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PARTISAN MEDIA AND POLITICAL DISTRUST

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INTRODUCTION

Nearly every day, President Donald Trump calls out news stories and reporters he dislikes, labeling them “fake news.”¹ He even refers to the news media as the “enemy of the American people,” telling his large public following that reporters are on the other side in an all-or-nothing battle to save the country.² Although Trump has taken media-bashing to a heretofore unseen extreme, his posture draws on a long history of anti-media activism in American politics, especially on the ideological right. Conservatives have long campaigned to sow distrust in so-called mainstream media and have built a parallel ideological media infrastructure to frame their views for public discussion and support Republican politicians. Trump has both capitalized on this infrastructure and amplified its effects by directly promoting Fox News Channel programs, talk radio hosts and conservative websites. He openly strategizes with conservative media personalities and hires them into his administration. He even ended the 2018 campaign at a rally featuring Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity. His supporters’ professed willingness to follow him into a conservative media bubble and adopt his anti-media attitude is a testament to the success of this strategy.

Until recently, it seemed that the Democratic base might be somewhat immune from the disease of partisan media insularity. But Trump has been a ratings gold mine for the liberal cable television network MSNBC. Additionally, leftist online media has resurfaced as a force in Democratic politics. A network of news outlets and podcasts, which grew from the early 2000s “NetRoots” online community around DailyKos, now goes so far as to demand government shutdown votes and promote progressive electoral challengers to Democratic incumbents.

Taken together, these developments on both the left and the right paint a bleak picture of polarizing partisan political camps, each with its own set of self-serving media outlets. But are Americans really cocooning themselves in partisan media bubbles that increase ideological and affective polarization, decrease trust in democracy, and undermine faith in our institutions?

Recent research casts doubt on this troubling picture of hyperpoliticized media consumption. The evidence suggests that we may not be trapped in bubbles, that media may not cause polarization and that declining trust may not threaten democracy. But this does not mean we should rest easy. Although scholarship in political science and communications has undermined the widely held “bubble” theory of polarized partisan media consumption, research on each step of that theory’s hypothesized causal chain raises other worries.

1 @realDonaldTrump used the phrase “fake news” 70 times from June to August 2018.

2 Grynbaum, Michael M. 2017. “Trump Calls the News Media the ‘Enemy of the American People.’ ” *New York Times*, p. A15. February 18.



Rather than inhabiting unpunctured bubbles, partisans in fact sample a variety of online news sources. However, it appears that media choice has become more of a vehicle of political self-expression than it once was. Partisans therefore tend to overestimate their use of partisan outlets, while most citizens tune out political news as best they can.

Furthermore, rather than media itself being the main source of polarization, media outlets seem to function mainly as conduits for competing political elites to mobilize already polarized partisan teams. But that means non-partisan media can serve some of the same functions as partisan media, aligning the views of engaged party supporters with their leaders on each side. Moreover, declining trust in institutions appears to be mostly an expressive antagonism to those in power, rather than a sign of an imminent anti-democratic revolt. But that suggests politicians can continue their public loathing of our institutions without facing the consequences of distrust themselves.

Another problem with the prevailing folk story of media bubbles, polarization and democratic decline is that it pays insufficient attention to the myriad remaining differences between the American left and right. Some avowedly liberal forces are gaining steam, but Democrats are not losing their trust in (or consumption of) mainstream sources. Reporters are disproportionately liberal in self-identification and are perceived by Republicans to be overwhelmingly and unfairly liberal. As a result, there will always be more of a felt need among conservatives to build ideological alternative media outlets. Even as Democrats have begun to copy some Republican media behavior, Republicans have moved further into their own distrustful world. The history of conservative media can therefore illuminate current liberal trends, but we should not equate liberal views of media or their related behaviors with those of conservatives.

Closer attention to research skeptical of media bubbles can help us examine the likely consequences of partisan media and polarized views of media with legitimate concern, but without alarmism. In many cases, it helps to bracket off broader changes in the media environment—such as the decline of print journalism and the nationalization of the news—which have important implications for politics, but are not necessarily part of the same narrative of polarization. In other cases, it helps to contextualize media change as part of a broader story of political trends that have pulled journalism into the domain of partisan warfare, alongside the spheres of academia, business and civil society. In either case, there are ample grounds for concern about changing media consumption, the polarization of opinion and declining trust—even if the best current research does not support the most sensational picture of the way it all fits together and Americans are not really trapped in partisan media “echo chambers.”



