Representative in the

House. Martin Van Buren's name was mentioned occasionally in the early days of the nominating process, but he was officially retired at this point, only serving as an occasional supplier of speeches. He had been tending to his estate in Kinderhook as well as tending to his other son Abraham's poor health. In his stead, Martin's son John Van Buren, now a member of the New York assembly, and a praised orator (Bradley, 2024, p. 478) would take a commanding role in the new faction.

The sudden and untimely death of presumptive nominee Silas Wright in 1847 plunged the Barnburners into uncertainty. It was at this point that other prominent Barnburners began to present Van Buren as an option in earnest, before that, John P. Hale was considered the obvious remaining choice, as he had offered to extend "temperate abolitionism" further than his predecessors could from his position in the Senate. But Van Buren's name created a "phenomenon" in the coalition of anti-slavery parties (Filler, 1960, p. 188). The first person to reach out to Martin was Elisha A. Maynard, a New York newspaper editor. Maynard encouraged Van Buren to, at the very least, "allow public sentiments to turn towards you for the Presidency, and [do not] say or do any act that shall prevent a result" (Bradley, 2024, p. 477). Other notable Barnburners like John Dix and David Wilmot himself would write to Van Buren, begging him to rise to the occasion, "if we are right, the authority and influence of your great name, will so strengthen the *right*." Wrote Wilmot (Bradley, 2024, p. 477). As time went on and the election drew nearer, it appears that Van Buren grew less hesitant to share his true views. When Supreme Court Justice Peter V. Daniel discovered that Van Buren had lent his support to the Wilmot Proviso, he was dismayed. Initially, like Jackson, Daniel could not believe he could ever impose "a degrading inequality or inferiority on the South" (Bradley, 2024, p. 480). Starting his reply with "retired as I am," Van Buren would write politely but sternly saying that he meant what he had said. Daniel would reply again with a condescending aura of victimhood that Van Buren's change in his opinion of this policy had caused him the "deepest sorrow", and that he was trying to reduce the South to "a disenfranchised or degraded Caste" (Bradley, 2024, p. 480). This sentiment of martyrdom would pervade the South before and after the Civil War, with the famous "lost cause" ideology predicated around the notion that the South was nobly defending its sacred traditions and lifestyle from an increasingly aggressive and authoritarian North. In these letters, Van Buren would once again confirm his newfound political alignment with "the late Mr. [Silas] Wright" (Bradley, 2024, p. 480).

The Right Channel

The distinction between the Barnburners and the already-existing Free Soilers and other anti-slavery parties must be made entirely clear in order to ascertain precisely where Martin Van Buren fell on the political spectrum of abolition at the time, and why he positioned himself where he did once he formally got involved. A generalization can be made that not all abolitionists were Barnburners and not all Barnburners were abolitionists, and this sums up the Venn Diagram-esque layout of that spectrum well enough to understand. Barnburners were almost exclusively Democrats, as they split from that party, while abolitionists could be Democrats, Whigs, or of any other political party or none at all. Most Barnburners would probably not be comfortable with the concept of immediate abolition, as was the standard position of the Free Soil Party, they generally favored gradual emancipation, but this rule is not hard and fast as there demonstrably *were* some Barnburners who supported full abolition. The majority position amongst the Barnburners was that they opposed the concept of slavery not on the single basis of civil and human rights, but on a more idealistic, class-based stance; they believed that slavery "encouraged sloth" and had a "corrupting influence on American society."

But their most important accusation about the institution of slavery in regards to understanding Van Buren's reason for aligning with them is that they believed slavery "promoted aristocracy" (Bradley, 2024, p. 472). And this was certainly true, as most of the South's individual wealth had been concentrated in what is now known as the "planter aristocracy," the class of wealthy, plantation-owning slavers whose vast estates and fields could generate immense amounts of wealth using exclusively forced labor. Prominent Democratic members of all three branches of government also tended to be slaveholders themselves: the legislative branch had firebrands like John C. Calhoun, the judiciary had Supreme Court Justices like John Catron, and the executive had slaveholders like Andrew Jackson and John Forsyth.

After entering the race in some capacity as a surrogate, Van Buren wasted no time on recruiting and letting loose his proxies in New York and beyond. His home state of New York was the effective headquarters of the Free Soil movement despite Van Buren's attempts more than a decade ago to stamp out the growing abolitionist sentiment there (Bradley, 2024, p. 470). He sent his son John on a speaking tour around New York. He would also call on his old friend Samuel J. Tilden to complete and disseminate a paper entitled "*Address and Resolutions to the Democracy of the State of New York*". In very typical Martin Van Buren fashion, it was a well thought out and at times long winded diatribe against the slave powers that he believed had corrupted his party and imperiled the Nation. His son wrote the first third of the paper, drawing inspiration from the speeches he had composed for his tour, Martin wrote the second third himself and left the final third to Tilden. The three men laid out an array of grievances against both the state and national party with John Van Buren accusing the Hunker faction of "abandoning the state's democratic traditions". Then they took aim at Congress, which they accused of being essentially derelict in their duty to "ban the evil of slavery." They asserted that not only did Congress have the *right* to ban slavery, but the *moral* obligation. To bolster their argument, they cited the founders by saying that they had tried "earnestly and actively to restrict the spread of slavery" (Bradley, 2024, p. 482). Invoking the founding fathers signaled just how serious Van Buren's new sentiment was. He channeled his past with DeWitt Clinton and John W. Taylor into a scorching tirade against the South, he accused them of conspiring to steer the national zeitgeist in the direction of a civil war with their threats, saying that they had "poisoned" their rhetoric in order to preserve the institution of slavery. He correctly raged that the South was not content with merely having slavery remain where it already existed, but that they wanted to facilitate its spread to where it had never existed before. Van Buren had *finally* linked the fight against slavery to the all-encompassing class struggle he waged throughout his political career. He drew attention to the fact that the planter aristocracy did not value labor. They, in Van Buren's opinion, valued labor so little that they would rather have slaves toil for free in their fields than pay their so-called fellow white men to do the same jobs, this echoed the homesteaders' concerns. He would argue in a sort of proto-Marxist style that there was an eternal struggle between "labor and capital" and that the very *existence* of slavery would *only* benefit the capital class at the detriment of labor. In a line of thought that wouldn't seem out of place in "*Das Kapital*", he accused the slave aristocracy of impeding the practice of free labor by exploiting the system of unpaid labor, and that by existing, slavery rendered paid labor undesirable to the elites. He would also attack those who he saw as class traitors; those in the North who abetted the spread of slavery, in his attestation that slave and free labor could not coexist he set up a figurative class war that pitted the elites he had always battled against the yeomanry he had always tried to champion. He lashed out against the "dough-faces" in the North, warning that

their cause would “be buried under... a grave from which there will be no resurrection” (Bradley, 2024, p. 483).

This letter, later fittingly called the *Barnburner Manifesto*, would be Van Buren’s first true shot in his final campaign, one to essentially burn down the party that he had a hand in creating and rearing. He realized at this point that the slaveocracy was too deeply rooted into his party to be weeded out by a strongly-worded letter, and that it would take drastic measures to be excised. He was now a *true* Barnburner. Calls began to come more urgently for Van Buren to enter the race as a candidate, but he still declined. Instead, he wanted to help the Barnburners “silence the South and bring the free states in line with New York for the future” (Bradley, 2024, p. 484). He wanted to present the Barnburners as the *real* Democrats, to take back the title from the Southern faction. He urged them never to form an alliance with the Hunkers as it would undermine their cause entirely. It is in this way of referencing the future as a positive idea that shows just how much Van Buren had strayed from his older values, as this sentiment was much more in line with the middle-class liberalism of the Whigs.

It was not just Van Buren who was dissatisfied with the state of the election, another disgruntled old politician who entered the fray was Henry Clay. Now seventy one year old, Clay briefly came out of retirement and announced his intention to seek the Whig nomination. He, like Van Buren, tended to frame his dissent from the expansion of slavery as not *explicitly* about human rights, but as a more class-centric, anti-authoritarian position. Clay accused the Whigs of trying to implement a sort of dynastic military presidency by selecting the politically inexperienced General Zachary Taylor. He grew increasingly uncomfortable about the prospect of “an end to our liberties and a throne of despotism” (Bradley, 2024, p. 483) which he thought might come to pass as a result of this election. Taylor largely quashed those fears for most Whig holdouts by releasing a public letter rebuking the accusations of closet despotism. In reality, Clay’s fears of Taylor becoming a tyrant were largely unfounded. At the Whig Convention, Clay would start strong but eventually be beaten out by Taylor. One strange development that came from the Whig’s convention, unlike its Democratic counterpart, was the absence of a stance on *any* slavery-related policy. Taylor essentially copied William Henry Harrison’s campaign of no promises and no positions. The Whigs hoped that by ignoring the divisive social issues of the time, it would serve them better in regards to public opinion than taking *any* side.

The Barnburners met again in Utica after the Democratic Convention and Van Buren penned another strongly worded letter to be read there. His long letter once again lambasted the Democratic Party and the Hunkers in particular for ceding the fight to the South on the issue of slavery. He also reiterated his appreciation – but disinterest – in the nomination. “Injustice must be resisted, indignities repelled”, he wrote forcefully, and then Van Buren made the important call to action for the Barnburners to play spoiler: “I do, therefore, unhesitatingly approve... withholding your votes from Governor Cass and shall do so myself” (Bradley, 2024, p. 485). He further promised that if the race remained unchanged and the candidates the same he would not vote *at all*. This shift was very significant, for even as late as 1844, Van Buren was still a party man above all. Even after the betrayal he suffered at the hands of the South, he worked tirelessly to deliver the tipping-point state of New York to James K. Polk, but now he threatened to energize his New York political machine to support *no* candidate, and especially not the Democratic nominee. This letter proved so powerful to the Barnburners that, even though Van Buren had earlier in the same letter declined interest in the nomination, he was nominated officially on the first ballot. Van Buren received 254 votes and his closest second-place rival, John P. Hale, got 183. Even John Van Buren, despite knowing of his father’s wishes, voted for

him. Though *Martin* Van Buren was now the Barnburners' official nominee, *John* Van Buren was its true beating heart.

John Van Buren's immediate action as de-facto head of the Barnburners and his father's proxy was to seek a broader alliance with other anti-slavery parties from across the political spectrum, no doubt to have the biggest electoral impact possible. Despite wariness and skepticism from some of the Barnburners about allying with disaffected Whigs or Abolitionist Parties like the Liberty Party or the Free Soilers, an alliance was formed. The reason for Van Buren's appeal to the anti-slavery coalition was multifaceted. Initially, he appeared as a figurehead, one to whom the average anti-slavery voter could relate: someone who was used and then discarded by the South's political interests, but eventually it became something more. Van Buren became a sort of sage-like figure to the burgeoning political force, garnering the attention and respect usually reserved for ex-Presidents; he became a powerful beacon for other disaffected voters to flock to. Even though other abolitionists like Martin Grover or Gerrit Smith (the eventual Liberty Party nominee) would probably have had more youthful vigor and been more up to the task, *none* of them could match the reputation and prestige brought by such a well-known and respected man like Van Buren, and Samuel Tilden told Van Buren as much. Tilden had initially favored a younger, more fiery candidate to helm the movement, but he too came to the conclusion that a powerful, well-known leader was needed, one who could command national attention.

Martin Van Buren finally accepted the nominations from both the Barnburners and the Free Soilers. He would tell Samuel Tilden that he knew more than likely this new party could not win this election outright, as the foundations of the old system had been too well entrenched for a single cycle to break through, but he knew that "slavery must expand or perish" (Bradley, 2024, p. 486). At best, Van Buren hoped that he could win a state or two and deny *either* party the majority. He hoped that he could send the election to the House of Representatives, similarly to how John Quincy Adams won in 1824. The initial goal of simply preventing Cass from winning the presidency had broadened, the movement had become more abstract, more idealistic. As more diverse and politically varied voices joined together, they looked ahead and saw a future that Van Buren hadn't been able to look towards in decades. A future of political optimism and hope. The scale of the fervor around Van Buren's nomination was visible in the twenty thousand attendees at the Free Soil Convention in Buffalo. Though most attendees were from New York, some came from all over the Nation, even ex-slave political pioneer Frederick Douglass attended and briefly spoke: "Godspeed your noble undertaking" (Bradley, 2024, p. 487).

This is not to say that every Free Soiler welcomed Van Buren's candidacy with open arms, in fact, a large number of dissenters were vocally against him representing their movement. They would correctly point to his record of pro-slavery stances and capitulation to the South, most of which have been detailed above. In response to their concerns, John Van Buren spoke on behalf of his father's character, saying that they should "forget the past"; that there was a larger, more pressing threat that needed to be dealt with: "The slave power". He used an allegory about the Battle of Bunker Hill to make his point: he asked them to imagine the catastrophic result that would have occurred if the American soldiers had not united against the British but had instead spent precious time and energy attacking each other for "all the past actions of their fellows." He urged the delegates at the Free Soil convention to also put aside past differences (Bradley, 2024, p. 487). One former Whig who was a chairman of the convention went further than forgetting the past, saying that he believed Van Buren had legitimately changed. He had previously thought the former President to be "timid, cautious, and calculating" but that he witnessed in Van Buren's

speeches and actions a man who was wantonly attacking the party he had built because he truly believed they had strayed from their past core values. He gushed that “it was a sublime spectacle. It was the poetry of politics. It was the religion of patriotism” that Van Buren exhibited in his willingness to defy the South and his own party men for the greater good (Bradley, 2024, p. 488). More convention-goers shared similar sentiments, saying that he had shown great courage for risking his legacy by coming out of retirement. The convention also saw the innate advantage of running a former President at the head of their ticket; Van Buren had received nearly 1.8 million votes between his 1836 and 1840 campaigns. That gave Van Buren indispensable political capital, he offered legitimacy to a fledgling party that had struggled to gain national prominence. *The Emancipator* tried further to persuade the more radical elements of the coalition to back Van Buren, printing “The Free Soil party was not an expansion of Liberty-party principles, but a catch-all political platform for abolitionists and anti-abolitionists” (Filler, 1960, p. 191). This showed the party’s intent to be a “big-tent” party, welcoming those from across the political spectrum who, though they may not agree on everything, were *all* anti-slavery in some capacity.

