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Invitation to A Polarization Party: Examining State Ideological Polarization

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### Author

Garcia, Isla

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Isla Garcia

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## **Invitation to A Polarization Party: Examining State Ideological Polarization**

### **Introduction**

According to the 2016 Economist's Democracy Index, a report by the Intelligence Unit, the United States for the first time ever was labeled as a "flawed democracy." Ultimately the U.S, who has been a model of democracy, fell under the 8.0 threshold for a label of a "full-democracy"<sup>1</sup> One of the many contributing factors to cause a democratic state to erode, such as what the United States experienced in 2016, is high levels of ideological polarization in both the public and political institutions. Due to the fact that ideological polarization can divide electorates and label those of the opposite political party as enemies.<sup>2</sup> As well as drive political institutions to gridlock while making public policy.<sup>3</sup> With the consequences of high ideological polarization, it is significant to understand and analyze the presence of ideological polarization in the political institutions in the United States.

My research analyzes the increasing phenomena of ideological polarization on a state level by questioning the relationship between the ideological polarization of the state party constituency and the ideological polarization of the state legislatures, including both lower and upper chambers. This research took account of 48 states during the 2016 and 2018 election

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<sup>1</sup> The Economist Intelligence Unit. "Democracy Index Revenge of the "Deplorables" (2016), Pg. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Haggard, Stephan, and Lindsay Morgan. "Why Is Democratic Backsliding on the Rise?" IGCC, March 11, 2021. <https://ucigcc.org/podcast/why-is-democratic-backsliding-on-the-rise/>.

<sup>3</sup> Pew Research Center "Political Polarization in the American Public." Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy. Pew Research Center, June, 12. 2014. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/#polarizations-consequences>.

cycles, and collected data from the Cooperative Election Studies Surveys and Aggregated Ideology Data from state legislature's ideological scores from Shor and McCarty. This research drew efforts to assess the ideological polarization in state legislatures, but also assess if the polarization of state party constituencies is what's driving the ideological polarization of state legislatures.

### **Significance of Issue**

The increasing ideological polarization in the United States has become a critical issue in the United States. The increase of ideological polarization can have great consequences, whether that be in the making of public policy causing gridlock, or contributing to the decline in the health of U.S democracy. Increased polarization leaves no room for compromise, or middle ground when crafting public policies, where consequently compromise and middle ground are key elements to what is referred to “legislative functioning”<sup>4</sup> It is also significant to note that increase of ideological polarization ultimately leads to increased animosity, including negative sentiments among partisans toward members of the opposing party.<sup>5</sup> Also, research has shown that polarization has increasingly taken a negative tone, specifically how anger has become a significant and primary tool for motivating voters<sup>6</sup> These research findings demonstrate that high levels of ideological polarization can have great consequences in the health of democracy but can also have great effect in the process of policy making. Although high levels of ideological polarization is largely concerned and researched on the national level, ideological polarization can also be significant to specific states, specifically California. This is due to the fact that

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<sup>4</sup> Frank, Newport. “The Impact of Increased Political Polarization.” Gallup.com. Gallup, September 21, 2022. <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/268982/impact-increased-political-polarization.aspx>

<sup>5</sup>Newport “The Impact of Increased Political Polarization.”

<sup>6</sup> Newport, “The Impact of Increased Political Polarization.”

California, in past literature, has been recognized as a heavily partisan state. Demonstrated where currently the California state legislature holds a supermajority of Democrats and is a heavily democratic state with heavily democratic party voters.

The writings of *Partisan and Ideological Polarization in the California Electorate*, discussed the increased partisan polarization in California's state government. The reading suggests that compared to other American voters, California voters are more loyal to their party candidates, less likely to split their tickets, and more extreme ideologically. This piece of literature also suggests that the California electorate, like the national electorate, has become increasingly partisan, and prone to ideologically extremity since the 1970's.<sup>7</sup> This literature is significant because it demonstrates a small portion of research in state polarization. However further research of polarization on a statewide level still needs to be assessed. Therefore the analysis of state ideological polarization is further needed because it will analyze ideological polarization of California's state legislature, in order to question if California still holds a high level of polarization in its state government and constituency.

Ideological polarization ultimately affects the state legislatures, as well as constituents of the state. Ideological polarization affects the state legislatures due to the fact that it could increase the chances for state legislatures to experience lack of compromise and gridlock in public policy. Also, if state legislatures are constantly encountering gridlock this would affect the state constituents and which the state legislature are not being active in passing legislation that could serve constituents.

