HOW POLITICAL POLARIZATION IMPACTS PUBLIC UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE (AND HOW TO OVERCOME IT)

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By

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ABSTRACT

The United States is experiencing a period of intense political polarization that has profoundly influenced public discourse and institutional functioning. This study investigated the impacts that polarization has on the governance of public flagship universities. Specifically, it set out to 1) analyze the forms, causes, and consequences of political polarization; 2) explore its effects on the governance structures of public flagship universities since 2010; and 3) examine how university leaders conceptualize "good governance" in light of shifting political dynamics.

The literature review examines scholarship on university governance and political polarization. It traces historical trends, key frameworks, and themes in governance studies, emphasizing how political forces like polarization affect public flagship universities. The polarization section defines partisan-ideological and affective forms, outlines their causes and consequences, and frames partisanship as a group identity that shapes political perception and behavior.

The methods section describes the case study approach employed in this study, which focused on the state of Wisconsin and its flagship university in Madison. Wisconsin was selected for its relevance to the researcher's local context. Data collection included 19 semi-structured interviews with members of the Wisconsin Board of Regents, senior university administrators, faculty leaders, and state policymakers in both the executive and legislative branches. In addition, documents such as Board minutes, Faculty Senate resolutions, policymaker speeches, and public statements from key stakeholders were analyzed.

The findings address the primary and supporting research questions, revealing two overarching conclusions. First, higher education governance decision-makers in Wisconsin since 2010 share a consistent understanding of good governance, emphasizing shared governance principles and the minimization of external political pressures. Second, affective political polarization has intensified during this period and has influenced governance practices at UW–Madison. The findings are discussed in relation to existing literature.

The study concludes with actionable recommendations for governance decision-makers at public flagship universities facing political polarization. First, leaders should cultivate personal relationships that transcend institutional identities. Second, universities should extend their educational mission beyond campus by engaging communities statewide and highlighting their contributions. Third, efforts should aim not only to inform the public about university activities but also to build widespread support and enthusiasm.

Keywords: polarization, governance, public universities, politics

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DEDICATION

For Rachel, Tyler, Addie, and Max: The inspiration to start this journey, and the encouragement to complete it.

And for GLB: I promised this day would happen. I just wish we could have celebrated it together.

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While this capstone has one name on the cover, it really is the work of many authors. The exhilaration, and exhaustion, of completing this study fills me with gratitude that far exceeds anything I can write on this page. But here is my humble attempt.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

America is deeply divided. Nearly half those surveyed in an October 2024 poll said members of the opposite party were "downright evil" (Robbins, 2024). A January 2025 Gallup survey found the center points of both major parties more ideologically apart than at any time since the survey began in 1992 (Brenan, 2025). The 118th Congress, whose term ended in January 2025, passed fewer bills than in any two-year period since the 1980s (Solender, 2024). Distrust of political opponents. Alignment of party and ideology. Policy gridlock. These data are markers of what is known as "political polarization," a phenomenon defined by space *between* two distinct groups and cohesion *within* those groups over matters of policy and governance (Poole & Rosenthal, 2011; Lee, 2015). From healthcare to crime to immigration to the integrity of our voting systems, polarization has shaped, defined, and disrupted nearly every aspect of American public life in recent years. Higher education, which throughout history has enjoyed bipartisan policymaking, even in times of high partisanship, has unfortunately not been immune to our present state of discord (Wolanin, 1997; Parker, 2019; Busteed, 2023). In fact, recent disputes over free speech, cost, diversity, and academic freedom have placed higher education squarely on the partisan battlefield (Ellis, et al, 2020a; Knott, 2022; Anderson, 2023; Brint, 2023; Svrluga, 2023).

Whether Republican or Democrat, conservative or liberal, or any other party or ideology, if you work at one of the more than 1,500 public institutions of higher education in the United States, this should trouble you. Why? Consider some of the many consequences of political polarization: fear, anger, and distrust toward political opponents; increased party

homogeneity and discipline; disincentive to find bipartisan solutions; lack of policy maintenance; legislative gridlock (Poole & Rosenthal, 1997; Binder, 2003; Stonecash, et al, 2003; Hacker, 2004; Bishop, 2008; McCarty, et al, 2008; Levendusky, 2009; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015; Lee, 2015; Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Fiorina, 2017; Mason, 2018; Iyengar, et al, 2019; Webster, 2020). Unfortunately, this is far from a complete list. For those who work in public universities, this poses additional and unnecessary challenges. Public distrust rises, long-term strategic planning is more difficult, issues outside the core teaching and research missions take center stage. Each of these makes it harder for universities to accomplish their objectives.

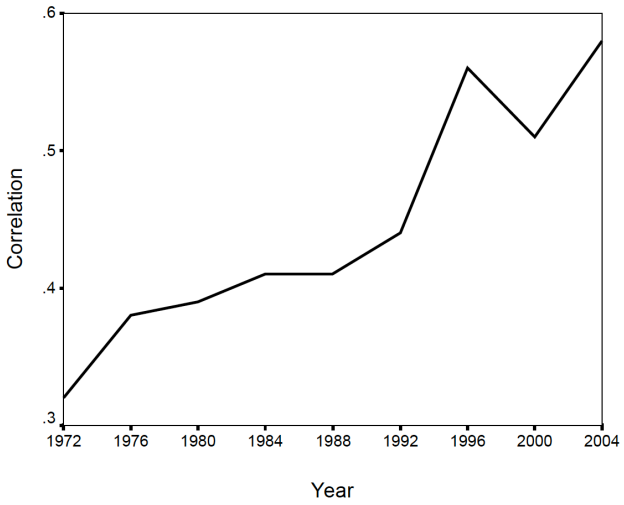
If history is any guide, the partisan fever will eventually break and higher education will again be fertile ground for forging policy by consensus (Poole & Rosenthal, 2001; Evans, 2003). But, for today and the eventual next time, public universities must learn how to operate effectively during times of high political polarization. That is what this study set out to do. The contribution it makes to that goal is threefold: First, it provides a deeper understanding of the various forms, causes, and consequences of political polarization in the United States. Second, it uses that understanding to examine the impact of polarization since 2010 on the governance of public flagship universities. And third, it sheds new light on how those in charge of university governance understand the concept of "good governance," particularly how external political dynamics can and should shape the work of the university.

The remainder of this chapter provides context on the history and present state of political polarization in the United States, an introduction to the problem of practice, the purpose of this study, the research questions that guided the study, and an overview of the methodology used. It concludes with a preview of the remaining chapters of this report.

Context

This study holds that there are two distinct – though related – forms of polarization present in the U.S. today. The first, and most common, understanding of polarization is the "partisan-ideological" form, which divides groups based on preferences of political party and ideology (Abramowitz, 2010). Partisan and ideological divisions have not always aligned in American politics. In the 1950s, for instance, conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans were meaningful voting blocs (Nie, et al, 1976; Poole & Rosenthal, 1997; Fleischer & Bond, 2004; Brownstein, 2007). Beginning in the early-1970s, however, a phenomenon described by some scholars as the "Big Sort" occurred in the U.S., which effectively aligned people from the left and right of the ideological spectrum into one of the two major parties – left with the Democratic Party and right with the Republican Party, as seen in Figure 1.1 (Evans, 2003; Brewer, 2005; Layman, et al, 2006; Bishop, 2008; Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Bafumi & Shapiro, 2009; Hetherington & Weiler, 2009; Levendusky, 2009; Abrams & Fiorina, 2012). The second form of polarization is what is known as "affective" polarization. Iyengar and Westwood (2015) define this as "the tendency of people identifying as Republicans or Democrats to view opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively" (p. 691). This is based on political affiliation not as a cohesive set of policy beliefs, but as a social identity (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Nicholson, 2012; Huddy, et al, 2015; Theodoridis, 2017; Mason, 2018; Iyengar, et al, 2019). Both these forms of polarization are evident in America today, with real import and consequences to social and political life.

Figure 1.1: Correlation of Party and Ideology, 1972-2004



Source: Abramowitz, A., & Saunders, K. (2005). Why can't we all just get along? The reality of a polarized America. The Forum, 3(2): 9.

Neither is a new phenomenon. Many have opined that the present time is the worst period of polarization in our nation's history. But widen the historical aperture: The Vietnam War, the Great Depression, the Gilded Age, Reconstruction, all the way back to the bitter and public divide between Federalists and anti-Federalists over the foundational principles of the Republic – polarization has been a recurring character in the American story (Poole & Rosenthal, 1997; McCarty, et al, 2008; Fiorina, 2017; Drutman, 2021). Whether the present political discord is the *worst* in our history was outside the scope of this study. But a preponderance of the data indicates that we are living in a period of high polarization (Abramowitz & Webster, 2018; Mason, 2018; Iyengar, et al, 2019; Desilver, 2022).

Polarization can exist at the voter (or what is commonly referred to as "mass") and policymaker (or "elite") levels.[1] At both levels, the consequences of polarization are real, and often devastating. I take a deeper look at the extensive body of research into the consequences in Chapter 2. For now, a brief overview serves to illustrate the point. Individuals sorted by partisan-ideological preference perceive reality within the political sphere in much different ways. They are less exposed to other viewpoints, which produces a range of cognitive biases such as "motivated reasoning," or filtering information in a way that conforms to one's beliefs and rejecting anything that runs counter to them (Bartels, 2002; Bishop, 2008; Jerit & Barabas, 2012; Druckman, et al, 2013; Mason, 2018). Partisans are also more accepting of cues from political elites, which narrows the range of ideas to which they are exposed (Levendusky, 2009; Druckman, et al, 2013).

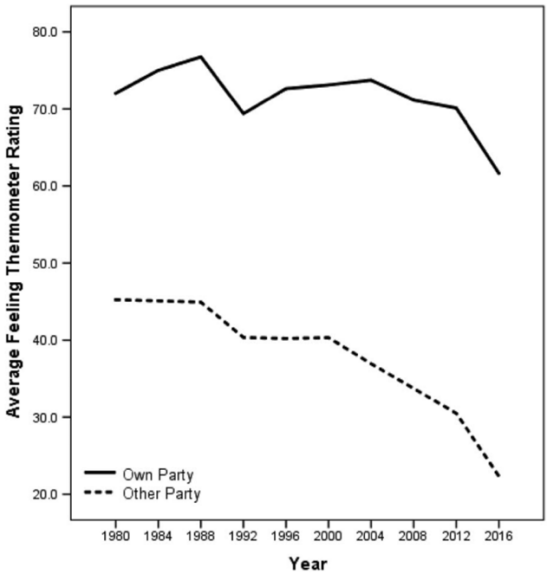
Polarized elites cater to the base, which is farther from the political center than the full electorate, leaving moderate voters with less representation in state and federal legislatures (Fiorina, et al, 2005; Abramowitz, 2010; Levendusky, 2010; Hopkins, 2017). Not only is there less common ground between the parties, but they are disincentivized by electoral politics from working across the aisle (Poole & Rosenthal, 1997; Stonecash, et al, 2003; Levendusky, 2010; Jacobson, 2013; Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Hopkins, 2017). Instead, their posture of constant campaigning typically leads to a lack of policy maintenance, a reliance on short-term fixes, or

[1] There is general consensus in the scholarly literature that the "masses" refers to a country's broad electorate. However, there is variance as to how narrow the "elites" circle should be drawn. Some include only elected officials, while others cast a wider net that includes those in positions of influence in social, economic, political, and/or military matters (see Mills, 1956; Burch, 1981; Carmines & Stimson, 1989; Domhoff, 1990; Hetherington, 2001; Brewer, 2005; Fiorina & Abrams, 2009; Levendusky, 2009; Druckman, et al, 2013). This study employed the broad view, defining political elites as elected officials, party leaders, and activists who are engaged in agenda setting and policy shaping.

worse, legislative gridlock (Hacker, 2004; Sinclair, 2006; McCarty, et al, 2008; Jacobson, 2013; Lee, 2015). This level of party homogeneity in Congress enhances the power of congressional leaders, who in turn use their newfound levers to demand greater intraparty cohesion and discipline (Aldrich & Rohde, 2000; Fleischer & Bond, 2004; Lee, 2015).

The consequences of affective polarization are different, though no less pernicious. Research shows that individuals polarized by identity divide the world into friends and foes, or what scholars describe as "in-groups" and "out-groups" (Brewer, 1999; Klandermans, 2014; Mason, 2018). This is a foundational component of affective polarization, one that shapes the way that people and ideas are perceived and acted upon in the political sphere. As Figure 1.2 indicates, feelings against the out-party have plummeted in recent decades. This makes sense once viewed through the identity lens, as this type of partisan sees the other side as representing a different – and, in many respects, opposing – way of life (Bishop, 2008). Under these conditions, compromise is difficult. Politics is a zero-sum game. They approach the other side with corrosive emotions such as fear, distrust, antipathy, anger, and disdain (Goggin & Theodoridis, 2018; Mason, 2018; Klein, 2021). An intense, emotion-based loyalty to their side is a potent driver of their political activity (Green, et al, 2002; Mason, 2013; Goggin & Theodoridis, 2018). They are less rational and open to evidence that runs counter to their side, which makes them prone to stereotyping and conspiracy theories (Taber & Lodge, 2006; Huddy, et al, 2015; Duran, et al, 2017; Iyengar, et al, 2019). They condone dehumanization and, in extreme cases, political violence as a legitimate tool of partisan battle (Iyengar, et al, 2012; Cassese, 2019; Young, 2019; Martherus, et al, 2021). Beyond the political sphere, the affectively polarized are

Figure 1.2: Average In- and Out-Party Feeling Thermometer Ratings, 1980-2016



Source: Abramowitz, A., and Webster, S. (2018). Negative partisanship: Why Americans dislike parties but behave like rabid partisans. Advanced in Political Psychology, 39(1): 121.

also more likely to engage in broader social sorting – where one lives, who they date, how they practice faith, and more (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Huber & Malhotra, 2017; Margolis, 2018). The presence of affective polarization creates new incentives for elites to exploit these perceptions and behaviors, emphasizing differences between the in- and out-groups (Tajfel, 1978; Aldrich & McGinnis, 1989; Greene, 2004; Davis & Dunaway, 2016). Finally, affective polarization serves to weaken or destroy traditional norms that are vital to a functioning pluralist society (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

Some scholars argue that partisan-ideological polarization is not all bad. When the two major parties promote ideologies that are both consistent and distinct, this offers voters a clearer choice (Hetherington, 2001; Abramowitz, 2010a). And that clarity produces an electorate wherein more people are, as Levendusky (2010) describes it, voting "correctly" (p. 125). (A

strong case has yet to be made for the "good consequences" of affective polarization.) This paper does not deride those conclusions. It does hold, however, that the net effects of political polarization, as demonstrated by the vast collection of scholarship on this topic, are harmful to American society. This includes the impact on public higher education.

Problem of Practice

Within higher education, polarization has shaped recent political debates over free speech on college campuses; how race is factored into teaching, training, and admissions practices; the appropriate balance between a broad-based education and narrow workforce training; how for-profit institutions should be supported or restricted; the rising cost of a college degree and the management of student loans; and, the future of tenure and its impact on academic freedom (Ellis, et al, 2020; Knott, 2022; Anderson, 2023; Brint, 2023; Svrluga, 2023). While much of the focus has been on the fights taking place in Washington, DC, or state capitals, there has been too little attention on how this political contest affects operations and decisions within the university.

Examining the impact of polarization on public university governance is important for two reasons. First, public universities are politically contested spaces. They are created and regulated by the state; they spend public monies; they are expected to provide public goods. Most importantly for governance, the people decide who will serves as trustees to these universities, either through direct election or through their representatives in the executive and legislative branches (Fulton, 2019; Ellis, et al, 2020). The potential for politics to seep into university governance is high, restricted more by norms than laws. Second, the work of what I

call "governance decision-makers"[2] impacts nearly every corner of university operations, from budget and strategy to curriculum and human resources. Their actions are felt downstream by practitioners in each functional area or administrative unit of the university (e.g., finance, marketing, advancement, research, enrollment management, government relations, and student affairs, among others). When these actions bear the negative consequences of political polarization, it is problematic for practitioners across the university.

Over the past decade, one of the notable external forces at both the state and federal levels has been the heightened partisan fighting over higher education policy. Days before the inauguration of President Donald Trump in January 2017, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that conservative activists were "poised to go on the attack to try to regain lost ground" (Schmidt, 2017). But conservative efforts to reshape higher education at the state level preceded the Trump presidency. While the changes pushed by governors Scott Walker (Wisconsin), Rick Perry (Texas), and Matt Bevin (Kentucky) may have grabbed the most headlines, they were part of a much broader constellation of activities being taken by legislatures, activists, and even governing boards at the state level (Ellis, et al, 2020; Cantwell & Taylor, 2022; Taylor, 2023a). A report by the 25-member National Commission on College and University Board Governance urged trustees to "retain their independence from external stakeholders" – in 2014 (AGB, 2014).

[2] "Governance decision-makers" refers to the principals of the three stakeholder groups that comprise the shared governance model as defined in the 1966 Joint Statement. The groups and decision-makers include: 1) Trustees, 2) Administration (presidents), and 3) Faculty (provosts and faculty senate chairs).

A notable change since 2017, however, has been the marked shift in GOP sentiments against higher education (Parker, 2019; Dunn & Cerda, 2022; Knott, 2022; Brenan, 2023). According to a 2019 survey by the Pew Research Center, 67% of "Democrat/Lean Democrat" respondents said universities have a positive "effect on the way things are going in the country." In contrast, just 33% of "Republican/Lean Republican" respondents had a positive view, while 59% held the negative position. Four years earlier, those numbers were flipped, with a majority (54%) of Republicans holding positive views and 37% negative (Parker, 2019; Dunn & Cerda, 2022). On the right, then, confronting higher education has become viewed as both sound policy and good politics (Grunwald, 2018; Knott, 2022; Chait, 2023).

Interestingly, it is the perception of partisanship on campus that is the most partisan issue. Sixty-seven percent of Republicans believe the political tilt within higher education is a "major problem," compared with just 26% of Democrats. Sixty percent of Democrats say students are hearing a "range of viewpoints," while just 26% of Republicans agree (Parker, 2019). That is where policymakers and activists have trained their focus. Since 2017, the conversation on higher education policy has centered not on cost or access or completion, but on free speech, the future of faculty tenure, oversight of curricular content, DEI programs, and related hot-button political issues (Cantwell & Taylor, 2022; Anderson, 2023; Novak, 2023; Svrluga, 2023; Taylor, 2023). Actions taken by a board, governor, or legislature in one state have inspired similar actions in other states, particularly when they have generated political gains. Legislation aimed at restricting or eliminating DEI initiatives offers an instructive example. In January 2023, model legislation for dismantling DEI programs was released by the Manhattan Institute and the Goldwater Institute, two conservative think tanks (Brint, 2023). That same

month, lawmakers in Arkansas, Indiana, Iowa, Missouri, Montana, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, Tennessee, and Texas introduced legislation based on that model. According to a tracker managed by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, since January 2023 anti-DEI pressures have led to policy changes in 215 colleges across 32 states (Gretzinger, et al, 2024).

Partisan conflict has bled into public university governance in a multitude of ways. The ability of governors and legislatures to use board appointments in particular to reshape the work of colleges and universities is enormous. In 2020, for instance, almost 70% of public-university board members appointed by political process were done so by a single political party (Ellis, et al, 2020). Policymakers and activists understand that boards are the supreme legal authority on university governance, and they have sought to deploy trustees as foot soldiers inside the castle walls (Svrluga, 2023). Take North Carolina, for example. W. Louis Bissett, Jr., a former Republican mayor of Asheville who served on the board of the UNC System, recalled being told by a newly-appointed board member on their first day, "I'm here as a representative of the General Assembly" (Ellis, et al, 2020). Elizabeth Haddix, a former staff attorney at UNC-Chapel Hill's Center for Civil Rights, which was a prominent target of the Board's ire, claimed that member Joseph T. Knott III told her, "There are legislators in our General Assembly who have appointed us. We won, and it's our turn to have the agenda here" (Ellis, et al, 2020). This approach is not without its supporters. After all, public universities expend finite public resources provided by the taxpayer. And like other public resources, the voters get to shape how that money is allocated by selecting their representatives in state government. That is the essence of politics. Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin made that case

last year when his attorney general affirmed that the "primary duty" of public governing boards is to the Commonwealth, not their university (Blake, 2023).

Whether Gov. Youngkin is right or not, the influence of external political actors presents challenges for the governance of public universities in times of high polarization. This can come in many forms. Policies designed and passed by partisan lawmakers and/or through partisan processes are more likely to be met with distrust and perceived as if they were created to benefit the side of the majority (Knott, 2022). Institutions are constrained from proceeding with big, bold ideas for fear they will run afoul of powerful political interests (Anderson, 2023). Faculty teaching, research, and testimony on polarizing political issues, such as climate change, gun control, or abortion, is limited or outright censored by policymakers, universities, or even faculty members themselves (Cantwell & Taylor, 2022; Brint, 2023; Knott, 2023; Young & Friedman, 2023). University employees are required to spend additional time on information requests and policymaker engagement – time that could be spent on more mission-specific activities (Taylor, 2023). Long-term strategic and operational planning becomes more difficult, as the level and direction of public investments can fundamentally change the next time the legislature or governor's mansion changes party (Ruth, 2023). Campus activities are viewed through an increasingly partisan lens, making standard activities, such as a guest speaker, a faculty op-ed, a major gift, or more recently, discussion of thorny policy issues, kindling for the next political firestorm (Graham, 2017; Anderson, 2023; Taylor, 2023). In short, polarization matters.

Purpose of the Study & Research Questions

When something impacts our work – whether demographic trends or technological advances or global competition or the state of the economy – we benefit by taking the time to interrogate it. Political polarization is one of those factors. Yet, there is a dearth of scholarship on the impacts it may have on public universities and how the range of consequences it presents might be navigated. That is what this study set out to do. The goal was not to solve political polarization; no such study could promise that. What it does, however, is provide insights on how it effects governance and recommendations to help those at the table do the best job possible in governing during times of high polarization. In so doing, this study also sheds light on the longstanding debate over what constitutes "good governance."

This study addressed the following primary research question: How does political polarization impact the governance of flagship public universities? This primary question begged several attendant questions, including:

- How do governance decision-makers operating in contested political settings describe what constitutes "good governance" of public universities?
- How do governance decision-makers describe the ways in which political actors and forces outside of their institutions shape their work?
- What do governance decision-makers describe as the most (and least) politically polarizing issues in higher education today?
- In what ways can the perspectives of governance decision-makers in contested political settings inform better governance practice?

Methodology

The first step in addressing the primary research question was to review the existing scholarship on the two concepts at the heart of this study: university governance and political polarization. A detailed review of the literature is provided in Chapter 2. What remained missing were insights from governance decision-makers on how political polarization impacts their work. To acquire these data, I employed the case study approach. This case focused on the state of Wisconsin and its flagship university in Madison.

Two forms of data were collected: semi-structured interviews and documents. First, I conducted 19 interviews with members of the Wisconsin Board of Regents, senior University of Wisconsin-Madison administrators, and faculty leadership, as well as state-level policymakers in both the executive and legislative branches. Wisconsin was selected as the site of study due to its relevance to my local context. Like Virginia, Wisconsin has a public AAU university, a majority of the board trustees appointed and confirmed by elected officials in the executive and legislative branches, and can be described as a "purple state," with power alternating between the two major parties (Fulton, 2019; Ellis, et al, 2020). Interviewees served in their case-relevant positions between 2010 and the present. Special emphasis was given to officials who served from 2014 (or earlier) through 2018 (or later) to capture perspectives during a period when a sharp rise in polarization over higher education occurred. Next, I surveyed documents including, but not limited to, Board minutes, Faculty Senate statements, executive branch proposals, public statements, and legislative bills and hearings. A detailed account of these methods is presented in Chapter 3.

Outline of the Remaining Chapters

The rest of this paper follows the standard format for a capstone report, outlining the study that was undertaken to understand and address the challenge of how political polarization impacts public university governance. Chapter 2 provides a survey of the literature on university governance and political polarization, and how the conceptual framework aligns with the rest of the study design. In Chapter 3, I detail the methods used in this study, including the research design, data collection and analysis, relevant limitations, and research bias. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study and a discussion of their significance and alignment with the literature on governance and polarization. The report concludes with a series of recommendations for practitioners in Chapter 5. References and appendices are included after Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This study is about how political polarization impacts the governance of public flagship universities. Therefore, it must be grounded in the scholarship on these two core subjects. This chapter begins with an overview of the literature on university governance, including its evolution within American higher education, key theoretical models, and recurring themes. Next, it summarizes the literature on partisan-ideological and affective polarization – how they are defined and measured, and their various causes and consequences. It concludes with an articulation of the theoretical frameworks that guided this study, and the alignment between these frameworks, the research questions, and the methods detailed in Chapter 3.

Governing the American University

For more than fifty years now, scholars have amassed an extensive body of research on the governance of higher education. And yet, "governance" remains a somewhat imprecise term. According to Kezar and Eckel (2004), defining it "is a troubling task since each theory about governance is embedded with a different definition; almost every book and article avoids any clear definition" (p. 375). While exact precision may be illusive, the literature indicates that scholars speak of governance more in different accents rather than different languages. Drawing from the canonical texts in the literature, this study defines governance as how institutions are formally organized and managed, particularly the structures and processes through which institutional participants interact with each other, create policies, and make

decisions on behalf of the organization (Corson, 1960; Millett, 1962; Baldridge, 1971; Birnbaum, 1988; Schuster & Miller, 1989; Bolman & Deal, 1991; Huisman, 2007; Pusser, 2011).

The governance of higher education varies around the world, shaped to a large degree by each country's unique culture and history (Clark, 1983; Austin & Jones, 2016). In the United States, university governance traces its roots back to the Colonial Era (Corson, 1960; Thelin, 2019). When Massachusetts' colonial legislature created a Board of Overseers to direct the work of Harvard College, they laid the foundation for a governance model that has lasted to the present day (Herbst, 1982; Thelin, 2019). Key to that model was assigning formal legal authority over governance to an independent board comprised of non-employees. Such lay boards, in turn, delegated the authority to manage the day-to-day operations to a university president (Rudolph, 1990; Cohen, 1998). Once the new nation was established, this model of governance continued, though the relative influence of the church on curricular matters waned considerably within public universities (Cohen, 1998). Beginning in the middle of the 19th Century, faculty became increasingly more professionalized and organized by rank, and academic programs and departments more structured by discipline (Rudolph, 1990; Veysey, 1965; Geiger, 1999). A growing number of university leaders agreed that faculty should have control over teaching and curricular matters (Birnbaum, 2004). Authority over university governance, however, continued to be dominated by boards and presidents until well into the next century (Veysey, 1965; Geiger, 1999).

The modern era of American higher education began in the middle of the 20th Century. During this period, the federal government took a series of bold actions – bookended by the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (GI Bill) and the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965 –

that transformed college education from a privilege of the select few to a possibility for the masses (Thelin, 2019). Also in the 1950s, universities began to attract a growing share of federal research dollars (Lowen, 1997). These were atop the long list of developments that transformed American higher education and gave rise to what Kerr (1963) labeled the "multi-versity" – large universities in the business not just of teaching, but of research, public service, and economic development as well. With the aid of faculty unions and collective bargaining rights, faculty gained a more prominent role in governing for a time, particularly at large public universities (Cohen, 1998; Altbach, 1999). This elevation of faculty authority was formalized in the 1966 "Joint Statement," which was endorsed by the leading organizations for boards, administrators, and faculty (AAUP, 1966). But in the sixty years since Kerr's landmark work, macro-level developments – new technologies, demographic shifts, rising costs, and market forces, among them – have made universities even more complex organizations. This has resulted in an increasing professionalization of higher education, often at the expense of faculty power and influence (Carlisle & Miller, 1998; Gumport, 2000; Birnbaum, 2004; Huisman, 2007).

Since the earliest research in this field, the literature has reflected the political, economic, and social changes that have impacted higher education governance. The next section provides a review of how scholars have built and refined the major conceptual approaches to how universities are – and ought to be – governed.

Universities as Organizations

There are myriad lenses used by scholars to understand how universities are governed and how various factors shape change that occurs within them. These perspectives emanate from a

diversity of academic disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, economics, political science, and many others (Manning, 2013). This work can be distilled into two broad scholarly approaches to governance. The first, and dominant school for roughly half a century, considers *universities as organizations*. Over the years, scholars have come up with a variety of labels and schemas to describe the short list of major organizational models within higher education. Baldridge (1971) pioneered the use of a multidimensional approach, arguing that university governance could be described by one of three models: Bureaucratic, Collegial, or Political. Birnbaum (1988) built upon these three by adding the Anarchical and Cybernetic models. Bolman & Deal's (1991) "four frames" retained the first four from Birnbaum, albeit with slightly different names: Structural, Human Resource, Political, and Symbolic. Morgan (1986) took a more creative approach by presenting a series of metaphors to describe different types of organizations, including "machines," "cultures," and even "psychic prisons." Childers (1981), Kuh (1989), and Berger & Milem (2000) are among the many others who have offered their own organizational taxonomy to describe university governance. Whatever the labels, each model is meant to reflect a distinct collection of values, structures, and processes. This section provides a brief overview of the major organizational models found in the literature, using Birnbaum's five models as the entry point for each approach.

Bureaucratic/Structural. The bureaucratic or structural model is defined by its rational approach to organization. This model was first developed by Max Weber (1947), who argued that bureaucracy was the most rational and efficient way for complex organizations to operate. Bolman and Deal (1991) describe the bureaucratic model as like a factory or machine, where each component has specific roles to play and goals to advance. Lines of authority are clearly

drawn and there is minimal ambiguity about who is responsible for what within the organization (Gross & Grambasch, 1974; Duryea, 1991). The increasing complexity of the modern university beginning in the second half of the 20th Century drew new adherents to the bureaucratic approach (Stroup, 1966). Subunits such as faculty senates or student governments were regarded as effective ways to share decision-making responsibility within a complex organization (Clark, 1963; Baldridge, 1971; Mintzberg, 1979). Of the five archetypal bureaucratic structures identified by Mintzburg (1979), the "professional bureaucracy" model was tagged as the most accurate in how universities operated. Complaints about the bureaucratic approach include its difficulty keeping up with change and operating in ambiguity and tending to become impersonal or too highly regulated (Weber, 1947; Kezar & Eckel, 2004). The structural approach has long been the dominant lens through which to consider university governance and therefore represents a sizable portion of the literature (Kezar & Eckel, 2004).

Political. Beginning in the 1970s, J. Victor Baldridge led the way in articulating the human side of governance for the first time (Baldridge, 1971; Cohen & March, 1974; Baldridge, et al, 1978; Kezar & Eckel, 2004). In what became known as the political model, universities are seen as political systems of interpersonal engagements rather than ideal hierarchical systems where formal structures and process shape decisions (Baldrige, 1971; Baldridge, et al, 1978; Pfeffer, 1981). It holds that universities are "sites of contest" between a wide range of internal actors, and "power and influence, once articulated, go through a complex process until policies are forged out of the competing claims of multiple groups" (Baldridge, 1971, p. 8). The various stakeholder groups that make up university communities have different interests, many of which may be in conflict (Baldridge, 1971; Baldridge, et al, 1978). The role of power and conflict

in these interactions has been an important part of the research within the political model (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980; Hoyle, 1982; Bush, 1995; Ordorika, 2003). Because organizational resources are finite, each group works to advance their interests through a combination of cooperation, negotiation, bargaining, and coalition-building with other university actors (Baldridge, 1971; Pfeffer, 1981; Berger & Milem, 2000). But these conflicts, inherent in any organization with a pluralism of values and interests, can often bring positive change (Baldridge, 1971). Some scholars who do not subscribe to the political model agree that it is nonetheless important in understanding some of the human dynamics that shape governance (Kezar & Eckel, 2004). Because each university is unique, its political dynamics work in different ways, thus making it difficult to generalize the experiences of any one campus community (Birnbaum, 1988).

Collegial/Human Resource. Scholarship on the collegial frame was introduced into the literature in the early 1960s (Goodman, 1962; Millet, 1962; Anderson, 1963). The designers of this approach argued that university governance needed to consider the individuals who made up the various units within the organization. These individuals have their own personalities, needs, motivations, and perspectives that they bring to where they sit and how they interact with others within the organization, something which impacts their work in substantive ways (Kezar & Eckel, 2004). The collegial approach promotes a culture that values consensus goal setting and informal decision making, with equal participation and a collaborative spirit amongst its members (Bush, 1995; Kezar & Eckel, 2004). Some scholars argue that the collegial model was a common approach prior to World War II (Goodman, 1962; Millett, 1962; Kezar & Eckel, 2004). But since the birth of the modern university examples have waned, particularly

among public flagships (Baldridge, 1982; Duryea, 1991; Kezar, 2000; Lapworth, 2004). While this model remains strongly supported by faculty and student affairs professionals, critics argue that it is more normative than descriptive in how universities operate (Berger & Milem, 2000).

Anarchical/Symbolic. In the early 1970s, scholars Michael D. Cohen, James G. March, and Johan P. Olsen articulated another new approach to governance, which attempts to decode the messy and often chaotic way decisions are made in complex organizations. This approach was characterized by three common traits: 1) the lack of a clear set of institutional preferences, 2) the use of technology through trial and error, and 3) the tendency for individuals within the university to contribute only to their areas of interest (Cohen & March, 1974). These factors lead to a loose connection among individuals, units, problems, and solutions where decisions often come together in a random manner, something the authors labeled the "garbage can model" (Cohen & March, 1974; March, 1981). The focus here is on how actors perceive and make sense of their environments rather than responding in a purely rational way (even if structures may help to define and reinforce the symbolic roles of campus actors) (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Weick, 1979; Birnbaum, 1988; Argyis, 1994). Meaning within a university may be created through the use of shared symbols, rituals, ceremonies, or sagas that serve to build cohesion and deepen understanding (Morgan, 1986; Bensimon, 1989; Berger & Milem, 2000; Kezar & Eckel, 2004). The upshot of this approach is that institutional culture matters; good governance varies based on the unique cultural makeup of each university (Clark, 1983; Birnbaum, 1988; Lee, 1991; Schuster, et al, 1994; Eckel, 2003). Cross-campus studies by Lee (1991) and Schuster, et al, (1994) suggest that institutional cultures can serve to help or hinder governance. Leadership within organized anarchies can be challenging and senior leaders often face difficulties being effective amid the

decentralized and ambiguous nature of these systems (March & Simon, 1958; Cohen & March, 1974). While this approach allows institutions to operate based on what is best within their own context, it presents challenges for offering any sort of rational or generalizable principles of organizational behavior.

Cybernetic/Systemic/Network. Robert Birnbaum (1988) attempted to integrate the bureaucratic, political, collegial, and anarchical approaches into a cohesive framework that reconciled their differences. Borrowing from elements of open systems theory, the cybernetic model recognizes that the governance of organizations is shaped by the systems within which they operate. Those systems are interconnected in a way that promotes information flow and feedback loops among its component parts (Birnbaum, 1988; Birnbaum, 1989; Kezar & Eckel, 2004). By doing so, organizations have the capacity to adapt in ways that maintain stability even in the face of changing internal or external conditions – something Birnbaum (1989) described as institutional "thermostats." Other scholars took a similar pathway as Birnbaum in trying to recognize and account for the interplay of internal and external forces that impact governance (Leslie & Fretwell, 1996; Clark, 1998; Gumport & Pusser, 1999; Eckel, 2003). Berger and Milem (2000), for instance, also identified five governance models, with the fifth – what they call "systemic" – incorporating key elements of the cybernetic approach. As the complexity of higher education has risen, the impact of external forces on university governance has increased in kind (Peterson & Dill, 1997; Berger & Milem, 2000). Universities are unable to insulate themselves from the political, economic, and social dynamics that occur off campus – and governance models that ignore these forces miss the full picture (Kezar & Eckel, 2004). Proponents of this model suggest that even framing these forces as "external" obfuscates the

interdependence of actors at all levels and how these interactions shape governance (Berger & Milem, 2000; Kezar & Eckel, 2004). This approach, they contend, offers governance decision-makers a way to both understand and manage the complexities of the modern university.