The Convention chose Charles Francis Adams to be Van Buren’s running mate. Like Van Buren, Adams offered an essence of prestige; he was the grandson of John Adams and son of John Quincy Adams. Having not just one but *two* Presidents in his direct lineage, he was also a regular facet in anti-slavery circles like his father was, which offset some of the wariness towards Van Buren. Adams’ acceptance showed that a man with staunch, lifelong anti-slavery beliefs was willing to share the stage with someone he described as a “mixed character.” Adams wrote an opinion of Van Buren that is very much in line with the opinion of this paper: “In early life, right; in the middle life swayed to the wrong by his ambition and his associates, now he seems towards the close of his career to be again falling into the right channel” (Bradley, 2024, p. 488).

The Whigs and the Democrats would outwardly scoff at the Free Soil Party, internally, however, both parties had to now begin campaigning in earnest to keep their own voters in their columns, now that they had been presented with an alternative to the two major, largely mediocre candidates (Bradley, 2024, p. 489). Many prominent and notable Whigs were sent out to speak for Zachary Taylor, warning their constituents in the North that Van Buren was not capable of halting slavery’s advance. Democrats almost immediately knew what Van Buren was trying to do and they laid siege to his candidacy in nearly every Democrat-aligned publication in the country. They excoriated him as an “apostate”, a “traitor”, an “ingrate”, an “assassin”, a “hypocrite” and even “the Judas Iscariot of the nineteenth century” (Bradley, 2024, p. 490). Some Southern Democrats felt vindicated in their previous criticism of Van Buren as a “closet abolitionist”, they accused the Free Soil party of being too divisive and radical in their demands for abolition and that their perceived antagonism towards the South may lead to a civil war.

Van Buren knew he had no realistic chance of winning the White House in 1848; his new party lacked the infrastructure and funds of the two major parties. They were also only on the ballot in seventeen Northern and Midwestern states. The total number of votes in the Electoral College in the 1848 election was 290. To win, a candidate would need 146 electoral votes. This was actually achievable in theory for the Free Soil party, as their ballot access granted them the possibility of winning 180 Electoral Votes. This feat would be all but impossible. The most realistic goal was to simply deny Lewis Cass the Presidency, and that is what they would set out to do. Van Buren would immediately identify New York as the key to sinking Lewis Cass’s chances. For his own campaign, Van Buren enlisted gifted Free Soil orators like his son John, Charles Sumner (famous victim of Preston Brooks’ cane attack), David Wilmot, and Salmon P. Chase, most of which were deployed to the all-important state of New York. Sumner delivered

some of the most apt words about Van Buren's candidacy, saying "it is not for the Van Buren of 1838 that we are to vote, but for the Van Buren of *today*", he lauded Van Buren as an accomplished statesman and echoed previous sentiments regarding the seriousness with which he was taking this campaign as he came out of retirement to pursue it. He would even call Van Buren "a champion of freedom" (Bradley, 2024, p. 490).

Analyzing the Results

When the election was over, the Free Soil Party did not carry any states, winning just shy of 300,000 votes. The Free Soil ticket did come in second place, beating Lewis Cass, in Vermont, Massachusetts, and most importantly, New York. They also cracked double digits in Ohio, Illinois, Maine, New Hampshire, Michigan, and Wisconsin (Woolly, et. Al. 2025). They had the best showing of a true third party ticket up to that point and their record would last until 1912 with Theodore Roosevelt's "Bull Moose" Progressive Party. The moment was bitter-sweet, they were happy with Lewis Cass's defeat, seeing one of their main goals realized, but they failed to accomplish many others. Some Barnburners and Free Soilers were discouraged by the results, naively thinking they could have won. Other, more politically experienced party men were much more optimistic. Charles Sumner was encouraged by the results because he saw that a large portion of the country, especially in the North, were willing to part with the traditional two-party system. He saw the formation of what he called "an alliance of principle" (Bradley, 2024, p. 494). Van Buren himself was very happy with the results, no doubt reveling in sending a very clear message to the Southern Democrats; that he was no longer under their thumb. He observed that "much more than there was good reason to expect" had been accomplished. He likely also knew that this party was laying the groundwork for another, more national, anti-slavery party to form sometime in the near future.

A Map of the 1848 Election Results

Not all anti-slavery Democrats were convinced to join Van Buren's final crusade against the Democratic Party; famed abolitionist orator and journalist Henry B. Stanton would say: "In my sober judgement... I think I can do more good by acting in & trying to impress my principles upon the great ruling party of the country than by any other mode of actions" (Filler, 1960, p. 191). He believed that by staying in the party and working within its mechanisms, he could create the change he sought. Whigs remained more loyal to their party than the Democrats, no doubt in part because the name on the top of the Free Soil ticket was the founder of the Democratic Party. In Pennsylvania, Whigs stood firm behind Taylor, and as Northerners they believed that the Whig Party was the best option to keep slavery contained. They also knew that ceding their votes to a third party would help Cass win, thus potentially expanding slavery via Popular Sovereignty. Barnburner David Wilmot was the chief representative for the new party in Pennsylvania, and in August of 1848 *The Philadelphia Whig* would gloat that "Free Soil can do no injury to the Whigs in Penn[sylvani]a. But might draw as many as 10,000 votes from Cass" (Holt, 2003, p. 340). As Figure 1 shows, this estimate was nearly spot-on, as Van Buren would win 11,263 votes in that state. The margin of victory between Taylor (who carried Pennsylvania) and Cass was 13,337 votes. This meant that, while he did not deny Cass Pennsylvania on his own, Van Buren's presence had surely given Taylor a considerable cushion in a state that went to James K. Polk by just 6,322 votes four years earlier (Woolly, et. Al, 2025). Slavery was also a key factor for northern Whigs, they mocked the Free Soil party for nominating Van Buren, questioning how *any* anti-slavery voter could side with the same man who "brought about the annexation of Texas, the extension of slavery, [and] the disgraceful Mexican War" (Holt, 2003, p.

343). Anti-slavery Whigs generally believed that Van Buren was insincere in his convictions, and they managed to convince enough Whig voters of the same.

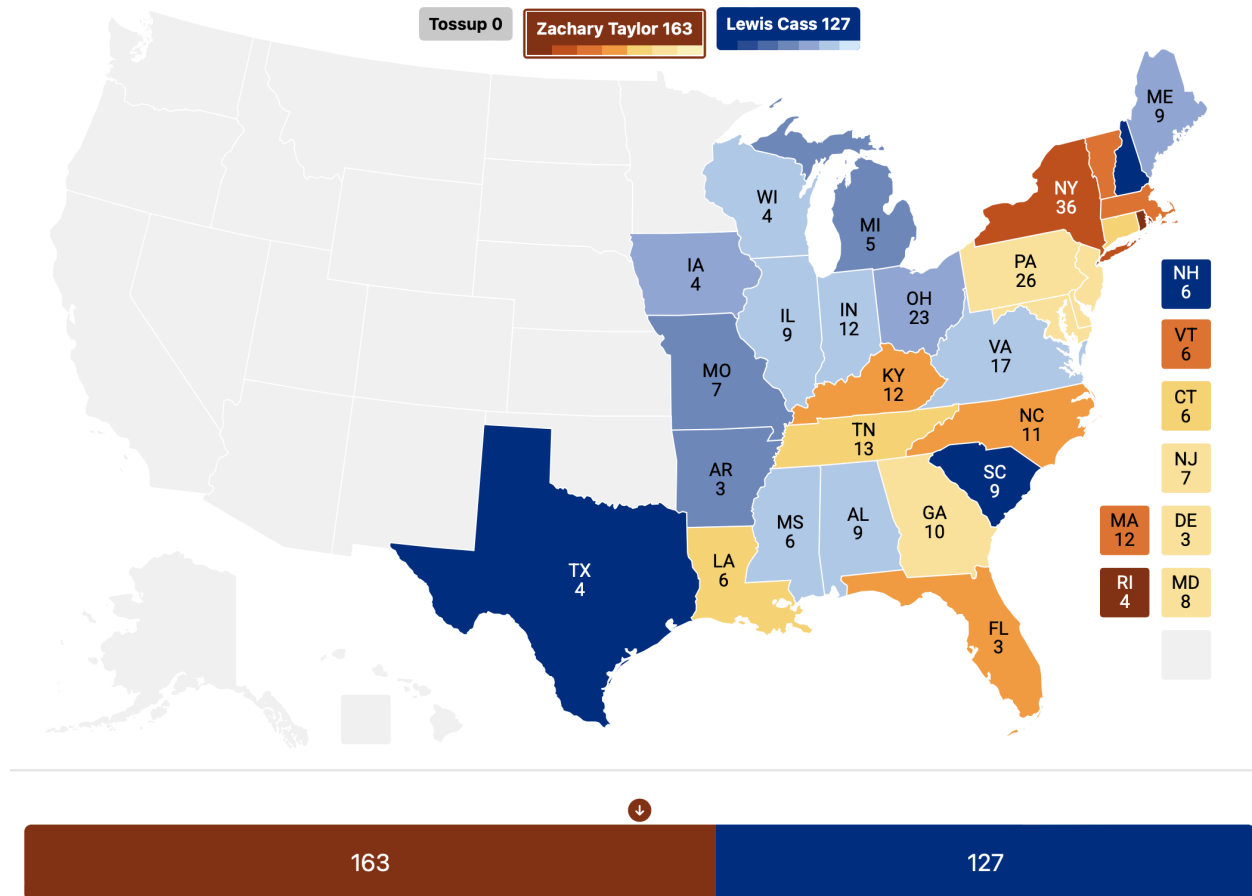


Figure 1: Blue: Democratic, Yellow: Whig. The darkness of each color corresponds to the wideness of the margin of victory in each state (YAPms, accessed May 2, 2025).

The Whigs also clinched an important victory for party unity in New York; the endorsement of the *New York Tribune*. Run by eventual 1872 Liberal Democratic Presidential nominee Horace Greeley, the *Tribune* initially considered endorsing Van Buren, given Greeley's staunch anti-slavery opinions. Eventually, they reluctantly endorsed Taylor over the Free Soil ticket for the same reason most anti-slavery Whigs did: they thought that Taylor could more efficiently keep slavery on a leash than Van Buren could (Holt, 2003, p. 341). This endorsement probably contributed to how steep the difference was between the drop in Democratic support in New York compared to Whig support (Woolly, et. Al, 2025). According to Michael F. Holt (2003) in his comprehensive book *"The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party"*, the Free Soil Party's ability to take votes from the Whigs largely depended on how strong Whig leadership was in each particular state. Even if some Northern, anti-slavery Whigs were put off by Taylor's nomination, "officeholders, editors, and party officials" whom they "trusted and respected" were able to keep them in line (p. 340). While, on the Democratic side, opposition to

slavery played a much more important role in a voter's choice to support Cass or Van Buren since the Whigs' statewide leadership could more successfully argue that a Whig majority could suppress the spread of slavery itself and was in no need of third party intervention. Taylor would later prove that assumption to be true, and after his untimely death, Fillmore would then prove it false.

Van Buren and the Free Soil Party would win 10.13% of the national popular vote, coming in third place behind Taylor and Cass. However, if one were to *only* include states where the Free Soil candidate was on the ballot in that popular vote total, it would give Van Buren 13.79% of *that* total vote (Woolly, et. Al, 2025). They also won nine seats in the House of Representatives.

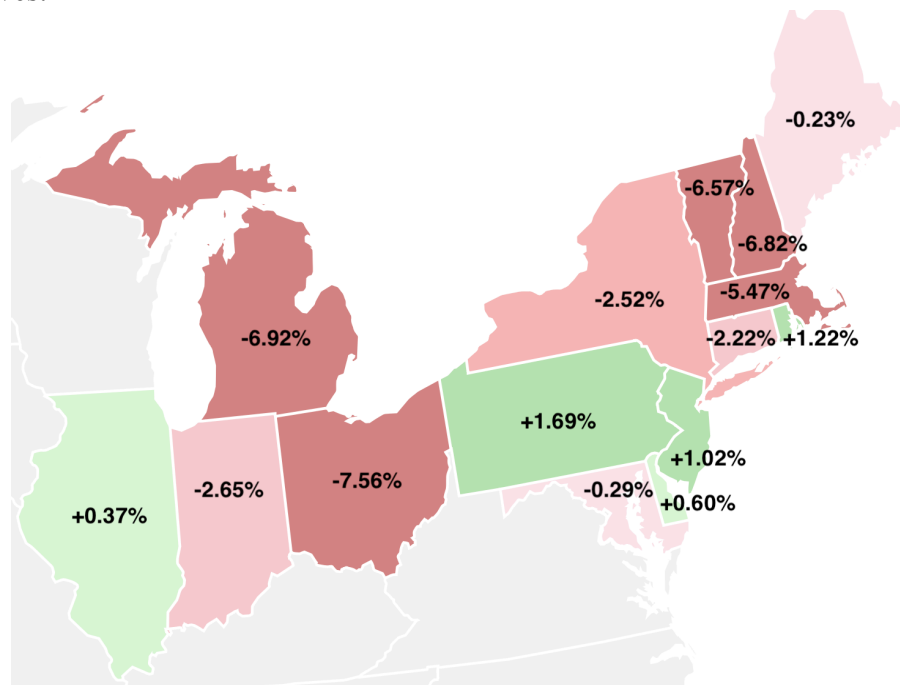


Figure 2: Change in Whig Support 1844-1848 Red: loss of Whig support, Green: gain in support. The darker the color, the more dramatic the shift towards or away from the party (YAPms, 2025) (Woolly, et. Al. 2025).

