

The Landscape of Campaign Finance in the Digital Age

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The landscape of American politics has changed significantly as the nation has seemingly become more polarized all throughout the government system. This project expanded my understanding of this new political sphere by observing regulations and voting patterns, as well as coding and analyzing data with the help of Professor Michael Franz and his work with the Wesleyan Media Project. I looked at the regulatory and enforcement actions of the Federal Election Commission (FEC) around campaign communications. This included collecting and coding FEC votes on new regulations around the enforcement of legal and regulatory violations by political campaigns. This project was meant to build my knowledge on data analysis and determining trends, code in political science, and better understand American campaign financing in the new digital age under an unprecedented wave of polarization.

This project was broken down into three phases. First, I collected votes on various enforcement actions done by the FEC. I observed Matters Under Review (MUR), which are instances where the FEC votes on certain regulatory actions and if campaigns violate those rules. I also observed Advisory Opinions (AO), which are instances where campaigns ask how certain regulations apply to their work and if they violated those rules. Finally, I looked at Regulations, where the FEC votes on new regulatory frameworks for campaigns to follow. In all of these different categories, I viewed how often Democrats and Republicans vote in conjunction and when they disagree. The FEC's decisions are centered on political communication and ads, and one of my goals in this phase was to dig into those cases to figure out what controversies they are debating and what conflicts have emerged. This first phase allowed me to become familiar with the issues at hand, the controversies, and polarization of the FEC. For phase 2, I coded the data I collected of FEC votes and put them into categories based on their purpose, the case name/who the case was about, the vote (including abstentions), and how each commissioner voted. The last phase consisted of analyzing my data in R to demonstrate the patterns I found amongst various commissioners based on political party. My goal was to analyze the data and draw trends between the FEC votes over time, across different commissioners, and across political parties.

Analyzing FEC votes and regulations has allowed me to see government and politics from various dimensions I had never seen before. During my research, I looked into the voting dynamics within the FEC and found a large level of polarization when it comes to their decision-making regarding new regulations and regulatory infringements by political campaigns. FEC commissioners are partisan and they aim to have equal amounts of Democrat and Republican commissioners on the board at all times. This means that their votes are partisan, and this is allowed. I worked mainly with data from the last four years and found that certain commissioners tend to vote with their party ideals and tend to vote with the same commissioners. These discoveries not only shed light on the current state of campaign finance but also serve as a troubling confirmation that the American government is becoming increasingly polarized as time progresses. Although campaign finance is only one small part of the American government system, these findings demonstrate that polarization is penetrating our government, which raises concerns about the broader impact on policy-making and campaigns in the United States.

Faculty Mentor: Michael Franz

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