

Political Polarization and Voter Turnout: Contours of a Symbiotic Relationship

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Abstract

Political polarization is endemic in the United States today. While political polarization is not new in the United States, it is now more pervasive than at any time in generations. It comes at a time in history when the country can ill afford it. And, for better or for worse, political polarization is not going anywhere anytime soon. Indeed, it is insidiously shaping the world into a place in which younger generations are destined to bear the brunt of its effects, including whether or not, and how, they will vote. This makes it of utmost importance to understand the relationship between voter turnout and political polarization so that we can understand, and perhaps realistically foresee, how the dynamics of future national elections in the United States might play out. This paper articulates the contours of what is effectively a symbiotic relationship between political polarization and voter turnout, while focusing on the impact polarization will have on the future. It depicts the roles that voter identity and ideology play in shaping polarization and, thus, voting behavior. However, most importantly, this paper illustrates the correlations between polarization and voting behavior and how trends and modern data can help us further understand how voter turnout will be affected by political polarization.

Keywords: political polarization, voter turnout, voter behavior, party ideology, voter identity, voter ideology, president, and fear

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Republican versus democrat. Conservative versus liberal. Right versus left.

Pro-government versus anti-government. On, it goes. Today, in America, we all know political polarization when we see it--it is seemingly omnipresent. But, what does it really mean? What can we learn from it? How can we use it? Or, abuse it? Good and important questions, all. Can political science principles potentially provide some, indeed any, useful answers or clues? This paper seeks to explore the potential.

For anyone who is familiar with politics, the idea that there is a correlation between voter turnout and an increase in political polarization is not shocking. This is due to the easily observable fact that voters become more engaged in politics as polarization increases. Thus, it is unsurprising that as polarization has increased in recent years, so has voter turnout. As noted by Drew DeSilver from *Pew Research Center*, the 2020 election posed the highest voter turnout since 1988, and the numbers have been on a rather linear uphill climb since the early 1980s (DeSilver, 2021). As found by authors Baldassarri & Gelman, who went on to have their work published by the Health and Human Services Department, this number also comes alongside a steady rise in polarization dating back to when political scientists started tracking this information in the early 1900s (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008, p. 38).

However, herein lies the limitations of political science that we must acknowledge at the outset. The study of political polarization is in its relative infancy, with most of the scholarly analyzed data tracking from the 1950s on through to the 2008 election. The reason why this data is so stale is due to the mass amount of data that must be reviewed, interpreted, written, peer-reviewed, and published--a very time consuming, multi-year process. This underscores the reality that the scholarly political science approach is imperfect and often out of step with current

times (Shapiro, 2002, p. 610-611). Therefore, to understand *current* polarization trends in a way that they can be meaningfully acted upon today, rather than await future scholarly articles that will already be legacy-oriented when published, we can--and should--locate, mine, and analyze current data and information as compiled from notable social research centers, such as the *Pew Research Center*, to better understand what is happening today, in real time.

As we begin this process, understanding how current political polarization can be usefully tracked is important. Tracking polarization comes from investigating and understanding the roles that partisanship, political parties, social ideology, and social identity play in dividing our country. These forces drive polarization and, in turn, affect voters' behavior, including voter turnout. Understanding why voters align the way they do, what drives them to think the way they do, and what inspires them to think the way they do is a key to unlocking whether voters are going to turn out and who they will turn out for in national elections. In short, answers and clues, as found in systematically surveying the contours of the political polarization/voter turnout relationship, may lie in better understanding, on a more micro-level, how and why voters' identity and ideology drives polarization.

Data suggests that the ideology factor holds particular promise as a key to understanding voter turnout. Although many voters profess not to have very strong ideologies, surveys reveal that most are in fact more likely to lean one way or another politically. This means they are likely to identify as either republican or democrat, despite the fact that they might not agree one hundred percent with either side. Therefore, it is common for voters to not specifically agree with everything a political party or politician says or implies, but to sufficiently agree to invariably vote for them (Institute for Social Research at The University of Michigan). It is also likely that the inverse holds equally true: if voters disagree with a politician or party enough, it is

very likely they will vote in the opposite direction. Understanding this fundamental breakdown in voters' ideologies has been critical to winning, and losing, national elections throughout the history of the United States.

