

Angry and Wrong

1

1 Introduction

As the violent attacks on the United States Capitol unfolded on January 6, 2021, many of the rioters appeared to be driven by two grievances. They expressed anger at the political system, anger at the outcome of the election, and anger at elected officials. At the same time, many rioters that day were motivated by the false belief that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from President Donald Trump through coordinated, systematic voter fraud. They waved signs with allegations of election fraud, chanted slogans like “Stop the Steal,” and vowed to fight to take back the country as they stormed the Capitol building.

The events of that day reflect two growing, related trends in American politics; many people are angry about politics and some are misinformed. The sources of anger and misperceptions are complex; decades of declining trust in government, increases in racial resentment, and partisan sorting along ideological, cultural, ethnic, and racial dimensions has made the American public angrier (Phoenix, 2020; Webster, 2020). This anger is rampant throughout the political system in the United States. Politicians use anger as a political strategy to generate support for their campaign or to discredit the opposition (Webster, 2020). Partisan media and online sources of political information use anger-inducing language to describe politics, which can attract audiences, increase engagement with content on social media, and be financially beneficial for the outlet (Berry & Sobieraj, 2013; Hasell, 2021; Hiaeshutter-Rice & Weeks, 2021; Peck, 2020; Young, 2019). The public at large is often angry at people they disagree with politically and willing to express outrage at political opponents (Mason, 2016), a pattern of political hostility that has increased in the United States since the early 2000s (Iyengar et al., 2019). Anger is clearly increasingly prominent in American politics.

At the same time, there is evidence that some Americans are misinformed about the political and social world around them. These political misperceptions, which are defined as personal beliefs that are considered incorrect based on the best available evidence from relevant experts at the time (Vraga & Bode, 2020), are a significant element of contemporary politics in the United States. Although there is some debate about the degree to which the American public is truly misinformed (Graham, 2023), there is no question that misinformation, disinformation, false conspiracy theories, and rumors are often believed.¹ One need only

¹ Misinformation and disinformation are sometimes distinguished in the literature by the intention behind false information, with misinformation considered unintentionally false information and disinformation being intentionally or purposefully false information (Jack, 2017). Conspiracy theories are attempts to explain social and political events with claims of secret plots by powerful actors (Douglas et al., 2019). While there are subtle nuances in these concepts, for the purposes of this book I primarily use the term “misinformation” to describe all false information and the label “misperceptions” to note false beliefs.

to look at polls registering Americans' false beliefs to see the potential threat misperceptions pose to politics and society. Two years after the 2020 US presidential election, surveys indicate that nearly one-third of Americans do not believe President Joe Biden legitimately won the election (Monmouth University, 2022). One in four Americans believed that Covid-19 was a planned conspiracy (Pew, 2020). Misperceptions are prevalent and problematic.

The simultaneous prominence of anger and misperceptions is not a coincidence. On the one hand, anger can make people more partisan and less rational. Anger can lead people to turn to political information sources that reinforce existing beliefs. It can encourage them to ignore, downplay, or counterargue evidence that challenges their worldview (MacKuen et al., 2010). Ultimately, anger can make people more susceptible to believing false claims about politics, science, and health if those claims are consistent with their political or ideological views (Weeks, 2015). On the other hand, much of the political mis- and disinformation in the public sphere directly plays on people's anger about the political world. The goal of much political disinformation, in fact, is to stoke anger about cultural, political, ideological, racial, or religious differences in society. Given the concurrent prevalence of anger and misperceptions in American politics, I argue that they are inextricably linked; anger promotes misperceptions and misperceptions fuel anger. The big question is, what is making us so angry and so often wrong about politics?

The power and prevalence of anger and false beliefs highlight the need to understand how such feelings develop and persist among the public. Certainly, in the case of beliefs about election fraud in 2020, partisan polarization coupled with consistent claims perpetuated by Donald Trump added to the outrage and misperceptions. There's little question that partisan sorting, growing distrust in institutions like government and media, along with active attempts by nationalist and foreign actors to undermine democratic societies have fueled both anger and misperceptions (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Jamieson, 2020). But other causes may be responsible as well. Notably, partisan media outlets – which tend to explicitly favor one political party or ideology over the other – may also contribute to both anger and false beliefs in American society. For example, consider the case of false beliefs about voter fraud in the 2020 US presidential election. It is notable that in 2020 and early 2021, *Fox News* – which is considered conservative partisan media – aired hundreds of television segments that mentioned voter or election fraud (Television Archive, n.d.). While not all mentions explicitly claimed that voter fraud took place during the election, some of the references suggested that election misconduct was at work and that allegations of fraud had merit. Such references to voter fraud may have angered

Angry and Wrong

3

audiences of conservative partisan media and promoted beliefs that election fraud was widespread.

The potential link between partisan media, anger, and misperceptions is not limited to Republican- or conservative-leaning media. During the 2020 presidential campaign there were claims circulating on social media that Donald Trump conspired with Postmaster General Louis DeJoy to deliberately slow down mail delivery service to undermine mail-in voting and help Trump win the election. While mail did slow down after DeJoy assumed his post, the claim that Trump directed the move for political gain was not supported by evidence (Lee, 2020). This claim drew ire among Democrats and was reported by liberal-leaning partisan media outlets. For example, a *Daily Kos* headline from July 31, 2020 read “Trump’s Scheme to Hobble Vote-by-Mail in Full Swing Under Top GOP Donor-Turned-Postmaster General.” That same day, *MSNBC* host Rachel Maddow took to Facebook to note that “There’s a ‘growing perception’ that U.S. Postal Service delays are the result of a ‘political effort’ to undermine voting by mail” despite any concrete evidence of such efforts.