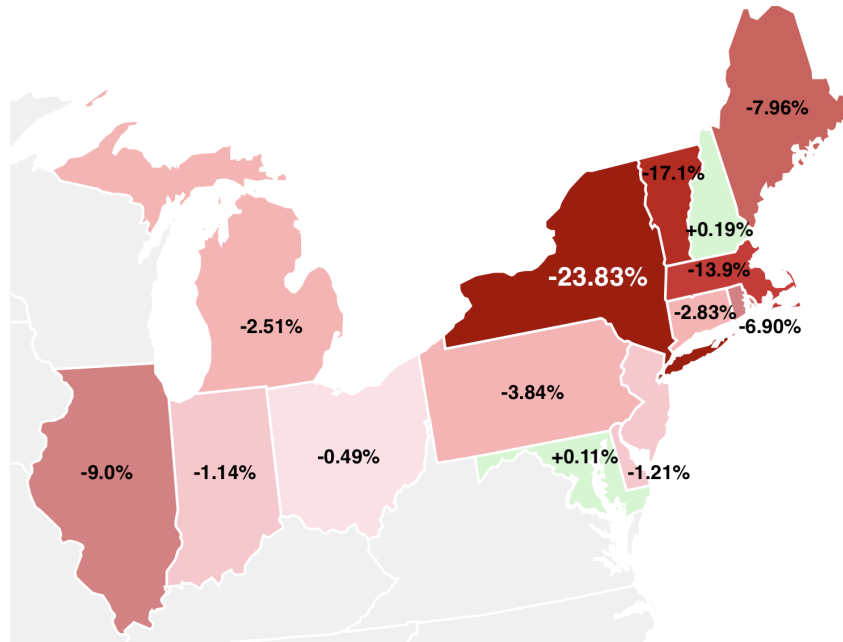


Figure 3: **Change in Democratic Support 1844-1848.** Red: loss of Democratic support, Green: gain in support. The darker the color, the more dramatic the shift towards or away from the party (YAPms, 2025) (Woolly, et. Al. 2025).

In order to effectively quantify the Free Soil Party's effect on the 1848 election, the results have been projected onto the Electoral maps (See Figure 2 and 3). Illustrated on Figure 3 is the variance of support the Democrats lost or gained from 1844 to 1848 based on percentage of the popular vote in each state where the Free Soil Party was also on the ballot. It can be observed that the states of New York, Vermont, and Massachusetts in particular were heavily affected by Van Buren's presence, and that the effects were generally more pronounced in the New England area, with the exception of New Hampshire. The state of New York lost the most Democratic support, with the party shedding 23.83% of its previous statewide vote percentage, this effectively cost Lewis Cass the election. The swing in New York is so exceptional especially because the previous Democratic Candidate, James K. Polk, won New York by a margin of 1.05%, while Zachary Taylor won the state by a comfortable 21.51% despite winning less of the overall vote. This was largely due to Van Buren siphoning Democratic voters from Cass. It is also notable that states like Illinois, Maine, Massachusetts, and Vermont Democrats shed significant support in this election because in the years following, they would become steadfast Republican voting states (Woolly, et. Al., 2025).

Figure 3. also illustrates the support lost or gained from the Whig Party from 1844 to 1848. As can be seen, the Whigs fared much better than the Democrats. Though they also lost support in key states like Ohio and New York, none of their losses exceeded 8%, while Democrats' losses were much steeper, especially in New York. The contrast between these two maps illustrates clearly that Van Buren successfully played spoiler against Lewis Cass, drastically shaving down his margins relative to the Whigs in key states (Woolly, et. Al., 2025) and ultimately costing Cass the Presidency.

One final note on the results is that this election would be the last in the pre-war era where a party other than the Democrats would win more than one of the true Confederate States (those that fully seceded, not including Tennessee). Democrats were completely divided, hence Van Buren's candidacy being at all possible. Whigs, though less divided, had run a "two-faced" campaign. They promoted themselves in the North as the most realistic and pragmatic anti-slavery party, and in the South they touted their pro-slavery bona fides. Whig Congressman Washington Hunt stated that, of the split, "they [Southern Whigs] may have their way South of it, & we must manage things for ourselves on the North side" (Holt, 2003, p. 343). This split would later devolve further and create a dynamic that would be the beginning of the Solid Democratic South that would last another century. Both parties were keenly aware that the sectional split Van Buren feared so much was forming and were essentially helpless to stop it as long as slavery remained a political tinderbox.

Conclusion

Martin Van Buren was famously non-committal on a plethora of issues like banking, nullification, and slavery. Once, while attending an event on horseback with President Jackson, an artillery salute spooked Van Buren's mount, causing it to lean upon a nearby fence. Another man at the event remarked that "The sight of Van Buren on a fence seemed like an apt metaphor for his politics", and Jackson then noted that "Van Buren was matched with a horse who is even more non-committal than his rider" (Bradley, 2024, p. 287).

Without Van Buren, there would be no Democratic Party, no President Zachary Taylor or President Millard Fillmore, and there may have been a more expedited pace of disunion leading up to the Civil War. Van Buren's contributions to American history are vast and complicated. When it comes to the question of why Van Buren ran in 1848, Historian James M. Bradley wrote his own personal thoughts on the matter in the closing pages of his biography. He stated that he believed Van Buren had a natural maturation of thought in regards to slavery, and that it was not entirely cynical or out of spite that he ran. He observed that John Van Buren's prospects as a future politician may have swayed Martin back into the race, but that *alone* was probably not enough to do so. He also scolded historians who charged Van Buren with being a hypocrite, saying that "he was living in real time" with no advantage of hindsight (Bradley, 2024, p. 498). Though Bradley's analysis does not mention anti-elitism as a factor, it is a very valid reading of the situation and of Van Buren's motives.

Martin Van Buren's contributions were many, vast, and varied in moral character, but in the end, he was a patriot who defied his party and his past to fight for the cause of the greater good against aristocracy. Van Buren had earlier considered telling the younger, more idealistic Barnburners not to be too crushed if (when) he lost, but he decided not to, perhaps remembering his own days of idealism and passion before his ambition clouded it. Now that he had succeeded in one last act of patriotism and political intrigue, Van Buren retired for good this time. Only once more after 1848 did someone attempt to call Van Buren from his final retirement, and it was at the dawn of the Civil War. Former President Franklin Pierce, another "dough-face" like Van Buren had been decades earlier, suggested in a letter that Van Buren had the respect and authority necessary to call a convention of all living former Presidents to present a united front against the war. Van Buren balked at Pierce's suggestion, noting that one former president, John Tyler, had actually just won a seat in the Confederate Government. He politely rejected Pierce's offer, noting that a convention would probably have no effect. Van Buren supported the man he once met in a tavern and spoke with over drinks, Abraham Lincoln, when the war broke out in earnest. He was furious at the South's attack on Fort Sumter, and called for Lincoln and the North to

“suppress the rebellion” (Bradley, 2024, p. 507). Van Buren died on July 24th, 1862, likely thinking that the war was lost and the Union had been permanently separated. At the time of his death, the turning points of Gettysburg and Vicksburg hadn’t happened yet, so he probably believed that his legacy was mostly lost and he would be remembered as only a footnote, but that couldn’t be further from the truth. Martin Van Buren had his hand in the creation of not just the modern Democratic Party, but the Republican Party as well. His efforts to embolden and unify the Free Soilers would lead to the formation of the Republicans within the next two election cycles, setting the stage for the next hundred and fifty years of electoral politics. Less than six months after his death, the first Republican President would issue the Emancipation Proclamation, effectively ending slavery in the Confederate states and heralding the end of the institution in *all* of America. Had Van Buren lived just a few months longer, he would have perhaps been more optimistic about America’s future.

“The purity of my intentions and motives will never prove a source of dishonor” – Martin Van Buren (Bradley, 2024, p. 42).

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Political Developments and the Second Amendment: How the Media and Shifting Public Opinion Impacted Gun Rights Since the Clinton Administration

Steven Sullivan
Robert Morris University

Abstract

The research question of the following study asks, "How has increasing media coverage of mass shootings influenced public opinion on gun control, therefore influencing Second Amendment rights in the United States legal system since the Clinton Administration?" This piece of literature serves to identify how the balance of freedom and security in America has changed regarding opinions on second amendment rights, and how favor for restrictions implemented by the law have tipped the scale of this predicament towards citizens relinquishing their freedom. This has become a key issue because of the continued polarization in American politics that has arguably originated in the 1990s, with a controversial point of debate being the interpretation of the second amendment. The research design utilized will consist of a mixed methodology. The paper will examine qualitative information derived from criminological studies, court cases, and peer reviewed studies. Quantitative research includes political polls, panels, and research regarding the numerical effects of media on legislation. These methods will be employed to assess the impact of change in the legal framework behind Americans' second amendment rights. The paper will measure and assess findings regarding public opinion on gun control using a mixed methods approach in order to understand how the second amendment has been gradually restricted since Bill Clinton's administration beginning in 1993, until 2024.

Introduction

The following piece of literature serves to answer the question, "How has increasing media coverage of mass shootings influenced public opinion on gun control, therefore influencing Second Amendment rights in the United States legal system since the Clinton Administration?" The Founding Fathers of the United States federal Constitution created this document with the intention of establishing a democratic nation, built on the values of individual liberty and the peoples' consent to be governed and represented. Violent crime and government overreach have been a perpetual problem of human existence. Thus, the Framers devised the second amendment, which reads: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed"(United States Constitution, 1789). This guarantees the people's rights to bear arms, or own firearms, to protect themselves, along with the assurance of governments reverence of the strength of the people. As technology has advanced, the power of firearms and military weapons have proportionally improved as well. Firearms have become more powerful, and some have become easier to conceal. This has led to a prevalent issue of violent crime in primarily urban areas, and mass shootings that have gained attention in the media since the late 20th century. Therefore, many Americans question the importance and ease of gun ownership, leading to advocacy for gun control and reform. The media and political rhetoric have echoed these sentiments, which has increased the success rate of passing laws that restrict certain weapons, capacities in magazines, or the process of buying a firearm. Rhetoric can be defined as, "The art of using language effectively so as to persuade or influence others"(Oxford English Dictionary, 2024). Thus, in this piece, political rhetoric refers to this art of language in the realm of politics, in order to influence voters. It is important to

understand and study how despite the issue of gun violence and the call for prevention thereof, Americans have gradually become complacent with giving up freedoms in the name of security and government intervention. This paper relies on the The United States Supreme Court definition and interpretation that “The Second Amendment protects an individual right to possess a firearm unconnected with service in a militia, and to use that arm for traditionally lawful purposes, such as self-defense within the home.” *District of Columbia v. Heller*, U.S. 554 (2008). This case is key in order to understand one of the lines of separation in the firearms debate that protects the Second Amendment and its multitude of purposes. The research design utilized will consist of a mixed methodology. These methods will be employed to assess the impact of change in the legal framework behind Americans’ second amendment rights. In the context of this paper, these laws are what people typically have in mind when they refer to gun control: regulations that specifically govern the use, possession, sale, manufacture of firearms”(Blocher, J. et al., 2016). Thus, gun rights are considered to be the ownership, acquisition, sale, or manufacture abilities of a citizen in the United States. This is an important topic of discussion due the contemporary polarized political climate, with a large focus on how to proceed with preventing gun violence while protecting an amendment on the country’s founding legal document. For example, many choose to sacrifice some liberty to preserve security and increase restrictions on constitutional rights, whereas others seek minimal restrictions on any constitutional right with the goal of preserving democracy. The paper will measure and assess findings regarding the media’s impact on public opinion and its translation to restrictive legislation on firearm ownership using a mixed methods approach since Bill Clinton’s administration beginning in 1993, until 2024.

Support for Gun Control Policies

This paper will examine literature which compares the impact of gun legislation to firearm related injuries, citizen’s support for gun control policies, and the increasing rhetoric towards restricting the second amendment. Some Americans believe that safety training standards, background checks, criminal gun acquisition, and greater accountability are key gun control laws to prevent firearms violence(Barry et al., 2018). There is also a consensus that there should be capacity regulations, certain weapons prohibition, and other more extreme methods of gun control. A study that surveyed both gun owners and non gun owners in 2017 served to understand how citizens regard the spectrum of aforementioned policies. “To understand the nature of the partisan divide, we fielded a national survey assessing Americans’ attitudes about 24 different policies to reduce gun violence in 2017 and measured the size of the gaps in support between gun owners and non-gun owners”(Barry et al., 2018). While analyzing the results from the study, Barry analyzed multiple levels of laws including universal background checks, accountability for irresponsible gun ownership, and tests with training for those who wish to concealed carry. There was a larger gap between gun owners and non gun owners in those who seek harsher restrictions on the second amendment, such as capacity and semiautomatic weapons bans. Gun owners are less likely to wish for restrictions to be imposed on capacities and weapons categories, whereas non gun owners often accepted this legislation goal. The study indicates that,”Online survey panels raise various methodological concerns that we have taken steps to overcome, including use of probability-based recruitment consistent with well-established standards and comparison of respondent characteristics in our data with national rates “(Barry et al., 2018). This study also intended to navigate policy relief following a new, devastating mass shooting in Parkland, Florida. The media continues to report on the issue of the Second

Amendment, with more attention being garnered following headlines of new shootings. The research represents a modern era of acceptance for gun control, however it fails to represent actual policy that has become gradually constraining throughout the duration of the modern political climate. There is a lack of representation for how political rhetoric and the reduction in gun culture has led to laws that may face less gridlock in the legislature. The operation of the reviewed piece of study does not include the necessary legal and political mechanisms that this research seeks to navigate.

Multidimensional Problems

The concept of gun culture in America is that it became entrenched in the fabric of this particular democratic society. The Founding Fathers ratified this amendment with the intention of a protection from tyranny. The idea that “the Second Amendment must protect the First” is a sentiment that reduces some traction in the growing movement to restrict gun rights. Scholars have pointed out that there is a gray area between compromise in the issue of gun violence. Many acknowledge that citizens should be encouraged to carry arms for self defense and the utilization of rights. However, the challenges are multifaceted. Many argue that Australia’s swift response to gun crimes and their strict model of gun control is comparable to the United States’ opportunity to follow suit. The ability for the U.K and Australia to serve as representatives for successful gun control laws is unfounded in comparison to the U.S, with their private gun ownership totaling 7.2 million firearms combined in the two countries, in comparison to the nearly 400 million American owned firearms(World Population Review, 2024). Thus, attempting to compare policy with the exponential ratio of firearms creates a weakness and unique dilemma in the issue of gun control in America. However, individualism reigns as a preeminent social value, leading many to preserve their ideals in an adamant non-compliance with potential restrictions on the second amendment (Keel, 2021). Keel’s chapter in *A Relentless Threat*, a novel where scholars respond to teens on weaponized violence, analyzes the complexities between the media’s sensationalism of mass shootings, political polarity, public outrage, and governmental and legislative action. The chapter displays a key element of the literature, that greater affinity towards further infringement on second amendment rights has stemmed from political sensationalism following school shootings. However, school shootings comprise a small portion of gun violence. The scholar acknowledges that,” Most guns used by school shooters come from the home of family or friends so strengthening background checks at the point of sale are inadequate to restrict access”(Keel, 2021). According to Keel, rights advocates minimize concerns about gun prevalence and cross border weapons flows, but rather focus on an armed and trained populace to deter and defend against gun violence. In contrast, gun control advocates frame guns as inherently dangerous and lethal due to technological advances that enable rapid casualties. Keel also asserts that control advocates often utilize a moral mandate to promote gun restrictions at a political level. The research also suggests that the new movement of gun control has led to public opinion for more gun reform, which have inspired policy responses by lawmakers. While this perspective delves into the complexities of how the second amendment has become further disavowed in American politics, it fails to fully encompass the political rhetoric in the media and policy maneuvers that has led to more restrictions in the present day.