FROM PARTISAN MEDIA BUBBLES TO UNDERMINED TRUST?

It may seem obvious that Democrats and Republicans now consume different news from different sources, but research that tracks individual media consumption mostly belies this conventional wisdom. It's true that some media outlets are more likely to have Democratic or Republican supporters. However, most people consume news about a range of subjects, most of it is nonpolitical, and those who consume the most news overall tend to get it from the most ideologically diverse set of sources.³

Online news outlets and social media platforms do tend to disproportionately match Democrats and Republicans to favorable news, but the effects of ideology on consumption are too small to match the caricature of partisan bubbles. Most evidence suggests that there is no more online political segregation than in our traditional offline communities and social networks.⁴

But there is a significant and informative divergence in the results of two different kinds of media consumption studies. One type of study asks people what news they consume in survey questions; they then recall their most frequent sources or what news they have consumed recently. Another type of study directly tracks users' news consumption, usually by unobtrusively and electronically recording their online behavior. An important pattern emerges when the two types of studies are compared. The key insight is that people overreport their consumption of news and underreport its variety relative to the media consumption habits revealed through direct measurement.⁵ Partisans especially seem to report much higher rates of quintessential partisan media consumption (such as Rush Limbaugh listenership) and underreport the extent to which they use nonpartisan or ideologically misaligned outlets. People may explicitly tell interviewers they rely mostly on Fox News, while their web browsing histories and Facebook logs suggest they visit several different newspapers and CNN's website (along with many apolitical sites).

3 Flaxman, Seth R., Sharad Goel, and Justin M. Rao. 2016. "Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80: 298–320.

4 Gentzkow, Matthew, and Jesse M. Shapiro. 2011. "Ideological Segregation Online and Offline." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 126 (4): 1799–1839.

5 Prior, Markus. 2013. "Media and political polarization." *Annual Review of Political Science* 16: 101–127; Prior, Markus. 2009. "The Immensely Inflated News Audience: Assessing Bias in Self-reported News Exposure." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 73 (1): 130–143.



On the one hand, this sounds like great news for democracy. Republicans are not as addicted to Fox News as they claim, nor are Democrats as reliant on Rachel Maddow as they say. But that also means partisans now think of media consumption as an expressive political act, and therefore believe that they *should* stick to Fox, as right-thinking Republicans, or that they *should* be loyal to MSNBC, as right-thinking Democrats. This pattern may also imply that partisans think that others within their party, and in the opposing party, are focused on ideologically aligned news, when the reality is that most Americans pay much less attention to news than the minority of highly engaged people who have strong partisan identities.

However, some laboratory research has shown that partisans can learn the content of partisan messages and come to agree with their side, not by watching partisan media, but simply by talking to those who have watched.⁶ So, if partisan media helps transmit each party's viewpoint out to the mass public, and partisans seek to match their views with the leaders they like better, the rise of partisan media brands may be enough to contribute to polarization, even if typical voters themselves consume very little political news.

It has long been true that politics is a sideshow in the circus of most people's lives. But that does not preclude significant change. Two consistent trends in media consumption have important implications for politics, even if they are not driven by media bubbles.

First, increasing media choice, brought about by the rise of cable television and the internet, means that people now tune into or out of news and political information based on their interest in politics. As Markus Prior has shown, the rollout of cable television led to a reduced average level of political information—people became more likely to forget the names of even major political figures—along with increased inequality in political knowledge.⁷ In short, when given a choice, most people chose sports and entertainment over news, but the already informed were able to follow politics even more closely.

