## AC – MV Round 1

### Overview

#### News is supposed to be a source of information. Ideally it teaches us what is true – however, the online age’s focus on appealing to specific audiences has made news tell us what is false. Because the current advocacy-based media instills mistrust and skepticism in objective fact, I affirm Resolved: In a democracy, a free press ought to prioritize objectivity over advocacy

### Definitions

#### In order to understand what it means for me to affirm, we first need to define a few key words in the resolution.

#### First, the Cambridge English dictionary defines “a” as:

(Cambridge English Dictionary; dictionary based on original research from the Cambridge English Corpus. “a” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/a> No Date) // ELog

used before a [noun](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/noun) to refer to a [single](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/single) thing or [person](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/person) that has not been [mentioned](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/mention) before, [especially](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/especially) when you are not referring to a [particular](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/particular) thing or [person](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/person): I've [bought](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/bought) a [car](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/car). She has a [boyfriend](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/boyfriend). There was a [sudden](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/sudden) [loud](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/loud) [noise](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/noise). What a [shame](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/shame) that you couldn't go to the [party](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/party). I [heard](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/hear) a [child](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/child) [crying](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/crying). Is he a [friend](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/friend) of yours (= one of [your](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/your) [friends](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/friend))?

#### This means if I can prove only a single instance where it is preferable to prioritize objectivity, I win the round.

#### Next, Oxford Languages defines “objective” as “not influenced by personal feelings or opinions in considering and representing facts”

(https://www.google.com/search?q=objective+definition&sxsrf=APq-WBuHl0XyiRsN7xugy1WY0nQPX1aldg%3A1645738280458&ei=KPkXYpO\_G6OyqtsPsPW2kAk&oq=objective+defin&gs\_lcp=Cgdnd3Mtd2l6EAEYADINCAAQsQMQkQIQRhD5ATIFCAAQkQIyBQgAEJECMgUIABCRAjIFCAAQgAQyBQgAEIAEMgUIABCABDIFCAAQgAQyBQgAEIAEMgUIABCABDoHCAAQRxCwAzoSCAAQgAQQhwIQsQMQFBBGEPkBOggIABCABBCxAzoLCAAQgAQQsQMQgwFKBAhBGABKBAhGGABQiAFY9wVgvQ1oAXABeACAAZoBiAG-BJIBAzEuNJgBAKABAcgBCMABAQ&sclient=gws-wiz)

#### This means an objective press is a press that does not let external things influence how facts are presented.

#### Finally, Dictionary.com defines “ought” as “used to express duty or moral obligation,” (<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/ought>)

#### This means this debate is not about whether it is possible to have an objective press, but rather whether or not one would be morally preferable.

#### However, what is moral is so seemingly subjective. How are you meant to evaluate it? That’s where the value and value criterion come in.

### Value/Value Criterion

#### The value, or how to decide what is moral, is democracy. When the resolution asks what a free press in a democracy ought do, it means the debate must center around what is best for a democracy

#### The value criterion, or how to achieve the value of democracy, is utilitarianism – the greatest good for the greatest number. Because democracy is a system of representation for all, the best democracies must serve as many citizens as possible

#### With the groundwork laid down, let’s look at the two reasons a free press in a democracy ought to prioritize objectivity over advocacy

### Contention One – Trust

#### The thesis of this argument is that objectivity restores trust in science while advocacy undermines it, and that trust in science is needed to solve a plethora of existential risks. Let’s look at each part of this claim in more detail:

#### Objectivity restores trust in science – it crowds out fake news with credible research

**As T. V. Gerbina wrote on February 25th,** (T. V. Gerbina; professor of scientific and technical information at the Russian Academy of Sciences. “Scientific Disinformation: On the Problem of Fake News” [https://link.springer.com/article/10.3103/S0147688221040092 25 January 2022](https://link.springer.com/article/10.3103/S0147688221040092%2025%20January%202022)) // ELog

With the development of science and technology, there has been a clear increase in interest in science and scientific research. On the one hand, society is aware of the dependence of progress on the development of scientific research; on the other hand, it perceives science as something that carries potential threats. The digital revolution contributed to the replacement of vertical models of dialogue between science and society with horizontal models [[43](https://link.springer.com/article/10.3103/S0147688221040092#ref-CR43)]. An important subject of the dialogue between society and science is the diversity of scientific knowledge in the information environment. The transition of scientific knowledge into knowledge for all is ensured by the popularization of science, which gives knowledge a form accessible to the general public. Fake science news is a socio-cultural phenomenon of imitation of reliable scientific knowledge. Fake news creators use complex terms to promote ideas that are not recognized by the scientific community, which can seriously affect the worldview of society. In the information environment, reliable and fake science news compete with each other and the user’s real choice is far from always obvious. The user chooses not between science and pseudoscience, but between understandable science and complex science. In addition, resistance to new knowledge may prevail due to the cognitive dissonance that occurs when new facts contradict their own ideas. The massive dissemination of fake science news can be seen as a crisis of the political system and science journalism and as a new propaganda tool, where fake scientific information is deliberately disseminated on social networks in a viral manner with the aim of quickly impacting the audience. There are many motives for creating fake science news, the most obvious being financial gain and ideological beliefs. Preventing the deliberate creation of false information is very difficult, and, in democratic societies that operate on the principles of free speech and freedom of expression, it is even more difficult. Thus, instead of looking for ways to prevent the creation of misinformation, the primary focus should be on limiting the spread of fake news and minimizing the damage it can cause. On the one hand, it is up to the scientific community to stand up against the spread of false information and fake science and to resolutely oppose the public figures who promote it. Scientists should contribute to research that promotes the understanding of false information, to education that develops knowledge and skills in the assessment of information, and to the scientific literacy of society. Even the publication of a “popular,” understandable to the general public, press release about one’s scientific work on the website of a scientific organization or university can contribute to the reliability of news information, i.e., the best way to combat fake science news is to fill the modern media environment with engaging and reliable information. On the other hand, the scientific community must promote ethics and integrity in research, the development of policies and practices to reduce the publication of false data and results and the use of predatory journals without adequate peer review [[44](https://link.springer.com/article/10.3103/S0147688221040092#ref-CR44), [45](https://link.springer.com/article/10.3103/S0147688221040092#ref-CR45)]. Reporting suspicious content, using only reputable news sources, and verifying information can help to create a safer news environment.