Criminological Perspective and Theory

The interplay between media coverage and its pivotal role in portraying the devastation of gun violence has appealed to the emotions of the general public, which can create the impression that

society is more dangerous than it actually is. This leads to a demand for policymakers to act, who utilize the acceptance of infringing on second amendment rights in order to suggest capacity restrictions, assault weapons bans, and prevention of concealed carry. As polarization in U.S politics has increased, the political rhetoric has contributed to an identity of either gun “grabbers” or gun “enthusiasts”, the latter of which are often referred to pejoratively by political opponents in order to imply a fanatical obsession with firearms, rather than an exercise of rights. The label “gun grabbers” represents the allegation that gun control advocates wish to address access to guns as the cause behind tragic violence, rather than socioeconomic, ideological, or mental health factors. “Gun control activism has origins in the 1981 attempted assassination of President Reagan; After a decade of lobbying and organizing local chapters, the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act was passed by the Democratic-controlled Congress and signed by newly elected President Clinton”(Keel,2021). This law preludes the federal assault weapons ban in 1994. This serves as a theoretical starting point for political rhetoric and pathos in order to implement control of gun ownership in the paper. Scholars in other studies have utilized criminological methods in order to understand how firearm restrictions impact gun violence. As previously mentioned, many studies are inconclusive in regards to impacts of legislation. One scholarly review analyzed the findings of a multitude of studies in the United States between 1980 and 2010 and how differing bills and established norms influenced homicide rates. While common laws such as storage and background check, led to a slight reduction in suicides and gun homicides, more aggressive laws such as the 1994 Federal Assault Weapons ban saw no association between the law and homicide rates in 15 states (Santaella-Tenorio, 2016). Preventing mentally ill or criminally offending citizens from owning a firearm will prevent firearm homicides, however the literature suggests that delaying the acquiring of certain firearms or permits from lawful citizens does not necessarily reduce the homicide rate. Moreover, other research examines the criminological angle of firearm homicide rates to theories of the effectiveness of gun control, but does not elucidate the connection between sensationalism in the media, and further restricting legislation passing to fruition. For example, the total gunstock quintupled from almost 48.5 million in 1946 to almost 260 million in 2000. Yet, the murder rates for 1946 and 2000 were almost identical. This noncorrelation helps support the general criminological conclusion that violence rates reject basic sociocultural and economic factors, not the mere availability of any particular form of weapon”Kates (2005).

This furthers the author’s theory that infringing on second amendment rights is irrational from a criminological perspective, as many laws currently in place with background checks that were implemented by democrats such as Clinton and Obama, are the proper means for a criminal to be prohibited from obtaining a legal firearm. A study in 2019 worked to analyze the effect of large capacity magazine (LCM) bans, which are classified as magazines capable of holding 10 or more rounds. Despite a noted increase in fatalities in shootings utilizing LCMs following the end of the 1994 Federal Assault Weapons Ban, the incident rate was exponentially low compared to suicides and low fatality homicides. Mass shootings comprise of less than 2 percent of gun death incidents, whereas suicide comprises nearly 61 percent (Lynch, K. et al., 2016). To expand, high-fatality mass shootings are not common, even in the United States. Between 1990 and 2017, there has been an average of 2.5 incidents per year, with an average of 25 people killed annually in such attacks. However, the number of incidents and the number of people killed per incident have been increasing since the end of the federal assault weapons ban(Klarevas et al., 2019). This study elucidates the compared ratio of mass shootings and its relevance to the research of the proportion of media portrayal in the gun debate. The literature reviewed shows that scholars

have compared American firearm laws and effectiveness to other nations, navigated the complexities between either side of the firearm debate, analyzed criminological statistics into the effectiveness and necessity for certain gun control laws, and the role of the media in pressuring legislatures. According to Brady United, in 2025, each common form of gun control has increased in law quantity in the last decade, however mass shootings have increased in frequency (Brady United, 2025). The research that is failing to complete these inconsistencies is in understanding how the media and the weaponization of tragedy has afforded lawmakers with a public that has become gradually complacent with restricting the second amendment. Studies that delve into the gun control debate also fail to address the lack of legislative efforts and media coverage regarding socioeconomic and mental health factors as potential drivers of gun violence.

The research will examine qualitative information derived from political rhetoric, proposed or passed legislation, court cases, and peer reviewed studies. Quantitative research includes political polls, voting counts, world value surveys, and research regarding the numerical effects of legislation. These methods will be crucial in understanding the gaps in the literature provided by the previously reviewed scholarly documents. Thus, the theory of this paper is that political actors and the media have sensationalized mass shootings, which has driven a greater consensus in public opinion towards more restrictive gun policies regarding the second amendment.

Research Methods

The research method utilized will be a mixed methods design of the Explanatory Sequential Design Model. The purpose of this design is to use the qualitative data to better understand the quantitative findings. The quantitative data will be collected through criminological studies, public opinion statistics, psychological studies, gun law quantities, mass shooting statistics, capacity statistics, media coverage increases in the United States beginning in President Bill Clinton's Administration in 1993 until the present day of 2024. The data will be analyzed and cross referenced to mass shooting events that have been increasingly publicized in the media and how this impacts public opinion towards the second amendment. The qualitative data will be collected from court cases, policy information, criminological journals, political complexities, laws and bills that have passed consequently from the widely reported mass shootings that have occurred and employed to rally for stricter gun control. This will be analyzed to understand the effect that public opinion has on legislation impacting gun ownership and acquisition.

Causation

The shifting opinions surrounding the Second Amendment and gun control in the United States have been significantly influenced by the increasing frequency and media coverage of mass shootings. Despite gun deaths being predominantly caused by urban violence and suicides, mass shootings, particularly in traditionally peaceful and symbolic spaces such as schools, nightclubs, and churches, have garnered disproportionate media attention and political focus. This shift can largely be attributed to the shock factor of mass shootings, which occur in settings associated with safety and community, creating a profound emotional impact on the public. The media's role in amplifying these tragedies cannot be understated, as the widespread coverage of mass shootings in peaceful settings contrasts sharply with the more routine and geographically isolated occurrences of gun violence in urban areas or suicides, which, though tragic, do not generate the same level of public outcry or emotional mobilization. This selective focus on mass shootings, despite their relatively low frequency compared to other forms of gun-related deaths, has led to a

larger impact on public opinion and the political discourse surrounding gun control. As a result, the increase in mass shootings has prompted a reevaluation of the Second Amendment and a growing demand for policy reforms, despite the fact that such incidents represent only a fraction of overall gun deaths in the United States. This has created a dissonance between the actual scope of the gun violence problem and the policy response, which tends to focus on the highly visible, yet less frequent, mass shooting events.

Analysis

The research observed in this study suggests that gun policy in the United States is amplified by media portrayal and public reaction to the threat of mass shootings. In her academic article titled, *The Role of the Media In the Disparate Response to Gun Violence in America*, Wanda Parham-Payne argues that, “by focusing heavily on crime stories, local news media outlets effectively construct a subjective reality that makes the viewing audience believe that crime is more prevalent than it actually is”(Parham-Payne, W. 2014). She also notes that inner-city homicides, due to their frequency in nature, are reported as routinely immoral events, whereas affluent mass shooting events garner more attention due to the way media portrays certain crimes in different sub-populations. The literature asserts that following the Sandy Hook shooting, policymakers were more inclined to take action in order to ameliorate the demands for stricter gun laws. In order to understand how the media impacts the gun debate, fear of mass shootings, and policymaking, it is important to examine and cross reference studies that measure these issues between 1993 and 2024. According to a study by James Alan Fox, mass shootings are, “are greatly overrepresented in the news media, the political debate, and the public discourse”(Fox, J. A. 2024). To specify, he noted an increase in fear of mass shootings and lifestyle changes by American citizens from a survey panel.

The following information was derived from multiple studies. Excluding the Parham-Payne study, an additional 2017 study examining the newsworthiness of mass shootings found that factors that will increase coverage include victim identity, perpetrator identity, location, and fatalities. The higher the fatalities, the location of a shooting being at a school, and the more affluent an area, the more increasingly publicized the shooting will be (Schildkraut, J. et al., 2017). The following graphs represent an increase in coverage proportional to the amount of victims killed and how it was proliferated in the media. The graphs displaying the coverage of the MP (Major Newspapers), the AP (Associated Press) and TV Coverage all display a sharp increase in coverage during and following 2012, when the Sandy Hook shooting occurred, with an outlier in 2007 noted as the Virginia Tech shooting(Fox, J. A. et al., 2021). These charts coincide with an additional chart that measures the quantity increase of criminological academic journals regarding mass shootings. In each display that represents publications on mass shootings, 2012 marks a significant increase in media portrayal, with each chart peaking in the respective limitations of their data, in 2018 (Fox, J. A. 2024). These charts can be connected with an additional chart in a study, which measures American fears of a mass shooting from a random public panel. Despite the lack of available data prior to 2015, there is a sharp increase in percentage of those fearful from 16.4% and peaking at 41.5% in 2018, while still remaining relatively higher in the years following. To expand, the study notes that in an additional panel, Over 75% of respondents experience stress, 33% avoid certain places or events, and nearly 25% alter how they live their lives . This measure of increase in media reports and fear of mass shootings create a possible correlation between media coverage and its impact on citizens fearing for their safety, leading to a demand for policy action. Despite the increase in rates of mass

shootings events and fatalities, the average American is still more likely to fall victim to a firearm through suicide or low fatality homicide incidents. These figures do not cover the entirety of my timeline due to lack of available data following 2018. Continued research will require further studies in this manner.

Figure 1. MP
Coverage compared
with victims killed
in gun violence
(2000-2018)(Fox, J.
A. 2024).

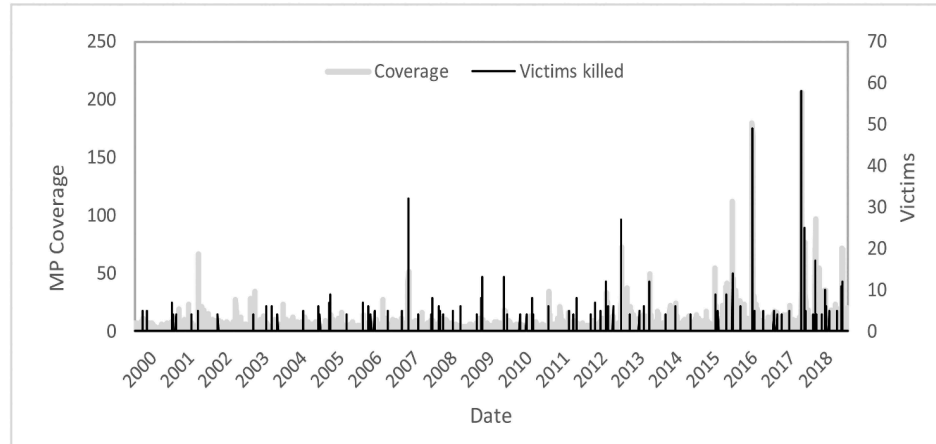


Figure 2 AP
Coverage compared
with victims killed
in gun violence
(2000-2018)(Fox, J.
A. 2024).

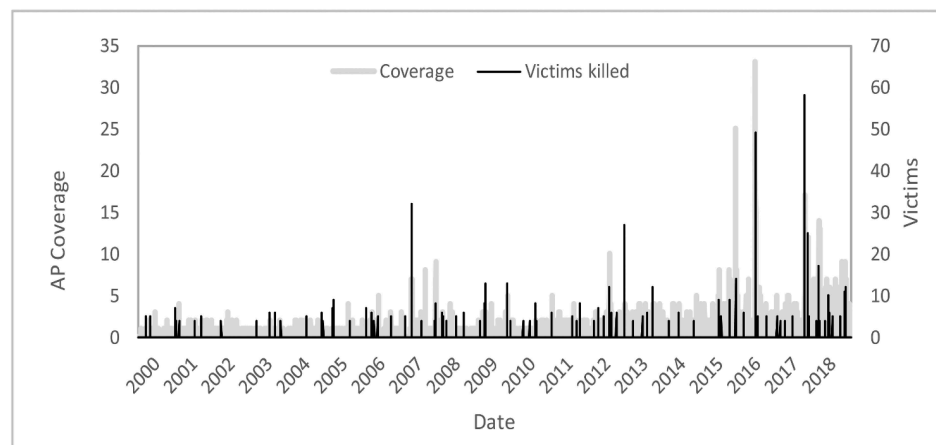
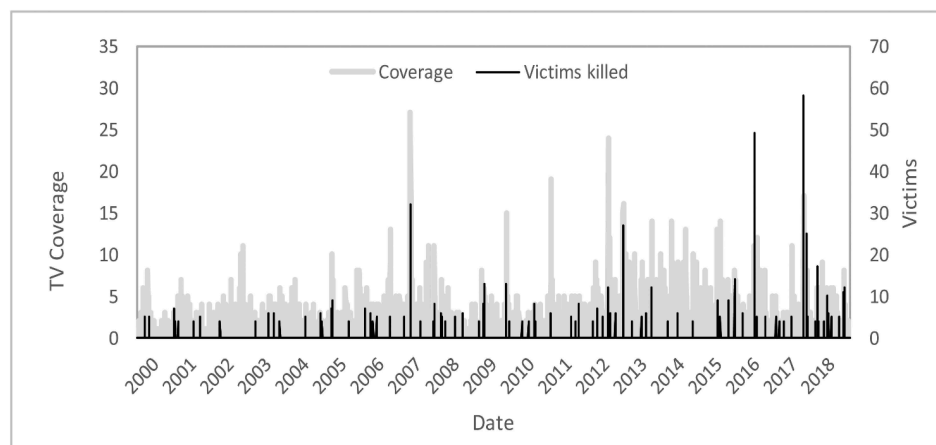


Figure 3. TV
Coverage compared
with victims killed
in gun violence
(2000-2018)(Fox, J.
A. 2024).



