

The Delegate Model and The McCarthy Debacle: On Whether McCarthyism was a Response to Perceived Public Opinion

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Abstract

This research paper will answer the question of whether the McCarthy movement, from the anti-communist trials to the Senator's censure, was an indication of the delegate model. The research was conducted through the careful analysis of public polling on the perception of communism in the late 1940s and early 1950s, which indicated that Americans generally feared communism. Polls on McCarthy's approval rating and his electoral data in the 1952 Wisconsin primary were also looked at to examine the Senator's popularity. Furthermore, newspaper articles published in this era gave an indication about attitudes towards McCarthyism and provided valuable information on Senators who chose to support or go against McCarthy. Finally, scholarship on the delegate model was used to establish a link between public opinion and senatorial actions. Analyzing these primary sources ultimately led to the conclusion that to a moderate extent, participation in McCarthyism by McCarthy and other Senators occurred in response to public opinion of the time period.

Keywords: Delegate Model, McCarthyism

Introduction

It is Autumn of 1951; the leaves have begun to switch from verdant to gold, people have started pulling on their jackets and the Senate Press Corps has just voted Joseph McCarthy the worst in office declaring him "the most ignorant and vicious member of the Senate."¹ Over half a century later, most historians describe him with the sentiments of that quote. However, if he truly was that awful, how did he become so influential? While the Wisconsin Senator may not have been winning popularity contests among the Senate Press Corps, he did achieve some popularity among the populous. This paper will analyze whether the McCarthy movement, from the McCarthy trials to the eventual censure of the Senator by the Senate, was a response to public opinion through the delegate model. Research does support that to a moderate extent, McCarthyism was a response to the delegate model, as seen through McCarthy's decision to conduct the trials, his initial popularity, the Senators who first supported him and the eventual decision by the Senate to censure him.

Premise and Literature Review

In 1950, a speech given in West Virginia by a relatively unknown senator set off a movement

that would occupy the American government and come to be defined as a national regret. Senator Joseph McCarthy's speech claimed that over 200 communists had infiltrated the State Department. It was delivered immediately after Alger Hiss, a top-ranking State Department official, was revealed to be a Soviet spy. The nation already harbored paranoia over communism; the Second Red Scare, an anti-communist movement, had swept America due to the start of the Cold War, which was defined by escalated tensions with the USSR and the perceived threat of nuclear annihilation. McCarthy became a national figure overnight and led many trials against suspected communists, in a movement that has since been dubbed "McCarthyism." This carried on until 1954, when the Senate censured McCarthy. While extensive scholarship exists on McCarthyism and the delegate model individually, literature on both is scarce, leaving the question of whether the progression of McCarthyism was a government reaction to public opinion or not.

Unlike the trustee model which suggests that a representative use their own knowledge and judgement to vote on issues, the delegate model asserts that elected officials act in a way that reflects the preferences of their constituents (Fox and Shotts, 2009). In the delegate model to be met, two conditions have to be fulfilled: first, a delegate has to feel an obligation to vote in a way that mirrors the belief of their district. Officials feel compelled to do this, as it helps their chances of reelection; "representatives and prospective representatives think about their constituencies because they seek support in their constituencies" (Fenno, 2003). Senators may feel more compelled to follow the delegate model to improve their reelection chances, as, "nearly every state is potentially winnable by either party" (Jacobson, 2004). The second and more difficult condition is that a constituency has to clearly express their beliefs so that the delegate can understand them and vote with those interests in mind; if both conditions are not met, the model cannot work (McCrone, Kuklinski, 1979).

The literature does acknowledge that flaws exist in the delegate model. Even if a

representative attempts to represent the views of their district, they may face obstacles such as opposition from special interest groups or within Congress (McCrone, Kuklinski, 1979).

When studying whether McCarthyism was a response to public outcry, it is important to examine whether McCarthy and the Senators who censured him were using the delegate model. For the purposes of this essay, public opinion will be mainly be measured through newspaper articles and national polling. The latter does provide some limitations, as the delegate model focuses on how a representative responds to their specific constituents and members of the Senate are not directly beholden to national opinions. However, given that state polling is much rarer and difficult to obtain, national polling will be used as a substitute.

If Joseph McCarthy was truly following the wishes of the constituents, then he made a grave mistake in caving to the will of the masses. If not, then this was a completely unjustified removal of constitutional rights from a government that is meant to protect personal freedoms.