#### Advocacy undermines trust in science – the press is encouraged to dispute scientific facts to appeal to their audience’s viewpoint

**As Christina Pazzanese wrote in 2020,** (Christina Pazzanese; staff writer at the Harvard Gazette covering national and world affairs. “Why isn’t the right more afraid of COVID-19?”<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/10/what-caused-the-u-s-anti-science-trend/> 30 October 2020) // ELog

Is the pandemic the most important election issue this year? That depends on whom you ask. Those who say that it is tend to favor overwhelmingly (82 percent) Joseph R. Biden, the Democratic Party nominee, yet only 24 percent of Trump supporters call it a very important factor, a sharp decline since August, according to a recent Pew Research Center [poll](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/10/21/only-24-of-trump-supporters-view-the-coronavirus-outbreak-as-a-very-important-voting-issue/?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=43bfff467e-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_10_23_02_31&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-43bfff467e-400906701). Many of the president’s most enthusiastic fans believe officials have overstated the dangers and probability of contracting the airborne virus and, with a vaccine potentially imminent, they see little to be gained by keeping schools and businesses across the country closed. But people on the left simply point to hard numbers: More than 9 million stricken across the nation with over 230,000 deaths and record new infections in recent days. The discrepancy has left many public health experts and political analysts shaking their heads. “One of the things we know from studies about how people respond to news is that nobody likes science or empiricism when it conflicts with their deeply held views. What’s happening now is that this crisis is locked into science and partisanship in a way that really strikes at the heart of the Republican Party as it’s currently constituted,” said [Tom Nichols](https://www.extension.harvard.edu/faculty-directory/thomas-m-nichols), a political scientist who teaches at [Harvard Extension School](https://www.extension.harvard.edu/) and the U.S. Naval War College in Newport, R.I. Observers of conservative politics say it’s perfectly logical that Trump fans so willingly accept his counterfactual statements about the pandemic and go along with efforts to discredit scientists in order to delegitimize politically damaging statistics. For years, Republicans have successfully seized upon a larger cultural trend of diminished faith in experts around issues like climate change. “We think expertise is this very exclusionary idea, which it is, because it’s supposed to be: Not everybody gets a vote on how to fly the plane,” said Nichols, who wrote about the trend in a 2017 book, “The Death of Expertise.” In the pandemic, “This rejection of science and of expertise [has] become [a] demonstration of political loyalty. That’s the part I didn’t expect — that there would be an entire political movement, led by the president of the United States, to basically disavow science.” In a recent [interview](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/fauci-no-surprised-trump-covid-19-media-appearances-60-minutes/), Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said that because science still holds a place of esteem and authority in the wider culture, it has become a proxy for those who want to lash out against authority figures. It’s a view Nichols shares. “At the end of the ’60s and ’70s, the right won the economic war. The American economy is structured just the way conservatives want. But the left won the culture war, and that just annoys the [expletive] out of conservatives,” said Nichols, a former Republican who [left](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/tom-nichols-why-im-leaving-republican-party/572419/) the party in 2018. He is now part of the Lincoln Project, an anti-Trump political action group of mostly lapsed members of the GOP. “Think of that biker rally in [Sturgis,] South Dakota: ‘We’re all gonna show up on our Harleys, and then we’re … gonna get sick and die. But we all felt really good for a minute.’ That’s mostly a howl against the fact that the conservatives basically ceded the culture war to the American left,” he said. Prior research into religious conservatives’ views on climate science is helpful in understanding today’s COVID and science skepticism on the right, said [Theda Skocpol](https://sociology.fas.harvard.edu/people/theda-skocpol), Ph.D. ’75, Victor S. Thomas Professor of Government and Sociology. It isn’t that religious conservatives were unaware of science or rejected scientific findings, the studies found, “It’s that they resent the use of experts as political authorities. And I think that is exactly what we see here.” Skocpol has studied conservative political groups and co-wrote a new book about “red state” America during the Trump administration. She says what the left and public opinion surveys often get wrong is assuming that conservatives, like the maskless crowds at Trump rallies, flout public health advisories because they’re uneducated or oblivious to the potential health risks. “Chances