Second, traditional distribution of news through local newspapers and local television networks exposed people to lots of local and state political news, but now Americans are increasingly selecting national-only news outlets. As Daniel Hopkins shows in *"The Increasingly United States,"* the results of this shift are poignant and profound. Americans are now less likely to know the names of their governors and more likely to identify politically with the nation rather than their state or region.⁸ They see the president regularly in the media, but do not pay much attention to their own community's leaders or specific issues. Their votes are now more affected by the national partisan

6 Druckman, James N., Matthew S. Levendusky, and Audrey McLain. 2017. "No Need to Watch: How the Effects of Partisan Media Can Spread via Interpersonal Discussions." *American Journal of Political Science* 62 (1): 99–112.

7 Prior, Markus. 2007. *Post-broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections*. Cambridge University Press.

8 Hopkins, Daniel J. 2018. *The Increasingly United States: How and Why American Political Behavior Nationalized*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.



mood than the conditions and issues of their immediate surroundings. Even though citizens recognize the importance of local affairs, they are not interested enough to pay for local coverage—and they can now get their sports scores, weather and classifieds elsewhere.

These trends have left us with media consumption habits that do not match the worst fears of critics of polarization, but which are nonetheless concerning. On the one hand, we have a hyperpartisan and engaged subset of Americans who consume mostly national news of all kinds and think of media consumption as a way to express their views and support their side. On the other hand, we have a much larger group of Americans who pay only sporadic attention to political news. Highly engaged partisans fight it out online over the president's latest pronouncements while most Americans watch the game.

But suppose the popular story about media bubbles were correct, and that party affiliation, rather than level of citizen engagement, were the key distinction in media consumption habits. The second step in this story is that media bubbles intensify polarization. The idea is that because partisan media choices and influence are self-reinforcing, they are implicated in rising differences in policy views and more negative views of the other party. But this appears to be wrong. There is an extensive literature on public polarization, which has converged on the consensus view that, rather than adopting more extreme policy views, most citizens are lining up their policy views with their pre-existing partisan affiliation.⁹ If opinion on policy is not polarizing, partisan media consumption cannot be blamed for polarizing it.

To the extent that Americans are growing more polarized, it is with respect to our *feelings* about the other party. The polarization we see in the American public is not substantive, but “affective” and “negative,” meaning that our emotional attitudes about the other side, especially its leaders, have grown more negative, even if we have not necessarily become more positive about our own side.¹⁰ This growing mutual dislike seems to be mostly driven by increasing social distance from people in the other party, because of the the tightening alignment of racial, religious, occupational and ideological identity with partisan identity.¹¹ Americans now feel more culturally distant from those who identify with a different party (and share fewer issue attitudes with them) than in the past. This is the basis of negative affective polarization. But that does not mean that Americans have become more extreme in our positions. It means that those with an extreme view on any given issue are now more neatly sorted into a single party.

9 Fiorina, Morris P. 2018. *Unstable Majorities: Polarization, Party Sorting, and Political Stalemate*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press; Abramowitz, Alan I. 2018. *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

10 Abramowitz, Alan I., and Steven Webster. 2018. “Negative Partisanship: Why Americans Dislike Parties but Behave Like Rabid Partisans.” *Political Psychology* 39(1 Supplemental): 119–135.

11 Mason, Lilliana. 2018. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.



Media usage could, of course, still have a role in these processes. But most evidence does not point toward extensive persuasion through media outlets themselves. Instead, media serves as a conduit for citizens to learn more about the views of each party's leaders, helping them line up with the side that agrees with their views, and to learn which side of new debates each party is on. This process may not differ much across media outlets, because both nonpartisan and partisan news coverage will tend to deliver the views of party leaders and differentiate them from those of the other party. In fact, polarization is growing faster among groups with less internet usage, suggesting that online media consumption is not the key factor.¹²

Because partisans engage in motivated reasoning, they do not necessarily need to hear a one-sided argument from their leaders, or avoid encountering the arguments of the other party's leaders. One experiment on Twitter found that exposing people to users from the opposing party actually increased polarization of their views.¹³ Any argument from an identifiably partisan advocate that clearly takes a side on an issue may be enough to further align people's views with those of their party. Watching CNN, MSNBC or Fox News can help partisans of either persuasion adjust their views to match their party's leaders.

