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Political Alienation in American Society

Michael Wood

Undergraduate Thesis

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Abstract:

Political alienation is a topic of enormous importance to American society. It can inspire protest voting, renunciation of citizenship, and violent protest against the established political system. It also reduces political participation, meaning that the views of the politically alienated are not as well-represented in government as the views of those who are not politically alienated. Despite this, there has been very little research into political alienation in the past two decades. This study attempts to help fill that void in the literature. I analyze pre-election (N=2,322) and post-election (N=2,102) survey data from the 2008 American National Election Survey to find the causes of political alienation among the population as a whole and among men and women separately. Ordinary least squares regression analysis and difference-of-slopes tests are used in this analysis. Results show several causes of political alienation in the population, including a low degree of civic engagement and little or no affiliation with a major political party. Also, a low level of education is found to be a cause of political alienation among women, but not among men. On the basis of these findings, several methods are proposed for the reduction of political alienation in American society. The limitations of this study are also addressed, as well as its implications for theory and future political alienation research.

Introduction

In a 1979 speech about the looming energy crisis, President Jimmy Carter identified a “crisis of confidence [...] that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will.” He declared that there was a “growing disrespect for government” among the American people and that “the gap between our citizens and our government has never been so wide,” (Lipset and Schneider 1983:379). At the time, a number of factors were thought to have influenced Americans’ feelings of distance from their government. Not only was the economy in a precarious position, but the massively unpopular Vietnam War had recently finished, the civil rights movement had failed to bring African-Americans out of their systematically disadvantaged position in American society, and second wave feminism was redefining gender roles across the country.

In response to these societal conditions, a great number of scholars investigated the causes and effects of political alienation in American society. In recent decades, however, academic interest in political alienation has all but disappeared. The irony is that many of the societal conditions that inspired political alienation research forty years ago are still present today. The War in Iraq has replaced the War in Vietnam, and the fight against terrorism has replaced the fight against communism. The economy is on a tentative rise, but millions of Americans are still feeling the calamitous effects of the financial crisis of 2008. Also, massive income and wealth inequality hinder the ability of low- and moderate-income households to reap the benefits of a healing economy.

This study uses survey data to investigate the recent causes of political alienation in the American citizenry. Before going any further, however, it is useful to precisely define political

alienation.

What is political alienation?

Weakliem and Borch (2006:415) have defined alienation as “a sense of weakened attachment to the central institutions in society.” Political alienation, then, is a weak attachment to the central *political* institutions in society: Congress, elected officials, the institution of voting, and so on. Oskarson (2007:118) goes further, defining political alienation as a combination of disinterest in political affairs and a lack of trust in public officials. Reef and Knoke (1999:414) claim that political alienation is “a social condition in which citizens have or feel a minimal connection with the exercise of political power.” Citlin et. al. (1975:3) emphasize that political alienation is characterized by an “enduring sense of estrangement” from political institutions, leaders, and values. It is important to note that one can feel distant from individual political leaders or from certain political institutions without feeling alienated from political leaders and institutions in general. Political alienation, however, is a generalized feeling. It goes beyond disapproval for individual politicians or institutions. The following definition will be used throughout this paper:

Political alienation refers to a generalized feeling of distance from the central political institutions, leaders, and political values of society.

Measurement of political alienation is slightly more complex. Scholars have identified a number of dimensions of political alienation, including cynicism, negativism, value rejection, and distrust (Citlin et. al. 1975:2). Finifter (1970:390-391), for example, has dimensionalized political alienation into four distinct categories: political powerlessness, political

meaninglessness, perceived political normlessness, and political isolation. Political powerlessness refers to an individual's feeling that she has no influence over the policies that are put in place by political leaders. Political meaninglessness occurs when there is little to no predictability in political events. Under this condition of political alienation, the individual cannot make any meaningful political choices because any choice she makes will not have a predictable outcome and thus cannot be used to effect social change. Political normlessness is linked to Emile Durkheim's theory of anomie.¹ Anomie occurs when the individual believes that the rules that govern political relations are not being followed, that corruption and self-serving politicians are rampant. Finally, political isolation refers to an alienation from the political norms that are accepted by the rest of society. Finifter (1970:391) asserts that political isolation can be exhibited by the belief that "voting or other socially defined political obligations are merely conformist formalities, or, indeed, that public participation is inappropriate in the formulation of public policy."

A second method of dimensionalizing political alienation identifies political efficacy and political trust as the two essential components of political alienation (House et. al. 1985). Political efficacy refers to an individual's belief that her personal actions have a real effect on the decisions made by political leaders. Political trust, on the other hand, refers to an individual's belief that such personal action is necessary (Gamson 1968:42). Almond and Verba make a similar distinction. They emphasize the difference between a trust-based "output affect," or "the expectations of how [people] will be treated by [government officials]" (Almond and Verba

¹ Anomie refers to a social condition in which the bonds between the individual and society have broken down. This condition is characterized by feelings of normlessness. Political normlessness is one aspect of the anomie that Durkheim describes. Durkheim's famous study, *Suicide*, linked feelings of anomie with heightened rates of suicide among Europeans (Durkheim 1951 [1897]).

1965:68) and an efficacy-based “input affect,” which measures “the feelings people have both about those agencies and processes that are involved in the election of public officials and about the enactment of general public policies” (Almond and Verba 1965:67). In this model, political trust and political efficacy combine to measure the concept of political alienation.

For the purposes of this study, political trust and political efficacy are considered the two components of political alienation. This method of dimensionalizing political alienation has the advantage of being relatively simple; it has two dimensions instead of four. Political efficacy and political trust encompass all four of the dimensions of political alienation identified by Finifter. For its part, political efficacy is the rough equivalent of Finifter’s political powerlessness. Both terms refer to an individual’s inability to meaningfully influence the political system. Political trust is an individual’s degree of faith in political leaders and institutions to act in his interest. It encompasses Finifter’s political normlessness and political meaninglessness, both of which identify reasons why someone would lack faith in political leaders and institutions. It also addresses political isolation, albeit indirectly. To the extent that an individual’s dislike of the dominant political values of society manifests itself in distrust for the political leaders and institutions that embody those values, political trust encompasses Finifter’s idea of political isolation.

Significance

Political alienation presents a number of concerns. Studies have linked feelings of political alienation with renunciation of American citizenship (Finifter 1970), abstention from voting (Herring 1989, Plane and Gershtenson 2004), protest voting (Thompson and Horton 1960), and open and sometimes violent protest of the established political regime (Herring

1989). Easton (1965:220) has argued, “[w]here the input of support falls below [a certain] minimum, the persistence of any kind of system will be endangered. A system will finally succumb unless it adopts measures to cope with the stress.” Thus, according to Easton, the continued existence of the American political system depends on the level of political alienation not falling below a certain threshold. If American society is to combat these problems, these scholars argue, it must address the issue of political alienation.