All of this is not to say that dated data has no usefulness in understanding the relationship between voter turnout and political polarization. For example, data from a study conducted by Abramowitz and Sanders through the 1952-2004 National Election Studies corroborate the idea that ideology is very closely related to party identification (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2006, p. 175). Understanding the close relationship between party identification and ideology will be important to understanding the growth in political polarization.

While this is useful in that it confirms what we suspect from observed voter behaviors, this connection seems attenuated when current data is compared. For example, *Pew Research* has found that many voters have more recently trended independent, for a number of reasons. This may seem confusing, as we just uncovered that ideology and party identification are closely related. However, even though many voters may not vote under a given party, they are far more likely to lean one way or another, which reinforces the polarization of the general population. Thus, understanding that although party identification may not be the single overarching answer, it is a strong clue and indisputably is important to furthering our understanding into how political polarization manifests and evolves in voters, in real time (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002, p. 139).

Interrelated with ideology, voter identity is necessarily a significant factor in the relationship between voter turnout and political polarization. Voters may politically identify in many different ways, including, but not limited to, their race, gender, socioeconomic status, home state, *etc.* Despite a strong correlation between political identity and party identification, it

is often not the only reason why a voter picks a specific political party. This is because voters' experiences also play a factor in their ideology (McLeod & Shah, 2009, p. 3). Voters' identity and their cycles of socialization are the primary defining factors in determining a voter's ideology (*6.2 Political Socialization*, 2016). These key roles in a person's life shape their belief systems, which thereby shape the voter's identity. However, it is not to say that if you are to identify as liberal or conservative, that means you will turn out to vote. It is crucially important to acknowledge that there is variety in turnout among different identities, therefore a political affiliation or identity does not define your likelihood to vote ((Husseys, 2012, p. 90). This further emphasises the idea that ideology is the more defining reason as to why voters show up to the polls and are becoming more polarized.

The cycles of socialization, especially political socialization, shape voters' morals and belief systems and thereby play a large role in determining voter ideology. This means that although identity is one of the larger factors that play into polarization, ideology encompasses all other consequential factors, making it the biggest determinate in why voters choose a political party. Thus, understanding this idea is massively important in understanding why voter turnout is increasing in modern-day America.

Voters have become increasingly independent for a multitude of reasons but mostly due to the fact that they feel a member or members of a "specific party are embarrassing" (Devine, 2020). Due to this, many voters who identify as independents have distanced themselves from any party affiliation out of fear that they themselves could be affiliated to the person who embarrasses them. The hesitancy to maintain strict fidelity to the name brand of any party, while not universal, is an increasingly growing trend that we must take note of and account for. Nonetheless, despite possessing specific identification as independents, the data underscores the

reality that most voters still lean one way or another and tend to more or less vote along party lines. It could be said that the biggest thing that is holding them back from fully identifying with and committing to a given party is a visceral aversion to that one “embarrassing” politician that they do not want to be associated with.

Therefore, something that may come as a surprise about the direction of party identification is that, in fact, voters are trending towards less identification overall. This is likely due to the idea that party identifications are becoming an important factor in driving ideology. This trend heralds potential changes in voter turnout going forward. More specifically, as the control of the political parties has pushed further and further apart, towards their more extreme ends, the parties are leaving their moderate voters, who are the majority of the country, behind.

From a data standpoint, as found by *Pew Research Center*, the only group of party affiliations that is growing is the group of independent or unaffiliated voters. This is mostly due to the fact that political parties are being dominated by the extreme wings of their parties, which fully embrace political polarization and which, in turn, tends to “embarrass” those who see themselves as moderate in their ideology. For the left, that means the rise of Bernie Sanders and democratic socialism that many independents are against; for the right, that means the rise of Donald Trump and alt-right conservatism that is pro-life and pro-gun that many independents are also against. This has left many voters without a place to fit in, joining them with the 9% of voters that shifted to become independents just between the 1992 and 2014 elections alone (*A Deep Dive Into Party Affiliation*, 2019).