Analysis

The perceived support for the McCarthy trials appears evident due to national fears of communism and Soviet influence in the late 1940s and early 1950s. As data indicated that the public had high fears about communism, it may have given the impression that Americans also supported anti-communist actions like the McCarthy trials. Panic about Soviet ideology infiltrating American borders was rampant during this time period. In the effort not to corrupt American minds, schools and libraries nationwide pulled copies of books like *Robin Hood* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, believing them to espouse pro-communist messages.² Likewise, anti-communist propaganda spread through the country, such as through the publication of "Is This Tomorrow," a comic book that showed a dystopian society if the Russians took over. Public officials only stoked the flames of this fear; FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover stated: "Communism is an ever-present danger. Don't be misled by false claims of a more

abundant life under imperialist communism; if you can't make it here, you can't make it anywhere.”³ Many Americans built bomb shelters, afraid of an attack, and their worries were only exacerbated in 1949 after learning that the Soviets tested nuclear weapons. A plethora of data quantitatively measures these concerns over communism. In January of 1950, 70% of Americans believed that Russia was trying to build itself to be a ruling power of the world. By November, the percentage rose by eleven points. Additionally, In 1950, 42% of Americans could not define the cold war and in 1951, 30% of Americans believed that Russia was winning the war and 45% of Americans did not know what the term Cold War meant. The mystery surrounding the Cold War likely contributed to the paranoia among Americans about communism in the country. In the summer of 1954, only 2% of Americans felt that Communists posed no danger to the country (8% did not know). At this same time, 71.8% of Americans said a communist man should be allowed to speak at a college, 93.6% said if a communist was teaching at a college, he should be fired, and 71.1% said that if that man wrote a book it should be removed from the public library. Meanwhile, in September of 1954, Americans had 99.1 % unfavorable opinion of Russia compared with an 8.5% mixed opinion and a low .4% favorable opinion. Evidence clearly illustrates the fact that Americans were scared about communism and the Soviet Union. While this does not directly translate to support for his actions, it does substantiate the notion that Senator McCarthy was attempting to follow the delegate model by conducting the anti-communist trials.

Through the fierce opposition against communism in America, Senators may have believed that many in the United States appreciated the Wisconsin senator's anti-communist actions. While national opinion did not fully equate to an endorsement of McCarthyism, pundits and politicians interpreted the senator's win of the 1952 Wisconsin primary as a sign of support for him. Joseph McCarthy ended up winning the primary with a total of 181, 238 votes; his closest contender barely got a third of that

number.⁴ Interestingly enough, he received these votes even after allegations of Democrats registering as Republicans to vote in the primary so they could unseat him.⁵ After the primary, the New York Times published an article titled “McCarthy scores smashing victory in Wisconsin vote.”⁶ In it, the author predicted results for the general election, stating that “Returns indicated that the controversial junior Senator would defeat his nearest opponent by margins of four to six to one in the rural areas and by as much as two to one in the urban centers.”⁷ Additionally, The Arizona Post published an article entitled “Sen. McCarthy Primary Victory called triumph for McCarthyism.”⁸ The article stated that because Senator McCarthy won, it appeared that Wisconsin Republicans were supporting the McCarthy trials; the author wrote, “The victory of Sen. McCarthy in the Wisconsin primary indicated an endorsement of McCarthyism by a majority of Republicans in that state, according to an analysis appearing in the Yale Law Review. Additionally, the article also wrote that many government workers anonymously confessed that they feared the totalitarian nature of McCarthyism.⁹ Many strongly opposed McCarthyism, but could not speak out against it, due to fear of retaliation. Failure to publicly criticize McCarthyism could have constituted perceived support of it. Additionally, about a week after the primary, the New York Times published an Op-Ed from citizen Joseph R Toven Jr. who expressed his support for McCarthy, noting that the Senator had made Americans aware of the prominence of communism. He wrote, “Senator McCarthy has accomplished a great deal in awakening the sleeping minds of many Americans whose use of the newspaper was confined to the comics and the sports pages; he has succeeded in disillusioning many false idealists who thought no evil such as communism would dare threaten our way of life.”¹⁰ Evidence overwhelmingly suggests that many Americans -whether they be journalists or average citizens- believed that McCarthy's victory in Wisconsin signified support for his actions. This, combined with the already rampant fears of communism in the country, may have

pressured some members of the Senate to support McCarthy.