are, they’re aware that the virus is dangerous,” she said. But in such deeply partisan times, the president’s repeated denials of the pandemic’s threat, his scorn for COVID mitigation measures, and ridicule for experts like Fauci, who over the weekend again pushed for a larger role for science in managing the pandemic, get amplified by conservative media outlets, and the conspiracy theories and disinformation spread by bad actors on social media help validate anti-science skepticism. “The president’s role in this is absolutely critical, plus the role of Fox News,” said Skocpol. “Trump’s hold over Republican voters is very strong. And some of them are simply misinformed because they’re not getting accurate information.” Despite having received treatment, including an experimental drug at a U.S. military hospital, Trump has called federal government’s scientists “idiots” and accused doctors and hospitals of padding COVID-related death totals to “get more money.” He continues to hold political events often with thousands of people, against the wishes of many governors, telling supporters that the pandemic is “ending,” as cases rise. One factor that has been largely overlooked and may contribute to skepticism over COVID restrictions involves the relatively minimal economic effect the pandemic has had on people working in knowledge-driven fields, like finance, tech, and academia, compared with those in retail, the service industry, and others who can’t work remotely, said [Jennifer Lerner](https://www.hks.harvard.edu/faculty/jennifer-lerner), Thornton Bradshaw Professor of Public Policy, Decision Science, and Management at [Harvard Kennedy School](https://www.hks.harvard.edu/). “If there’s a perception that elites are giving these stay-at-home orders and elites aren’t actually that affected by them as much as working-class individuals are, then there can be perceptions of unfairness, and perceptions of unfairness are one of the single biggest drivers of anger,” she said. With so much uncertainty around the length of the pandemic, prospects for a vaccine, and the possibility of getting sick or having it infect a loved one, Lerner said, “It’s very natural to fall into an angry state because fear is so aversive experientially. If I can be mad at somebody or mad at something, it feels like I have a little more control than if I just remain in fear or anxiety.” Unlike recent infectious disease outbreaks, the coronavirus pandemic has prompted widespread hostility, threats, and even violence directed at government, public health officials, even store employees over requests to don face masks and adhere to social-distancing guidelines. In addition to serving as a coping mechanism, Lerner said, anger also promotes a feeling of certainty and energizes people, which drives risk-seeking behavior. “That risk-seeking behavior and that anger will help people feel more of a sense of empowerment. It automatically will give that sense of control, when in fact a lot of control has been taken away,” she said. “It isn’t the case that acting out in anger makes us less angry. Acting out in anger actually can fuel anger. So then you get into a cycle of anger and risk-taking, anger and risk-taking.” Amid a difficult reelection campaign, the president has ample political reasons to encourage his devotees to dismiss public health warnings and attend his rallies. That so many choose to do so, often without masks, even in the face of overwhelming evidence that it could result in illness or death, is not a demonstration of Trump’s cult-like hold on people but of cognitive dissonance, Lerner said. “It is simply a commitment to a way of viewing the world and viewing a leader that ‘I’ve’ chosen to follow. In that sense, when I start to hear in the media that maybe Trump is not actually looking out for me and his promises about when a vaccine would be delivered aren’t coming true, and when he said the virus wasn’t a big deal and I believed that, it’s too threatening to think that I was lied to and that I, myself, believed him and talked to others about my beliefs,” she said. “And so instead, I’m going to find news sources online that will keep allowing me to say, ‘Trump is my guy and he is looking out for me.’” Surprisingly, Nichols says, the public health and medical community, which has been leading the COVID battle, shares some blame, having inadvertently delivered some “self-inflicted wounds during this time.” “Doctors, for example, not condemning the [large-scale] Black Lives Matter marches as potentially dangerous because they wanted to agree with the message — which we all did,” he said. “It really cut the legs out [from under] them to say, ‘I can’t believe Trump is holding these super-spreader rallies,’ when [they] thought that 50,000 people on the Washington Mall was OK. “If you’re going to be disinterested, impartial, nonpartisan, the way you maintain that is to be that even when it hurts and when you think you’re not helping the cause of racial justice,” he said. Signing letters blasting the administration and wagging fingers on TV at maskless rallygoers only pushes those people further away. “You’re solidifying [former Republican Sen.] Rick Santorum’s point that ‘the smart people have picked a side, and it’s not our side.’”