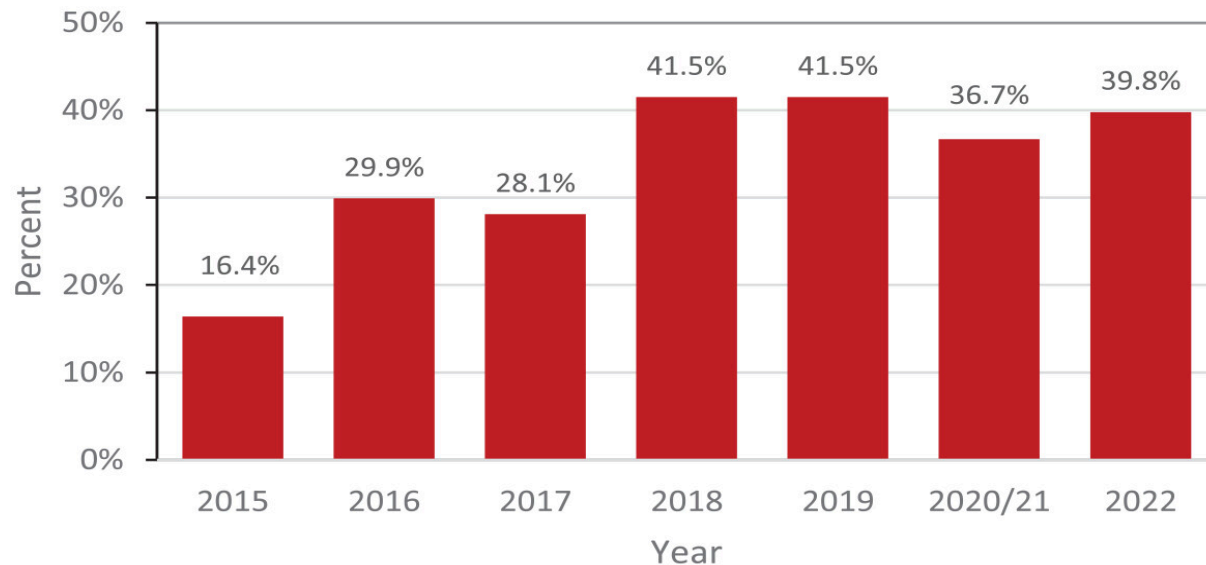


Figure 4. Percentage of respondents experiencing fear of mass shootings (2015-2022) (Fox, J. A. 2024)

The figure provided above does not begin nor end in the researched timeline due to lack of available data and the study's completion date. In order to understand how the media coverage and public opinion translates to changes in gun policy, it is important to examine the laws enacted as a consequence of a shooting event. According to a legislative study conducted by the *Journal of Public Economics*, "our results show that even random and infrequent events that account for a relatively small portion of total societal harm (as measured by fatalities in the current study) might nonetheless be crucial levers for policy consideration and change" (Luca, M. et al., 2020). The study examines laws and policies enacted between 1990 and 2014. According to Figure 3 of the study, the total number of laws and bills enacted over the years remained inconsistent, with some years as high as 1200 bills at the state levels, but will fall by hundreds the following year. The number of laws enacted per year remained relatively unchanged from 1990 until 2012 as well. Following Sandy Hook, the laws and bills enacted increased immensely. However, due to lack of available data, there is no information past 2014 on the amount of firearm policies in the study, however each major shooting in 2017 and onwards saw actions taken such as the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act, which imposed a three day waiting period for purchasing a gun and raised the age to purchase a firearm from 18 to 21 (WFSU, 2019). There is a clear increase in firearm policy actions following mass shootings since the Sandy Hook tragedy, as a result of the demands in public opinion, and an increase in reports from the media. The study that examined policy action following shooting events found that, "A mass shooting leads to a 15% increase in the number of firearm bills introduced within a state in the year after a mass shooting, on average and each additional death in a mass shooting leads to a 2.3% increase in the number of gun bills introduced" (Luca, M. et al., 2020). The issue is complex however, because at the state level, a democratic jurisdiction will take action to restrict gun laws, while republican legislators will loosen them. At the federal level, there have been 3 Democrat presidents and 2 Republicans between Bill Clinton's inauguration and the present study. The Democrat presidents have been

more likely to increase gun control, while Republicans often loosen it. Obama was President during the significant shift in polarization in the gun debate following Sandy Hook. As a result, he enacted 23 executive orders to prevent guns in nefarious possession, the most out of any President during the studied timeframe. This can be represented in the closing gap in support between gun owners and non owners on policy restrictions to prevent mass shootings (Barry et al., 2018). Overall, the media has increased reports and proliferation of mass shooting news significantly since 2012, resulting in increased fears of victimization to mass shootings, demands for policy change, and consequent political polarization.

Conclusion

Conclusively, the research evaluates a significant change in the landscape of media coverage and legislative response surrounding mass shootings in the United States, specifically in the years following the Sandy Hook tragedy. The analysis is conducive to a paradigm shift in the gun rights debate in the United States. From 1993 to 2011, federal action, public opinion, and media reports on gun control remained relatively limited, but the devastation of the Newton, Connecticut shooting at Sandy Hook elementary school, and other similar tragedies led to demands for increased policy action. The role of mass shootings in driving legislative action at the state level is also evident. The increase in reports, fears, and policy action following Sandy Hook compared to the relatively low contention in the gun control debate with little regard to mass shooting frequencies prior to 2012 is evident of a paradigm shift. The paradigm shift is a phenomenon that certainly requires future research and understanding to fully assert, however it appears evident in the present findings. The shocking incidents in areas of higher socioeconomic status compared to the “routinely immoral” inner city violence has created the tragic factor that the media industry commodifies. Media commodification and the sensationalism of tragedy has created opportunities to infringe on the Second Amendment. However, while more restrictive policies have been introduced, gun rights activists respond with resistive policies. The lack of compromise and further hostility portrays the extreme focus of the media on mass shootings and gun acquisition as a mechanism of increasing death tolls. Despite the larger ratio of suicides and low fatality homicide incidents in comparison, that may occur in part due to mental health or socioeconomic circumstances, policy action has strayed away from preventing the majority of gun deaths.

The gun control debate and legislative action has grown to be very contentious in the new paradigm past 2012. Media coverage has been a central factor in shaping both public fear and the political debate on gun control. As mass shootings have become more frequent than they were prior to 2012, and widely reported following Sandy Hook, public awareness and fear of such events grew significantly. How will this phenomenon impact domestic politics? The shift in public attitude toward the Second Amendment, driven by the media's framing of mass shootings, presents significant implications for future policy and societal change. With the increasing media attention on mass shootings, there is a growing public demand for stronger gun control measures. This shift in attitude increases the likelihood of more restrictive gun laws, potentially including assault weapon bans or stricter background checks. As the debate intensifies, the possibility of a constitutional amendment to either limit or redefine the scope of the Second Amendment may gain traction, though such an amendment would face significant resistance. Additionally, this shift in attitudes could have profound political consequences. Political parties may increasingly align or realign based on their stance toward gun rights and control, influencing future elections and legislative priorities. This dynamic may also continue to polarize American politics, as

policy change may face substantial resistance, and focus will remain on mass shootings rather than the larger causes of gun deaths. Cultural divisions may deepen as the nation grapples with balancing individual rights with public safety. Gun rights advocates may resist these changes, framing them as a direct threat to personal freedoms, while gun control advocates see them as necessary steps to curb violence. Ultimately, the changing attitudes surrounding the Second Amendment could lead to a transformation in American law, politics, and culture. The aforementioned Post-Sandy Hook paradigm theory has certainly documented an increase in gun control advocacy and media proliferation. As the nation continues to debate the issue of gun violence and control, the implications of these changes will reverberate across all aspects of American society, influencing not only public safety but also the fundamental values that define the country's approach to individual rights and collective well-being.

Discussion of Future Research and Limitations

The research in this piece underscores a necessity for future research and policy implications in relation to the role of the media and gun debate complexities in American politics. Due to the complexities of the gun violence issue in America, the issue requires updated research on mass shooting perpetrators' motives, firearm acquisition, and psychological effects in the media. For the purpose of this study, comparative research on any increase in fear regarding falling victim to a low-fatality homicide incident such as armed robbery or gang violence should be collected. An anonymous public panel with a diverse geopolitical survey population would create an opportunity to justify the current findings. If fears of these incidents are low in comparison to fear of mass shootings, respondents could be questioned on why certain events are feared over others. The issue of the proportion of mass shootings being reported in the media despite the low ratio in comparison to overall gun deaths warrants future research on suicide and its prevention, along with low fatality homicide prevention and occurrences in urban areas. This notion also applies to the idea that adolescent exposure to gun violence occurs at higher rates in urban areas compared to otherwise affluent socioeconomic areas where mass shootings have taken place. Regardless of the circumstances, public health research should focus on preventing and understanding overall gun deaths.

Therefore, the lack of available, recent research on effects of gun legislation to overall gun violence statistics, and media portrayal of the Second Amendment debate calls for continued research as the contentious polarization continues in the United States. Due to the nature of the gun debate predicaments, there are consequent policy implications. Legislators should address causes of gun deaths such as mental health factors, and focus on restricting firearm access to those who are at risk of harming themselves, such as those with a history of mental health incidents. Moreover, rather than restricting law-abiding citizens from owning firearms, policies should encourage proper training and storage of firearms, and policing should focus on deterring illegal sales and manufacturing of weapons. Due to the intensity of media coverage fueling the ambivalent political gun debate following mass shootings, cooperation should occur between public health officials, lawmakers, law enforcement, and criminological researchers in order to prevent infringements on Second Amendment rights, while simultaneously promoting public safety and compromise. In sum, continued research and evidence based policymaking should be utilized in order to prevent fear from spreading as a result of media proliferation, and to reduce the prevalence of gun deaths in contemporary American society.

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China's One Belt One Road Initiative

Liam McCullough
Robert Morris University

Introduction

The concept of soft power was introduced in 1990 by international relations scholar, Joseph Nye, in his book *Bound to Lead*. The term refers to a state's ability to influence other states through appeal and attraction rather than coercion (hard power). In modern politics, soft power is implemented by every established state government as a catalyst for domestic and foreign growth. How could China, despite being seen as a controversial state, effectively employ soft power action when the whole foundation of the concept is attraction. This research will be examining China's effort to effectively employ economic soft power through the One Belt One Road Initiative. This work identifies both negative and positive ways that China has employed the initiative and uses comparative politics to conclude an effective way of implementation. This paper will be using the United States implementation of the Marshall Plan to identify solutions to China's implementation of the One Belt One Road Initiative. Using the Marshall Plan as a comparison makes sense because of its similar purpose of restructuring a large region. This will be done using the comparative mixed methodology research design in order to find not only a conclusive but also descriptive answer. What factors of the One Belt One Road Initiative have led to successful attraction in some countries but failure and doubt in others? Using the answers to this question, what similarities does this have with the United States' implementation of the Marshall Plan? This will provide the answer to the ultimate question of, what action must China take to find success in the One Belt One Road Initiative.

What is China's Soft Power?

Nye describes soft power as an indirect way to exercise power such that you have the ability to get others to want what you want, allowing you to set the agenda and determine the framework (Nye 1990). It includes intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions. Soft power itself stems from credibility, trust, fairness, legitimacy, and right motives (Nye 2021). China employs trust by promoting a "peaceful development" and "harmonious world" to lay the foundation for international cooperation and a peaceful settlement of issues (Aydin & Yuce 2019). Hard and soft power are interdependent forces that coexist among each other. China employs soft power economics diplomacy and relies on hard power to ensure effectiveness (Yagci 2018).

Public Diplomacy occurs when a government engages with another country with the intention to foster understanding and build relationships. Public diplomacy has had three objectives: to seek understanding for their political system, to perceive a stable and trustworthy partner, and respect as an ancient culture with rich history (Voon & Xu 2020). Recent efforts by the country to implement soft power through the appeal of their culture is seen both domestic and foreign, both funded by their booming economy. China has done this through improving its international broadcasting service and hosting large events that attract worldwide audiences. These events include the 2008 Olympic Games and 2010 World Expo (You 2018). "Peaceful Rise" "Peaceful Development" and "Harmonious Society" promoted by Chinese officials in 21st century uprising indicate that China is making dramatic efforts to assure the world of their peace. Xi Jinping popularizes "The Chinese Dream" to motivate Africa and Asia-Pacific regions. The Chinese dream being a significant economic and social revolution in the last 300 years done nearly independently. According to China, global organizations such as the World Bank and

World Trade Organization favor only Western nations, the reason being the East is more underdeveloped. This story of hope and prosperity attracts underdeveloped countries by voicing desire for a reform of global governance. However, provision of public goods in the international system requires smart power (use of hard and soft power tools) and enhances soft power (Voon & Xu 2020). China plans to accomplish this through one of the largest infrastructure projects in the world: The One Belt One Road Initiative.

What is the One Belt One Road Initiative?

Introduced in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, the One Belt One Road Initiative is a large infrastructure project that promotes free trade and global cooperation. It is the third largest source of overseas direct investment in the past decade: involving 155 countries and more than 1 trillion USD (Du 2016). It includes more than 60 countries and covers over 70 percent of the world population (Aydin & Yuce 2019). It is primarily made up of 2 components: Maritime Silk Road (ocean oriented) and the Silk Road Economic Belt (Land oriented). The maritime road is designed to link South China sea to the Indian ocean, East Africa, Red Sea, and Mediterranean Sea. Today this project is the center piece for China foreign and international economic strategy (Du 2016).

Following the 2008 financial crisis, China continued to provide financial aid worldwide when no other country could, which expanded dependence on the Chinese economy. China was successful in utilizing soft power-oriented economics for appealing to many countries, ensuring their participation (Yagci 2018). China is now leading trading partners with a number of Latin American, African, and Asian countries (Trunkos 2020). According to the International Monetary Fund, China contributed to 27.8% of world economic growth since 2014 (Du 2016). Since the introduction of the initiative, China has dramatically increased overseas investments. Trade flow among countries has increased 4.1%, while the Initiative promotes GDP growth for countries by 2.6% and 3.9% (Voon & Xu 2020).