By contrast, Wright (1976) has argued that high levels of political alienation do not threaten a democratic system. His research revealed that political alienation is found in roughly equal amounts among people of different races, political ideologies, and sexes. Therefore, he says, it is nearly impossible to unify the alienated to bring about fundamental change in government. However, Wright does not see this as a bad thing. He cites evidence that the masses are “racially bigoted, anti-Semitic, disrespectful of the rights of minorities and intolerant of dissent, authoritarian, anomic, hostile to outgroups, politically simple-minded, demagogic, tough and punitive in foreign policy orientation, belligerent, irrational, and otherwise deficient in an entire range of matters far too numerous to list” (Wright 1976:13). In the face of the inadequacy of the masses, Wright promotes the idea that a democracy should be run by educated elites who believe in democratic ideals and who have the training and intelligence to effectively govern a country. Although this seems anti-democratic, Wright points to the American marriage of democracy and representation as justification for his view. The masses elect their representatives, and the representatives govern the country. These representatives are usually upper- or upper-middle class, educated, and believers in democratic ideals. Under such a system, he argues, the alienation of even a majority of the population does not necessarily threaten the survival of the government.

To substantiate this claim, Wright (1976:113) points to 1972 survey data that indicate 53% of the American public believed that the government was run for the benefit of a few big interests and 49% thought that public officials did not care what they thought. Despite such a distrustful and alienated public, the American government continued to function as it always had. Indeed, in the forty years since Wright's research, no serious popular threat to the continued existence of the American government has emerged.

Hetherington (2005), however, presents an alternative explanation for why political alienation is important: its effect on policy. Declining support for progressive social programs like welfare and food stamps, he argues, cannot be explained by a change in the American public's ideology, since the ratio of liberals to conservatives has remained more or less constant since the 1960s. Hetherington presents the alternative hypothesis that the lack of support for social programs is caused by a decline in the American people's trust in their political leaders. The majority of Americans pays for welfare programs but does not receive any benefit from them. Therefore, if Americans cannot trust the government to distribute welfare resources effectively and to prevent abuses of the system, they are unlikely to support welfare programs which do not benefit them directly. Hetherington's data confirm his hypothesis. Those who do not trust their government are generally less likely to support welfare or food stamp programs (Hetherington 2005).

My own argument for the importance of political alienation has both a philosophical and a practical basis. The United States was founded as a democratic republic, a nation in which the people have the power to choose their own leaders and determine their own political destiny. If American citizens do not feel that their elected leaders are effectively representing their beliefs, or that they themselves have no way to affect public policy, then the principles on which this

nation was founded are not being upheld. Political alienation, then, measures the extent to which the United States stays true to its foundational democratic principles.

Political alienation becomes an even bigger concern when it is unequally distributed throughout the citizenry. If certain categories of people do not engage with their political leaders as much as others, the needs of those people will likely go unaddressed. This leads to a situation in which the political establishment only concerns itself with the problems of a select group of people rather than the citizenry as a whole. The final report of the American Political Science Association's Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy argued that this is indeed the case today.

Today [...], the voices of American citizens are raised and heard unequally. The privileged participate more than others and are increasingly well organized to press their demands on government. Public officials, in turn, are much more responsive to the privileged than to average citizens and the least affluent. Citizens with lower or moderate incomes speak with a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government officials, while the advantaged roar with a clarity and consistency that policy-makers readily hear and routinely follow (Jacobs et. al. 2004:1).

By way of example, let us examine the carried interest provision in the American federal tax code. This provision allows individuals, usually hedge fund managers, to pay a 15% tax rate on capital gains earned by risking the money of others. The rate paid on this form of income is significantly lower than that paid on income from wages, which is taxed at a rate of 25% or more for all taxpayers who make \$36,250 or more per year. The carried interest provision disproportionately benefits wealthy financial executives, and the provision exists because of the well-funded and effective lobbying of the financial sector (Gibney 2012). By contrast, less well-funded anti-hunger lobbyists were unable to prevent federal lawmakers from cutting billions

from food stamp programs in the recently-passed Federal Agricultural Reform and Risk Management Act (Nixon 2014). I would argue that their failure was due not only to a lack of financial backing but also to the fact that the people they represent are alienated from the political system and thus unlikely to bother advocating on their own behalf. Lower- and lower-middle class Americans make up a significant proportion of the constituencies of almost all federal politicians. If they were to vote out of office representatives that did not cater to their interests, the American political system would be profoundly different.

Factors Affecting Political Alienation

Disadvantaged Place in Society: The Role of Race and Class

In contrast to Wright's research (1976: 270), which showed that "political alienation is pretty weakly correlated with most sociodemographic variables," many scholars have suggested that political alienation is unequally distributed throughout the American citizenry; those who are marginalized or disadvantaged by mainstream society are more likely to be politically alienated. Thompson and Horton (1960:195) found that "a deprived position in the social structure appears to be a significant factor which contributes to political alienation." In a recent study, Cohen (2010) found that black youth scored consistently higher on measures of political alienation than did white youth. Finifter (1970) found that political powerlessness was most common among those with little education. Herring (1989) found that political inefficacy was particularly high among blacks, those with low incomes, and those with low levels of education. In keeping with these findings, I hypothesize that:

1. Blacks are more politically alienated than Whites.

2. The higher one's income level, the lower her level of political alienation.

Gender

The literature tying gender to political alienation is sparse, but some findings have nevertheless emerged. Citrin et. al. (1975) found no statistically significant gender difference with regard to political alienation. However, in a longitudinal study spanning from 1966 to 2005, Weakleim and Borch (2006) found that women's levels of political alienation increased at a faster rate than that of the general population. In light of the inconclusive findings regarding gender and political alienation, I hypothesize that:

3. Males and females have approximately equal levels of political alienation.

Political Party Affiliation

Political structure and interest group theory (Herring et. al. 1991) states that political alienation varies according to the degree to which specific interest groups are served by the existing political climate. For example, this theory would predict that political alienation is low among small business owners in a political climate that is pro-business. It would also predict that Democrats would be less politically alienated in a political climate controlled by Democrats and that Republicans would be less politically alienated when their party held the majority. Accordingly, since Democrats controlled Congress in late 2008 when the survey was taken, and since their candidate for President, Barack Obama, was the favorite to win the Presidency at that time, I hypothesize that:

4. Democrats are less politically alienated than Republicans at the time the ANES was taken.

Strength of Party Affiliation

Social identity theory (Tajfel 1981; Turner 1991) states that individuals develop their own self-concept based in part on the social groups to which they belong. It predicts that individuals are likely to adopt attitudes and beliefs that are commonly held by other group members (Bettencourt and Hume 1999). The Democratic and Republican Parties stand opposed to political alienation because they both promote the legitimacy of the American political system by nominating and supporting candidates for public office. Therefore, in accordance with social identity theory, I hypothesize that

5. Those who are strongly affiliated with either political party are less politically alienated than those who have weak or no political party affiliations.

