

The background is a dark blue gradient with faint, light blue concentric circles and numbers (40, 150, 160, 170, 180, 190, 200, 210, 220, 230, 240, 250, 260) scattered across it, creating a technical or scientific aesthetic.

The Logical Result: How Right-Wing Media & GOP Politicians Have Amplified American Polarization To The Point Of Violence

Dr. Alison Dagnes

Professor, Shippensburg University

Where We Were Going Into November: Negative Partisanship

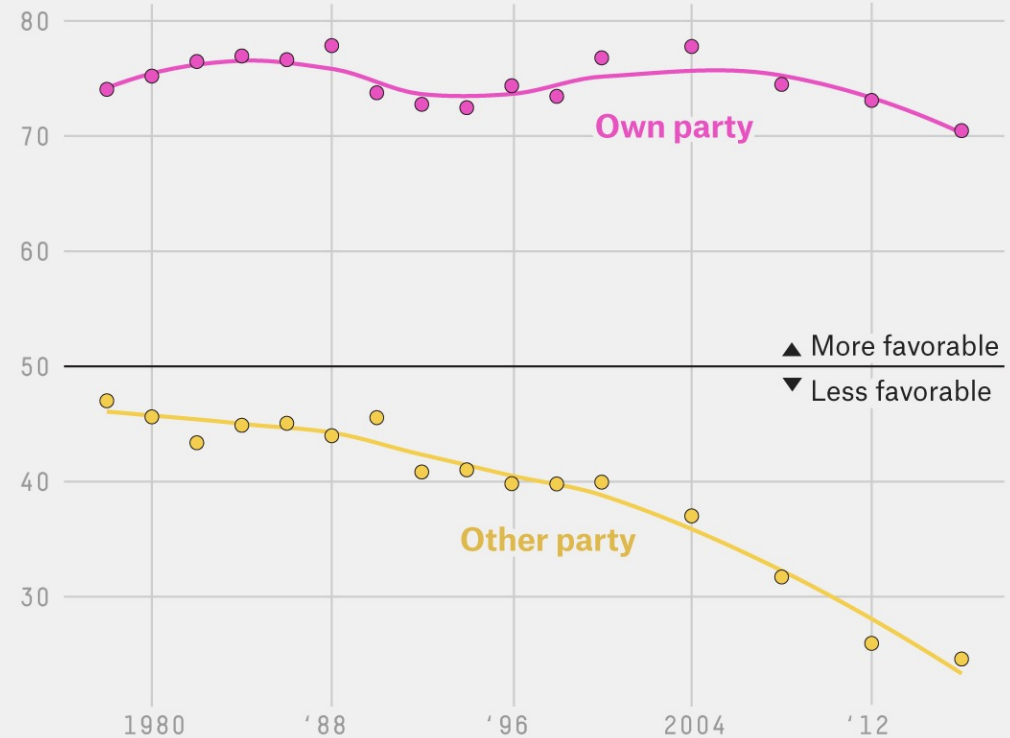
When people do not love their own party but *really* hate the other.

Many reasons for this:

- Nationalization of elections
- Slim majorities in Congress
- Gerrymandering & sorting
- Beneficial for outside groups & politicians.
- Media

Americans really don't like the other party

How "favorable and warm" respondents rated their feelings toward their own and the other political party, on a scale of 0 to 100



Respondents who identified as members of neither party were not included in the average.