5 tasks included in the Action Plan of SREB/MSR include: Policy coordination, facility connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bond. These goals appeal mostly to underdeveloped/neighboring countries. China has identified that in order to succeed it must develop institutions such as high standard FTA and efficient dispute settlement mechanism to smoothly facilitate the project. One example of these institutions at work is the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank created to facilitate investment to the project which contains 57 countries (Du 2016).

The One Belt One Road Initiative will compare to the U.S. Marshall Plan due to their similar intentions and significant investment size. The One Belt One Road Initiative and the U.S. Marshall Plan both aimed to rebuild economies, government, and trade relationships. They aimed to do this by investing more foreign aid than anyone ever has during their respective time periods.

The Marshall Plan:

The Marshall Plan was a crucial program following the end of World War 2 that outlined the reconstruction of Europe. It was a humanitarian aid effort led by the United States that transferred 12.5 billion dollars to western European countries in the period 1948-1951 (Tarnoff 2018). Since the end of the Marshall Plan, it has been referenced several times as a remedy for other struggling regions. For example, officials suggested another implementation of the policy throughout Eastern Europe throughout the 1990s to serve as a combatant against communism. It was also referenced in efforts to develop African countries during the 2000s (Crafts 2011). This

would suggest that the Marshall Plan may very well be one of the most successful soft power actions in United States History.

What constitutes the Marshall Plan as being so effective? The Marshall Plan represents the foundational settings of the 1950's and 1960's "European Golden Age" (Crafts 2011). However, there is much debate about how much effect the initiative truly had on reconstruction. To evaluate this, authors have written numerous works that will be examined to evaluate the struggles and success of the Marshall Plan.

Theory

This paper tests the theory that overseas direct investment is not the primary solution to gaining favorability among foreign countries. More specifically, if China is going to find success with their One Belt One Road Initiative, they will need to identify other ways besides overwhelmingly large investments. It is commonly understood that soft power and hard power tools can work dependently. In this case, China's economic success has allowed them to introduce the One Belt One Road Initiative. However, this has not found success due to a lack of trust and misunderstood intentions. If China continues to contradict their intentions with their actions, this initiative will never come to life. These solutions can be found by examining historic public diplomacy that are similar to the One Belt One Road Initiative.

Gap In Literature

So far in this paper, two major diplomatic actions have been evaluated: The One Belt One Road Initiative and The Marshall Plan. When researching the implementation of the BRI, there was a lack of scholarly research on how China could resolve the issues they are facing with changing the attitudes revolving around the initiative. Scholars today have identified the success and failures of the initiative, but they have not provided a remedy to them. What this paper aims to do that other scholars have not done, is to compare the two initiatives and create possible remedies for China's implementation of the BRI.

Method of Research

This paper will answer the question of; how China can implement the One Belt One Road initiative better despite their negative view around the world. Comparing the Marshall Plan to the One Belt One Road initiative will identify similar failures and how China can use similar diplomacy to the United States to create a smoother progression. It will do so by using the comparative mixed methodology design.

Using quantitative data will confirm that China's BRI is failing despite massive ODI and efforts to improve global image. Through qualitative data, I will find reasonings for this failure. I will then compare this reasoning with solutions to The Marshall Plan to create a modern interpretation of the solutions.

2025 China can be compared to 1948 United States for several reasons. One of which is the fact that they are both dominant world powers in their respective time periods. In 1948, the United States was left standing as the only industrial powerhouse remaining after the war. World War 2 had left the world in wreckage and had created a sense of desperation in European and Asian countries. In a sense, this provided the United States with a call to action to provide reparations. Comparably, China was left standing as the only economic powerhouse following the 2008 housing crisis. With the entire world mostly in panic, this allowed China to assert its dominance and set the foundational beginnings for the One Belt One Road Initiative. Second, both China and the United States held financial superiority that allowed them the means to create such large initiatives. At the time of the Marshall Plan, the United States controlled most of the

world's trade which gave them the leverage to create it. Similarly, China is a lead trading partner with many of its target One Belt One Road countries which gives them the advantage.

Findings

China has spent the last 3 decades building relationships with members of the ASEAN countries to promote smooth cooperation in the BRI. It has been stated by ASEAN officials that China has cooperated effectively with economic, security, and political issues. They even went as far to say that benefits have been mutual in their partnership, urging other concerned companies to join (Ploberger 2017). NDRC has found that this strong relationship will help China greatly when building relations with other Southeast Asian countries, while developing underdeveloped countries in the region –the end goal of the BRI (Ploberger 2017). This is facilitated by the high-speed railway projects in southeast Asia that promote connectivity (Yagci 2018). China recently used economic development to bring reform in the Plenary Session of 18th CCPC by using foreign reserves to export at overcapacity in order to establish cooperation mechanisms with developing countries. For countries like Turkey, this ensures that there will be a mutual benefit. Turkey Foreign Affairs Minister recently made remarks about eliminating anti-China in the media, further cementing the country's devotion to China (Yagci 2018). Another crucial country that has shown full support of the BRI is Russia. In May of 2015 Putin stated that the BRI and Eurasian Integration Project complement each other and will create a common ground amongst all Eurasian countries (Ploberger 2017).

How Has it Failed?

As glamorous as the One Belt One Road Initiative seems, it comes with a number of concerns and failures. No existing multi-lateral organizations support the strength to create the goals desired by China: Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is designed to facilitate security cooperation among its members and the members lack incentive to create FTA (Du 2016). Other countries view the initiative as a scheme for China to assert itself as a leading military and economic power (Du 2016). On top of a lack of support, previous infrastructure investments made by China in Africa and Asia were small and unpopular locally, making them failures. Doing the same with this project would potentially harm China significantly.

There are concerns in the West that overwhelming Chinese development money will undermine institutions like the World Bank (Du 2016). Participating states argue the initiative is too China centric and they will only receive marginal benefits (Du 2016). The Pakistani government could only fund for 470 million USD worth of CPEC projects and rest is financed by China. On top of this, BRI related projects in Nepal and Pakistan face challenges because there is no open tender process in former and the terms of deal are very strict (Yagci 2018). This begs the question; will this lead to a debt trap for BRI countries? Recent media reports about the debate generate negative media for China, ultimately discouraging cooperation. China soft power is lower in BRI countries among the maritime silk route than the land route. This is because, the South China Sea conflict proposes political setbacks for BRI countries along the maritime route (Voon & Xu 2020). Border dispute with India and South China Sea conflict arise major implications for the project (Yagci 2018). Economic export structure of BRI maritime route countries are similar to China's and this may lead to dispute and economic pressure in countries along the route (Voon & Xu 2020). The Chinese push of excess capacity/exports on other countries, is being seen as a strategy to take over certain assets or businesses entities ultimately leading to local firms losing autonomy, loss of local labor due to influx of Chinese workers, exposure to competition pressure from China exports, rise of corruption and unfairness

concerning funding (Voon & Xu 2020).

Shambaugh finds that China has little soft power because it does not offer a model for other countries to emulate (Yagci 2018). Culturally Chinese global image is not positive, it can't set global trends, and society is the main source of soft power (not government) despite diplomatic efforts to improve it (Yagci 2018). Nunn and Wantchekon argue it is difficult to break cycle of personal attitudes (Voo & Xu 2020). Therefore, no matter what diplomatic action China makes, it will likely not change the personal attitudes of other countries unless it acknowledges its shortcomings government wise.

China has used coercive strategy in pursuit of foreign policy despite the goal to not damage it's international image. For example, Philippine President put South China Sea dispute on hold when he returned from a 2016 visit with 24 billion USD worth of funding and investment pledges (Yagci 2018). This goes against all the principles of soft power.

Lastly, there are future concerns indicating that China may not be able to maintain this rate of growth as the population grows and the world economy becomes more developed. Since 1978 the rate of working-age population growth has decreased from 2 and a half percent to less than one percent in 2011 and is expected to reach negative numbers in the near future (Haltmaier 2013). If China can't maintain economic growth, it can't fund soft power efforts, and the project is gone (Johnston 2017).

Statistical Analysis of BRI

Authors Voon and Xu have conducted a study in 2020 analyzing the favorability effects of the BRI in both BRI countries and non-BRI countries. Voon and Xu gathered data from the Program on International Policy Attitudes and the Globe Scan under the BBC world service (Voon & Xu 2020). This data collects survey results in which participants are asked their overall views on China's global influence. Summaries of this data are then gathered to provide an overall soft power score, which will be used to compare attitude shifts among different periods of time. Altogether, 51.35% of the respondents reported a positive image of Chinese global influence. Of this 51.35% of respondents, 36.8% were BRI recipient countries (Voon & Xu 2020). This study provided data that correlated more positive responses among land route BRI countries than maritime route.

This can be attributed to several different factors, but the South China sea conflict and economic structure of maritime route countries remain the most notable of them (Voon & Xu 2020). As previously mentioned, some of the countries integrated in the BRI are currently in a heated conflict with China over control of the South China Sea. While this initiative may open sea trade up to them, there is distrust about China's real intentions. Maritime BRI countries fear that China is using the BRI as a ploy to gain control of the import/export market in the region and drown out competitive business in surrounding small countries (Voon & Xu 2020).

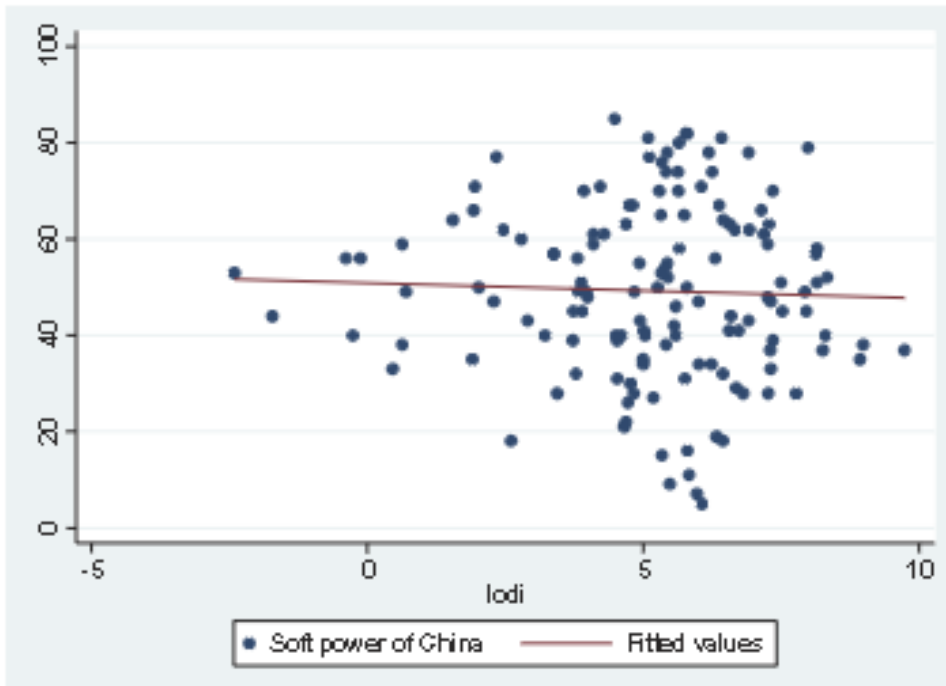


Figure 1: ODI & Soft Power Correlation 2011-2016

According to the image above, China's increase in favorability was not statistically significant among non-BRI countries than BRI countries despite massive trade agreements and investment. This contradicts the notion that ODI has significant effects on soft power (Voon & Xu 2020).

The Success of the Marshall Plan

To evaluate the success of the Marshall Plan, scholars have compared post-World War 1 construction with post-World War 2 construction to create an accurate interpretation. Following the end of World War 1, the United States offered financial assistance but would quickly withdrawal to follow an isolationist stance as a nation. This would lead to a complete and utter failure of a European reconstruction. One where Germany would enter states of poverty never seen before. Despite World War 2 being more destructive in some cases, the post-war reconstruction process was far more successful. According to economist Long and Eichengreen, the Marshall Plan was not large enough to significantly accelerate the recovery process of financial investment or rebuild infrastructure (Long & Eichengreen 1991). However, it did play a crucial role in constructing the framework for post WW2 Western European growth. It did so by creating representative democracies all throughout Europe that were in the U.S. eyes, ideal political and social institutions for growth (Long & Eichengreen 1991). In the years leading up to the implementation of the plan, many Western European countries feared an economy with no government regulation with the Great Depression still fresh in their mind (Long & Eichengreen 1991). If they took the chance at a free market, they exposed themselves to another economic crisis that would potentially finish off many of the countries. On top of that, the Soviet Union's war efforts and post-war success had served as a temptation for many of the failing countries. Sticking to a centrally focused government had led nearly all the countries in Western Europe to dry up reserves of foreign assets. Export earnings were so low by 1947 that they were unable to

purchase any raw material or manufacturing equipment from the only industrial based economy left; The United States. To make matters worse, per capita income was so low that government institutions were unable to collect taxes to build up their destroyed infrastructure. It is believed that if the U.S. did not offer assistance, much of Western Europe would have completely collapsed by the 1950's (Long & Eichengreen 1991).

As mentioned before, it isn't believed that the Marshall Plan bought Western Europe out of debt, rather it created a solid foundation to build upon. The Marshall Plan focused itself on the theory that it would "permit the emergence of political and social conditions in which free institutions would exist," (Allen 1948). This initiative would provide the funds for financial investment and public expenditures while allowing recipient countries to import goods from the United States. These goods included machinery, raw materials, and general goods such as food and clothing (Long & Eichengreen 1991). Access to raw material and machinery boosted the industrial sector of countries, all the while allowing them to trade with the United States. After an incredibly successful first year, nearly all Western European countries joined the initiative. The United States withdrew the funds in 1951 after concluding that Europe was able to function by its own.

Today, the Marshall plan is viewed as a highly successful structural adjustment program rather than financial lifeboat (Long & Eichengreen 1991). That is to say, the purpose of the Marshall Plan was not to give European countries all the money they need to return to normalcy. It was to give them just enough money where they could build strong industries that rested upon democracies. Trade would then be encouraged among the countries, creating a win-win situation.