Below, in appendices A and B, two charts are attached that depict the change in the American public’s political values over approximately 23 years. Created by *Pew Research Center*, it compiles a scale that includes 10 questions over seven Pew Research surveys since

1994 (*The Shift in the American Public's Political Values*, 2019). In Appendix A, it depicts American's ideologies in 1994. Notable is how close the two parties are together, especially the peaks of their identities. Also notable, is that a significant amount of ideological belief is still relatively overlapping. However, as we switch over to Appendix B, we see that this is no longer the case, as significant divergences emerge and far less overlapping is present. More specifically, the peaks of the identities, which is where the meaning of people from each party lies, are much further apart. This is significant because it visually displays the change in how partisanship and identity correlation has in fact become much more drastic in the past 20 years, as showcased in the appendices below.

This is important in terms of uncovering why voter turnout increases alongside partisan development, as we are, for the first time really, uncovering how partisan identification--or lack thereof--actually correlates to political partisanship. The next logical trend to explore is why partisanship and "leaning towards political parties," even if not totally aligning with them, impacts voter behavior. To understand this, we must turn to political scientists and authors, such as Larry Bartles, who have studied the impact polarization has on voting behaviors in presidential elections.

More specifically, Bartles found "that the impact of partisan loyalties on voting behavior has increased in each of the last six presidential elections," referencing the elections that occurred before the publishing of this scholarly article in 2000. Therefore, in 1996, partisan loyalties reached "a level in 1996 almost 80 percent higher than in 1972 and significantly higher than in any presidential election in at least 50 years," underscoring the idea that partisanship loyalties have increased dramatically between 1940s and the late 1990s (Bartles, 2000, p. 35). This is important to note because, as found by Pew Research, partisanship (and particularly

political partisanship) were also on a dramatic rise during this time. For example, “The average partisan gap has nearly doubled over this 25-year period – from 10 percentage points in 1987 to 18 percentage points” as per a 2017 published study (*Partisan Polarization Surges in Bush, Obama Years*, 2019). This means that both polarization and partisan loyalties (although not necessarily party identification, as we mentioned above) have together been on the rise.

Ultimately, in order to understand partisanship and political polarization, it is important to understand that partisan loyalties do in fact play a role in voter turnout. This is due to a number of reasons, but mostly due to the fact that voters are seemingly investing a much higher stake in who wins in a given election. The record turnout that supported the 2020 election was supported by a “record share of registered voters (83%) saying it ‘really matter[ed]’ who won.” Voters are increasingly putting a new emphasis behind what each candidate’s win would mean, and how it would affect the party in terms of its relationship towards the voters’ perceived values and the imagery of the future of our country.

Although this phenomena was most drastically seen in the 2020 election, this is certainly not the first time this idea has taken a hold on the US electorate. It was also observed in the 2004 Presidential Election, where partisan ideologies defined why voters voted for or against a certain candidate (Jacobson, 2005, p. 206). This took hold in many facets, but I remember thinking back to my mothers perspective on this election. She voted against George W. Bush because she did not like him, nor his father George H. Bush, who was the 41st president. When she was voting, she believed that the Bushes were perpetuates of war and, as also stated by 84% of voters in the 2020 election, believed he was an “embarrassment” to our country, and, thus, felt that the Bush era should come to an end. Obviously, Bush went on to win his election, but her and millions of people voting against Bush and not for Gore left the election close enough to be left up to the

Supreme Court to decide, in the historical case of *Bush v. Gore* (Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, 2020). Although this is just a personal example of one individual who voted in this manner, as found by our evidence above, the number of people voting like this has dramatically surpassed the majority of the population, meaning millions of voters are voting upon who they don't want to see in office rather than who they do. This has huge implications that we can not ignore for future elections and candidates must now play into the hands of being at least not disliked by a majority in the public in order to prevent being voted against.

A major reason why Donald Trump is the first incumbent president since George H. Bush in 1992 to lose reelection can be found in his widespread unpopularity among the voting electorate and which worsened as his presidency went on. The 2016 election was a highly polarized election due the controversies each candidate had to offer. Hillary Clinton was saddled with email scandals and Benghazi, and Trump was riddled with ill phrased misogynistic and downright degrading comments that led to a confused voter populace that did know who was truly the right candidate to vote for (or against). This further perpetuated their ideologies to cling to who was the candidate to vote against, rather than voting for who would be the best candidate.

