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The Real Story About Fake News Is Partisanship

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In his farewell address as president Tuesday, Barack Obama warned of the dangers of uncontrolled partisanship. American democracy, he said, is weakened “when we allow our political dialogue to become so corrosive that people of good character are turned off from public service, so coarse with rancor that Americans with whom we disagree are not just misguided, but somehow malevolent.”

That seems a well-founded worry. Partisan bias now operates more like racism than mere political disagreement, academic research on the subject shows. And this widespread prejudice could have serious consequences for American democracy.

The partisan divide is easy to detect if you know where to look. Consider the thinly disguised sneer in most articles and editorials about so-called fake news. The very phrase implies that the people who read and spread the kind of false political stories that swirled online during the election campaign must either be too dumb to realize they’re being duped or too dishonest to care that they’re spreading lies.

But the fake-news phenomenon is not the result of personal failings. And it is not limited to one end of the political spectrum. Rather, Americans’ deep bias against the political party they oppose is so strong that it acts as a kind of partisan prism for facts, refracting a different reality to Republicans than to Democrats.

Partisan refraction has fueled the rise of fake news, according to researchers who

study the phenomenon. But the repercussions go far beyond stories shared on Facebook and Reddit, affecting Americans' faith in government — and the government's ability to function.

The power of partisan bias

In 2009, Sean Westwood, then a Stanford Ph.D. student, discovered that partisanship was one of the most powerful forces in American life. He got annoyed with persistent squabbles among his friends, and he noticed that they seemed to be breaking along partisan lines, even when they concerned issues that ostensibly had nothing to do with politics.

“I didn't expect political conflict to spill over from political aspects of our lives to nonpolitical aspects of our lives, and I saw that happening in my social group,” said Mr. Westwood, now a professor at Dartmouth.

He wondered if this was a sign that the role of partisanship in American life was changing. Previously, partisan conflict mostly applied to political issues like taxes or abortion. Now it seemed, among his acquaintances at least, to be operating more like racism or sexism, fueling negative or positive judgments on people themselves, based on nothing more than their party identification.

Curious, Mr. Westwood looked at the National Election Study, a long-running survey that tracks Americans' political opinions and behavior. He found that until a few decades ago, people's feelings about their party and the opposing party were not too different. But starting in the 1980s, Americans began to report increasingly negative opinions of their opposing party.

Since then, that polarization has grown even stronger. The reasons for that are unclear. “I suspect that part of it has to do with the rise of constant 24-hour news,” Mr. Westwood said, “and also the shift that we've unfortunately gone through in which elections are more or less now a permanent state of affairs.”

To find out more about the consequences of that polarization, Mr. Westwood, along with Shanto Iyengar, a Stanford professor who studies political communication, embarked on a series of experiments. They found something quite shocking: Not only did party identity turn out to affect people's behavior and decision

making broadly, even on apolitical subjects, but according to their data it also had more influence on the way Americans behaved than race did.

That is a sea change in the role of partisanship in public life, Mr. Westwood said.

“Partisanship, for a long period of time, wasn’t viewed as part of who we are,” he said. “It wasn’t core to our identity. It was just an ancillary trait. But in the modern era we view party identity as something akin to gender, ethnicity or race — the core traits that we use to describe ourselves to others.”

That has made the personal political. “Politics has become so important that people select relationships on that basis,” Mr. Iyengar said. For instance, it has become quite rare for Democrats to marry Republicans, according to the same Westwood/Iyengar paper, which cited a finding in a 2009 survey of married couples that only 9 percent consisted of Democrat-Republican pairs. And it has become more rare for children to have a different party affiliation from their parents.

But it has also made the political personal. Today, political parties are no longer just the people who are supposed to govern the way you want. They are a team to support, and a tribe to feel a part of. And the public’s view of politics is becoming more and more zero-sum: It’s about helping their team win, and making sure the other team loses.

How partisan bias fuels fake news

Partisan tribalism makes people more inclined to seek out and believe stories that justify their pre-existing partisan biases, whether or not they are true.

