

## In defense of partisanship

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Political parties are central institutions of most modern democracies. Many citizens ascribe moral importance to supporting a party and trust it while mistrusting its opponents. These ethical and epistemic forms of partisanship are sometimes criticized as thoughtless ways of acting and forming beliefs.<sup>1</sup> This essay explains why partisanship is justified in contemporary America and environments with similar voting systems and coalition structures.

Section 1 discusses how political parties operate. The makeup of party coalitions explains their candidates, policies, and ideologies, largely through primaries. Section 2 explains how helping a party succeed can have genuine ethical significance. If parties are the best vehicles for affecting policy, the importance of instituting better policies makes the better party's victory important. Section 3 explains how trusting one party and mistrusting another can be a reliable way to form true beliefs. If sociological factors that promote bias are heavily concentrated in one party coalition, its media will be less reliable, while the opposing party's media may exceed the reliability of nonpartisan media. Section 4 applies these arguments to contemporary political systems.

### 1. How American political parties work

The nature of each political party is determined by the coalition of voters, interest groups, and media organizations animating it. These groups' activities explain what parties do, which ideology they have, and how they compete in elections.

A narrower construal of parties might focus on institutions with "Democratic" and "Republican" in their names and the politicians officially affiliated with them. But the operations of these institutions don't explain which candidates the parties nominate, which policies they support, and how they strive against each other in general elections. A variety of other institutions, described as "party actors" by political scientists like Cohen *et al* (2009), make up party coalitions and determine what the parties do. Party actors in the Republican coalition include anti-abortion groups, the National Rifle Association, and Fox News. Mirroring them on the Democratic side are labor unions, Emily's List, and media figures like Rachel Maddow and Stephen Colbert. Wall Street is an influential actor in both parties because of its enormous wealth.

Party actors such as labor unions and feminist groups are integrated into Democratic campaigns and influence whom the party nominates. At a fundraiser in Oregon, I saw a speaker pass around a pie chart of outside groups that had provided organized volunteer support for Democrats in the last gubernatorial election. Nearly half of the support came from labor unions, nearly half came from feminist groups, and the rest came from the League of Conservation Voters. Influential donors and politicians recognized these groups' role in the party. They gain influence from such recognition. Democratic candidates court them, since their ability to mobilize supporters helps in winning elections. Party actors have many goals beyond partisan politics, and their self-conception need not be as partisan organizations. But they affect electoral politics by supporting candidates who promote their interests. Anti-abortion groups, the National Rifle Association, and the broad coalition of conservative organizations called the Tea Party play a similar role on the Republican side.

Fox News is a party actor of another sort. As a news channel promoting Republican views, it transmits ideas from party elites to ordinary voters. This gives Republican voters strategies for how to achieve ideological goals -- for example, contacting their representatives about developments in Congress or by voting for particular candidates in primaries. By telling viewers that Democrats have done outrageous things, it motivates them to vote for Republicans and donate to Republican candidates. *The Onion* subtly plays a similar role with Democrats. While its satirical format prevents it from being explicitly partisan, sophisticated media observers note its effectiveness in communicating left-wing political

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1 Such criticisms are catalogued in Nancy Rosenblum (2008) *On the Side of the Angels*, Princeton University Press.

messages.<sup>2</sup>

The power of these party actors is quite fluid, and they can struggle with each other to control a party. White supremacists who openly supported segregation were significant Democratic Party actors before the Civil Rights Act, but their influence has collapsed with the progress of racial equality. Supporters and opponents of trade agreements, immigration restrictions, financial industry regulation, and war contend with each other for influence within major parties. Before the reforms of 1972, party insiders worked all this out in the proverbial smoke-filled rooms. But as Cohen *et al* (2009) write in discussing presidential nominations, "that system is a far cry from the one that exists today... Today, in contrast, the voting public chooses almost all of the delegates to the national party nominating conventions. They do so by means of state-by-state primary elections and caucuses in which candidates win delegates in rough proportion to the popular vote for them in that state" (1-2). The same holds for lower offices.

Party actors' influence is ultimately determined by their ability to help candidates win. Some, like Fox News and any issue-oriented group with an email list, wield influence by communicating with voters. Others provide campaign contributions. Either way, candidates have incentives to seek their favor. Party actors gain and lose influence with candidates as they gain and lose influence over voters.