## **Background**

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<sup>7</sup> Gary Jacobson, "Partisan and Ideological Polarization in the California Electorate" in *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* (2004).

Ideological polarization refers to the divergent political beliefs in the public to the ideological extremes<sup>8</sup> This ultimately means that individuals are moving away from the ideological center, and moving towards ends of the political spectrum to ideological extremes. Further demonstrating that the middle representing the ideological “center” is further vanishing from both the public and in political institutions.

What is known from past research is the presence of ideological polarization in political institutions, specifically in the elite level, in Congress. Research from the Pew Research Center, suggests that in Congress both political parties have moved further away from the ideological center since the early 1970s.<sup>9</sup> As well as during the 92nd session of congress (1971-1972) and the 177th congress (2021-2022), both parties in both the House and Senate have moved away from the center, but republicans more so<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, Democrats and Republicans, on average, are farther apart ideologically than at any time in the past 50 years in the federal level<sup>11</sup>

Ideological polarization has the chance to affect public policy, whether that be on the federal or state level, if it is present in these political institutions. This is demonstrated where ideological polarization can affect legislation by causing gridlock. This is a significant consequence in the elite ideological polarization due to the fact that as democrats have grown more liberal and Republicans even more conservative, the “center” where moderate Democrats and Republicans could have found common ground issues, vanishes.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately resulting in

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<sup>8</sup> (IGI Global, “What Is Ideological Model of Literacy,”<https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/empowering-multilingual-learners-through-critical-liberating-literacy-practices-in-english-dominated-speech-communities/87475>).

<sup>9</sup> Drew, Desilver, “The Polarization in Today’s Congress Has Roots That Go Back Decades,” Pew Research Center 2022.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/03/10/the-polarization-in-todays-congress-has-roots-that-go-back-decades/>.

<sup>10</sup> Desilver, “The Polarization in Today’s Congress Has Roots That Go Back Decades”

<sup>11</sup> Desilver, “The Polarization in Today’s Congress Has Roots That Go Back Decades”

<sup>12</sup> Desilver, “The Polarization in Today’s Congress Has Roots That Go Back Decades”

gridlock as the “center” has disappeared, ultimately leaving no space for compromise.

Consequently, with high ideological polarization will lead the two major parties to make it impossible to reach an agreement and find common ground when debating about policy.

On the national level, ideological polarization can be demonstrated from the ideological extreme incumbents in regards to their proposed legislations. Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene who has recently has called for a “national divorce” which was a call to action to separate red (republican) and blue (democratic) states<sup>13</sup> Congresswoman Taylor Greene has also called for limiting voting rights where she suggested that Democrats who moved to Republican states should not be allowed to vote for five years.<sup>14</sup> This example of Congresswoman Taylor Greene demonstrates the actual current presence of highly ideological polarized elected officials, which results in the declining health of U.S democracy, such as calling for state secession in the country. As well the violation of democratic norms to unconstitutionally revoke and diminish voting rights. This example also can lead to the theory in which if there are highly ideological polarized members at the national level, there is the possibility of ideological polarization in state legislatures as well as extreme ideological incumbents.

Not only does ideological polarization ultimately lead to elected officials to propose calls to actions that ultimately cause great damage to the democracy of the United States. However it can also affect the ability to compromise in policy making which can be contributed from an increase of animosity between parties, which has been actually present in the California State Legislature. This is demonstrated with elected officials Assembly Member Tim Leslie and

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<sup>13</sup> Josh, Marcus “Marjorie Taylor Greene Slammed after Pushing for Red State Secession.” The Independent February 20, 2023. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/marjorie-taylor-greene-secession-twitter-b2286137.html>

<sup>14</sup> James Bickerton. “Marjorie Taylor Greene's Voting Plan Branded ‘Unconstitutional.’” Newsweek, February 24, 2023. <https://www.newsweek.com/marjorie-taylor-greene-voting-plan-branded-unconstitutional-17835>

Assemblywoman Jackie Goldberg. In 2013, the Assembly chamber rejected AB 585, a bill sponsored by Assemblywoman Jackie Golberg (Democrat), which drew efforts to ban public schools from using Native American names.<sup>15</sup> Goldberg’s colleague Assemblymember Tim Leslie (Republican) spoke up on the Assembly floor regarding attacking the legislation. He stated towards his Democrat colleagues “You people are so messed up. it's beyond description.”<sup>16</sup> The language presented by Assemblymember Lesslie, specifically the implementation of “You people” demonstrates and showcases the animosity present in the California state legislature.