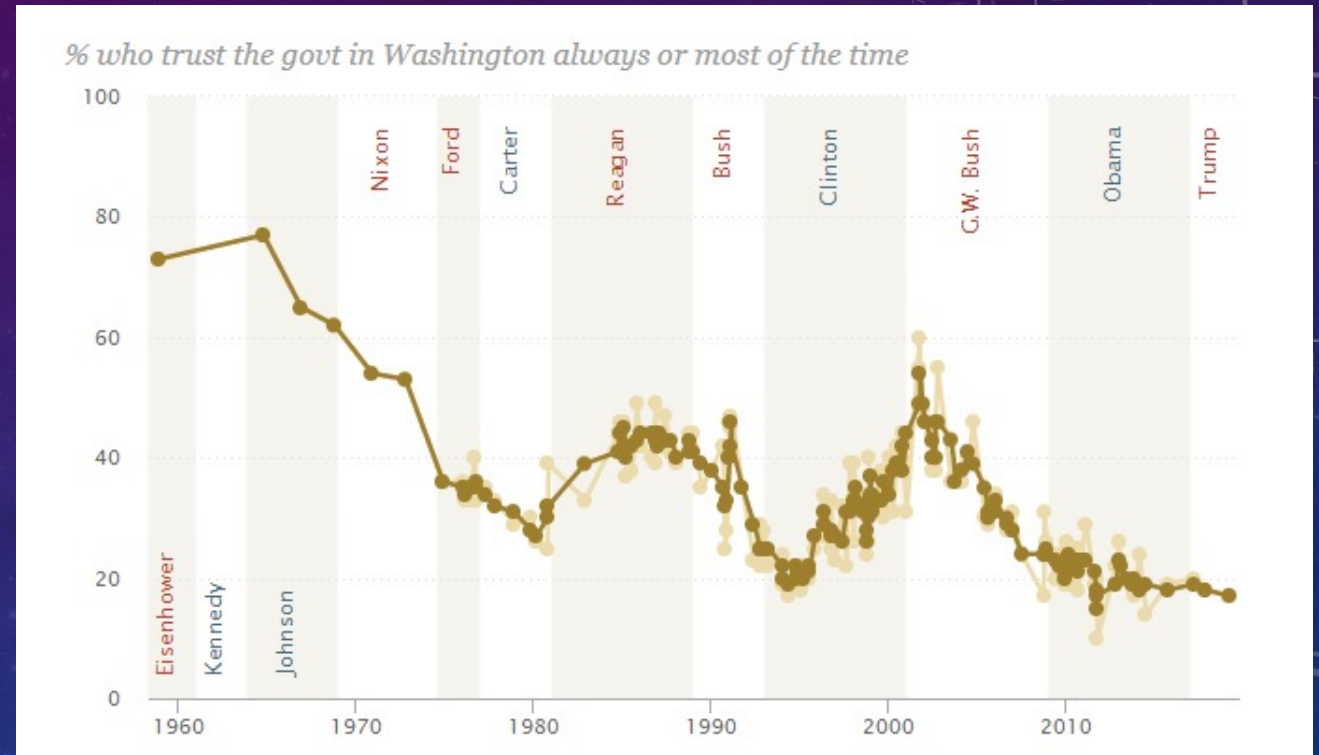
FiveThirtyEight

SOURCES: BOXELL, GENTZKOW, SHAPIRO

Where We Were Going Into November: Distrust of Elites, Establishment

Americans used to have a patriotic love for and belief in politicians, but now are cynical, distrusting, and angry:

- The *Daily Show* Effect: Constant mockery & increased cynicism.
- 24-hour news cycle, push alerts, outrage industry.
- Anti-Elite messaging from politicians running as outsiders.



Where We Were Going Into November: Competing Narratives

Blue Wave/ Blue Tsunami



Red Mirage



The Red Mirage

- “This was the idea that early vote counts would look better for Republicans than the final tallies because Democrats feared COVID-19 more and would disproportionately cast absentee votes that would take longer to count. Trump intended to exploit this — to weaponize it for his vast base of followers.
- His preparations were deliberate, strategic and deeply cynical. Trump wanted Americans to believe a falsehood that there were two elections — a legitimate election composed of in-person voting, and a separate, fraudulent election involving bogus mail-in ballots for Democrats.”
- *Axios, January 16, 2021*

Trump-Supporting Media Upheld Allegations

Republicans who turned to Trump for election news were far more likely to see voter fraud as a major problem

% who said in September 2020 that voter fraud is a **major problem** when it comes to voting by mail in U.S. presidential elections

Among Rep/Lean Rep who say ...

Voter fraud is a major problem

Trump campaign is a **major source** of election news

61%

Trump campaign is **not a major source** of election news

36

Before 2020 election, Republicans who relied on Fox News, talk radio much more likely than rest of GOP to see voter fraud as a major problem with mail-in voting

% who said in September 2020 that voter fraud has been a ____ when it comes to voting by mail in U.S. presidential elections

Among Rep/Lean Rep who use ____ as major sources for political news

	Major problem	Minor problem	Not a problem at all	Not sure
Only Fox News or talk radio	61%	26%	1%	11%
Fox News/talk radio and other sources	44	28	3	25
No Fox News/talk radio; only other sources	23	39	14	24
None of the sources asked about	38	31	3	26

Among Dem/Lean Dem who use ____ as major sources for political news

Only MSNBC, CNN, NPR, NY Times or Wash. Post	4	21	67	7
MSNBC/CNN/NPR/NYT/WaPo and other sources	18	23	43	16
No MSNBC/CNN/NPR/NYT/WaPo; only others	14	26	35	25
None of the sources asked about	8	26	35	32

Trump On Election Night 2020:

- “Millions and millions of people voted for us tonight, and a very sad group of people is trying to disenfranchise that group of people. And we won't stand for it.”
- “This is a fraud on the American public. This is an embarrassment to our country. We were getting ready to win this election. Frankly, we did win this election.”
- “And all of a sudden, I said what happened to the election? It's off. And we have all these announcers, saying, ‘What happened?’ And then they said, ‘Ohhh.’ Because you know what happened? They knew they couldn't win, so they said, ‘Let's go to court.’”

So? What
Happened On
November 7?



Red Mirage!

- Trump lost the popular vote by more than 7 million votes (51.3 % to 46.8 %)
- Lost Electoral College by the same margin he won in 2016 (306 to 232)

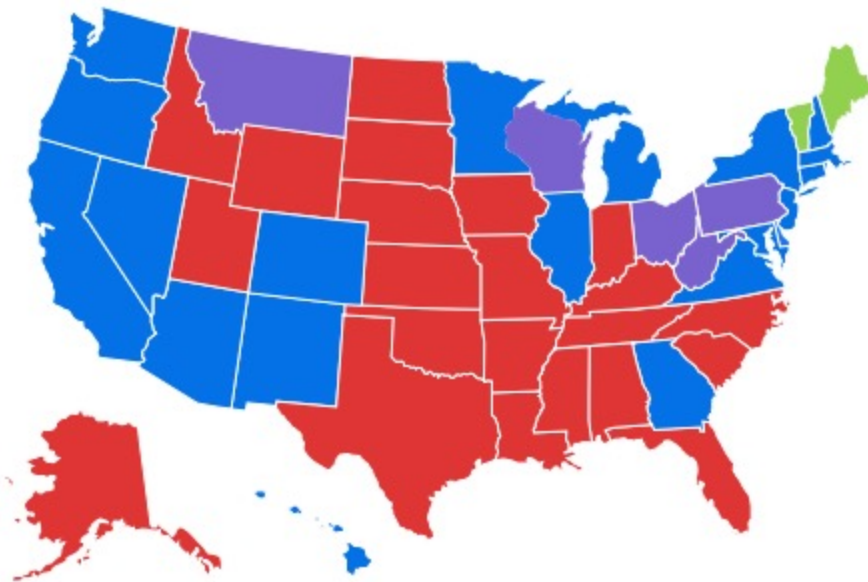
BUT:

- It was a great night for Republicans (just not for Trump)

Democrats Control the Senate and House by the Narrowest Margin for Either Party in 20 Years

■ Republican ■ Democrat ■ Republican + Democrat ■ Independent

Senate



50*
Democrats

50
Republicans

House



218
Democrats

211
Republicans

6
Vacancies

Note: *2 Independent senators caucus with Democrats.