Universities as Political Institutions of the State

While the "universities as organizations" paradigm has long dominated the scholarship on higher education governance, in recent decades a second school of thought, crafted by political scientists and economists, has emerged. This school considers public organizations, including public universities, as *political institutions of the state* (Slaughter, 1990; Rhoades, 1992; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Pusser & Ordorika, 2001; Pusser, 2004; Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015). Pusser (2011) defines political institutions as those "that control significant public resources; that have the authority to allocate public costs and benefits; that implement policies with significant political salience, such as conditions of labor or standards of credentialing; and that stand as particularly visible sites of public contest" (p. 803). Note the selected phrases from this list of criteria: "significant public resources," "significant political salience," "particularly visible." It is not enough simply to expend public resources. These resources must be significant enough to matter for powerful interests so that a public struggle for those resources occurs. The most highly contested universities according to these criteria are public flagships.

This struggle highlights one of the two fundamental components of universities as political institutions of the state: They are *sites of contest* between the government, the civil society, and market forces (Pusser & Ordorika, 2001). The rationale behind this contest is simple. Public higher education generates a range of public goods, including a skilled

workforce, local economic development, opportunity for social mobility, and the fruits of basic and applied research, among many others (McMahon, 2009; Marginson, 2011; Carnoy, et al, 2014; Marginson, 2018). But the distribution of these public goods is not predetermined; in fact, these goods are frequently in conflict with one another (Labaree, 1997; Mansbridge, 1998; Pusser, 2011; Carnoy, et al, 2014; Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015). They are also fluid. What is considered a public good is a contested construct, subject to the competing visions of powerful groups vying to elevate their own definition (Mansbridge, 1998; Marginson, 2011; Carnoy, et al, 2014). These groups effort to influence university governance in a variety of ways to maximize their allocation of those public goods. The forces involved can range in size, power, and organization, and may include political parties, grassroots advocacy groups, think tanks, and unions, as well as those without formal recognition in the state or civil society (Pusser, 2013). Scholars have found the activities these forces engage in include attempts to shape governance structures, impact school priorities, and build relationships with university leaders, among others (Kingdon, 1984; Weingast & Marshall, 1988; Parsons, 1997).

Scholarship identifying the state as a site of contest over public goods has been around for many decades (Weber, 1947; Gramsci, 1971). However, it was Slaughter's (1990) work that opened a new channel of research focused specifically on universities. Her work pointed to the impact of market forces specifically in shaping public higher education, something she described as "academic capitalism" (Slaughter, 1990). Subsequent work by Slaughter and others has supported and built upon the market-driven thesis (Rhoades, 1995; Peterson & Dill, 1997; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Bok, 2003; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). The relative power of market forces on higher education varies around the world. An earlier study by Clark (1983) found that

the structures and practices of university governance reflect how these forces are aligned in each country, and in the United States market forces have impacted higher education more than in most nations. There are additional collections of research examining how university governance has been shaped by forces in the state and civil society, as well as broader political and social movements (Gladieux & Wolanin, 1976; Slaughter, 1988; Rhoades, 1992; Pusser & Ordorika, 2001; Tandberg & Ness, 2011; Pusser, 2016). This research has added needed depth to our understanding of the various components that make up our understanding of universities as sites of contest.

In addition, scholars in the "political institutions" school hold that a second fundamental component of public universities is that they are *instruments* in these contests (Pusser, 2013). They argue that universities are not merely neutral venues playing host to a fight between external actors. They are often players in that game as well. This image runs counter to how many believe universities should and do act. Part of this is due to the persistent effort of public university leaders and communications offices, who want to protect their legitimacy in the eyes of the public by appearing neutral on politically contested matters (Pusser, 2011; Pusser, 2015). Closer scrutiny, however, reveals that universities too have their own interests that they pursue alongside allies and opponents in the government and civil society. The most regular example of this is activities that generate revenue for the university, such as tuition or the monetization of research findings through patents or licensing agreements. In these instances, university leaders will engage policymakers, business leaders, and other external actors to shape policies in ways that benefit the school's finances (Bok, 2003; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Rooskby, 2016). Other activities can be more politically risky, such as taking a position on a social issue with

both strong support and opposition amongst the public. Examples of this include diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, provision of in-state tuition for so-called "Dreamers," the implementation of mask mandates, and most recently, campus policies on free speech (Sebel & Schmidt, 2007; Kelderman, 2021; Brint, 2023; Zahneis, 2024). The choices that a public university makes in these cases is hardly neutral, even if its leaders wish to minimize the impact of battling powerful opponents in the government and civil society.

As was outlined in the previous chapter, scholars within the "universities as organizations" school do recognize the significant impact that external forces can have on the governance of public universities. But these theories hold that activities in the political, economic, and social realms shape the work of universities more as a downstream effect. In Baldridge's "revised" political model, for instance, governance decision-making was still primarily an internal process, not the result of contest between both endogenous and exogenous forces (Pusser, 2011). By reorienting public universities as sites of contest and instruments within a broader struggle, these scholars have provided a more capacious frame to capture and assess the full range of interests, actors, and dynamics that shape the governance of public flagship universities.

Major Themes in University Governance

Regardless of one's theoretical frame, many of the same topics and challenges come up repeatedly in the literature on university governance. This section highlights four of those themes: how universities adapt to change, the division of authority within the shared

governance model, the response to external pressures, and how governance is seen from the perspective of individual stakeholder groups.

Adapting to Change. In the literature on higher education governance, one of the few constants is change. In some of the early research produced in the 1960s and 1970s, scholars warned how universities must adapt to the massive changes that had spawned the creation of the modern university (Goodman, 1962; Kerr, 1963; Stroup, 1966; Berdahl, 1971; Grambasch, 1974). In every decade since, the same warnings about the impact of changes in technology, politics, economics, and society on the university are present (Brubacher, 1982; Clark, 1983; Schuster, et al, 1994; Sporn, 1999; Kezar & Eckel, 2004; Huisman, 2007). Most scholars point to the need to remain adaptable in the face of change (Grambasch, 1974; Duryea, 1991; Schuster, et al, 1994; Rhoades, 1995; Benjamin & Carroll, 1998; Kezar & Eckel, 2004; Huisman, 2007). How institutions choose to respond to change can vary, from recommitting to their educational missions to riding the macro-level trends happening in the world around us. Clark (1998) called on institutions to become "entrepreneurial universities," collaborating with external actors to keep pace with the rapidly changing world. The bulk of the literature, however, encourages university leaders to find an appropriate balance between internal values and traditions, and external realities (Rhoades, 1995; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Gumport & Dauberman, 1999). University leaders are responsible for managing whatever change strategy they take (Riley & Baldridge, 1977). This requires effective leadership and broad-based participation within the institution (Eckel, et al, 1998; Sporn, 1999). This is particularly important in hard times, when financial, social, or political pressures require institutions to make difficult choices (Birnbaum, 1989; Leslie & Fretwell, 1996; Eckel, 2003). While it may pose challenges in the short term,

history has shown that higher education has always been able to adapt in ways that remain faithful to the overarching mission while keeping pace with the times (Altbach, et al, 2005).

Shared Governance. The second recurring theme is the focus on shared governance. The shared governance model is a relatively recently phenomenon, formalized for the first time in the 1966 "Joint Statement," which recognized the "inescapable interdependence" of the three governing principals in managing university affairs (AAUP, 1966). There is broad consensus in the literature that as higher education became larger and more complex in the second half of the 20th Century, the relative power of trustees and administrators over matters of governance increased at the expense of faculty (Carlisle & Miller, 1998; Gumport, 2000; Birnbaum, 2004; Huisman, 2007). This has upset the traditional model of shared governance, where faculty, boards, and presidents each have a specific and important role in university governance. Some argue that faculty senates are ill-equipped to manage the range of pressures facing the modern university (Schuster, et al, 1994), or that shared governance only works on college campuses of certain sizes and cultures (Mortimer & Mconnell, 1979). Supporters of a more bureaucratic approach also claim that it leads to greater efficiency in university operations, which is essential to keep up with the world around it (Weber, 1947; Keller, 1983; Dill & Helm, 1988; Drummond & Reitsch, 1995; Eckel, 2000; Gumport, 2000; Kezar, 2000). This is not, however, a uniform belief (Stroup, 1966; Mortimer & McConnell, 1979). Further, the drive toward efficiency may come at the expense of effective decisions, built on trust and broad institutional support (Birnbaum, 2004). For instance, Weick (1979) found that decentralized decision-making, while slower, generated greater innovation and flexibility at the unit level. Other internal and external factors, including organizational restructuring, demands for greater accountability, fiscal constraints,

and the expansion of market-oriented activities have also been cited (Baldridge, 1982; Carlisle & Miller, 1998; Gumport & Pusser, 1999; Gumport, 2000; Birnbaum, 2004; Lapworth, 2004).

Proponents of shared governance argue that the balance between administrative and academic authorities is critical for universities to thrive (Stroup, 1966; Lee, 1991; Schuster, et al, 1994; Gumport, 2000). Even outside the collegial framework, the balance of power between these groups is important to maintain (Hardy, 1990). Among the many benefits of the participatory approach embodied in the shared governance model: faculty and administrators feel more positive about their places of work (Drummond & Reitsch, 1995); trust and mutual respect amongst stakeholders is advanced (Eckel, 2000); the full range of perspectives and expertise is leveraged (Schuster, et al, 1994; Birnbaum, 2004); academic freedom is secured (Stroup, 1966); order and stability are maintained (Kerr, 1963; Birnbaum, 2004); and better decisions are made for the entire university (Riley & Baldridge, 1977, Mortimer & McConnell, 1979; Dill & Helm, 1988; Gilmour, 1991; McLendon, 2003; Birnbaum, 2004; Lapworth, 2004). Shared governance is challenging to maintain, as Baldridge (1982) noted in his fable of the "Lost Magic Kingdom." But he and others have argued that it can be revitalized in a way that keeps up with the times (Birnbaum, 2004; Lapworth, 2004). It is normal for the academic and non-academic elements of a university to conflict (Clark, 1963; Lee, 1991). It takes good leadership from all sides to balance the variety of needs, perspectives, goals, and values within a university (Senge, 1990; Bolman & Deal, 1991; Kezar & El-Khawas, 2003). Ideas such as strategic planning councils and Joint Big Decision Committees have been introduced to inject fresh solutions to age-old problems (Keller, 1983; Yamada, 1991; Schuster, et al, 1994). But what has always been

present in the governance literature is the need for the principal decision-makers to communicate and coordinate in a spirit of common purpose (Corson, 1960).

External Pressures. The third theme relates to the external pressures that have long impacted how universities are organized and the decisions they make (Riley & Baldridge, 1977; Mintzberg, 1979; March & Simon, 1986; Schuster & Miller, 1989; Rhoades, 1992; Benjamin & Carroll, 1998; Gumport, 2000). This is especially true for public flagship universities, which are heavily contested institutions due to the public resources they expend and the public benefits they are expected to generate. Mingle (2000) argued that universities have been quite responsive to external forces over time, even if these responses are not as swift as some would hope. Mortimer and McConnell (1979) are among the scholars who argued that the shared governance model ignores the impact that external forces can have on governance. These pressures can come in many forms, including new regulations, shifting demographics, active partisans in state legislatures, and demands for greater accountability and performance metrics (Slaughter, 1988; Rhoades, 1995; Pusser, 2000; Doyle, 2012). Some of these forces open the door for external stakeholders to increase their involvement in university operations (Grambasch, 1974; Mortimer & McConnell, 1979). These pressures are often resisted by internal university actors (Berdahl, 1971; Baldridge, 1982). Critics of external involvement have argued that they distract from universities' pursuit of their educational missions, weaken the legitimacy of their work, and create imbalances in shared governance (Kerr, 1963; Berdahl, 1991; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Gumport & Dauberman, 1999). Proponents contend that there are benefits to strategic engagement with these external forces; for instance, being more responsive to economic, political, and technological change (Clark, 1998). Either way, external pressure has been a

consistent theme in the governance literature, one that shows no sign of abating. University leaders must recognize and engage these forces, practicing what Schuster, et al (1994) called "environmental responsiveness" (p. 195), while continuing to preserve their academic values and advance their core mission (Slaughter, 1990; Rhoades, 1995; Leslie & Fretwell, 1996; Gumport & Dauberman, 1999; Kezar & Eckel, 2004).

Stakeholder Perspectives. Finally, many scholars have researched this topic through the lens of one of the key stakeholder groups with a role in university governance. Much of this literature is focused on the three groups with either formal or delegated authority in the traditional shared governance model: boards, presidents, and faculty. The work on boards largely examines how trustees can add the most value and effectively lead strategic oversight and policymaking rather than day-to-day management of university operations (Chait, et al, 1996; AGB, 2014; Barringer & Riffe, 2018; Scott, 2018). Much of the work on presidents has centered on the increasing complexity of the job, the many distinct roles a president must play in the modern university, and the skills they need to manage the range of internal and external pressures (Cohen & March, 1974; Kerr & Gade, 1986; Peterson & White, 1992; AGB, 1996; Birnbaum & Eckel, 2005). Scholarship on the faculty role in governance notes the long-term trend away from faculty involvement and how this negatively affects faculty perceptions of governance at their institution (Carlisle & Miller, 1998; Birnbaum, 2004; Lapworth, 2004). Much of this work is in defense of the benefits that faculty bring within the shared governance model, including their function as a bridge between scholars and administrators, the legitimacy they bring to university-wide decisions, their symbolic role as faculty leaders among their peers, and their protection of the academic integrity of their institution in the face of market pressures

(Millet, 1962; Clark, 1963; Dill & Helm, 1988; Birnbaum, 1991; Schuster, et al, 1994; Eckel, 2000). Some argue that their value goes beyond traditional faculty roles and should include key institutional decisions, such as budget and strategic priorities (Dimond, 1991; Leslie & Fretwell, 1996; Kissler, 1997). Outside of these three core decision-makers, studies have also focused on state governments, state coordinating agencies, students, alums, and other stakeholder groups whose perspective may impact university governance (Berdahl, 1971; Glenny & Schmidtlein, 1983; Rhoades, 1992; McLendon, 2003; Davis, 2006; Weerts, et al, 2010).

American higher education is in many respects a living and breathing sector, constantly adapting to its internal and external environments. What constitutes good governance continues to evolve in kind. The needs of Harvard College in 1636 are worlds apart from the needs of the modern university. The theories behind good governance also continue to expand as scholars discover new avenues of inquiry. In examining the impact of political polarization on public university governance, this study sheds new light on current debates and identifies critical questions for future research.

Understanding Political Polarization

The second phenomenon at the heart of this study is political polarization. Polarization is fundamentally about space – the space between and within groups. For polarization to exist, groups must be both sufficiently apart from one another on a predefined continuum of choices or characteristics, *and* clustered within the group (Poole & Rosenthal, 2011; Lee, 2015). In the political sphere, groups can be polarized among a multitude of dimensions. Most of these pairings are part of the everyday political lexicon: liberal and conservative, rich and poor, urban

and rural, pro-life and pro-choice, Democrat and Republican. All have their own meanings, measures, histories, causes, and consequences. This study focused on the two main forms of political polarization in the U.S. today: partisan-ideological and affective. This section covers how each of these forms is defined and measured.

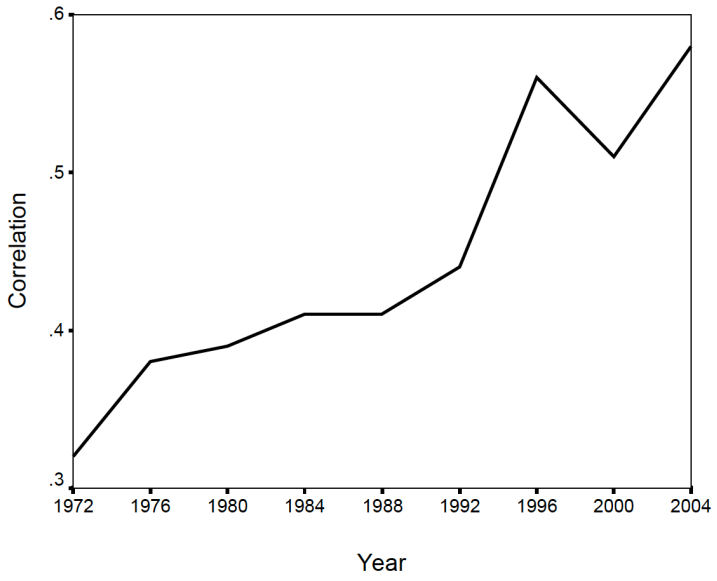
Partisan-Ideological Polarization

Definition. Separating ideological and partisan polarization may seem like a distinction without much of a difference. Conservatives are, in the main, Republican voters, and progressives typically side with the Democratic Party (Saad, 2022). However, while this does generally describe American politics today, it has not always been the case. Liberal and moderate Republicans made up a significant bloc in the GOP between the 1930s and 1970s. And conservative Democrats, largely concentrated in the South, held considerable power in the party in the postwar era until eventually migrating to the Republican side following Reagan's victory in 1980. Even as recently as 1994, a year of substantial partisan and ideological contest, the percentage of conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans was double what it was in 2021 (25% and 8%, respectively) (Saad, 2022). Partisan polarization, therefore, does not necessarily indicate ideological polarization, and vice-versa. But there are times where the two forms do align, and when that does occur a new variant of polarization is formed – one that is greater, and more pernicious, than the sum of its parts. Many scholars have aptly described this as "partisan-ideological polarization" (Abramowitz, 2010).

An important distinction exists between the alignment of partisan and ideological perspectives – a phenomenon known as "sorting" – and partisan-ideological polarization. As

Figure 2.1 demonstrates, since the 1970s partisan and ideological preferences at both the elite and mass levels have come into greater alignment (Evans, 2003; Brewer, 2005; Layman, et al, 2006; Bishop, 2008; Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Bafumi & Shapiro, 2009; Hetherington, 2009; Levendusky, 2009; Abrams & Fiorina, 2012). Some scholars argue that sorting is the only thing actually occurring; that observers are mistaking increased sorting with increased polarization (Abrams & Fiorina, 2012; Fiorina, 2017). There are also many instances in which the two parties stake out very distinct positions on a series of issues, but these issues do not have ideological consistency, thus providing little evidence of increasing partisan-ideological polarization (Lee,

Figure 2.1: Correlation of Party and Ideology, 1972-2004



Source: Abramowitz, A., & Saunders, K. (2005). Why can't we all just get along? The reality of a polarized America. The Forum, 3(2): 9.

2011). Others, however, present strong evidence that these newly aligned clusters within American politics are increasingly homogeneous and farther apart from one another – the two defining characteristics of polarization. The sorting process itself can cause political evaluations

to become more polarized and ideological (DiMaggio, et al, 1996; Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Brewer & Pierce, 2005; Theriault, 2008; Levendusky, 2009; Mason, 2015). Because party and ideology are different constructs, the connection between the two is in constant movement as well (Malka & Lelkes, 2010; Mason, 2015).

Measurements. Scholars were measuring partisan and ideological polarization individually long before the two phenomena came into alignment. Elite party polarization is seen in congressional voting behavior, including in-party voting (Fleisher & Bond, 2000; Stonecash, et al, 2003; Sinclair, 2006; McCarty, et al, 2008; Theriault, 2008), interest group ratings of votes (Stonecash, et al, 2003), party voting within committees (Aldrich & Rohde, 2005; Sinclair, 2012), legislative progress or gridlock (Mayhew, 1991; Binder, 2003), and member support of presidential policies (Edwards & Barrett, 2000; Fleisher & Bond, 2000; Sinclair, 2012). At the mass level, party polarization is seen through voter behavior as found in registration and voting data (DiMaggio, et al, 1996; Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; McGhee & Krimm, 2009; Fiorina, 2017). Voter surveys also provided evidence of party polarization, with the American National Election Survey (ANES), which includes polls of voters before and after each presidential election since 1948, being a primary resource (White, 2003).

Ideological polarization at the elite level is also measured using congressional voting data (Poole & Rosenthal, 1997; Stonecash, et al, 2003; Sinclair, 2006; Theriault, 2008), the most comprehensive effort conducted by Poole, Rosenthal, and McCarty, whose research has tracked every congressional roll-call vote since 1789 as well as the voting pattern of each member on a liberal-conservative continuum (Poole & Rosenthal, 1997; McCarty, et al, 2008). In their model, the scholars calculate the average position of members from each party to determine the degree

to which Congress is polarized at any given time – what they call a "NOMINATE" score. Beyond congressional voting patterns, analyses of laws passed (see Mayhew, 1991, and Binder, 2003, for competing models) and interest group ratings of members' records (Stonecash, et al, 2003) have also been used as indicators of ideology at the elite level.

At the voter level, public opinion surveys are the most common data used to measure ideology. The ANES survey, along with other large-scale surveys, such as the General Social Survey, the National Election Studies survey, and the Cooperative Congressional Election Study, have also been used to examine ideological preferences (DiMaggio, et al, 1996; Jacobson, 2000; Layman & Carsey, 2002; Evans, 2003; Fleisher & Bond, 2004; Abramowitz & Saunders, 2005; Brewer, 2005; Hetherington & Weiler, 2009; Fiorina, 2017; Kalmoe & Mason, 2022). Some scholars have taken the data in these surveys and designed their own models. Others have used presidential and congressional election voting, though as will be seen below these votes are difficult to correlate solely with ideological preference (Abrams & Fiorina, 2012; Klein, 2021).

Evidence of partisan-ideological polarization is found through many of the same measures: executive and legislative branch behavior at the elite level, and public opinion surveys and voter registration data at the mass level. Scholars will often use these data in different ways, however, to discover correlations between the two dimensions. Mason (2015) and Davis and Dunaway (2016) created models to determine the extent of correlation between party and ideology. Abramowitz and Saunders (2008) and Boxell, et al (2017) also examined correlation, but instead used a seven-question survey on issue positions to look at divergence between party and ideology. Scholars have also studied how voters perceive ideological differences between the two major parties, finding that voters have a good sense of which issues

are linked to which party and ideological framework (Hetherington, 2001; Layman & Carsey, 2002; Davis & Dunaway, 2016; Boxell, et al, 2017; Goggin, et al, 2020). As research on the relationship between party and ideology continues to expand, scholars will likely discover new and better ways to analyze these two phenomena.

Causes. Among scholars of polarization, there has been a lengthy argument about the directional relationship between actions at the elite versus the mass levels. What follows are six ways identified by scholars in which mass-level and elite-level phenomena may cause partisan-ideological polarization. The first is that the external social and/or economic environment simply changes, leading individuals to adapt their partisan or ideological positions in response. Polarization is a phenomenon that occurs not in isolation, but amid social, economic, and political realities that are in constant flux. Changes to the status quo are often driven by the pace and intensity of how the parties adjust to a new issue or trend (Ura & Ellis, 2012). Since the end of World War II, scholars have pointed to numerous social or economic changes as reasons for increased polarization, including the Civil Rights Movement, the growth in the salience of moral issues, widening income inequality, changing demographics due to immigration, and response to shock events such as 9/11 or COVID-19. (Stonecash, et al, 2003; Oppenheimer, 2005; Layman, et al, 2006; Brownstein, 2007; McCarty, et al, 2008; Stoker & Jennings, 2008; Campbell, 2016). What binds these examples is that they offer evidence of the impact that social and economic change can have on polarization within the electorate.

A second macro-level change that may lead to increased polarization is when partisan and ideological identities move into greater alignment. There is substantial evidence that it has occurred in the U.S. in recent decades and persists to the present day (Bishop, 2008;

Levendusky, 2009; Jacobson, 2013; Fiorina, 2017). As parties became increasingly associated with an ideology, the moderating effect of cross-pressures – or exposure to divergent or conflicting opinions – was diminished. This served to create greater ideological cohesion within the parties, and distance between the parties – the two key variables in polarization. The impact of sorting on polarization can be found at both the voter and policymaker levels. For voters, when sorting exposes conflict between one's partisan and ideological beliefs, people more commonly adapt their issue positions to align with their party affiliation (Carsey & Layman, 2006; Stoker & Jennings, 2008; Levendusky, 2010; Goggin & Theodoridis, 2018). When congressional districts are comprised of more homogenous voter bases, policymakers – both on the campaign trail and while in office – must satisfy these more polarized interests (Stonecash, et al, 2003; Carson, et al, 2007; Abramowitz, 2010; Jacobson, 2013). At the same time, party leaders are emboldened to pursue a narrower ideological agenda and use their new powers to compel support from their members (Fleischer & Bond, 2004; Theriault, 2008).

Third, as Republicans and Democrats have moved farther apart, party caucuses have used procedural rules and leadership powers to encourage unity within their ranks at the expense of interparty comity (Roberts & Smith, 2003; Theriault & Rohde, 2011). The "conditional party government" theory advanced by Alridge and Rohde (2000) asserts that as parties become more internally cohesive, their congressional leadership teams acquire greater power. By making committee assignments, controlling the congressional agenda, and doling out other resources, leaders can lean on their members to fall in line either in support of their own proposals or to block the opposition's (Rohde, 1991; Cox & McCubbins, 1993; Sinclair, 2002;

Roberts & Smith, 2003). Theriault (2008) holds that most of the polarization in Congress is due to leadership forcing party-line votes on procedural matters.

Fourth, as polarization has increased, the cues from political elites have become more explicit in how issue preferences connect with the party position (Garner & Palmer, 2011). Voters often look to the political class to determine what is considered acceptable political rhetoric and behavior (Lenz, 2012; McLaughlin, et al, 2017; Martherus, et al, 2021). Those who do hold that the masses have sorted according to party and ideology argue that this consolidation followed the lead set by elites (Levendusky, 2010). Lee (2015) notes how congressional leadership in particular has expanded their communications offices and the resulting increase in partisan messaging has given the perception, if not the reality, of greater polarization. It is not uncommon for policymakers and their institutional backers to use extreme rhetoric to instill fear and anger in their voters, and in the process deepen the loyalty of voters to their side (Webster, 2020; Martherus, et al, 2021). In times of high polarization, cues are a potent tool in shaping how voters perceive friends and foes alike.

Fifth, there are two variables regarding how congressional elections are contested that are frequently mentioned as causes of polarization: redistricting and closed primaries. Stonecash, et al (2003) argue that redistricting has increased the internal consistency within districts, while at the same time widening the gap between districts. The result has been the election of more ideologically extreme members (Layman, et al, 2006; Carson, et al, 2007; Theriault & Rohde, 2011). However, numerous studies provide evidence that redistricting has had little to no effect on rising polarization in Congress (Abramowitz, 2006; Mann, 2007; McCarty, et al, 2008). Proponents of redistricting as a cause of polarization point to the impact it

has in the party nomination contests in particular. Because primaries are disproportionately made up of extreme and passionate partisans, the winners of those contests – and, therefore, the general election – are more in line with partisan activists (Jacobson, 2000; Aldrich & Rohde, 2001; Carson, et al, 2007). While logically appealing, there does not appear to be evidence to support such an assertion (Hirano, et al, 2010; McGhee, et al, 2010; Poole & Rosenthal, 2011; Rogowski, 2012). Separate from redistricting and primary rules, Hopkins (2017) holds that America's two-party, winner-take-all system does elect policymakers that are more polarized and less representative of the voters that they serve.

Finally, the growth of the partisan media complex has been cited as a critical factor in the polarization of the American voter (Sinclair, 2006; Stroud, 2010; Levendusky, 2013; Lelkes, et al, 2015; Boxell, et al, 2017; Webster, 2020). Before the rise of partisan media, the public relied largely on local newspapers and broadcast television for information, which Campante and Hojman (2013) argue had the effect of moderating partisan attitudes. Partisan media has grown exponentially in recent decades, giving voters the power to curate their own information ecosystems. Levendusky (2013) shows that people who prefer a range of perspectives in their news consumption hold more moderate attitudes. Yet, most voters regularly select news that affirms rather than challenges their worldviews, pushing moderates away from the center and partisans ever closer to the edges of the political spectrum (Sunstein, 2001; Levendusky, 2013; Lelkes, et al, 2015). In a 2019 study by Druckman, et al, which randomly assigned some participants to be exposed to partisan media, the authors found a measurable increase in ideologically polarized views over those not subject to the stimuli (Iyengar, et al, 2019). Other

studies have yielded similar results (Slater, 2007; Stroud, 2010). Moreover, the most partisan voters are the most likely to access and trust partisan news (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013).

Consequences. The sorting of American politics into two camps, united by party and ideology, has tremendous ramifications on both elites and the voting public. In this section, I highlight five consequences, beginning with the impact on what voters believe and how they perceive reality within the political sphere. Levendusky (2010) shows that as an individual's political exposure becomes more ideologically homogeneous, views harden and people become more susceptible to "motivated reasoning," or filtering information in a way that conforms to one's beliefs and rejecting anything that runs counter (Bartels, 2002; Bishop, 2008; Jerit & Barabas, 2012; Druckman, et al, 2013; Mason, 2018). Once situated in this way, voters more readily accept cues by political elites (Levendusky, 2010; Druckman, et al, 2013). The most important behavioral difference is that partisans are more politically active compared with independents and centrists, particularly political activism and higher levels of voting (Fiorina & Abrams, 2009; Abramowitz, 2010; Fiorina, 2017; Mason, 2018).

The impact of sorting on the behavior of political elites is much greater. In most congressional elections, where toss-ups are increasingly rare, the real battle takes place in the primary. What is entering Congress, then, are members who are more faithful to the party orthodoxy and more closely aligned within their caucus (Mann & Ornstein, 2006; Fiorina, 2017). In a winner-take-all system, the polarization of elected officials along partisan and ideological lines does not match the range of ideologies in the voting public (Fiorina, et al, 2005; Hopkins, 2017). This has a profound impact on governance and policymaking – there is less common ground between the parties; policymakers are disincentivized from working across the aisle;

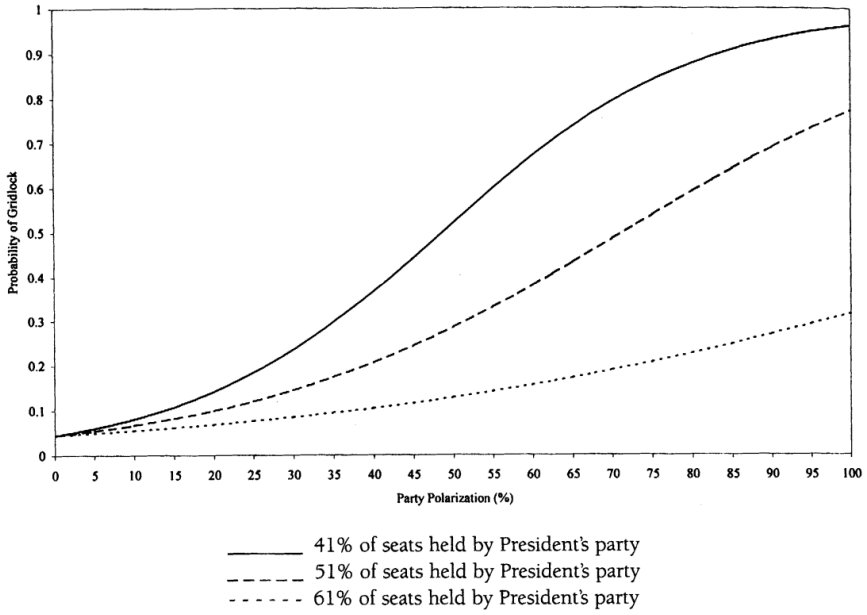
and the default position is campaigning rather than governing (Rohde, 1991; Stonecash, et al, 2003; Sinclair, 2006; Jacobson, 2013; Lee, 2015; Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Hopkins, 2017).

Second, as policymakers become more unified, congressional leadership is endowed with greater power to ensure that their caucus is disciplined in towing the party line; for example, the reduction in seniority power or changes in how committee chairs are selected (Aldrich & Rohde, 2000; Fleischer & Bond, 2004; Lee, 2015). Stronger party leaders have been able to exploit procedural rules in a more effective way to impact the legislative agenda (Lee, 2015). Today, it is difficult to get anything passed without at least 60 votes due to the rampant use of the filibuster (Smith, 2007; McCarty, et al, 2008; Mayhew, 2010; Sinclair, 2012). These are used not so much to advance legislation, but instead to obstruct and delay and send messages to voters (Hanson, 2014; Oleszek, 2014; Lee, 2016). Since 1980, more than half the staff growth in congressional leadership offices are related to communications, as PR teams coordinate messaging, media appearances, and floor speeches aimed primarily at external audiences (Groeling, 2010; Malecha & Reagan, 2012; Lee, 2015). These tactics make Congress seem even more polarized than it actually is on the issues (Sinclair, 2006; Cooper, 2013).

Third, partisan-ideological polarization prevents lawmakers from timely policy maintenance so that existing laws keep up with the times (Hacker & Pierson, 2006; McCarty, et al, 2008; Lee, 2015). And for new policy, very little is achieved absent a crisis or disaster that compels policymakers to act (Sinclair, 2006; Jacobson, 2013). There are few examples of Congress in recent decades working on a bipartisan basis to tackle a complex policy issue (Binder, 2003; Brownstein, 2007; Sinclair, 2012; Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Lee, 2016). Instead, as Jacobson (2013) argues, incremental steps and short-term fixes are the more common

approach. Even worse than slow policymaking is gridlock. A study by McCarty, et al (2008) which measured laws passed, found a correlation between polarization and gridlock, which they called "policy paralysis" (Binder, 2003; McCarty, et al, 2008). Additionally, numerous studies have been published which dispel the previous wisdom that gridlock is a product of divided government, including the data found in Figure 2.2 below.

Figure 2.2: Estimated Effect of Party Polarization and Seat Division on the Probability of Gridlock



Source: Jones, D.R. (2001). Party polarization and legislative gridlock. Political Research Quarterly, 54: 136.

The fourth consequence of partisan-ideological polarization is not necessarily bad – at least according to some scholars. When the two major parties promote ideologies that are both consistent and distinct from one another, this offers voters a clearer choice (Hetherington, 2001; Abramowitz, 2010a). And that clarity produces an electorate wherein more people are supporting the party that aligns with their beliefs – or, as Levendusky (2010a) describes it,

voting "correctly" (p. 125). This alignment may help voters produce more cohesion between all policy areas (Layman & Carsey, 2002; Abramowitz, 2007; Levendusky, 2010a). It also generates higher energy among voters and stronger ties between parties and the policymakers and individuals that support them, a fact that has been borne out by the reduction in split-ticket voting as alignment has risen (Abramowitz, 2010; Levendusky, 2010b). This is certainly not the case for centrists and non-ideologues, whose moderate perspectives are marginalized within a sorted and polarized party system. But for most citizens who freely identify with one of the two major parties, the alignment of party with ideology is a positive development.

Affective Polarization

Definition. The second major type of political polarization examined here is what is known as affective polarization. Iyengar and Westwood (2015) define this as "the tendency of people identifying as Republicans or Democrats to view opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively" (p. 691). This is based upon the notion of political affiliation not as a cohesive set of policy beliefs, but as a social identity (Green, et al, 2004; Abramowitz & Saunders, 2005; Nicholson, 2012; Huddy, et al, 2015; Theodoridis, 2017; Mason, 2018; Iyengar, et al, 2019). Social identity theory was first formulated in the 1970s by social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner. Tajfel (1981) defined it as "that part of the individual's self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 255). Central to social identity is the presence of "in-groups" and "out-groups," or the groups to which one does and does not belong (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). A vast collection of social psychology

research has found that group membership generates positive affect, or feelings, for the in-group and negative affect for the out-group (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). For a strong social identity to be present, one must have a strong affinity for their own group as well as negative feelings toward those outside their group (Tajfel, et al, 1971; Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Mason, 2018). One must also have a desire to maximize the differences, whether perceived or real, between in-group and out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Greene, 2004).