As ideological polarization increases the animosity between Democrats and Republicans is greatly affected, but also most importantly ideological polarization also affects public policy making with significant issues that states face. This demonstrates how common ground is already difficult to reach regarding legislation that would prevent mass shooting on a national level. However state legislators from Oklahoma and constituents voiced that in the state legislature it may be harder to find the common ground on this particular issue <sup>17</sup> This is demonstrated where in Oklahoma’s state legislature Democrats and Republicans are heavily divided on this topic. Oklahoma state legislature Democrats want to pursue stricter background checks and more restrictive gun policies, and Oklahoma state legislature Republicans say recent mass shootings stem from mental health issues. Currently, Oklahoma has very minimal gun control restrictions.<sup>18</sup> Republican Oklahoma state senator Nathan Dahm had stated that even if the federal government

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<sup>15</sup> Jones, Gregg, and Nancy Vogel. “Assembly Oks Bill Revoking Farm Industry Tax Breaks.” Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles Times, June 6, 2003.

<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2003-jun-06-me-farmworkers6-story.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Gregg and Vogel “Assembly Oks Bill Revoking Farm Industry Tax Breaks.”

<sup>17</sup> May, Payton. “Oklahoma Democrats, Republicans Divided on Gun Policy Following Tulsa Shooting.”. KOKH, June 3, 2022.

<https://okcfox.com/news/local/oklahoma-democrats-and-republicans-divided-on-gun-policy-following-tulsa-shooting-senator-dahm-gun-violence-saint-francis-hospital-ualde-texas-michael-louis-doctor-preston-phillips-restrictions-mass-capitol-politics>

<sup>18</sup> Payton “Oklahoma Democrats, Republicans Divided on Gun Policy Following Tulsa Shooting.”“

passes red flag legislation, it won't impact Oklahoma constituents. He also stated that he does not foresee any gun restrictions that would pass the Oklahoma state legislature either now or in the future<sup>19</sup> This example is significant due to the fact that high ideological polarization interferes with legislation and public policy demonstrated in the Oklahoma state legislature. Where Democrats and Republicans find it impossible to find common ground on gun policy, where even Republicans Oklahoma legislators won't even consider, hear, or expect legislation from the other party therefore extending the less chances of common ground.

According to research, ideological polarization is not only present but also increasing on the federal level. However, what is still needed to find out is the level of ideological polarization that is present in state political institutions. Also, if that ideological polarization is increasing, and what is ultimately driving the ideological polarization in state legislatures. These questions are critical to pursue due to the fact that ideological polarization could have a great impact on state legislatures, and ultimately affect the policy making of state laws.

### **Theory and Argument**

The research presented suggests the more ideologically polarized the state party constituency is, the more polarized the state legislatures would be, including both lower and upper chambers. Therefore simply suggesting the ideological polarization of state party constituencies will affect the ideological polarization of state legislatures. The independent variable is the measurement of the state party constituency, and the dependent variable is the the ideological polarization of a state's upper and lower legislative chambers. The causal mechanism of the research is that the emotional state of the voters in a state, will influence extreme candidates to run, possibly win their elections, and hold extreme ideological views while they

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<sup>19</sup> Payton "Oklahoma Democrats, Republicans Divided on Gun Policy Following Tulsa Shooting."<sup>19</sup>



conduct work in the state legislatures. Further suggestion that if these candidates win their elected offices then the legislatures will then result in a highly ideologically polarized state legislature.

Other possible explanations for an ideological polarized state legislature, could be donors. This is due to the fact that donors already have a great influence in campaigns in general. Where money is not the complete deciding factor for election success, however research suggests that money is strongly associated with political success,<sup>20</sup> An explanation to this alternative theory is that donors could be contributing to the most polarized candidates. Therefore the most polarized candidates win with the most powerful and largest donors, and therefore affect the ideological polarization of a state legislature. Although this theory was not something this research took into account, this research will expand more and take account of this in future research.

### **Research Design and Data**

This research is a large-n study taking quantitative data, which 48 states were taken into account. However, two states were excluded in this study for two completely different reasons and those states were Nebraska and Hawaii. Nebraska was excluded due to the fact that it is the only unicameral state legislature. Where all of the research takes account of the two chambers in each state legislature. Therefore to keep all data the same, Nebraska was excluded from the analysis since it is the only legislature in which it only has one chamber. The exclusion of Hawaii was due to simple data limitation. There was no data for Hawaii in regards to ideological polarization of its state legislatures from Shor and McCarty.