Struggles Faced

Despite the overwhelming success of the Marshall Plan today, there were several obstacles that were faced during the implementation of it. To begin, opponents of the treaty feared that it would lead to a more severe economic crisis (Allen 1948). As briefly mentioned, European countries were fresh out of World War 2 and were amidst an economic crisis. With the Soviet Union faring better than all of them, there was an underlying temptation to avoid a capitalist environment and favor a more communistic approach (Long & Eichengreen 1991). One could argue that they had no reason to favor communism if the United States was doing far better than the Soviet Union. However, the difference between these countries is that one had been in the war years longer and fought battles on its own land. The Soviets joined World War 2 far earlier than the United States, and the United States did not suffer battle in their territory except for Hawaii. To make matters more difficult, the capitalist market is the same market that led the globe into a Great Depression not too long ago. This created anti-capitalist movements in France, Greece, and Turkey that forced the United States to amend (Allen 1948).

The United States reassured countries such as France, Greece, and Turkey that a capitalist model economy was favorable for reconstruction by targeting countries like Germany and Japan to showcase development through the program (Allen 1948). Germany and Japan had been hit the hardest by World War 2 and did not have much say as to how they were handled following the war (since they were the main antagonists). This allowed the United States to use their lack of power to carry out the agenda of the Marshall Plan as "centers of recovery" (Allen 1948).

Next, the United States was challenged to prove to countries that this was not an attack on their sovereignty. Many countries included in the Marshall Plan feared that this was a ploy for the United States to establish European dominance and build a center for American monopolies. Countries that joined the initiative were forced to surrender all trade barriers and hand over their domestic markets to the U.S. industrial complex. It was said that once the European countries

reconstructed business to the extent that they produced more output than they were receiving from America, they would have officially been reconstructed. The U.S. would also obtain control of currency and have ultimately overwhelming control of these countries' economies (Allen 1948). Scandinavian countries, Switzerland, and other Eastern European countries all rejected due to a concern that this was an attack on their sovereignty.

However, the United States combated this concern by assuring state officials that this was an initiative designed to achieve self-aid and cooperation. Saying self-aid assured countries that this was not a plan to take complete control of their governments, rather it would be a new foundation for future governments to build off on their own efforts. The U.S. also used the miserable state of the countries as incentive for them to join (Allen 1948). Through repetitive efforts, the U.S. convinced many of the countries that their government would fail otherwise. Another concern the U.S. was challenged with silencing was the failure of the Truman Doctrine. The Truman Doctrine was the first post-war agreement constructed by the U.S. that promised to combat communism to create “free and thriving societies,” (Allen 1948). This would turn out to be a catastrophic failure in countries such as France, Greece, Turkey, and China. America was funding Civil Wars against communism in places like China and Greece that were showing little to no progression and creating international U.S. negative sentiment. After efforts in Greece and China appeared to be failing, President Truman addressed the world and announced that economic conditions and military situations weren’t improving, instead they were worsening than before. After his address, he requested Congress for more money to transfer to Greece and China which was denied. In France, there was massive support for a communist government despite America’s presence (Allen 1948). There was even a negative attitude toward U.S. efforts within the United States itself.

The United States resolved this conflict by assuring the American and European people that the Marshall Plan was a humanitarian aid centered around the improvement of Europe. By shifting away from a negative “anti-communist” mission statement and promising a positive outcome, that changed attitudes of some Europeans and most Americans (Allen 1948). To win over the support of Europeans, U.S. officials invited Soviet official Molotov and a large group of Soviet economists to review the Marshall Plan and make a statement. They even went as far to say that the Soviet government was permitted to enter into the agreement if they saw fit. Molotov and his team actually agreed that Europe needed rehabilitation and that the United States was fit to facilitate the aid. This was under the circumstances that it didn’t interfere with the receiving country's sovereignty. Ultimately, he opposed the idea of promoting representative governments across Western Europe (Allen 1948). It is important to note however, that he did agree with reconstruction under U.S. regulation. This assured European countries that the U.S. was not on a military mission to eliminate communism through the Marshall Plan.

Conclusion

After reviewing the data that has been collected, there is clear indication that China’s increase in overseas direct investment has had little to no effect in their success of collecting support for the One Belt One Road Initiative. This begs the ultimate question, how can China effectively employ the economic soft power action that is the One Belt One Road? This is no easy answer. As mentioned before, the most difficult factor of soft power is changing the traditional beliefs of other countries. For centuries China has advertised a “peaceful uprising” or “friendly neighbor” but continue to contradict this with actions like paying the Philipino President 24 billion dollars to end the South China Sea conflict (Yagci 2018). On top of this, they provide an overwhelming amount of investment for countries like Pakistan that struggle to fund the initiative. Actions like

this are the exact reason that countries are hesitant to trust China's intention of the One Belt One Road Initiative (Voon & Xu 2020). Countries both included in the initiative and in the west fear that China's irrational investments to push the initiative forward indicate a hidden motive regarding it.

However, there can be a solution to amend the trust of the countries involved in the initiative if the struggles and success of the Marshall Plan are examined. Similarly to the One Belt One Road Initiative, countries involved in the Marshall Plan feared that the United States was only trying to overrun European industry by taking complete control of trade and handing over domestic markets in turn for U.S. industry (Allen 1948). The United States combated this problem in 1948 by reassuring other countries that the Marshall Plan was a "self-aid" project rather than "aid" (Allen 1948). This changes the narrative that the U.S. was taking sole responsibility for rebuilding Europe to a narrative that they were giving the funds for Europe to rebuild Europe.

China can use a similar solution to help the One Belt One Road's trust as the United States did to help the Marshall Plan's trust. If China were to provide resources for these underdeveloped countries in Southeast Asia and Africa to build instead of taking head control of all construction, they may trust their intentions more. As previously mentioned, China is providing trillions of dollars to these countries and designing projects to rebuild them. The underdeveloped countries will need more control, just as the countries in the Marshall Plan, for them to trust the initiative.

China's next biggest obstacle when implementing the One Belt One Road Initiative is the South China Sea Conflict. As found by Voon & Xu, favorability of the project along the maritime route is much lower than the land route. This is because the South China Sea is crucial to Southeast Asian trade. If China were to be the main voice of trade in the area, it's very likely Southeast Asian markets would cripple under the weight of Chinese exports (Voon & Xu 2020). China's export market is identical to Southeast Asia's export market. If they were to flood the market, local business in these underdeveloped countries would suffocate.

The United States faced a similar issue when communist countries feared the U.S. model of economics was only to benefit the U.S. considering they had faced little damages following World War 2 (Allen 1948). Eastern European countries saw the state of the Soviet Union and the U.S. following the war and had a choice to make. They could either follow a new communist form of economics just as the Soviets have or adopt the old capitalist system as they did before the wars. Considering the capitalist system had recently led them into the Great Depression, they feared adopting it in such a fragile state. On top of that, the Soviet had suffered much loss and seemed to be faring well following the war (Long & Eichengreen 1991). As a result, they transitioned to communist economics. To put the fear of capitalism to bed, the U.S. used the extremely broken countries of Germany and Japan to serve as an example of what success capitalism could bring (Long & Eichengreen 1991).

China can install economic trust within the Southeast Asian countries if they follow a similar path the United States did. Like the United States, China can find the weakest Southeast Asian countries and aim to make a model of success from them. For example, if China targeted Laos or Myanmar (both severely underdeveloped) they can take advantage of their desperate needs to show their intended agenda for other Southeast Asian countries. Countries like these don't have the resources to deny China's assistance. If they can make an approving example of them, it may very well garner support elsewhere.

Lastly, the countries implemented in the One Belt One Belt Initiative fear that China will

not be able to support the investment required to fund it. As the world develops and the economy continues to progress, China will not see continued economic growth (Haltmaier 2013). Data has shown that the working age population in China has been on a steady decline since the 1980s (Haltmaier 2013). This may be due to foreign success motivating Chinese citizens to move for more successful countries.

The United States combatted this issue by adapting to the modern world. Since its establishment, the United States has maintained an isolationist point of view. This may have allowed them to expand domestic interest, but overall, they lagged in the world economy. This didn't change until the U.S. decided to abandon isolationism and join the world market.

If China wishes to continue to progress their economic interest, they need to adopt new standards that follow the rest of the world. One of the most pressing issues is their lack of civil rights. This has led many citizens to flee the country in search of freedom. If China slowly improves social standards, they will see both human and economic development. This would fuel their success required for the One Belt One Road Initiative.

Ultimately, China has a long road ahead before it sees success with the One Belt One Road Initiative. The One Belt One Road Initiative is an economic soft power action that is going to take immense trust and economic funding. In order to see success China is going to need to model after historic diplomacy like the Marshall Plan to find similar struggles and the partnering remedies. If they identify modern versions of these old solutions, they can effectively implement the One Belt One Road Initiative.

Future Research Implications

This research can be attributed to future research regarding the One Belt One Road considering the initiative has not taken full effect yet. Furthermore, it can be used to analyze all current and future soft power affairs. The advantage history has given serves as the greatest tool for political scientists. If they continue to analyze the soft power action of the past (before soft power was even a concept), they can find modern versions of them and employ it in the most effective way possible. Afterall, soft power action is the future of diplomacy. It provides a peaceful resolution to possible violent conflicts. Countries that cooperate effectively together are more unlikely to rise into armed conflict against each other.

In regard to this research, the author will continue to research Chinese economic soft power action. This research project has exposed several ways that China can continue their "peaceful uprising". If China effectively employs economic soft power, there is no telling how world order could change.

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Is Disney Out-pricing Their Market?

A Trend Analysis Examining Family Income and Walt Disney World Cost Structure

Kamden Miller
Robert Morris University

Abstract

For American families, the family vacation is an important component of culture and family lifestyle. Research suggests that about a third of Americans vacation 2-3 times a year, Fleck, (2023). Vacations can be costly due to travel expenses, food, housing, attractions, and the decision of where and when to go can impact the cost. This is important for families and more importantly to the Walt Disney Company because the increasing prices in turn affect their cost structures and appeal as a vacation destination. This research project examines the relationship between family income and vacation expenses to travel to Walt Disney World.

Research discusses how discretionary spending, which is non-essential spending that a household can survive without, if necessary, impacts a family's ability to vacation, (Liberto, 2024). Discretionary spending over the past year of 2023, the average American Household spent \$13,000, (Boccia & Lett, 2023). As a result, families now need to ensure that their vacations are memorable, while also being mindful of their limited discretionary funds. Despite the change in families' discretionary spending, Disney continues to capitalize on this consumer market through broadening their access to Disney products to target all demographics through a variety of experiences.

However, with this change, the company seems to be capitalizing on their market regardless of the financial stability because it is such a big part of American culture to vacation to the tourist destination at some point in life. According to a recent survey, the number one visited landmark in America is the Walt Disney World resort in Orlando, Florida (Leasca, 2023).

This research uses correlational quantitative research to examine families' ability to afford a Disney vacation and the market feasibility with pricing ratio. Results discuss Walt Disney World tourist's consumers and its impact on Disney's cost structure. The following sections discuss vacations in American society, average American household income trends, Disney current and historical cost structure, and the relationship between the market for tourism both in the past and the present.

Vacation Importance to American Families

American culture is built up of many things, such as tourism and traditionally, a happy and healthy family. Each dream is personalized, but family and inclusivity have always been pillars. Tourism is a major player in the economic and social structure by providing interpersonal relationship dynamics over shared experiences (Yehia, 2019). Blundel et al. (2017) discuss the importance of families involving their children in tourism at a young age and continuing the tradition of exploration to improve and encourage individual societal skills for children. Research also highlights the importance of lived experiences and family vacations into three main parts as justification of why vacations are important to society, (Hilbrecht et al, 2008). The three parts are the importance of having fun, experiencing adventure and the unknown, and strengthening interpersonal relationships (Blundel et al, 2017). These three parts are justified within the field of belonging through society and familial status because persons can use

vacations to have a new experience as well as adjust and learn from new environments. In contrast Zucker (2010) states that vacations are grouped by importance through the recharge they bring to a person's life. According to this perspective a vacation is as simple as unplugging or a change in scenery that can allow your body to improve mental health and improve productivity. However, in this paper, the model of Hilbrecht will be the main focus with its topic of impact on family vacations rather than people. It is imperative that family vacations continue to be a part of social normalities in order for families to bond and young children to have experiences with ability and change in their environments while remaining with some constants that are the family members, (Macdermid, Shelley, Choi, Soojin, and Lin, Yi-Chin, 2009).

How to decide whether to vacation or not? Many researchers argue that providing children with travel experiences are very influential to their lives as well as providing structure for future generations both socially and individually with navigating relationships (Blundel et al. 2017; National Bureau of Economic Research 2017; Hilbrecht et al. 2008). While the views may differ on the above theories of why individuals vacation, the commonality in the above research is that a family vacation positively impacts familial bonds.

Now that we have discussed the impact of individuals within the family, now the financial aspect for a family and their vacations. Review of family income from the United States Census Bureau highlights a decline during the last few years, as shown in Table 1.1, family income has declined by 2.9% from 2021 to 2022. The impact of the global pandemic was significant. Research indicates that households' income decreased from 2019 to 2020 by 3.0%, (Kochhar, 2022; Schrider, 2022).

Time Period	Family Households
2020	\$67,521
2021	\$95,450
2022	\$74,580
2023	\$63,442

Table 1.1

In addition to the global pandemic's impact data indicates that prior to the pandemic family tourism was on a decline due to demographic factors (Metz, 2024). This same research indicates that the unmarried population of America, want to travel to eclectic modern locations since they have no children. This impacts family vacations as well as the Walt Disney World market because singles allocate their discretionary spending towards other things in their life such as personal independence and finances instead of taking family vacations, (Metz, 2024). In addition to these factors the increased use of technology also impacts family vacations. Virtual reality's ability to simulate consumer experiences without many of the financial constraints a real vacation would cost, (Whittington, 2015; Bowen, 2017). Virtual reality may never replace actual travel; it offers people a chance to experience being fed through a lens that could replace destinations that are not accessible or feasible to get to, (Afriyie, 2021; Dingman, 2021). While it is difficult to narrow down virtual reality's impact on the tourism industry at this point as it continues to advance and potentially replace many in person activities such as tourism and

overall family vacations (Chen, 2020). In spite of the benefits of vacations for children and families alike, there is a projected decline in the number of vacations currently taken due to economic reasons such as demographics and finances, as previously mentioned by Whittington (2015).