Preferred Presidential Candidate

Consistent with the political structure and interest group theory (Herring et. al. 1991), those whose preferred Presidential candidate is behind in pre-election polling are likely to be more politically alienated. Since Barack Obama was the heavy favorite to win the Presidency at the time that the ANES survey was conducted, I predict that:

6. Those who plan to vote for John McCain will be significantly more alienated than those who plan not to.²

² I chose to analyze respondents' voting intentions before the election rather than their self-reported voting record after the election because of the tendency of post-election polls to overestimate the percentage of the population that voted for the winning candidate (Crow et. al. 2010).

Civic Engagement

In his book *Bowling Alone*, Putnam cites participation in community service, volunteerism, and membership in community organizations as examples of civic engagement. He argues that the decline in political participation in America is indicative of a downward trend in civic engagement generally (Putnam 2000: 31-47). As explained above, a low level of political participation is indicative of a high level of political alienation. Based on Putnam's findings, I hypothesize that:

7. Those who are civically engaged are less politically alienated than those who are not civically engaged.

Interaction of Gender and Education

Despite the inconclusive research tying gender to political alienation, there is a well-documented gender gap in political participation. A 2001 study found that there were about 9 million fewer women than men who were affiliated with a political organization and that about 2 million fewer women than men had contacted their elected officials in the past year (Burns et. al. 2001:2) Karp and Banducci (2008) found that women are less likely than men to become involved in political campaigns, to attempt to persuade others, and to be satisfied with the concept of democracy, even after controlling for age and socio-economic status. Data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2013) show that this gap is particularly pronounced at the highest levels of government. Only 21.3% of MPs in the national parliaments who reported to the IPU were women.

Factors like level of education and general intelligence are tied to political knowledge and, to a lesser degree, political participation. However, some researchers have found that the

most convincing explanation for the gender gap in political participation is the fact that politics has historically been primarily a man's game (Burns et. al. 1997). American women gained the right to vote fewer than one hundred years ago, and the overwhelming majority of national political representatives are still male. When researchers isolated states with a female Senator, they found that the ability of women to correctly identify their Senator skyrocketed. Men's abilities to correctly identify their Senator increased as well, but this change was much more modest (Burns et. al. 1997). This finding indicates that female citizens would be more likely to become more involved in political life if there were more female politicians.

Karp and Banducci (2008) found that women are generally less interested in politics and less prone to believe in democratic ideals than are men. Hillygus (2005) found that high levels of education are associated with a greater degree of belief in democratic ideals and a greater tendency to participate politically. In short, education has been linked with a belief in the legitimacy of the established political system, and thus to low levels of political alienation. However, education cannot inspire interest in politics among those who already have it. Therefore, education is likely to decrease political alienation among women more dramatically than among men, since men generally already have much of the interest in political affairs that education promotes. Following this line of thinking, I hypothesize that:

8. Education suppresses political alienation in women more than in men.

Methodology

The Data Set

This study is based on a secondary analysis of 2008 Time Series data collected by American National Election Studies (ANES). The data set consists of two waves of interviews. The first took place before the 2008 Presidential election between September 2nd and November 3rd, 2008 and had a sample size of 2,322. The response rate for the first wave of interviews was an estimated 63.7%. The second wave of interviews was conducted after the election between November 5th and December 30th, 2008. This wave had a sample size of 2,102 and had a response rate of 57.7%. The relatively low response rate of both waves is mitigated somewhat by the fact that the demographic characteristics of the sample closely mirror those of the population from which it has been drawn. It is therefore unlikely that the response rate biased the sample in either the pre-election or the post-election survey. The target population of the study was English- or Spanish-speaking U.S. citizens of eighteen years of age or more who lived in the lower 48 states or the District of Columbia. Both waves of interviews were conducted face-to-face, but for certain sensitive questions, respondents' answers were self-recorded using Audio Computer Assisted Self-Interviewing technology.

Each wave also included an oversample of 350 Latinos and 310 African-Americans. In order to compensate for this oversampling, the data were weighted using the ANES post-election weighting system, which was centered on a mean of 1.0 and adjusted for attrition. Thus, the survey accurately represents those demographic groups who responded to the survey at a lower rate than the general population. Additionally, because it was adjusted for attrition, the survey

data accurately represents those demographic groups that were less likely than average to respond to the second wave of the survey after having responded to the first.

Measurement of Political Alienation

For the purposes of this analysis, political alienation has been operationalized according to the method developed by Almond and Verba (1963), Easton (1965), and Gamson (1968). This method identifies two dimensions of political alienation: political trust and political efficacy. Half of the ANES study respondents were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statement:

“Public officials don’t care much what people like me think.”

The other half were asked the following question:

“How much do public officials care what people like you think?”

Both versions of the question were designed to measure respondents’ levels of political trust, and both versions provided respondents with a five-point political trust spectrum on which to place themselves. For the first statement, the spectrum ranged from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree,” and the spectrum of the second statement ranged from “a great deal” to “not at all.” Those who either strongly agreed with the statement or who said that they thought that public officials cared “a great deal” about their opinions were given a rank of 1. Those who either strongly disagreed with the above statement or who thought that public officials cared “not at all” about what they thought were given a rank of 5. Thus, those respondents who score highly on either statement have a high level of political alienation.

The responses to both statements were combined into a single measure of political trust. On their faces, both statements measure the same concept: respondents' levels of political trust. Also, both use a five-point scale to measure the extent of that political trust, meaning that a score of 4 on one statement corresponds roughly to a score of 4 on the other. Therefore, the combination of the two statements doubles the sample size, allowing for more accurate statistical analysis without significantly changing the concept being measured.

Similarly, half of the ANES sample was asked how strongly it agreed or disagreed with this statement:

“People like me don't have any say about what the government does.”

The other half was asked this question:

“How much can people like you affect what the government does?”

Both of these versions attempted to measure respondents' perceived levels of political efficacy. Respondents asked the first question were told to place themselves on a 5-point agree-disagree spectrum, and respondents asked the second question were offered five different responses that ranged from “a great deal” to “not at all.” Those who strongly agreed with the first statement or who responded “not at all” to the second question were given a score of 5 on the political efficacy scale. Those who strongly disagreed or who responded “a great deal” were given a score of 1. Therefore, a high score on the political efficacy spectrum corresponds to a high level of political alienation.

As before, both statements were combined into a single measure of political efficacy. Again, this doubles the sample size without significantly altering the concept being measured.

After creating a single measure of political trust and another for political efficacy, the trust and efficacy measures were themselves combined to form a political alienation index in order to simplify the analysis³. To the extent that Almond and Verba (1963), Easton (1965), and Gamson (1968) were correct in their assessment of political alienation as a combination of political trust and political efficacy, the fusion of those two concepts into a single political alienation index has face validity. Because the ANES was administered once before the 2008 Presidential election and again after the election, two political alienation indexes were created. One index measures respondents' pre-election levels of political alienation and another measures their post-election political alienation. The purpose of including both pre-election and post-election measures of political alienation is to measure, albeit indirectly, the effect that the Presidential election itself has on respondents' levels of political alienation. If a respondent's political alienation is considerably higher after the election than before it, it can reasonably be inferred that the results of the election itself had something to do with the change in political alienation. Cronbach's alpha for the pre-election alienation index was 0.584, and the post-election alienation index had a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.612.