While many voters did not think either candidate was fit to serve as president, they could conclude in their minds which one was worse than the other. Given that America's reputation was on the line, it became extremely polarizing, as people did not want to have to be more embarrassed by either person than they had to be. Therefore, they voted more strictly down partisan lines, even if they registered as independents, seeking to vote against who they thought would really do the worse job. How do we know this? This was proven by Pew Research's poll which notes that 33% of people who voted for Trump were because he is not Hillary Clinton and

32% of people voted for Hillary Clinton because she is not Donald Trump (*In Their Own Words: Why Voters Support – and Have Concerns About – Clinton and Trump*, 2019).

For Trump, trashing Hillary's reputation was the best strategy in this climate to win the election. His ability to make her appear like the worst of the two was a winning strategy as he just needed to chip away her Democratic majority and scare enough independents into turning out against her. Ultimately, this strategy was successful and which led to him to become the U.S.'s 45th president. This is the clearest national electoral example of how to win by increasing voter turnout, by using political partisanship to drive moderate, seemingly ideologically unaligned voters into focusing on voting against who they disliked the most.

However, as time went on and the 2024 election cycle came about, Trump had made many major mistakes that never allowed his approval rating to get to a majority of the population. When Trump left office, in January 2021 his disapproval rating was a whopping 57.4% (Silver, 2021). This set him up for failure in the 2024 cycle because a majority of voters already knew they did not like him. Biden, on the other hand, due to his familiar ties with relatively popular 44th President of the United States Barack Obama, led the public to have a relatively positive, non-negative perception of him. Whereas Trump continued to make mistakes, in regards to Covid-19, Black Lives Matter Movements, and other defining moments of the year 2020. Biden ran a low key, scandal free campaign. Overall, an incredible 56% of voters cast their votes for Biden because he was not Trump, and there went the election (Gilberstadt et al., 2020).

Ultimately, what the tale of the past two elections reflects is that voters are using their ideologies, and therefore identities, not to vote in support of candidates, but rather against them. As found by Pew Research, “more than half of Democrats (55%) say the Republican Party makes them “afraid,” while 49% of Republicans say the same about the Democratic Party”

(*Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016*, 2019). This new process of politicizing elections to vote against parties or candidates is a reason why polarization has increased: fear and hate are the driving factors. People are more likely to turnout and vote out of fear due to the fact that fear engenders stronger feelings than liking a candidate. Fear and hate also have a hand in making a voter less likely to being open to changing their mind or opinion on a candidate or given topic (*The Most Powerful Emotion in Marketing May Surprise You — and More Brands Need to Tap into It, According to an Expert in Social Influencer Marketing*, 2019).

This is incredibly important to acknowledge and apply to future elections. Candidates who want to win at the national level, especially the presidency, must now work to mobilize the fear in voters against the other candidate in order to win. This method will not be leaving our political system anytime soon, due to the usefulness of it. As much as many voters would like politics to ‘return to normal’ and for candidates to be respectful towards each other, it is no longer a winning strategy. Whoever runs against Joe Biden in 2024 (he has already announced he would run) will need to mobilize the fear of ideologically republican leaning voters in order to beat him. This will be a challenging task to muster due to the success that Joe Biden has had leading us out of the Covid-19 pandemic and the worst recession since the 2008 Housing Bubble burst. The days of nice politicking are over, and for better or for worse, at least on a national political level. President Trump’s fear stroking tactics worked and have proven the massive success it can have at a national level. Therefore, we must be prepared for much more partisan animus to come between voters, politicians, and political parties in the years to come (*Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal*, 2019).

As the rise of political polarization and voting out of fear is inciting a rise in voter turnout, our country's political system has taken a drastic change. Our identities are playing a

role, alongside our cycles of socialization, to influence our ideologies. Our ideologies are playing a role alongside our party identifications (or leanings) into how and why we will vote. Our fears sparked, empowered, and politicized by political parties and their leaders will spark who we will vote for, and these trends will shape America for many more years to come. Ultimately, the rise in polarization and in voters turnout is due to the fear mongering that both political parties are playing with. Although many voters are increasingly becoming independent and no longer fall into these specific parties, they are still listening to them and their candidates. They are still voting out of fear and resentment against one party and aligning themselves with another, meaning polarization, although not at the surface level, is still dramatically increasing through the use of fear by politicians. Our elections going forward, until a better successful model is adopted, will be filled with fear mongering, belittling other candidates, and preying upon the anxiety that many people fear our democracy will fail. Politicians who understand the contours of the symbiotic relationship between political polarization and voter turnout have the best odds of success. The question now before us in the lead up to 2024: which presidential candidate will scare the most Americans into voting against the other presidential candidate?