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<sup>20</sup> Maggie, Koersch, "How Money Affects Elections." FiveThirtyEight, September 10, 2018. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/money-and-elections-a-complicated-love-story/>.

The research also took place into the 2016 and 2018 election cycles. The choosing of these years was due to data limitations. Ideally it would have been great to research post 2018 ideological polarization of state legislatures and current polarization. However this was not possible. The year 2017 was not included in the research project due to the assumption that there would not be much change in the state legislatures between 2017-2018. Compared to election cycles, there would be many changes in the state legislatures due to the fact that there are elections for Assembly and Senate seats during these election cycles.

The data for the independent variable was gathered from Cooperative Election Study surveys, which ultimately this data measured the state party constituency. The Cooperative Election study, surveys constituents from each state. For 2016 there was a sample size of around 64,000 adults<sup>21</sup>, and for 2018 around 60,000 adults.<sup>22</sup> One question was taken in consideration for this research from both 2016 and 2018 cooperative election study surveys. The question asked how constituents would measure themselves on an ideological scale. The scale ranged from 1-8. 1 was very liberal, 2 liberal, 3 somewhat liberal, 4 middle of the road, 5 somewhat conservative, 6 conservative, 7 very conservative, and 8 not sure. This research project only accounted for responses from 1-7, 8 was excluded. From there, the average democrat and average republican for each state was accounted for and then proceeded to subtract the two averages. That's how the ideological polarization of the state party constituency was measured. In other words, the ideological polarization was measured by the difference between average democrat and average republicans in each state.

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<sup>21</sup> Ansolabehere, Stephen; Schaffner, Brian F., 2017, "CCES Common Content, 2016", <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/GDF6Z0>, Harvard Dataverse, V4, UNF:6:WhtR8dNtMzReHC295hA4cg== [fileUNF]

<sup>22</sup> Brian Schaffner; Stephen Ansolabehere; Sam Luks, 2019, "CCES Common Content, 2018", <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ZSBZ7K>, Harvard Dataverse, V6, UNF:6:hFVU8vQ/SLTMUXPgmUw3JQ== [fileUNF]

The dependent variable was measured between parties in the state legislatures from aggregated ideological scores of states legislatures from Shor and McCarty. Usually with ideological polarization it is measured on a scale. However with Shor and McCarty's data, ideological polarization was measured by the distance between parties. There was not a specific threshold that identified the "maximum" ideological polarization of a state legislature. Therefore the greater the number demonstrates the larger the ideological polarization was in the state legislature. As well as the smaller the number of differences between parties, meant the smaller the ideological polarization. This was done for both lower and upper chambers. Therefore there were two scores lower and upper chambers of ideological polarization scores.

The analysis for the data in this research project was completed by comparing the results for the ideological polarization of state party constituencies of 2016 and 2018 to the ideological polarization of the state legislatures for 2016 and 2018. An analysis of ideological polarization over time between 2016-2018 for both lower and upper chamber was conducted. This was to measure the increase or decrease of ideological polarization over time in state legislatures. As well as an analysis of the relationship of state party constituencies of the House chamber in 2016 and 2018. As well as the relationship of party constituency and senate chamber in 2016 and 2018. This was in effort to determine whether polarization of state party constituencies had an effect on the polarization of state legislatures.

While conducting the research project there were some concerns of reliability for the measurement of ideological polarization to be determined as the strongest way to measure ideological polarization for both the independent and dependent variables for this research study. The strengths of the data sources were that both data sets were reliable in regards to how to measure ideological polarization in both the state party constituency and the state

legislatures. This is demonstrated where in both data the measurement of polarization was conducted through the difference of average democrat and average republicans in each state. Therefore this was a very strong indicator of ideological polarization for both variables. As well as an alternative form of measurement of ideological scale, rather than the traditional measure of ideological polarization through a numerical negative and positive scale, as other data sources use to analyze ideological polarization.

While conducting the research project there were some concerns in regards to the validity of the measurement of the independent variable, also known as the ideological polarization of the state party constituency, The concern with the validity was how accurate the polarization of the party constituency would be. This is further elaborated where the measurement is taken through a survey question in which a constituent is measuring the level of their own ideological scale. The concerns if they are measuring themselves might not be accurate. This is demonstrated in how a constituent could mark themselves as a 4 referring to themselves as in the middle. However if we look at their voting records the constituent might instead be somewhat liberal Therefore this could interfere with the average scores for the independent measurenet.