The foundational research on this phenomenon is found in Campbell, et al's *The Voter Decides* (1954), Lane's *Political Life: Why People Get Involved in Politics* (1959), and Campbell, et al's *The American Voter* (1960). These scholars described partisan identification not as a set of policy beliefs, but as a psychological attachment to a reference group (in this case, political parties) that is primarily emotional or "affective," and that this emotional bond determines how voters cast their ballots (Burden & Klofstad, 2005; Rothschild, et al, 2019). In what became known as the "Michigan Model," proponents of this perspective theorized that group identification was the central motivator of political behavior (Mason & Wronski, 2018). There remains a broad consensus that political affiliation as a social identity has profound influence on how individuals perceive and behave within the political world (Bartels, 2002; Druckman & Bolsen, 2011; Jerit & Barabas, 2012; Bolsen, et al, 2014; Duran, et al, 2017; Fernandez-Vazquez & Theodoridis, 2019). Partisanship is an attitude, which social psychologists describe as a disposition that causes individuals to react either positively or negatively to stimuli in the political sphere, such as an endorsement by a party leader or speech by a political opponent (Bem & McConnell, 1970; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1974; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981; Ajzen, 1988). In this way, many scholars consider partisanship as similar to ethnicity, religion, or gender (Green, et

al, 2002; Huddy, et al, 2015; Theodorodis, 2017). These affinities are formed early in life and persist over time, as they are fundamental to what an individual believes they *are*, and not simply a catalog of what they believe (Alwin, et al, 1991; Green, et al, 2002; Jennings, et al, 2009; Iyengar, et al, 2012). And as more identities align, as they have since the 1970s, the stronger the loyalty to that group becomes – and the farther it moves from the opposing party (Mason, 2018).

Measurements. To measure affective polarization scholars must examine both how one identifies with their own political tribe as well as the consequences of this affinity. The bulk of these data are found through surveys of various kinds. I listed earlier many of the datasets most often used: ANES, GSS, NES, CCES, Americas Barometer, and other large-N national surveys (DiMaggio, et al, 1996; Evans, 2003; Hetherington & Weiler, 2009; Martherus, et al, 2021). Scholars look to a variety of dimensions to demonstrate affective polarization, including feelings of warmth and coolness toward in- and out-parties (Hetherington & Weiler, 2009; Iyengar, et al, 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015); bias toward the out-group (Stern, et al, 2012; Jost, et al, 2013); responses to stimuli related to an in- or out-group (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Binder, et al, 2009); disproportionately negative affect toward an out-group (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2005; Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Druckman, et al, 2019); support for language that dehumanizes political opponents (Martherus, et al, 2021); behavioral measures of interpersonal trust and group favoritism or discrimination based on partisan cues (Mason, 2018; Iyengar, et al, 2019); and politically-motivated behavior in apolitical situations (Iyengar, et al, 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Huber & Malhotra, 2017; McConnell, et al, 2018). In addition to surveys, scholars have deployed experiments that yield empirical evidence of affective behaviors (La Raja & Schaffner, 2015; Martherus, et al, 2021; Kalmoe & Mason, 2022).

Scholars also look for and measure the phenomena they believe lead to affective polarization. This includes the alignment of partisanship and ideology detailed in the previous section (Bishop, 2008; Levendusky, 2013; Hetherington & Rudolph 2015; Mason & Wronski, 2018); the increase in availability of and trust in partisan media (Arceneaux, et al, 2012; Lelkes, et al, 2015; Henderson & Theodoridis, 2017); misunderstandings about the characteristics of individuals on the other side of the partisan divide (Ahler, 2014; Ahler & Sood, 2018); and the structure of one's social network, which serves as an individual's information environment (Sunstein, 2001; Huckfeldt, et al, 2004; Lee, et al, 2014). Where these are present, scholars will look to find evidence of affective polarization. Measuring affective polarization among elites is more complicated since they do not participate in the same large-scale surveys taken by the mass public. Some of the same metrics may be used; for instance, dehumanizing rhetoric or evidence of negative affect. But instead of surveys, scholars will look to public statements or documents to provide this evidence.

Causes. Affective polarization has its roots in actions at both the mass and elite levels, four of which are described here. First, as was outlined earlier, the U.S. is currently sorted along partisan-ideological lines, and such sorting encourages affective polarization because as voters are exposed less to conflicting ideas their partisan identities are strengthened (Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Brewer & Pierce, 2005; Mason, 2015; Bougher, 2017; Iyengar, et al, 2019). But ideology by itself is not enough to generate affective polarization within the electorate; in fact, there are cases wherein affective polarization has risen even as the ideological gap between the parties narrowed (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016; Iyengar, et al, 2019). The more consequential shift has been the increase in *social* sorting, which many scholars hold is the primary cause of modern

party homogeneity (Abramowitz & Saunders, 20005; Bishop, 2008; Mason, 2018). People are increasingly choosing to live in neighborhoods and engage in online communities with those from similar social groups, which minimizes the number of cross-cutting identities to which they are exposed (Oppenheimer, 2005; Bishop, 2008; Mason, 2018; Robison & Moskowitz, 2019). Affective polarization is, according to Iyengar, et al (2019), a "natural offshoot" of social sorting, even among those who are ideologically moderate, so long as they possess a strong partisan identification (Huddy, et al, 2015; Mason, 2015; Iyengar, et al, 2019; Robison & Moscowitz, 2019). This is because individuals place tremendous emotional value on the groups to which they belong, which leads to irrational trust in and bias toward the positions taken by the in-group, and a desire to preserve their good name (Tajfel, 1978; Levendusky, 2009; Mason, 2013; Goggin & Theodoridis, 2018). With out-groups, the opposite feelings are activated: distrust, anger, and negative affect (Brewer & Brown, 1998; Mason, 2013). Group members seek to maximize the differences between in- and out-groups, which causes people to perceive greater distance than actually exists (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Nicholson, 2012; Iyengar, et al, 2019). In the zero-sum game of intergroup conflict, the prospect of the out-group gaining power instills fear within the in-group, for this is perceived as a direct loss of power for one's own side (Mason, 2018).

A second cause is when multiple group identities are "stacked" under one of the two parties. Scholars have found that when people are confronted with cross-cutting identities, the psychological problems of bias, anger, and negative feelings are dampened and they have greater tolerance for opinion and group diversity, and more positive affect toward out-groups. As these cross-cutting pressures are reduced, the negative effects rise (Lipset, 1960; Nordlinger, 1972; Powell, 1976; Brader, et al, 2009). Unfortunately, the identities of conservative Republicans

and progressive Democrats have been converging in greater numbers with multiple other salient identities, including religion, race, geography, and socioeconomic status (Fiorina, et al, 2005; Abramowitz, 2013; Frey, 2015; Mason 2015; Iyengar, et al, 2019). These alignments have been described by Mason & Wronski (2018) as "mega-identities" (p. 14) and "a tribe that binds all other identities together" (p. 274). When multiple identities reinforce one another, partisans are less able to deal with perceived threats, more likely to react emotionally in political matters, and have a stronger sense of in- and out-groups (Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Mason & Wronski, 2018). They also see an attack on one aspect of their identity as an attack on all the groups that comprise this identity (Klein, 2021). Even if ideological polarization decreases, the alignment of group identities remains a discrete – and corrosive – force in American politics (Mason, 2015).

The third and fourth causes emanate from political elites. Well aware of how partisan voters are primed to receive messages about the in- and out-group, elites stoke feelings of anger, uncertainty, and distrust about the opposition to increase loyalty and activism amongst their base (Heatherington & Rudolph, 2015; Webster, 2020; Klein, 2021). Party leaders play an important role in fueling such passions within the electorate, since, as Nicholson (2012) finds, their support carries greater weight than a generic party endorsement. This tool is wielded with stronger results as each election day nears (Iyengar, et al, 2019). Messaging from one's own party reinforces voters' collective identity and loyalty to their cause (Einwohner, 2002; Sood & Iyengar, 2016). They also confirm stereotypes about the opposition and engender fear amongst voters about what could happen if they win the election (van Dijk, 2003; Iyengar, et al, 2019).

Finally, the rise in affective polarization has coincided with the proliferation of partisan media (Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006). Exposure to partisan media

has been shown to lead to increased levels of polarization, as these outlets enhance partisan group identities and reinforce negative affect toward the opposition (Stroud, 2010; Iyengar, et al, 2012; Abramowitz & Webster, 2016). Those who trust these news outlets see the out-group hostility, blind loyalty, anger, and outrage portrayed by hosts and guests as acceptable ways to engage in politics (Hogg, 2001; Puglisi & Snyder, 2011; Iyengar, et al, 2019). Additionally, when voters receive their news not just from like-minded sources but from like-minded people as well through social media, their partisan identities are reaffirmed and the differences between in- and out-group appear larger than they are (Stroud, 2010; Gabler, 2016; Settle, 2018). Bakshy, et al (2015) find that even regular users of social media for other reasons are involuntarily exposed to messages and news stories that reinforce and deepen connections to one's social groups.

Consequences. Iyengar & Westwood (2015) suggest that "partisan identification is all encompassing and affects behavior in both political and nonpolitical contexts" (p. 705). Among the masses, the most significant effect can be seen in how voters perceive political information and the behavioral changes that flow from these beliefs. It begins with a simple division of the world into friends and foes (Brewer, 1999; Klandermans, 2014; Mason, 2018). Such a black-and-white framing of our politics leaves voters with an irrational perception of both their own side and that of the opposition. These voters believe their party not only represents the correct policies, but they are on the side of the good and the virtuous (Iyengar, et al, 2012; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015). They willingly ignore flaws in their candidates and elected officials and turn a blind eye to unethical actions if they serve to damage the other party (Goggin & Theodoridis, 2018; Martherus, et al, 2021). When faced with supportable facts that run counter to their beliefs, they typically dismiss the evidence as nonsense manufactured by the enemy (Sunstein, 2009).

When their own party is in power, they place greater trust and legitimacy in the institutions of government (Iyengar, et al, 2012). What is perhaps most troubling about the cognitive processes of the affectively polarized is that the more they listen to their side the more confident and extreme they become in their beliefs (Parsons, 2010; Druckman, et al, 2013).

Perception of the other party is shaped by the same flawed cognitive processes. They consider the other side as bad and untrustworthy and a danger to society (Iyengar, et al, 2012; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015; Goggin & Theodoridis, 2018). Those who are polarized by affect are willing to believe anything their side says about the opposition, including unsupported claims and conspiracy theories (Huddy, et al, 2015; Duran, et al, 2017; Martherus, et al, 2021). Erroneous inferences are made, and stereotypes are accepted in order to fit neatly within their established narrative about the two parties (Zaller, 1992; Taber & Lodge, 2006; Iyengar, et al, 2019). Because of this, the other side is perceived to be more radical and more distant from one's own side than it actually is (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Baldassarri & Bearman, 2007; Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016; Rothschild, et al, 2019). A study by Iyengar, et al (2012) finds that when the other party is in power, voters in the minority are less satisfied with government institutions and more likely to perceive the actions of the state to be illegitimate. This "perceptual screen" has a significant impact on what voters believe (Bartels, 2002; Goggin & Theodoridis, 2018). Because of the danger of the other side, affective partisans believe that defeating them is more important than victory for one's own side (Klein, 2021).

These perceptions and beliefs pave the way for the second consequence among partisan voters: how they behave when they engage in politics. Motivation is found more by antipathy for the other side more than affinity toward their own – something known as negative

partisanship (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Klein, 2021). Fear and distrust of the opposition leads partisan voters to approach political conflict not as dialogue across principled differences, but a battle waged with anger, disdain, and hostility (Mason, 2015; Webster, 2020). The most partisan voters are more likely to use dehumanizing language to describe their opponents (Cassese, 2019; Martherus, et al, 2021). And several studies have found that dehumanization leads to greater acceptance of political violence as a legitimate tool (Iyengar, et al, 2012; Young, 2019; Martherus, et al, 2021; Kalmoe & Mason, 2022). Both Green, et al (2002) and Goggin and Theodoridis (2018) have described partisans as akin to fans of a sports team, driven by intense loyalty to their side and fueled by an emotional attachment rather than a rational examination of the facts (Iyengar, et al, 2019). They are more active than the average voter, willing to take irrational risks out of fear of losing and more likely to act on behalf of the group (Baldassarri & Bearman, 2007; Druckman, et al, 2013; Mason, 2013; Huddy, et al, 2015; Iyengar, et al, 2019). Those who do dissent from the party line or endeavor to work across the aisle are vilified as if they are supporting the other team (Huddy, et al, 2015). As in sports, there are no norms that might mitigate the irrational hatred partisans display for the opposition. The prospects for turning back from these behaviors appears to be dim as well. Individuals polarized by affect build social and information environments that confirm their existing beliefs and cause them to sort to an even greater degree (Sunstein, 2009; Parsons, 2010; Iyengar, et al, 2019). Such social sorting has widespread consequences for interpersonal relations far beyond political preferences, including where one lives, who they date, how they practice their faith, and more (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Huber & Malhotra, 2017; Margolis, 2018). According to Mason (2018), “Partisan battles become social and cultural battles, as well as political ones” (p. 60).

There are many within the political elite who fall under the affectively polarized, so most of the perceptions and behaviors outlined above apply to them as well. In addition, because affective polarization creates new incentives for elites to exploit the perceptions and behaviors of the partisan masses, they take great efforts to rile up their bases by encouraging social identification among their members and painting the opposition as dangerous, evil, and even less than human (Tajfel, 1978; Greene, 2004; Davis & Dunaway, 2016). Using what Brewer (1991) called "optimal distinctiveness theory," they also emphasize the differences between the in- and out-groups, which is important in solidifying one's self-perceived membership in their social group (Brewer, 1991; Greene, 2004). Pointing out what they have in common or working to build consensus is an easy way to lose a primary or depress turnout in a general election.

The fourth consequence is the impact these behaviors have on policymaking. To work with the opposition is to engage with people you, and partisan voters, see not just as wrong, but as evil, dangerous, and untrustworthy (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015; Martherus, et al, 2021). This challenge is described by Hetherington & Rudolph (2015) as a "polarization of trust." Trust assumes a mutual commitment to the common good and negotiating based on shared facts, both of which are unlikely in this environment (Mason, 2018). Moreover, as Iyengar and Westwood (2015) find, it assumes that these policymakers are willing to ignore the electoral perils of being a consensus builder. Instead, the relationship between members of the two major parties is typified by actions meant to damage the opposition (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). This is often achieved through the erosion of longstanding norms that have facilitated policymaking. As affective polarization worsens, additional norms are broken, with both sides blaming each other for the poisoned political culture (Levitsky &

Ziblatt, 2018). What results is a policymaking process that is again defined by protracted debate and incremental progress at best, and obstruction and gridlock at the worst.

Theoretical Framework and Methods

This study drew on two theoretical frameworks to address the problem of practice. The first relates to the role that politically appointed trustees play in the organization and governance of public universities. Importantly, a wide swath of the literature maintains that political phenomena, such as polarization, can impact public university governance. The second framework used explains the nature, causes, and consequences of political polarization. It defines partisanship in terms of group identity and outlines a set of consequences for how one perceives and acts on matters of politics. As will be demonstrated, these frameworks are mutually reinforcing, providing a firm theoretical foundation from which to examine the problem of practice.

On University Governance: Politics Matters

This study was centered around the governance of public universities. There are myriad lenses used by scholars of higher education to understand how universities are governed, and how various factors shape change that occurs within them. These perspectives emanate from a diversity of academic disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, economics, and many others (Manning, 2013). Nearly half a century ago, Berdahl (1971), Clark (1983), and other scholars advanced a "functionalist" approach, arguing that institutions of higher education fulfill essential functions within society, such as skilled labor, economic development, and social

mobility. This model, grounded in sociology, was often criticized for minimizing the issues of power and conflict that shaped higher education. Baldridge (1971) posited that universities are the "site of contest" between a wide range of actors, and that "power and influence, once articulated, go through a complex process until policies are forged out of the competing claims of multiple groups" (p. 8). This approach was seen by some scholars as too reliant on pluralism and rational choice-functionalist analyses, and a critical political model was developed which drew upon state theory, political philosophy, and critical sociology (Slaughter, 1990; Barrow, 1991; Ordorika, 2003; Pusser, 2011; Pusser & Ordorika 2020; Taylor, 2023). This critical political model recognizes the importance of power and the interplay among shifting interests (Lukes, 2005; Pusser & Marginson, 2013).

Within this vast and diverse collection of scholarship, a common theme is that what happens in the political realm *matters* to the governance of higher education. Public universities are created, supported, and regulated by the state, with the goal of generating public goods and advancing other objectives. Once a state decides whether they're going to provide public higher education and how, these institutions in many respects become political institutions. In fact, powerful constituencies have strong preferences for how public universities should act, making them hotly contested political institutions. Their activities are therefore not determined by state objectives alone, but rather political contest between a much broader set of actors.

Governing boards have been used as political instruments in this contest. They play an essential role in achieving a proper balance between supporting the vision proposed by university faculty and administrators and ensuring that the preferences of the citizenry are reflected and the public good is advanced. They are also one of the many elements of public

universities that is subject to democratic control. Every step of an individual getting onto a governing board is politically mediated. This varies from state to state and can include direct election of trustees and political appointment and confirmation by executive and legislative branch bodies. But the people ultimately determine the trustees, either directly or through their elected representatives. Additionally, the intensity and direction of contest within these spheres is reflective of the political and social environments and power dynamics of the day, which is shaped by many factors (Harcleroad & Eaton, 2011; Pusser, 2013). One of these factors is political polarization. As has been presented throughout this chapter, the consequences of political polarization are a net negative for American politics and public policy. This has been seen this in a variety of other policy contexts. The impact of polarization on higher education has yet to be fully examined.

Partisanship as Group Identity

As has been shown throughout this chapter, the subject of political polarization has generated sustained scholarly attention for many decades. Even a cursory review of the leading journals in political science, psychology, sociology, and related disciplines today demonstrates that it remains a subject of high interest among scholars. However, most of these studies are focused on a single type of polarization. The literature on partisan-ideological and affective polarization was reviewed above; other studies have focused on geographical, religious, ethnic, socioeconomic, and other divides. Focusing on one form of polarization is not a deficiency in any way. On the contrary, the work of these scholars has allowed us to better understand some of the most consequential phenomena in American social and political life.

And yet, to address this problem of practice, it is necessary to move beyond a one-dimensional approach. Some scholars have already drawn the connections between multiple forms of polarization. An experiment by Rogowski and Sutherland (2016) showed that when ideological views become more polarized, a rise in affective polarization follows. Mason and Wronski (2018) traced the increasing alignment of race, religion, and ideology with stronger affinity for each of the two major political parties. Webster (2020) saw the opposite directional relationship, with increased affective polarization pushing people more fully into their political tribes. Bettarella and Van Haute (2022) found linkages between socioeconomic regional divides and affective polarization. These – and many other – studies argue that while each form of polarization has its own unique notes, they often harmonize with other forms.

This study employed a multi-dimensional approach to political polarization. While this approach is a story with many authors, the most cogent articulation of this theory is the model presented by Lilliana Mason (2018) in *Uncivil Agreement*. Drawing on her prior research, as well as other leading voices in this theoretical space (listed below), this framework defines our present form of political polarization as a division in partisan-aligned social identities. It has been gestating for decades, beginning in the early 1970s when the so-called "big sort" started to bring partisan and ideological preferences into greater alignment (Bishop; 2008; Fiorina & Abrams, 2009; Levendusky, 2009; Abramowitz, 2010; Levendusky, 2010b; Jacobson, 2013; Fiorina, 2017). In the decades that followed, other social identities, including race, religion, culture, geography, and socioeconomic status, came into greater alignment with the two parties, creating what Mason (2018) describes as "mega-identities" (p. 14; see also Greene, 2004; Fiorina, et al, 2005; Bishop, 2008; Levendusky, 2009; Abramowitz, 2010; Iyengar, et al, 2012; Iyengar &

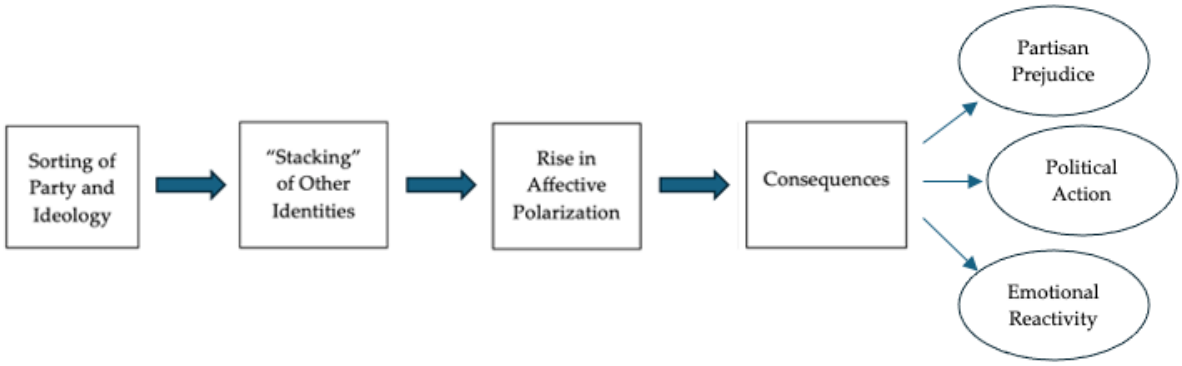
Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2015; Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Mason and Wronski, 2018; Mason, 2018; Webster, 2020; Kalmoe & Mason, 2022). As the two parties have become more socially homogeneous, partisan identity has become synonymous with social identity. This type of partisanship is best described as the "expressive" or "social" form, whereby a person's attachment is to a group rather than a set of policy beliefs (Campbell, et al, 1954; Lane, 1959; Campbell, et al, 1960; Wattenberg, 1996; Burden & Klofstad, 2005; Green, et al, 2002; Huddy, et al, 2015; Theodoridis, 2017; Mason & Wrongski, 2018; Rothschild, et al, 2019). This is in contrast to the "operational" or "issue-based" form of partisanship, where individuals choose their political party based on which one is aligned most with their policy attitudes (Fiorina, 1977; Zechman, 1979; Achen, 1989; Gerber & Green, 1998; Bartels, 2002).

She draws on social-psychological theory to explain how partisanship as social identity drives political behavior. This theory holds that humans have a natural inclination toward social group membership and a need to understand the group(s) to which they do, and do not, belong (Billig & Tafjel, 1973; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2018). Individuals that are part of a social group express positive feelings (or affect) about fellow members of their in-group, and negative feelings toward out-groups (Billig & Tafjel, 1973; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Feelings toward in- and out-groups can be exacerbated by limited exposure to out-group members and perception of a zero-sum competition (Oppenheimer, 2005; Bishop, 2008; Mason, 2018; Robison & Moskowitz, 2019). On the first, Mason (2018) holds that the partisan alignment of social identities has created "two mega-parties, with each party representing not only policy positions but also an increasing list of other social cleavages" (pp. 19-20). This means that individuals are exposed to far fewer perspectives that run counter to the

constellation of social identities that exist within their parties. Research shows that such "cross-pressures" may have a dampening effect on partisan hostility, while the lack of such exposure can lead to exaggerated perceptions of both in-groups and out-groups (Lipset, 1960; Nordlinger, 1972; Powell, 1976; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Brewer & Brown, 1998; Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Brewer & Pierce, 2005; Levendusky, 2009; Sunstein, 2009; Nicholson, 2012; Mason, 2015; Bougher, 2017; Iyengar, et al, 2019). On the second, the winner-take-all nature of America's electoral system leads many voters to view politics as a zero-sum competition (Goggin & Theodoridis, 2018; Mason, 2018; Klein, 2021). This leads partisans to approach their political opponents with fear, distrust, and hostility (Iyengar, et al, 2012; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015; Huddy, et al, 2015; Goggin & Theodoridis, 2018; Webster, 2020; Martherus, et al, 2021; Kalmoe & Mason, 2022).

This social sorting has led to an increase in affective polarization (Iyengar, et al, 2012; Mason, 2013; Iyengar and Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2015; Mason and Wronski, 2018; Mason, 2018; Iyengar, et al, 2019; Robison & Moskowitz, 2019; Rothschild, et al, 2019; Kalmoe & Mason, 2022). Scholars have categorized the consequences of affective polarization in many ways. According to Mason (2018), "Our political identities are running circles around our policy preferences in driving our political thoughts, emotions, and actions" (p. 16). For this study, I used Mason's framework, which lists three types of consequences: 1) an increase in partisan prejudice, 2) greater involvement in political activities, and 3) stronger emotional reactivity to political issues and events (Mason, 2018). This theory is visually expressed in Figure 2.3 below.

Figure 2.3: Polarization as Partisan Group Identity



Alignment of Theories and Research

These two theoretical lenses led me toward a set of pathways for the design of this study. I examined the impact of polarization from the perspectives of multiple stakeholder groups involved in that political contest, which I believed was done most effectively through the case study approach. The individuals I interviewed and the documents I reviewed provided the information needed to examine this phenomenon. And my chosen theoretical framework on polarization detailed what data needed to be sought within these resources; namely, evidence of partisan prejudice, political action, and emotional reactivity. Full details on the study design are presented in Chapter 3: Methods.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to place this study on a firm intellectual foundation, standing on the shoulders of the scholars who have examined the two phenomena at the heart of this

study: university governance and political polarization. The section on university governance covered broad historical trends in the United States, key theoretical frameworks, and recurring themes in the literature. The section on polarization provided critical insights into how the partisan-ideological and affective forms are defined and measured, and the various causes and consequence they have on American political life. Finally, I concluded with an articulation of the theoretical frameworks that guided this study, and the alignment between these frameworks, the research questions, and the proposed methods. Greater detail on these questions and methods is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Introduction

The literature presented in the previous chapter put us on a firm footing to design this inquiry. Upon conclusion of this review, I asked: What else do we need to know, and how do we find it out? These questions guided my research design, which is presented in this chapter. It begins with a restatement of the primary and supporting research questions at the center of this study. Next, it outlines the case study design I used to answer these questions. Then, it provides a detailed description of the data collection and analysis protocols. It also includes brief notes on the delimitations and limitations contained in this study. It concludes with reflections on the role of myself as the researcher and my statement of positionality in this study.

Research Questions

The primary research question of this study is*: How does political polarization impact the governance of flagship public universities?* In addition, I probed the following supporting questions:

- How do governance decision-makers operating in contested political settings describe what constitutes "good governance" of public universities?
- How do governance decision-makers describe the ways in which political actors and forces outside of their institutions shape their work?
- What do governance decision-makers describe as the most (and least) politically polarizing issues in higher education today?

- In what ways can the perspectives of governance decision-makers in contested political settings inform better governance practice?

Inquiry Design

Approach and Rationale

To address these questions, I used the case study approach. Case studies are an effective method for investigating people, processes, and phenomena, particularly those that draw on multiple sources of data (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Yin, 2013). By using multiple data sources, I was able to generate a rich description of the impact of polarization on public university governance (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Merriam's (2001) suggestion that case studies can generate the type of knowledge that can directly influence policy and procedures was especially important, as this project aims to deliver practical recommendations for university leaders to implement. The type of case study I used is known as the explanatory approach. In contrast to a descriptive case study, which seeks to describe an event or subject, the explanatory approach is used to probe how or why certain phenomena impact certain outcomes (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). For this study, I was interested in how political polarization (the phenomenon) impacts the governance of public flagship universities (the outcome).

Site Selection and Timeframe

This case study examined the impact of political polarization on governance at the University of Wisconsin-Madison from 2010 to the present. Wisconsin was selected due to its relevance to the researcher's local context (University of Virginia), in three ways. First, the flagship university in

Madison is a member of the Association of American Universities (AAU), a collection of the largest research universities in the U.S. and Canada. Second, Wisconsin can be described as a "purple state" over the past 15 years, based on data at both the state and national levels. On the state side, Wisconsin has had governors representing each of the two major parties in office for at least 40% of the time over the past 15 years. This is an important marker due to the role that governors play in the appointment of public university trustees. On the federal side, both major party candidates received at least 45% of the popular vote in Wisconsin in each of the last three presidential elections. Wisconsin and Virginia were two of just eight states that satisfied both criteria. Finally, I wanted to ensure that the political appointment and confirmation process of trustees was similar. In Virginia, all members of the Board of Visitors are appointed by the governor and confirmed by the General Assembly. In Wisconsin, 16 of the 18 members of the Board of Regents are appointed by the governor and confirmed by the State Senate.

The time boundary of 2010 to the present was selected for two reasons. First, it encompasses periods of strong party divergence over higher education at both the state and national levels. In Wisconsin, the 2010 elections ushered in an eight-year run of Republican unified government, led by Governor Scott Walker, who advocated for fundamental changes to the state's public universities. (*A timeline of relevant events in Wisconsin from 2010 to 2025 is included as Appendix A.*) At the national level, the study covers the period immediately before and after the precipitous divergence in national party opinion over matters of higher education took place beginning in 2017 (Parker, 2019; Dunn & Cerda, 2022; Knott, 2022; Brenan, 2023). Together, these provided an opportune moment to examine how – if at all – the rise in polarization impacted governance. Second, recent history offered the best opportunity for data

collection. With each passing year, memories fade, and more individuals retire or pass away. By beginning with the present day, these recollections were the freshest and the prospective interview list as large as possible. Likewise, documents are generally easier to locate the closer we get to today.

Higher Education Governance in Wisconsin

It is worthwhile to gain a richer understanding of the site for this study. In this section, a brief overview of the history and governance of the University of Wisconsin System is presented.

History of the UW System. Public higher education has occupied a special place in Wisconsin's history since it became the 30th state in the nation in May 1848. Ten years prior, the territorial legislature voted to establish a University of Wisconsin "at or near Madison." In 1848, just two months into Wisconsin's statehood, Governor Nelson Dewey approved the creation of UW-Madison and its inaugural Board of Regents. In 1857, lawmakers passed a law establishing the Wisconsin State Universities System with its own Board of Regents of Normal Schools. The first school in the WSU system opened nine years later in Platteville (Historical Timeline, n.d.).

This first phase in Wisconsin public higher education coincided with the rising interest across the union in investing more in agricultural and mechanical education. The idea that formal education should be extended to cover these fields had been a topic of debate since the late-18th century. The first green shoots of what became the Second Industrial Revolution helped make the case, but farmers were still largely resistant to the concept. As one U.S. senator from Minnesota remarked, "We want no fancy farmers; we want no fancy mechanics." (Rudolph,

1990, p. 250). Vermont congressman Justin Smith Morrill proposed a bill in 1857 that would provide public lands to each state to build universities that would teach the agricultural and mechanical arts. Resistance from the southern states, however, was high, and President James Buchanan vetoed the measure. Secession of the South several years later paved the way for final passage of the Morrill Act, in 1862. The law gave federal land to each state equal to 30,000 acres for every member of Congress after the 1860 apportionment (Thelin, 2019). Like many other states, Wisconsin decided that an existing university – UW-Madison – would receive the land grant and the responsibility of serving the state's educational mission in the agricultural and mechanical arts (Rudolph, 1990).

It took time, however, for the largely rural population of Wisconsin to warm to the concept of formal education. By 1880, just one student had graduated from the agriculture program at Madison (Rudolph, 1990). Eventually, farmers and allied social organizations like the Grange realized the benefits that more sophisticated techniques could generate in the form of better harvests and higher incomes. According to Rudolph (1990), the Morrill Act of 1862 "did probably the most to change the outlook of the American people toward college-going" (p. 247). In 1887, the Hatch Act gave additional federal support for agricultural experiment stations. These educational outposts were popular and generated more affinity for higher education within agrarian communities. Such activities were strongly supported by John Bascom, the president of UW-Madison from 1874 to 1887, who believed the university had a moral obligation to serve the state. This notion left a lasting impression on Charles Van Hise, president of UW-Madison from 1903 to 1918, and an undergraduate during Bascom's presidency (Drury, 2017). During a speech in 1905, Van Hise said, "I shall never be content until the beneficent

influence of the university reaches every family of the state" (Van Hise, 1905). This perspective encapsulated what would become known as the “Wisconsin Idea,” that public higher education should serve the needs of the government and the citizens of Wisconsin (Drury, 2017). Two years after the speech, the University Extension was created as a division of UW-Madison, with the goal of providing access to university resources and research throughout the state (University of Wisconsin-Madison, n.d.a.). This public service mission remains a defining feature of Wisconsin higher education.

The next significant shift in the state’s public higher education system occurred in 1971. At that time, the University of Wisconsin System consisted of campuses at Madison, Milwaukee, Green Bay, and Parkside, as well as the University Extension and ten “freshman-sophomore centers.” In addition, the Wisconsin State University System had nine universities and four freshman-sophomore centers. The 1971 law merged the two systems under a single Board of Regents and empaneled a study committee to determine the governance of the unified system. The merger was finalized with the creation of Chapter 36 of the state statutes, which defined the mission and purpose of the new University of Wisconsin System. Additional changes to the System have taken place over the past decade. In 2017, the Board of Regents approved the restructuring of Extension as a division of UW-Madison, a transition that became official in 2019. And in 2018, an additional restructuring folded the state’s thirteen two-year UW colleges into seven of the four-year universities, reducing the Universities of Wisconsin from 26 institutions to thirteen (Probst, 2023).

Today, the Universities of Wisconsin serve more than 164,000 students and have an operating budget of approximately $8 billion. The thirteen UW campuses range in size from

under 2,000 students (UW-Superior) to more than 50,000 students (UW-Madison). These campuses are scattered geographically across the state and include rural, suburban, and urban settings. Each campus also has its own specialties and academic programs, such as the liberal arts (UW-Superior), nursing (UW-Oshkosh), animal sciences (UW-River Falls), or polytechnic education (UW-Stout) (The Universities of Wisconsin, n.d.a). UW-Madison's student body is drawn from all corners of the state, and it contains the largest percentage of non-resident students in the system (Probst, 2023). Wisconsin is the 21st most populous state in the U.S., with nearly six million residents. While it is the 17th most rural state, it also boasts urban centers in Milwaukee, Madison, and Green Bay. Its largest industries are manufacturing, agriculture, and tourism (World Population Review, n.d.). Collectively, the UW System effectively serves the unique needs of the entire state.

UW System Governance. The UW System is governed by a systemwide Board of Regents. According to their bylaws, the Board is charged with "establishing policies and rules for governing the System, planning to meet future state needs for collegiate education, setting admission standards and policies, reviewing and approving university budgets, and establishing the regulatory framework within which the individual units are allowed to operate with as great a degree of autonomy as possible" (The Universities of Wisconsin, n.d.c). Other key responsibilities of the Board include appointing the System's president and the chancellors and vice chancellors of the thirteen universities and granting tenure to UW faculty (The Universities of Wisconsin, n.d.a.; The Universities of Wisconsin, 2024c).

There are eighteen members on the Board of Regents. Sixteen are appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the State Senate. The Governor must appoint at least one Board

member from each of the state's congressional districts. Fourteen of the sixteen appointed members serve staggered, seven-year terms (The Universities of Wisconsin, n.d.b). According to a 2022 decision by the State Supreme Court, political appointees do not have to leave their posts until their successor is confirmed by the Senate (Kremer, 2024). Regents may be reappointed. The remaining two appointed Regents are student representatives, each of whom serve two-year terms. One of the two student representatives must be a "non-traditional student," meaning they have one or more of the following characteristics: they are at least 25 years old, married, single with children, active-duty military, veteran, dependent of a veteran, or a spouse of a veteran or active-duty military. All appointed Regents are unpaid. The Board also includes two ex officio members: the State Superintendent of Public Instruction and the President (or a designee) of the Wisconsin Technical College System Board (The Universities of Wisconsin, n.d.b).

