Tanya Domi:

Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi:

Javier Padilla is a PhD student of political science at the Graduate Center, CUNY. He holds a dual bachelor degree in law and business from Universidad Autónoma of Madrid, and a master's degree in philosophy and public policy at the London School of Economics. His research is focused on electoral behavior, public opinion, and the European political space.

Tanya Domi:

Javier won the Comillas Award in 2019 for his biography, A finales de enero, which deals with the life of three Spanish students engaged in the anti-Francoist movement in Spain. Padilla shares his research on affective political polarization of the American public with respect to the Corona 19 novel virus today. Welcome to the Thought Project, Javier Padilla.

Tanya Domi:

I wanted to start off and explain what affective polarization is. So you have, in fact, political science research on polarization.

Tanya Domi:

This is a theory in political science that previously had viewed polarization as primarily seen only in issue based terms, but a new type of division has emerged in the mass public in recent years. Ordinary Americans increasingly disliked and distrust those from the other party.

Tanya Domi:

Democrats and Republicans both say that the other party's members are hypocritical, selfish, and close-minded, and they are unwilling to socialize across party lines. This phenomenon of animosity between the parties is known as affective polarization.

Tanya Domi:

I would like to say, at this point, and I want to think Javier, who was written the first blog for the Thought Project blog, Medium Vertical, that we're going to launch very soon, most likely in the next week. And this blog is titled "Coronavirus in the American Election: A story of polarization."

Tanya Domi:

Tell us how affective polarization influences democratic functions in general. Javier, you describe that for us?

Javier Padilla:

Yes. affective polarization is problematic for the functioning of any democracy, because it can make more difficult the reaching of any compromise between the political parties. And also, it can deteriorate the way in which the population live.

Javier Padilla:

For example, some studies have found that Democrats and Republicans are less likely to be willing to marry a person from the other party. And this tendency has increased in the last years. And in other countries, we can see that this phenomenon is also occurring, and this is highly problematic, in many regards, for any democratic country.

Tanya Domi:

Right, yeah. Your previous work is on Spain. And you said that it is present there, and less so in Germany. Can you tell our audience why?

Javier Padilla:

I mean, the data is not definitive yet. But the idea is that in Spain, the country was already somehow polarized, and then the coronavirus crisis increased that tendency. So the people are divided in partisan lines, regarding on whether they think that the party in the government is doing a good job with the coronavirus.

Javier Padilla:

However, in Germany, we don't see that tendency, so the partisan divide is not so high. We can see that most of the people, independently of what are the party, or the actual party, they think that Merkel and the government in Germany is doing a good job with the coronavirus.

Tanya Domi:

That's really interesting. And I want to talk later about the behavior of the leaders, and how that may indeed affect this polarization. So what did you find? How polarized are Americans on the issues confronting the American electorate?

Tanya Domi:

I mean, we are less than two weeks out from a general election. Apparently, over 31 million people already voted, which is a historical high, and that this is an election like no other. And you used a Kaiser Family Foundation survey to measure issue polarization. So why don't you tell our audience what you found, in general, at the beginning of the survey?

Javier Padilla:

So yeah, the United States is one of the countries that the prioritization is higher, and this is very easy to see, if we evaluate, or we compare, how Democrats and Republican trust the candidate from the other party.

Javier Padilla:

We can see that the Democrats, they totally distrust Trump. With the Republican, it's not exactly the same. I mean, they mostly distract Biden, but there are some more nuances over there. But basically,

there is a big partisanship divide on whether they believe that the other party can provide reliable information on coronavirus.

Javier Padilla:

Actually, this is not only happening with the other party, but also with the experts. So I have seen that Dr. Fauci was also polarized, and Democrats are trusting him, but Republicans are not.

Javier Padilla:

Even the CDC is going through a similar process, in which many Republicans somehow don't trust, at least in the degree in which it will be desirable, to be able to go away from the coronavirus crisis.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah. And it's also noted, in that slide, that Dr. Birx was not viewed with as much polarity. And I want to ask you here, do you think there is a correlation between the behavior of President Trump, who has repeatedly attacked Dr. Fauci, and actually less so of Dr. Birx? I wonder if there's a correlation that you didn't measure, necessarily, but I'd like to hear your thoughts on that.

Javier Padilla:

From my point of view, there is no doubt this is the case. So President Trump is influencing, so it's that top-down relationship. So the Republican base is very receptive to what the President is saying. And that's maybe the reason, because I should do some kind of outside test, to see that whether that is happening or not.