With McCarthy's actions appearing popular during 1952, some Senators chose to actively support his movement, while many others remained silent. Both are inherently "pro-McCarthy," as the action of not publicly opposing the Junior Senator allowed his trials to continue. Evidence from this time period does suggest that Senators who were vocal in their endorsement for McCarthy or those who simply chose not to comment were following the delegate model. Soon after the victory in the primaries, Senator Robert Taft stated "[I] do approve of his accomplishments in rooting out and Communists and subversion in Government."¹¹ The senator's praise of McCarthy came right after a show of public approval for the latter. While Taft was outspokenly in favor of McCarthyism, some Senators thought it best to avoid speaking on the controversial issue. That can be said of Senator Lodge, who did not take a position on McCarthyism while campaigning for reelection of his seat. One D.C. newspaper commented on this, writing, "On the explosive McCarthy issue, he filed a minority report, as a member of the Tydings Committee, but still didn't endorse McCarthy's methods or claim he had found anything. In Massachusetts, where McCarthy is on the whole well thought of, this would not be held against him."¹² The Tydings Committee was a Senate committee created to investigate possible communists after McCarthy's accusations, and Senator Lodge's involvement with it does signify some level of support. As the article notes, Lodge's actions correlated with McCarthy's perception among his constituents. In 1954, once support for McCarthyism had begun to wane, one New York Times article attempted to explain why so many Senators allowed the movement to continue. The author argued that "McCarthy's case went largely unanswered in Congress even by the most entrenched members of the party-the Democrats-against which for years it was directed. It is a plain and incontestable fact that many Republicans who were then (as now) privately denouncing 'that fellow McCarthy' were making

every possible political use of him."¹³ The fact that many Senators, especially those who secretly opposed McCarthy, refused to take a stand against him so they could make "every possible political use of him" appears to be linked with a desire to follow the delegate model. The Wisconsin primary, which gave off the impression that McCarthyism was approved in the Junior Senator's home state, correlates with the support for McCarthy in the Senate.

While evidence gives the indication that Senator McCarthy and his movement enjoyed some popularity during and around 1952, in the following two years, he fell out of the public's good graces; this phenomenon was greatly exacerbated by the Army-McCarthy Trials. From 1953 onwards, McCarthy showed a gradual decline in approval rating. Although polling supports that Americans had consistent views on communism in this time period, their views on Senator McCarthy was far less consistent. In 1953, Gallup found he had a 35% popular approval rating (this did not mean 65% of people did not approve of him).¹⁴ Most scholarship identifies 1954 as the specific year that McCarthyism and McCarthy became unpopular. On March 9, 1954, Edward R. Murrow released *See it Now* a CBS special in which he condemned McCarthy's actions.¹⁵ The TV special is said to have played a moderate role in turning public opinion against McCarthy. Also, in March of that year, Milton Friedman published an article in which he remarked on the "distaste for 'McCarthyism which [was] shared by even President Eisenhower."¹⁶ The catalyst in the growing unpopularity for the Wisconsin Senator was the Army-McCarthy trials, in which Joseph McCarthy accused members of the army of having ties with communism, based on flimsy evidence and loose accusations. These trials were televised, which allowed the American public to witness McCarthy's brash and totalitarian nature while he questioned those on trial. John M Fenton, a high-ranking member of Gallup stated that 45 million Americans had seen parts of the television hearings.¹⁷ One defining moment of the Army-McCarthy trials was when

Joseph Welch, who was the Army's counsel, fired back at the Senator, asking him: "Have you no decency?" Many historians attribute these four words as a turning point in the popularity of McCarthyism. After saying this notable quote, Joseph Welch publicly announced that he had received over a thousand telegrams, the majority of which showed support for him.¹⁸ One Washington D.C. newspaper commented on Welch's actions, saying, "Mr. Welch came to Washington to defend the Army. But he had his finest hour defending a friend."¹⁹ Public opinion had changed; while in February of 1954, Americans had a 46% favorable and 36% unfavorable view of McCarthy, a month later 34% had a favorable view and 45% had an unfavorable view.²⁰ The evidence that McCarthyism became increasingly unpopular during this time period is substantial, as proven by polling and journalism.

With his popularity levels plummeting, it became a matter of time before the Senate took action. Interestingly enough, despite his low approval ratings in March of 1954, the Senate voted 85 to 1 to increase his annual budget in regard to his committee work. A Whiteville article commented on this vote, writing, "This vote- 85 to 1- ought to convince the most skeptical that the United States Senate believes in McCarthy, even if every individual Senator does not fully agree with every word he speaks or every method he employs."²¹ However, this vote appears to be an anomaly in Senatorial actions. On June 11, 1954, Republican Senator Flanders of Vermont made a motion to remove McCarthy from his chairmanship of the Government Operations Committee and to stop him from becoming head of the Permanent Investigations subcommittee.²² Additionally, Democratic Senator Symington publicly advocated for an investigation to be made on McCarthy.²³ In a letter to the editor that was published in a newspaper in 1954, one citizen attempted to explain why some Senators that had supported Joseph McCarthy suddenly turned their backs on him. The writer wrote, "Why then has the Republican party finally had to defend itself against Senator McCarthy and why have Republican Senators who have usually supported