“If I’m a rabid Trump voter and I don’t know much about public affairs, and I see something about some scandal about Hillary Clinton’s aides being involved in an assassination attempt, or that story about the pope endorsing Trump, then I’d be inclined to believe it,” Mr. Iyengar said. “This is reinforcing my beliefs about the value of a Trump candidacy.”

And Clinton voters, he said, would be similarly drawn to stories that deride Mr. Trump as a demagogue or a sexual predator.

Sharing those stories on social media is a way to show public support for one's partisan team — roughly the equivalent of painting your face with team colors on game day.

“You want to show that you're a good member of your tribe,” Mr. Westwood said. “You want to show others that Republicans are bad or Democrats are bad, and your tribe is good. Social media provides a unique opportunity to publicly declare to the world what your beliefs are and how willing you are to denigrate the opposition and reinforce your own political candidates.”

Partisan bias fuels fake news because people of all partisan stripes are generally quite bad at figuring out what news stories to believe. Instead, they use trust as a shortcut. Rather than evaluate a story directly, people look to see if someone credible believes it, and rely on that person's judgment to fill in the gaps in their knowledge.

“There are many, many decades of research on communication on the importance of source credibility,” said John Sides, a professor at George Washington University who studies political communication.

Partisan bias strongly influences whom people perceive as trustworthy. One of the experiments that Mr. Westwood and Mr. Iyengar conducted demonstrated that people are much more likely to trust members of their party. In that experiment, they gave study participants \$10 and asked how much they wanted to give to another player. Whatever that second player received would be multiplied, and he or she would then have a chance to return some of the cash to the original player.

How much confidence would the participant have that the other player would give some of the money back? They found that participants gave more money if they were told the other player supported the same political party as they did.

Partisanship's influence on trust means that when there is a partisan divide among experts, Mr. Sides said, “you get people believing wildly different sets of facts.”

Beyond fake news: how the partisan divide affects politics

The fake news that flourished during the election is a noticeable manifestation of

that dynamic, but it's not what experts like Mr. Iyengar and Mr. Westwood find most worrying. To them, the bigger concern is that the natural consequence of this growing national divide will be a feedback loop in which the public's bias encourages extremism among politicians, undermining public faith in government institutions and their ability to function.

Politicians "have an incentive to attack, to go after their opponents, to reveal to their own side that they are good members of the tribe, that they are saying all the right things," Mr. Iyengar said. "This is an incentive for Republicans and Democrats in Congress to behave in a hyperpartisan manner in order to excite their base."

That feeds partisan bias among the public by reinforcing the idea that the opposition is made up of bad or dangerous people, which then creates more demand for political extremism.

The result is an environment in which compromise and collaboration with the opposing party are seen as signs of weakness, and of being a bad member of the tribe.

"It's a vicious cycle," Mr. Iyengar said. "All of this is going to make policy-making and fact-finding more problematic."

He already sees it affecting politicians' partisan response to Russia's election interference, for instance: "The Republicans are going to resist the notion that there was an intervention by the Russians that may have benefited Trump, because it is an inconvenient act. Whereas the Democrats are obviously motivated to seize upon that as a plausible account of what occurred."

Mr. Westwood agreed. When Russia intervened in the American election, "for a lot of voters it was to help defeat Hillary Clinton, so it's not surprising that many Republicans see that as righteous."

"To be cliché, the enemy of my enemy is my friend," he said.

Already, partisan bias is undermining confidence in the last election. "We saw some symptoms of that in this last campaign," Mr. Iyengar said. "You begin to have doubts about the legitimacy of the election. And you begin to view the outcome as somehow contaminated or tainted. And you had all of Trump's comments about how

he would not concede if the election went to Clinton, and then you had all the people demonstrating.”

Now, “you have quite a few people who are willing to call into question an institution for centuries that has been sacrosanct,” Mr. Iyengar said.

Mr. Westwood was even more pessimistic. “The consequences of that are insane,” he said, “and potentially devastating to the norms of democratic governance.”

“I don’t think things are going to get better in the short term; I don’t think they’re going to get better in the long term. I think this is the new normal.”

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