My discussion of parties excludes minor parties, as they're very different institutions from major parties. In America's two-party system, minor-party and independent candidacies are similar. After losing his primary in 2006, Joe Lieberman started a new party called "Connecticut for Lieberman" and ran as its nominee. He won the general election only because the Republican nominee's gambling addiction had gotten him thrown out of casinos, leaving many Republicans open to voting for him. Connecticut for Lieberman isn't like major parties. It didn't have meaningful primaries, won only because the Republican was a gambling addict, and didn't outlive its candidate. Like most minor-party and independent candidates, Lieberman's success required prior fame and strange circumstances.<sup>3</sup>

Bernie Sanders' 2006 election to the Senate as an independent Socialist in Vermont had its own special circumstances. Explicitly supported by the state and national Democratic leadership, Sanders was functionally a Democratic candidate. He voted like one before and after his victory.<sup>4</sup> While the Green and Libertarian parties sometimes have competitive primaries, only the thinnest permanent coalitions of party actors and voters surround them. Given the stark differences between major and minor parties, partisanship in this essay will only involve supporting major parties. I'll treat supporting a minor party as equivalent to nonpartisanship.

Party coalitions explain the parties' distinctive combinations of issue positions. The Republican Party is largely a coalition of white evangelical Christians and wealthy people and businesses. The fact that wealthy Southerners are often white evangelicals helps to unify this coalition. The Democratic coalition brings together diverse groups whose favored policies conflict with those of the Republican coalition. This is why Jews, African-Americans, gays and lesbians, supporters of abortion rights, labor unions, and environmentalists are all firmly Democratic despite their demographic differences.

%Obama - %GOP nominee in exit poll <sup>5</sup>	2008	2012
Jews	78-21	69-30
African-Americans	95-4	93-6
Gay / Lesbian / Bisexual	70-27	76-22
Union households	59-39	58-40

2 Malone, Noreen (2013) "The Onion Is The Country's Best Op-Ed Page. Seriously", *New Republic*.

3 Anne Kornblut (2006) "G.O.P. Deserts One of Its Own for Lieberman", *New York Times*.

4 Raja Mishra (2006) "Vt.'s Sanders poised to be 1st Senate socialist", *Boston Globe*.

5 <http://edition.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls.main/> <http://edition.cnn.com/election/2012/results/main/>

White evangelicals	24-74	21-78
National popular vote	53-46	51-47

The social conservatism supported by the dominant strand of American Christianity forbids gay marriage and abortion, and worries many Jews who remember how politically dominant ethnoreligious groups killed their ancestors. Fervent black support for Democrats comes from class and racial divisions that began with slavery. Despite their seemingly unrelated concerns, labor unions and environmentalists unite against businesses whose pursuit of profit conflicts with workers' interests and the environment.

Partisans recognize these coalitions, supporting their coalition partners and acting spitefully against opposing coalition members. Democrats have warm feelings towards the poor, blacks, Hispanics, working class, and union members; while Republicans feel close to businesspeople.<sup>6</sup> Negative attitudes towards opposing coalition members are also common.<sup>7</sup> Republicans who lacked previous signs of pro-environmental sentiment increased their home energy usage after receiving reports on it and how it could be reduced, and Rush Limbaugh told his listeners to waste energy during Earth Hour to spite environmentalists.<sup>8</sup>

Coalition politics, not ideology, unifies parties. While party ideologies certainly differ, coalition politics better explains party ideology than vice versa. The simple equations of "Republicans=the wealthy + white evangelicals; Democrats=opponents of Republicans" explains why Republicans offer libertarian arguments against taxation but resist libertarian arguments for abortion rights, and Democrats do the opposite. The wealthy fear progressive taxation, while white evangelicals oppose abortion rights. Broad political ideologies like libertarianism are only selectively accepted by the parties, as coalition politics requires. The demand for ideological consistency on issues that don't stand in immediate practical conflict (like taxation and abortion) comes mainly from a group weakly represented in both coalitions: intellectuals who care about consistency.

After coalitions come together, ideology develops around them. Consistent opposition to government power wouldn't serve either party's interests, so neither party has such an ideology. Republican ideology combines white evangelicals' favored social policies with economic royalism. Democratic ideology combines tolerant social views favorable to its diverse coalition with mild redistributionism. If academics tend to support Democrats, that may be because abstract theorizing often doesn't match the intricacies of dominant ethnoreligious groups' idiosyncratic views. In any case, party ideology is explained from the coalition members' interests up, rather than from philosophy down.

Republican views of abortion, contraception, homosexuality, and generous financial assistance for single mothers display how parties' favored policies arise from their members' antecedent views rather than being derived from abstract considerations. Opposition to abortion is usually expressed in terms of concern for fetal life. This might make anti-abortion views seem harmonious with government support for contraception, tolerance for homosexuality, and generous assistance for single mothers. Contraception prevents unplanned pregnancies and abortions, homosexual sex can't result in abortion, and financially assisting single mothers reduces economic incentives to have abortions. But the Republican Party opposes free contraception, homosexuality, and generous financial assistance for single mothers along with abortion. Conservative Christians' ideal of sexual abstinence until heterosexual marriage explains all of this. Abortion, contraception, homosexuality, and single motherhood are condemned as departures from this ideal. Since the wealthy oppose redistribution, they join evangelicals in opposing financial assistance for single mothers and raise the specter of such assistance in attacking other redistributive programs.