That does not mean the media only helps viewers align with their party and never directly persuades them. There is some evidence that the geographic rollout of Fox News Channel was associated with persuasion. Studies using the random variation in Fox News adoption by cable systems (or the random placement of the channel at a more accessible lower channel number) do show changes in presidential voting and congressional behavior in affected districts.¹⁴ Fox News may have left a particular mark. But these same studies found no effects of the spread of MSNBC, suggesting collective moves rightward or the mobilization of right-leaning constituencies as a mechanism, rather than steady polarization.

Even if partisan media is not responsible for persuading citizens to take their party's position, the role the media does play in polarization raises other concerns. It suggests that elite party leadership is guiding public opinion and that partisan team spirit, social group overlap, and motivated reasoning are doing the work that persuasion does not have to do. If citizens just had to be exposed to the other side to adopt more moderate views, that would make polarization easier to counteract. If partisans are liable to take their own side even in a two-sided argument, and even in the absence of argumentation based only on partisan labels or teams, that

12 Boxell, Levi, Matthew Gentzkow, and Jesse M. Shapiro. 2017. "Greater Internet use is not associated with faster growth in political polarization among US demographic groups." *PNAS* 114 (40): 10612–10617.

13 Bail, Christopher A., Lisa P. Argyle, Taylor W. Brown, John P. Bumpus, Haohan Chen, M. B. Fallin Hunzaker, Jaemin Lee, Marcus Mann, Friedolin Merhout, and Alexander Volfovsky. 2018. "Exposure to Opposing Views on Social Media Can Increase Political Polarization." *PNAS* Ahead of print. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1804840115>

14 Martin, Gregory, and Ali Yurukoglu. 2017. "Bias in Cable News: Persuasion and Polarization." *American Economic Review* 107 (9): 2565–99; Clinton, Joshua D., and Ted Enamorado. 2014. "The National News Media's Effect on Congress: How Fox News Affected Elites in Congress." *Journal of Politics* 76 (4): 928–943..



suggests it will be difficult to reverse.

The third step in the popular story of how media bubbles allegedly undermine democracy is the idea that polarization causes declining trust and confidence in institutions such as the media, in governing institutions like Congress, and even in democracy itself. There has indeed been a broad decline in trust and confidence in many institutions, though there is evidence that people maintain an implicit trust in government that allows them to continue assuming the full faith and credit of economic and judicial institutions.¹⁵ Importantly, rising distrust in the media did not necessarily lead to other forms of rising distrust; in fact, there has been a recent *uptick* in media trust as other institutions have continued to lose support. Individual trust in institutions, like other political attitudes, mostly follows from partisanship: Democrats trust government less under Republican presidents and vice versa. Polarization has been rising while overall trust has been declining, but it is difficult to demonstrate that the polarization led to the distrust.

To the extent that they are related, it seems to be elite polarization in Congress that drives negative feelings about political institutions, rather than mass polarization leading polarized citizens to become distrustful. It may also be the case that formerly trusting citizens were those paying little attention, and increased transparency in political institutions (along with years of negative coverage and campaigns) reminded them not to take trust for granted.

¹⁵ Intawan, Chanita, and Stephen P. Nicholson. 2018. "My Trust in Government Is Implicit: Automatic Trust in Government and System Support." *Journal of Politics* 80 (2): 601–614.