© BRUNSWICK

What Happened *After* November 7? Fighting a Fair Election In The Courts

Trump filed 56 lawsuits challenging the Election results; his legal team won *one* case.

126 House GOP lawmakers & Attys General from 17 states signed *amicus* briefs for a SCOTUS-denied case to overturn the election results.



Zoe Tillman @ZoeTillman · Dec 11
Sure why not supremecourt.gov/DocketPDF/22/2...

No. 220155, Original

In the Supreme Court of the United States

STATE OF TEXAS, Plaintiff,

v.

COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA, STATE OF GEORGIA, STATE OF MICHIGAN, AND STATE OF WISCONSIN, Defendants.

On Motion for Leave to File Bill of Complaint

BRIEF OF STATE OF NEW CALIFORNIA AND NEW NEVADA STATE AS AMICI CURIAE IN SUPPORT OF PLAINTIFF'S MOTION FOR LEAVE TO FILE BILL OF COMPLAINT

ROBERT P. THOMAS III

State and New Nevada State by the arbitrary and capricious laws and procedures occur with ty in the current States of a.

ison for the formation of New New Nevada Sate is to stop the overnors Newsome (California). An opinion by this Court d, uniform rule of law re-macy of The Electors Clause of United States Constitution will he complaints causing the e new States.

556 1.3K 2.5K

Zoe Tillman @ZoeTillman · Dec 11
There's an updated version of the amicus brief from GOP House members that adds more names — up from 106 to **126 members, including House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy** supremecourt.gov/DocketPDF/22/2...

75 220 345



Legitimized The Big Lie

“The Big Lie:” Democrats’ shorthand for Trump’s false and overwhelmingly debunked effort to call the results of the 2020 election into question.

The Big Lie

"...in the big lie there is always a certain force of credibility; because the broad masses of a nation are always more easily corrupted in the deeper strata of their emotional nature than consciously or voluntarily." Adolph Hitler, Mein Kampf

"Over and over again, Trump and his allies pushed far-flung, doomed and legally specious efforts to overturn the election they claimed had been stolen. They said GOP state legislatures could change the results, including by designating their own competing electors. They claimed judges hadn't actually ruled on the merits of their claims, when in fact they had. They assured not only that the Supreme Court had the power to tell states how run their elections, but suggested that it would soon intervene. And toward the end, they advanced a desperate, last-ditch attempt to get Vice President Mike Pence to unilaterally throw the election to Trump." Blake, *Trump's Big Lie* (2/12/21)

After January 6th Insurrection, 8 Senators & 139 House Members Voted to Overturn Election Results



“Do you believe Joe Biden won the 2020 election fair and square, or do you believe that he only won it due to voter fraud?” (Monmouth 3/17/21)

TREND:	March 2021	Jan. 2021	Nov. 2020
Fair and square	62%	65%	60%
Due to voter fraud	32%	32%	32%
(VOL) Biden won't be declared	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	2%
(VOL) Don't know	6%	3%	6%
(n)	(802)	(809)	(810)

SUPER MAD AT EVERYTHING ALL THE TIME

Political Media and
Our National Anger

ALISON DAGNES



Right Wing Media Circle

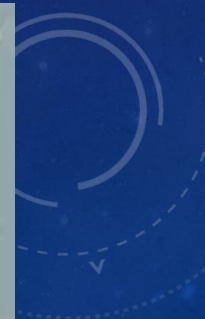
- The American political media are polarized, but not in equal spheres.
 - On one side are the mainstream media *and* the purposely liberal media.
 - On the other side, a tightly closed, uncompetitive “antidote” to everyone else.
 - Indefatigably Pro-Trump.



RWMC Qualities:

- Specifically & openly ideological
- Oppositional: State their mission is to oppose MSM
- Less original reporting (journalism), much more analysis (punditry)
- Self-reinforcing & supportive within
- Generates the narrative & circulates it among outlets