Javier Padilla:

But in principle, as an hypothesis, I will say that it's here, or at least it is plausible, that Trump is having a big influence on the polarization of different experts in the United States. And something interesting in that, like with Fauci, he was working with both the Democrats and the Republicans. And Trump has criticized it, in many different regards, and he said that he was a Democrat, without any base.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Javier Padilla:

Clearly, that has had a lot of influence. Something also that could be interesting to see is whether Dr. Fauci is better seen by Democrats, because of Trump's criticism, or has always been seen as a respected doctor or expert.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Javier Padilla:

But in any case, the situation with the expert is problematic. It is not only happening in the US, but also, we saw that in the UK, with the Brexit campaign, there is something that is a, kind of a trend.

Tanya Domi:

That's a trend, right? And just this week, it's been widely reported that in a White House meeting, Trump attacked Dr. Fauci in a meeting, and also called him an idiot.

Tanya Domi:

Now I think that, just given his career, having served and advised six Presidents, I think he's very well known and very well-established. So I'm not sure that Democrats would just put their faith in him, based upon the fact that he was attacked by Trump.

Tanya Domi:

I think it's based on his track record, but certainly, also take note of just another thing that happened this past week, is it Dr. Fauci was issued a second citation by the American Academy of Medicine. It is unprecedented, never been done before, and they honored him for his service of more than six decades, and also his work on COVID. So he is an interesting person in the eye of the politics of the COVID pandemic.

Tanya Domi:

As I said to you earlier, before we started, what I was most surprised by, in the Kaiser Foundation survey, is that while Republicans ranked healthcare as their number one issue at the time of this survey, Democrats did not. Democrats felt race relations was their greatest concern.

Tanya Domi:

And the independent voters viewed the Corona 19 novel virus as their top issue, crosscutting, intersecting with the Republicans. I'd like to hear your thoughts about those issues, and how they were perceived and ranked by the respective party numbers.

Javier Padilla:

This is very interesting, because it's not like only Republicans and Democrats are divided on the issues, on the policies that they want, or on the distrust for the different politician, or experts. But they also don't agree on which topic is more important.

Javier Padilla:

In my case, I wasn't very surprised to see that Republicans are mostly worried about the economy, and the criminal justice and policy, as it has been following the law and order, and the recovery of the economy, and the mandate that Trump has been trying to enforce. Meanwhile, in the Democrats, it is interesting to see that race relations plays a very important role, also healthcare, of course, the coronavirus outbreak.

Javier Padilla:

So we can see that the preferences and the saliency of different issues, that maybe explain why we see so many difference between the two parties, and how they address the electorate. Regarding the point of the experts before, it is interesting that the Republican is doing something that was already done by the Conservative Party in the UK, that is, this kind of distrust of experts in general.

Javier Padilla:

This goes back in time, because Republicans, or some wings of the Republican Party, have been always undermining science, for example, in the case of climate change. So this was from a long time ago. But now, with the COVID crisis, the consequences can be more visible for the general population.

Tanya Domi:

Right. And it would be interesting to see a second poll, second survey by Kaiser, getting into October, in the Supreme Court nominee hearings, and the shift to the healthcare situation, because now you have a scheduled case hearing in front of the Supreme Court, on November 8th, on whether or not the ACA will continue as it has existed, the Affordable Care Act. And this became a major focus of Democrats during the nominee's hearings this past couple of weeks.

Tanya Domi:

It would be interesting to see what Democrats would say today on those issues, how they would rank them today. It does seem, that as you have suggested, Americans are definitely occupying different parts of the world, and they, as you also said, it's very clear that Republicans have an established track record of doubting science, with respect to climate change, in particular. And you have the administration even striking the term "climate change" from government websites. And also, it's become banned vocabulary for use by administration officials.

Tanya Domi:

In your last graph, you evaluate and measure how Republicans and Democrats respond to how wearing a mask or not wearing a mask limits or enables the spread of coronavirus. What did you find?

Javier Padilla:

Yeah, I mean, I found that there were a striking difference between them. So, while Democrats think that wearing a mask is very helpful, to limit the spread of coronavirus, and the Republicans are more divided, and 30% of them think that wearing a mask is useless.

Javier Padilla:

I guess this also respond to what we were talking before, about Trump performances in the past, together, of course, with the fact that many Republicans do not believe in science anymore. The combination of the two factors may play a critical role here, and this has very serious consequences, in different regards.

Javier Padilla:

For example, a professor from CUNY, Keena Lipsitz, it has shown that in the Republican counties, the mobility was higher than in the Democratic ones. And therefore, the spread of coronavirus could be higher too. So that was problematic, because it suggests that affective polarization, and the fact that Republicans are not following the kind of-

Tanya Domi:

The CDC guidance, right?

