

Analysis: Finding Political Influence in a World Gone Mad

The current political environment, while seemingly unprecedented in its chaos, has a logic that can be understood and leveraged to influence opinion leaders and critical decision-makers in Washington, D.C. and state capitals throughout the nation. The key is assessing how information is processed in an era where technology is shifting the balance of power from traditional gatekeepers to ordinary people. Analyzing how competing viewpoints and sources influence people can help discern how decision-makers ultimately weigh policy choices.

Polarization

America is a divided nation with half the nation believing one thing and the other half another. This is unlike other periods of history. In 1981, the Reagan tax cuts were shepherded through a House of Representatives where the Democrats held a 244-191 majority. This form of bipartisanship is considered impossible today.

The partisan gap between Republicans and Democrats on “fundamental political values” reached record levels during the first year of Trump’s presidency. From 15 percent in 1994, the Pew Research Center found that the average partisan gap grew to a remarkable 36 points.

The gap is notable given that it has become wider than other divisive demographic differences in American society. In 1994, partisan political differences were generally in line with differences across lines of religious attendance, educational attainment, and race. Today, the partisan gap is considerably wider than these divides.

These sentiments partly reflect a greater degree of ideological polarization between the parties. But they are also symptomatic of fundamental differences in Americans’ orientations toward life. Stark differences in the “brand universes” of those who follow different candidates are strong enough to reveal political affiliations and predict future voting preferences.ⁱ

Strategic Takeaway:

Polarization often comes with absolutist expectations that perceive compromise as surrender. There is seldom one message that can bridge the poles. Rather than messaging traditional “bipartisan” approaches, use partisan influencers, language and mediums to define the issue as a partisan win within each base.

Ideological Shifts

Both parties have seen profound ideological shifts over the last 25 years.

On the Democratic side, the percentage who are liberal on most value dimensions nearly doubled from 30% in 1994 to 56% in 2014.ⁱⁱ The share of consistent liberals has quadrupled from 5% to 23% and more Democrats would like to move the party “even further to the left.”ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Oded Netzer and Verena Schoenmueller, “Why understanding the political influence of social media extends beyond Russia,” *Mashable*, 9 October 2017, available at: <https://mashable.com/2017/10/09/social-media-russia-marketing/#vq6EDZA87kqH>

ⁱⁱ “Political Polarization in the American Public,” Pew Research Center, 12 June 2014, available at: <http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/section-1-growing-ideological-consistency/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Available at: http://harvardharrispoll.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/HCAPS-October_Topline-Memo_with-banners_Registered-Voters_Current-Events.pdf

Ideological shifts on the Republican side are particularly salient on issues where Trump has emphasized breaks with his GOP predecessors. Polling on issues like trade and immigration show significant gaps between Republicans on the one hand, and independents and Democrats on the other. Two-thirds of Republicans agree that “a trade war would be good for the United States, and could be easily won” in contrast to just 7 percent of Democrats and 19 percent of independents.^{iv} On immigration, a plurality of Republicans rank the issue as the top problem facing the country, while just 4 percent of Democrats feel the same way.^v While 77% of Republicans want a border wall, 91% of Democrats and 62% of independents are opposed.^{vi}

Strategic Takeaway:

Politicians’ decision matrices reflect recent ideological shifts. Both bases are increasingly active in pressuring representatives. It’s no longer enough to convince decision-makers behind closed doors. Giving them political cover with their bases is more crucial than ever.

The Rise of Ideological Media

Partisan and ideological polarization is occurring in a context in which consumers have vastly more sources of information than ever before. The days when members of both parties trust a Walter Cronkite on the nightly news to bring them information has long passed.