Senator McCarthy in the past because they thought they knew what he was after, finally come to join the defense of the party against him? The answer is: Because at last it has become clear that at stake was the ability of a national Republican administration to govern the country."²⁴ The author indicates that the Republican party no longer supported the Wisconsin Senator after realizing that public opinion was no longer on his side. In fact, it was the Republican Senator Flanders who championed the eventual censure of McCarthy in December of 1954. While causation is difficult to establish, research indicates a strong correlation between the loss of popularity for McCarthyism and Senatorial actions taken against the Junior Senator. This implies that the decision to censure McCarthy, which occurred after his popularity drastically decreased, was in response to the delegate model.

Research does indicate that to a moderate extent, the McCarthy movement was a reaction to the delegate model. The rampant fears about communism in the 1940s and 1950s may have prompted the Wisconsin Senator to launch a massive anti-communist movement. Similarly, after his victory in the 1952 Wisconsin Republican primary, Senators were more likely to side with, or simply not oppose, him. However, when public opinion changed around 1954, the Senate voted to censure him. This paper is being written in January of 2021, as impeachment charges are currently being voted on for a very McCarthy-like figure, one who has consistently defrauded the American people about a false threat to their democracy. Among these claims, he finds enablers like Senator Josh Hawley and Senator Ted Cruz, both of whom voted to reject fair election results due to baseless accusations that stood no legal merit. Were these two Senators following the delegate model due to a loyalty to support their constituents' wishes? Or were they serving a trustee role and voting with their personal views in mind? This question lingers in the minds of many political pundits, but unfortunately cannot be answered currently. After Senator Symington verbally diminished him,

Joseph McCarthy fired back and said, "I'm glad we are on television. I think the millions of people can see how low an alleged man can sink. I repeat, they can see how low an alleged man can sink." Ironically, his statement was true, just not in the way he may have claimed. With the easy access to mainstream and social media, millions of Americans were able to witness just how low a man could sink when the President allowed the riots on the Capitol to occur. Senator McCarthy died alone and despised, a social pariah whose allies had all left him. The fate and legacy of the modern McCarthy and his backers in Congress are still not determined. When one stirs the country in a frenzy over false accusations, may they be of communism or election fraud, they are worthy of being called the "most ignorant and vicious" person in their era to hold public office.

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- ² For more information please see "Students Allied Themselves With Robin Hood During This Anti-McCarthyism Movement" by Kat Eshner in *The Smithsonian Magazine*.
- ³ To read the article visit page 6 of the Arizona Sun article.
- ⁴ See "Wednesday September 10, 1952," in *The New York Times* for further information
- ⁵ Ibid
- ⁶ Ibid
- ⁷ Ibid
- ⁸ See *The Arizona Post* Page 3, Image 3 published on October 03, 1952, for further.
- ⁹ Ibid
- ¹⁰ See "Senator McCarthy Praised," in *The New York Times* for more on this.
- ¹¹ See "TAFT IS 'DELIGHTED' BY MCCARTHY VOTE; Voices Support of Wisconsin Senator's Actions -- Benton Decries 'Dark Victory'" in *The New York Times* for the full article on this.
- ¹² See "Evening Star Page A-26, Image 26," for the full article.
- ¹³ Please see "What Motivates Joseph McCarthy; The Senator from Wisconsin, to This Washington Observer, Looks like an Engine of Outward Fury with an Inner Mood Far from Furious," in *The New York Times* for further analysis.
- ¹⁴ This poll was published in Gallup. See "Gallup Vault: J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI and American Communists," for an analysis.
- ¹⁵ This information was taken from a transcript of Murrow's report, which originally aired on CBS.
- ¹⁶ For more of Friedman's take visit "The Phoenix Jewish News, March 26, 1954, Page Six, Image 6,"
- ¹⁷ More important quotes can be found in "Flickering Images: Live Television Coverage and Viewership of the Army—McCarthy Hearings."

¹⁸ See “Evening Star June 10, 1954,” for the full article.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ From a poll conducted by Gallup, which was republished in 2020. See “Gallup Vault: J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI and American Communists,” for further analysis.

²¹ For the full article visit “The Lincoln Times, March 01, 1954, Page 4, Image 4.”

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