³In order to test the reliability of this procedure, one political alienation index was created by combining the first versions of the trust and efficacy questions and a second index was created by combining the second versions of those questions. Both of those subsample indexes were entered into separate regression models. The Pearson's r and Beta values of both models were compared with each other and with the values from the model ultimately used in the analysis. Some small differences were detected between the two subsample models, but there were no directly contradictory findings. In other words, there were no variables for which the two subsample models disagreed as to the direction of the correlation while both being statistically significant. This indicates that the two subsample indices can be combined into a single political alienation index without compromising the results.

Measurement of Independent Variables

Race

For the purposes of this study, race was dichotomized into two categories: white and black. Whites were assigned to category 1 and blacks were assigned to category 2. Those of other races or of mixed race were excluded from the study. These demographic groups were excluded for several reasons. First, analyzing only two racial groups – blacks and whites – simplifies the analysis. Second, much of political alienation research has analyzed the difference in political alienation between whites and blacks specifically. By limiting my research to those two racial groups, I am able to more effectively draw on previous research.

Gender

Gender was measured as a dichotomous variable. Males were assigned category 1 and females were assigned category 2.

Age

A respondent's number of years old at last birthday was used as the measure of age in this study. The categories for the age variable were not simplified or condensed in any way.

Social Class – Education and Household Income

For the purposes of this work, social class has been operationalized separately by educational attainment and household income. Traditionally, education, occupational prestige, and household income or wealth have been the three measures of objective social class (Adler et.

al. 2000; Oakes and Rossi 2003; Kraus et. al. 2011). However, the 2008 ANES did not include a question regarding occupational prestige. Therefore, occupational prestige has been dropped from the analysis, leaving two measures of social class. Education was measured by years of formal schooling, and household income was measured in dollars earned per year. The ANES created twenty-five ranges for household income and asked respondents to place themselves into one of those ranges. Each range typically spanned about \$5,000. Those ranges were preserved for the purposes of this analysis. The median household income figure listed in Table 1 was found by taking the midpoint of the median range. Education and household income were not combined or indexed in any way, allowing the analysis to measure the unique effects of education and household income on political alienation independently.

Civic Engagement Index

Putnam (2000) cites a number of ways in which one can become involved in his community, including political participation, involvement in a religious community, and philanthropy. The 2008 ANES asked respondents about their level of involvement in many of these same practices.⁴ From these questions, it was possible to create a civic engagement index capable of testing the hypothesis that civic engagement was negatively correlated with political alienation. It was found that, of the questions listed in Appendix A, the following questions were most closely correlated⁵ (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.696$):

⁴ See Appendix A for a complete list of survey questions that addressed civic engagement.

⁵All questions listed were asked in a dichotomous yes/no fashion. volunteer * meeting : gamma = .723 ; volunteer * community work: gamma = .795 ; meeting * community work: gamma = .863

- Were you able to devote any time to volunteer work in the last 12 months or did you not do so?
- During the past twelve months, did you attend a meeting about an issue facing your community or schools?
- During the past twelve months, have you worked with other people to deal with some issue facing your community?

A civic engagement index was created by combining respondents' answers to these three questions. Each response was weighted equally. Those who scored a 3 on the civic engagement index – that is, those who volunteered, attended a community meeting, and worked in the community in the past year – were considered highly civically involved. Respondents scoring a 2 were considered moderately civically involved. People scoring a 1 were considered weakly civically involved, and those scoring a 0 were considered to be not at all civically involved.

The Political Structure and Interest Group Theory

The political structure and interest group theory (Herring et. al. 1991) was tested in two ways. First, the correlation between respondents' political party affiliation and their levels of political alienation was tested. To this end, two sets of dummy variables were created. The first dichotomized the sample into Democrats and non-Democrats, while the second dichotomized between Republicans and non-Republicans. More than 30% of the sample identified with neither the Democratic nor the Republican Party, so two dummy variables could be created without risking multicollinearity. The political structure and interest group theory would predict that Democrats were significantly less alienated than Republicans in the latter part of 2008, since

Barack Obama was the heavy favorite going into the 2008 election and he ultimately won the Presidency.

The second method used to test the political structure and interest group theory analyzed respondents' preferred presidential candidate. The pre-election ANES asked respondents to identify the presidential candidate for whom they intended to vote. A set of dummy variables dichotomized respondents into pre-election John McCain supporters and non-McCain supporters. Since, more than 90% of respondents stated that they intended to vote for either McCain or Obama, no dummy variable dichotomizing Obama supporters from non-Obama supporters was created. Entering both a McCain dummy variable and an Obama dummy variable into the same model would have resulted in multicollinearity and thus compromised the integrity of the analysis. Political structure and interest group theory would predict that McCain supporters were more politically alienated than non-McCain supporters, since Obama was the heavy favorite at the time the ANES was administered.

Strength of Political Affiliation

Another cause of political alienation explored in this study is strength of political affiliation. The ANES asked a question about respondents' political party affiliations. Respondents were instructed to identify themselves as a strong, moderate, or weak Democrat, a strong, moderate, or weak Republican, or a true independent. In order to measure the strength of respondents' political affiliations, strong supporters of either party were assigned a strength value of 4, moderate supporters a 3, weak supporters a 2, and true independents a 1.

Multiple Regression

All of the above variables were entered into two ordinary least squares multiple regression models. The first model measured the effect of the independent variables on post-election political alienation without using pre-election political alienation as an independent variable. The second model added pre-election political alienation as a predictor of post-election political alienation. The resulting Pearson's r values measure the correlation between each independent variable and the post-election political alienation index without controlling for the other independent variables. Meanwhile, the beta values (β) measure each independent variable's standardized effect on post-election alienation when controlling for the effects of all other independent variables. The standardized slopes adjust for the fact that many of the independent variables were measured using different units (e.g. age is measured in years and income is measured in dollars). The standardized slopes thus represent a condition in which all variables have been adjusted to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1 (Howell 2002:542).

The sample sizes for both of these models were about 430 respondents lower than the sample size for the survey as a whole. This is a result of the listwise deletion process used in both models; if a respondent refused to answer, answered "I do not know," or was unclear about a response to any of the questions included in the model, that respondent was dropped from the analysis. Eliminating such a large percentage of respondents from the sample has the potential to create bias in the results. To investigate this possibility, the same models were also run using a pairwise deletion process, which eliminates far fewer respondents than does listwise deletion. The Pearson's r and beta values generated by the pairwise models closely reflected those generated by the listwise models, significantly reducing the likelihood that the listwise deletion process introduced bias into the results.