6 Donald Green, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler (2002) *Partisan Hearts and Minds: Political Parties and the Social Identities of Voters*. Yale University Press.

7 Jennifer Emery (2008) *Finding Common Enemies: Social Groups as Shortcuts to Partisanship*, Dissertation, SUNY-Binghamton.

8 Dora Costa and Matthew E. Kahn (2010) "Energy Conservation" National Bureau of Economic Research. Working Paper.

It may seem surprising that anything general could be said about the ethical and epistemic significance of such philosophically ungainly institutions as political parties. But people are complicated too, and sometimes it's right to trust one instead of another. When a political system gives us two parties to choose from, we may be right to trust one and mistrust its rival.

## **2. Ethical partisanship: support major parties and use primaries to steer them**

This section presents a simple ethical justification for partisan action. As I'll assume, it's important to improve public policy on the issues at stake in electoral politics. And as I'll argue, the best way to achieve this important goal is by supporting the better party and by improving the parties' policies through primaries. So that's what we should do. I'll explain why supporting the better major party is the best strategy in general elections. Then I'll describe how primaries allow voters to improve the major parties.

My defense of partisanship focuses on electoral politics. It doesn't address many valuable activities that could change society without involving government policy, which fall outside electoral politics and need not be pursued in a partisan way. Examples include reducing prejudice against disadvantaged groups and changing social institutions that aren't governments. I'll also set aside government activities themselves, like criminal trials and military campaigns. I'll also set aside efforts to popularize an idea with the hope that it'll eventually be implemented by policymakers, if no electoral means to that end are specified. But this leaves many important issues within electoral politics. Social services, taxation, criminal justice, civil rights, nuclear nonproliferation, immigration, and war are all matters of government policy that have massive effects on people's lives, and over which the electoral system has ultimate control.

This section won't assume that either party has the right answers on any substantive question of public policy. I'll instead assume that you have the right answers. Whatever these answers may be, acting through the major parties is the best way for you to translate them into policy. Even if the parties favor deeply flawed policies, primaries let you democratically change their policy commitments. Then you can support a major party with the right policies in a general election. Of course, if your favored policies would be disastrous, my advice will help you cause disaster. It's good if people with disastrous views leave electoral politics, or better yet, pursue counterproductive means. But the optimal political agent will combine excellent policy preferences with effective means. In contemporary America and similar systems, these means involve using the major parties as vehicles of political change.

America has two major political parties because of how its elections are structured: each voter votes for one candidate, and the candidate with the most votes wins. This system can reject the most popular policy merely because multiple candidates support it. Suppose policy A is more popular than policy B by a 60%-40% margin. Then the democratic process should deliver policy A. But if two similar candidates support A, and only one candidate supports B, a 30%-30% split between the A-supporting candidates lets the B-supporting candidate win with 40%. The coalition favoring A can avoid losing this way by establishing a party and having a primary. The winner gains the party's nomination for the general election and the loser withdraws. This concentrates votes for A on one candidate. Political scientists call the principle that plurality-vote systems become two-party systems "Duverger's Law".<sup>9</sup>

Running for office outside a major party risks dividing the pool of voters who support one's favored policies, delivering victory to one's least favorite major-party candidate. The classic example is Ralph Nader's 2000 Green Party presidential campaign. Al Gore would've won if just 1% of the 97,488 Nader voters in Florida had instead voted for him, overcoming George W. Bush's 537-vote margin of victory in the state. Bush went on to invade Iraq, cut taxes on the rich, appoint right-wing Supreme Court justices, and do many other things likely to make Nader voters wish that Gore had won instead.

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<sup>9</sup> Maurice Duverger (1963) *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State*, New York: John Wiley; William Roberts Clark and Matt Golder (2006) "Rehabilitating Duverger's Theory", *Comparative Political Studies* 39:6, 679-708.

The counterproductive nature of minor parties is well-understood by political tacticians. The \$66,000 donated to Pennsylvania Green Party Senate candidate Carl Romanelli came entirely from Republican sources, except for \$30 from the candidate himself.<sup>10</sup> \$40,000 came from identifiable supporters of Romanelli's Republican opponent Rick Santorum, or from their housemates. Romanelli received 99.95% of his funding from Republicans who hoped that he would cut into the Democratic share of the vote. Knowing how counterproductive minor parties are, hard-nosed tacticians among their ideological opponents coordinate funding schemes to prop them up.