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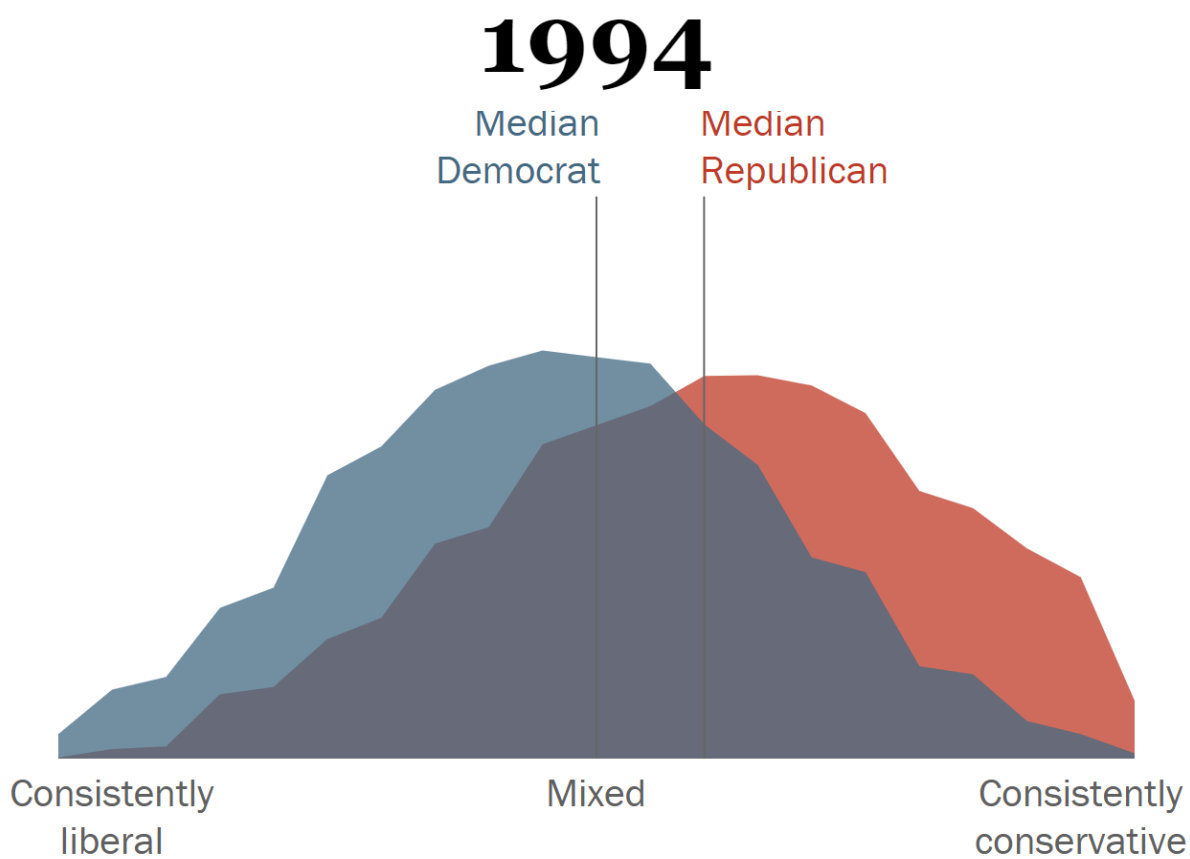
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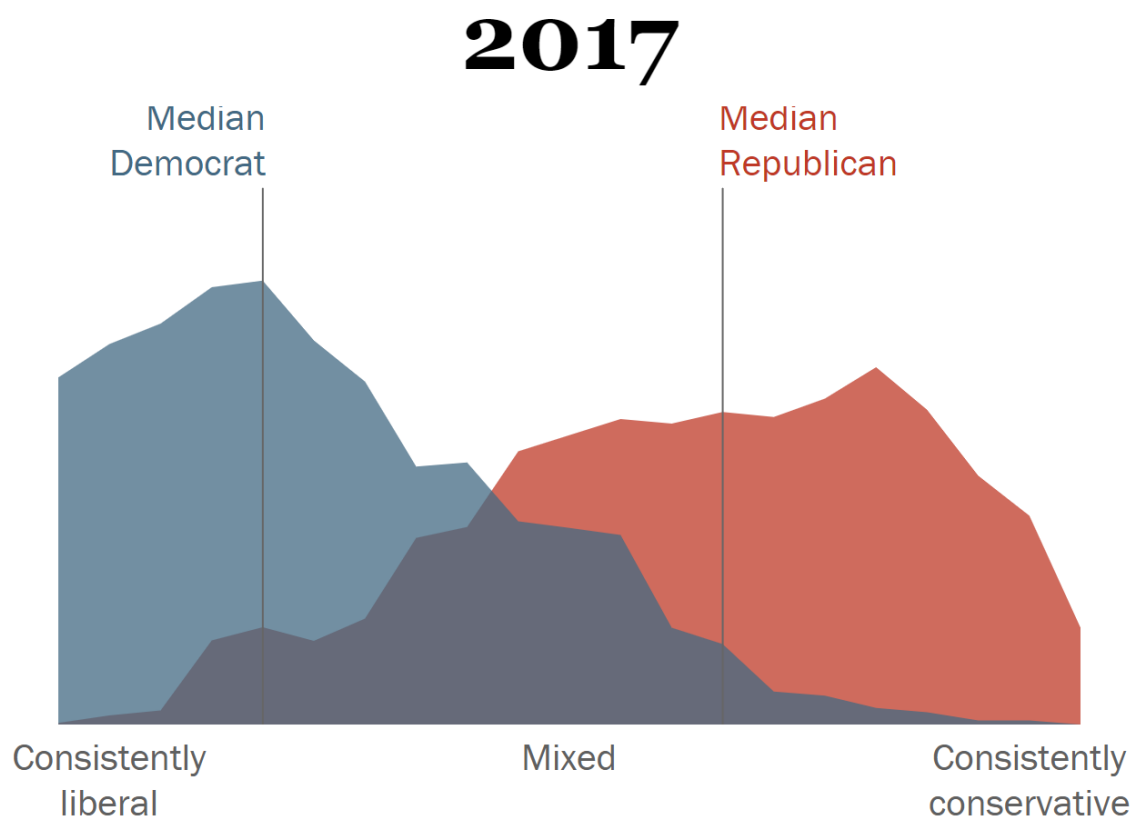
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Appendix A