Javier Padilla:

Yeah.

Tanya Domi:

Right. Yeah. By mobility, the Democrats were locked down, they agreed to be locked down, they were very careful. Republican areas, and now you can see, in the United States, as of yesterday, 31 States now have red hot spots, where you're seeing in Utah, North Dakota, across the West, in Idaho, where hospitals are being overrun.

Tanya Domi:

This really isn't a second wave. It's just basically the first wave, because they never really locked down. They never locked down, they never gave out mask orders. Just yesterday, I saw that the mayor of Fargo, North Dakota actually did issue a mask ordinance. And he told Rachel Maddow, who was reporting on that situation, that he expects other mayors in North Dakota to do the same, now that the outbreak is overrunning hospitals. That's very interesting.

Tanya Domi:

Now, I would also ask you about Trump's performance in this area. He wears a mask when he's forced to, one, when he went to Walter Reed, before he got COVID. He was forced to, he was told before he got to the hospital to visit soldiers, he would have to wear a mask.

Tanya Domi:

Then he gets COVID, and as soon as he gets out of the hospital, he does this dramatic unmasking on the balcony, the Truman Balcony of the White House. What do you think about that performance and what does that communicate to the American public?

Javier Padilla:

No, that responds to Trump's logic over time, he will do there, liberate how many states, and a campaign that was a disaster. And now, the last thing with the mask was totally irresponsible. And it is interesting, because now we will see, and evaluate whether there are more or less Republican thinking that wearing a mask doesn't help limit the spread of coronavirus.

Javier Padilla:

Because we have seen, that for the President, it wasn't something to take into account. The way in which the elites have been behaving, not only in the United States, but in many other countries, the political elites' behavior, has been quite problematic, in terms of democratic accountability. And in the case of Donald Trump, it has been another level of confusion. So ...

Tanya Domi:

Well, it's one of the most extreme examples in the world, you're saying?

Javier Padilla:

Exactly, yeah, yeah.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah.

Javier Padilla:

Yeah. I will say that, Donald Trump, I am not an expert. I don't know whether there will be, for sure, other countries, probably non-democratic countries that have been facing, even, more crazier personalities ruling the state.

Javier Padilla:

But in the case of the United States, we are talking about a democracy, a consolidated democracy. And the way in which it is governed, it is difficult to understand, sometimes, for people that are not from this country.

Tanya Domi:

So lastly, here we are, we're less than two weeks out. And you summarize, from your survey of the Kaiser Foundation survey, and how you measure effective polarization, that Americans are not only effectively polarized, but they possess opposite views of the world. And based on that conclusion, Javier, who do you think will win on November 3rd?

Javier Padilla:

I mean, I think, and I hope that Biden will win, in part, because I'm an internationalist student, and if Trump wins, you have to leave the country. But I really think that's going to happen. But the point is that the level of prioritization and misinformation, distrust, is going to remain, whatever it happens. So it's going to be a complicated situation for the country.

Javier Padilla:

But in the case, Trump wins, I don't know, but the situation in the United States can get incredibly tough. So I hope Biden will win. And I think that Biden is a good candidate for the Democrats in one thing, at least, is that he will generate less hate and less distrust than other candidates.

Javier Padilla:

You can see that in the data, actually, and the Republicans somehow trust more Biden than the Democrats trust Trump, and I don't know whether this will be the case, if another Democratic candidate will be the candidate. In any case, Biden will have a lot of difficulties. And I don't know whether the campaign of Biden has been great, I will say so, but we will see what's right, what happens.

Tanya Domi:

We shall see. A remarkable data point that was reported yesterday, in the state of Texas, they have already voted one-half of their total from 2016.

Tanya Domi:

I fully expect Texas to get very close to their 2016 vote, out so it maybe even surpasses it. It really reflects absolutely energized voting electorate, none like we have ever seen, at least in my lifetime, as well. And it will be an interesting election day.

Tanya Domi:

And I think the days that follow, we shall see who will, in fact, become the next president of the United States. Thank you very much for being with us today, Javier.

Javier Padilla:

Thank you. Thank you very much.

Tanya Domi:

And good luck in your pursuit of your PhD in the political science program. Thanks for tuning into the thought project and thanks to our guests. Javier Padilla, a PhD student in political science at the Graduate Center, CUNY.

Tanya Domi:

The Thought Project is brought to you with production engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolfe, of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.