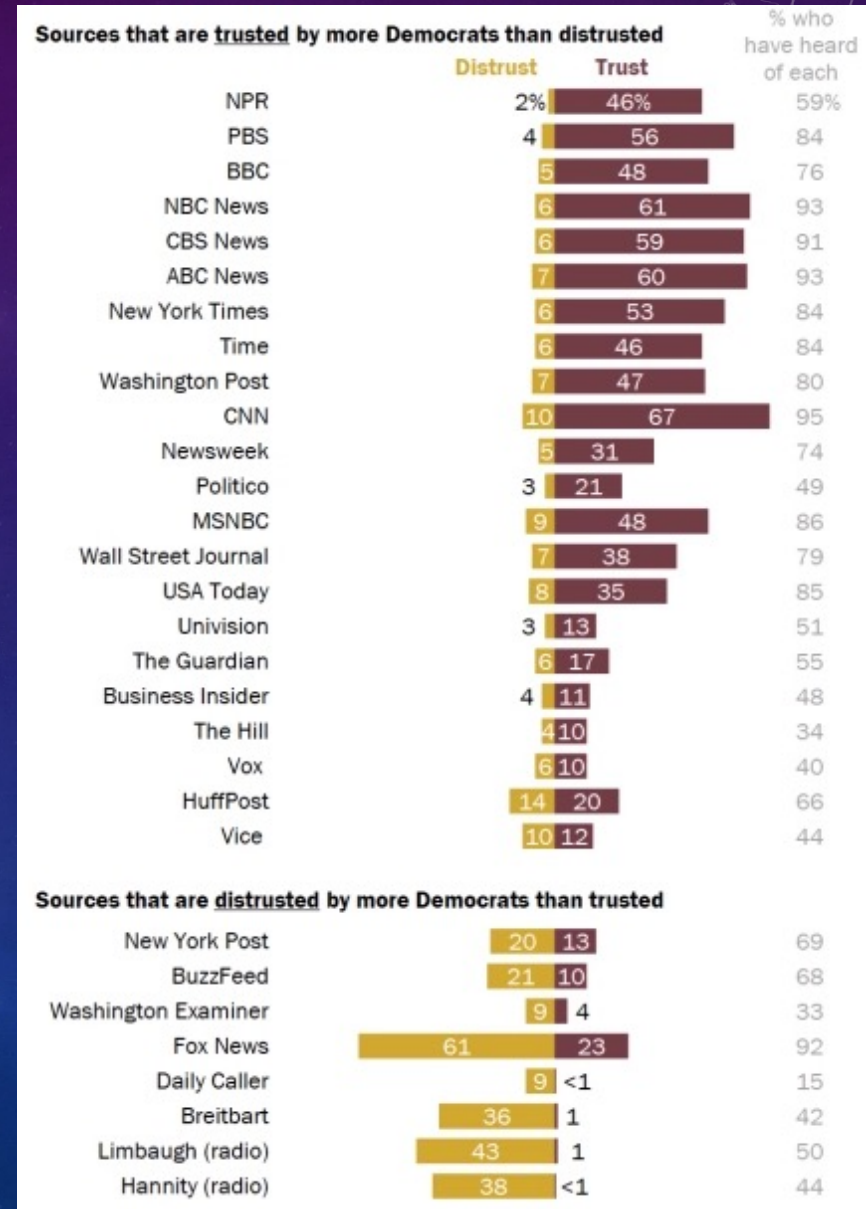
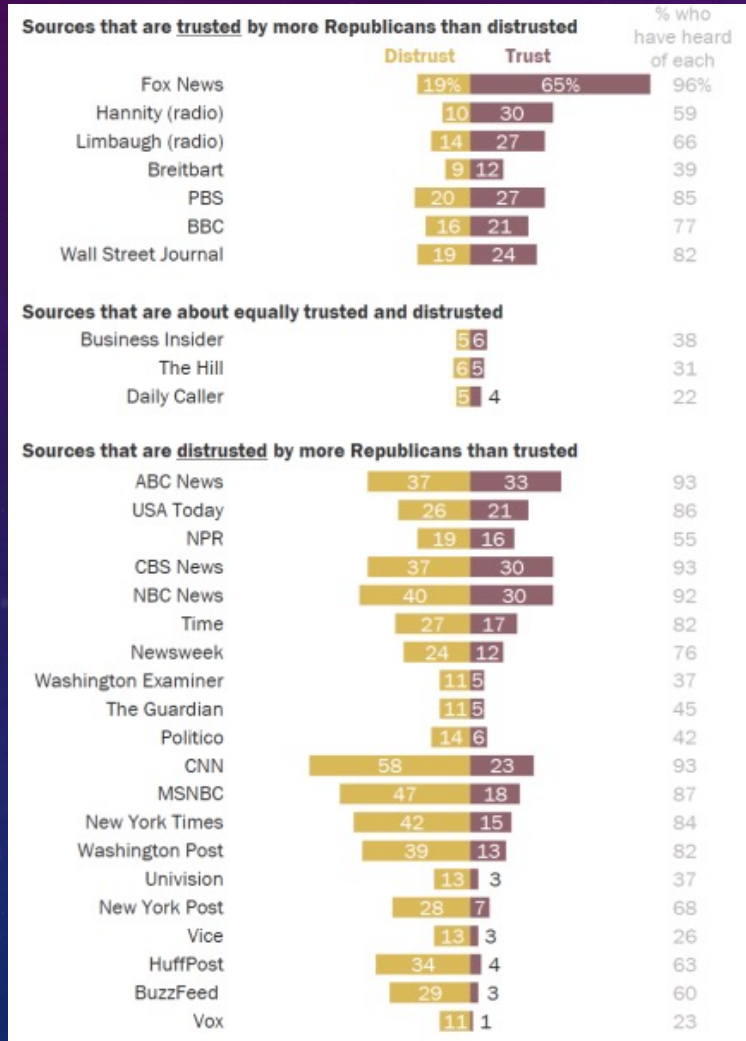
A composite image featuring a blue background with white circular patterns and a silhouette of a head containing a donkey. The background is a deep blue with several white circular patterns, including concentric circles and arcs, some with tick marks and numbers (e.g., 100, 110, 120, 130, 140, 150, 160, 170, 180, 190, 200). A dashed white line with an arrow points from the bottom left towards the center. In the bottom left corner, there is a black silhouette of a human head in profile, facing left. Inside the head, there is a white circular area containing a black silhouette of a donkey. The overall composition suggests a theme of cognitive science or psychology.