Trying to get a major party to support a policy by voting for a minor party endorsing that policy is similarly ineffective. The major party may instead concede that policy's supporters to the minor party, and seek other ways to make up the lost votes. This is especially likely when the minor party is further from the center than the major party. If Democrats move right and win over a Republican voter, they gain a vote while the Republicans lose a vote. But if Democrats move left and win over a Green voter, they gain a vote without reducing the Republican total. So as long as Greens have less support than Republicans, winning Republican votes is twice as good as winning Green votes. Nader's pivotal role in 2000 certainly didn't create a left-wing resurgence within the Democratic Party. Two years later, 22 Democratic Senators voted for the Iraq War.

If your favored policies don't have major-party support, working through primaries is the way to get support for them. This strategy has firm mathematical foundations and has been used by Tea Party groups to control the Republican Party. Far from permitting only two options, the two-party system allows many different options in primaries, and democratically selects two of the most popular ones for the general election.

Primaries make parties responsive to new ideas. Suppose 30% of voters favor policy X, 30% favor policy Y, and 40% favor policy Z. Even if one major party has historically favored X and the other has favored Y, Z-supporters can change this by voting in one of the two existing parties' primaries. Since their numbers exceed those of any party's previous supporters, they can carry a candidate who favors Z to victory in either party's primary. Old party actors are likely to struggle against the Z-supporters for control of the party. But Z-supporters are positioned to win this struggle. Modern primaries are decided at the ballot box, allowing greater popular support for Z to lead its candidate to victory.

Primaries make it easier to take over an existing party than to win with a new one. Winning three-way general elections requires at least a third of the voters. 34% will win if the opponents are divided at 33% and 33%, but usually the opposition won't be so neatly divided and more than 34% will be needed. But over a third of the electorate is always enough voters to take over one of the two major parties and win its nomination. If over a third of the population supports a policy, it's mathematically impossible for both major parties to consist of more than a third of the population entirely opposing the policy. So ideas with enough democratic support to win three-way general elections will always have enough support to enter and win a major-party primary.

The success of the Tea Party shows how primaries can democratically transform parties. Unhappy with Republican leaders for compromising with Democrats, Tea Party groups supported conservative candidates in Republican primaries against mainstream candidates favored by the party establishment. Senators whose Tea Party support helped them defeat established mainstream Republicans include Ted Cruz, who defeated former Texas Lieutenant Governor David Dewhurst; Marco Rubio, who defeated former Florida Governor Charlie Crist; and Mike Lee, who defeated longtime Utah Senator Bob Bennett. Many other Tea Party candidates won Republican Senate primaries against strong mainstream candidates only to lose general elections to Democrats. By my count, Tea Party candidates defeated moderate Republicans in primaries but lost general elections a total of 7 times in the 2010 and 2012 Senate elections.<sup>11</sup>

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10 Daryl Nerl (2006) "Republican Bankroll Taints Green Party Hopefuls", *Morning Call*; Paul Kiel (2006) "GOP Donors Funded Entire PA Green Party Drive", *TalkingPointsMemo*.

11 Neil Sinhababu (2012), "Senate Republicans' Primary Problem", *Donkeylicious*.

The Tea Party used its success in primaries to steer the Republican Party. Political scientist Dave Hopkins notes that "Most Republican senators are more worried about losing a primary election than a general election, and their behavior is understandable given these electoral incentives."<sup>12</sup> Bennett lost his primary partly for co-sponsoring Democrat Ron Wyden's health care bill. Richard Lugar lost the Indiana Republican primary largely for co-sponsoring successful nuclear nonproliferation legislation with Barack Obama and supporting his judicial nominees. The threat of losing primaries makes Republican legislators afraid to cooperate with Democrats, just as the Tea Party desires. The Tea Party demonstrates control over a party can be acquired through primaries, even if it sometimes uses its control so aggressively as to be counterproductive.

Working through the parties need not involve individually acting through official party organizations or knowing much about the details of elections. Partisanship can instead involve supporting an organization that works through official party organizations and has such knowledge. Emily's List donates to pro-choice women. Most of this money goes to Democratic candidates, since pro-choice female candidates are usually Democrats. Even if some of these donors don't see themselves as supporting the Democratic Party, their donations promote their ideological goals by helping it succeed. Likewise, these donors' contributions also help pro-choice female candidates win Democratic primaries, whether they can identify the candidates or not.

Individuals can also let more knowledgeable party actors act through them. On Election Day 2004 in Detroit, I saw African-American voters requesting voter guides made by local activist groups. Determining how to vote in all the different elections on the ballot takes time and effort, so these voters quite reasonably delegated that work to community activists whom they trusted. My arguments apply more directly to groups like Emily's List and the community activists. If their strategy is to vote for major parties in general elections and steer them using the primary system, they're choosing the right means to their ends. If donors and voters affiliate themselves with organizations which choose these means, they're also making the right choices.