#### Trust in science solves disease, climate, food and water insecurity, and unknown future threats – decline in trust risks extinction

**As Sudip Parikh wrote in 2021,** (Sudip Parikh; CEO of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and executive publisher of the *Science* family of journals. “Why We Must Rebuild Trust in Science” [https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trend/archive/winter-2021/why-we-must-rebuild-trust-in-science 9 February 2021](https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trend/archive/winter-2021/why-we-must-rebuild-trust-in-science%209%20February%202021)) // ELog

When the history of our current moment is written, science will be central to the story. In the crucible of 2020, did science rebuild the societal trust needed to defeat the coronavirus? Or did a break in trust lead to a lingering pandemic that foreshadowed future failures to solve the coming crises of climate change, food and water insecurity, and economic stagnation? Historians will consider what led to this pivotal moment in the relationship of science and society and how it was resolved. Scientists and society must work together to ensure that this time of uncertainty and upheaval leads to a new era of solutions that enrich the lives and well-being of us all. We live in wondrous times: The pace of discovery and innovation has never been faster. We have seen for the first time the methane-covered mountains of Pluto, discovered gravitational ripples caused by colliding black holes, detailed extensive changes to our climate and environment, advanced quantum computing to the brink of broader utility, and harnessed gene editing to potentially cure sickle cell anemia and other diseases. Despite failures in our public health response to the pandemic, the biomedical research enterprise has never worked more quickly than during its quest to understand and address COVID-19. While basic researchers work around-the-clock to answer fundamental questions about the coronavirus’ structure, transmission, and impacts, clinicians and physician scientists are testing therapeutics and vaccines. The record-shattering number of submissions to the journal Science and other peer-reviewed publications for COVID-related research—from structural biology to epidemiology—speaks volumes about the speed and intensity with which researchers are responding to this crisis. We also live in uncertain times: Multiple intersecting challenges have the potential to become global crises. The COVID-19 pandemic will not be the last time that science will be essential to society’s triumph over existential threats. Addressing future public health concerns, such as climate change, food and water insecurity, and other challenges—some of which are yet to emerge—will require the long-term integration of science into policymaking in ways that have only been temporary in the past. The cadence of emerging crises and the pace of planet-changing discoveries necessitate permanent elevation of scientific advisers to the front ranks of policymaking as they have only sometimes been during national crises like world wars, and moments of global competition like the space race. At the same time, we need to more fully engage diverse communities with an intentional emphasis on those that have been ignored, marginalized, or harmed by scientific advancement. One element is absolutely critical to the success of our mission to improve the human condition: trust. It’s a foundational element of any relationship, but for the mutual benefit of the scientific enterprise and the people who support it, trust is essential. Simply put, a scientific endeavor that is not trusted by the public cannot adequately contribute to society and will be diminished as a result. The COVID-19 pandemic presents us with just such an example. Late last year two of the vaccine candidates in clinical trials demonstrated safety and effectiveness in preventing infection of the virus that causes COVID-19. Although this was a remarkable accomplishment on its own, manufacturing and delivering these vaccines to the world’s population will be an enormous challenge. To further complicate this situation, a public that is generally trusting of scientists and health professionals is receiving vastly different information, guidance, and recommendations based on its news consumption, political leaders, and geography. A September 2020 Pew Research Center survey found that Americans were evenly divided as to whether they would get a vaccine to prevent COVID-19 if one were available now. The science of vaccine development cannot be successful if it is not trusted enough that people will get vaccinated. Science will have accomplished nothing by producing a vaccine that sits unused in a warehouse. We cannot become resigned or complacent as we work to maintain trust in science during this critical moment.

### Contention Two – Polarization

#### The thesis of this argument is that objectivity solves the political polarization that advocacy creates, and that polarization endangers democracy. Let’s look at each part of this claim in more detail:

#### Objectivity prevents political polarization – it unites all groups around central truths, which is necessary to preserve democracy

**As Mark Walsh wrote in 2018,** (Mark Walsh; archive curator for St. John Fischer College with a B.A. is history and political science. “Polarization and the Modern Media Landscape” <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1016&context=journal3690> 1 May 2018) // ELog

The objective press is not perfect in this regard, certainty, but as explained above, it has no obligation to be: it is simply a means thorough which a journalist should report the news. Stephens even concedes in his article that the objective press did have one monumental advantage the subjective press didn’t: widespread trust, in which Republicans and Democrats could seek out the same anchors or papers to get the same, factual news (Stephens, 2017). This trust never dispelled division or ideological differences, but it did unite Americans in the information they knew to be legitimate and honest. That dynamic obviously didn’t exist in 1861, simply because Americans all looked to a seemingly infinite amount of different, plainly biased papers that reported facts and events through the tints of ideology and partisan loyalty, leaving no place for the nation as a whole to come together and agree on certain, intrinsic truths. Stephens, it seems, is advocating here for a subjective press simply because he likes the ideological direction it’s going, a common trend among modern liberals who, for the most part, don’t even bother admitting the bias exists in the first place. His entire article, even objectively speaking, reeks of bias and partisan sympathies. If the tables were turned, and it was instead conservatives who heavily influenced mainstream reporting, one can imagine Stephens writing a very different article. And that is precisely the problem. Without objective journalism, this nation and its populace has no objective, universal truth; no objective set of facts, or even values, upon which we can all agree. It is shattered, fragmented, and pit against itself as ideologies, parties and value systems all try to claim the facts of a situation for their own, with varying degrees of honesty to each of their claims. That’s certainty how America looks today, due in no small part to the partisan media. Objective truth must stay objective, and it is the journalist’s job to maintain and defend this principle as a foundation not just for the preservation of their institution, but for the preservation of our democracy itself. Conclusion In conclusion, today’s modern media landscape, including mainstream and social media, do indeed exhibit, to a certain degree, political bias. The impacts and influence of this fact are disturbing and require immediate action, both by the average citizen and the institution of journalism itself. It remains in danger of selling its soul to polarization and sensationalism, a decision that would disenfranchise millions more and destabilize the very fabric of our democracy. The bias present in today’s media varies based upon where it originates. As described, more traditional sources, such as network news and news wires, remain the least biased sources around, though even today some in those ranks have proven susceptible to partisanship. The greatest danger lies online and on cable television, with an endless number of blogs, websites, opinion pundits and charismatic personalities pitching and selling sound-bites, anger and the moral high ground. The nature of the echo-chamber that develops in its wake blinds and deafens the individual to criticism of said ideology, further radicalizing not only them but also those around them. As a result, democracy itself remains exposed and vulnerable to radicalization, extremism and intense division, a terrifying prospect for all who know and appreciate the freedoms of speech and the press we have enjoyed for so long. Overall, it is key to realize that, more than likely, the news you’re reading or watching has some degree of bias within it. All it takes is for an individual to spot it, understand the message it’s trying to send, and put it aside as you analyze the objective facts. This critical thinking can help put partisanship behind us, and help many escape the ideological bubbles they themselves have found themselves in.