Reason #1: 50 Years Of Vilifying Intellectuals, Government, & Media

- Snowflakes
 - Preference for “common man” over experts.
 - Total distrust of science and fact.
 - Threat of liberalism in academia, faculty, “cancel culture.”
- The Swamp
 - Expansion of government led to backlash
 - Fear of communism & socialism led to demonization
 - Newt Gingrich, Tea Party rebellion, Trump

GOP Trusts Fewer Sources/ Distrusts More



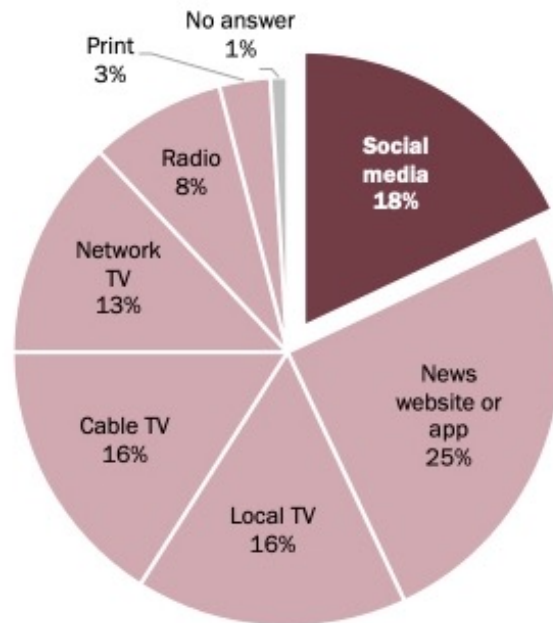
Reason #2: Technological Advancements

- News Orgs = Profit-driven
 - Have to monetize boring things by making them palatable for ad revenue.
- Speed imperative:
 - Have to be first to report & respond.
 - All of this dumbs things down.

U.S. Polarization & Ignorance: Social Media

About two-in-ten U.S. adults got most of their political news on social media

% of U.S. adults who say the most common way they get political and election news is ...



Americans who primarily get political news from social media are among least knowledgeable about politics

% of U.S. adults who have ____, according to an index of nine knowledge questions

Among those who say ____ is the most common way they get political news

	High political knowledge	Middle political knowledge	Low political knowledge
News website or app	45%	31%	23%
Radio	42	34	24
Print	41	29	31
Cable TV	35	29	35
Network TV	29	35	36
Social media	17	27	57
Local TV	10	21	69

Reason #3: Financial Rewards

- Ability for more outlets led to niche programming: More room for specific tastes, huge money to be made.
- Generated partisan media: *CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, OANN*
 - Noisy & Crowded Political Media Landscape
 - Offers increasingly polarizing content.
 - Audience becomes addicted to the anger.
 - Magnifies the need to feed the beast, continuous amplification of rage.

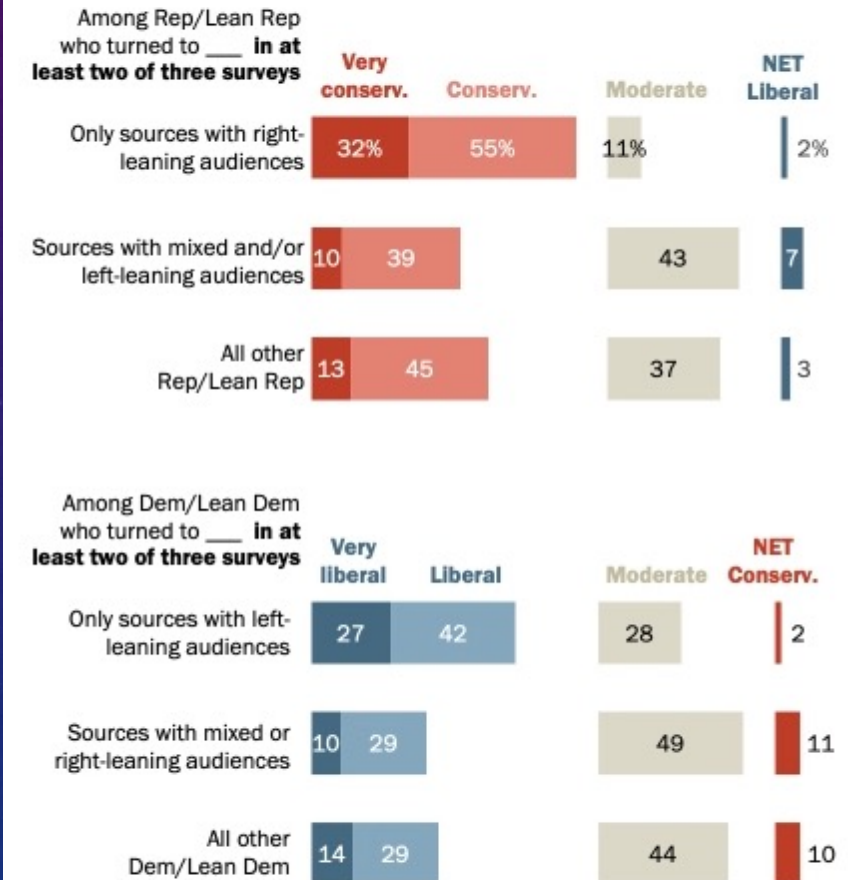
Confirmation Bias

When people seek out information that supports an existing belief or understanding.

Epistemic closure: When people stay in their information silos and do not hear an opposing argument.