Source: Surveys conducted in 1994, 1999, 2004, 2011, 2015 and 2017.

Appendix B



Source: Surveys conducted in 1994, 1999, 2004, 2011, 2015 and 2017.

Hi Professor Moomau,

My project has faced many hurdles and changes throughout the entire drafting process, however, I do feel as though I have finally gotten to a solid final paper. When I first proposed my ideal research question, I envisioned a world where scholarly articles connecting political polarization and voter turnout would be vast and proportionate to the recent public interest on the topic. However, it was quickly brought to my attention this was not the case. This caused me to deviate from my original course just a bit to gather information from scholarly articles and multiple scholarly sources on a wide variety of topics to further develop my article as to why polarization and voter turnout do in fact correlate.

Between the workshop phase and the final draft, I made many large tweaks to my paper. As I am a writer who needs a strong foundation to build my paper, I went into my meeting with you with only a foundation and outline to confirm I was on the right path. I then went on and developed the main research body of my paper with the major statistical facts and information that would need to be tweaked by my classmates to give you the author total clarity. Finally I went on to add my conclusion which encompassed the shiny new thing: the value knowing the correlation between political polarization and voters turnout has on future elections.

The part of Project Three that was the most difficult for me was certainly the fact that my sources were not modern. Having acknowledged the fact that the sources were not specifically relevant, and having to tie them to new modern sources added a new level of difficulty I had not yet experienced until this paper.

Thanks,

Sierra Rodriguez