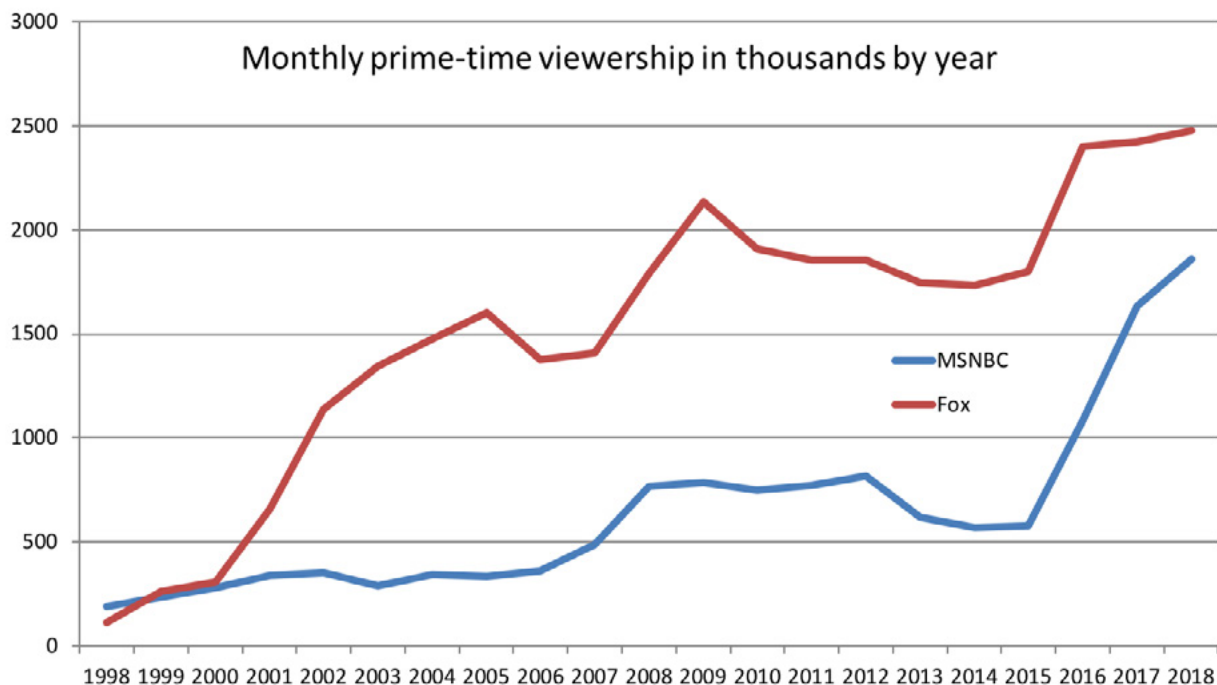
THE UNIQUE REPUBLICAN RELATIONSHIP TO JOURNALISM

Assessments of media bubbles and declining trust in institutions should not treat the political parties symmetrically. The Republican Party, and its associated conservative movement, has long sought to undermine trust in mainstream institutions and build explicitly ideological alternatives, which then further critique mainstream sources and reinforce conservative partisans' reliance on conservative sources. The Democratic Party and its affiliates have not done the same.

To acknowledge that reality is not a gratuitous shot at Republicans. It is widely acknowledged by Republican politicians, operatives and media figures, and it has a clear explanation: Democrats and liberals were disproportionately represented in the journalism profession by the middle of the 20th century, and they continue to be much better represented. Republican leaders had reason to doubt that they would have their views fully and fairly represented in mainstream media. The conservative movement viewed counteracting mainstream media as critical to its success. It took an early role in talk radio and print media, burgeoned in talk radio in the 1990s and (after several failed television ventures) eventually succeeded with Fox News Channel.¹⁶

The figure below visualizes Fox News viewership over time, showing the network's annual average of monthly figures for nightly prime-time viewership ratings alongside its liberal rival, MSNBC. Fox and MSNBC were equivalently (and minimally) viewed until 2001, when Fox ratings began to skyrocket in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. This was the point at which the network became a more full-throated and round-the-clock conservative network, though daytime coverage remained more geared toward traditional news. Since then, Fox has maintained a substantial lead over MSNBC. Note, however, that the 2016 campaign and the election of Donald Trump coincided with a massive increase in viewership for both networks. Averaging 2.5 million viewers a night makes Fox the No. 1 cable network, but this fact should be kept in perspective. Many of Fox's viewers watch repeatedly and its audience skews older, so this does not necessarily represent a major expansion in the network's appeal.

¹⁶ Hemmer, Nicole. 2016. *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.