After measuring the effect of the independent variables on the sample as a whole, the sample was divided into male and female subsamples. Both subsamples then underwent multiple regression analysis using the same two models, except that gender was excluded as an independent variable.

A difference-of-slopes test was employed to measure whether each independent variable had a more significant effect for men than it did for women, or vice versa. The difference-of-slopes test employed the following equation (Paternoster et. al. 1998):

$$T = \frac{b_{\text{men}} - b_{\text{women}}}{\sqrt{SEb_{\text{men}} + SEb_{\text{women}}}}$$

where b_{men} and b_{women} are the unstandardized slopes for men and women, respectively, and SEb_{men} and SEb_{women} are the standard errors of those slopes for men and women. T-scores of ± 1.96 or greater were considered significant at the 0.05 level, and scores of ± 1.65 or greater were considered significant at the 0.10 level. These values reflect the fact that the above T-test is a two-tailed test, meaning that the null hypothesis of no significant difference between males and females is rejected only when the T-value falls within either the lowest 2.5% or the highest 2.5% of the distribution (in the case of 0.05-level significance) or within the lowest 5% or the highest 5% of the distribution (in the case of 0.10-level significance).

Normally, only one significance level is needed to determine statistical significance. However, by subdividing the sample by gender, this study delves into unexplored territory in political alienation research. As such, it will be useful to know which independent variables affect male and female political alienation differently even if the gender difference for a given

independent variable does not quite meet the .05 significance level threshold. Thus, a .10 significance level is used in addition to the usual .05 significance level.

Results

Meeting the Sample

Table 1 displays the demographic characteristics and political preferences of the sample used in this study. These data generally accord with data taken from the 2010 Census, with a few notable exceptions. First, females are somewhat overrepresented, occupying 55.1% of the sample but only 50.8% of the U.S. population. Also, the sample is somewhat poorer than the United States population as a whole. The ANES sample had a median household income of \$47,500/year, while the median United States household income is \$53,046/year. Although the unweighted percentage of blacks in the sample is 25.2% of the sample, weighting reduces the percentage of blacks to 13.1%, which exactly matches the proportion of blacks in the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau 2010).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

The median age of the sample was about 47 years with a standard deviation of just over 17 years. This approximately matches the median age of U.S. citizens over the age of 18. The mean number of years of formal schooling was 13.08 with a standard deviation of 2.59 years, which means that the average respondent had slightly more than a high school education. These data agree with data from the U.S. Census that state that 57.28% of the population over the age of 25 has attended at least some college (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). According to the civic engagement index, about half of the sample was not at all civically engaged. The sample

contained about 35% Democrats and 25% Republicans. These data accord with a Gallup poll taken during the same month as the ANES, which found that 35% of respondents considered themselves Democrats and 28% considered themselves Republicans (Gallup 2004). Almost 40% of ANES respondents supported John McCain. A Gallup poll conducted just before the 2008 election are in agreement with this datum. Gallup found that 53% of likely voters supported Obama while 42% supported McCain (Newport et. al. 2008). Finally, only 11.4% of the sample had no political party affiliation, while 31.8% of the sample considered themselves to be strong partisans.

Political Trust, Political Efficacy, and the Political Alienation Index

The two components of the political alienation index used in this study are political trust and political efficacy. Table 2 shows the levels of political trust and political efficacy both before and after the 2008 Presidential election. Additionally, Table 2 displays the levels of political alienation according to the political alienation index before and after the election. Levels of political alienation were actually slightly higher after the election than before it. Before the election, 69.7% of the sample scored a 6 or higher on the political alienation scale. After the election, that number increased to 75.0%. This would seem to contradict theorists who posit that elections tend to confer legitimacy upon democratic institutions in the eyes of their citizens (Gibson and Caldeira 1992). Instead of reducing political alienation, as this theory would predict, the 2008 election actually resulted in an increase political alienation.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Predictors of Political Alienation

Table 3 displays the correlations between all relevant independent variables and the post-election political alienation index. Pearson's r identifies a number of factors that affect post-election political alienation in a statistically significant way, but only education, civic engagement, and pre-election political alienation affect it non-trivially.⁶ Pre-election political alienation was the strongest predictor, with a Pearson's r value of 0.516. Civic engagement, with a Pearson's r of -0.242, was the next highest predictor. Education was the third-strongest predictor of post-election political alienation, with a Pearson's r of -0.182.

[insert Table 3 about here]

Two different models measure the effect of each independent variable on post-election political alienation while controlling for the other independent variables. The first model does not include pre-election political alienation as a predictor, while the second model does include the pre-election measure. Thus, the second model identifies those predictors whose effect on respondents' levels of post-election political alienation is not explained by their political alienation before the election. The first model identifies six predictors that affect post-election political alienation in a statistically significant way. Civic engagement ($\beta = -0.192$) was the strongest predictor of post-election political alienation in this model, followed in order by strength of party affiliation ($\beta = -0.172$), membership in the Republican Party ($\beta = 0.134$), membership in the Democratic Party ($\beta = 0.128$), education ($\beta = -0.115$), and an intention to vote

⁶ For the purposes of this paper, any Pearson's r with an absolute value of less than 0.10 is considered to represent a trivial effect.

for John McCain ($\beta = 0.101$). Model 1 had an R^2 value of 0.085, meaning that the model explained 8.5% of the variance in post-election political alienation.

When pre-election political alienation was entered into the model, the effects of membership in the Democratic Party ($\beta = 0.128$ to $\beta = 0.006$), membership in the Republican Party ($\beta = 0.134$ to $\beta = 0.027$), and strength of party affiliation ($\beta = -0.172$ to $\beta = -0.008$) disappeared almost entirely. This suggests that the effect of each of these predictors is largely explained by pre-election political alienation. The effect of civic engagement was partially explained by the addition of the pre-election measure, dropping from a Beta of -0.192 to a Beta of -0.115. However, the addition of pre-election political alienation into the model largely failed to explain the effects of education ($\beta = -0.115$ to $\beta = -0.085$) and an intention to vote for John McCain ($\beta = 0.101$ to $\beta = 0.083$). The effect of pre-election alienation itself on post-election political alienation was a strong $\beta = 0.477$. The R^2 value for the second model was 0.294, suggesting that the model explains 29.4% of the variance in post-election political alienation. The second model explains more than three times the variance explained by the first model.

These findings confirm the hypothesis that civic engagement is negatively correlated with political alienation. They also confirm that a strong political party affiliation is negatively associated with political alienation. Notably, neither race nor household income was a significant predictor of political alienation. These findings contradict the hypotheses that blacks are more politically alienated than whites and that political alienation decreases as household income increases. As the political structure and interest group theory predicts, watching their preferred candidate lose the election seems to have raised the levels of political alienation among McCain supporters. Democrats and Republicans were both significantly more alienated than non-

Democrats and non-Republicans, respectively, although that relationship was explained almost entirely by pre-election political alienation.

