



Why Republicans Rely More than Democrats on Ideological Sources of Information

Matt Grossmann, Michigan State University

David A. Hopkins, Boston College

During the 2016 presidential election, supporters of Donald Trump commonly read and shared news stories favorable to their candidate and opposed to Hillary Clinton. In contrast, Clinton supporters relied more on mainstream news sources rather than turning to openly ideological alternatives. Similarly, Trump's campaign rarely used academic experts to craft its policy positions, while Clinton's campaign regularly did. These contrasts are hardly unique to 2016; they reflect enduring differences in how the two major U.S. political parties gather information.

How Conservatives Undermined Mainstream Media and University Research

For decades, journalists and professors have consistently been much less likely than the typical American citizen to identify as conservatives or Republicans. Even though reporters and academics try to provide unbiased knowledge and expertise, Republican leaders and voters come to view both professions as tainted by liberal bias. From its emergence in the 1950s, the modern American conservative movement has not only criticized academia and news organizations for perceived hostility to its values; it has also created alternative sources of information that openly promote right-of-center perspectives.

- To persuade the public, the right created a self-contained ideological media ecosystem. Originally composed of print journals, talk radio and direct mail, this system expanded over the past quarter century to include Fox News television and conservative websites.
- To reach policymakers, conservatives founded a network of think tanks – beginning in 1973 with the Heritage Foundation – to develop and disseminate ideologically congenial policy proposals.

As they built these alternatives, Republican politicians and activists repeatedly complained of “liberal bias” in the media and academia – often pushing such claims through conservative media and think tanks. A drum beat of criticisms ultimately persuaded most Republican voters to share the suspicions of conservative leaders and, over time, undermined shared public confidence in mainstream media organizations and universities as independent, reliable arbiters of truth.

Republicans in the Public and Congress Rely on Ideological Information

The success of these efforts has produced a contemporary political climate in which Republicans are much more likely than Democrats to rely on openly ideological information sources. Conservative think tanks vastly outnumber those on the liberal side, while editorial media on the right are more popular than their liberal counterparts in both the broadcast and online domains. Republicans are much more skeptical of mainstream

news organizations and academic researchers than are Democrats.

To be sure, partisans on both sides are more likely to accept new evidence if it reinforces existing political biases. Nevertheless, because the conservative movement has so successfully undermined mainstream media and academia in the eyes of its adherents, Republicans are more likely to perceive non-partisan sources as slanted and seek out explicitly ideological alternatives from outlets and experts that share their values. Though the majority of the public still pays little attention to national political news of any kind, citizens who are regular consumers of such news also tend to be disproportionately active in politics. This bolsters the impact of information asymmetries on the parties themselves.

Indeed, the growing popularity of conservative media – and the lack of an analogous apparatus on the ideological left – has become one of the most important recent developments in American party politics. Conservative media authorities help to popularize conservative views in the electorate and stoke opposition to Democratic policies and politicians, but they also wield considerable power within the Republican Party. Republican officeholders have become increasingly vulnerable to electoral challenges in party primaries from ideologically purist opponents who get high-profile backing from conservative media celebrities. And outlets like talk radio and Fox News have given popular personalities – most notably, Donald Trump – valuable platforms from which to launch unconventional political careers.

To Reach Republicans, Scholars and Reporters Need to Acknowledge Legitimate Skepticism

No parallel to the conservative media and think tank apparatus currently exists on the American left. In recent years, however, some Democrats have sought to copy Republican institutions and tactics, founding ideological news outlets and forthrightly liberal think tanks. But even if Democrats and Republicans reach near parity in their reliance on such ideological sources in the future, Democratic leaders and voters will not likely come to distrust non-partisan news coverage and university research as much as Republicans do. Democrats are still overrepresented in those professions. And only Republican elites urge their supporters to dismiss messages from mainstream information providers.

What can be done by honest reporters and scholars who aim to provide objective information? They must understand and not entirely dismiss conservative concerns about bias. In a polarized political environment, it is natural that policymakers and citizens might be resistant to information produced by sources they believe do not share their values and ideological predispositions. Scholars and reporters can endeavor to incorporate various points of view into their products – and consider how the facts and information they provide might be interpreted differently by people with various goals and assumptions. Meanwhile, citizens of all political persuasions should also recognize the costs of ignoring non-partisan expertise and shared facts. Even if the professionals who provide information have their own values and biases, citizens can and should expect them to offer complete and honest information – while leaving it to citizens and leaders to decide how to use that information for their own valued ends.

Read more in Grossman, Matt and David A. Hopkins, *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats* (Oxford University Press, 2016).