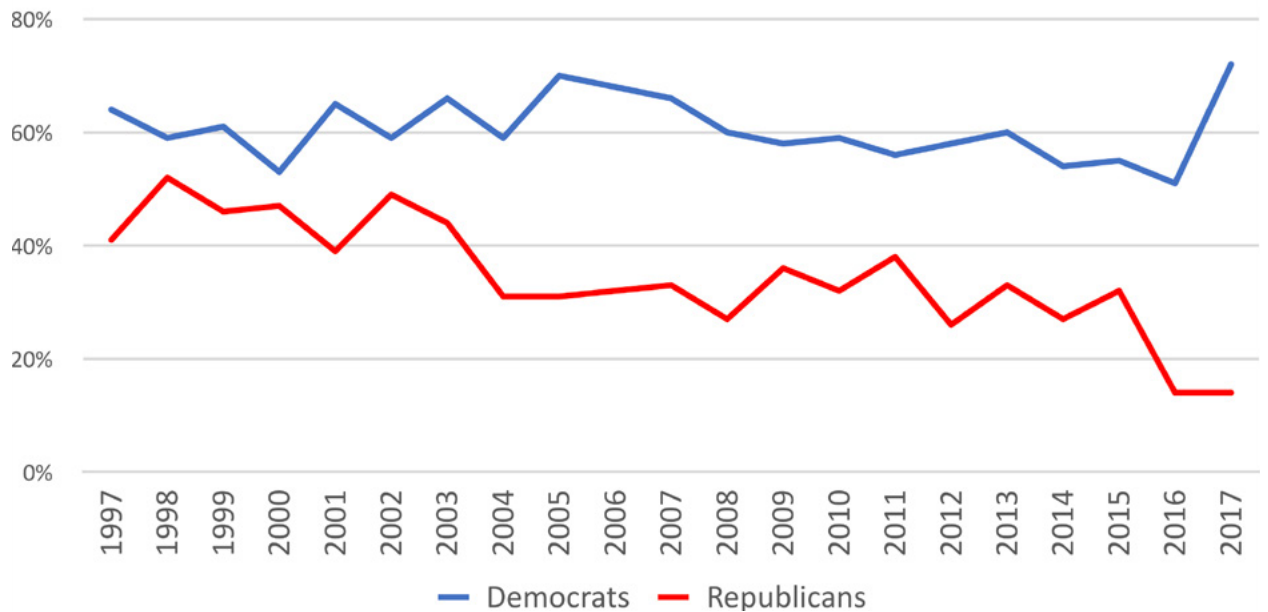
Source: Nielsen ratings, compiled by the author

MSNBC viewership has risen more dramatically since Trump jumped into politics, significantly narrowing the gap in the size of the two networks' audiences. Though MSNBC viewership is rising, Democrats have not turned their back on mainstream news. They are watching more news overall and their self-reported respect for many traditional media outlets has risen as those outlets are publicly challenged and scolded by Trump.

The figure below reports Gallup poll data on the percentage of Democrats and Republicans who trust mainstream media. Republicans have long had less trust in the media than Democrats. Before the 2016 election, trust in the media had been declining for more than a decade in both parties—though Republican loss of trust was more severe and started earlier. These trends sharply diverged around the time of the 2016 election. Republican media trust dropped massively during Trump's campaign. However, media trust among Democrats saw a major increase in 2017, after Trump took office. Other surveys seem to show a continued upsurge in Democrats' professed support for the media, though it is unclear how much of that is due to partisan cheerleading for anyone attacked by Trump.¹⁷ In any case, Democratic trust in media is now higher than it has been in over 20 years, while the reverse is true for Republicans.

17 Barthel, Michael, and Amy Mitchell. 2017. "Americans' Attitudes About the News Media Deeply Divided Along Partisan Lines." Pew Research Center. http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2017/05/09144304/PJ_2017.05.10_Media-Attitudes_FINAL.pdf

% with a Great Deal or Fair Amount of Trust in Media



Source: Nielsen ratings, compiled by the author

Today, partisan attitudes toward the media are polarized not only in terms of trust, but also on the question of the media's impartiality, whether the media advances the public interest, and whether it is important for democracy or is, instead, an enemy of good governance.¹⁸ In short, Trump seems to have both increased the audience for partisan media and polarized partisan views about the media's value and credibility—turning Republicans further against the media and rallying Democrats to its defense.