Republicans and Democrats who consistently turned only to news outlets with like-minded audiences are more ideological than others in their party

% who describe their political views as ...



Note: Respondents who did not provide an answer not shown. See Appendix for details on how news diets were measured across the three surveys.

Source: Surveys of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019, Aug. 31-Sept. 7, 2020, and Nov. 18-29, 2020.

"How Americans Navigated the News in 2020: A Tumultuous Year in Review"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Thing #4: Polarization

- Natural: Sorting into groups is Social Identity Theory
 - Unnatural: Media feeds this to get & hold attention
 - Cable news needs ratings.
 - Social's algorithm wants to stir emotion.
- AND we are sharply (and closely) politically divided.

Narrow Margins in a Handful of States Determined the Outcome of the 2016 and 2020 Presidential Elections

2016 Election		
Trump 306 –232 Clinton		
State	Vote Margin	EV
MI	10,704	16
WI	22,746	10
PA	44,929	20
Total	78,379	46

2020 Election		
Biden 306 – 232 Trump		
State	Vote Margin	EV
AZ	10,457	11
GA	12,670	16
WI	20,565	10
Total	43,692	37

A change in 78,379 votes in 2016 would have given an electoral college victory to Clinton (278-260), while a change in 43,692 votes in 2020 would have given Trump an electoral college victory with the House electing him President (269-269).

Put together: Conditions ripe for Right Wing Media Circle



Right Wing Media Circle: Agenda Setting

- Self-supporting, self-reinforcing, everyone gets on board.
 - Provides uniformity of opposition.
 - Amplifies the polarization.
- In order to keep audience, short cuts complicated issues into code words (“HR. 1,” “The Squad,” “Socialism,”)
- NOT invested in changing opinions: Preaching to the choirs.

RWMC

- Sees themselves as providing “alternative” to the mainstream news media.
- This is a *very* different mission than journalism.
- Provides airtight filter bubble for about 30% of the American public.
- ALSO provides/ sustains false information (Big Lie).

Confirmation Biased Content is Addictive: Entertainment

Entertainment now similarly polarized:

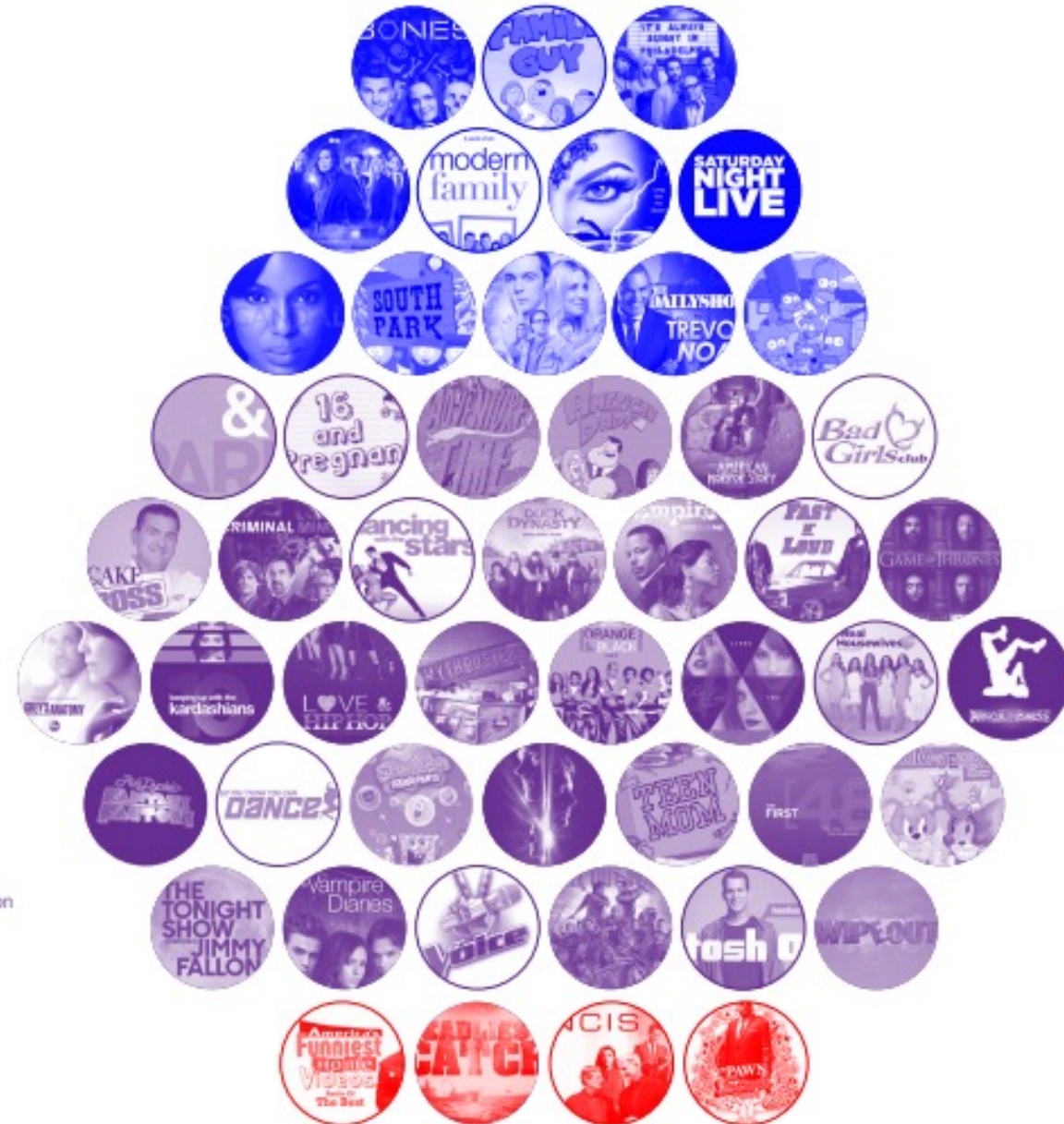
- Danna Young *Irony & Outrage: The polarized landscape of rage, fear, and laughter in the United States* (Oxford, 2019) argues that entertainment varies across the ideological spectrum, and opinion talk is “the satire of the right,” while modern political satire is “the opinion programming of the left.”
 - Lawyers for Tucker Carlson (Fox News) agree: his defense in a 2020 defamation lawsuit argued that anyone who had watched his show could not think it was serious. The judge agreed.
- Jody Baumgartner “Is It Funny if No One is Watching?” (*Comedy Studies*, 2020) observes that the ratings and popularity of late night comedy is decreasing as comedians become more politically active and ideologically strident.