Discretionary spending relates to the tourism industry and therefore family vacations because discretionary spending, or income is the amount of income left over after the deduction of necessary things such as taxes, mandatory charges, or expenditures, (Nickolas, 2022). Individuals who have financial scarcity have more discretionary expenditures because they have a more optimistic perception of their future, (Sarial-Abi et al, 2023). This means that individuals in this grouping believe there will be more finances in the future and therefore spend more than they would normally with their level of income. Loosely relating to the pull of Disney world for vacation is their pull of entertainment, since Walt Disney World is an entertainment company with park experiences, in relation to United States gross domestic product, GDP, overall expenditures in the entertainment industry in 2022 decreased 3.1% from the rise in 2021 of 22.7% , (Davis, 2023).

Previously, there has been an increase in the growth of tourism from 2020 to 2021 from the comparison when the world was hit with the economic change of Covid- 19 in 2020. In 2020, the total tourism output was 952 billion dollars, compared to the 2021 statistics that climbed to 1.7 trillion dollars, Osbourne (2023). Along with an increase in tourism, the American GDP has also increased from 2020 to 64.4% in 2021 and from 50.7% in 2020 allows for a greater number of people to travel due to economic growth, (*National Tourism Satellite Account* 2024).

Year	Tourism Share of GDP based on change from previous year by percent	Tourism annual growth rate On change from previous year by percent	Direct tourism employment On change from previous year by percent
2019	2.99	3.8	4.8
2020	1.54	-50.7	-45.7
2021	2.15	64.4	38.7
2022	1.5	NA	42
2023	2.5	NA	NA

Table 1.2 Tourism Percentage Rates

Americans' tourism spending habits impact vacation destinations, such as Walt Disney World, due to their changing costs over time with demand-based pricing, which will be discussed later in the paper. Therefore, in relation to the statistics of familial vacation and their financial aspect, consumers will have to decide priorities in their style of social structures and experiences. This means that families will have to decide what to allocate their discretionary spending on with all things considered. As for Walt Disney World, it is important to stay a relevant tourism spot to pull people into such a unique experience so that families have a reason to return or visit for the

first time to see for themselves if the destination does all that it says it does. However, to decide this, families will need to rationalize their financial situation and the affordability of a family trip to the destination.

Walt Disney Vacation American Societal Norm

Regardless of social status or financial stability in American society the question that is commonly asked is "When are you taking your kids to Disney" or "When are you going to Disney" in some sort of fashion. But why? In a research paper published by Bartleby, Giroux (n.d.) titled *Disney is a Utopian Society*, the research explores that "Ultimately, the Disney parks are based off of two key concepts: commoditization and Americanization" which would explain the pull of Americans to the vacation and tourism site. However, Disney is an escapism spot based on imagination and wonder, that feeds into the guest and their inner child. Sharma (n.d.), suggests that Disney intertwines Americanization through music, visuals, and other cultures that the guests accept and appreciate. Another stream of research, (Lang, 2020) capitalize on the subject theory of childhood innocence and the protection of it against harsher realities, as explained by Rousseau in the early 1800's (Rousseau, J, 1762). The idea that children should be protected from negative influences from outside environments due to a child being pure until it has had a negative impression from civilization, (Kilroy, n.d.) says that no matter what country, Disney is a powerful force that few people challenge due to its immense marketing for the freedom of dreams which plays into the protection of childhood that is not centralized to Americans.

Americans are an easy market for the Walt Disney World property because it has multiple theme park experiences that are all uniquely themed to different age groups and interests. The property has a mixture of food and beverage experiences, attractions for all ages, and numerous shows and experiences so that no matter what a person's preferences are for vacation, they may experience it. With this property having more theme parks, water parks, and overall locations than other Disney properties, it has a greater appeal to the market because there is more diversity in products and services. It is also located in Orlando, Florida which a lot of people appreciate the 'Florida sunshine' as the popular American saying goes because it is proven by medical professionals, Timothy J. Legg PhD, PsyD and Rachel Nall, MSN, CRNA (2019) that exposure to sunlight increases the brain's release of serotonin, which is a hormone that is associated with boosting mood and helps a person feel calm and focused, not to mention the benefits it has on increasing natural vitamins. With this, people naturally feel better when they are in the Lake Buena Vista Area, because it is generally warm with sun every day of the year, therefore biologically and naturally giving the destination an appeal which helps the company without them having to do anything.

Historical Income Trends

American income trends are projected on a measure of personal capita income, or PCI, based on several economic location and demographic factors. The PCI is the income per person in the United States by definition of the Corporate Finance Institute, (2015). With historical trends and relations, the current monetary valuation can be compared to past valuations with relations to economic factors such as inflation, money circulation, and overall economic health and stability. Basically, what this means is that \$10 in today's economy is not worth as much as \$10 in 2015. The \$10 value in 2015, is now valued at \$13.06 in 2024, (What is \$10 in 2015 worth in 2024?, n.d.). This happens so quickly because of the amount of money circulated in the economy, the

backing of the value for the money, and inflation; the economy is always fluctuating for supply and demand which in turn affects the value of money across the globe. The income statistics from the United States Census Bureau are helpful in that the economy can clearly lay out an outline for what and where people may spend their income, which in turn allows businesses to access this information to better understand their markets and how to capitalize success financially.

For example, The Walt Disney Company can use this information to establish cost structure and see the direct spending the average American family spends on tourism based on previous years of spending and income relation trends. Disney is able to do this through a demand based cost structure which is defined as a pricing strategy where consumers' demand determines the price of product or service, (et al., 2023). Within Table 2.1 located later in the paper, there are numerous examples of holiday and peak times that the prices will be a higher price since so many guests wish to go.

The United States Regional Economic Analysis Project (n.d.) calculates the change in the valuation of gross growth for average American income, so between 1968-2022, the growth of the valuation of monetary funds in the United States increased by the current USD, 2,794.83% in relation to monetary value and the amount in circulation. This number is imperative in relation to the comparison of income trends to pricing prices for the Walt Disney Company, Walt Disney World sector to see if the growth percentage is balanced with the cost structure and price increase. From 1971, when the Walt Disney World location first opened the ticket increase has expanded 3,871% which obviously is not an equal ratio to percentage increase with American PCI increase, (Blitzer, 2022). With the amount of growth in historical monetary value, there is also the topic of how much, on average, the average American families will spend on tourism annually. On average in 2017, a household American families allocated and spent about \$6500.00 on tourism, or about 8% or overall annual expenses. (United States Regional Economic Analysis Project (n.d.), Skift Research (n.d.)). A recent study on travel expenses breakdown from Pacaso (2024), the average 1-week, 4-person family vacation cost is around \$7600.00 for the week for the same household American family in 2024. This same research also mentions that 28% percent of people plan to spend more in the coming years on tourism than they previously budgeted for in 2019, which again supports many vacation spots to project for more revenue. This is important to note because the allocated funds from families to tourism from year to year, especially after the pandemic of Covid-19 in 2020 is increasing (Pino, 2024). Through historical trends and average spending statistics, it is easier for businesses, such as tourism, to see how people allocate their money as well as what they would be willing to spend, on average for a family vacation. Especially a breakdown of where and what they are spending their money on throughout the vacation such as food, travel, and entertainment to better target markets and allow companies such as Walt Disney World to filter to guests' wants.

Income in Relation to Spending

Why does all of this matter so much to the tourism industry and more specifically, Walt Disney World? It matters because Walt Disney World's mission is to have as many guests as possible experience the magic, as they would say. But what can allow someone to allocate their discretionary funds to such a large financial undertaking, rather than buying a simple chocolate bar to fulfill certain requirements. Researchers, (Sarial-Abi et al, 2021) have combed through the financial records of the American family income and have developed many ideas on how and why people can justify spending their discretionary income throughout any health of the

economy. The memories of an experience like a vacation rather than a quick sensation are sought after because of its longevity and recollections, (Bowen, 2017). The result has been meaningful relationships among family members that have bonded over leisure time spent together and shared experiences, creating memories that people can discuss at a later date. (Van-Helvoort et al. 2009; Freundlich 2013). Using the survey analysis from the American Federal Reserve, the background of financial history and its trends are evaluated through yearly percentage increases, which in turn factors into the historical trends of American income in order to qualify the ratio of income to tourism spending at places like Walt Disney World. Connecting back to the idea of tourism and family vacations importance to future generations as well as social structured needs.

Disney Cost Structures

Several factors should be considered when comparing American families' average income and Walt Disney World ticket prices. Research suggests that Disney uses their stock value, growth projections, net operating income, and projected demand to determine their prices (Barnes 2016). Researchers have explored this topic from many vantage points including macroeconomics, microeconomics, investment, risk analysis, industry comparisons, competitive analyses, and overall economic structure to discuss how and why Disney continues to succeed on evolving prices, strategies, and models (Freundlich, P. 2013; Angermann, C. 2015; Bianchi 2023). Researchers are interested because of Disney's continued success that cannot be explained by one dimension listed above of economics or cost structures but rather the fact that Disney is a cultural normality in America. Using historical economic and family income trends, my research finds that the gap between average family income and tourism costs impacts families' ability to afford vacations. Despite the increasing Disney ticket price and decreases in families' discretionary spending, families continue to vacation at Disney as part of the Disney cultural vacation phenomenon discussed earlier.

Within the Walt Disney World sector pricing structure, there is a large difference in ticket prices. Disney claims that ticket and vacation costs increases are a result of natural supply and demand, (Barnes, 2016). Walt Disney World opened in 1971, and comparison of ticket prices highlight a 3,871% ticket price increase which is significantly higher than the 3,000% percent average American per capita income (Blitzer 2022). The ticket prices have also grown out of proportion in years with the income trend starting in 1968 again being only 2,794.83%.

	2022	2023	2024 so far...	2025 projections
Ticket Price Range: per day/per park	\$104-\$189	\$104-\$189	\$104-\$189	\$119- \$189+
Peak Times (summer and holidays): per day per park	\$129-\$189	\$154-\$189	\$154-\$189	\$154-\$189+

Park Hopper	\$65+	\$169-\$269	\$188 to \$254	\$188 to \$254+
Annual Pass	NA	\$439-\$1449	\$439-\$1449	\$439-\$1449

Table 2.1 Disney

The following paragraphs clarify what is in the table as well as elaborate on things that were not included such as discounts and other experiences offered. Table 2.1 details individual adult ticket prices. Ticket price varies based on the park, day, and overall demand or forecasted attendance for the location. For example, Animal Kingdom Park would normally have a lower cost than Magic Kingdom due to park hours and attractions available. This type of ticket can be anywhere from \$109-\$150+ per person, per day, again depending on the time of year and predicted attendance for the individual park. With this type of base ticket, you can buy a single day ticket, or you can buy a multiple day base park ticket which allows for one park per day. The next tier of ticketing would be a park hopper ticket which can be purchased for a higher price based on the percentage of a base ticket for the selected day. These tickets allow for multiple parks in one day but are slightly more expensive than a base ticket. Another option for ticketing is for a park hopper plus, providing access to all 4 theme parks as well as admission to water parks and the ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex. These tickets are not as common among tourists however are available at a higher price than park hoppers.

Additionally, Disney offers other tickets at a higher price point targeting frequent visitors. An annual pass is a promotion that the company runs throughout the parks to allow admission on basically any day of the year depending on which type of annual pass is purchased. In relation to the newest pricing model, updated on October 11, 2023, the top tier of an annual pass will be \$1,449 which was an increase of \$50 from previous tiers. This price is for 1 calendar year for one single person, however there are other tiers of the pass that are slightly less expensive but still above several hundred per person.

Walt Disney World also offers discounts to Florida residents, Military, Cast members, Disney vacation Club Members, and Annual Passholders that may include but are not limited to select dining experiences, merchandise locations, resort stays, and park ticketing. With all of these financials being thrown into the open air, there are also experiences at Walt Disney World that are free admission such as Disney Spring the shopping center for the property that includes shopping, dining, and entertainment offerings.

In addition to all of the 4 theme parks, 2 water parks, 2 mini golfs, sports complex, and shopping center, there are also over 30 different uniquely themed resorts that guests may stay at or hop around to. Understanding visitors differing vacation budgets, the resort's price points vary from value, moderate to deluxe based on amenities offered. For example, the nightly room price ranges from \$200-\$1000+. As a result, families can use the ticketing type and pricing information along with the hotel pricing structure to create a Disney vacation within their budget.

While a vacation is a considerable financial expenditure, Disney aims to provide visitors with a range of pricing options allowing a range of different experiences increasing the attractiveness of a Disney vacation (Carmely, 2022). By creating multiple experiences and choices with a range of costs, they widen their market.

In theory and through reason, Walt Disney World should be outpricing its market by increasing their prices in relation to the income and spending trends of the average American family, according to reason, if something is too expensive people will not buy it. However, Walt Disney World continues to thrive and gain profits. Walt Disney World capitalizes on so many

different things because it is proven that even though the ratios and percentage of price to income mentioned above are not equivalent, the Walt Disney Company continues to grow in and as a result of the varied attractions and their commitment to create new experiences increasing the likelihood that visitors want to return. For example, Disney announced a \$60 billion expansion to theme parks and cruise lines over the next decade including the largest expansion to Magic Kingdom, according to Local 10 news per Bob Iger (CEO of Disney). The company also aligned their tourism market to those who are of every demographic and household through their stories of individuals that are all different and allow people to identify with characteristics of something portrayed, disregarding any factor other than that they are people looking for a vacation to induce escapism from the 'real' world.

Escapism is an idea that people seek engagement with fantasies and entertainment to distract them from unpleasant realities, from Oxford Language (2024). In this theory, Walt Disney World can not necessarily out price their market because reach is through growth regardless of prices because of the idea the company sells through magic, Cohen (n.d.). In addition, the company knows that there need to be changes and improvements to all aspects of their experiences in order to keep people coming back to experience everything that is offered throughout the property, like new rides and shows within the parks that are either newly built or being modified, as well as new resorts being built to expand the resort options based on research that our brains are intrigued by things we perceive as new and fresh, Swaminathan (2008). Part of that is the enhancements to experiences, but also the exceptional customer service that the company has a reputation of with a feeling nothing can go wrong as well as a sense of safety and security, Gallo (2011).

Continued Expansion

If the company continues to expand, they will always have something new to market to the public to gain traction and a customer base, hopefully expansion. The cultural normality of America is change and innovation towards the future Swaminathan (2008), which is another reason that Walt Disney World can capitalize on. With the continued expansion of the Walt Disney World property, the research qualifies that the company is not outpricing their market.

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