Predictors of Political Alienation by Gender

As predicted, a new story unfolds when the sample is divided by gender. The factors that are associated with political alienation are somewhat different for men than they are for women. Table 4 shows the correlation between each independent variable and post-election political alienation. Pearson's r identifies a number of factors that are statistically significant, but only a few of those affect post-election political alienation in a non-trivial way. For men, civic engagement has the most significant correlation with post-election political alienation ($r = -.205$), followed by education ($r = -.100$). For women, civic engagement ($r = -.267$) and education ($r = -.247$) were also the most significant correlates of post-election political alienation, but household income was also an important negative predictor ($r = -.117$).

[Insert Table 4 about here]

Table 4 also shows the direct effects of the independent variables on post-election political alienation among men and women separately without including pre-election political alienation as an independent variable. For men, civic engagement ($\beta = -.186$) was the strongest predictor, followed by an intention to vote for John McCain ($\beta = .109$). The adjusted R^2 value for this model is .052, corresponding to an explanation of 5.2% of the variance in post-election political alienation by the independent variables in the model.

For women, membership in the Democratic Party ($\beta = 0.232$) was the strongest predictor of post-election political alienation. The next strongest predictor was strength of party affiliation

($\beta = -0.229$), followed in order by membership in the Republican Party ($\beta = 0.208$), civic engagement ($\beta = -0.193$), and education ($\beta = -0.187$).⁷ The model had an adjusted R^2 value of 0.116, indicating that it explains 11.6% of the variance in post-election political alienation. This is more than twice the variance explained in the corresponding male model.

This model revealed several significant differences in the causes of post-election political alienation between men and women. Education had a significant effect among women, but its effect among men was insignificant ($T = 2.65$). Membership in the Democratic Party tended to increase political alienation among women, but it had a minimal effect among men ($T = -2.10$).

Table 5 shows the results of a model analyzing the direct effects of the independent variables on post-election political alienation when pre-election political alienation is included as a predictor. Because pre-election political alienation is included, the beta values in this model reflect the causes of post-election political alienation not explained by pre-election political alienation or any other predictor in the model. For males, pre-election political alienation was the strongest predictor, with a beta value of 0.492. The next strongest predictor was civic engagement ($\beta = -0.133$), followed by an intention to vote for McCain ($\beta = 0.084$). The adjusted

⁷ The fact that Beta identifies political party membership and strength of party affiliation as significant predictors of post-election political alienation but Pearson's r does not indicates that some other variable(s) in the model are suppressing the relationship between political party membership and post-election political alienation and also between strength of party affiliation and post-election political alienation. Two regression models were created in order to identify the cause(s) of the suppression. The first model contained strength of party affiliation as the only predictor of political alienation. Other independent variables were added one at a time until the Beta value measuring the association between strength of political party affiliation and political alienation matched the value listed in Table 4. The second model contained only the Democrat and Republican dummy variables as predictors of political alienation. The other independent variables were similarly added one at a time. This analysis revealed that the variable measuring strength of political party affiliation was wholly responsible for the suppression of both the Democratic and the Republican dummy variables. Likewise, both the Democratic and the Republican dummy variables were responsible for the suppression of the relationship between political alienation and strength of political party affiliation.

R^2 value for the male model was .280, corresponding to an explanation of 28.0% of the variance in post-election political alienation by the independent variables. As with the general models in Table 3, the addition of pre-election political alienation as a predictor significantly increased the amount of variance explained by the model.

[Insert Table 5 about here]

For females, as for males, pre-election political alienation ($\beta = 0.462$) was the best predictor of post-election political alienation. Education was the next strongest predictor, with a beta value of -0.151. Civic engagement ($\beta = -0.100$) was the third strongest predictor, followed in strength by an intention to vote for McCain ($\beta = .084$). The adjusted R^2 value for the female model was .306. This means that 30.6% of the variance in post-election political alienation was explained by the independent variables in the model. Again, more variance was explained in the female model than in the male model.

There was only one statistically significant difference between the second male and female models: education. Education had almost no direct effect among males ($\beta = -.014$), but it had a significant negative effect among females ($\beta = -.151$). The T-score for this difference was 2.81.

These findings reveal several important facts. Contrary to my hypotheses, neither race nor household income had significant effects on post-election political alienation. As predicted, however, civic engagement had a significant negative impact on post-election political alienation regardless of whether pre-election political alienation was included as a predictor. Strength of party affiliation was found to have a significant negative impact on post-election political alienation for both genders, a finding that confirmed my hypothesis. However, that effect

disappeared when pre-election political alienation was included in the model. The analysis also revealed an unexpected positive effect of membership in either political party on post-election political alienation for women. That effect disappeared, however, when pre-election political alienation was included as a predictor.

In both the model that included pre-election political alienation as a predictor and the model that did not, education was found to have a significant negative effect on female political alienation. This finding was similar to the effect that I hypothesized. Notably, the fact that education was a significant predictor in both models indicates that its effect is not explained by pre-election political alienation.

Discussion

In the following section, I address the meaning of the findings detailed above. I start by summarizing those findings, explaining which hypotheses were confirmed by the data and which were not. I then discuss the implications of these findings for theory, public policy, and future political alienation research. Finally, I identify the limitations of this study and explain how future research can address these limitations.

Summary of Hypotheses

Race and Income Level

Two of my hypotheses stated that blacks are more politically alienated than whites and that political alienation varies inversely with household income. Neither of those hypotheses was supported by the data. These findings are consistent, however, with Wright's (1976) research,

which found that political alienation was only weakly correlated with demographic variables like race and income level. On the other hand, they oppose another body of research (Thompson and Horton 1960; Herring 1989; Cohen 2010) that has found that political alienation is more common among those with a disadvantaged position in society.

One possible explanation for this finding may be found in the social and political context in which each piece of research was conducted. When Wright conducted his study in 1976, the United States had recently ended a massively unpopular war in Vietnam. It is to be expected that such a war would increase political alienation levels across demographic groups, thus reducing the discrepancy between whites and blacks and between rich and poor. Similarly, the survey upon which my own research is based was administered in 2008. At that time, Barack Obama's Presidential campaign was appealing especially to black and poor voters. As a result of his campaign, blacks and the poor may have become temporarily less politically alienated because there was a Presidential candidate who was addressing their specific needs. When Thompson and Horton conducted their research in 1960, there was no such political event or public figure to unify levels of political alienation across racial or income-level divides. The same is true of 1989 when Herring conducted his research and of 2010 when Cohen conducted hers. By 2010, Barack Obama had established himself in the White House, and the campaign trail rhetoric that appealed specifically to blacks and the poor had all but disappeared. This theory suggests that if data from 2012 were analyzed, they would show that race and income level had returned to their previous levels of importance as predictors of political alienation.