Confirmation Biased Content In Non-political Media

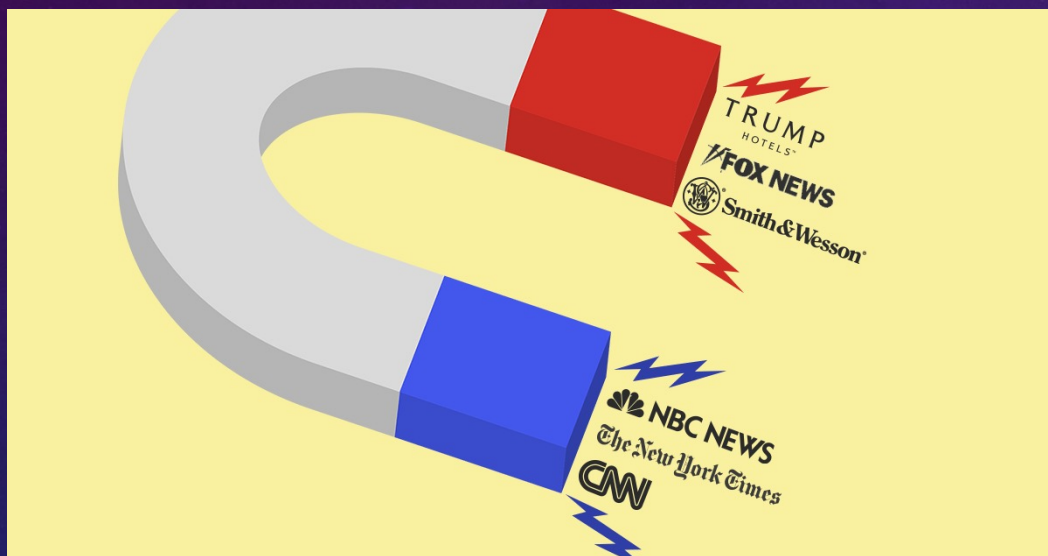
Gerrymandered Media:
We don't even have fun the
same way.

MOST WATCHED SHOWS BY GROUP

Bones
Family Guy
It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia
Law & Order: SVU
Modern Family
Once Upon a Time
Saturday Night Live
Scandal
South Park
The Big Bang Theory
The Daily Show with Trevor Noah
The Simpsons
106 & Park
16 and Pregnant
Adventure Time
American Dad
American Horror Story
Bad Girls Club
Cake Boss
Criminal Minds
Dancing with the Stars
Duck Dynasty
Empire
Fast n' Loud
Game of Thrones
Grey's Anatomy
Keeping Up with the Kardashians
Love & Hip Hop
MythBusters
Orange is the New Black
Pretty Little Liars
Real Housewives of Atlanta
Ridiculousness
Rob Dyrdek's Fantasy Factory
So You Think You Can Dance
SpongeBob SquarePants
Supernatural
Teen Mom
The First 48
The Tom and Jerry Show
The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon
The Vampire Diaries
The Voice
The Walking Dead
Tosh.0
Wipeout
America's Funniest Home Videos
Deadliest Catch
NCIS
Pawn Stars