Mainstream media is increasingly filtering through an overt viewpoint. As documented by Harvard’s Shorenstein Center and the Media Research Center, the current level is unprecedented.^{vii}

In this environment, more ideological sources that largely offer opinion are gaining credibility as news sources. A Harvard University study of the 2016 election found, for instance, that conservative media were able to set the agenda by “developing narratives that have currency in right-wing circles, then both enticing and demanding coverage” from mainstream press.^{viii}

Alternative media on both the right and left have further eroded mainstream media dominance through the growing legitimacy of social media. Pew found in 2016 that more than 62% of U.S. adults get news through social media—a number that is growing.^{ix} Social media is particularly attractive to ideological influencers because it provides opportunities—with minimal barriers to entry—to register as a news publisher, offer their perspective and gain credibility similar to an established news outlet.

^{iv} Quinnipiac poll, 6 March 2018, available at: https://poll.qu.edu/images/polling/us/us03062018_ugbt36.pdf/

^v RJ Reinhart, “Immigration a Top Problem for Republicans, Not for Democrats,” Gallup, 15 January 2018, available at: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/225473/immigration-top-problem-republicans-not-democrats.aspx>

^{vi} “Stop Taking the Kids, 66 percent of U.S. voters say, Quinnipiac University national poll finds; support for dreamers is 79 percent,” Quinnipiac Poll, 18 June 2018, available at: https://poll.qu.edu/images/polling/us/us06182018_uwsf18.pdf/

^{vii} Berny Belvedere, “Is the Media Biased Against Donald Trump?” *Arc Digital*, 22 December 2017, available at: <https://arcdigital.media/is-the-media-biased-against-donald-trump-72109d6423cb>

^{viii} Faris, Robert M., Hal Roberts, Bruce Etling, Nikki Bourassa, Ethan Zuckerman, and Yochai Benkler. 2017. *Partisanship, Propaganda, and Disinformation: Online Media and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election*. Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society Research Paper.

^{ix} Amy Mitchell, “Traits and habits of U.S. news consumers: 5 key findings,” Pew Research Center, 7 July 2016, available at: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/07/modern-news-consumer/>

A Republican base that has lost faith in the mainstream press^x is fueling the rise of a “conservative media universe” that has used data analytics to morph into a “parallel power structure” rivaling the Republican establishment.^{xi} More than half of Republicans in a January 2018 survey, 58%, said they do not have confidence in television news; 53% feel the same way toward newspapers. Conservative media is benefiting from a lack of trust in the media that extends beyond partisan Republicans. Only 32% of independents have trust in the media.^{xii}

New media has also changed the nature of left-wing activism. Political scientists Matt Grossmann and David Hopkins have found that Democrats rely on a variety of “specialized outlets that match their supporters’ diversity.” Compared to Republicans, Democrats are less influenced by ideological media and more inclined to treat mainstream media as “legitimate arbiters.”^{xiii} Still, social media is facilitating a broader trend on the left away from movements centered around charismatic leaders toward democratic, deliberative movements^{xiv} that “become newsworthy when they fit the norms, incentives, and routines” of major news organizations.^{xv}

Strategic Takeaway:

Just as there is no one message, there is no one medium. Execute hybrid campaigns that aggressively target ideological media outlets and social media with tailored messages that speak directly to partisan audiences to define your issue and generate, shape, or rebut mainstream news coverage.

Toward Direct Democracy

Partisan trends are having an outsized impact on decision markets because they are occurring against the backdrop of a more democratized political environment. The rise of disruptive technologies is propelling a shift in our politics toward more direct forms of democracy. Traditional gatekeepers are increasingly irrelevant in a paradigm in which grassroots movements can pressure decision-makers directly. When governments abruptly shift course on policy and companies abruptly fire controversial executives, they often do so not through a deliberative process, but rather, in response to the loudest movements that amplify the emotions of their members.