Opponents of the two-party system might argue for withholding support even from the better party, in order to undermine the two-party system and eventually create a better system. Some institutions can be undermined in analogous ways. If you want to help in undermining the cola industry, you might abstain from buying Pepsi or Coke, even if you prefer one to the other. If most people did so, the cola industry would collapse. So can you help in undermining the two-party system simply by not voting or doing anything to support either party?

The zero-sum nature of political competition prevents nonparticipation from undermining the two-party system. Even if most people didn't participate, a major-party candidate would still win, giving one party coalition the outcome it wanted. Unlike the cola industry, where Pepsi and Coke care about their own profits and don't especially care to exceed the other's profits, each party cares less about its raw vote total than about exceeding the other. Winning or losing 5,000,000 to 4,500,000 is no different from winning or losing 5,000 to 4,500. So massive nonparticipation is no threat to the two-party system. If one thinks instead of voting for a third party, one faces the Duverger's Law argument discussed earlier in this section. The structure of American elections compresses political coalitions into two parties, so that multiple similar candidates don't divide a majority and cause its defeat.

Ending the two-party system requires changing America's voting structure. Instead of having everyone vote for one candidate and letting the candidate with most votes win, one might institute Instant Runoff Voting. My arguments might not apply to such a system, depending on the details. Those interested in ending the two-party system should explore such options.

### **3. Epistemic partisanship: when partisan news sources are more reliable**

The case for epistemic partisanship is as simple as the case for ethical partisanship. As I'll assume, we

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12 Dave Hopkins (2016) "Mitch McConnell Knows What He's Doing", *Honest Graft*.

should trust news sources that reliably produce true belief.<sup>13</sup> And as I'll argue, the structure of American political coalitions and media suggests that the most reliable sources of true belief on public policy issues will be concentrated within one party's media infrastructure. So we should trust these partisan news sources. I'll consider the question of whether Iraq had WMD as a case study of how one party's partisan media can exhibit superior reliability.

As the first section of this paper describes, partisan news sources aren't limited to official party institutions. Fox News is a partisan source, almost as much as the Republican National Committee. To not regard people who trust Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity as Republican epistemic partisans just because Fox isn't legally owned by the Republican Party would be a mistake. Other partisan sources on the Republican side include talk radio hosts like Mark Levin and Rush Limbaugh. Democratic partisan news sources include TV hosts like Rachel Maddow, John Oliver, and Stephen Colbert. Both sides have a large network of partisan social media groups and blogs. While many major newspapers are nonpartisan news sources, they also create a limited zone for partisan media on their opinion pages.

Since partisan sources promote an excessively favorable view of their party and an excessively unfavorable view of the opposing party, one might wonder how partisan media could be more reliable than nonpartisan media. Political parties are interested parties when it comes to information that could affect our votes, giving their media outlets incentives to mislead us. In some environments, this will indeed make nonpartisan media sources more reliable than partisan ones.

In other environments, nonpartisan media may have a centrist bias that prevents it from getting to the truth, making one party's media more reliable. Of course, the opposing party's media is then likely to be very unreliable. I won't argue that partisan media is generally more reliable. Instead, I'll explain how one party's media could provide the most reliable sources.

As I'll explain, partisan media is likely to contain especially reliable and especially unreliable sources of information, because it ties itself tightly to some sources while disconnecting itself from others. When sources of information favor the party's interests, its media will amplify their statements and defend their credibility, while the opposing party's media will ignore them or attack their credibility. Media outlets defending the credibility of sources will trust them in the future and convince their viewers to do so. Attacking a source's credibility has the opposite effects. Over time, this will lead opposing parties to trust very different sources. Parties trusting reliable sources will have highly reliable partisan media, and parties trusting unreliable sources will have highly unreliable partisan media. A party that ties itself to a mix of highly reliable and highly unreliable sources will have a partisan media that sharply varies in reliability.

Climate scientists and Christian religious leaders are sources of this kind. While environmentalists in the Democratic coalition regard climate science as providing useful information about environmental outcomes, it threatens the profits of oil companies in the Republican coalition. So while Democratic media respects climate scientists, Republican media attacks their credibility. The reverse is true with Christian religious leaders, who are respected by the Republican Party's religious base but whose opposition to feminism and homosexuality earns Democrats' enmity. Republican media respects them; Democratic media mocks them. If climate science is reliable, Democratic media will be right about climate-related issues while Republican media will be systematically mistaken. And if Christian religious leaders are especially reliable, Republican media will have a spectacular source of guidance that Democrats ignore.