#### Advocacy leads to political polarization – exposure to the other side can’t stop it and it creates a feedback loop of more polarization

**As Ezra Klein wrote in 2020,** (Ezra Klein; founder of Vox and formerly editor-at-large. “Why the media is so polarized – and how it polarizes us” [https://www.vox.com/2020/1/28/21077888/why-were-polarized-media-book-ezra-news 28 January 2020](https://www.vox.com/2020/1/28/21077888/why-were-polarized-media-book-ezra-news%2028%20January%202020)) // ELog

In today’s media sphere, where the explosion of choices has made it possible to get the political media you really want, it’s expressed itself in polarized media that attaches to political identity, conflict, and celebrity. That is to say, it expresses itself in journalism and commentary that is more directly about the question of why your side should win and the other side should lose. I’ve produced a lot of this kind of journalism. I cover politics because I think policy is important, which is to say, because I think who wins and who loses policy fights is important. And, obviously, my views on those questions are rational, judicious, disinterested, and objectively correct. The problem is lots of other people are doing that kind of work, too, and some of them come to different conclusions than I do. But rather than argue over who’s right, I want to step back and look at how a political media system increasingly organized around that axis deepens political identity, hardens polarization, and raises the political stakes. The simplest measure for assessing political journalism is whether it’s giving those who follow it a more accurate understanding of American politics. As one disturbing window into this question, consider [a fascinating study](https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/697253) published by Douglas Ahler and Gaurav Sood in 2018. In it, Ahler and Sood conducted a survey asking people “to estimate the percentage of Democrats who are black, atheist or agnostic, union members, and gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and the percentage of Republicans who are evangelical, 65 or older, Southern, and earn over $250,000 per year.” They were asking, in other words, how much people thought the composition of the parties fit the caricatures of the parties. Misperceptions were particularly high when people were asked to describe the other party. Democrats believed 44 percent of Republicans earned more than $250,000 a year; it’s actually 2 percent. Republicans believed that 38 percent of Democrats were gay, lesbian, or bisexual; the correct answer is about 6 percent. Democrats believed that more than four in 10 Republicans are seniors; in truth, seniors make up about 20 percent of the GOP. Republicans believed that 46 percent of Democrats are black and 44 percent belong to a union; in reality, about 24 percent of Democrats are black and less than 11 percent belong to a union. Here’s the kicker: As the charts below show, the more political media people consumed, the more mistaken they were, in general, about the other party. This is a damning result: The more political media you absorb, the more warped your perspective of the other side becomes. The old line on local reporting was “If it bleeds, it leads.” For political reporting, the principle is “If it outrages, it leads.” And outrage is deeply connected to identity — we are outraged when members of other groups threaten our group and violate our values. As such, polarized media doesn’t emphasize commonalities, it weaponizes differences; it doesn’t focus on the best of the other side, it threatens you with the worst. As that last paragraph suggests, I’m about to step into some dangerous territory, so let me say this clearly: I’m not asserting moral equivalence, and in [the book](https://simonandschusterpublishing.com/why-were-polarized/) this article is adapted from, I have much more to say about the ways and reasons the left and the right — including their media spheres — have diverged. But virtually everyone in political media is competing for audience attention and loyalty amid a cacophony of choices. We all make different decisions about how to compete for that audience, but since we are all trying to attract other human beings, there are certain similarities in our approach. Why audience-driven media is identitarian media Historically, not only did the audience have less choice in what media to consume, the media didn’t have much information about the audience. The networks had ratings. The newspapers had subscription renewals. Everyone received letters. But that was it. I used to regularly guest-host on cable news. The emotional rhythm of that workday crested at 4 pm, when the Nielsen numbers came out and everyone stopped to compare how their show did against the competition. If you beat your competitors, you could rest easy. If you didn’t, you had to worry. And if you lost a few times in a row, you’d start getting calls from upstairs. Maybe your programming should stick closer to the news of the day. Maybe you needed shorter intros, or longer intros, or more guests, or more heat. Cable news is journalism, but it’s also a business. Chris Hayes, who anchors MSNBC’s 8 pm newscast and is among the most thoughtful, civic-minded journalists in the industry, referenced a Will Ferrell joke from Anchorman 2 on his podcast, saying, “What if instead of telling people the things they need to know, we tell them what they want to know?” That is, he says, “the creation story of cable news.” “At some level,” he continued, “we’re wedding DJs. And the wedding DJ’s job is to get you on the floor.” The point is not that this leaves no room for serious journalism. As Hayes says, there are good wedding DJs and bad wedding DJs, and the work of being a cable news host is making sure you’re one of the good ones. But this is the business context in which cable news decisions are made. Then came the rise of real-time digital analytics. Every digital newsroom in the country, including Vox, subscribes to some service or another that tracks traffic in a gamified, constantly updating interface. The most influential is Chartbeat, which shows you every article on your site, indicates the number of people on each article at any given second, and colors the dots representing those people to tell you how they found the article. Green dots mean they found you through a search engine. Purple dots mean they came from a social network, usually Facebook, Twitter, or Reddit. It’s pure pleasure to watch the display for an article you worked hard on fill with dots. But we don’t just want people to read our work. We want people to spread our work — to be so moved by what we wrote or said that they log on to Facebook and share it with their friends or head over to Reddit and try to tell the world. That’s how you get those dots to multiply. But people don’t share quiet voices. They share loud voices. They share work that moves them, that helps them express to their friends who they are and how they feel. Social platforms are about curating and expressing a public-facing identity. They’re about saying, “I’m a person who cares about this, likes that, and loathes this other thing.” They are about signaling the groups you belong to and, just as important, the groups you don’t belong to. BuzzFeed’s secret: Identity = virality The rise of BuzzFeed made this subtext into text. Its co-founder and CEO, Jonah Peretti, originally built BuzzFeed on the side as a skunkworks for experimenting with how viral content spread online. The answer soon became clear: Identity is the slingshot. “A classic early BuzzFeed post, and later video, was ‘13 Struggles All Left-Handers Know to Be True,’” Peretti tells me. “Another early classic was ‘Signs You Were Raised by Immigrant Parents.’ That one’s a racial identity but also an immigrant identity.” There are so many more. One of BuzzFeed’s most popular series was “X Things Only a Y Would Understand.” A Google search for those keywords brings up articles like “14 Things Only Anxious People Will Understand,” “19 Things Only People With Fibromyalgia Will Understand,” “53 Things Only ’80s Girls Can Understand,” “30 Things Everyone Who Went to College Will Understand,” “27 Struggles You’ll Only Understand If You Were Born Before 1995,” “38 Things Only Someone Who Was a Scout Would Know,” “19 Comics Only Night Owls Will Understand,” “19 Things You’ll Only Understand if You Had Strict Parents,” “18 Photos That Only People Who Had Braces Will Understand.” This is identity media in its purest form. Sharing the scouting article says you were a Scout, and you were a serious enough Scout to understand the signifiers and experiences that only Scouts had. To post that article on Facebook is to make a statement about who you are, who your group is, and, just as important, who is excluded. In political media, identity is affirmed and activated with slightly more oblique headlines. But the underlying dynamic is the same: This public figure that you and everyone in your group loathe said something awful. This poll came out saying you and your group are going to win or, better yet, that your out-group is going to lose. This slashing column explains why you’re right about everything and why your opponents are wrong. A lot of these pieces are accurate, and some of them are genuinely useful. I have written many of them myself, and edited countless more. But cumulatively, it’s a sharp change from the days in which most political content people saw was self-consciously trying to avoid offending anyone. The stories that thrive when your business model is a local monopoly that needs a news product that’s appealing to every kind of person who might shop at a department store are different from the stories that thrive when your business model is people who strongly agree with your stories sharing them with their friends. Identities are malleable things. They can be activated or kept dormant, strengthened or weakened, created or left in the void. The flood of identity-oriented content deepens the identities it repeatedly triggers, confirms, or threatens. Many of us who wrote about politics on the internet before the rise of social media lament the feeling that something has been lost, that a space that once felt fresh and generative now feels toxic and narrow. In her book Trick Mirror, Jia Tolentino offers a description of what changed that feels right to me, which is that social media shifted the “organizing principle” of online discourse: The early internet had been constructed around lines of affinity and openness. But when the internet moved to an organizing principle of opposition, much of what had formerly been surprising and rewarding and curious became tedious, noxious, and grim. This shift partly reflects basic social physics. Having a mutual enemy is a quick way to make a friend—we learn this as early as elementary school—and politically, it’s much easier to organize people against something than it is to unite them in an affirmative vision. And, within the economy of attention, conflict always gets more people to look. When I entered journalism, the term of art for pieces infused with perspective was “opinion journalism.” The point of the work was to convey an opinion. Nowadays, I think a lot of it is closer to “identity journalism” — the effect of the work, given the social channels through which it’s consumed, is to reinforce an identity. But an identity, once adopted, is harder to change than an opinion. An identity that binds you into a community you care about is costly and painful to abandon, and the mind will go to great lengths to avoid abandoning it. So the more media people see that encourages them to think of themselves as part of a group, and the more they publicly proclaim — through sharing and liking and following and subscribing — that they are part of a group, the deeper that identity roots and the more resistant the underlying views become to change. Reading the other side doesn’t change our minds Many people worry that modern media generates polarization by locking us into echo chambers. We’ve cocooned ourselves into hearing information that only tells us how right we are, and that’s making us more extreme. There is an optimistic theory embedded in this story: If only we crossed the informational aisle, our enmity and polarization would ebb. Beginning in October 2017, a group of political scientists and sociologists decided to test this theory. In [the largest study](http://www.pnas.org/content/early/2018/08/27/1804840115.full) of its kind conducted, they paid 1,220 regular Twitter users who identified as either Democrats or Republicans to follow a bot retweeting elected officials, media figures, and opinion leaders from the other side. The participants took regular surveys asking about their views on 10 issues ranging from immigration to government waste to corporate profits to LGBTQ acceptance. The result of the month-long exposure to popular, authoritative voices from the other side of the aisle was that respondents became more, not less, polarized. “We find that Republicans who followed a liberal Twitter bot became substantially more conservative posttreatment,” write the authors. “Democrats exhibited slight increases in liberal attitudes after following a conservative Twitter bot, although these effects are not statistically significant.” The difference between the Democratic and Republican responses is interesting and merits more study. But the key finding is that neither group responded to exposure to the other side by moderating its own views. In both cases, hearing contrary opinions drove partisans not just to a deeper certainty in the rightness of their cause, but to more polarized policy positions — Republicans became more conservative rather than more liberal, and Democrats, if anything happened at all, became more liberal rather than more conservative. I spoke to Christopher Bail, one of the study’s authors and the head of Duke University’s Polarization Lab. “For a long time, people have been assuming that exposing people to opposing views creates the opportunity for moderation,” he told me. “If I could humbly claim to figure out one thing, it’s that that’s not a simple process. If Twitter tweaks its algorithms to put one Republican for every nine Democrats in your Twitter feed, that won’t increase moderation.” There is evidence that structuring positive, collaborative interactions can promote understanding. But very little in either political media or social media is designed for positive interactions with the other side. Most political media isn’t even designed for persuasion. For all the reasons we’ve discussed, the bulk of opinionated political media is written for the side that already agrees with the author, and most partisan elected officials are tweeting to their supporters, who follow them and fundraise for them, rather than to their critics, who don’t. When we talk about political media, we tend to cut a sharp line between the political elites who create the media and the audience that consumes it. But that’s a mistake. No one consumes more political, and politicized, media than political elites. This is part of the reason political media has an enormous effect on politics, even though only a small fraction of the country regularly consumes it. Politicians are increasingly addicted to Twitter, with the president being only the most prominent example. Fox News has whipped the Republican Party into a number of government shutdowns, and much of Trump’s most offensive rhetoric comes on a direct conveyor belt from conservative media feeding him conspiracies that he transforms into presidential proclamations. Indeed, the impeachment effort House Democrats launched against Trump [stems](https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-invention-of-the-conspiracy-theory-on-biden-and-ukraine) from Trump believing a set of anti-Biden conspiracies pushed by Breitbart editor-at-large Peter Schweizer and heavily promoted on Fox News. Most Americans had never heard of Hunter Biden, much less followed vague insinuations about Ukrainian prosecutors. But the president was sufficiently persuaded that he threw the weight of his administration into an investigation, setting off a chain of events that changed American political history and further polarized the country. Politics is, first and foremost, driven by the people who pay the most attention and wield the most power — and those people opt in to extraordinarily politicized media. They then create the political system they perceive. Journalists are hardly immune to these forces. We become more polarized, and more polarizing, when we start spending our time in polarizing environments. I have seen it in myself, and I have watched it in others: When we’re going for retweets, or when our main form of audience feedback is coming from highly partisan social media users, it subtly but importantly warps our news judgment. It changes who we cover and what stories we chase. And when we cover politics in a more polarized way, anticipating or absorbing the tastes of a more polarized audience, we create a more polarized political reality.