That political elites are accountable to a wider array of influencers is illustrated by the diminishing the value of some tactics and the growing importance of others. The impact of monetary donations to congressional campaigns has

^x Andrew Guess, Brendan Nyhan, Jason Reifler, “‘You’re Fake News’: Findings from the Poynter Media Trust Survey,” 29 November 2017, available at: <https://poyntercdn.blob.core.windows.net/files/PoynterMediaTrustSurvey2017.pdf>; “Most GOP Voters Say Trump Will Never Make the Media Happy,” Rasmussen Reports, 17 August 2017, available at: http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/trump_administration/august_2017/most_gop_voters_say_trump_will_never_make_the_media_happy; “‘Fake News’ Threat to Media; Editorial Decisions, Outside Actors at Fault,” Monmouth University, 2 April 2018, available at: https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/reports/monmouthpoll_us_040218; Andrew Guess, Brendan Nyhan, Jason Reifler, “‘You’re Fake News’: Findings from the Poynter Media Trust Survey,” 29 November 2017, available at: <https://poyntercdn.blob.core.windows.net/files/PoynterMediaTrustSurvey2017.pdf>

^{xi} Matt Grossmann and David Hopkins, “How the conservative media is taking over the Republican Party,” *Washington Post*, 9 September 2016, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/09/09/how-the-conservative-media-is-taking-over-the-republican-party/?utm_term=.641964ba152c; Sarah Swinehart, “Conservative Media Takes Its Influence to the White House,” *Edelman*, 7 August 2017, available at: <https://www.edelman.com/post/conservative-media-influence-white-house/>

^{xii} Eli Yokley, “Republicans More Likely Than Before to Trust Trump Over Political Media,” *Morning Consult*, 27 June 2018

^{xiii} Grossmann and Hopkins, “How the conservative media is taking over the Republican Party,” *Washington Post*, 9 September 2016, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/09/09/how-the-conservative-media-is-taking-over-the-republican-party/?utm_term=.641964ba152c

^{xiv} Sharon Cohen, “Social media is the new heart of political protests,” *Associated Press*, 22 June 2018, available at: https://apnews.com/b31f49aa9610429488ebad63caa63f6d/Social-media-_not-famous-face-_is-key-to-protest-marches?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter_axiospm&stream=top

^{xv} David Karpf, *Analytic Activism: Digital Listening and the New Political Strategy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, 5.

fallen since 2012 as members are finding that they need political cover before acting on behalf of an interest group.^{xvi} Responsiveness to audience feedback, by contrast, is yielding new rewards with steep increases in advertising revenues from mobile devices and rich media ads with audio/video components.^{xvii}

Strategic Takeaway:

Decision-makers follow social media, blogs and even comments on articles to gauge and react in real time to voter perspectives on issues. Take control of this variable and use it to your advantage with grassroots and digital “people” campaigns that educate, organize and mobilize voters to be the loudest voices politicians hear.

Conclusion

Trends in today’s political and technological environment offer stakeholders opportunities to yield outsized returns in their influence campaigns. This is because of—not in spite of— the seeming chaos.

In this environment, no single tactic can reach audiences en masse even with persuasive messaging. Diversify the message, the messengers and the mediums: The sheer volume of information available has empowered those who can curate and recirculate content in digestible ways to audiences that trust their editorial judgment. New attention to the politicized ways large news organizations and social media platforms curate content through algorithms and censorship policies is empowering new influencers whose primary contribution is to identify and publicize existing content.^{xviii}

Leverage expert voices and the populist masses to harness direct democracy before your opponents do. Realize that traditional gatekeepers and decision-makers do not operate in a vacuum and are far more likely to be responsive to movements that can mobilize a response. Leaders are more likely to act when they feel that they have political cover with their base—a perception that movements can shape with hybrid campaigns, protests, and content targeted at audience segments distributed across different media.

About TDS Public Affairs

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^{xvi} *Ibid*

^{xvii} Eun-Ju Lee, Edson C Tandoc; When News Meets the Audience: How Audience Feedback Online Affects News Production and Consumption, *Human Communication Research*, Volume 43, Issue 4, 1 October 2017, Pages 436–449, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/hcre.12123>

^{xviii} For a discussion on the “politics of curated flows” see Karine Nahon, “Where There Is Social Media There Is Politics,” in Alex Bruns et. al, ed. *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics*, New York: Routledge, 2016, 49-50.