### **Findings**

In this research it found that ideological polarization has increased in 2018 in both the state party constituencies and the state legislatures. Where in 2018 there were higher levels of polarization in state legislatures including both lower (figure 1) and upper chambers (figure 2). This answers the research question if the ideological polarization is present and is increasing on a state level in political institutions. Not only did the research demonstrate that there is a presence of ideological polarization, however it also uncovered that ideological polarization in state

legislatures increased between 2016-2018. As well the research found that ideological polarization is also increasing as in the state party constituency.

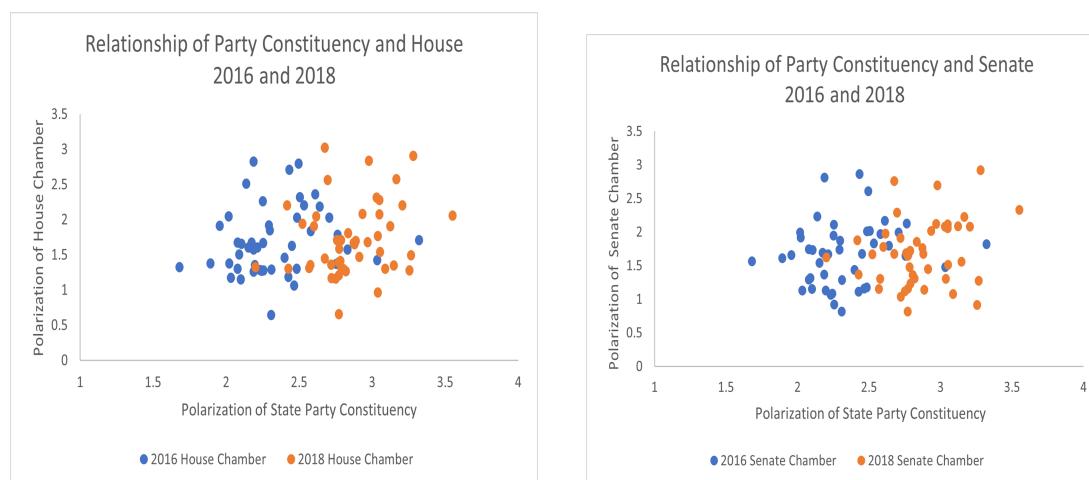


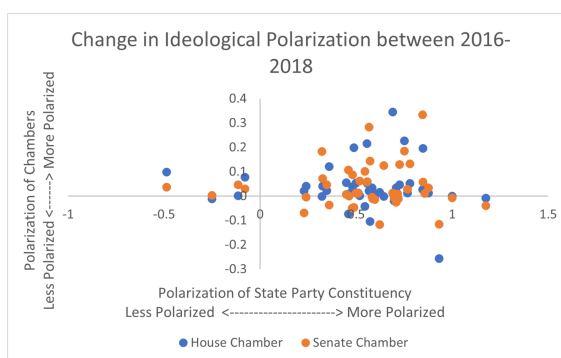
Figure 1(Left side) Figure 2 (Right Side)

The second finding was that there was a weak relationship between the ideological polarization of state party constituencies and the ideological polarization of state legislatures. This weak relationship was demonstrated both ways. First from both graphs (Figure 1) and (Figure 2), which showcase the relationships of state party constituencies and house and senate chambers. In both graphs there was no strong linear relationship that demonstrates which would ultimately define the relationship between the variables.

The relationship was also demonstrated through the correlation coefficient. There was a weak relationship between the ideological polarization of state party constituencies and house chambers where in 2016  $r=0.17$ , and in 2018  $r=0.22$ . There was also a weak relationship between the ideological polarization of state party constituencies and senate chambers where in 2016  $r=0.18$  and in 2018  $r=0.23$ . The findings of the correlation coefficient demonstrate the weak relationship between the ideological polarization of state party constituencies and the ideological polarization of state legislatures. Although the ideological polarization seems to be increasing by

one point each chamber each year, however this was still a weak relationship. Therefore the findings suggest that there is a weak positive effect of the ideological polarization of state party constituencies on state ideological polarization of state legislatures. Further suggesting that ideological polarization of state party constituencies does not have a strong effect on ideological polarization of state legislatures.