The coalition structure of American politics explains how more reliable sources of true belief might be concentrated in one party's media, with less reliable sources concentrated in the other. The Republican coalition consists mainly of white evangelicals and wealthy people and businesses. The Democratic

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13 Reliable production of true belief is regarded as fundamental to knowledge by Fred Dretske (1981) *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; and Alvin Goldman (1986) *Epistemology and Cognition*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Party is a diverse collection of groups whose policy preferences conflict with those of Republicans. If beliefs favoring the distinctive policy preferences of white evangelicals or of wealthy interests are especially likely to be true, Republican media will be more reliable. But if these groups' distinctive policy preferences result from biases that less diverse and wealthy coalitions avoid, Democratic media will be more reliable. I'll focus on the two groups making up the Republican coalition in explaining this.

While Republican media supports policies favored by white evangelical Christians, the diversity of the Democratic coalition prevents the idiosyncratic views of any one group from dominating its ideology. Instead, it promotes a broadly egalitarian ideology congenial to its black, feminist, Jewish, and LGBT supporters' interests. Self-aggrandizing or idiosyncratic views within these groups aren't emphasized within Democratic media, to avoid alienating coalition partners. Presenting blacks as superior to whites would alienate white lesbians, and presenting lesbians as superior to heterosexuals would alienate black heterosexuals. So Democratic media promotes ideals of equality that a diverse coalition can agree on.

Each party defends the reliability of sources of information promoting its favored policies, and attacks the reliability of contrary sources. So if something special about white evangelicals explains the reliability of the sources that favor their policies -- for example, if divine revelation gives them good information -- Republican media will be more reliable. But if their distinctive views result from the sorts of biases that are smoothed out by the demands of maintaining a diverse coalition, Democratic media will be more reliable.

Economic issues work similarly. If ideas favoring the wealthy are generally right, Republican media will be more reliable. But if society is biased in favor of the wealthy because wealth helps them promote dubious ideas favoring their interests, Democratic media will be more reliable. Since wealth provides influence within both parties, Democratic media may itself be biased in favor of the wealthy, though less so than Republican media. Whether society is unduly biased in favor of wealth or against it will thus affect which party's media is more biased.

So whether Democratic or Republican media is systematically more reliable comes down to two questions. Are beliefs supporting white evangelicals' favored policies more or less likely to be true than beliefs supporting a diverse coalition's opposition to these policies? And are beliefs supporting the favored policies of the wealthy more or less likely to be true than beliefs supporting a broad coalition's opposition to these policies? If the answer to both questions is "more", Republican media will be more reliable. If the answer to both questions is "less", Democratic media will be more reliable. The answers may differ, making one party more reliable on one cluster of issues but not on another. But there's a near-50% chance of the answers lining up (assuming the independence of the questions), making one party's media more reliable than the other on a broad range of issues.

Nonpartisan media has its own biases. Broadcast news networks, national magazines, and major newspapers seek to appeal to an audience that spans both parties. Broader audiences provide greater advertising revenue, biasing nonpartisan sources to stand in the center of their potential audience, with special care to flatter the most widely held views. They may focus especially on appealing to the wealthy, since advertisers will pay more to communicate with an audience that can spend more money on their products. Even if nonpartisan journalists can easily discover facts refuting a popular ideology, their management must be careful not to alienate its supporters and especially the wealthy. These facts will emerge more clearly in the media of a party opposing that ideology.

Nonpartisan media isn't non-ideological. Instead, it combines the ideology of the social and economic forces controlling it with the ideologies that help it meet its organizational goals -- usually, maximizing profits by maintaining a broad and wealthy audience. Absorbing a broad range of popular ideologies may promote its reliability, if this prevents any group's idiosyncratic or self-aggrandizing views from wholly capturing it. But when one such view dominates society, it's likely to also dominate nonpartisan media. So nonpartisan media will usually provide news that promotes the interests of many powerful



ideologies, especially those with popular support or economic control over it.

This defense of the greater reliability of some partisan media applies only to public policy issues. Nonpartisan media is likely to be more reliable on other questions, such as politicians' personal scandals. Partisan incentives to defend allies and attack enemies are merely biases in these cases. There's no obvious reason why one party's politicians would be more scandal-prone than the other, or why one party's media would be more fair-minded.

The question of whether Iraq had weapons of mass destruction provides the best case study in how partisan sources can be more reliable than nonpartisan ones on public policy issues. Obviously there are many cases available for assessing the reliability of various types of media. But the issue of whether Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear and biological weapons which could kill people by the millions, stands out as a good test case. First, it concerns a public policy issue rather than a personal scandal. Second, it's a simple and narrow factual question to which the answer has been demonstrated. Third, media institutions of all kinds had time to deliberate about whether Iraq had WMD, making their results a genuine sign of their nature. Fourth, this question had political significance unequalled by any similarly narrow factual question in American politics over the last four decades. Widespread false belief that Iraq had WMD led the US to start a war that cost trillions of dollars, thousands of American lives, and hundreds of thousands of foreign lives.<sup>14</sup> No question of public policy in my lifetime with such a simple factual answer was discussed so long and proved so significant.