The Board is led by a President, who is responsible for committee membership and other appointments. The President, as well as the Vice President and a full-time Executive Director and Corporate Secretary, are elected each June during the Board's annual meeting. The Board also includes six standing committees: Audit, Capital Planning & Budget, Business & Finance, Education, Personnel Matters Review, and Student Discipline. Typically, the first five of these committees meet at regular Board meetings. The Executive Committee of the Board consists of the President, Vice President, chairs of five of the standing committees, the immediate past President, and one other member appointed by the President (Probst, 2023). In addition to the systemwide Board of Regents, individual UW campuses have organized a variety of advisory boards (The Universities of Wisconsin, 2016). For instance, UW-Green Bay has a Chancellor's

Council of Trustees, UW-Milwaukee has a Board of Visitors, and UW-Madison has boards of visitors for numerous units within the University (University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, n.d.; University of Wisconsin-Madison, n.d.b.; University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, n.d.). There is no systemwide model for how advisory boards must be organized on each campus.

The president of the UW System serves as its chief executive officer. Each of the thirteen universities in the UW System is led by a chancellor, who is responsible for the administration of their unit. Together, the president and the chancellors are responsible for implementing the Board's policies and managing the universities. The System administration, located in Madison, includes vice presidents for academic and student affairs, university relations, and finance and administration. The vice presidents and chancellors report to the System president. Wisconsin statute outlines the role of faculty, academic staff, and students in governance at their institution, subject to the authority of the Board, the System president, and the chancellor of their university. The role of university staff is found in Regent Policy Document 20-20, adopted in 2012. Each of these groups has the right to organize themselves however they see fit and to select their representatives to participate in institutional governance (The Universities of Wisconsin, 2015b). Wisconsin law also provides for coordination between the UW System and the Wisconsin Technical College System (The Universities of Wisconsin, n.d.a).

The Board holds seven or eight regular meetings each year, with additional special meetings scheduled as needed. Prior to each meeting, advanced materials, including the schedule of events and meeting books for the full board and each committee, are distributed and posted. The meetings are typically over two days. On Day 1, the standing committees meet in the mornings, followed by a session of the full board, which includes approval of meeting

records, reports by the Board President and UW System President, and a closed session. On Day 2, the standing committees present their reports to the full board. Meetings are typically well attended by all Regents, including ex officio members, with somewhere between zero and three Regents usually unable to attend. The thirteen university chancellors and senior UW System administrators are expected to attend as well. Meetings are open to the public, though there is no time for public comment. The Board allows for public comment through a form available on the UW System website. Citizens may also contact the Board directly or through the Office of the Board of Regents (The Universities of Wisconsin, n.d.d).

Minutes of all meetings of the Board of Regents between 1921 and 1991 are publicly available on the Universities of Wisconsin website. Since 1992, the public record includes advance meeting materials (agendas and supporting materials, committee lists, and the meeting calendar) as well as minutes from committee meetings and full meetings of the Board. Audio of each Board meeting became available in September 2004. Video of each meeting held in Madison became available in May 2006, with video from meetings outside of Madison added in subsequent years. The System's communications office provides news summaries following each meeting of the Board (The Universities of Wisconsin, n.d.d). Media coverage of the Regents depends upon the type and importance of issues covered during the meeting.

Data Sources

Creswell (2007) sorts qualitative data into four categories: 1) observations, 2) interviews, 3) documents, and 4) audio-visual materials. In this study, I drew on interviews and documents.

Interviews. Qualitative interviews give researchers access into the minds of participants who can bear witness to certain events or phenomena where direct observation is no longer possible (Patton, 2015). Interviews also work well in concert with other data sources. The perspectives of informants help us generate a richer understanding than can be provided solely with documents (Hatch, 2002). This combination also serves to increase the credibility of the findings, as data sources can be triangulated and verified against one another (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews, which allowed me to collect consistent data across interviews, while providing the flexibility to probe topics of interest more deeply as they arose. These interviews were also useful in exploring the thinking and experiences of stakeholders away from the research scene and in a setting where both interviewer and interviewee knew the purpose was to collect data (Hatch, 2002).

I selected my interviewees based on a "purposeful sampling" strategy (sometimes referred to as "criterion-based" or "criterion sampling") (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Patton, 2015). Purposeful sampling targets individuals who can provide specific perspectives of interest to the research questions; in this case, people who had first-hand insights of the impact of polarization on public university governance. It also allowed for the selection of specific "settings, events, and processes" of importance that were aligned with the research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 41). Another benefit of purposeful sampling was that it provided a valuable range of perspectives within the stakeholder groups of interest, not simply a collection of similar people with similar experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Maxwell, 2008).

I conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with members across the three primary stakeholder groups in charge of university governance:

1. The Wisconsin Board of Regents
2. University of Wisconsin Administrators (System and University levels)
3. University of Wisconsin-Madison Faculty Leadership

In addition, I interviewed selected policymakers from both the executive and legislative branches. Each of these stakeholder groups offered an important, and unique, lens into the research topic. From the Regents, the goal was to gain insights into interactions between them and both university officials and policymakers, and how these interactions affected the work of the Board. From university administrators, it was to understand their interactions with the Regents and how they approached the work of a body that is appointed through a political process. Interviews with faculty leaders were aimed at discovering their perspective on shared governance and how polarization has changed the role of faculty in that process. Finally, from the policymakers in the executive and legislative branches, I sought to learn how they viewed their role in the work of public universities, both normatively and during their time in service, as well as their perspectives on the appointment and confirmation of Regents. From all four stakeholder groups, I probed in depth what issues were most politically divisive and how they navigated the impact of political polarization. Special emphasis was given to individuals who served before 2014 through at least 2018, as that encompasses the time when a significant divergence in public opinion by partisan identification occurred.

The 19 individuals interviewed for this study were as follows:

Wisconsin Regents

- Robert Atwell – Wisconsin Regent from 2017 to 2024; appointed by Gov. Scott Walker; Atwell originally said he would not step down until his replacement was confirmed, but he eventually resigned in June 2024
- Amy Bogost – Wisconsin Regent since 2020; Regent President since 2024; appointed by Gov. Tony Evers
- John Miller – Wisconsin Regent from 2021 to 2024; appointed by Gov. Evers; the Wisconsin Senate voted down his confirmation as a Regent in March 2024
- Gary Roberts – Wisconsin Regent from 2011 to 2014; appointed by Gov. Walker
- David Walsh – Wisconsin Regent from 2002 to 2015; Regent President from 2005 to 2006 appointed by Gov. Scott McCallum
- Karen Walsh – Wisconsin Regent since 2019; appointed by Gov. Evers
- A current member of the Board of Regents, who has served since 2018; appointed by Gov. Walker *(interviewee requested to remain anonymous)*

University Administrators

- Kevin Patrick Reilly – President of the University of Wisconsin System from 2004 to 2013

Faculty Leaders

- Bradford Barham – Member of the University Committee from 2009 to 2012; Chair from 2011 to 2012

- Michael Bernard-Donals – Member of the University Committee from 2011 to 2014; Chair from 2013 to 2014
- Terry Warfield – Member of the University Committee from 2017 to 2020; Chair from 2019 to 2020
- A former member and Chair of the University Committee during the Doyle and Walker administrations *(interviewee requested to remain anonymous)*

State Policymakers

- Sachin Chheda – Executive Director of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction since 2024
- Gordon Hintz – Member of the Wisconsin State Assembly from 2007 to 2023; Assembly Minority Leader from 2019 to 2022
- Jim Steineke – Member of the Wisconsin State Assembly from 2011 to 2022; Assembly Majority Leader from 2015 to 2022
- John Nygren – Member of the Wisconsin State Assembly from 2007 to 2020; Co-Chair of the Joint Committee on Finance from 2013 to 2018
- Kelda Roys – Member of the Wisconsin State Assembly from 2009 to 2013; Wisconsin State Senator since 2021; Joint Committee on Finance since 2023
- Dana Wachs – Member of the Wisconsin State Assembly from 2012 to 2018; Ranking Member of the Assembly's Committee on Colleges and Universities from 2015 to 2016 *(Note: Mr. Wachs also served on the Wisconsin Board of Regents; he was appointed by Gov. Evers in 2023 and rejected by the State Senate in 2024)*

- A member of the State Assembly since 2021 and the Joint Committee on Finance since 2023

  (interviewee requested to remain anonymous)

Together, these 19 interviewees represent a robust cross-section of insights and experiences across a range of important dimensions, including individuals from: all four stakeholder groups; both major parties (six Republicans and eight Democrats, including elected and appointed); the system and university levels; the executive branch and both houses of the legislative branch; and the minority and majority parties. In addition, for each year covered in this study, at least three interviewees served in their relevant leadership positions – and for half the years at least eight individuals served in these positions. As a result, all of the germane issues from this study were covered from multiple distinct and important angles.

Documents. The second category of data I used was documents. The benefits that documents bring to case study research are vast, including, notably, for this study: they are stable; they are unaffected by the research process; they provide a record of officials acts; and they offer insights into the political and social context of when and where they were created (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Gross, 2018). For this study, they were the best source of data to illuminate who precisely did what, and when. Documents do have some limitations as well. They were produced for the purposes of their work, not this study, so finding data that addresses the research questions takes additional effort (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). They may also omit context that this study would find valuable; for instance, board minutes are typically brief and factual, and do not include details on board deliberations that would be helpful for this study. This reinforces and importance of drawing on multiple data sources.

I drew mostly on primary sources, including, but not limited to, the following documents from each of the four stakeholder groups:

1. Wisconsin Board of Regents
    - Minutes and Meeting Materials
    - Regent Policy Documents
    - News and Press Releases
    - Other Board of Regents Documents
2. University of Wisconsin Administrators
    - UW System Presidents: News, Writings, and Public Statements
    - UW-Madison Chancellors: News, Writings, and Public Statements
3. University of Wisconsin-Madison Faculty Leaders
    - Faculty Senate Minutes
    - Faculty Documents
    - University Committee Minutes
4. State Policymakers
    - Speeches and Press Releases from Wisconsin Governors
    - Legislation and Legislative Council Act Memos from Wisconsin Legislature
    - Other Primary Documents from the Executive and Legislative Branches

These documents are considered to be "static data" (Marotzki, et al, 2014). When necessary, I drew on secondary resources, such as newspaper articles, to fill in gaps on the people, events, and phenomena at the heart of this study. Because the targeted stakeholder groups serve public

institutions, these documents are both free and easily accessible online. For instance, each governing board has a webpage which serves as a repository for all board documents. *The full list of documents examined for this study is included as Appendix C.*

Data Collection

Interviews

Mining the recollections of people who were "in the room" can provide the sort of insights that are critical to a successful case study. However, that mining process is difficult, and success requires a well-constructed data collection plan (Hatch, 2002). Jacob & Furgerson (2012) argue that first-time qualitative researchers should employ interview protocols, which is what I used for these semi-structured interviews. My interview protocol was built with several best practices in mind. First, the questions were grounded in the literature presented in Chapter 2 and aligned with this study's primary and supporting research questions (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Second, they were respectful, neutral, clear, germane to the topic, and familiar to the individuals being interviewed (Hatch, 2002). Third, they were open-ended and expansive in order to gain as much information as possible (Hatch, 2002; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). And finally, they sought a balance between focus and flexibility – focused to remain on task, since I sat with each informant only once, and flexible to allow me to pursue topics that unexpectedly arose which may add value to the study (Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein, 1997; Hatch, 2002). *The interview protocol is included as Appendix B.*

I reached out to prospective informants with an email request and an attached Study Information Sheet which explained the project, why they had been asked to participate, and a

clear understanding of the content and duration of the interview (Hatch, 2002). For those who responded, I arranged an interview time that was most convenient. For those who did not respond, I sent a follow-up email approximately two weeks after the initial outreach. Because these efforts did not yield the desired 15 to 20 interviews, I followed up with a third email shortly after. After three rounds of emails, I was able to schedule 19 interviews.

Interviews were conducted over Zoom for ease of scheduling and collection of a reliable file to use for transcription. I began each interview by reviewing the Study Information Sheet sent in the original invitation and receiving their verbal consent to proceed as stated. I then proceeded with the interview protocol. I relied on a written script more at the beginning and end of the interview to ensure that information on important topics such as privacy and data storage was conveyed accurately (Jacob & Fergerson, 2012). For the bulk of the interview, I referred to the protocol and pre-written list of potential follow-up questions, though I adapted based on where the most relevant data was located. I remained committed to being an active listener, keeping written notes to a minimum so as not to seem distracted (Seidman, 1998; Hatch, 2002; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Overall, I wanted informants to feel comfortable that there were no right or wrong answers, that their insights were valuable, and that the conversation was marked by "respect, interest, attention, good manners, and encouragement" (Hatch, 2002, p. 107).

After each interview, I saved both the audio and video files to my computer using a naming convention of "Interviewee Pseudonym Interview Audio -- Interview Date." For instance, the audio file of the interview with former State Assemblyman John Nygren was named "D91 Interview Audio – 2024OCT31." The interview protocol, with my notes and

immediate post-interview reflections, was also saved using the same naming convention. These data were placed in my personal folder on the UVA OneDrive file storage service, which is protected by two-step verification and backed up immediately. The audio was then transcribed using the Otter.ai service, and that file was saved to the interviewee's folder using the same naming convention. Interview transcripts were then sent to the informants to provide a member check, with a deadline of one week to make any revisions or redactions deemed necessary.

Documents

Documents were identified and collected in a systematic way in order to provide an audit trail for future researchers on this subject (Gross, 2018). To that end, I kept a record of all sources used, and when search engines were employed, I tracked keywords and results. Similar to the interview data, documents reviewed for this study were safely stored on OneDrive with a naming convention that included Stakeholder Group_Document Type _Date_ Document Source. Minutes from the October 12, 2017, meeting of the Wisconsin Board of Regents were stored as "Board of Regents_Board Minutes_10122017_Regents Webpage." Documents for each stakeholder group were organized in separate folders.

Data Analysis

Analyzing documents and interviews required different approaches. For interviews, I used a narrative analysis approach as a way to learn about how informants understood the events and experiences of interest to this study (Check & Schutt, 2017). The goal was not to discover an objective truth, but instead to gain an accurate picture of informants' perspectives and how their

experiences aided in addressing the research questions (Guba, 1978). For documents, I conducted content analysis to look for specific words or concepts within the text (Merriam & Tisdelle, 2015). This was a directed approach, whereby existing research on university governance and political polarization was used as a guide for coding. The data from both interviews and documents was similarly coded using the strategy outlined in the following section.

Coding Strategy

As data collection proceeded, I began the process of examining it through coding strategy, which allowed for deconstructing the data it into meaningful parts, discovering patterns, themes, and relationships, and making sense of the data as it related to the research questions (Strauss, 1987; Creswell, 2007; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; Patton, 2015; Check & Schutt, 2017). I brought a post-positivist approach to this study, so I began with my theory, collected the relevant data, and revised as the data dictated (Creswell, 2007). Regarding the level of categorization, I sought the appropriate balance between too general and too specific (Bazeley, 2013). All data were logged in a code book, which included the name and definition of the code, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and an example. A code book is critical for indexing data, ensuring consistency, and ease of access if away from the data for an extended period (Gibbs, 2012; Bazeley, 2013; Patton, 2015). I used Delve, a computer-based platform, to conduct my coding.

Initial Coding

I took a "concept-driven" approach to coding these data, beginning with 34 codes I expected to find (Miles & Huberman, 1994; King, 1998; Gibbs, 2012). Based on the research questions and the literature presented in Chapter 2, I identified eight categories of consequences I expected to be seen in the data:

1. Governance
2. External Forces & Impacts
3. Interactions with External Stakeholders
4. Impact of Party Composition
5. Polarizing Issues
6. Consequences of Polarization
7. When Polarization Was Overcome
8. Recommendations

Other markers of polarization, or different categorizations thereof, were expected. Therefore, I had a combination of both deductive analysis, examining how the data supported existing theories, as well as inductive analysis, as new themes and categories were discovered through the data (Patton, 2015). Topic codes began broadly and were gradually narrowed throughout the analysis process (Bazeley, 2013). The goal was not to squeeze each data point into a pre-defined set of codes, but rather to get the most out of each element (Richard, 2009). The types of information coded included specific acts or behaviors; incidents or episodes; strategic, practices, or tactics; relationships or interactions; conditions; consequences; and settings; among many others (Strauss, 1987; Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Mason, 1996).

Rather than waiting until data collection was completed, I began initial coding as documents and interviews were gathered (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Maxwell, 2005). This was especially important for interviews, as notes and recollections may lose analytical value if not captured close to the interview time. During the first round of coding, Richards (2009) suggests reviewing the data with three questions in mind: What is interesting? Why is it interesting? And why am I interested? This approach allowed me to identify data of "substantive significance" (Patton, 2015). Codes were applied to the units of analysis that were warranted (e.g., sentence, paragraph, document). Some codes overlapped with one another – a strategy Bazeley (2013) calls "slicing" or "layering" (p. 144). Others in the original code list remained blank after the first round. This initial phase also included preliminary thoughts on themes or connections I saw in the data (Patton, 2015). I recorded these thoughts in a series of analysis memos, which were important to utilize throughout the study (Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 2015). Analysis memos allowed me to track my thinking as the analysis progressed, record my coding decisions, note patterns or connections, test ideas or hypotheses, highlight gaps in the data set, and check researcher bias (Corbin, 2004; Gibbs, 2012; Bazeley, 2013).

Focused Coding

Once all of the data had been coded for the first time, I organized them into categories and subcategories that reflected what I believed to be the structure of the data. I then returned to my research questions and checked for any missing data needed to address these questions (Bazeley, 2013). I then began what is called "focused coding" or "progressive focusing," where I gradually refined and resorted the data until they reached their final location (Saldana, 2009;

Bazeley, 2013). Flexibility was important to maintain during this phase. Codes and themes were expanded, narrowed, combined, divided, added, deleted, and more as I deepened my understanding of the data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Corbin, 2009; Bazeley, 2013). This fluidity, common in qualitative research, is described by Miller and Crabtree (1999) as a "dance." I kept an audit trail during this process, logging my ongoing thoughts and coding decisions to maximize the reliability of my conclusions (Yin, 2013). While this was a dynamic process, it concluded with a well-articulated set of categories and subcategories that accurately described what was in the data and how to make sense of it. This taxonomy also allowed for the discovery of patterns within categories, as the data can be reviewed by category rather than in the context of the research process (Morse & Richards, 2002). Maxwell (2005) identifies three main types of categories used during the coding process: 1) organizational, 2) substantive, and 3) theoretical (p. 97). My categories were theoretical, as they were drawn from my selected framework and other theories outlined in the literature review. I concluded this process once I believed the coding possibilities had been saturated and the data was suitably organized to begin work on findings and recommendations (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Glossary of Key Terms and Phrases

This field of study includes many terms and phrases which for which varying definitions may be found in the scholarly literature. For purposes of clarity, below are the definitions used throughout this study for eight key terms and phrases:

- Affective polarization – The tendency of individual to view opposing partisans in a negative light and co-partisans in a positive light. This is based upon the notion of political affiliation

not as a cohesive set of policy beliefs, but as a social identity (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2018; Iyengar, et al, 2019).

- Governance decision-makers – The principals of the three stakeholder groups that comprise the shared governance model as defined in the 1966 Joint Statement: 1) Trustees, 2) Administration (presidents), and 3) Faculty (provosts and faculty senate chairs) (AAUP, 1966).
- Ideological polarization – The division of citizens into two distinct and opposed political sides based on political ideology. In the United States, these sides have historically been conservatism on the right and progressivism on the left (Poole & Rosenthal, 1997; Stonecash, et al, 2003; Sinclair, 2006; Theriault, 2008).
- Partisan polarization – The division of citizens into two distinct and opposed political sides based on political party. In the United States, these sides have historically been the Republican Party on the right and Democratic Party on the left (Fleisher & Bond, 2000; Sinclair, 2006; McCarty, et al, 2008; Theriault, 2008).
- Partisan-ideological polarization – The division of citizens into two distinct and opposed political sides based on the increasing alignment of party and ideology over the past 50 years (Bishop, 2008; Hetherington, 2009; Abramowitz, 2010).
- Political polarization – A phenomenon defined by space *between* two distinct groups and cohesion *within* those groups over matters of policy and governance (Poole & Rosenthal, 2011; Lee, 2015).
- Shared governance – The principle that acknowledges the final institutional authority of governing boards and distributed authority to the administration and faculty (AGB, 2016).

- System-wide board – A governing board that manages and oversees most functions of a state's public higher education system, including all educational institutions within that system (Fulton, 2019).

Delimitations

In this study, I chose to examine a narrow component (public university governance) of a much broader subject (the impact of political polarization in higher education). This required a series of delimitation decisions, several of which are worth explaining. First, I chose governance because it is a politically contested space within the modern university, impacted by both endogenous and exogenous factors. This makes it an opportune unit of analysis to examine the impact of political polarization. Next, I decided to focus on the University of Wisconsin-Madison because of its similarities to my local context at the University of Virginia. While this was where I determined were the appropriate lines to draw for this study, they excluded many other types of schools as well as other key stakeholder groups (e.g., students, alumni, advocates) for which polarization is a relevant phenomenon, but were outside the scope of this particular project. My hope is that this will provide a roadmap for examining the impact of polarization on other institutions of higher education.

The research paradigm guiding this study also generated several delimitations. I approached this problem of practice from a post-positivist perspective, which takes a reductionistic approach with the goal of examining a discrete set of variables to test (Creswell, 2007). There are a multitude of ways to look at the phenomenon of political polarization in the United States – socioeconomic, geographical, spiritual, demographic, elite/mass, just to name a

few. My conceptual framework considered political polarization through a combination of the partisan-ideological and affective lenses. That framework led to a set of research questions that might be different from what would be used when examining these other forms of polarization. To answer these questions, I chose to employ the case study approach, which also generated its own set of methods and methodologies. While there were several options available, I believed this approach would provide the most fruitful analysis of this problem of practice at one institution.

Limitations

Both practical and theoretical limitations were present in this study. As noted in the previous section, the scope of this project had to be narrowed to a manageable size. While I remain interested in the impact of political polarization on the governance of all U.S. colleges and universities, practicality dictated that I focus on a subset of that larger community. Even as the case focused on just one university, practical limits remained – many of the desired interviewees were at the highest level in their profession, making it difficult to schedule an interview for a doctoral dissertation; those interviewed were limited in the time they could offer and the extent of what they shared to the interviewer; and, there were only so many interviews this researcher could conduct in a reasonable timeframe.

The theoretical limitations are common to the research design selected for this study. First, the lack of generalizability of findings and the inability to draw causal connections are standard limitations for qualitative research. Second, the possibility for researcher bias is a perpetual concern in a case study, one that required maximum use of methods to mitigate its

impact. Finally, while the study design presented in this chapter provides a clear blueprint for how to conduct a similar analysis in other higher education contexts, repeating this design would require a significant expenditure of time and energy since it would include identifying and interviewing a substantial list of stakeholders.

Role of the Researcher

My interest in this topic is drawn from a combination of my academic and professional experiences. With this Ed.D., I will have completed individual graduate degrees in higher education, political science, business administration, and history. Therefore, a study that examined the role of political polarization on university governance in recent history sat at the nexus of my academic interests. Additionally, I have worked at a public flagship university for more than 21 years, including at a school of leadership and public policy since 2016. I have served as the corporate secretary to the Governing Council and Foundation Board of the Miller Center of Public Affairs (six years), and I currently serve as a liaison to a committee of the Batten School Board of Advisors and as secretary to the Longwood University Trust, which is in another Virginia public university. During this time, I have seen how various external factors can impact the work of university governance.

I also support the purpose and value of public higher education. I believe that it has the capacity to improve society through the cultivation of citizen-leaders and the creation of new knowledge and innovations – both of which redound to the good of the general public. I recognize, however, that this study had to minimize the influence of my predilections for the value of public higher education and examine the research questions on the basis of evidence

and not opinion. Therefore, I utilized the following methods outlined in Lincoln & Guba's (1985) classic work to minimize researcher bias and establish the trustworthiness of this study:

- *Triangulation of Sources*: Consulted multiple types of sources (interviews, documents, and public statements) and the various stakeholder groups from which these materials were gathered (trustees, administrators, faculty, policymakers).
- *Member Checking*: Sent interview notes and transcripts to interviewees to ensure fidelity to their perspectives.
- *Peer Debriefing*: Utilized the community of peers within the Ed.D. program who generously reviewed and critiqued the work.
- *Audit Trail*: Kept an organized account of raw data, field notes, documents, data analysis, and other sources consulted and analyzed during the study.
- *Reflexivity*: Ensured, through a reflexive journal during the study, that my preconceptions did not veer into bias.
- *External Auditing*: Drew on the expertise of my capstone committee at all stages.

These methods were used not simply as a late-stage checklist of techniques, but as an ongoing learning process to ensure the quality of the study (Weaver-Hightower, 2019).

Positionality Statement

A foundational element of any research journey is the consideration of one's own position in relation to that inquiry. This requires the researcher to examine their ontological, epistemological, and axiological perspectives. My worldview includes the following:

- Ontology: I believe that there is an objective reality, placing me closer to the objectivist end of the spectrum.
- Epistemology: I maintain that the natural world can be known through empirical study. Acquiring knowledge of the social world, however, poses greater challenges. There are aspects of political polarization that are able to be observed and measured; for instance, how often a Senator votes for or against their party, or what percentage of voters are registered as Democrats, Republicans, or Independents. Other facets, such as how perceptions of the out-party framed one's approach to a particular policy debate, cannot be discovered with the same level of precision.
- Axiology: I approached this project from a beneficent perspective. This research was not simply to discover new knowledge, but instead to address what I perceived as a *problem* for practitioners at public flagship universities – a problem that I am hoping this study will offer ideas to alleviate to some degree.

This set of beliefs about the world and the nature of my research problem led me to employ a post-positivist approach to this project. While I believe there is an absolute truth, I recognize that there are challenges in finding that truth in regard to human behavior and actions (Creswell, 2007; Phillips & Burbules, 2000). This shaped my intended process for examining the impact of political polarization on public university governance. My research questions relied on qualitative data; namely, semi-structured interviews and documents, which are the most effective method for collecting and analyzing the experiences of various stakeholder groups. These data were carefully observed, measured, and analyzed in an effort to accurately assess the outcomes of polarization (Creswell, 2007).

In addition to my world view, I also interrogated my own relationship to this research problem, using Savin-Baden and Major's (2013) three-part process to locate my positionality in relation to the subject, the participants, and the research context. I do not subscribe to the simple dichotomy of the researcher as either an "insider" or "outsider." Rather, as Herod (1999) and Mercer (2007), among others, have described, I believe that the insider/outsider positioning is more accurately located on a continuum between these two ends. On this continuum, I am positioned closer to the insider end, for three reasons. First, the research topic relates to the governance of large public flagship universities, and I have worked at a large public flagship university for more than two decades. Second, I interviewed individuals that include employees of a public university (faculty and administrators) and members of their governing board. Because of my tenure at the University of Virginia, and particularly my experiences in leading, engaging, and serving on boards, these individuals were likely to view me as an insider. And third, my proximity to the topic of political polarization, both as an author of multiple books on political history, and a senior administrator in a school of leadership and public policy, provided me with a familiarity and closeness to the research topic. It should be noted that locating myself on the insider portion of this continuum had both advantages and disadvantages, and I had to remain cognizant of how my position could affect my treatment of the topic and engagement with stakeholders (Hammersley, 1993; Mercer, 2007). Finally, positionality changes over time, even throughout the course of an individual project. I am part of the social and professional world that I researched. Therefore, in an effort to conduct this research as ethically as possible, I continued to revisit my positionality as this inquiry proceeded.

Summary

I began this chapter by restating the primary and supporting research questions that guided this study. These questions informed the approach and rationale I took, including site selection and the collection of interviews and documents as my data sources. Next, I outlined the plan I used to collect documents and conduct 19 semi-structured interviews as my data set. Then, I detailed my strategy for coding these data, moving from initial coding to focused coding to saturation. From there, I noted the key limitations and delimitations contained in this study. Finally, I offered reflections on the role of the researcher and my own positionality statement. Together, this plan left me well-positioned to discover the meaning behind these data and produce a series of recommendations to help navigate the impact of political polarization on public university governance.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS & INTERPRETATION

Introduction

The seed of a capstone study often begins with an observation. The student-practitioner believes that something within their local context is not functioning as it can or should. And through a deeper understanding of that issue, they believe that data-driven insights and actionable recommendations may be crafted to address the problem in a meaningful way. Executing that vision requires a thorough understanding of the problem, a detailed plan for conducting the study, and a deliberative approach to the collection and analysis of relevant data. Ultimately, however, it is the quality and relevance of the data that determine the success or failure of the study. Sharing the fruits of the data collection and analysis is the purpose of this chapter.

It begins with a brief restatement of the problem of practice at the heart of this study. Specifically, it charts the rise of political polarization in the U.S. and the negative impacts it may have on public higher education. It then states the purpose of the study, which is to examine how polarization affects the governance of public flagship universities. Included in this section are the primary and four supporting research questions that guided this study. The bulk of the chapter is used to present the findings of the study and a discussion of how these findings align with the literature contained in Chapter 2. The chapter concludes by foreshadowing the recommendations for practice that comprise Chapter 5.

Problem of Practice

It is difficult to find a space within American public life that has not been shaped by the high political polarization present in our society today. In higher education, its impact has been felt in disputes over public funding, free speech, DEI efforts, the cost and value of a college education, and much more (Ellis, et al, 2020; Knott, 2022; Anderson, 2023; Brint, 2023; Svrluga, 2023). These disputes have often been viewed through the lens of national politics, which, while important, only tells part of the story. There is a critical gap in our knowledge of how polarization shapes debate and impacts operations and decisions at the university level. Understanding this is important for two reasons: First, public universities are politically contested institutions, created and regulated by the state to spend public funds to provide public goods. The people, through their elected representatives and the trustees they select, play a significant part in shaping the present and future of public universities (Fulton, 2019; Ellis, et al, 2020). Therefore, when that political space is polarized, public higher education may be impacted in myriad ways. Second, governance decision-makers in public universities, which include trustees, senior administrators, and faculty leaders, shape every aspect of their institution, from finance and research to curriculum and student affairs. When the consequences of polarization are negative, it creates challenges for practitioners across the university.

The debate over public higher education has seen a notable spike in partisan fighting over the past decade. This is not the first time there have been disagreements between the parties over higher education policy. But, according to the Association of Governing Boards, "this time it's different and well beyond what has been witnessed thus far" (AGB, 2024). The

rise of the Tea Party movement and their success in the 2010 elections paved the way for elected officials in Texas, Kentucky, Wisconsin, and others states to challenge the status quo (Ellis, et al, 2020; Cantwell & Taylor, 2022; Taylor, 2023). Following the election of President Donald Trump in 2016, however, a more nationalized shift in Republican sentiments against higher education took place (Parker, 2019; Dunn & Cerda, 2022; Knott, 2022; Brenan, 2023). A 2019 Pew Research Center survey found that just one-third of respondents who described themselves as "Republican" or "lean Republican" believed universities had a positive "effect on the way things are going in the country." Four years earlier, 54% in that group held a positive view (Parker, 2019; Dunn & Cerda, 2022). The areas of greatest concern among these voters were the perceived tilt against conservative principles on college campuses, which is where policymakers and activists have focused much of their attention (Parker, 2019; Cantwell & Taylor, 2022; Anderson, 2023; Svrluga, 2023; Taylor, 2023). For conservative leaders today, confronting higher education and righting these perceived wrongs is both sound policy and good politics (Grunwald, 2018; Knott, 2022; Chait, 2023).

Being the site of partisan conflict can negatively impact public university governance in a number of ways. For instance, governors and state legislatures have the power to select board trustees to serve partisan aims. Nearly 70% of public-university board members in 2020 were appointed and confirmed entirely by the majority party (Ellis, et al, 2020). Thus far, such a partisan approach to board governance has been the exception rather than the rule, though there are advocates of that strategy. Their argument is that public universities are publicly regulated institutions that expend finite public funds provided by taxpayers, so voters ought to shape, through their representatives in government and on boards, how that money is spent. In

2023, Virginia Attorney General Jason Miyares affirmed that the "primary duty" of governing boards for public universities is to the Commonwealth, not the university (Blake, 2023). Even if trustees continue to serve their institutions faithfully, there are a host of other ways in which political polarization can present challenges for the governance of public universities. Lawmakers could withhold funding unless other operational changes are made; faculty research and teaching on controversial issues could be limited or censored for fear of partisan backlash; universities could be discouraged from pursuing big, bold initiatives; campus activities could be scrutinized from an increasingly partisan lens. The list goes on, but the upshot remains the same: Polarization matters. And when something matters to our work, we must seek a deeper understanding of the causes and potential consequences.

Purpose of the Study & Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to probe the impact that political polarization has on the governance of flagship public universities, and to use these new insights to guide and empower governance decision-makers through times of high polarization. It also sought to shed new light on what, according to these decision-makers, defines "good governance" for public flagships. The primary research question (RQ1) that guided this study was: *How does political polarization impact the governance of flagship public universities?* The study also examined four supporting research questions:

- RQ2: How do governance decision-makers operating in contested political settings describe what constitutes "good governance" of public universities?

- RQ3: How do governance decision-makers describe the ways in which political actors and forces outside of their institutions shape their work?
- RQ4: What do governance decision-makers describe as the most (and least) politically polarizing issues in higher education today?
- RQ5: In what ways can the perspectives of governance decision-makers in contested political settings inform better governance practice?

The case study method was used for this study, with the case being how polarization has impacted governance at UW-Madison, Wisconsin's flagship public university, since 2010.

Findings

As presented in Chapter 3, this study addressed these research questions by examining documents and conducting semi-structured interviews with UW Regents, faculty leaders, University and System administrators, and elected officials in the Wisconsin executive and legislative branches. These interviews, and relevant documents generated by each stakeholder group, produced ample data to answer the study's five research questions. In the section that follows, the findings for Research Questions #1-#4 are presented. The interview and documentary data have been integrated rather than presented separately in order to tell a cohesive story using all the data collected. As noted earlier, this includes nineteen semi-structured interviews and more than 300 primary documents from the four stakeholder groups. All nineteen interviews are cited in this section, as well as more than 60 documents. The value that each data source provided varied, ranging from historical context and official information

to personal perspectives and interpretations of events. This author believed that these data were best presented as one coherent narrative to best fit within the case study framework.

Regarding the ordering of this section, because the primary research question (RQ1) was informed by the supporting questions it begins with Research Questions #2-#4. It then concludes with findings related to RQ1. Research Question #5 asked how the experiences of decision-makers who have operated in contested political settings could be used to inform better governance practice. Because these responses came in the form of recommendations, these data are the foundation of Chapter 5.

Research Question #2: How do governance decision-makers operating in contested political settings describe what constitutes "good governance" of public universities?