Civic Engagement

Another of my hypotheses predicted that those who are civically engaged are less politically alienated than those who are not. The data bore out this hypothesis. This finding is in line with Putnam's (2000) research, which found that people who volunteer in their communities are more likely to trust their political leaders and positively engage with the political system. In other words, volunteers are less politically alienated. What is true for volunteerism, Putnam argues, is true for civic engagement more generally; civic engagement tends to suppress feelings of political alienation.

Strength of Political Party Affiliation

My study revealed that strength of political party affiliation is also a factor that reduces political alienation, especially among women. Those who were the strongest members of either the Democratic or the Republican Party were found to be the least alienated. There has been precious little research specifically tying strength of political party affiliation to political alienation. However, social identity theory (Tajfel 1981; Turner 1991) states that individuals tend to adopt attitudes and beliefs that are held by other members of the group(s) to which they belong. Both the Democratic and the Republican Parties suppress political alienation by actively participating in the American political system by nominating and supporting candidates for public office. Social identity theory would therefore predict that those who are most strongly affiliated with a political party are the most likely to hold the alienation-suppressing beliefs and values of the party as their own.

Political Structure and Interest Group Theory

The political structure and interest group theory (Herring et. al. 1991) states that people are less politically alienated when their preferred public officials and political organizations are in power and that, conversely, they are more politically alienated when their preferred public officials and organizations are out of power. In keeping with this theory, I hypothesized that Democrats were less politically alienated than Republicans at the time the ANES was taken. I also hypothesized that supporters of John McCain, who was behind in pre-election polls, were more politically alienated than non-McCain supporters. I had mixed findings regarding the political structure and interest group theory. On the one hand, supporters of McCain were generally more politically alienated after the election than McCain non-supporters. Further, the elevated levels of political alienation among McCain supporters were not explained by their levels of political alienation before the election. This suggests that the outcome of the election itself was the primary cause of their political alienation. These findings support the political structure and interest group theory.

On the other hand, the gender-specific analysis was inconsistent with this finding. Membership in either major political party increased political alienation among women, but it had no significant effect among men. The theory predicted that membership in the Democratic Party would have a negative impact on political alienation, since the Democrats held the majority in Congress in 2008 and supported Barack Obama, who was the heavy favorite to win the election when the survey was administered. It also predicted that membership in the Republican Party would have a positive relationship with political alienation, since the Republicans were out of power and about to lose the presidential election when the survey was taken.

In short, my research has failed to uncover consistent support for the political structure and interest group theory. It would seem that whether or not one's preferred political party is in power is not a consistent predictor of political alienation.

Gender and Education

One of my hypotheses stated that female levels of political alienation are approximately equal to male levels of political alienation. Another of my hypotheses predicted that education is a much stronger deterrent of political alienation among women than among men. Both of these hypotheses were confirmed by the data. This second finding can be explained by a combination of factors. First, women are less likely to be interested in political affairs and are less likely to believe in democratic ideals than are their male counterparts (Karp and Banducci 2008). Second, a high level of education is correlated with a belief in the legitimacy of the established political system and therefore a low level of political alienation (Hillygus 2005). Thus, it is logical that education lowers political alienation in women more than in men because education gives women that which men have already: an interest in political affairs and a belief in the legitimacy of the established political system.

Burns et. al. (2001) found that political participation increases among women when there is a high proportion of female politicians in office. In line with their findings and the above explanation, therefore, I would predict that the effect of education on female political alienation will diminish as more women become involved in politics. However, it is difficult to test this hypothesis until political alienation data from the coming decades have been gathered.

Implications

The analysis reported above showed that neither race nor income level is significantly correlated with political alienation. These findings support some previous research (Wright 1976) but are contradicted by other studies (Cohen 2010; Herring 1989; Thompson and Horton 1960). In light of these contradictory findings, I suggested that political alienation may be affected by the social and political events of the day, causing political alienation levels to change over time. I cited the Vietnam War as an unpopular political event that may have evened political alienation across demographic groups, making it appear as though there was no discrepancy in political alienation between whites and blacks or between rich and poor. However, it is entirely possible that the Vietnam War had no effect or that other social or political events have affected political alienation. In order to test this theory, future political alienation researchers could take a longitudinal approach, measuring changes in political alienation over time and comparing those changes to a timeline of significant political and social events. Of course, such research would run into the well-documented age-period-cohort problem. It would be difficult for longitudinal researchers to disentangle the independent effects of respondents' ages, their age cohorts, and the political and social events of the particular time period under study (Glenn 1977:46-61). However, such research may still yield important findings about the relationship between political alienation and political and social events.

My research also found that education has a significant negative effect on female political alienation. In light of this finding, a solution to female political alienation presents itself: increase female access to education, especially civic education. Civic education, specifically, is important because it is correlated with an increased belief in democratic ideals, increased political participation, and decreased fear of out-groups (Galston 2004). However, I theorize that

education has an effect on female political alienation because education raises female interest in political affairs to more closely mirror the interest levels of men. If this is true, then education will have a weaker effect on female political alienation as more women become involved in politics and as women in general become more interested in political affairs.

In light of my finding that civic engagement is a negative predictor of political alienation, I believe that any attempt to lower political alienation in America must take strides to promote civic engagement. Putnam (2000) suggests a number of ways to accomplish this goal. Increasing extracurricular opportunities in schools, increasing the availability of community service opportunities for children, and making the workplace more family- and community-friendly are just a few of his suggestions. By implementing some or all of the measures that Putnam suggests, American society can reduce political alienation in its citizenry.

I also found that strength of political party affiliation is negatively correlated with political alienation. However, I am hesitant to promote increased political polarization as a cure for political alienation. While polarization may solve the political alienation problem, it gives rise to a host of other issues. McCarty (2007:232) posits that political polarization has a tendency to “gridlock” Congress. This leads to less efficient lawmaking and slower confirmation of judicial appointees. It also, according to McCarty, reduces the role of the legislative branch. He claims that if Congress is gridlocked, executives tend to make more decisions unilaterally, cutting out the legislative branch. Political polarization, therefore, has negative implications for the separation of governmental powers. Because of these findings, I suggest increasing education and civic engagement to cure political alienation rather than increasing political polarization.

Limitations

Even when pre-election political alienation was included as a predictor in the regression models, the adjusted R^2 value did not rise significantly above .300. This indicates that a majority of the variance in post-election political alienation remains unexplained even when all of the independent variables in the model are taken into account. There are a variety of factors that could explain this low R^2 value. First is measurement error. Because the political alienation index was composed of only two questions, it is likely that a degree of natural variability in respondents' answers accounts for a significant portion of the unexplained variance. Ideally, this problem would be combatted by entering more questions into the political alienation index, but the ANES asked only a select few questions that directly measured respondents' levels of political alienation. The General Social Survey, for example, includes questions that ask about respondents' levels of confidence in the federal government, the court system, and a variety of other national institutions. It also asks a battery of questions about alienation in general. These types of questions were absent from the 2008 ANES and it was therefore impossible to include them in the political alienation index.