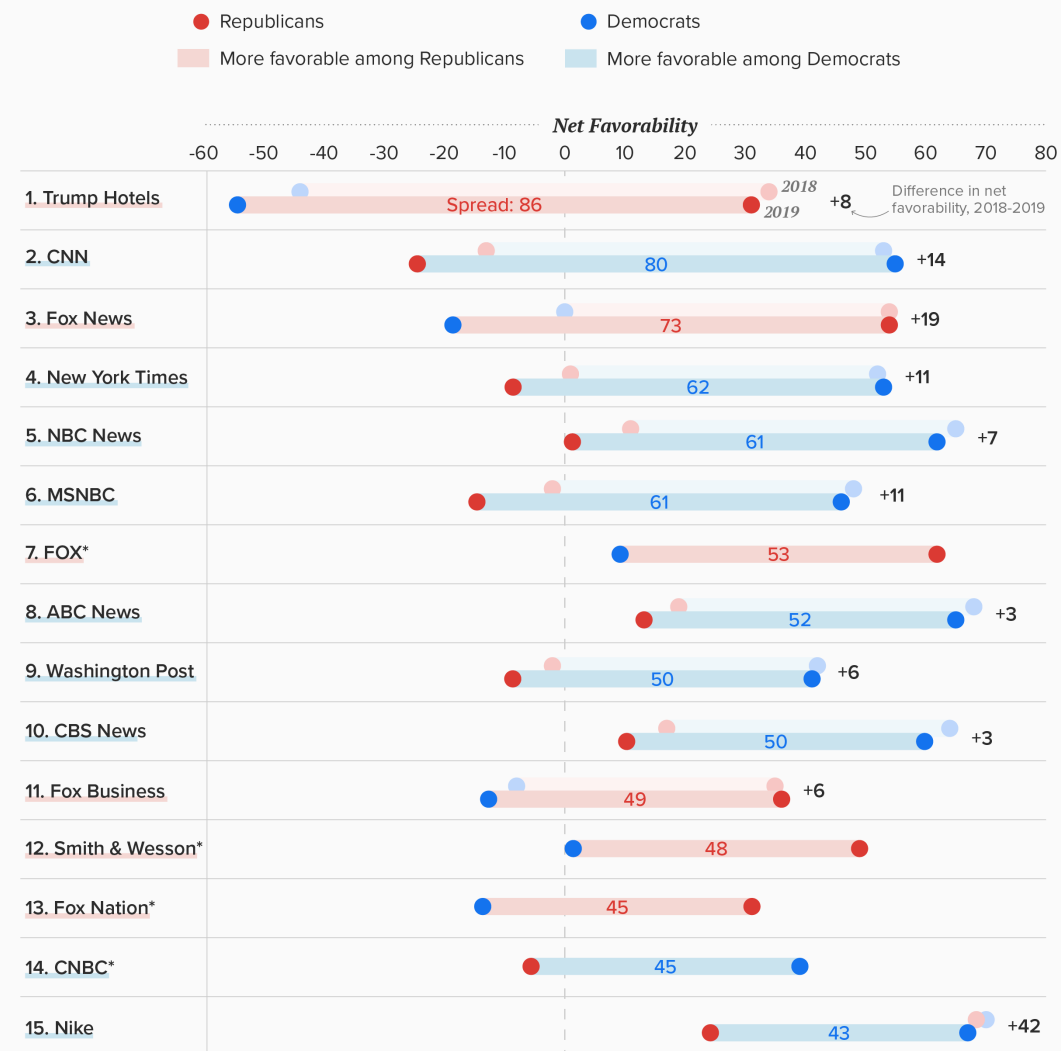


Polarizing Brands: Or Consume Goods & Services the Same Way



The Most Polarizing Brands Have Become More Polarized

The brands with the greatest difference in net favorability (share who hold a favorable view minus those who have an unfavorable view) between Republicans and Democrats



*Brand was not surveyed in 2018.

Two Separate Worlds

Our Politics Are No
Longer About Ideology
Or Policies, Especially
on the Right:

They are About
Performance

- “There is no legislative agenda here, only a new form of highly theatrical posturing that has replaced what was left of substantive conservatism in the GOP. Under Trump, the Republican Party literally decided that it did not need to have a platform; and even after Trump’s departure, it doesn’t think it needs an actual agenda, or indeed fixed principles of any kind.” *Charlie Sykes*

Before: Incumbency Advantage. Now: the Loudest Voice Reward

- Incumbency advantage: Earned media attention
 - Earned media: free coverage/ Paid media: Ads
 - Incumbents had earned media advantage because they held office & could credit claim.
- Today: outrage is the new earned media:
 - Paid media still a thing – need to advertise.
 - BUT the crazy brings the heat, gets the attention on cable/ social/ political sites.

Everything Is Performative



- “Politics, they say, is show business for ugly people. The real question is who writes the scripts and produces the acts. You are governed by the theater geeks from high school, who went on to make it big booking guests on the talk shows. Ignore them and they’ll ignore you, and you’ll go nowhere fast. The hairdressers and makeup ladies and cameramen pick our presidents. As well they should. They are closer to the viewers and therefore the voters. Why raise money to advertise on the news channels when I can make the news? And if you aren’t making news, you aren’t governing.” *Matt Gaetz*

Becomes the Mandate: Performance Fundraising

- Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.), the controversial MAGA firebrand, raised over \$3.2 million in Q1 in her first year in office.
- This haul came from over 100,000 individual donors, for an average donation of \$32.



Becomes the Expectation: Performative Governing



Senator John Cornyn ✓ @JohnCornyn · Apr 12, 2021



Replying to @JohnCornyn

The president is not doing cable news interviews. Tweets from his account are limited and, when they come, unimaginably conventional. The public comments are largely scripted. Biden has opted for fewer sit down interviews with mainstream outlets and reporters.



Senator John Cornyn ✓

@JohnCornyn

Invites the question: is he really in charge?

6:48 AM · Apr 12, 2021



1.2K



9.4K



Share this Tweet

"I have built my staff
around comms rather
than legislation."



GOP Voters Want the Performance: Becomes a Bottom-Up System



GOP Voters
Want the
Uncut
Grievance &
Anger



GOP Elected
Officials Want
Votes,
Attention,
Future

Right-Wing
Media Will
Forgo News &
Deliver Emotion
for Ratings

Gresham's Law of Politics: Bad Politics Drives Out Good Politics

“... Our culture has moved toward a new way of conducting its business, especially its important business. The nature of discourse is changing as the demarcation line between what is show business and what is not becomes harder to see with each passing day. Our priests and our presidents, our surgeons and lawyers, our educators and newscasters need worry less about the demands of their discipline than the demands of good showmanship.”

Neal Postman *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985)

Consequences

Supply Side Problem



Demand Side Problem