#### Polarization undermines democracy – us vs. them mentality means resorting to authoritarian tactics to hold power, but fact-based coverage solves

**As Jennifer Lynn McCoy wrote in 2018,** (Jennifer Lynn McCoy; distinguished professor of political science at Georgia State University. “Extreme political polarization weakens democracy – can the US avoid that fate?” [https://theconversation.com/extreme-political-polarization-weakens-democracy-can-the-us-avoid-that-fate-105540 31 October 2018](https://theconversation.com/extreme-political-polarization-weakens-democracy-can-the-us-avoid-that-fate-105540%2031%20October%202018)) // ELog

The midterm elections are approaching during one of the most polarized moments in recent American politics. [A collaborative research project I led](http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0002764218759576) on polarized democracies around the world examines the processes by which societies divide into political “tribes” and democracy is harmed. Based on a study of 11 countries including the U.S., Turkey, Hungary, Venezuela, Thailand and others, we found that when political leaders cast their opponents as immoral or corrupt, they create “us” and “them” camps – called by political scientists and psychologists “in-groups” and “out-groups” – in the society. In this tribal dynamic, each side views the other “out group” party with increasing distrust, bias and enmity. Perceptions that “If you win, I lose” grow. Each side views the other political party and their supporters as a threat to the nation or their way of life if that other political party is in power. For that reason, the incumbent’s followers tolerate more illiberal and increasingly authoritarian behavior to stay in power, while the opponents are more and more willing to resort to undemocratic means to remove them from power. This damages democracy. Are Americans now stuck in animosity and anger that will undermine democracy, or can the nation pull out of it? Politicians divide Our research finds that severe polarization is affected by [three primary factors](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328538486_Toward_a_Theory_of_Pernicious_Polarization_and_How_It_Harms_Democracies_Comparative_Evidence_and_Possible_Remedies_Forthcoming_in_a_Special_Issue_of_the_Annals_of_the_American_Academy_of_Political_and). First, it is often stimulated by the rhetoric of political leaders who exploit the real grievances of voters. These politicians choose divisive issues to highlight in order to pursue their own political agenda. In other words, what a leader says is as important as what she or he does. Since launching his campaign, President Donald Trump has vilified so-called external enemies such as [“criminal and rapist” Mexican immigrants](http://time.com/4473972/donald-trump-mexico-meeting-insult/), [terrorist Muslims](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/29/us/politics/trump-anti-muslim-videos-jayda-fransen.html) and [foreign allies out to drain America’s coffers](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-confronting-chinas-unfair-trade-policies/) through “unfair trade deficits.” Now, the president is targeting internal enemies. He has famously [labeled the media “the enemy of the people”](https://www.apnews.com/1f8f123667b94f65a931cf710c7a698d) and recently accused the [Democrats of unleashing an “angry mob”](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-democrats-unhinged-us-midterm-election-2018-iowa-a8577266.html) unfit to govern. Such unprecedented attacks by a president of the United States seemed designed to discredit his critics and delegitimize his political opponents. But they also trigger the dynamics of polarized politics by reinforcing the notion that politics is an “us versus them” contest. By [August 2017](http://www.people-press.org/2017/09/13/partisans-differ-widely-in-views-of-police-officers-college-professors/), just eight months after Trump took office, three-quarters of Republicans had negative views of Democrats, and 70 percent of Democrats viewed Republicans negatively. This was a large increase compared with the mid-1990s, when about 20 percent of each party had unfavorable views of the other party. Even more disturbing for democracy, roughly half of voters of each party say the other party makes them feel afraid, and growing numbers view the policies of the [other party as a threat](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328570284_United_States_Racial_Resentment_Negative_Partisanship_and_Polarization_in_Trump's_America) to the nation. America’s recent political polarization did not begin with Trump. It has been growing since the 1990s and accelerated under President Barack Obama, when the Tea Party formed in reaction to his election, and bipartisanship broke down in the Congress. By [2016](http://www.people-press.org/2016/06/22/partisanship-and-political-animosity-in-2016/), 45 percent of Republicans felt threatened by Democratic policies, and 41 percent of Democrats viewed Republican policies as a threat, up nearly 10 points in just two years. Our research shows that in extreme polarization, people feel distant from and suspicious of the “other” camp. At the same time, they feel loyal to, and trusting of, their own camp – without examining their biases or factual basis of their information. Although this is a common phenomenon long identified by social psychology, it is even more pronounced in the age of social media 24-hour news cycles and more politicized media outlets who repeat and amplify the political attacks. Most dangerously, [words can unleash](https://dangerousspeech.org/) actual violence by avid supporters seeking approval from the leader or simply inspired to carry out an attack against the designated “enemy,” as we saw when supporters of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela attacked a media mogul whom Chávez had labeled [public enemy number one](http://usip.org/publications/2011/10/international-mediation-venezuela). Similarly, last