Another potential cause of the low adjusted R^2 values is the fact that there are a number of predictors of political alienation that were not included in the regression models. It would have been interesting, for example, to examine the effect of respondents' preferred news sources on their levels of political alienation. It would make sense that a regular viewer of Fox News would have a different level of political alienation from someone who regularly watched MSNBC. Unfortunately, while the ANES did ask questions about respondents' preferred types of news media – radio, television, print newspapers, websites, etc. – and about the frequency with

which they consulted those sources, they did not ask about respondents' preferences for specific news channels – FOX, CNN, NBC, etc.

A factor that may partially explain the lack of correlation between race and political alienation and thus the low overall adjusted R^2 value was the fact that the race variable did not distinguish between Latinos and non-Latinos. The ANES question that was used to measure respondents' race distinguished between Whites, Blacks, and those of other races. Because Latinos were not specifically included as a category, it is likely that some Latinos identified as White, some as Black, and some as members of another race. The race variable was intended to distinguish between members of a dominant social group – Whites – and members of a disadvantaged social group – Blacks. The fact that a significant percentage of Latinos, another disadvantaged social group, were included in the White category likely decreased the effectiveness of the race variable.

This study was a secondary analysis of survey data. Such a study has the advantage of analyzing a representative sample of the population, which allows conclusions to be drawn from the data and applied to the population as a whole. The use of closed-ended survey questions also allows for sophisticated statistical analysis of the data. However, closed-ended responses are often gathered at the expense of detail. A respondent can give a much more exhaustive explanation of her political alienation in an in-depth interview or a focus group than she can by placing herself on a five-point spectrum (Babbie 1999:251-252). I suggest that future studies in the field of political alienation include in-depth interviews with respondents in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the causes of political alienation on an individual level. Political alienation studies using interview-based analysis have been conducted in other countries (McClain-Tatum 1979). At least one such study (Cohen 2010) has been conducted in America,

but the population under study in that case was non-white urban youth. Using in-depth interviewing techniques, Cohen identified several causes of political alienation among her interviewees. These included physical and verbal abuse at the hands of police officers, lack of economic opportunity, and the prevalence of negative stereotypes about racial minorities in popular media. Findings like these show that in-depth interviewing has the potential to deepen our understanding of political alienation beyond the somewhat superficial findings of survey data analyses like this one. Studies that employ in-depth interviewing of a sample of the entire adult American population together with analyses of representative survey data like this one will yield a more complete understanding of the causes of political alienation.

This study was largely cross-sectional; it measured respondents' levels of political alienation at only two specific points in time, separated by one to three months. Respondents' political alienation was surveyed just before the 2008 election and again just after the election. Because these two surveys took place in such a small chronological window, it is difficult to conclude how respondents' political alienation may have changed over time in response to specific political or social events. My study has no way of knowing how, for example, the 9/11 attacks and the start of the War on Terror affected political alienation among the citizenry. A longitudinal study that measures respondents' levels of political alienation regularly over a period of years would help to address this problem. It could also potentially be used to measure the effect that an increase in education or civic engagement has on a given respondent's level of political alienation.

Conclusion

This study has analyzed survey data from the 2008 American National Election Survey in order to find the causes of and solutions to political alienation. I have identified a number of

correlates of political alienation. Civic engagement was found to be negatively correlated with political alienation. Education was found to lower political alienation, especially among women. A strong affiliation with either major political party was also found to reduce political alienation. Contrary to my hypotheses, neither race nor income level had any significant effect on political alienation.

In light of these findings, I proposed several steps that would reduce political alienation in American society. For example, access to education, especially civic education, could be increased. Also, steps could be taken to increase civic engagement across the country. My findings suggest that increasing political polarization among American citizens would also reduce political alienation, although I believe that the negative consequences of increased political polarization would outweigh the positive effect of reducing political alienation.

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Appendix A: Civic Engagement Index

As indicated in the text, the civic engagement index was formed by combining respondents' answers to three dichotomous questions:

- Were you able to devote any time to volunteer work in the last 12 months or did you not do so?
- During the past twelve months, did you attend a meeting about an issue facing your community or schools?
- During the past twelve months, have you worked with other people to deal with some issue facing your community?

Those particular questions were chosen because responses to those questions were the most highly correlated. The ANES, however, asked a number of questions about different aspects of civic engagement, all of which were considered and ultimately rejected for use in this index. The following is a list of dichotomous questions asked in the 2008 ANES involving civic engagement but that were not used in the creation of the civic engagement index:

- Were you able to contribute any money to church or charity in the last 12 months?
- Aside from attending services, in the past six months have you been an active member at your place of worship -- I mean, have you done things like serve on committees, give time for special projects, or help organize meetings?
- During the past twelve months, have you telephoned, written a letter to, or visited a government official to express your views on a public issue?
- During the past twelve months, did you attend a meeting about an issue facing your community or schools?

- How many organizations are you currently a member of?
- During the past twelve months, have you worked with other people to deal with some issue facing your community?

Appendix B: Cognitive Dissonance

One of the hypotheses that I explored in the course of conducting my research was that of political cognitive dissonance. I hypothesized that people whose political party allegiance did not match the party of their preferred presidential candidate are more politically alienated than those who had no such internal conflict. In order to test this hypothesis, I created a series of five dummy variables. The first distinguished between Democratic Obama supporters and everyone else. The second compared Republican Obama supporters to the rest of the sample. Dummy variables three and four did the same for Democratic and Republican supporters of McCain. The fifth dummy variable distinguished between politically independent supporters of Obama and the rest of the sample. Independent supporters of McCain were left as a residual group so that a sufficient number of degrees of freedom would be maintained. If my hypothesis was correct, Republican Obama supporters and Democratic McCain supporters would be significantly more politically alienated than the other groups.

The data did not support the hypothesis. As the table below shows, there were few statistically significant relationships between the dummy variables and post-election political alienation. Those correlations that were statistically significant were trivial. Being both a Democrat and an Obama supporter did have a non-trivial negative effect on post-election political alienation ($\beta = -0.101$), but this finding supports the political structure and interest group theory rather than the political cognitive dissonance hypothesis. The political structure and interest group theory predicts that people are the least politically alienated when their preferred public figures and political parties are in power. Since the Democrats controlled Congress when the ANES was administered, and because Barack Obama was the heavy favorite to win the

election, it is unsurprising to find that those who simultaneously support Obama and the Democratic Party are less politically alienated than those who do not.

Appendix B: Table 1

<u>Independent Variable</u>	<u>Beta (β)</u>
Democratic Obama supporters	-0.101*
Republican Obama supporters	0.002
Democratic McCain supporters	0.057*
Republican McCain supporters	0.044*
Independent Obama supporters	0.024
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N = 1564	Adjusted R ² = 0.042

Effect of the combination of political party affiliation and preferred presidential candidate on post-election political alienation, controlling for sex, race, age, education level, and household income level

* p < 0.05 (2-tailed test)