This study is centered around the governance of public flagship universities and the individuals who perform that governance. It is thus imperative to begin with a deeper understanding of how governance leaders at UW-Madison envision their roles, both from a normative standpoint and how they described it in practice during their time of service. Each of the interviews began by asking what they thought the role of their group was in the governance of UW-Madison. Most had a clear and consistent understanding of the role they played. Faculty believed their charge was to set university policy and safeguard faculty policies and procedures (Barham, personal communication, October 28, 2024; Bernard-Donals, personal communication, November 1, 2024; Warfield, personal communication, November 5, 2024). They also took seriously their role of providing faculty input and perspective to university and system leadership (anonymous, personal communication, November 1, 2024; Barham, 2024; Warfield,

2024). In this way, they demonstrated their strong belief in shared governance. Bradford Barham, who served as chair of the University Committee (UC), was one of several who noted that UW-Madison "prided itself on having one of the most comprehensive shared governance approaches to public university life, and the faculty University Committee sat at the center of that" (Barham, 2024). Faculty leaders saw attempts by other stakeholder groups to gain greater authority over university governance as an encroachment on the shared governance model. When the Faculty Senate spoke out against the actions of administrators or policymakers, shared governance was their chosen frame (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2015a, 2015b, 2015d, 2016c, 2016d, 2018). While their commitment to shared governance was strong, faculty leaders did not interact all too frequently with their governance partners. Engagement with the UW-Madison chancellor was constant, but interactions with Regents, System leaders, and policymakers were far less frequent and typically for a special reason; for instance, working with the Regents in 2015 to design a new post-tenure review policy (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2015e; 2016b, 2016c, 2016e).[3]

In contrast, administrators at the system and university levels are charged with advancing the interests of a larger and more diverse group of internal stakeholders. As a result, they have regular interactions with all other governance decision-making groups, as well as a much broader constellation of external actors, including students, alums, policymakers, and business and industry leaders. Chancellors and system presidents are also hired and fired by

[3] While the University Committee does not typically engage with elected officials, the UW-Madison faculty's advocacy organization, Public Representation Organization of the Faculty Senate (PROFS), is in frequent contact with policymakers. The UC serves as the Board of Directors of PROFS.

the Regents, which adds an additional dimension to their relationship. When asked about the political skills needed in this role, former System President Kevin Reilly said, “A lot. An awful lot. If you don't want to do that, you shouldn't be in that job” (Reilly, personal communication, November 6, 2024). He noted that one of the reasons the System was created in the first place was to protect UW-Madison from political attacks and interference by the legislature (Reilly, 2024). System and university leaders understand that to be successful, they have to build trust amongst stakeholders from all corners and build consensus on issues of importance to the future of their institution.

Of all the stakeholder groups consulted, the Regents had the least consistent understanding of their governance role. In fact, their perspectives were in many cases in direct contradiction to one another. One Regent noted how “the legislative guidelines about what the university is, and who’s responsible for governing it, are very clear” (Atwell, personal communication, October 31, 2024), while another, who served during the same time, observed, “If you look at what defines us in the statutes, there’s really not a lot of definition” (Bogost, personal communication, November 15, 2024). Some felt Regents had a lot of authority in establishing university policies and overseeing the System (Chheda, personal communication, October 28, 2024; Miller, personal communication, November 4, 2024; Thompson, 2024). Others said the Board’s activity was tightly controlled by administrators and they served as more of a “rubber stamp” for decisions that had already been decided (Atwell, 2024; Miller, 2024; Roberts, personal communication, October 30, 2024). One Regent even panned the body as little more than a “social group” (Roberts, 2024). They also differed in whose agenda they felt the Regents could serve. John Miller said they were “very, very, very cognizant of our role to really do what

is best for the University" (Miller, 2024). But David Walsh said of his decision to join the Board that he was "very close to the governor, and I saw it as an opportunity to advance his pro-education policies" (D. Walsh, personal communication, November 6, 2024).

Most Regents, however, did agree on three things: First, that it was their responsibility to hire and fire the System presidents and 13 campus chancellors (Bogost, 2024; Miller, 2024). Second, that they played an important advisory role in bringing to the governance table diverse lenses of people and institutions across the state that were impacted by the universities (Miller, 2024). And third, the System administration went to great lengths to manage their activities. Regents used phrases like "when we need you, we'll let you know," "keep them on script and show them all the respect in the world," "make sure that we're all singing from the same hymnal," and "keep you in a warm bath" to describe, with some frustration, how the Board is often managed (Atwell, 2024; Bogost, 2024; K. Walsh, personal communication, November 18, 2024). There was also a shared sense that the powers of the Board have eroded in recent years, something that will be covered in detail later in this section.

While not a governance decision-maker as defined in this study, legislators knew their actions bear heavily on how UW-Madison operates. They viewed their governance role in both narrow and broad terms. On the narrow end, they agreed that their primary legislative responsibility was funding (Hintz, personal communication, October 31, 2024; Roys, personal communication, November 11, 2024; Nygren, personal communication, November 14, 2024; Steineke, personal communication, November 18, 2024). With 14% of UW-Madison's budget coming from state revenues, it has a tremendous impact on how the university operates and the choices available to its governance decision-makers (University of Wisconsin-Madison, n.d.c.).

Legislators from both parties also said their role was not to micromanage (Pitsch, 2013; anonymous, personal communication, November 12, 2024; Roys, 2024; Steineke, 2024). Republican Assemblyman and former Majority Leader Jim Steineke's view was clear: "When it gets down to micromanaging of what the University System does, I don't think that's something the legislature should do" (Steineke, 2024). But for many legislators, public funding is not simply about underwriting an operational plan crafted on campus. It is about "representing our constituents" and "doing what they need to do to try to keep costs low" on behalf of the people of Wisconsin (Nygren, 2024; Steineke, 2024). As we will see later in this chapter, some legislators' efforts to represent their voters, or their party, often led them to get involved in university activities outside these narrow bounds of funding.

While the roles, interests, and political philosophies of these stakeholder groups varied, there was some alignment around what constitutes good governance. Specifically, they identified three markers of good governance, as well as one problem to be avoided. First, shared governance was seen by many as a positive model for managing an organization as complex and diverse as UW-Madison. Shared governance is a deeply held belief by faculty leaders, who count on it as a mechanism for inclusion, transparency, and collaboration – values they believe are essential to a healthy and strong university community (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2015d 2016d, 2018). Former UC Chair Michael Bernard-Donals called shared governance at UW-Madison "as close to ideal as I could imagine" (Bernard-Donals, 2024). This belief was not limited to faculty either. Examples of Regents, chancellors, System presidents, and others praising shared governance abound. Former UW-Madison Chancellor Rebecca Blank held that "universities run best when there is broad consultation," lauding shared governance as a "time-

tested value" that has kept Madison among the nation's great public institutions (Blank, 2015; University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2015b). Former Regent President Drew Petersen pointed to shared governance as the key to "ensuring the stability and strength of the UW System" following the COVID-19 pandemic (Petersen, 2020). To be sure, not everyone saw the same virtues in shared governance. These criticisms often centered around the pace of deliberation and the number of people involved in decision making. Wisconsin Public Radio reported that System President Ray Cross, in an October 2017 email to Regent Gerald Whitburn, complained that he was "getting hammered by the 'shared governance' leaders," suggesting that "had they been involved we wouldn't be doing anything!!" (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2018). Some legislators reasoned that authority should be more centralized in the hands of Regents and administrators to streamline the decision-making process (Warfield, 2024). For example, shortly after becoming Speaker of the State Assembly, Robin Vos asked in a public forum, "Does the role of allowing faculty to make a huge number of decisions help the System or hurt the System?" (The Universities of Wisconsin, 2013b).

Shared governance also implies that there is an appropriate balance of authority between governance leaders. A common refrain from decision-makers across stakeholder groups was concern about overreach that would upset this balance. There is a natural push and pull anytime there is shared power among multiple groups with disparate, and often competing, interests. This is more acute in a contested political environment, where the exercise of power can disrupt that balance. At some point during the period covered by this study, members of all four stakeholder groups found other groups operating in what they considered to be their proper domain of governance. In 2011, faculty leaders were furious with Chancellor

Biddy Martin for negotiating what UC Chair Bradford Barham called a "backroom deal" with Gov. Scott Walker to separate UW-Madison from the rest of the System (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2011d; Barham, 2024). Barham recalled that while the faculty was split over the move, it was the attempt by Martin, who was "not keen on shared governance," to marginalize faculty from this essential governance role that led to the confrontation with university leadership (Barham, 2024). For nearly a decade, Gov. Walker and the Republican legislature froze tuition across the Wisconsin System, nullifying the power of the Regents to set tuition rates. In 2021, System President Tommy Thompson criticized the attempt by the state legislature to "block the UW System's authority" in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic as "both wrong on the law and wrong as a matter of public policy" (Thompson, 2024). In each of these cases, the expected role of one governance decision-maker was appropriated, at least from their perspective, by another group.

The second principle of good governance involves healthy personal interactions among stakeholders. Members of the Board of Regents were particularly vocal about the friendliness and mutual respect that existed amongst trustees, even in the midst of tense political battles. Robert Atwell, who for a brief time in 2024 held out leaving his seat on the Regents until his replacement was confirmed, found no signs of animosity among members: "The Board of Regents was usually really quite congenial, even when you're disagreeing with each other. These are pretty mature people who are in a room together, and it's really hard to deplore people when you're face to face with them" (Atwell, 2024). Such positive relationships between trustees had a ripple effect on the work of the Board, who displayed none of the partisan vitriol found in other fora cohabited by Democrats and Republicans. As we will see in the next chapter,

some legislators believe greater personal interactions across partisan lines could serve to dampen the worst effects of polarization within their body as well.

Third, good governance is built on a sense of shared purpose, not governed through a partisan lens. Individuals who served prior to 2010 spoke wistfully about the days when support for public higher education in Wisconsin was bipartisan. As several of them retired from the Board, they counseled for a return to those days (Board of Regents, 2011). Even today, many Regents believe this is one of the defining features of the Board. Former president Karen Walsh said, "From the moment I joined the Board of Regents, its professionalism, camaraderie, and bipartisanship were evident" (The Universities of Wisconsin, 2024a). Dana Wachs, who served in both the legislature and the Board of Regents, observed that the Board felt like a non-partisan body because of the members' shared understanding on the importance of public universities (Wachs, personal communication, November 11, 2024). John Miller said it "was not partisan at all" (Miller, 2024). Another member, who recalled being surprised by the respectful conversations that she, a proud supporter of President Trump, had with the Democratic appointees on the Board, said, "It doesn't matter if they're Democrat or Republican or conservative or liberal or gay or straight. Everybody seems to be very cohesive" (anonymous, personal communication, November 6, 2024). Current Board President Amy Bogost boiled this down to a shared sense of purpose:

> We all really have the same goal in mind. We understand. We got the memo. This is about the Universities of Wisconsin. This is about these students that are coming here. And we want to do the very best we can. So, since my time on the Board, we've all aligned that way. Even when perhaps I disagree with some – it doesn't

> matter, D or R – we're very respectful, and I understand where they're coming from. (Bogost, 2024)

Elected officials having a sense of shared purpose on higher education policy may be an unreasonable expectation during times of high political polarization. But working in a collaborative and respectful manner to support Wisconsin's flagship public university sets an aspirational bar that most governance decision-makers endorsed.

Finally, one thing they argued that should be avoided in the name of good governance was external pressure on areas within their control. As political appointees, Regents are frequent targets of this sort of pressure, which they say makes governing difficult (Bogost, 2024; Miller, 2024). "The threat was always there," said Miller (Miller, 2024). The recent debate over diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programming in the current biennial budget is a stark example. Republicans in the legislature refused to release more than $800 million in the budget that was approved in July 2023 until the System agreed to cut its DEI programs (Knox, 2023). After an uneasy compromise had been reached, the budget was sent to the Regents for a vote. Prior to the vote, Senate President Chris Kapenga threatened trustees who voted against the budget deal (Wachs, 2024). Following the vote, Kapenga posted on X: "It's good to know before their upcoming Senate confirmation votes that several Regents chose their sacred ideology over getting our students ready for their careers" (Kapenga, 2023). He and his colleagues made good on that promise a few months later when the Senate voted against the appointments of Dana Wachs and John Miller, both of whom opposed the budget agreement (Richmond, 2024). Even after this, Miller emphasized that Regents must "have a fealty to the University of Wisconsin" and not the elected officials that can determine one's fate on the Board (Miller, 2024).

More than a decade ago, Regent José Vásquez said presciently, "The biggest concern I have is the number of instances where other external entities are making decisions about this institution" (The Universities of Wisconsin, 2013a). The attempts by stakeholders outside of the University System, UW-Madison, and the Board of Regents to influence decisions or assume governance powers is what, decision-makers said, constitutes bad governance. In contrast, a collaborative governance process, between individuals who act with mutual respect and for the good of the university, are the hallmarks of good governance.

Research Question #3: How do governance decision-makers describe the ways in which political actors and forces outside of their institutions shape their work?

Public flagship universities are large, complex organizations made up of a multitude of distinct enterprises – undergraduate and graduate education, basic and applied research, athletics, and community engagement, among many others. With an annual operating budget of approximately $4 billion, the University of Wisconsin-Madison is the target of persistent pressure from both internal and external stakeholders seeking the largest possible share of that pie and its benefits for activities that advance their objectives. Former System President Reilly once told the Regents that their role was to be the "equilibriumizers" of these competing public interests (Reilly, 2013). In this section, we look at some of the key external forces and factors outside UW-Madison, and how they shape the work of governance decision-makers.[4]

[4] Because the lines between internal and external can appear permeable at times, a definition is in order before examining the data. With respect to the governance decision-makers, university administrators and faculty leaders are clearly in the internal category. In this paper, we also consider the third decision-making group in the shared governance model – trustees – to be internal stakeholders, even if their

The Legislature. The most influential external force on the governance of UW-Madison since 2010 has been the state legislature. In fact, the legislature was cited more than all other external forces combined, including the governor. "They have complete control of the University," said one current Regent. "It's insane. They have more control, financial and whatever, at the University of Wisconsin System than any other system in the country" (anonymous, 2024b). The legislature shapes the work of the university in numerous ways, the most significant of which is through its budgetary authority. Governance decision-makers expressed resignation that, despite their many powers, their work is fundamentally shaped by the state budget – something over which they have little control. Robert Atwell said that any input the Board has on how to invest in UW-Madison is "contingent upon the agreement of the legislature and the governor" (Atwell, 2024). John Miller said the legislature was "above them all" because of their budgetary authority (Miller, 2024). As to the effects of that, Miller put it bluntly: "That budget request gets thrown over the fence to the legislature, and they completely dismantle it" (Miller, 2024). David Walsh agreed they were a "very difficult body for the University of Wisconsin System," but was more accepting of the distribution of power, conceding that "the decision-makers make the decisions, and we've got to live with that" (The Universities of Wisconsin, 2013a; D. Walsh, 2024). Every two years, university leaders publicly recognize their reliance on the state for financial support (The Universities of Wisconsin, 2013a; G. Bump, 2017; G. Bump, 2022). These leaders had to approach their requests with caution too. As one faculty leader put it, the message from the legislature was, "If you speak out against us,

professional affiliations sit outside the university. All other actors whose primary affiliation is outside of the university are considered external.

we'll cut your budget some more" (Barham, 2024). Funding levels have been a source of significant disagreement between Democrats and Republicans since 2010. In one of Gov. Tony Evers' oft-used phrases, he describes the Republican Party's approach to the budget as a decade-long "war on higher education" (Office of the Governor, 2024c).

Appropriations are not the only measures passed by the legislature that impact the university. For instance, in 2015 tenure policy was removed from Wisconsin law, prompting the creation of a Tenure Policy Task Force to recommend a new policy to the Board. In addition, the legislature also passes laws that might not be directly about higher education but nonetheless bear heavily on its work. Wisconsin's Open Meetings Law requires every meeting of a "governmental body" to be preceded by public notice. This includes smaller and less formal gatherings of members, which can be considered a "walking quorum" (Wisconsin Department of Justice, 2024). Regent John Miller said this law prevented any sort of negotiating out of the public eye from happening: "That was a difficult thing that we had to try to overcome. We didn't overcome it. You can't really have a public kind of spit-balling session" (Miller, 2024). Ethics laws have had a similar effect on the ability to get policymakers together in more social settings. Those rules required organizations to charge lawmakers to attend a dinner, which was something they had little interest in doing (Reilly, 2024). Nygren observed that after the legislature passed ethics reform early in his tenure, "people went to their own silos and didn't really talk to each other anymore outside the building" (Nygren, 2024).

Apart from legislation, policymakers have also attempted to assert and/or expand their power over what happens at Wisconsin's public universities in other ways. According to Miller, "Where they don't have the statutory authority, the legislature, to get involved, they exert their

influence and figure out a way to do it" (Miller, 2024). Another current member of the Assembly agreed: "We're really starting to see much more policy decisions writ large trying to be made at the legislative level" (anonymous, 2024c). This has occurred across a number of different spaces. For much of the period covered in this study, tuition freezes by the legislature restricted the Board's authority in that area. Board confirmations were hung over the heads of Regents by the Senate. The budgetary authority covered earlier was used as an instrument to pressure universities on cutting their DEI programming. Dana Wachs noted vexingly, "At the time that the state is spending less and less money on education in comparison with the past, the state Republicans specifically are increasing their oversight" (Wachs, 2024).

Finally, there are ways in which the legislature affects UW-Madison that are real and important, though less simple to define. Among the governance decision-makers, this was felt most acutely by faculty leaders, who were immersed in campus culture through their daily interactions with students, staff, and fellow scholars. According to former UC Chair Michael Bernard-Donals, "the legislature and the governor have profound effects on the university, not just legislatively, but also in terms of climate, in terms of morale and various other intangibles" (Bernard-Donals, 2024). Bradford Barham said that the "squeeze, squeeze, squeeze, squeeze, squeeze" of declining state support every two years led to frustration and loss of morale among faculty, which had a substantial impact on the vitality of UW-Madison (Barham, 2024). Faculty were left with little recourse beyond resolutions criticizing the budget reductions (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2011e, 2011f, 2015d).

The Governor's Office. Wisconsin's chief executive also possesses authority that impacts UW-Madison in consequential ways. The most important of these powers is the selection of

trustees to serve on the Board of Regents. After several years in office, governors will have typically appointed the majority of the Board. The political impact of these appointments may be overstated, however. John Nygren, former Co-Chair of the legislature's Joint Committee on Finance, noted with frustration that even "the most true believers" appointed by governors often "go native" once they join the Board: "They're not necessarily as helpful as I think governors would like them to be in the long run" (Nygren, 2024). Some Regents held that there was little contact or direction between the Board and the governor's office (Miller, 2024; Roberts, 2024). Beyond Regent appointments, every two years the Wisconsin governor produces an Executive Budget – the first draft of the state budget – and delivers a Budget Address which outlines the administration's priorities. Through these actions, the governor plays an important role in shaping how the state funds its public universities. Another way in which the executive branch impacts university governance is through the service of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction as an ex officio member of the Board of Regents. Notably, this statewide elected position was held by Gov. Evers from 2009 to 2019.

The impact of the governor depends largely upon whether they are serving in a divided or united government. From 2011 until 2019, the GOP controlled the governor's office as well as both chambers of the state legislature. It was Gov. Walker who led the way on higher education policy during this time. With the support of the legislature, he proceeded to cut state funding and initiate significant revisions to the model of higher education in Wisconsin, including tenure, shared governance, academic freedom, and collective bargaining. In contrast, since 2019 Gov. Evers, a Democrat, has been frustrated by the power of the legislature. The Republican-led Joint Finance Committee, and later the State Assembly and Senate, have taken a heavy hand in

altering his proposed biennial budgets. Governors may use the bully pulpit to try and impact those deliberations (Office of the Governor, 2023a, 2024a, 2024d). And they retain a line-item veto on the final budget. But in a divided government, the legislature wields greater power over the biennial budget, and therefore over the direction of higher education policy.

Other External Forces. Beyond the governor and legislature, there are other external forces that seek to shape the opinions of governance decision-makers and affect the operations of UW-Madison. Six additional factors, and their impacts on decision-makers, are listed below:

State Economic Conditions. The biennial budget process often centers on competing priorities for public dollars. But this debate is framed by a fundamental question: How much funding is even available? Chancellor Blank noted publicly on several occasions during the budget process how she understood the financial pressures involved and was "acutely aware" of the state's economic conditions (G. Bump, 2013b). Regents and policymakers also noted how the state's financial position affected the level of funds appropriated for public universities (The Universities of Wisconsin, 2013a; Nygren, 2024). This becomes more challenging during economic downturns, as state tax revenues decline and expenditures on social safety programs rise, which reduces the funding available for education, health care, infrastructure, and other large state programs.

Business & Industry. In 2015, Gov. Walker met with strong opposition when he attempted to revise the beloved Wisconsin Idea in a way that prioritized meeting the state's workforce needs. While that plan was ultimately abandoned, Wisconsin's public universities have long developed and supplied the human capital for business and industry across the state. As former Assembly Leader Jim Steineke noted, "The business community is obviously

interested in having a well-educated workforce and people that are ready to go on Day One. So, they're always kind of in the background" (Steineke, 2024). Their engagement with decision-makers is not limited to advancing their interests either. They can also serve as useful allies when partisan battles threaten to disrupt the university's work in other ways. System President Reilly told the story of when he encouraged farming leaders to speak with legislators who had raised concerns over the policy of charging any Wisconsin high-school graduates in-state tuition, regardless of their parents' immigration status. The farmers, whose businesses were in the districts of those legislators, convinced them of the economic damage that could come from a change in policy (Reilly, 2024). More recently, in 2023 funding for a new engineering building at UW-Madison was held up by the legislature unless the university agreed to end its DEI programs. In an effort to break the logjam, UW-Madison's leaders teamed up with some of the state's largest employers to impress upon them the importance of this building in serving their workforce needs (Office of the Governor, 2023c; University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2023).

Partisan Politics. What was once a space with frequent bipartisan support, higher education since 2010 has increasingly been placed on the partisan battlefield. Both governance leaders and policymakers have used colorful language to describe how party politics has affected the policymaking process: "a political circus," "a political punching bag," "petty politics," "too many political pressures" (Barham, 2024; Miller, 2024; Office of the Governor, 2024a; Office of the Governor, 2024c; Roberts, 2024; Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2024). John Miller, who, three years after his appointment to the Board, was rejected by the State Senate, said that vote was simply an act of partisan politics: "We were not provided any reason for our rejection. I was appointed by a Democratic governor. The Republicans control two-

thirds of the legislature. And that should tell the story right there of how partisanship impacts the administration of our public universities" (Miller, 2024). Both he and Dana Wachs were rejected on a party-line vote of 21 to 11 (Wisconsin State Legislature, 2024a).

The Public. Since UW-Madison expends public monies allocated by public officials to provide public goods, it is expected that the citizens of Wisconsin would have an interest in how those funds are used. University and System leaders often emphasized that their ability to receive state funding was dependent upon them having the trust and support of the people of Wisconsin (The Universities of Wisconsin, 2014; G. Bump, 2022). Former Assemblyman John Nygren argued that elected officials serve as a "mouthpiece of their constituencies," and when citizens disagree with the way the universities are operating it is the legislature that acts on their behalf (Nygren, 2024). As public opinion on higher education has diverged along party lines, this has changed the issues on which citizens are expressing their opinions. Gordon Hintz noted how concerns in the broader public have been increasingly "driven by the public's resentment of education and higher education and the perception that it's suppressing free speech and that it's liberal indoctrination," which leads traditional issues like student debt getting "distorted" by the politics of the day (Hintz, 2024).

Parents. State funding for higher education, while still substantial in total dollars, has fallen steadily over the years. The percentage of UW-Madison's budget paid for by state support was just 14% in 2024, down from 43% when the UW System was created in 1974 (University of Wisconsin-Madison, n.d.c.). Tuition now makes up roughly one-fifth of the University's revenue sources, meaning students and their parents shoulder a greater share of the cost of attendance. Parents are often vocal about their concerns over cost, something that

university leaders and elected officials have commented on when discussing state support (Walker, 2017; Hintz, 2024). It must be noted that parents are also part of the general public, so for those that are staunch party supporters the partisan criticisms listed in the previous paragraphs also obtain here as well.

Together, a tremendously powerful group of external forces and factors impact the governance of UW-Madison. This isn't simply about a dispassionate allocation of funds either. This is an ongoing struggle led by political actors across the state of Wisconsin. The most influential group of external forces listed in this section – policymakers from the executive and legislative branches – are elected to advance the vision of their respective political parties. Scholars have also shown that policymakers both affect and are affected by the political perspectives of the voters. Because of this, when polarization increases, divisions widen, and consensus becomes more challenging to achieve. As we will see later in this chapter, even if governance leaders are not similarly polarized, the consequences of polarization within external groups still bears heavily on the governance of the university.

Research Question #4: What do governance decision-makers describe as the most (and least) politically polarizing issues in higher education today?

In the 19 interviews conducted and the hundreds of primary documents examined for this study, there was a remarkable consistency in what governance decision-makers believed to be the most politically polarizing issues in higher education. The biennial budget negotiations were a throughline of most conversations. Since 2010, this months-long exercise has pitted opposing sides against one another in some of the most bruising battles in recent state history.

This fifteen-year budget battle has been punctuated by episodic fights that left Republicans and Democrats entrenched and governance leaders struggling to minimize the damage to the university's work. Act 10, changes in tenure policy, concerns over free speech, dueling efforts to maintain and eliminate DEI initiatives – these are some of the boldened dots on the timeline of Wisconsin higher education over the last 15 years. And while each episode is interesting, they cannot be fully understood in isolation. Rather than a series of fights, this is a cohesive story with many chapters, each of which builds upon the past. In this section, we use the data to tell the story of how higher education became an increasingly polarized space in Wisconsin since 2010. By presenting the data in this way, it will shed important light on how we got to where we are today, and what this may portend for the future.

The period in which this study begins coincided with the so-called "Tea Party" movement nearing the height of its political power in the United States. This social and political force was comprised of citizens frustrated with the political status quo who favored a conservative/populist vision to increase personal and economic freedom. In the 2010 elections, the Republican Party, home to the Tea Party candidates, rode this wave of enthusiasm to massive victories at the local, state, and national levels. In Wisconsin, the Republicans took control of both houses of the legislature and won the races for every statewide office except the Secretary of State. This included, most notably, 43-year-old Governor-elect, and Tea Party favorite, Scott Walker. A month after the election, the Board invited a special guest to give a presentation entitled "The Future of Higher Education in the Changed Political Environment." The overarching message: Confidence in higher education was on the decline and change should be expected (Board of Regents, 2010).

One former UC Chair noted how "fairly quickly, some strange things started happening" (anonymous, 2024a). Regent David Walsh, who was appointed by Walker's predecessor, Jim Doyle, had a simpler assessment: "Walker became the governor, and he just didn't like the University" (D. Walsh, 2024). On March 11, little more than two months into his term, Walker signed Wisconsin Act 10 into law. A key component of that law, which had been introduced just weeks earlier, cut public employees' right to collective bargaining (Wisconsin Legislative Council, 2011a). "That was an attack on staff, which are important to the University," former UC Chair Terry Warfield said (Warfield, 2024). Deliberations around the bill became so heated that all 14 Democratic members of the State Senate made the unprecedented move to leave Wisconsin to prevent a quorum from voting on the bill. The legislators remained in neighboring Illinois for three weeks before Republicans found a way to overcome their opposition. Former Assembly Minority Leader Gordon Hintz observed that Act 10 inflicted wounds within both caucuses that never fully healed: "You went from having the Democrats in Wisconsin control the governor and both houses to big Republican majorities and a Republican governor. And then you had Act 10. … And because it did impact higher education, the divisiveness and the resentment and the animosity and the sort of, *you're with us or against us*, that's really where things started getting bad" (Hintz, 2024). Years later, when Robert Atwell joined the Board, he said the reverberations of Act 10 were still being felt: "Even in 2017, the wounded were still laying, dead bodies were all over, and the hard feelings never dissipated" (Atwell, 2024).

The fight over Act 10 coincided with the first biennial budget negotiation under the Walker administration. Part of the Governor's budget proposal included support for separating

UW-Madison from the rest of the Wisconsin System, making it a "public authority" with some of the increased financial and operational flexibilities that university leaders had long sought. The move had all the makings of a successful deal. In addition to Walker's support, System President Reilly told the Regents, "This Governor gets it," and described the proposal as "a way forward that is simple, reasonable, and equitable" (The Universities of Wisconsin, 2011). UW-Madison Chancellor Biddy Martin concurred, saying it would "give us greater ability to preserve our strengths and remain one of the nation's great public flagships" (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2011b). And the chair of the UC estimated that the faculty was split 50-50 on the idea (anonymous, 2024a). In fact, the Faculty Senate adopted statements in February and May of 2011 indicating support for greater flexibility and articulating principles to guide the negotiations with the state government (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2011a; University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2011c). But Republicans on the Board and in the legislature were tepid on the move, concerned that giving the flagship independence would hurt the universities that remained in the System (anonymous, 2024a; Barham, 2024). Moreover, the proposal was largely crafted by the Governor and Chancellor, which faculty said ignored the spirit of shared governance (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2011d; Warfield, 2024). UC Chair Barham said the faculty leadership only found out about the proposal through "back circles," which led to a confrontation with university administration:

> We marched up to the legal aid office of the Chancellor and said, "Show us the document. No. Show us the document. We're the Executive Committee of the Faculty Senate. This change will not go through the university without a vote of the Faculty Senate. And if you don't give us the document, we will call for a vote

> of no confidence. And we will start moving." I mean, we had to be direct, because she was operating way out there already. And so she released it. And somehow it had no chapter on shared governance in it. So, you had a whole new document, and shared governance had also been just tossed out the window. So, we were like, "Uh, okay, we're on." (Barham, 2024)

Barham held that the faculty was not necessarily going to oppose the idea, just that they required a deliberate vetting with all stakeholders involved. The proposal was eventually withdrawn, and in June, less than three years into the job, Martin resigned to become the president of Amherst College.

The next partisan battle came just a few months later. In August 2011, Walker signed Wisconsin Act 43, which enacted the state's legislative redistricting plan based on the 2010 Census (Wisconsin Legislative Council, 2011b). Critics argued that these were heavily gerrymandered to give the Republican Party nearly veto-proof majorities in both chambers of the legislature, despite the fact that total votes across the state were often split more evenly between the parties. In 2018, for example, Democrats won a majority of the total votes cast yet ended up with just over one-third of the seats in the Assembly (Balz, 2021). There is evidence at the national level that as congressional districts become more homogeneous, more ideologically extreme candidates are elected (Stonecash, et al, 2003; Hirsch, 2005; Layman, et al, 2006; Carson, et al, 2007; Theriault & Rohde, 2011). Dan Balz of the *Washington Post* wrote that Act 43 reshaped Wisconsin not as a purple state, but as "two states in one – the first comprising a few heavily populated blue enclaves and the second a red sea of rural, small-town, and suburban geography that surrounds those blue pockets" (Balz, 2021). This was sure to impact how

legislators felt about public universities (anonymous, 2024c; Chheda, 2024). Dana Wachs contended that "the way they had gerrymandered Wisconsin, they have pools of folks that hate education" (Wachs, 2024). UC Chair Terry Warfield said it led to "twelve long years of just constant attack on the University" (Warfield, 2024). It would not be until 2024 when, following a state Supreme Court decision, Republicans agreed to support new voting maps. Some wondered how different funding levels would have been during this period had the maps been what they are today (Barham, 2024; Chheda, 2024). Sachin Chheda, the Executive Director in Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction, pointed to the political profiles of the districts drawn by the 2011 maps as a principal cause not just of lower funding, but of broader partisanship on all aspects of higher education: "All these things are profoundly affected by the fact that these things have all become more political and more polarized than they had been historically" (Chheda, 2024).

Less than a year into his governorship, driven largely by the fight over Act 10, a recall effort began, and in March of 2012 Walker's opponents secured enough support to force a recall election for that summer (Walker ultimately survived the threat, defeating Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, 53% to 47%). Partisan battle heightened again in the spring during the negotiations over the state's next two-year budget. These negotiations got off to a relatively smooth start. In February 2013, the Governor's Office proposed a $181 million increase in funding for the UW System, and a month later the announcement of U.S. Commerce Secretary Rebecca Blank to serve as Chancellor of UW-Madison was well-received. But in May, it was reported that the school had $1.35 billion in cash, including nearly $650 million in unrestricted reserve funds, of which state policymakers were unaware. In response, the state enacted a two-year tuition freeze

and reduced the earlier proposed budget increase to a $66 million reduction. Blank admitted that the university had lost credibility with the legislature as a result and promised greater transparency on budget matters (G. Bump, 2013a; G. Bump, 2013b). John Nygren said this episode created a lot of distrust between the System and policymakers and made the latter hesitant to accept the "pleas of poverty" coming from the state's public universities every budget cycle (Nygren, 2024).

The next biennial budget process took place during what could be considered the highwater mark of Republican control over Wisconsin higher education. A few months earlier, Walker was reelected to a second term as governor, and Republicans expanded their majorities in both houses of the state legislature. In addition, a majority of Regents were now Walker appointees. Working from a strong position, Walker took aim at some of the most cherished pillars of the academy: tenure, shared governance, and academic freedom. Wisconsin was an outlier in that tenure protections were part of state law. Some conservative lawmakers, including Walker, who called tenure an "outdated" concept, thought it prevented universities from cutting programs that were losing money (Office of the Governor, 2016). University scholars and administrators countered that tenure was essential for protecting academic freedom, which is critical to building a strong research agenda and attracting outstanding faculty (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2015d; anonymous, 2024a; Warfield, 2024). Following its removal from state statute, each public university was tasked with creating their own tenure guidelines to be adopted as Board policy. The Board approved these new guidelines in March 2016, but not without significant damage to relations between the various governance decision-makers (Board of Regents, 2016; University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2016a, 2016c). UC

Chair Bernard-Donals said, "There were three or four years of dust that needed to settle and some Board members to cycle off before we fully trusted the Board again" (Bernard-Donals, 2024). UW-Madison faculty advocated for proposals that were ultimately rejected by the Board. During that process, they felt undermined by System leadership, who they argued "flagrantly violat[ed] local faculty governance by suggesting revisions to the Board without faculty consultation" (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2016c). In May 2016, the Faculty Senate passed a vote of no confidence in System President Ray Cross for leading "a weakening of these traditions and engag[ing] in practices that fall short of principles of responsible governance" (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2016c, 2016d).

In the 2018 statewide elections, Gov. Walker was defeated in his reelection bid, 49.5% to 48.4%, by Tony Evers. Democrats also held the Secretary of State and flipped the other three statewide offices, giving them full control of the executive branch. However, the numbers barely moved in the legislature. And the strong Republican majorities in both chambers, coupled with a Board of Regents comprised entirely of Walker appointees, set up a challenging new era of divided government. As it had under Walker, the biennial budget negotiations continued to be a point of contention between the two parties. In Evers' first inaugural, when discussing the upcoming budget proposal, he laid an important marker: "To no one's surprise, it begins—as it always has for me—with education" (Office of the Governor, 2019). What Evers lacked, however, was a legislature led by his own party.

Republican and Democratic legislators held differing views about how the budgets have been crafted during the Evers years. Republican Jim Steineke believes they have landed somewhere in the middle: "Governor Evers has consistently advocated during his time as

governor for pretty significant increases. And Republicans in the legislature typically knock those down a bit" (Steineke, 2024). In contrast, Democratic Senator Kelda Roys says the GOP still controls the process: "The Governor puts out what he thinks the budget should be by himself and the Republicans on the Joint Finance Committee decide in the closed room what they're going to do. And they send it to him and he signs it and vetoes the stuff that he thinks he can veto. So, we end up with, functionally, mostly Republican budgets" (Roys, 2024).

Many of the flashpoints during this time were more ideological than economic. In October 2019, the Board of Regents voted to amend its policy to enact stronger punishments for students who restrict campus speech after Republican legislators introduced a similar bill in the Assembly (Board of Regents, 2019). This had been a divisive issue since the fall of 2017 when the Board first approved a policy to punish students who disrupt controversial speakers (Board of Regents, 2017). The 2019 policy was opposed by Gov. Evers and Edmund Manydeeds, who was appointed by Evers five months earlier (Board of Regents, 2019). In June 2020, when University of Alaska President James Johnson withdrew as the only finalist for the System presidency, Speaker Vos blamed "leftist liberals" for driving him away from Madison (Redman, 2020). Longtime Wisconsin Governor, Republican Tommy Thompson, then took over as interim System President, but his response to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly on masking and testing, was met with skepticism and ire from leaders in his own party. In May 2022, after Jennifer Mnookin was selected as the next chancellor of UW-Madison, a long list of statewide Republican leaders criticized the move, including Speaker Vos, two gubernatorial candidates, and former Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch, who called Mnookin a "woke radical" who wants to "force-feed liberal ideology" to Madison's students (Zahneis, 2022).