week an avid Trump supporter [sent pipe bomb mailers](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/26/nyregion/cnn-cory-booker-pipe-bombs-sent.html) to prominent Trump opponents, and the killings in a synagogue in Pittsburgh were carried out by [a man who used similar language to Trump’s assertion](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/29/us/politics/caravan-trump-shooting-elections.html) that the U.S. was being invaded by a caravan of Central Americans. Polarization, though, is a two-way street. Both sides now How the political opposition reacts is the second factor explaining the impact of polarization on democracy. If the opposition returns the bitter rhetoric with similar political hardball and demonizing language, they risk locking in place a cycle that leads to entrenching the politics of polarization. A perceived political win may in fact prove to be an eventual defeat. That happened in 2013 when the [Democratic Party changed the long-standing rule](https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/01/democrats-trump-cabinet-senate/513782/) that nominees to federal judgeships needed 60 Senate votes to end debate and move to a confirmation vote. To overcome Republican obstruction under Obama, the Democrats who held a majority in the Senate at the time abandoned that rule and decreed that only 51 votes would be needed for all federal judgeships – except the Supreme Court. Eventually the majority party becomes once again the minority. That’s what happened when Republicans gained the majority in 2014 and [blocked Obama’s last nomination](https://www.npr.org/2018/06/29/624467256/what-happened-with-merrick-garland-in-2016-and-why-it-matters-now) for a Supreme Court justice. When Democrats retaliated by filibustering Trump’s first nominee for the Supreme Court, the [Republican Party escalated the fight and abolished](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/01/us/politics/kavanaugh-supreme-court-senate-hearing.html) the century-old filibuster rule even for the highest court in the land. They approved Justice Brett Kavanaugh [with only a single Democratic vote](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/05/us/politics/brett-kavanaugh-vote-confirmed.html). Backing away from polarization The third, and most difficult, obstacle is what our research found about the underlying basis of polarization. When countries polarize around [rifts](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328538491_Transformations_through_Polarizations_and_Global_Threats_to_Democracy_Forthcoming_in_a_Special_Issue_of_the_Annals_of_the_American_Academy_of_Political_and_Social_Sciences_guest_editors_Jennifer_McCoy) that reflect unresolved debates present at the country’s formation, then that polarization is most likely to be enduring and harmful. The U.S. was [founded](https://www.amazon.com/These-Truths-History-United-States/dp/0393635244) on unequal citizenship rights for African-Americans, Native Americans and women. As these groups reasserted their rights in the [1960s civil rights movement](https://www.britannica.com/event/American-civil-rights-movement) and the [1970s women’s movement](https://www.cnn.com/2015/07/22/living/the-seventies-feminism-womens-lib/index.html), polarization around these rights and changing [group status](https://www.asc.upenn.edu/news-events/news/fear-losing-status-not-economic-hardship-drove-voters-2016-presidential-election) grew. The same is true for the growing [diversity of religion, gender and ethnicity](https://library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/document.php?id=cqresrre1997101000) in the workplace and society since the 1980s, which has become an added polarizing issue in U.S. politics. Can the U.S. overcome the dynamics of polarization, where certain phenomena – divisive and demonizing rhetoric, tit-for-tat political retribution and long-standing unresolved rifts – lead to diminished democracy? Our research shows that the most democratic of actions – participating in elections – is exactly the thing to do to help reduce polarization. To avoid deepening the state of division and distrust that seems to pervade our society, both political leaders and citizens must play a part. Simply withdrawing from politics is not effective. Citizens can protect themselves and their democracy by being aware of the political and psychological workings of polarization and the early warning signs of democratic erosion. They can refuse to participate in the trap of demonizing politics, while insisting on voting massively against those who use polarizing methods. Political leaders should be conscious that their words and actions can advance, prevent or reverse severe polarization. For those who prioritize winning for their team above all, the realization that they will eventually be the losers of their re-engineered rules should be sobering – whether it is eliminating the filibuster in the U.S. Senate or the right to gerrymander electoral districts. For those who have a broader perspective focused on the collective interests and welfare of the society, understanding the logic of polarization that blocks cooperative problem-solving could instill the courage to cross the divide rather than reciprocate pernicious polarizing strategies. The ultimate solution to depolarize the contentiousness around national identity and citizenship rights that divides the U.S., however, requires addressing these debates head-on. With a spirit of inquiry, generosity and openness, rather than blame and vilification, the U.S. can move past the bitter divisions that threaten the democratic foundations of the country.

### Underview

#### In conclusion, to understand what a democracy ought do, we must look at what would benefit the greatest amount of people. Through this lens, when we see that advocacy in media leads to mistrust in science and polarization that objective news can prevent, there is no doubt that in a democracy, a free press ought to prioritize objectivity over advocacy.