With President Bush enjoying massive public support after the 9/11 attack, nonpartisan media heeded administration warnings that the "smoking gun" for Iraq having WMD might take the form of a "mushroom cloud". Bush speechwriter Michael Gerson suggested these phrases in a September 5, 2002 meeting, and they were later used publicly by Condoleezza Rice.<sup>15</sup> Media outlets casting doubt on these warnings would alienate supporters of a popular president. This came through most clearly in the media treatment of UN weapons inspector Hans Blix, whose investigations into Iraq weren't revealing the weapons that Bush described. This cartoon is a typical example:<sup>16</sup>



Blix was derided as ineffectual by nonpartisan media at all levels,

from op-ed writers to the 2004 comedy *Team America: World Police*.<sup>17</sup>

*New York Times* reporter Judith Miller was foremost in convincing America that Iraq had WMD, with a series of stories passing along false testimony from supposed defectors and dissidents. One of her sources claimed "to have done repair or construction work in facilities that were connected with all three classes of unconventional weapons: nuclear, chemical, and biological programs."<sup>18</sup> Another

14 Linda Bilmes and Joseph Stiglitz (2006) "The Economic Costs of the Iraq War: An Appraisal Three Years After the Beginning of the Conflict." NBER Working Paper No. 12054.

15 Michael Isikoff and David Corn (2006) *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War*. New York: Crown.

16 Mike Peters (2003) *Dayton Daily News*.

17 Thomas Friedman (2002) "'Sodom' Hussein's Iraq", *New York Times*.

18 Judith Miller (2001) "Iraqi Tells of Renovations at Sites For Chemical and Nuclear Arms", *New York Times*.

pseudonymous source claimed that "All of Iraq is one large storage facility" and that the Iraqi arsenal included "12,500 gallons of anthrax, 2,500 gallons of gas gangrene, 1,250 gallons of aflatoxin and 2,000 gallons of botulinum" as well as 5 tons of VX gas.<sup>19</sup> An anonymous source claimed that a Russian scientist had given Iraq a "particularly virulent strain of smallpox."<sup>20</sup> As Jack Shafer writes, "Miller, more than any other reporter, showcased the WMD speculations and intelligence findings by the Bush administration and the Iraqi defector/dissidents. Our WMD expectations, such as they were, grew largely out of Miller's stories."<sup>21</sup> As the invasion began, Miller went to Iraq with a US military team seeking the weapons of mass destruction, and wrote several more stories describing new WMD evidence.<sup>22</sup> All this evidence proved false.

Republican media firmly supported Bush, his WMD claims, and the war. The image of a manly, plain-spoken Texan protecting America against Arab Muslims helped Bush consolidate white evangelical support. Republican columnists described Bush's decision to invade Iraq with poker metaphors, explicitly connecting them to his Texas background.<sup>23</sup> Republican attacks on the credibility of war opponents, including European WMD skeptics, provided a perfect foil for this image of Bush. One right-wing blogger wrote:

Now I don't know what the hell is up with the Europeans, but I can't help but compare them to International Ice Skating Judges. They try to give the appearance of straight-laced professionals interested in fair play and sportsmanship, but you know they're just a bunch of hucksters on the take. And why are European bureaucrats the worst liars?<sup>24</sup>

This attitude ran to the top of the Republican Party, where Bush Administration officials disregarded Blix's reports. The media of a party dominated by white evangelicals frequently conflated the Arab Muslims of the Ba'ath Party with those of al-Qaeda, so that attacking Saddam Hussein could avenge the crimes of Osama Bin Laden. Laurie Mylroie's fanciful claims that Hussein was responsible for the 9/11 attacks made her a favorite on Fox News.<sup>25</sup>

Skepticism about WMD found a home only in Democratic media. At that time, no left-wing counterpart to Fox News had emerged. So the core of Democratic partisan media became a network of blogs such as *Daily Kos* (named for its founder, Markos Moulitsas). Moulitsas and other bloggers criticized the supposed WMD evidence, noting for example that an Iraqi plane described by Colin Powell as able to launch chemical attacks on America was made of balsa wood and duct tape, and had a maximum range of five miles.<sup>26</sup> Many of them drew the correct conclusions from Blix's inability to find WMD.<sup>27</sup> In December 2002, Moulitsas wrote of the Bush administration, "I don't believe they have any evidence. Otherwise, what better way to rally world support than to prove once and for all to everyone that Iraq was lying? Give the inspectors the name of just ONE facility suspected of having WMD, have the inspectors swoop in, find the evidence, and reveal it to the world." Fellow Democratic blogger Duncan Black drew similar conclusions in a post titled "Blix Says Powell Lying".<sup>28</sup> Satirical articles by *The Onion* contrasted this lack of evidence with the plentiful evidence for North Korean WMD.<sup>29</sup> They

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19 Judith Miller (2002) "U.S. Says Hussein Intensifies Quest For A-Bomb Parts", *New York Times*.