The most recent – and, arguably, the most contentious – battle was the fight over DEI programming. It should be remembered that race was a critical driver of the sorting of party and ideology beginning in the 1960s, as the two major parties took opposite views on race-related issues (Carmines & Stimson, 1986; Poole & Rosenthal, 1997; Abramowitz, 2010; Lee, 2015; Mason, 2015). Abramowitz & Webster (2018) contend that "the single most important factor underlying the rise of negative partisanship has been the growing racial divide between supporters of the two parties" (p. 123). And in Wisconsin today, there are considerable differences between Republican and Democratic voters on issues of race (Center for Communication and Civil Renewal, 2023). In 2021, System President Thompson praised DEI efforts and promised to "keep equity, diversity, and inclusion at the forefront of our work" (The Universities of Wisconsin, 2021a). But by 2023, the politics had shifted. That year, the Wisconsin legislature held up more than $800 million in pay raises, capital projects, and other mission-critical investments for nearly six months while lawmakers struggled to reach resolution on whether DEI programs should continue. During that time, Gov. Evers sued the legislature for blocking pay raises for university employees while allowing them for other state workers (Office of the Governor, 2023b). Even with the compromise budget reached in December 2023, the battle continued. On the day of the vote, several Regents and university chancellors pledged to maintain and improve DEI programs (Board of Regents, 2023). And Evers said he would "make damn sure" that the objectives of these programs continued despite the budget agreement (Office of the Governor, 2023d). The appointments of Regents Miller and Wachs were rejected by the Senate in March 2024. Ironically, one of the main reasons the two Board members did not support the compromise budget was because they believed it would set a bad

precedent for legislative involvement in non-budgetary matters (Board of Regents, 2023). Two months later, Assembly Republicans voted to audit the use of DEI programs in all state agencies, which allowed the Legislative Audit Bureau to review "the procedures by which decisions are made and priorities are set in the UW System" and "the manner in which such decisions and priorities are implemented" (Wisconsin State Legislature, 2024b). In the November statewide elections, Democrats closed the gap from 29 seats to nine in the Assembly and from 11 seats to three in the Senate. Evers has already signaled his intention to propose the largest-ever budget increase in higher education for the 2025-2027 state budget (Office of the Governor, 2024d). And in the early weeks of the second Trump presidency, nearly anything bad that happens is instinctively blamed by the administration on DEI. Together, these signs portent continued partisan battle over higher education in Wisconsin – and a need for continued management of the fallout by university leaders.

This research question examined what governance decision-makers considered the most polarizing issues in higher education. A full account of this period is a much longer and richer story. The objective, however, was not to provide a comprehensive account, but to demonstrate the connectivity between individual instances of polarization shaping public higher education in Wisconsin. In addition, it highlights the dual impacts of national and local issues. Since 2017, as higher education has become more of a partisan issue, these effects have been seen in Wisconsin. But local context – from Act 10 to new legislative maps to state economic conditions to the personalities in the University, the System, the Board, and the state government – also matters. It is essential that we retain this lens as we shift in the next section to the primary research question.

Research Question #1: How does political polarization impact the governance of flagship public universities?

Based on the previous three sections, we now know what decision-makers think constitutes good governance, what external forces and factors impact governance and how, and what they believe have been the most polarizing issues in higher education since 2010. We are now equipped to address the issue at the heart of this study: How political polarization impacts the governance of public flagship universities.

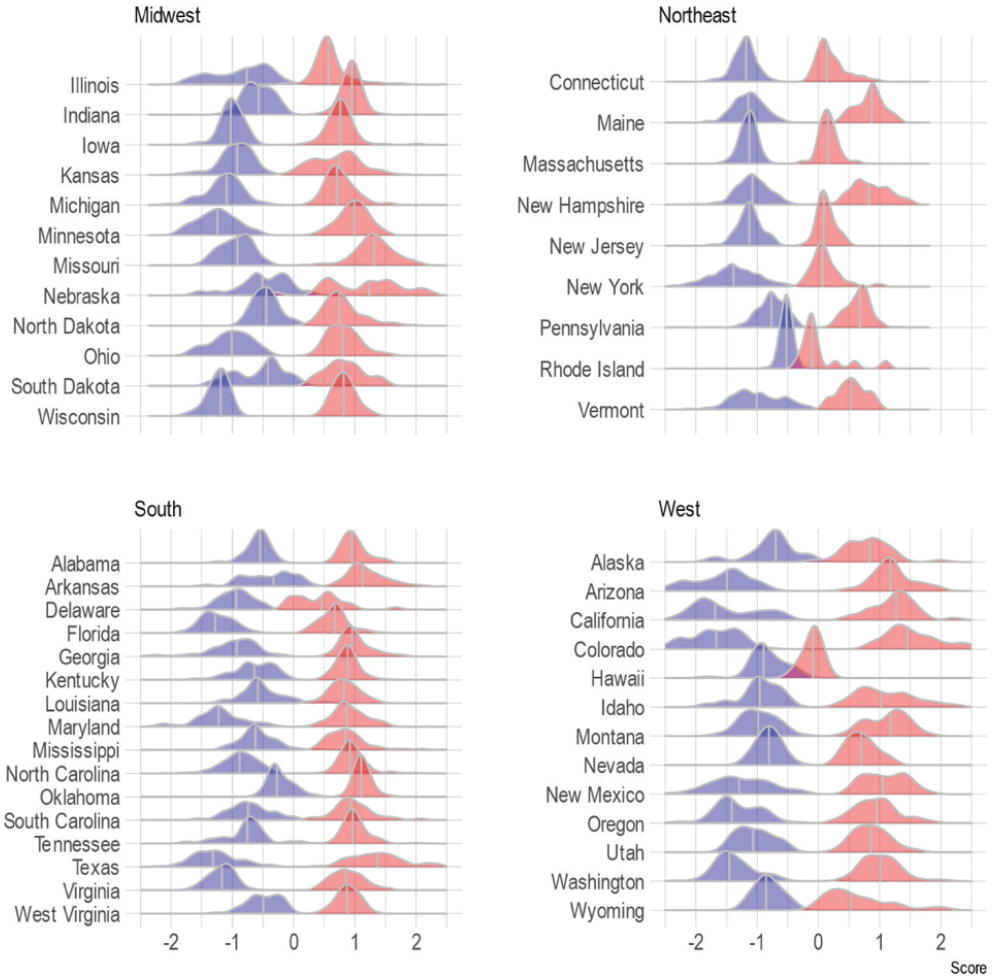
The interviews and documents affirmed two central points presented earlier in this paper. First, political polarization exists. Interviewees framed this in a variety of ways, including "the modern polarization of Democrats and Republicans," "an era of political polarization," "this incredibly partisan, incredibly toxic political environment," "polarization that has kind of put people in their camps," and "shockingly little bipartisanship," among other descriptors (anonymous, 2024c; Barham, 2024; Bernard-Donals, 2024; Nygren, 2024; Roys, 2024). And second, polarization in higher education has been on the rise in Wisconsin since 2010. Said former System President Reilly: "The universities got caught in the overall divisiveness of the country. And we've had people, unfortunately for their own political purposes, just making that worse and worse in the last ten years or so. It was starting when I was there, but it's gotten a lot worse since. So, we're just kind of caught up in that partisan divide now" (Reilly, 2024). Former Chancellor Blank agreed that higher education had moved from a topic of consensus to one of confrontation: "Where we once were a nation with high bipartisan support for higher education and particularly public higher education, we are now a nation deeply divided along political lines" (G. Bump, 2022). Regents, policymakers, and faculty leaders had their own assortment of

ways to describe the same thing – that polarization over higher education has gotten worse in Wisconsin (Atwell, 2024; Barham, 2024; Chheda, 2024; Hintz, 2024; Wachs, 2024).

The numbers tell a similar story. Three years ago, Gov. Evers and Senator Ron Johnson won reelection with just 51.1% and 50.4% of the vote, respectively. And in each of the last three presidential elections, the winner secured the state by less than a 1% margin – a far cry from Bill Clinton's double-digit win in 1996 and Gov. Tommy Thompson's whopping 36-point victory in 1994. The Wisconsin legislature has moved along a similar trendline. A study by Shor and McCarty (2022) that tracked the difference in median ideal points between parties found that state legislatures across the country, including in Wisconsin, have become more polarized over the past two decades, matching the national trend. As Figure 4.1 illustrates, the polarization in Wisconsin is among the starkest in the nation, with the two parties far apart and the median ideal points tightly clustered (Shor & McCarty, 2022). Prior to the 2022 elections, NBC's Chuck Todd said Wisconsin was the "most polarized" state in America and wondered if it was "patient zero" that would spread polarization to other states in the union (Powers & Larry, 2022). Anthony Chergosky, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin-La Cross, agreed: "Polarization and partisan brinksmanship are nationwide trends," Chergosky said, "but those trends are uniquely severe in Wisconsin" (Greenblatt, 2023). With that stipulated, we are well-positioned to examine what our interviews and the documents revealed about how polarization has impacted governance at UW-Madison. One of the key findings from this study is that while polarization exists and is on the rise, it has not been even across stakeholder groups. In fact, governance decision-makers demonstrated little signs of partisan affect. Interactions within and between groups of decision-makers were generally collegial, even aspirational, as in the case of

the Regents. Just because governance decision-makers were not polarized, however, one should not interpret this as meaning that polarization did not impact governance. We defined in Chapter 2 how governance is about the ways in which institutions are formally organized and managed, and how participants interact with each other, create policies, and make decisions. There is a great deal of activity external to trustees, faculty leaders, and university administrators that can affect those interactions, policies, and decisions. In the interviews and documents, there was ample evidence of partisanship among state policymakers and the

Figure 4.1: Legislator level ideal point densities, 2022



Source: Shor, B., and McCarty, N. (2022). Two decades of polarization in American state legislatures. Journal of Political Institutions and Political Economy, 3: 351.

broader citizenry. While these groups are not governance decision-makers, their actions nonetheless bear heavily on the work of those leaders. These impacts will be detailed later in the chapter.

How do we locate the impacts of polarization on the governance of UW-Madison? It begins with a restatement of how political polarization is defined and what is considered evidence of its existence. This study holds that the form of polarization present in the U.S. today is *affective polarization*, which Iyengar and Westwood (2015) define as "the tendency of people identifying as Republicans or Democrats to view opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively" (p. 691). To measure affective polarization, scholars look at these party identities in tandem with various psychological and behavioral outcomes (Bartels, 2002; Druckman & Bolsen, 2011; Jerit & Barabas, 2012; Bolsen, et al, 2014; Duran, et al, 2017; Fernandez-Vazquez & Theodoridis, 2019). These outcomes can be organized into three broad categories: 1) Perceptions, 2) Behaviors, and 3) Policymaking & Governance. In the section that follows, the negative effects in these three categories found in the data are presented. In the Discussion section later in the chapter, this evidence will be connected to the literature on affective polarization.

Perceptions. Affective polarization causes individuals to perceive things in the political world in black and white terms. Gordon Hintz said there were really just two choices for policymakers in the Assembly: "You're with us or against us" (Hintz, 2024). Being "against us" wasn't just a matter of being on the opposite side of a policy debate either. "We're the enemy to them," recalled Dana Wachs (Wachs, 2024). The simple us-versus-them dichotomy was the lens through which many saw the debates over free speech and ideology on campus. This

perception was aided by the fact that Madison, the deep blue capital city on the southern end of Wisconsin, was different from much of the rest of the state, which is predominantly rural and conservative. In *The Politics of Resentment*, Katherine Cramer asserted that the identity from these rural parts of the state – what she called a "rural consciousness" – drove much of the polarization of this period and led to the political success of Gov. Walker and the Republican Party (Cramer, 2016). UW-Madison was mocked from the right as a campus for liberal, lazy professors who were more focused on developing the next generation of progressive leaders (Barham, 2024; Bernard-Donals, 2024; Bogost, 2024; Miller, 2024). The message to voters, according to Hintz, was "those aren't our constituencies anymore" (Hintz, 2024). Bradford Barham went a step farther, arguing that it was "the strategy of the state and national Republican Party to identify public institutions as the bad guys" (Barham, 2024). For individuals who hold that perception, policy becomes increasingly viewed as a zero-sum game. And in cases where a zero-sum actually exists, like the biennial state budget negotiations, the stakes can feel higher in a polarized environment. Those voters were told, "They just want money from your taxes, and you don't get anything back" (Barham, 2024). Such a frame makes it harder for people not directly engaging with a public university to understand the statewide benefits (Hintz, 2024). As we will see later in the chapter, this has real consequences on the ability of governance leaders to garner bipartisan support for higher education.

It wasn't just that each side was entrenched in their positions. They appeared to have strongly divergent opinions of the reality of each situation as well. Hintz noted that in his interactions across the aisle, he felt like he was "never dealing with the same set of facts" (Hintz, 2024). When presented with information that may go against their preconceived notions,

partisans often treated it with skepticism or avoided it altogether (Chheda, 2024). Regent David Walsh recounted a time when he met with a senior member of the Assembly to discuss an economic study conducted on the public universities. The lawmaker cut him off immediately, saying, "I don't want to hear about it" (D. Walsh, 2024). The System's management of the COVID-19 crisis provided many instances of this sort of thinking. Karen Walsh, who served as both vice president and president of the Board of Regents during the pandemic, recounted some of the criticism System President Tommy Thompson received on the efficacy of masking and the broader response to the health crisis. She described how "no one was above suspicion" and that there was a great deal of mistrust from lawmakers, university employees, and the general public (The Universities of Wisconsin, 2021b; K. Walsh, 2024).

Finally, there was evidence of governance leaders painting their political opponents in terms that were inaccurate and more extreme than their actual positions. Conservativism was described in the interviews not as a competing political theory, but as "anti-intellectual," "anti-education," and an ideology that "disdains expertise" (Bernard-Donals, 2024; Chheda, 2024; Hintz, 2024). Scholars were also frequently stereotyped as liberal, elitist, and "woke," among other slights (Barham, 2024; Bogost, 2024; Hintz, 2024; Miller, 2024). A prime example is the aforementioned comment by former Lt. Gov. Kleefisch describing Chancellor Mnookin as a "woke radical" (Zahneis, 2022).

Behaviors. The ways in which individuals perceive political information bears heavily on how they act on that information. Interviewees from across the governance decision-making groups noted the pervasive distrust they felt in their interactions with leaders from across the political divide, and how it has become more challenging for people to trust the other party as

polarization has risen (anonymous, 2024a; Nygren, 2024; Reilly, 2024; Warfield, 2024). Former Assembly Majority Leader Jim Steineke described the distrust that Democratic members in his chamber felt toward his party:

> The minority party always thought we were up to something. They always had their suspicions that there was some kind of grand scheme behind the scenes that was going to play out, and they got no idea about it. I think the reality is somewhat different than that. Obviously, there's things that both sides kind of keep to themselves until the time is right. But I think for the most part, a lot of that stuff is more black helicopter thinking than anything else. (Steineke, 2024)

This distrust on the part of governance leaders was not conjured out of thin air either. From faculty leaders being excluded from talks about splitting UW-Madison from the System, to policymakers being surprised by hundreds of millions in reserve funds, to Regents being left unconfirmed by the Senate for multiple years – they had real events to justify at least some misgiving. But these emotions were exacerbated by affective polarization. These emotions impacted governance as well. As an example, UC Chair Michael Bernard-Donals suggested that university leaders' fear of the legislature's budgetary power led them to take a too-cautious approach: "It's had a dampening effect, I think, on some of the more forward-looking policy making, around freedoms in the classroom, around diversity, that we might otherwise want to champion, because we see the good of it, but we don't want to piss somebody off so much that they're going to cut us by another $200 million" (Bernard-Donals, 2024). There were also some who believed that an environment built on fear and distrust was the goal rather than a feature.

Barham opined that the legislature preferred "to sow distrust in order to stay in power and keep things polarized and keep their fear running their show" (Barham, 2024).

Sometimes this fear and distrust bred hostility and animosity between the two sides. "Hatred would be a fairly good descriptor of that," said Dana Wachs. "They hate each other. … Some of it is just flat out punitive" (Wachs, 2024). This, coupled with the feelings of fear and distrust mentioned above, led to interactions that were commonly hostile and antagonistic. Nearly everyone interviewed for this study recounted stories of animosity between partisans. Robert Atwell described how disagreement became the standing order: "There's a dynamic in Wisconsin where if this guy's for it, that guy's got to be against it. If that guy's for it, this guy's got to be against it" (Atwell, 2024). "Everything's a fight," Sachin Chheda agreed (Chheda, 2024). One current member of the Assembly told the story of trying to engage with members across the aisle early in their tenure to see if there might be areas in which they could work together: "The response I got was, 'Well, you better watch it. We're coming for your seat'" (anonymous, 2024c).

A notable dynamic in American politics is that hostility between parties is not seen in the same light as division between other social groups. Worse than simply being acceptable, there is a belief that it is beneficial to govern from the poles rather than in the middle. For nearly the entirety of this study, Wisconsin's legislative districts were contested under the 2011 maps, which created strong Republican and Democratic seats. These are the kinds of districts that punish those who stray from the party orthodoxy. Regent John Miller claimed this is what happened in March 2024 when the Senate voted down his appointment to the Board: "They were playing to their base, and it works for them" (Miller, 2024). In recent years, that base has

included a lower percentage of college graduates. “I think that's increasingly sharpened opinions of lawmakers as they follow their constituencies in terms of what higher education is all about,” said Hintz (Hintz, 2024). As a result, policymakers often sought out opportunities to emphasize the differences between the two sides. The reaction by Speaker Vos to the selection of Chancellor Mnookin is an example of emphasizing differences among groups. The Speaker criticized the pick as “a blatant partisan selection” and accused the incoming chancellor as having “an ideology that doesn’t fit with Wisconsin” (Zahneis, 2022). Such statements impact the governance of UW-Madison on multiple fronts. Vos also said the selection was a step backwards in relations between UW-Madison and the legislature, which prompted University and System leaders to try and smooth things over with dissatisfied policymakers. A member of the Regents who was appointed by Gov. Walker and expressed great pride in their conservative principles said of Vos’ comments, “This isn't just about her. This kind of reflects on all of us, like we're a bunch of idiots.” The Regent then called the Speaker on his cell phone to deliver that message personally (anonymous, 2024b).

Policymaking & Governance. Consider the lens that polarization brings to the table: fear and distrust, antipathy, stereotypes, political opponents as foes, strong incentives to govern as a partisan. Such perceptions and behaviors naturally conspire against any attempt at finding common ground. When partisans do not trust the other party, they are unwilling to engage in the normal give-and-take required for any sort of compromise. This was the perception of legislators from both parties. As Jim Steineke observed, the most partisan elements of the legislature “typically have an outsized influence. And it doesn't seem like those fringe elements of either party really want a whole lot of compromise and getting along. They want to see

people fight more than anything else" (Steineke, 2024). John Nygren agreed, saying how "polarization has kind of put people in their camps and made them less willing to move out of their camps" (Nygren, 2024). The Assembly member whose initial attempts at outreach were rebuffed said that despite continued entreaties, "so far, my scorecard is pretty grim on legislators that have been willing to work with me" (anonymous, 2024c). And when there is "no conversation or negotiation," according to Senator Kelda Roys, the prospects for consensus are slim: "It makes any type of innovation or compromise or deviation from the literal party line very risky and almost certain to fail" (Roys, 2024).

Even where inter-party engagement is required, it is often characterized by bad faith negotiations. Sen. Roys, who has served on the Joint Committee on Finance since 2023, described a broken process between Republicans and Democrats on the panel:

> It sort of assumes that there's an actual political process that happens by which legislators of different parties have a difference of opinion and discuss it amongst themselves and somehow work it out. And that's just a complete fiction that does not happen. … The reality of how things happen is that Republicans decide in a closed room…what their position is going to be. … And they say, here's what we're doing. And then they hammer it out, and then they come in and they don't say a single word of defense in their position. … There's just not a normal political give and take that people think about when they watch *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* or the *West Wing* or *Schoolhouse Rock.* (Roys, 2024)

Several others interviewed also pointed to the lack of a normal process of discussion and give-and-take during the biennial budget negotiations (Atwell, 2024; Bernard-Donals, 2024; Chheda,

2024). With nearly 15% of UW-Madison's budget coming from state sources, a process marred by bad faith between the parties poses unnecessary challenges to governance leaders.

When normal process breaks down, other norms often follow. A recent example of this in Wisconsin has been the uncommon activities over the appointment and confirmation of Regents. First, John Miller and Dana Wachs, appointed by Gov. Evers in 2021 and 2022, respectively, served as unconfirmed Regents until their confirmations were rejected by the Senate in March 2024 (Richmond, 2024). Two months later, Robert Atwell, appointed by Gov. Walker in 2017, stated his intention to remain on the Board past the end of his term until his replacement had been confirmed by the Senate (he ultimately decided to resign the post a month later) (Kremer, 2024). It must be emphasized that the Wisconsin Senate was well within its authority to vote against Miller and Wachs. However, the longstanding norm in Wisconsin has been that governors appoint Regents, the Senate confirms them, and Regents leave when their terms end. Miller and Wachs, rejected by a party-line vote, were the first Regents to be voted down in more than 30 years. The last Regent before them to fail the confirmation process was rejected after the discovery of insensitive remarks he made against Black South Africans and LGBTQ individuals (van Wagtendonk, 2024). Gov. Evers called the move "unprecedented" and blamed it on "petty, partisan politics" (Office of the Governor, 2024b). Wachs himself saw it as "an example of partisan politics off the rails" (Richmond, 2024).

Lack of interest in finding common ground. Bad faith negotiations. The erosion of norms. When any of these factors obtain, the policy process is either slowed or ground to a halt. In the former case, protracted debate yields little more than incremental progress. The budget battle referenced in the previous paragraph is an instructive case in how this occurs. Creation of

the state budget in Wisconsin has traditionally followed a consistent model. In the summer of even years, roughly one year out from the new fiscal year, the governor makes a request to the various state agencies to develop their budget requests, which are delivered in the fall. The governor then sends the Executive Budget to the legislature and delivers the Biennial Budget Message before both chambers early in the next year. The Joint Committee on Finance then schedules public hearings and makes revisions to the draft budget, which is sent on to the Assembly and Senate. The final draft approved by the legislature is sent to the governor, who has the power to change elements of the budget through a line-item veto. The final approved budget is signed prior to the start of the next fiscal year, which begins on July 1 (Office of State Treasurer, n.d.).

The budget for fiscal years 2023 to 2025 was signed by Gov. Evers on July 5, 2023. But more than $800 million of that budget, including funds for a new engineering building at UW-Madison and pay raises for tens of thousands of UW employees, was withheld by the legislature until the universities agreed to cut their DEI activities (Knox, 2023). After months of back and forth at the highest levels of the legislature, the governor's office, the Board, and the University System, a compromise was reached and the Board approved the proposal on December 13, 2023 (Board of Regents, 2023). As Bogost described it, "you had a deal that everyone hated but knew they had to make" (Bogost, 2024). In the end, most of the funding that was released had already been approved six months earlier. The impacts on the governance of UW-Madison, however, were extraordinary. Two Regents – Miller and Wachs – were voted down by the Senate for their votes against the compromise budget; university administrators and faculty leaders were left in limbo on DEI programming, pay raises, critical capital

investments, and more; and the newest front in partisan warfare over higher education had opened – one that continues to be fought to the present day. Former System President Reilly said, "there are those kinds of direct policy pressures, changes, reversals that polarization has caused" (Reilly, 2024).

In other instances, policymaking and governance were plagued by obstruction and gridlock. As Regent President Amy Bogost observed, "A lot of policy isn't getting done. It's all ideology" (Bogost, 2024). Most of the examples came from policymakers themselves. The creative use of the partial veto is perhaps to most striking example of how both parties are using every tool at their disposal to obstruct the normal policymaking process. Since 1930, Wisconsin law has provided the governor with a partial veto. Constitutional amendments in 1990 and 2008 limited this power to prevent governors from striking individual letters to make new words (known as the "Vanna White veto") and cutting parts of two or more sentences to make new sentences (the "Frankenstein veto"). What you can do to numbers, however, is still working its way through the state courts. One lawmaker told the story of how the limits of that power continue to be explored:

> The Supreme Court said you can't strike out letters. That's the Vanna White veto. Didn't say numbers. And so this past session, [Gov. Evers] used his partial veto to increase per pupil funding that was supposed to sunset in 3045, or something like that. So, it was 1,000-year funding for schools. I mean, that is the level of insanity. The last budget cycle we had to wait around for two hours as the Republicans scoured the budget for every "cannot" that was not one word, because if it's two

> words, you can strike out the "not" and make something new. That is the level of pettiness that we have right now. (anonymous, 2024c)

As entertaining as such stories can be, they exact a real cost on the individuals and institutions counting on a functional governance process. Absent some unforeseen change, those interviewed for this study were pessimistic of things getting back on track anytime soon.

Returning to the primary question: How did political polarization impact governance at UW-Madison? According to Senator Roys, "the modern polarization of Democrats and Republicans has had a terrible impact on public education as a whole, and it's by far the most significant factor in the state's abrogation of its responsibility" (Roys, 2024). But we must move beyond sweeping generalizations and identify what, specifically, that meant for governance. Recall from Chapter 2 that governance refers to how institutions are formally organized and managed, particularly the structures and processes through which institutional participants interact with each other, create policies, and make decisions on behalf of the organization. The decision-makers consulted for this study held that polarization had real, tangible consequences on the governance of UW-Madison. Many of these were emphasized in this section, including:

- Reductions in state funding
- Elimination of the right of university employees to collectively bargain
- Delay of pay raises for university employees
- Regents left unconfirmed for years, with the persistent threat of Senate rejection
- Senate removal of Regents who did not support the majority party's budget proposal
- Removal of tenure protections from state law
- Imposition of new policies on, and activities regarding, free expression

- Erosion of bipartisan public confidence in the university
- Delays in funding for construction of a new Engineering building
- Reorganization or discontinuation of DEI programs
- Increase in distrust between university employees and state policymakers
- Partisan conflict over university management and policy during the pandemic
- Moderation on other university priorities out of fear of additional budget cuts

This is an incomplete list. But it serves to illustrate the many ways in which interactions, policies, and decisions at UW-Madison have been affected by partisan battle since 2010. Barrett Taylor (2022) summed it up this way: "The aftermath of the collision of Wisconsin's Right and higher education left the state's university system wrecked, and therefore in a far worse position from which to serve its students" (p. 71). What this means and how these findings align with the literature on governance and political polarization are the focus of the next section.

Discussion

Anyone interested in American higher education will be drawn to the story of the University of Wisconsin-Madison since 2010. It is a tale of extraordinary success and immense challenge, of collaboration and confrontation, of exogenous shocks and internal squabbles, of a future filled with both promise and peril. And while the precise details may be unique to Wisconsin, practitioners at public flagships across the country are sure to find shades of their own experiences in this story – and perhaps some lessons to help write the next chapter in theirs. The charge of this study was not just to tell that story, but to ask: What does it mean? What can practitioners at other public flagships learn from Madison? In this section, the findings from this

chapter are placed in the larger context of the existing research on public university governance and political polarization outlined in Chapter 2. It begins by integrating the findings from Research Questions #2 and #3 to the governance literature. Next, it connects the literature on political polarization to the findings from Research Questions #4 and #1. The chapter concludes with a foreshadowing of the recommendations for practice that comprise the final chapter.

The Wisconsin Idea (of Good Governance)

University governance is an imprecise concept in the academic literature. Kezar and Eckel (2004) claim that "almost every book and article avoid any clear definition" of what it means and who is involved in its execution (p. 375). Even when constructing a workable definition based on the canonical texts – as we did in Chapter 2 – the opinions on how universities are, and ought to be, governed are legion. RQ2 in this study asked how governance decision-makers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison defined "good governance" in their own institution. Unlike the broader literature on the subject, their responses were tightly connected around four themes. First, for most of the decision-makers good governance is shared governance. While it has been romanticized by some as a foundational principle from the earliest days of American higher education, the fact is that shared governance is a more modern system for distributing authority within a university. For most of the time since the founding of Harvard College in 1636, power was shared between trustees and university administrators. It wasn't until the middle of the 20th century when faculty gained a more prominent role in governance, particularly at public flagships (Cohen, 1998; Altbach, 1999). In 1966, this model of shared governance between faculty, trustees, and university administrators was summarized in the so-

called “Joint Statement,” endorsed by the leading professional organizations of those three groups (AAUP, 1966). Even then, anything resembling shared governance was being faithfully practiced in only a small percentage of institutions (Baldridge, 1982). And since that time, faculty power and influence has waned as macro-level trends have made higher education more complex and university operations more professionalized (Carlisle & Miller, 1998; Gumport, 2000; Birnbaum, 2004; Huisman, 2007).

But at UW-Madison, shared governance has remained a cherished principle. According to the “anarchical” or “symbolic” frame, good governance is often tied to the unique culture of each institution (Clark, 1983; Birnbaum, 1988; Lee, 1991; Schuster, et al, 1994; Eckel, 2003). And the interviews and documents both revealed that shared governance is part of UW-Madison’s DNA. UC Chair Bradford Barham noted how Wisconsin “historically prided itself on having one of the most comprehensive shared governance approaches to public university life” (Barham, 2024). When shared governance came under attack by policymakers in 2015, Chancellor Blank reaffirmed it as a “time-tested value” and the Faculty Senate raised it as a principle “embedded in the culture, organization, and workings of UW-Madison” (Blank, 2015; University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2015b). In fact, Wisconsin is one of the few states where shared governance is enshrined in law (Wisconsin State Legislature, n.d.). This was not an outdated legal relic either; it was a guiding principle of how university actors operated in practice. UC Chair Michael Bernard-Donals felt it was “by far the most robust system of shared governance that I've ever been a part of….as close to ideal as I could imagine” (Bernard-Donals, 2024). Governance leaders also emphasized the balance between the respective decision-makers as evidence of the strength of the system. When Chancellor Martin and Gov. Walker negotiated

to separate UW-Madison from the rest of the System in 2011, faculty leaders argued that it ran afoul of shared governance (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2011d; Barham, 2024). In contrast, Chancellor Blank held that "an inclusive, transparent governance process brings the best ideas to the forefront" (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2015b). That belief at UW-Madison that an open and shared process yields positive results for the institution is supported in much of the literature (Riley & Baldridge, 1977, Mortimer & McConnell, 1979; Dill & Helm, 1988; Gilmour, 1991; McLendon, 2003; Birnbaum, 2004; Lapworth, 2004).

The interviews and documents also reflected the range of other costs and benefits of shared governance noted by scholars. Former Regent President Drew Petersen's contention that shared governance was a stabilizing force align with arguments made by Kerr (1963) and Birnbaum (2004). At the same time, these – and many other – scholars also conceded that shared governance may slow down the decision-making process, something that System President Ray Cross decried in his reported October 2017 email to Regent Gerald Whitburn (Kerr, 1963; Stroup, 1966; Drummer & Reitsch, 1995; Eckel, 2000; Birnbaum, 2004; University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2018). Bernard-Donals' assessment that it was a bulwark against threats to academic freedom is an argument for shared governance that goes back several decades (Stroup, 1966; Berdahl, 1991; Kezar, 2000; Birnbaum, 2004). And Warfield's description of shared governance as leveraging the full range of perspectives across the campus community is found in the work of Schuster, et al (1994), Birnbaum (2004), and others. Shared governance also serves to advance the two other areas mentioned in the interviews as keys to good governance. First, it has been seen by scholars as a strong model for building trust and mutual respect amongst members (Baldridge, 1982; Drummond & Reitsch, 1995; Chait, et al, 1996; Eckel, 2000; Kezar, 2000).

Wisconsin Regents from both political parties found this to be a key component of their good working relationships within the Board (anonymous, 2024b; Atwell, 2024; Bogost, 2024; Miller, 2024). And Bernard-Donals contended that Chancellor Blank's commitment to shared governance, even during tense battles, served to build trust between faculty and university leaders (Bernard-Donals, 2024). Second, scholars have argued that shared governance facilitates a more cohesive understanding of the university's goals. Barham felt that this system brought together a "community of shared interest" (Barham, 2024). The Faculty Senate described it as a system that "binds the academic community together in its unified mission" (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2016c). These sentiments align with the work of Drummond & Reitsch (1995), who found that shared governance models, when successfully deployed, can yield stronger cohesion amongst decision-makers within the university.

In short, the perspectives on shared governance collected during this study mirror the diversity found in the literature. It can, as many scholars have asserted, aid in good governance by promoting institutional order and stability, by facilitating trust and mutual respect, by protecting academic freedom, and by consulting the full range of options and perspectives within an institution, among many other goods. It can also be frustratingly slow, an impediment to innovation, and ill-equipped to keep up with the rapidly changing world around it. It can be the ideal model for one institution or one stakeholder group, yet a poor fit for the next. The case of UW-Madison reinforces the rich mosaic of this scholarship and reminds us that it is in many ways a living and breathing model. For Wisconsin trustees, faculty leaders, and university administrators operating in contested political settings, shared governance is a

port in the storm. Its promotion of stability, collaboration, and cohesion serve as a defense against the worst consequences of polarization.

The fourth key to good governance according to UW-Madison's leaders was minimizing the impact of external pressures on their work. As the findings from RQ3 indicated, external forces and factors played a significant role in the governance of UW-Madison during the period examined in this study. The main external forces were state policymakers in the executive and legislative branches, which shaped the work at UW-Madison through their budgetary authority, passage of other legislation that affected higher education, appointment and confirmation of Regents, and authority and oversight over university operations. Governance at UW-Madison was affected by other external forces and factors as well, including state economic conditions, partisan battles, business and industry leaders, the broader public, and more. Mortimer and McConnell (1979) are among the scholars who argued that the shared governance model ignores the impact external forces can have on governance. To better understand these findings, then, we must resituate ourselves inside the literature on how external forces impact the work of public universities.

While some organizational models of university governance focus exclusively on internal people and processes, most of the literature does recognize the impact that external pressures can have on institutions (Riley & Baldridge, 1977; Mintzberg, 1979; March & Simon, 1986; Schuster & Miller, 1989; Rhoades, 1992; Benjamin & Carroll, 1998; Gumport, 2000). But the "universities as organizations" paradigm, where institutions are simply impacted by external activities, does an insufficient job of explaining the case of UW-Madison since 2010. What the data show more closely resembles the model of "universities as political institutions of the

state." According to this model, UW-Madison is a *site of contest* between the government, civil society, and market forces. Three examples serve to illustrate how this has occurred at the university. First, governance leaders, state policymakers, and interest groups have expended considerable time and energy in recent years on whether conservative free speech is being appropriately protected. UW-Madison was just one instance of a national push on this issue. Beginning in 2017, more than a dozen states passed legislation modeled after a proposal by the Goldwater Institute to protect against what they deemed to be censorship of conservative viewpoints (Mangan, 2019). And in March 2019, President Trump issued an executive order requiring that colleges uphold free speech or risk federal research dollars (Thomason, 2019). Second, the University's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was a microcosm of the partisan battle lines that existed across the country on these same issues. In particular, fights between the System and the Republican-led legislature over vaccine requirements played out at Madison and other public university campuses. These mirrored the back and forth between the Evers administration, who initiated emergency orders, and the legislature, who repeatedly sued the Governor for overstepping his authority – something affirmed by the state Supreme Court (Greenblatt, 2023). And third, the ongoing struggle over DEI programming is just one front in a nationwide battle. According to a tracker managed by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, since January 2023 anti-DEI pressures have led to policy changes in 215 colleges across 32 states (Gretzinger, et al, 2024). This fight has become even more visible in the early weeks of the second Trump administration. These, and other, examples are not just battles over public goods. They are a struggle between competing visions over what should be considered a public good

(Mansbridge, 1998; Marginson, 2011; Carnoy, et al, 2014). And they are being waged on the campus of UW-Madison.