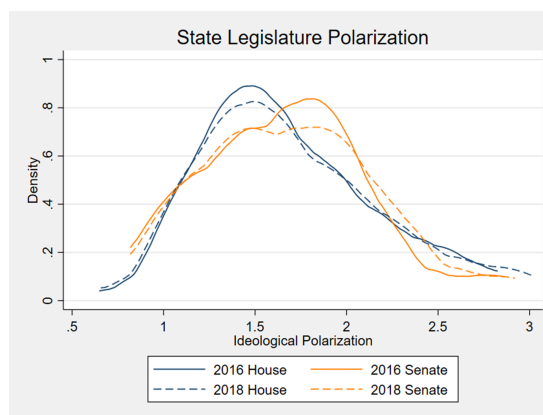
Another significant finding that was encountered that was not the main question in my research was the number of states change in polarization. In figure 3, this graph demonstrates that a very few states experienced minimal changes to the increasing ideological polarization. This finding was significant due to the fact that this demonstrates that not only is ideological polarization has been increasing in state legislatures, but in fact a large number of states are experiencing this increase in ideological polarization.



(Figure 3)

Another significant finding that was not part of the main research questions was which chamber held higher levels of ideological polarization. This research found that the senate chamber experienced higher levels of ideological polarization compared to the house chamber. Due to time constraints, it is unclear for the reason why the senate chamber experienced higher levels of ideological polarization. Research in the future will address the reason for this finding.

However, this finding was significant in which revealed which chamber is experiencing higher ideological level of polarization in uncovering the level of ideological polarization in political institutions.



(Figure 4)

A significant outlier that is worth mentioning in the findings of the research was that in 2018 the most polarized house chamber in 2018 was California. This finding is significant to mention due to the fact that it is related to the previous literature of *Partisan and Ideological Polarization in the California Electorate*, which mentioned that California held high levels of ideological polarization in its state constituency and explored increased partisan polarization in California's state government.<sup>23</sup> Therefore this research was able to connect previous research and literature regarding California's ideological polarization in its state government.

The research findings not only directly answered the question of the presence of ideological polarization in state legislatures and whether or not the ideological polarization is increasing, but also along the way found significant sub- findings in which only few state legislatures experienced few changes in ideological polarization, senate chamber experienced higher levels of ideological polarization, and finally california was the most ideologically

<sup>23</sup> Jacobson, "Partisan and Ideological Polarization in the California Electorate" in *State Politics & Policy*

polarized house chamber in 2018. All these findings were significant as it showcases the presence of ideological polarization in state political institutions that has been left out in past literature and research.

### **Further Suggestions**

One suggestion to this research project is the urge for a date extension in order to investigate current ideological polarization in state legislatures. This is due to the fact that this research encountered data limitation. Therefore it has been up to five years since the last ideological polarization data has been conducted. Although there was a weak relationship between the ideological polarization of state party constituencies and the ideological polarization of state legislatures, the relationship did increase, however very insignificantly. However with more years it could be possible that we could see if these relationships could have grown stronger.

Another suggestion includes for the call to action for public education about the consequences of high ideological polarization in U.S political institutions, and its effect on the decline of U.S health democracy. Public education can be accomplished in various ways, including conducting more research regarding ideological polarizations in U.S institutions. As well as politicians writing an OpEd, to describe their experience working in the state legislatures with high levels of ideological polarization, and write about the consequences of the decline of U.S democracy. As well as news articles to be published that alert and inform the public regarding the dangers of high ideological polarization on U.S health democracy.

### **Conclusion**

This research analyzed ideological polarization on the state level, as well as questioned what is ultimately affecting the ideological polarization in these state institutions. My research



ultimately questioned the relationship between ideological polarization of state party constituencies and the polarization of state legislatures. The findings in the research demonstrated that there was a weak positive effect of the polarization of state party constituencies on the polarization of state legislatures. However it is significant to also mention that the findings include that there is increasing ideological polarization in the state party constituency and state legislatures. With these findings it is significant to conduct a research extension to look at other factors that are driving the increased ideological polarization in state legislatures. As well research extension in order to assess current ideological polarization in state legislatures with data post 2018. This research is significant to move forward due to the fact that it not only affects the making of public policy, the way state legislatures conduct themselves, but most importantly play a big role in the decline of U.S health democracy. Therefore ideological polarization should be carefully more researched and taken into account not just by researchers, academics, but public policymakers as well.

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