20 Judith Miller (2002) "C.I.A. Hunts Iraq Tie to Soviet Smallpox", *New York Times*.

21 Jack Shafer (2003) "The Times Scoops That Melted: Cataloging the wretched reporting of Judith Miller" *Slate*.

22 Herbert Abrams (2004) "Weapons of Miller's Descriptions." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*.

23 Robert Novak (2003), "Playing Texas Poker, Bush Bets All on Iraq"; William Schneider (2003), "Bush Lets It All Ride on His War".

24 Sgt. Stryker, cited by Glenn Reynolds (2003), *Instapundit*. <http://pjmedia.com/instapundit/38296/>

25 Laurie Mylroie (2001) *The War Against America: Saddam Hussein and the World Trade Center Attacks: A Study of Revenge*.

26 Markos Moulitsas (2003) "Iraqi 'drone' made of duct tape", *Daily Kos*.

27 Markos Moulitsas (2002) "Blix to US, UK: pony up evidence", *Daily Kos*. Markos Moulitsas (2003) "Hans Blix: Inspections working", *Daily Kos*.

28 Duncan Black (2003) "Blix Says Powell Lying", *Eschaton*.

29 *The Onion* (2003) "N. Korea Wondering What It Has To Do To Attract U.S. Military Attention". *The Onion* (2003) "Bush On North Korea: 'We Must Invade Iraq'".

expressed this skepticism before the invasion, when policymakers could've avoided war, and before military investigations proved them right.

No single example could conclusively demonstrate the greater reliability of more diverse and less wealthy coalitions. But the question of whether Iraq had WMD is the best individual test of reliability in recent American history, as it's a simple and settled factual question of immense policy significance where everyone had months to deliberate. It nicely illustrates how differences in coalition structure give rise to differences in the transmission of reliable information. While a diverse party learned the truth from foreign experts, nonpartisan media mocked them. Charles Krauthammer provides a final word on the reliability of parties whose ethnoreligious biases prevent them from learning from foreigners. In May 2003 with no WMD in sight, he counseled fellow Republicans to be patient: "Hans Blix had five months to find weapons. He found nothing. We've had five weeks. Come back to me in five months. If we haven't found any, we will have a credibility problem."<sup>30</sup>

#### **4. A partisan conclusion**

My allegiance is to the Democratic Party. Its diversity prevents the idiosyncratic and self-aggrandizing views of any one demographic group from dominating it. If God doesn't communicate specifically with evangelical Christians and the races are equal, the ethnoreligious homogeneity of the Republican Party is unlikely to deliver any countervailing benefits. Democratic media also is less supportive of the wealthy, who can easily promote dubious ideas favoring their interests. This makes its partisan media systematically more reliable, giving it better-informed policies. Since major parties are the best vehicles for enacting policy changes, I support Democratic candidates and strive to improve Democratic policies through primaries.

The factors favoring Democratic partisanship also favor supporting similar parties in similar political environments around the world. India's Congress Party, the current Canadian Liberal Party, and arguably the Australian Labor Party are more diverse and less wealthy than their opponents. They can be expected to pursue better policies, because their coalition makeup mitigates bias from wealth and idiosyncratic ethnoreligious views. These countries' parliamentary systems don't fully share America's rigid plurality-rule structure, so many of my conclusions regarding partisan action will hold in a weaker form. But if other factors promote an American-style two-party system, the relevance of my arguments will rise.

Can Republicans reasonably dismiss this openly partisan argument as an extension of Democratic media into an unusually highbrow venue? I've argued that one party's media is likely to be very unreliable, and Republicans will think that party is mine. But as you've seen, broad sociological observations about the structure of party coalitions and their biases entail my epistemic conclusions. To respond, Republicans will need an alternative sociology of the parties, or perhaps an argument that the distinctive views of white evangelicals result from a connection to God rather than bias. Accepting the sociology that I've presented, and thinking that the distinctive views of dominant ethnoreligious groups and the wealthy emerge from biases, I can only conclude that the Democratic Party is more worthy of support and that its media is more worthy of belief. I practice the partisanship I preach.

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30 Matthew Yglesias (2011) "Happy Krauthammer Day", *ThinkProgress*.