In addition to being a site of contest, this model holds that UW-Madison is also an *instrument in this contest*, something the data supports as well. In the cases of COVID protocols and DEI programming, the governance decision-makers were not neutral observers. To the contrary, they pursued positions in both instances that aligned with some external political forces and against others. Numerous other examples like this were found in the data. For instance, in 2015 and 2016, System and University leadership, along with the Faculty Senate, came out in opposition to conceal-carry bills introduced by Republican lawmakers that would allow for concealed weapons in university buildings (The Universities of Wisconsin, 2015a; University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2015c). In December 2016, the University voiced its support for Prof. Damon Sajnani, after his new course, entitled "The Problem of Whiteness," came under attack from GOP legislators. David Murphy, who chaired the Assembly's Committee on Colleges and Universities, threatened to withhold funding for the campus if the course was allowed to remain (Brookins, 2016). And in July 2020, System and Board leadership publicly backed a lawsuit by 18 state attorneys general fighting new rules by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (The Universities of Wisconsin, 2020). Despite their desire to remain above the political fray, these cases illustrate how governance decision-makers at public universities must periodically take positions that place them on one side of a political contest.

Universities can also be used by others as instruments in political contest. Critics of Gov. Walker argue that during his two terms in office he used public universities as an instrument to advance his political ambitions, both as governor and as an aspiring candidate for higher office.

Still recovering from the Great Recession, Walker detected frustration within the state against the perceived elitism of public universities. By freezing tuition and cutting state funding, he forced universities to do more with less. He also attacked some of the most cherished principles among university employees – faculty tenure, collective bargaining, academic freedom, shared governance. According to Barrett Taylor (2022), these actions "eroded the social basis" of public higher education in Wisconsin (p. 91). They also created the blueprint for building a powerful political coalition, with elite public universities as the unifying enemy (Taylor, 2022). This blueprint, which fueled Walker's presidential run in 2016, has continued to be an effective model on the right.

Regardless of whether one subscribes to the "universities as political institutions" paradigm, it is clear that what happens in the political realm matters to the governance at UW-Madison. It is a public university, created, supported, and regulated by the state, with the goal of generating public goods for the people of Wisconsin. As such, powerful political constituencies have strong preferences for how it should act. Its work is shaped by political contest between this broad set of actors. The nature of that contest is determined by the political and social environments and power dynamics of the day (Harcleroad & Eaton, 2011; Pusser, 2013). One of most consequential factors in that political contest today is polarization. In the next section, we return to how polarization has impacted governance at UW-Madison, and what the data can tell us about the nature of this phenomenon.

UW-Madison since 2010: A Case of Affective Polarization

It was established in the Findings that political polarization exists, has been on the rise, and has had an impact on governance at UW-Madison since 2010. In addition, when examined through the lens of the scholarly literature, the data reveal more about the form of polarization that has shaped the University. In Chapter 2, we highlighted some of the various forms of polarization present in American society today – divisions based on income, race, education, religion, urbanicity, and other dimensions. The most common interpretation of polarization in America today is partisan-ideological. This form separates people into one of two camps: Republicans, who believe in a conservative ideology, and Democrats, who believe in a progressive ideology. Yet, there is considerable evidence that a multi-dimensional approach to political polarization, one that views our polarization as a division of partisan-aligned social identities, provides a more accurate picture of the current state. And as the findings from this case study demonstrate, the story of polarization at the University of Wisconsin-Madison since 2010 aligns with that model.

In this section, we return to our primary research question: How does political polarization impact the governance of flagship public universities? We look again at how polarization shaped Perceptions, Behaviors, and Policymaking/Governance with regards to governance at UW-Madison. This time, however, we examine these findings through a multi-dimensional lens, drawing on the literature on partisan-ideological and affective polarization.

Perceptions. The conceptual framework for this study draws from social identity theory, which holds that an individual's perceived membership in a social group affects their perceptions and attitudes of the external world (Tajfel, 1978; Greene, 2004). This so-called

"perceptual screen" causes people to comprehend what they observe in the political world in different ways (Goggin & Theodoridis, 2018). One common manifestation of affective polarization is the *division of the political world into "in-groups" and "out-groups"* (Brewer, 1999; Klandermans, 2014; Mason, 2018). Hintz's description of relations between Democrats and Republicans as "You're with us or against us" is an example of that perception among state policymakers (Hintz, 2024). The characterization of public universities as "them" was also an attempt to tap into the "rural consciousness" in Wisconsin and paint UW-Madison as the out-group: "*those* aren't our constituencies anymore;" "*they* just want money from your taxes, and you don't get anything back" (Cramer, 2016; Barham, 2024; Hintz, 2024). This can devolve easily into a friends-versus-foes perspective. The "other" isn't just different, it's a dangerous force that cannot be trusted (Iyengar, et al, 2012; Mason, 2013; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015). Barham's assertation that the GOP wanted to cast UW-Madison as "the bad guys" and Wachs' belief that "we're the enemy to them" were just two of the examples found in the data (Barham, 2024; Wachs, 2024). These feeling align with the broader political observation that the city of Madison is a Democratic stronghold with real import to state elections. After the 2018 contests, Speaker Vos noted that Republicans would have had a clear majority if you "took Madison and Milwaukee out of the state election formula" (Beck, 2018). Dividing the political square into two simple camps leads partisans to perceive the other side as more distant from their side than they are. (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Baldassarri & Bearman, 2007; Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016; Rothschild, et al, 2019).

Research also shows a connection between affective polarization and a phenomenon known as *motivated reasoning,* where individuals filter information in a way that conforms to

their beliefs and rejects anything that runs counter to them (Bartels, 2002; Bishop, 2008; Jerit & Barabas, 2012; Druckman, et al, 2013; Mason, 2018). As noted above, when individuals identify with a social group, their evaluations of that group and its opponents become more biased (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1981). The tendency is to believe your side is always right and virtuous and the other side is always wrong and dangerous (Tajfel, 1981; Gardner & Palmer, 2011; Huddy, et al, 2015; Iyengar, et al, 2019). Goggin & Theodoridis (2018) have likened the effects of this to rooting for one's favorite sports team. People prefer information that supports their predispositions and maintains positive perception for their team (Thibideau & Aronson, 1992; Goggin & Theodorodis, 2018). How information is received, then, is based more on who is delivering it and less on a reasoned examination of the evidence (Druckman, et al, 2013; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015). The data included several cases of individuals treating information skeptically or refusing it altogether when delivered by the opposing party (Chheda, 2024; D. Walsh, 2024). The differing interpretations of information during the COVID-19 pandemic made governing even more difficult. It affirmed Hintz's feeling that he was "never dealing with the same set of facts" (Hintz, 2024). As we will see later in this section, the consequences of motivated reasoning have a devastating effect on the ability of people to build consensus across party lines.

A third way in which affective polarization impacts governance is through the *stereotyping* of out-group members. The point of these stereotypes is to reinforce the simple narratives each party is trying to get into the minds of voters about the opposition (Zaller, 1992; Taber & Lodge, 2006; Iyengar, et al, 2019). These stereotypes are generally inaccurate and paint people on both sides as closer to the extremes of their sides than they are (Levendusky &

Malhotra, 2016; Iyengar, et al, 2019). The battles over higher education in Wisconsin have not been short on invectives by both parties littered with stereotypes. The most common caricatures of UW-Madison were of a woke, liberal, radical institution, while Republicans in the legislature were painted as anti-university, anti-intellectual, and anti-expert (Barham, 2024; Bernard-Donals, 2024; Bogost, 2024; Chheda, 2024; Hintz, 2024; Miller, 2024). As we will see, dividing the world into in- and out-groups, interpreting information through a partisan lens, and stereotyping political opponents generates a long list of pernicious consequences.

Behaviors. The ways in which individuals perceive political information bears heavily on how they act on that information. Affective polarization generates powerful emotions against the political opposition, including strong feelings of *fear and distrust* toward the motivations and actions of out-groups (Munro, et al, 2010; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015). Partisans will often use strong language to engender fear and distrust in their voters, which has the effect of deepening the loyalty of their base (Webster, 2020; Martherus, et al, 2021). Party leaders play a particularly important role in fueling such passions, since their support carries greater weight than a generic party endorsement (Nicholson, 2012). When University of Alaska president James Johnsen withdrew as the only finalist for the presidency of the Wisconsin System in 2020, Speaker Vos pinned the blame on intimidation by "leftist liberals on campus" who had questioned the composition of the search committee (Redman, 2020). While this may have been an effort to put pressure on the university for the next search, the message was one of fear and distrust in university faculty. Faculty leaders also expressed a high level of distrust in the legislature because of persistent budget cuts and confrontations over tenure, academic freedom, and shared governance (anonymous, 2024a; Warfield, 2024). Among policymakers,

there was little trust between the two parties. Former Assembly Leader Jim Steineke said it had gone too far at times, accusing Democrats of engaging in "black helicopter thinking" about Republican activities (Steineke, 2024). Warranted or not, being driven by fear and distrust, as we saw in Wisconsin, provides the fuel for intense partisan warfare (Brewer, 1999; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). That warfare generates negative consequences for how UW-Madison is governed.

Another powerful emotion that increases as individuals become sorted along partisan, ideological, and social lines is *antipathy* towards out-groups (Brewer, 1999; Davis & Dunaway, 2016; Mason, 2018). "Hatred would be a fairly good descriptor of that," recalled Dana Wachs of his time in the Assembly (Wachs, 2024). Here again, nearly everyone had an example of animosity between the two sides. One member of the Assembly told how she still makes hand-crafted Valentines Day cards each year for those across the aisle and asks them what they can work on together in the coming year. The response has been, in her words, "pretty grim" (anonymous, 2024c). That sort of hostility between parties is not seen in the same light as division between other social groups. In fact, Iyengar & Westwood (2015) found that partisan warfare is "acceptable, even appropriate:"

> Compared with the most salient social divide in American society—race—partisanship elicits more extreme evaluations and behavioral responses to in-groups and out-groups. The most plausible explanation for the stronger affective response generated by partisan cues is the non-applicability of egalitarian norms. These norms, which are supported by large majorities, discourage the manifestation of behavior that may be constructed as discriminatory. … No such constraints apply to evaluations of partisan groups. (pp. 703-704)

Worse than simply being acceptable, elites are actually *incentivized to exploit partisanship* among the masses, in two ways. First, research shows that it works. When affective polarization rises, the strength of partisan cues increases along with it (Levendusky, 2010; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). The more a party leader remains disciplined in praising their side and attacking the opposition, the greater the likelihood that those messages will be internalized by the party rank and file. Second, it can be perilous to work across the partisan divide during times of high polarization. For nearly the entirety of this study, Wisconsin's legislative districts were contested under the 2011 maps, which created strong Republican and Democratic seats. The representatives from these districts must satisfy these partisan views while in office (Stonecash, et al, 2003; Carson, et al, 2007; Abramowitz, 2010; Jacobson, 2013). Working with the political opposition could generate a primary challenge in the next election, whereas attacking the other side could solidify one's support among the party faithful (Abramowitz, 2010; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Hopkins, 2017). Dana Wachs said it always "got back to, *how do I get elected*?" (Wachs, 2024). And straying from the party line is "very risky" in today's legislature, said Sen. Kelda Roys (Roys, 2024). Beyond these safe districts, there is also the larger consideration of the state legislature. While the Republican Party has held strong majorities since the 2010 elections, the new electoral maps introduced in 2024 should eventually even out the seats in what is a 50-50 state. And when both sides feel they have a chance at victory in the next election, the default position becomes campaigning rather than governing (Sinclair, 2006; Lee, 2015). This means avoiding any political victories for the opposing party and keeping the distinctions between the two sides front of mind for the voters (Lee, 2011). As a result, partisans will seek out opportunities to emphasize the difference between the two sides –

something known as "optimal distinctiveness theory" – which serves to reinforce the identity of the in-group while positioning the out-group in opposition (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Greene, 2004). As noted earlier, stereotypes are a common and effective way of placing individuals on the right or wrong side of that divide.

Policymaking & Governance. These perceptions and behaviors present during times of high political polarization impact policymaking and governance in a number of negative ways according to the literature. First, many of the above perceptions and behaviors naturally conspire to push hard *against any attempt at finding consensus* or common ground. To collaborate across the aisle is to engage with people you – and, perhaps more importantly, the voters – see not just as wrong on the issues, but as dangerous and untrustworthy (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015; Martherus, et al, 2021). Hetherington and Rudolph (2015) identified what they call a "polarization of trust" that has developed between the two sides. When partisans do not trust the other party, they are unwilling to engage in the normal give-and-take required for any sort of compromise. Instead, the two sides turn inward, which pulls them farther and farther from the center. The middle ground where consensus is built is left fallow. This was the perception of legislators from both parties. Jim Steineke lamented how the most extreme 15% on either side of the spectrum have an "outsized influence," and these kinds of partisans "want to see people fight more than anything else" (Steineke, 2024).

Second, negotiations are often conducted in *bad faith* rather than the normal give-and-take people expect from policymakers. The election of more ideologically pure representatives from safe districts means that there is very little common ground to begin with (Rohde, 1991; Poole & Rosenthal, 1997; Stonecash, et al, 2003; Abramowitz, 2010). And as polarization has

risen, party leaders have taken full advantage of procedural rules and other powers at their disposal to fight political battles (Roberts & Smith, 2003; Theriault, 2008; Theriault & Rohde, 2011; Lee, 2015). These actions are more often geared toward damaging the opposition rather than advancing good policy (Grimmer & King, 2011; Nicholson, 2012; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). The convening of special sessions during the Evers governorship provides a good example of the breakdown of a longstanding process. The Wisconsin Constitution allows the governor to call a special session of the legislature to consider important matters that it believes must be addressed quickly. In each of the 98 special sessions convened between 1848 and 2018, the legislature took some form of action – bills or resolutions introduced, laws enacted, etc. – on the issue(s) in question. During his time as governor, Evers has called thirteen special sessions. No legislative actions were taken in ten of the thirteen. In fact, most have been gaveled in and out in less than a minute (Champagne & Kasper, 2024). This includes a September 2023 special session called to break the logjam on the funding being held by the legislature, which included monies for UW-Madison (Bauer, 2023).

A third consequence, closely connected to bad faith negotiations, is the *erosion of norms*. Because partisans consider the opposite party to be a threat to the country's well-being, they exhibit less of a commitment to traditional norms and values in their interactions with them (Webster, 2020). This was exhibited during the 2023 standoff over the higher education budget and the future of DEI programs. When the State Senate refused to confirm Regents John Miller and Dana Wachs in March 2024, it was a break from decades of bipartisan approvals of Board appointees. Miller and Wachs were just two of the many Evers appointments in recent years to have served in unconfirmed capacities before ultimately being rejected by the Senate

(Richmond, 2024). In that same session, six other Evers appointees were voted down, bringing the total at the time to 21 (Spears, 2024; Wisconsin State Legislature, 2024a). As political scientist Anthony Chergosky observed, "The norms of politics do not seem to apply at this point in Wisconsin" (Greenblatt, 2023).

What results is that policymaking during times of high affective polarization is often characterized by *incremental progress* at best. For policymaking to run smoothly, officials must engage in a certain amount of give-and-take to arrive at a position that enough members find acceptable. Yet, the consequences of affective polarization severely limit the willingness to "give" to the other side (Huddy, et al, 2015). In the case of UW-Madison, there is little political incentive for representatives of deep red districts to give anything to help deep blue Madison (Roys, 2024). The best that policymakers can hope for are incremental steps and short-term fixes (Jacobson, 2013). This is especially the case with budget negotiations. A study by Birkhead (2016) found that polarization leads specifically to delays in budget formulation at the state level. Regent Robert Atwell said there was no way to reach a budget compromise "if the parties don't even talk to each other, let alone do the horse trading that I think our state constitution and federal constitution are intended to create in divided government" (Atwell, 2024). Dana Wachs said of the legislature, "It's the most dysfunctional organization I have ever seen in my life, by an exponential factor. It really is. It's just unbelievable" (Wachs, 2024). In Wisconsin, the most recent biennial budget met its deadline for passage, but delays occurred after when the distribution of approved funds became mired in partisan conflict. One of the critical investments that was held up during this battle was construction on a new engineering building at UW-Madison. Those funds were finally released in March 2024, but in December 2024 the

State Building Commission denied a motion to reallocate underspent funds to that project, citing "lack of transparency" (Hess, 2024). This is a common consequence of policymaking in polarized environments, where delays prevent institutions from keeping up with timely actions to remain competitive (Hacker, 2004; McCarty, et al, 2008; Lee, 2015).

People frustrated with the slow pace of progress may find solace in knowing that it can be – and often is – worse. There is a substantial amount of research which links party polarization with *policy paralysis or gridlock* (Jones, 2001, Binder, 2003, Lapinski, 2008; Jacobson, 2013). This is another logical outcome of a process paved by distrust, fear, and antipathy among partisan policymakers with strong incentives for confrontation over cooperation (Fleisher & Bond, 2004; Carson, et al, 2007; McCarty, et al, 2008; Lee, 2015). The ongoing fight over DEI programming could continue to be a factor that drives additional policy paralysis in the capital. In the fall of 2023, when negotiations over these programs were reaching a fever pitch, Speaker Vos dug in firmly on the prospects of any public spending on higher education if these programs remained: "I don't think that they deserve to have any more resources until they accomplish the goal. Not a nickel. When I say a nickel, that's what I mean" (Office of the Governor, 2023a). Immediately after the compromise budget was passed by the Regents, Vos tweeted that this was "just the first step in what will be our continuing efforts to eliminate these cancerous DEI practices on UW campuses" (Vos, 2023). The incentives are there to hold the line and stand firm on their partisan positions (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Unfortunately, as partisan forces in the capital and across the nation continue waging war on the issue, Wisconsin's public universities will be left managing the fallout as best they can.

Conclusion

This chapter began by restating the problem of practice that guided this study and its goal of examining how political polarization affects the governance of public flagship universities using the case of the University of Wisconsin-Madison since 2010. The findings of the study, based on the primary and three supporting research questions, were then presented in detail. This was followed by a discussion of how these findings connect to the scholarly literature outlined in Chapter 2. This new knowledge can be used to develop a series of tangible, achievable steps for governance decision-makers operating in times of high political polarization to consider. To be sure, there are limitations to what from the case of UW-Madison can be applied to other contexts. Each university has its own history, culture, internal and external stakeholders, political dynamics, challenges, opportunities, and a host of other dimensions. We maintain, however, that there are widely applicable lessons for governance decision-makers to consider as they navigate their work in times of high political polarization. Those recommendations, and the format and strategy for delivering them to the target audience, is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Introduction

The objective of this final chapter is to draw on the lessons learned from this case study and offer a series of actionable recommendations to help governance decision-makers at public flagship universities navigate the consequences of political polarization. It begins with a restatement of the target audiences and the intended purpose of these recommendations. It then explains the format selected for the design and delivery of the recommendations, and why this offers a favorable pathway for helping governance leaders address this problem of practice. The bulk of the chapter focuses on the recommendations themselves. Using the data collected from Research Question #5, these recommendations are organized into three key areas. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research on this topic.

Target Audiences and Intended Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine how political polarization shapes governance at public flagship universities, and to offer recommendations that help governance decision-makers do the best job possible in leading during times of high polarization. In Chapter 1, we defined governance decision-makers as the three stakeholder groups that comprise the traditional shared governance model; namely, trustees, university administrators, and faculty leaders. In Wisconsin, those groups were represented by the Board of Regents, the President of the University of Wisconsin System, the Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the Chair of the University Committee. While the names of these offices may vary between

institutions, the overarching roles are present within any public flagship. The recommendations below have been crafted for these target audiences.

Format for Recommendations

The recommendations section is modeled after the content produced by *The Chronicle of Higher Education's* "Chronicle Intelligence" (CI) division. This framework was chosen for several reasons. First, the *Chronicle* is a publication whose content is widely consumed by the target audiences of this study. They have the largest newsroom dedicated to covering higher education and, according to their data, 1.7 million monthly visitors to their webpage and more than 30,000 paid subscribers. In a survey conducted by the *Chronicle,* 86% of readers reported themselves as "decision makers and influencers" at their institutions, and 76% said they use information found in the *Chronicle* to make those decisions. The mission of the Chronicle Intelligence division is "to help readers better navigate the future by solving pressing problems on their campuses or in their careers and helping them understand important issues and trends." They advance knowledge through a variety of products, including in-depth reports and case studies. The recommendations that follow are presented as a CI "Research Brief."

Recommendations

Executive Summary

America is mired in a period of high political polarization. The negative impacts can be felt in nearly every facet of American life – who we date, where we live, what news we consume, how we think our nation should be governed. Higher education has unfortunately not been spared

from the damage wrought by this partisan struggle. In fact, disputes over free speech, DEI, and the cost and value of a college degree, among other things, have placed higher ed squarely in the partisan battlefield.

If you work at one of America's public flagship universities, you should be especially concerned. Public flagships are heavily contested political institutions, created and regulated by the state, supported by public funding, and expected to provide a range of public goods. Elected representatives, and the university trustees they appoint, shape nearly every corner of their operations, from budget and strategy to curriculum and human resources. The potential for politics to seep into the governance of these public flagships is therefore high, restricted more by norms than laws. When governance bears the negative consequences of political polarization, it is problematic for the university. Campus activities are viewed through a partisan lens; teaching and research are placed under stricter scrutiny; oversight of university operations increases; funding gets delayed; consensus on a shared future is impossible to build. In short, polarization matters.

Throughout our history, polarization has ebbed and flowed. However, there appear to be no signs that it will go away anytime soon. For today, and the eventual next time, governance decision-makers must do all they can to mitigate its worst consequences and ensure that their institutions survive – even thrive – during times of high political polarization.

This Research Brief is divided into two parts. In the first, we look at the nature of political polarization that is present today in the United States. This is a combination of "partisan-ideological" polarization, or division based on party and ideology, and "affective" polarization, or when people think positively about their side and negatively about people on

the other side. This form of polarization generates a long list of pernicious consequences, ranging from how individuals perceive people and information to how they behave in the political square to how policymaking and governance are conducted. These consequences, and how they impact university governance, are detailed in this section.

In the second, we offer three recommendations for how governance decision-makers – trustees, university administrators, and faculty leaders – can lead their institutions to succeed when political polarization is high:

- Recommendation #1: Create opportunities for stakeholders to **engage as people, not identities**, to moderate the psychological forces of identity-based interaction and discover areas of shared interest.
- Recommendation #2: Commit to **educating outside the university** about the economic, social, and other benefits public institutions bring to their communities, as well as the consequences of disinvestment.
- Recommendation #3: **Broaden your fanbase** by investing in areas of agreement that cross partisan lines and get political opponents rooting for the same team.

These recommendations will not solve political polarization; no such report can. But they are meaningful – and achievable – steps that governance decision makers at public flagship universities can take to blunt the worst consequences of the polarization that exists today and advance their good and important public mission.

Introduction

America is deeply divided. Nearly half those surveyed in an October 2024 poll said members of the opposite party were "downright evil" (Robbins, 2024). A January 2025 Gallup survey found the center points of both major parties more ideologically apart than at any time since the survey began in 1992 (Brenan, 2025). The 118th Congress, whose term ended in January, passed fewer bills than in any two-year period since the 1980s (Solender, 2024). Distrust of political opponents. Alignment of party and ideology. Policy gridlock. These are markers of political polarization, a phenomenon defined by space between two groups and cohesion within them on issues of policy and governance. From immigration to energy to the integrity of our elections, polarization has shaped, defined, and disrupted nearly every aspect of American public life in recent years.

Higher education has been unable to avoid this partisan warfare. Throughout history, higher education has enjoyed greater bipartisan support than most other policy areas. With the rise of the Tea Party movement, conservatives at the state level began to take aim at issues such as campus culture, free speech, and diversity. It was not until 2017, however, that mass opinion on higher education began to diverge between the two parties. In a 2019 survey by the Pew Research Center, 67% of "Democrat/Lean Democrat" respondents said universities have a positive "effect on the way things are going in the country." In contrast, just 33% of "Republican/ Lean Republican" respondents shared that positive view, while 59% held the negative position. Four years earlier, those numbers were flipped, with a majority (54%) of Republicans holding positive views and 37% negative (Parker, 2019; Dunn & Cerda, 2022).

Interestingly, it is the perception of partisanship on campus that is the most partisan issue. In the Pew survey, 67% percent of Republicans believed the political tilt within higher education is a "major problem," compared with just 26% of Democrats. Sixty percent of Democrats said students are hearing a "range of viewpoints," while just 26% of Republicans agreed (Parker, 2019). That is where policymakers and activists have trained their focus. Since 2017, the conversation on higher education policy has centered not on cost or access or completion, but on free speech, the future of faculty tenure, oversight of curricular content, DEI programs, and related hot-button political issues (Cantwell & Taylor, 2022; Anderson, 2023; Novak, 2023; Svrluga, 2023; Taylor, 2023). Actions taken by policymakers in one state have inspired similar actions in other states, particularly when they have generated political gains. As an example, according to a tracker managed by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, since January 2023 anti-DEI pressures have led to policy changes in 215 colleges across 32 states (Gretzinger, et al, 2024). Confronting higher education has become viewed on the right as both sound policy and good politics (Grunwald, 2018; Knott, 2022; Chait, 2023).

In this Research Brief, we look at how political polarization impacts the governance of public flagships. This is an important task for two reasons: First, public flagships are politically contested institutions, created and regulated by the state and provided public funding to generate public goods. The public, through their elected officials and the board trustees they appoint, has a consequential role in how these universities are governed. The ability of governors and legislatures to use board appointments in particular to reshape the work of colleges and universities is enormous. In 2020, for instance, almost 70% of public-university board members appointed by a political process were done so by a single political party (Ellis,

et al, 2020). The potential for politics to seep into university governance is therefore high, restricted more by norms than laws.

The second reason this is important is that governance impacts nearly every corner of university operations, from budget and strategy to curriculum and human resources. The actions taken by governance decision-makers are felt downstream by practitioners in each functional area or administrative unit of a university. When these actions bear the negative consequences of polarization, it poses additional and unnecessary challenges. Public distrust rises, long-term strategic planning is more difficult, issues outside the core teaching and research missions take center stage. Each of these makes it harder for universities to accomplish their objectives.

As Lumina Foundation president Jamie Merisotis said recently, the polarization affecting higher education today is "not a new challenge, but a more extreme one" (Merisotis, 2024). While history teaches us that polarization will decline at some point, there are few signs of interparty détente anytime soon. For today, and the eventual next time, public universities must learn how to operate effectively during times of high political polarization. That is the purpose of this Brief – to better understand political polarization and how it impacts public university governance, and to offer tangible steps that governance leaders can take to mitigate its consequences. *(Note: The data contained in this Brief are taken from a larger study on the impact of polarization on the governance of the University of Wisconsin-Madison since 2010.)*

Political Polarization & Its Impact on Public University Governance

There are myriad lenses used by scholars of higher education to understand how universities are governed, and how various factors shape change that occurs within them. Scholars have long held that political, economic, and social dynamics shape how universities are organized and the decisions they make. The longstanding model that considers universities as "organizations" views governance largely as an internal phenomenon that may be impacted by external forces and factors as a downstream effect. Another model for understanding university governance, crafted in recent decades by political scientists and economists, describes public universities as "political institutions of the state." Such institutions, which control public resources, provide public benefits, and operate in areas with high political salience, generate a struggle between powerful external forces as to how those resources should be allocated (Pusser, 2011). The most highly contested universities according to these criteria are public flagships, which this paradigm holds are both "sites of contest" between the state, civil society, and market forces, and "instruments" in these contests as well (Pusser & Ordorika, 2001; Pusser, 2013). Regardless of which model one subscribes to, there is broad agreement that what happens in the political realm *matters* to the governance of higher education. And when something impacts our work – whether demographic trends or technological advances or global competition or the state of the economy – we benefit by taking the time to interrogate it. One of these external forces is political polarization. The consequences of political polarization are a net negative for American politics and public policy. This has been seen in a variety of other policy contexts. The impact of polarization on higher education, however, has yet to be fully

examined. By properly diagnosing the problem, we will be in a better position to work through it.

There are two distinct – though related – forms of polarization present in the U.S. today. The first, and most common, understanding of polarization is the "partisan-ideological" form, which divides groups based on preferences of political party and ideology. Partisan and ideological divisions have not always aligned in American politics. Beginning in the early-1970s, a phenomenon described as the "Big Sort" occurred, which aligned people from the left and right into one of the two major parties – left with the Democratic Party and right with the Republican Party. In the decades that followed, other social identities, including race, religion, culture, geography, and socioeconomic status, came into greater alignment with the two parties, creating what Lilliana Mason (2018) describes as "mega-identities" (p. 14). As the two parties have become more socially homogeneous, partisan identity has become synonymous with social identity. This has led to the second form of polarization, known as "affective" polarization. Shanto Iyengar and Sean Westwood (2015) define this as "the tendency of people identifying as Republicans or Democrats to view opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively" (p. 691). This is based on political affiliation as a social identity, not a cohesive set of policy beliefs. The combined forces of partisan-ideological and affective polarization are present in America today.

This potent form of political polarization creates a long list of consequences. It shapes how individuals perceive people and information in the political sphere. Partisans divide the world into friends and foes, or "in-groups" and "out-groups." Information is filtered in a way that confirms existing beliefs and rejects anything that runs counter – a phenomenon known as

"motivated reasoning." Political opponents are stereotyped and misperceived in such a way that they are seen not just as holding a different opinion but representing an entirely different way of life. These perceptions lead to certain behaviors among partisans. Interactions with political opponents are characterized by fear, distrust, and antipathy. Policymakers are incentivized to exploit these divisions and please their base and punished for working across the political aisle. Such behaviors at both the voter and elite levels have devastating consequences for policymaking and governance. The two parties close ranks in unity against the opposition, assuming a posture of campaigning for the next election rather than governing. What interactions do occur are conducted in bad faith, and both policy maintenance and policy making are the exception rather than the rule. This environment produces incremental progress at best, and political gridlock at worst.

Such an environment can create extraordinary challenges for public university governance. Policies designed and passed by partisan lawmakers and/or through partisan processes are more likely to be met with distrust and perceived as if they were created to benefit the side of the majority. Institutions can be constrained from proceeding with big, bold ideas for fear they will run afoul of powerful political interests. Faculty teaching, research, and testimony on polarizing political issues, such as climate change, gun control, or abortion, may be limited or outright censored by policymakers, universities, or even faculty members themselves. University employees can be required to spend additional time on information requests and policymaker engagement – time that could be spent on more mission-specific activities. Long-term strategic and operational planning become more difficult, as the level and direction of public investments can fundamentally change the next time the legislature or governor's

mansion changes party. Campus activities may be viewed through an increasingly partisan lens, making standard activities, such as a guest speaker, a faculty op-ed, a major gift, or more recently, discussion of thorny policy issues, kindling for the next political firestorm.

Understanding the form of political polarization that exists today and its impacts on public university governance makes the challenge facing institutional leaders clearer, though no less daunting. Public universities, however, are not left powerless. Below are three recommendations for tangible, practical actions university leaders can take to mitigate these consequences and advance their missions during times of high political polarization.

Recommendations

Recommendation #1: Engage as People, Not Identities

> *"It's hard to hate people when you've broken bread with them or had a drink with them."*
>
> Kevin Patrick Reilly, former President, University of Wisconsin System

The first recommendation is for governance decision-makers to develop personal relationships that can mitigate, and even transcend, the identities that come with their positions. Interest today is high in the promotion and facilitation of civil dialogue across differences. Universities, foundations, and nonprofits are among the many organizations investing in programs to get diverse groups of individuals – Democrat and Republican, liberal and conservative, urban and rural, Muslims and Jews – at the same table to encourage a deeper understanding one another's perspectives. These are laudable efforts, and they may even lead to progress in some ways. But they fail to address a fundamental component of affective polarization: The power of our

identities to shape interactions. Under affective polarization, political affiliation is a social identity, not a cohesive set of policy beliefs (Huddy, et al, 2015; Mason, 2018; Iyengar, et al, 2019). According to Mason (2018), when multiple identities align, "partisan battles become social and cultural battles, as well as political ones" (p. 60). One of the consequences of an identity-driven polarization is that civil debate on the issues cannot overcome these larger divisions (Mason, 2013). Any activity that brings together people with opposing viewpoints should be celebrated. But our best hope for building sustained relationships that fade the lines of social identity are to create spaces where governance leaders can interact not as Regent Joe and Professor Jane or conservative Joe from rural Wisconsin and liberal Jane from Madison, but simply as Joe and Jane.

Personal interactions like this were common in the past. Kevin Patrick Reilly, who served as President of the University of Wisconsin System, remembers inviting policymakers to the president's house for dinners and football games. "It's hard to hate people when you've broken bread with them, or had a drink with them," said Reilly of the strategy behind these gatherings (Reilly, 2024). Former State Assemblyman David Walsh, who later served on the Regents, said of Board engagement with policymakers: "We don't do a good job of reaching out and making them comfortable with us." (D. Walsh, 2024). Absent that personal engagement, it's difficult to really understand the positions and motivations of people on the other side of the issue. As former Assembly Majority Leader Jim Steineke noted, "You can't get a good sense of where people are at if you're just lobbing bombs from across the Capitol" (Steineke, 2024).

There is research that shows the electoral value of playing to one's base and maximizing party unity, particularly in a state like Wisconsin where the electoral maps contain large

numbers of safe red and safe blue districts. But there are also indications that most voters want policymakers to work together as much as possible. In a 2023 survey of Wisconsin voters, 78% of respondents – including a large majority of both Democrats and Republicans – agreed that it was important to talk to people "who have different opinions" than they do (Center for Communication and Civil Renewal, 2023). Of the governance decision-makers and elected officials interviewed for this study, not one endorsed the view that segregating political opponents was a good idea. More importantly, interaction of this type works. The Board of Regents is a profile of success for how personal engagement can be facilitated and the power it has to bring people together from across the political spectrum. They shared powerful stories about how, despite their differing philosophies, they developed good personal relationships – relationships that served the university well. Former Regent President Karen Walsh, one of Gov. Evers' first appointments to join the GOP-dominated Board, recalled how when she joined the initial reaction, she felt from the others was: "Who is this woman? Is she wearing a pair of Satan horns? Is she a screaming liberal woman from Madison?" However, through personal engagement, they were able to move past the partisan identities: "When they met me as a person and got to know me, then we found out we shared a lot of the same concerns" (K. Walsh, 2024). Another Board member – a proud supporter of President Trump who serves alongside mostly Evers-appointed Regents – had a similar experience: "The thing is, we were all on opposite sides of the political spectrum. And we had the most wonderful conversation about it. It's really cool. And that's what this is all about. And I've learned that everybody has reasons for their opinions" (anonymous, 2024b). The key ingredient in the comity within the Regents has been spending time together.