This state of affairs is the product of both short-term responses to Trumpian bluster and a long-term effort by the conservative movement to counteract disproportionately liberal institutions. That effort has borne fruit in the rise of successful conservative media outlets, in reduced Republican trust in mainstream institutions, and in greater Republican attachment to ideological alternatives to “mainstream” media—which perpetuates the cycle, shoring up conservative outlets and reinforcing the idea that the rest of the media is biased, harmful and not to be trusted.

Republicans also have less trust than Democrats in government's ability to solve problems, and their level of trust in government is more liable to change when their party gains or loses control of the White House. Liberals still trust mainstream institutions. Even if they were to succeed in copying conservative media institutions and generating broad audiences for liberal networks, this might pose less of a threat to democratic discourse or governance. New liberal outlets would be likely to reflect liberals' ongoing support of mainstream media and government solutions, rather than relentlessly

18 Grossmann, Matt, and David A. Hopkins. 2016. *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats*. New York: Oxford University Press; Pew Research Center. 2018. *The Public, the Political System, and American Democracy*. Available at <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2018/04/15160829/4-26-2018-Democracy-release1.pdf>





question their legitimacy.

APPROPRIATE WORRIES ABOUT MEDIA AND POLITICAL CHANGE

Changes in the media landscape and in Americans' faith in democratic institutions both warrant close attention. It is plausible that these changes are related, but the connection between them is not best characterized as an inevitable path from information polarization to partisan discord to democratic decay. Research findings thus far do not support expansive claims about partisan media bubbles or their consequences. Trends in media use are not as influenced by new media as originally believed, are not the same for Democrats and Republicans, and are often consequences rather than causes of polarization. Recent research on polarization leaves space for some media influence, but the literature sees media outlets more as conduits for communication between elites and the mass public—an arena for reinforcing motivated reasoning—rather than the main culprit driving polarization.

There are nonetheless clear problems that are worth addressing, even if they do not quite match the conventional narrative. The nationalization of news media and the decline of local and state sources are implicated in dwindling public knowledge about local politics, the nationalization of political priorities and issues, declining split-ticket voting, and increasingly partisan and ideological politics. Additionally, voters without local information may be more prone to polarization. Even if these trends are a consequence of increased choice in media and better matching of individual interests to content, citizens may still understand the collective downside. Efforts to increase local political journalism could have positive effects, mitigating some of the worst aspects of the trend toward the nationalization of local politics.

Likewise, even if people may hear from both sides on social media, that does not mean the shareable content on their feeds amounts to useful information. Social media platforms are not bastions of deliberative democracy, as some had hoped they would be. Even if studies of online media have shown us that people are no more segregated online than they are offline, that does not mean we should not be concerned by both kinds of separation. Similarly, knowing that political elites are uninformed about the views of their constituents, much as their constituents are uninformed about their elite views, should not keep us from feeling dismayed by the broader public's political ignorance. We should be concerned to identify how constituents of all kinds can become more knowledgeable and engaged political participants, as well as how representatives can become better informed about the public's views.



Media trends may be enabling political actors to amplify polarization and distrust, even if reporters are not directly responsible. President Trump has proved willing to use distrust in media to impugn reporters and media organizations as enemies of the people. He has also used conservative media to broadcast and defend his threats to democracy's key procedural norms and institutions. Some liberals are seeking to emulate this approach, thinking that Republicans have gained an advantage from such behavior. These trends should provoke sustained and substantial pushback from those who see the obvious risks. However, critiques of irresponsible political leaders will be more forceful if they are leveled at specific bad actors than if they are framed as general criticisms of the direction of the politics and media writ large. For example, Trump may benefit from Twitter or Fox News, but this need not be seen as an inevitable consequence of their wide availability.

As media use and political attitudes continue to evolve, research will need to keep up. Scholars will have to gather generalizable descriptive data on partisan patterns of media consumption and undertake innovative studies of the impact of observed trends. Research thus far has not validated some of the most widespread worries about the effects of new technology and media on politics, but that does not mean these hypothesized effects will never arise, or that changes in the media landscape will not combine with other political trends to contribute to troubling problems. Polarization may not be as bad as frequently assumed, but that does not mean it will not get worse. Trends in media and politics, good and bad, tend to go together. Understanding both trends requires paying close attention to each without prematurely concluding that one is the singular cause of the other.



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