Personal engagement can serve to mitigate a range of consequences of affective polarization. First, it introduces what scholars call "cross-cutting pressures" into people's lives. Polarization has the effect of creating a perceptual screen that leads people to form more radical and less accurate generalizations of out-groups (Levendusky & Halhotra, 2016; Iyengar, et al, 2019). When people are exposed to a greater diversity of individuals and ideas, it replaces some of these misperceptions about out-groups being more extreme than they are and pulls people toward the center (Ahler & Sood, 2018; Druckman, et al, 2022). As Bill Bishop (2008) wrote in *The Big Sort*, "Mixed company moderates; like-minded company polarizes" (p. 68). Several studies have found that cross-partisan conversations can reduce political prejudice and affective polarization, even as ideological distance remains the same (Voelkel, et al, 2021; Santoro & Broockman, 2022; Blattner & Koenen, 2023). Personal interactions also serve to mitigate the fear and distrust that results from such misperceptions, which can have a positive effect on the policymaking process, according to Steineke: "Get to know the other people that you're serving with. Anytime that there's cooperation, it tends to help legislation" (Steineke, 2024). John Nygren, who co-chaired Wisconsin's powerful Joint Finance Committee, remembered a time when Democrats and Republicans were able to find common ground on the opioid crisis. He was told by colleagues that his personal story on how it has impacted his family allowed people on both sides to relate in a way that seeded dialogue on the issue (Nygren, 2024).

From a logistical standpoint, this recommendation is quite easy to implement. It doesn't require a faculty vote or Board policy or new funding (except, perhaps, for some of the proverbial bread to break). There are countless ways in which a governance decision-maker could encourage personal engagement. When meetings were held in Madison, former Board

President Karen Walsh would host dinner at her house for Regents and their spouses. She had a simple rule: "No shop talk. Talk about your lives. Talk about the cat you saved. Talk about how your dog's having puppies. Just get to know each other as people." (K. Walsh, 2024). She was told by many Regents that these dinners were "transformational" to their experience of serving on the Board. An inventive idea suggested by Kevin Reilly was to make sure that your direct reports include people from across the partisan divide so that you can better understand the points of view of other governance leaders (Reilly, 2024). Governance leaders should also tout when such interactions take place. Scholars have found that even the observation of warm cross-partisan interactions between political leaders can reduce affective polarization (Huddy & Yair, 2021; You & Lee, 2024).

That is not to minimize the various headwinds at play. The psychological forces of affective polarization are strong and cannot be easily set aside after sharing a meal or attending a football game. But the research shows that many of the worst perceptions and behaviors are motivated by the desire to remain in good standing with one's in-group, not any deep hatred of the out-group (Brewer, 1999). So, there is reason for optimism. The electoral incentives of party unity are strong as well, both from leadership and the rank-and-file (Abramowitz, 2010; Jacobson, 2013). There may also be legal barriers preventing a return to the bourbon and poker days in their fullest form; in Wisconsin, this includes ethics and open meeting laws. Such laws are well-intentioned, but they have limited the ability of governance decision-makers to engage with public officials on a human level. Governance leaders should seek reforms to allow for such interactions, while maintaining the public's trust in their elected and appointed officials.

With enough political will, each of these obstacles are surmountable. "Human interaction is foundational to all of this," said Regent Robert Atwell. "Spend time with each other. There's a lot to be gained from being in relationship with other people" (Atwell, 2024). The University would be better served if interactions of the sort typified by the Regents became more of the norm among governance decision-makers and state policymakers.

Proposed Actions for Governance Decision-Makers:

- Remove Barriers to Engagement – Advocate for reform of laws (e.g., ethics laws, open meeting laws) that create obstacles to trust-building interactions between policymakers and governance leaders
- Build an Inclusive Team – When staffing your office, consider the diversity of perspectives and identities from across the state and commit to giving them a seat at the table
- Promote Cross-Party Friendships – Vigorously promote instances of so-called "warm interactions" with out-party political leaders to their networks

<u>Recommendation #2: Educate Outside the University</u>

"We can't take for granted that everyone is aware of all of the ways in which this university and its alums are involved in communities across the state."

Rebecca Blank, former Chancellor, University of Wisconsin-Madison

In every public release made by the University of Wisconsin System, a footer is included which summarizes the many benefits these thirteen public universities bring to the state: A 23:1 return

on state investment, new business and industry, and cultural and economic contributions that "make Wisconsin a better place to live" (The Universities of Wisconsin, 2024b). While compelling, this is information not widely known around the state. Some have a narrower view of higher education, thinking it only benefits students and alums. Gordon Hintz admitted it has been "harder to have the conversation about why everybody in the state should support broader funding for higher education and why it benefits them if they don't have direct skin in the game" (Hintz, 2024). But according to the System, everyone does have skin in the game, in the form of the goods the university provides to everyone in Wisconsin. Our second recommendation is for governance decision-makers to take their teaching mission off campus and educate the people and institutions across Wisconsin of the many benefits they bring to the state.

Being an advocate in a contested political environment takes courage. Partisans are more active during times of high polarization, so you are competing for the attention of voters and policymakers (Mason, 2018). But as Regent President Amy Bogost said, failure to do so risks doing more damage to the confidence in our public institutions: "We need to be more courageous and out in front of what this education will do for our state. What it has done, what it continues to do. … People need to speak out more, stop denigrating education" (Bogost, 2024). This includes not just the benefits the universities bring, but the consequences of disinvestment as well. "You have members on both sides with communities that are thriving or dying depending on the health" of public universities, said a current lawmaker (anonymous, 2024c). Citizens need a clearer understanding of the ramifications that lower funding can have on local economies and the people employed by these universities. As in Recommendation #1,

there is no limit to the creative ways in which governance leaders can tell these stories. Here, we include three examples suggested by current and former governance decision-makers.

First, invite decision-makers onto campus to experience the work of the university. UW-Madison, like most public flagships, leads some of the most exciting and important research in fields ranging from space science and genomics to democracy and global health. It trains its students for the jobs of tomorrow with cutting-edge pedagogy. It hosts public events that expand the mind and spotlight the many fruits of the university's labors. As former Regent David Walsh suggested, "You involve them, you get them over there, you let them watch some of the research going on, you get an understanding of the impact of the dollars" (D. Walsh, 2024). Such exposure breathes life into the funding requests made to policymakers every two years: "Our challenge is to persuade decision-makers that we're not an expense on a balance sheet but part of the solution," said Walsh (The Universities of Wisconsin, 2013a). There is research showing that when individuals are provided with the actual work and beliefs of out-groups, their most inaccurate perceptions shift and affective polarization is reduced (Ahler & Sood, 2018; Lees & Cikara, 2020; Moore-Berg, et al, 2020; Ruggeri, et al, 2021).

Second, governance leaders need to take their show on the road and share their story across the state. Former University Committee Chair Brad Barham devised a comprehensive engagement plan to demonstrate the university's value to all corners of Wisconsin:

> Take a map and say we were going to cover basically every county and almost every township in some way, by getting out with a forum, a meeting on the water quality, or whatever the topics du jour were. Bring some of our experts and say, "Let's have at it." Say to the communities, "First, let us understand what's going

> on from your perspective. And then let's talk about how we might contribute to whatever steps forward you want to take. And maybe we just agree that we can't do anything on this issue. But let's keep talking. Or we got an action plan." (Barham, 2024)

This would take a real commitment, said Barham, who estimated it would require a dedicated five-year investment to succeed in a "fundamental remaking of the relationship" between the university and the people (Barham, 2024). Scholars have found that such deliberate gatherings of Democrats and Republicans, built around interpersonal contact, can reduce affective polarization (Levendusky & Stecula, 2021; Swanson, 2021). The effort must include more than visits to diners and local chambers of commerce too. Leaders need to "go to the people" digitally as well. Exposure to partisan media has been shown to exacerbate affective polarization, especially when shared on social media by like-minded people (Stroud, 2010; Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Gabler, 2016; Settle, 2018). Participating in these digital ecosystems will raise the possibility that the benefits generated by the university will reach more of its detractors. It also delivers information directly to the masses. A study by Reijlan and Garzia (2023) found that the U.S. is the rare case where affective polarization among leaders is much greater than it is among voters. Engaging directly, rather than having information filtered through policy elites, can correct misperceptions and stereotypes of the out-party, which reduces partisan animus (Ahler & Sood, 2018; Druckman, et al, 2022; Blattner & Koenen, 2023).

A third idea is to make alliances with stakeholders trusted by the opposition and have them serve as validators of the university's value. On the issues, there is evidence to suggest that voters may be closer than they appear. There is a difference between what scholars call an

"operational" ideology, which aligns with one's preferences on the issues, and a "symbolic" ideology," which is how one identifies themselves in social and political dialogue (Ellis & Stimson, 2012). While these two types may at times align, there are decades of data that show how shifts in voter affect does not correlate with shifts in voter ideology (Mason, 2015; Iyengar, et al, 2019). In other words, some of this might be about the messenger rather than the message. A common heuristic in politics today is to consider ideas from one's own side as good and virtuous, and ideas from the other side as bad and untrustworthy (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015). Labels have a tremendous impact on how people react to an issue (Goggins & Theodoridis, 2018). If one of "them" from UW-Madison tells me the proposed engineering building is worth the capital investment, that might not be as well received as if someone who owns a manufacturing firm in my home district says it. The latter is the case of a "cross-cutting identity," or one that does not fit in today's normal identity stack, which has the effect of reducing negative feelings and increasing tolerance of new ideas (Lipset, 1960; Nordlinger, 1972; Powell, 1976; Brader, et al, 2009). Kevin Reilly recalled a time when he was feeling pressure from Republican legislators over their policy of giving the in-state tuition rate to any student who graduated from a Wisconsin high school, regardless of their parents' citizenship status. His strategy was to bring in people those same legislators trusted and have them make his case:

> When I got called to the hearing, I asked a couple farmers who are major farmers out in areas that were represented by Republicans to come with me and talk about the workforce in agriculture. So, I got them up there. They were great, you know. And the basic message was, "Look, if you guys really want to screw up our farms

> and the whole agricultural industry, let's treat these people badly and send them back from wherever they came." And that was the end of that. After that hearing, I never heard a thing. (Reilly, 2024)

David Walsh, who served on both the Board and in the Assembly, agreed, saying that businesspeople who support UW-Madison can be effective in promoting the economic returns of the university. Governance leaders ought to "get them at the same table with the legislators so that they know that their constituents are supportive" (D. Walsh, 2024).

To be sure, educating people about the benefits of the university, even with the help of a friendly face, isn't the cure-all for partisan affect. The incentives to stick with the party orthodoxy remain intact. Target audiences may be resistant to even having this sort of dialogue. If they do, governance leaders must be careful not to criticize people's current opinions or diminish them as simply ill-informed. And there may be principled differences at play, even if all sides are looking at the same data. The state budget is a limited pie, and people may place a higher priority on other investments. But even if the conversion rate is minimal, there are still a range of goods that could result from telling the university's story. In the same way as Recommendation #1, engagement across partisan identities weakens the perceptual screen common with affective polarization; UW-Madison will become more than just the out-group or the sum of its stereotypes. Being exposed to conflicting ideas also counters the worst impulses of partisan identity (Mason, 2015; Bougher, 2017; Iyengar, et al, 2019). If third-party validators are used, it could generate much-needed trust between the university and those previously opposed to elements of its work. Hetherington and Rudolph (2015) described the mistrust toward the actions and motivations of political opponents as a "polarization of trust," which has

a devastating effect on the ability of people to build consensus. If these validators can repair that trust, even modestly, it could forestall the worst cases of policy gridlock. And when policymakers find common ground, those cues get back to the masses, making higher education a less divisive political issue (Levendusky, 2010; Davis & Dunaway, 2016; Iyengar, et al, 2019). The downside of sharing your story and making your case across the state is negligible compared to the potential benefits that could come from a focused and sustained effort.

Proposed Actions for Governance Decision-Makers:

- Capital-to-Campus Tours – Each legislative session, invite all party leaders and members of the relevant congressional committees for campus visits to meet with students, alumni, scholars, and administrators
- Go to the People – Each legislative session, organize at least one event with party leaders and committee members in their home districts to rebuild trust and signal that the university is for everyone in the state
- Find Trusted Validators – For politically contested issues, build alliances with stakeholders trusted by the opposition to serve as validators of the university's value

<u>Recommendation #3: Broaden Your Fanbase</u>

"When all of us walk through this door, we cease being Democrats or Republicans. We instead become Regents of what we think is the finest public university system in America."

Charles Pruitt, former President, Wisconsin Board of Regents

In her final address to the Board of Regents, Chancellor Rebecca Blank emphasized that state flagships must have broad public support to thrive (G. Bump, 2022). They are chartered and supported with taxpayer dollars to provide a range of goods to the people and institutions of the state. If public universities are perceived to only be benefitting one side, they run the risk of losing legitimacy in the eyes of half the citizens, and their elected representatives. This would have a devastating effect on the teaching, research, and engagement missions of the university. This final recommendation builds on the prior two in that it is predicated on both stakeholder engagement and greater awareness of the statewide benefits of the university. With these efforts in place, governance decision-makers must try to make people not just aware of what the university is doing, but fans of it as well.

The fan analogy is used intentionally for two reasons. First, UW-Madison already has a dedicated fanbase across the state of Wisconsin. "We all love the Wisconsin Badgers," said Gordon Hintz. "A lot of people in the legislature have kids that attended state universities. They'll say that they had a good experience there" (Hintz, 2024). Sharing a rooting interest in a team has a powerful way of bringing people together, even – especially – people who might not align in other areas of life. Second, many scholars have likened the consequences of affective polarization as akin to supporting your favorite sports team (Goggin & Theodoridis, 2018). And your identity as a fan of that team shapes how you perceive information, where the strong desire is to maintain positive affect for your team. An emotional attachment also develops which creates a rooting interest for your team to win and for anything against that team to lose (Green, et al, 2002; Mason, 2013). To be clear, the objective is not to get people to switch loyalties; any sports fan understands that would be an exercise in futility. Instead, the goal is to

carve out new spaces where individuals and organizations can build affinity for UW-Madison, one that either stacks onto their existing support or serves as a balance to their opposition to the university on other topics. Studies have shown that directing people toward a common identity can reduce affective polarization. In a 2018 experiment by Levendusky, subjects were exposed to instances where national identity could unify political opponents, such as the 2008 Summer Olympics. These cases showed that appeals to national identity led subjects to consider out-group members as fellow Americans rather than political enemies (Levendusky, 2018). Appeals to the commonality of Badger fans should be encouraged in the same way.

This is another area where governance decision-makers can get creative in how they expand their fanbase. Getting people to root for Badgers Athletics is already being deployed to great effect. But that is just one of the many areas that students from Madison are competing. Middle- and high-school students and their families can enjoy supporting other competitions, from marching band to robotics to debate. Another way to build team spirit is by sharing a victory. The objective in this case is to find some area where there might be the potential for agreement and take advantage of the opportunity. This need not be a major policy initiative or an area where both sides have dug into their positions. But a win together on something that leaves both parties with positive feelings about the work of the university has present and future value. Policy compromises alone have not been shown to reduce affective polarization (Huddy & Yair, 2021). However, the signals that cooperation between in- and out-groups provide do have a moderating effect (Wagner & Praprotnik, 2023). Finally, the flip side of that idea is to avoid fights that accentuate the partisan battle lines. One former chair of UW-Madison's leading faculty body, the University Committee, warned that "there are shrill voices

on all sides" (anonymous, 2024a). They are there to wage partisan warfare and keep the partisan lines sharply drawn, not seek areas of common purpose. The best advice, according to Hintz, is "try to stay away from the fight" (Hintz, 2024).

Of the three recommendations made in this report, this one poses the greatest challenge for governance decision-makers. Over the past 15 years, many have already decided where they stand with UW-Madison. As former Regent Robert Atwell described it, "the University culture is characterized by more of a left-wing orientation and so their ability to engage the entire state" is difficult (Atwell, 2024). Whether it's the cost of tuition or the COVID protocols or the protection of free speech or the future of DEI programs, there is no starting from square one. Positions on these issues have unfortunately stacked with other partisan identities as well. When multiple identities reinforce one another, partisans are more likely to react emotionally in political matters, have a stronger division of friends and foes, and view any attacks on one aspect of their identity as an attack all the groups that make up this identity (Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Mason, 2018; Klein, 2021). In addition, sometimes a fight cannot be avoided; indeed, sometimes one *should* not be avoided, if it is in defense of a core university principle. But this should not dissuade governance leaders from seeking whatever gains they can in this way. Any new point of affinity for UW-Madison makes it that much easier to thrive in times of high polarization.

Proposed Actions for Governance Decision-Makers:

- Promote "Us v. Them" Opportunities – Take advantage of high-profile events (e.g., a football game against a border state) that can unify people across the state against a common opponent

- Find a Cross-Partisan Win – Cooperation is contagious. Seek areas of agreement that not only advance the university's objectives, but build trust and moderate confrontational forces on each side
- Avoid the Partisan Battlefield – Seek acceptable compromises on the issues of highest national attention (and tension) to prevent their impact on regular business

Conclusion

More than 40 years ago, J. Victor Baldridge (1982) wrote the fable of the "Lost Magic Kingdom." This kingdom was Baldridge's idealized version of a university, but one that was unable to cope with the realities of the political forces that impact the kingdom. To restore the Magic Kingdom, he implored its members not to ignore these external forces, but to engage them. Said Baldridge, "Many of the controlling demons live off the campus; faculty statesmen must learn to journey to faraway kingdoms in order to protect their own home front" (Baldridge, 1982, p. 15). This lesson is still relevant today for governance decision-makers at public flagship universities.

As politically contested institutions, public universities have always been shaped to some degree by external forces. One of those forces is political polarization. The form of polarization that exists in the U.S. today – known as affective polarization – shapes nearly every aspect of social and political life. It is rooted in the notion of political affiliation as a social identity, which has profound impacts on how people perceive and behave in the political world (Bartels, 2002; Druckman & Bolsen, 2011; Jerit & Barabas, 2012; Bolsen, et al, 2014; Duran, et al, 2017; Fernandez-Vazquez & Theodoridis, 2019). This form of polarization divides the world into friends and foes; shapes how information is received; stereotypes out-group members; creates

fear, distrust, and antipathy in relations with political opponents; breaks down norms; impedes the policymaking process, often to the point of gridlock. These qualities are also rewarded in times of high polarization, as partisans become more active and policymakers remain in a perpetual campaign to win the next election. And there is little evidence that affective polarization will decline anytime soon.

While it may appear daunting, there are real, meaningful, achievable actions leaders can take to "protect their home front" and ensure that their institutions thrive during times of high polarization. This report identified three steps leaders can take to best position their universities now and in the future: 1) **Engage as people, not partisan identities** by fostering personal relationships with those who shape university governance. 2) **Educate people and institutions outside the university** on the broad benefits your school brings to the state, as well as the negative impacts of declining investment. 3) **Broaden your fanbase** by finding areas of common interest for people to root on and build affinities for the university. For governance decision-makers seeking a magic bullet to rid higher education of the ill effects of political polarization, this report – nor any other – will not meet that goal. Instead, the goal is to better understand the nature of the political polarization present in the U.S. today and the consequences this has on the governance of public flagship universities. And with that knowledge, consider steps governance leaders can take to bend the curve away from the worst impacts. These recommendations may not get us back to the Magic Kingdom. But they can bring us closer to the best version of a public university.

Conclusion

Political polarization is likely to remain high in the United States, at least in the short term. The current alignment of partisan, ideological, and social identities has conspired to create two sides in America, internally consistent and far apart from one another, each of whom can legitimately claim the support of roughly half the country. While this is troubling in many respects, it is not unique. Polarization in its various shapes and sizes has ebbed and flowed throughout American history. At some point in the future, it will decrease. Then it will increase again. Each time, the governance decision-makers in the nation's public flagship universities will have no power to fix the problem. But they will have the agency, and the responsibility, to learn about the problem and determine the best way to continue advancing the university's mission in spite of it. This study was conducted to advance that conversation among both scholars and practitioners.

There are limits to what this study can provide. First, the focus was on governance at public flagship universities, as that is the researcher's local context. Yet, public flagships represent less than 1% of the Title IV institutions of higher education, including less than 2% of the public institutions, in the United States today. Second, the impact of polarization was examined on university governance. This decision was made because public university governance is a politically contested space impacted by various external factors, making it a rich unit of analysis to examine the consequences of polarization. While this is the frame I selected for this study, it excludes many other types of schools, processes, and stakeholders for which polarization is a relevant phenomenon. I remain interested in the myriad ways in which political polarization impacts U.S. colleges and universities. A logical next step in this research

would be to expand the scope to all fifty public flagships. After that, perhaps a way to revise the model to encompass the full list of American public universities. Other scholars may find a different class of institutions, a different process, or a different group of stakeholders of interest. My hope is that this study offers a roadmap for how this important topic can be examined in other ways in the future.

I conclude with a note of optimism. When I first embarked on this study, I was unsure of the response I would receive from current and former governance leaders. Would they be reticent to speak on the issue? Would they say it wasn't actually a problem? Would they consider it a Sisyphean task to suggest a way forward? Instead, the response was overwhelmingly in the other direction. The agreements to participate came in fast, including from people in the most senior positions – former System president, current and former Board presidents, committee and chamber leaders in the Wisconsin legislature. Though the topic was on division in America, there was consensus in their perspectives that political polarization is a problem. There was unity across party, ideology, gender, urbanicity, stakeholder group, and other dimensions where agreement is nearly impossible today. They expressed gratitude that I had decided to take on this project, saying it was important for the university. They also asked when they could see the final recommendations and how I planned on sharing them with governance leaders around the state. The study – at least to governance decision-makers for UW-Madison – is worthwhile. With knowledge, ideas, and enough political will, we have what is needed to address, at our universities, one of the great challenges of our time.

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Appendix A: Timeline of Selected Events in Wisconsin, 2010-2025

2010

November
Republican Scott Walker is elected the next Governor of Wisconsin. The Republican Party takes control of both houses of the Wisconsin legislature. Republican candidates also win the races for every statewide office except the Secretary of State. The Republican gains in Wisconsin are part of a nationwide shift to the right in the 2010 midterm elections. Driven by Tea Party enthusiasm, the Republican Party picks up a net of 63 seats in the House (the largest shift since 1948, giving the GOP control of the House), seven seats in the Senate, six state governorships, and 20 state legislative chambers.

2011

February
Gov. Walker introduces Assembly Bill 10, which would cut benefits and eliminate collective bargaining rights for most state employees. The proposal leads to large demonstrations outside the Wisconsin State Capitol. Fourteen Democratic senators leave Wisconsin for three weeks to prevent a quorum from voting on the bill.

UW-Madison's Faculty Senate adopts the principles of a plan floated by Chancellor Carolyn Martin last fall (called the New Badger Partnership) to free the flagship university from state controls over various parts of its operations.

March
Gov. Walker releases his budget proposal, which supports the separation of UW-Madison from the rest of the UW System. The university would become a "public authority" rather than a state agency.

Gov. Walker signs Assembly Bill 10 into law, becoming Act 10.

May
The proposal to split UW-Madison from the other schools in the UW System is no longer under consideration.

June
Chancellor Martin resigns her position to become president of Amherst College. The Regents make clear that despite their contentious relationship over Martin's attempt to break UW-Madison away from the System, they did not push her out.

August
Gov. Walker signs Wisconsin Act 43, which enacts the state's legislative redistricting plan based on the 2010 Census. Critics argue that the plan is heavily gerrymandered to give the Republican Party nearly veto-proof majorities in both chambers of the legislature,

October
Wisconsin's Department of Administration informs the UW System that they are implementing a $174.3 million "lapse," which allows the state to withdraw a portion of funding previously allocated to agencies. This means another $65.6 million cut for the System, in addition to the $250 million cut in the biennial budget signed over the summer.

2012

March
Opponents of Scott Walker gather the necessary signatures to trigger a recall election.

June
Gov. Walker defeats Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, 53% to 46%, to win the special election and remain in office.

2013

February
Gov. Walker releases his proposed 2013-15 budget, which calls for $181 million in new taxpayer investments for the UW System. Many of these investments are geared toward economic development and workforce training programs. The proposed budget is roundly praised by the Board of Regents.

April
The Board of Regents approves the hiring of Rebecca Blank to be the next chancellor of UW-Madison. She succeeds David Ward, former chancellor from 1993-2000, who served as interim chancellor after Martin resigned.

May
Lawmakers are furious after it is reported that UW-Madison has nearly $650 million in reserves. In response, Gov. Walker recommends freezing tuition and scaling back his proposed budget increase over the next two years. The tuition freeze will cost UW institutions $42 million. The Board of Regents promises greater transparency on financial matters and a new policy regarding cash balances.

On the 23rd, the Joint Finance Committee advances a budget that cuts state funding for the UW System by $66 million over two years and requires UW schools to reallocate $78 million for new initiatives and other expenses. They also rejected Gov. Walker's recommendation to give the Board new authority over compensation plans for all UW employees.

June
UW-Platteville student Josh Inglett has his nomination to the Board of Regents rescinded after it is learned that he supported the recall effort against Gov. Walker. Speaker Robin Vos defends the rescinding.

For the first time in his tenure, Gov. Walker has more members on the Board of Regents than his predecessor, Gov. Jim Doyle (10 to 8).

July
UW System President Kevin Reilly announces he will resign his post. He claims that it is not due to the fallout over large cash reserves that drew the ire of lawmakers, including some who called for him to resign.

October
UW-La Crosse assistant professor of geography Rachel Slocum is embroiled in controversy over an email she sent her students where she blames the GOP for the recent partial government shutdown. A Republican student in her class posts the email, which goes viral, prompting a national story.

UW-Whitewater Chancellor Richard Telfer agrees to serve as interim president of the UW System when Kevin Reilly officially leaves his post at the end of the year.

2014

January
Raymond Cross is named the next President of the UW System

April
Gov. Walker calls for an additional two-year freeze on tuition at System institutions. Cross promises to find a solution to keep costs low as Walker wants.

October
The Board of Regents approves the UW System's Program Revenue Fund Balances report – a collaborative effort between the campuses, System, and legislature to better define and manage fund balances held by the campuses. The unprecedented level of transparency comes on the heels of a firestorm over high reserves at UW-Madison in recent years.

November
Scott Walker is reelected to a second term as governor.

2015

March
In his budget proposal, Gov. Walker tries to eliminate the words "knowledge," "truth," and "public service" from the UW mission statement – tenets central to "The Wisconsin Idea." University leaders are quick to defend the System's broad mission, which goes far beyond workforce training. Walker quickly backs away from the push, calling it a "drafting error." The same budget proposal calls for a reduction to the system's appropriations by roughly $300 million over two years, and freezing tuition during that period.

May
The GOP-controlled legislature declines Gov. Walker's proposal to give all universities within the System greater autonomy from regulations in exchange for major cuts in appropriations. The measure would also have stripped from state law faculty protections for tenure, shared governance, and academic freedom.

The Legislature's Joint Finance Committee, charged with finalizing the state budget, approves Senate Bill 21, which would limit the faculty's role in shared governance and eliminate laws protecting tenure. The committee's measure would allow universities to lay off tenured faculty members without declaring financial exigency.

June
The Board of Regents votes unanimously to add tenure protections to system policy as the Republican-led legislature appears ready to remove them from state law.

The Senate approves Michael Grebe to serve on the Board of Regents. Grebe's father is president and CEO of the conservative Bradley Foundation, who chaired Gov. Walker's gubernatorial campaigns. Michael Grebe argues the UW System should be run more like a business. His nomination meets with opposition among Democrats and his confirmation vote is split along party lines.

July
Gov. Walker signs the two-year budget, which includes the changes to tenure policy and shared governance.

October
Cross and the UW System chancellors release a joint statement in opposition of a concealed carry bill working its way through the legislature.

December
The Board of Regents adopts a statement reiterating its commitment to academic freedom and freedom of expression. The resolution incorporates language from statements made by the University of Chicago and Johns Hopkins University.

2016

February
Faculty leaders across the UW System sound alarms that the moves by the Board of Regents to protect tenure are too weak. Board President Regina Miller says the criticisms are unfounded and mirror what is in place in many other states.

March
The Board approves new policies regarding layoffs and tenure, over the objections of faculty leaders and a few board members.

April
The Board of Regents' Education Committee unanimously approves a version of the UW-Madison policy that excludes most of the provisions to restore faculty tenure rights. The committee's decision to revise the policy defied the wishes of UW-Madison's Faculty Senate, who asked that their proposal either be accepted without material alteration or returned for further discussion.

May
The UW-Madison Faculty Senate passes a vote of no confidence in UW System President Raymond Cross and the Board of Regents. In response, Regent President Millner releases a statement defending Cross.

October
Cross announces he is forming a UW System Business Council so that business and industry leaders can advise the System on how the universities can continue to best meet the needs of Wisconsin.

December
State Assemblyman David Murphy, who chairs the Committee on Colleges and Universities, calls a UW-Madison class entitled "The Problem with Whiteness" "garbage." He goes on to say, "If UW-Madison stands with this professor, I don't know how the University can expect the taxpayers to stand with UW-Madison." Gov. Walker responds that he does not agree with Murphy's call to withhold funding from the university if it doesn't drop the class.

2017

December
In accordance with the 2017-19 budget law, the Board of Regents votes nearly unanimously to monitor faculty workloads more closely. The only member to hold out is State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Evers.

October
The Board of Regents approves a policy that will compel campuses to suspend, and eventually expel, students who repeatedly disrupt controversial speakers and speech. State legislatures, including in Wisconsin, have passed similar policies this year based on model legislation created by the Goldwater Institute.

UW System President Raymond Cross announces that each of the state's 13 associate-granting colleges (not technical colleges) will be merged with a baccalaureate-granting university within the UW System.

2018

November
Tony Evers defeats Scott Walker to become governor-elect of Wisconsin. Democrats also hold the Secretary of State and flip the other three statewide offices, giving them full control of the executive branch. Republicans maintain control of both houses of the legislature.

2019

January
Gov. Evers delivers his first inaugural. In it, he says, "The budget that I'll be introducing in the coming weeks is about connecting those dots. And to no one's surprise, it begins—as it always has for me—with education."

Assemblyman and chair of the Committee on Colleges and Universities Dave Murphy sends a letter to UW-Madison political science professor Kenneth Mayer criticizing his negative comments about President Trump in his course syllabus. He sends the letter to the Assembly and Senate committees and to members of the Board of Regents, UW System president, and UW-Madison chancellor. In response, UW-Madison issues a statement of support for Prof. Mayer.

October
The Board of Regents votes to amend current policy on punishments for students who restrict free speech on campus. The policy mandates suspension and eventual expulsion, which is farther than many other states have gone. Gov. Evers' office says he will not approve the new policy, which is required for it to go into effect.

December
Wisconsin begins its search for a new UW System president. The process draws fear and criticism from faculty who feel they are being shut out of the process and who do not trust the Board of Regents. Due to a 2017 policy change, the search committee has been reduced to nine people, half of which must be Regents. There are no faculty members on the search committee.

2020

June
University of Alaska President James Johnson withdraws from the UW System presidential search. He was announced as the only finalist. Assembly Speaker Robin Vos releases a statement blaming "leftist liberals" for driving Johnson out of the search.

July
UW System Interim President Tommy Thompson tells the Board of Regents at his first meeting that he is committed to having students back on campus in the fall. Thompson, a four-term governor and former HHS Secretary, is working with federal officials to help the higher education sector secure the necessary supports to return to normal operations.

2021

June
Edmund Manydeeds defeats Michael Grebe by a vote of 10-8 to become the next president of the Board of Regents. It is a rare example of a competitive vote for the Board presidency.

2022

January
The UW System announces that Jay Rothman has been selected as its next president. He takes office on June 1.

February
The Board votes unanimously to remove the "interim" designation on Thompson's title, making him the eight UW System President.

May
The Board of Regents unanimously approves the selection of Jennifer Mnookin, dean of the UCLA School of Law, to be the next chancellor of UW-Madison. Republicans in the state legislature quickly condemn the hiring. Speaker Vos says it's a "blatant partisan selection" and calls on the Board to reconsider. The current board includes nine Regents selected by Evers and seven by Walker.

August
Mnookin officially begins her tenure as chancellor of UW-Madison on the 4th.

November
The UW System releases the free-speech survey that was delayed since the spring over political and procedural concerns. The survey asks students for their perspectives on "campus free expression, viewpoint diversity, and self-censorship."

Gov. Evers wins reelection to a second term.

2023

March
In response to the results of the free speech survey, Assemblyman Dave Murphy said he plans to hold several hearings on campus speech. He also plans to introduce a bill, similar to one he proposed in 2022, that would block universities and technical colleges from enforcing time, place, or other restrictions on free-speech events anywhere on campus except classrooms.

June
Wisconsin Republicans in the Assembly try a new strategy in the national fight against diversity, equity, and inclusion programs (DEI) by proposing a budget that cuts $32 million in funding to the UW System, which is the equivalent of what the System would spend on DEI during the budget period. Gov. Evers responds that he will veto any budget that contains the $32 million cut.

October
Gov. Evers sues several Republican legislators for obstructing "basic government functions," including salary increases that had already been budgeted for system employees. GOP leaders pledged to withhold the pay increase until all DEI positions were eliminated.

December
After a months-long standoff between the UW System and the Republican-controlled Assembly, the two sides broker a deal to release $800 million in state funds – for long-delayed UW pay raises and key campus building projects – if the system agreed to realign dozens of DEI positions and support several other GOP-backed priorities. The deal was initially rejected by the Board of Regents by a vote of 9-8. Following threats by Republican lawmakers, the Board reconvened four days later and passed an identical resolution, 11-6.

In a 4-3 decision, the Wisconsin Supreme Court rules that the voting maps as currently drawn violate the state constitution and must be redrawn before the 2024 elections.

2024

January
Sixteen Republican legislators from both chambers, including Speaker Vos, introduce a constitutional amendment that would prohibit all state-government entities from discriminating against or granting preferential treatment to people on the basis of race, sex, ethnicity, or national origin during hiring processes.

March
The Senate rejects the appointments of John Miller and Dana Wachs to the Board of Regents. They are the first Regents to be rejected in more than 30 years. Both Miller and Wachs voted against the compromise budget in December.

May
Regent Robert Atwell, appointed by Walker in 2017 (one of two remaining on the Board), says that despite his term ending this month he will not step down until the Senate confirms a successor to his seat. In 2022, the State Supreme Court ruled that political appointees do not have to leave their posts until a successor is confirmed. Atwell eventually resigns a month later.

November
In the November statewide elections, Democrats close the gap from 29 seats to nine in the Assembly and from 11 seats to three in the Senate.

2025

February
Gov. Evers proposes a biannual budget that includes over $856 million for higher education, the largest-ever two-year increase in state support for the Universities of Wisconsin

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Question #1**:** It's been [insert number] years since you served [position]. How would you describe the role of [position] in the governance of the University of Wisconsin-Madison?

Potential follow up: Did this align with your own perspective on what constitutes "good governance"?

Question #2: What are some of the key external forces and factors that impacted the work of [position] in relation to university governance? What thoughts or guidance were you given on these relationships before you [took your position]? From whom?

Potential follow up: How did this advice guide your thinking?

Question #3: What sort of interactions do [position] have with Wisconsin policymakers, either legislators or officials from the governor's office? *[Note: For Wisconsin policymakers this question will refer to interactions with governance decision-makers at UW-Madison]*

- Tell me about an interaction that was particularly memorable. Why that one?

Question #4: In what ways has the party composition of the state government impacted governance at UW-Madison?

Potential follow up: For instance, was it different when there was one-party control versus when government was divided, either between the state houses or between the legislature and the governor?

Potential follow up: When there are political shifts in the state, how does your role shift? Could you give an example?

Question #5: What is an issue upon which it was most difficult to achieve consensus? Why?

Potential follow up: What role did the political dynamics of that time play in making that such a challenging issue?

Question #6: In your experience, what were the consequences from the external political environment that impacted university governance? Is there a specific instance to which you can point to illustrate this?

- How, if at all, was the ability to govern in any way impacted? How did it affect maintaining existing policy and creating new policy?
- Describe any instances where relations or interactions were characterized by distrust or enmity toward the other side.

Question #7: Can you describe a time when the consequences of polarization in the political environment were overcome?

Question #8: What advice would you give to current and future [role] on how best to think about their work during times of high political polarization?

Appendix C: List of Documents

Wisconsin Board of Regents

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