What these examples illustrate is that partisan media exposure, political anger, and political misperceptions may be closely linked. Existing evidence indicates that they are indeed related. My prior research shows that frequent users of partisan media are more angry than those who rarely or do not use partisan media (Hasell & Weeks, 2016), that political anger promotes false beliefs (Weeks, 2015), and that use of partisan media is associated with more political misperceptions (Garrett et al., 2016; Weeks et al., 2023). These individual pieces point to the power of partisan media to anger and misinform audiences but a larger, more expansive test of the causal role of partisan media, as well as how this process unfolds over time is needed. Open questions persist: are partisan media at least partially responsible for the anger and misinformation that have come to characterize the political system in the United States? If so, do conservative and liberal partisan media exert the same degree of influence on audiences?

The answers to these questions are critically important, particularly given unsettled debates about the influence partisan media have in contemporary American politics and society. Some critics argue that partisan media play a damaging role in American politics, allowing people to use extreme, partisan media at the expense of more moderate, nonpartisan news (Sunstein, 2007). The concern here is that people will fall into media ecosystems where the only information they see reinforces their existing worldviews, polarizing and misinforming them along the way. Others have challenged this argument and suggest instead that the influence of partisan media is more minimal, particularly given that partisan audiences are small. The overwhelming majority of

Americans do not use partisan media on a regular basis; most Americans have somewhat diverse news repertoires and do not exist in like-minded echo chambers or filter bubbles online (see Arguedas et al., 2022; Jamieson et al., 2023). In fact, audiences for partisan sources remain quite small relative to other, more mainstream news outlets (Guess, 2021). This would suggest that partisan media may appeal to smaller, more fringe audiences that are not reflective of the larger public. Because these audiences remain relatively small, the argument suggests, partisan media are not capable of creating widespread polarization and discord present in the American political system (Prior, 2013; Wojcieszak et al., 2023). Yet a third possibility remains: partisan media audiences are small but democratically troublesome. While direct audiences are modest, angry and misinformed users of partisan media still raise alarm, particularly given the disproportionate influence they potentially have on American politics through their activities on- and offline (Prior, 2013). More evidence of the impact of partisan media is clearly needed.

The purpose of this Element is to better understand if and how partisan media affect false political beliefs by more systematically examining the relationships between partisan media exposure, political anger, and political misperceptions during the 2020 U S presidential election. To do so, I rely on a comprehensive survey of 1,800 American adults who closely resemble the population of the United States and were surveyed at three time periods in the fall of 2020. The survey measured their media exposure – including partisan media – along with their levels of political anger and their beliefs about a series of false claims related to politics, science, and health that were circulating at that time. By surveying the same group of respondents three times during the election season, the data allow me to more precisely test how partisan media introduce, change, and/or reinforce levels of political anger over time. The data here can also be used to examine whether partisan media exposure and political anger bias political beliefs, making people more likely to accept political falsehoods as true. The three waves of data also allow me to test whether people who are angry and/or misinformed are subsequently drawn to partisan media over time, which may further reinforce anger and misperceptions (Slater, 2007). This approach therefore offers a more stringent causal test of the reciprocal influence of partisan media on anger and misperceptions.

Through these analyses, I find that partisan media matter a great deal. They are influential in shaping their audiences' anger and beliefs about politics. These effects are persistent even when accounting for other explanations, like political party identification or ideology. Although the audiences for these outlets are relatively small, the people who consistently use partisan media think, feel, and behave differently from those who infrequently or do not use them. Compared

Angry and Wrong

5

to people who are not (or rarely) exposed to ideological media, users of partisan media are angrier at their political opponents and are considerably more willing to believe political falsehoods that reflect well on their own political party or poorly on the opposing party. There is also evidence that the relationships here are often mutually reinforcing; partisan media incite anger and misperceptions, which make it even more likely that audiences seek out these sources again in the future. Such a reinforcing spiral may make it difficult to combat false beliefs, or diminish feelings of political anger, and point to the power partisan media can hold over audiences.

However, the analyses that follow show that the role of partisan media in the United States is asymmetrical and different depending on the ideological alignment of the source. In short, the data indicate that conservative partisan media have a stronger and more consistent impact on audiences' anger and misperceptions than do liberal media. During the 2020 election, users of conservative partisan media became more angry and inaccurate in their beliefs over time and were angrier and more misinformed than those who used conservative partisan media infrequently or not at all. This suggests that conservative media can *cause* people to be more angry and misinformed. Similarly, audiences of liberal partisan media were also angrier and held more false beliefs than did people who did not use it frequently. But there is little evidence in the data that users of liberal partisan media became more angry and misinformed during the election as a result of using these sources. While both types of media are no doubt important in shaping audiences' beliefs, conservative and liberal partisan media are not equivalent in their effects on the American public. Rather, conservative media are particularly influential in promoting anger and political misperceptions among their audiences.

This Element proceeds as follows: in the next section, I draw on theories of media exposure, emotion, and information processing to outline my expectations regarding the ways in which partisan media promote anger and misperceptions. Along the way I argue that anger is the vital link between exposure to partisan news and being misinformed; partisan media trigger anger in their audiences, which subsequently promotes incorrect beliefs. After outlining the theory, I next describe the survey and data before reporting my analyses. I conclude by offering a discussion of the implications of findings.

2 How Partisan Media Drive Anger and Misperceptions

2.1 What Are 'Partisan' Media?

One defining feature of the contemporary American political media environment is the prevalence of explicitly partisan political information sources. Partisan media outlets are those that present political information in a way

that is notably favorable to one political party or ideology (Levendusky, 2013). The partisan nature of this coverage is evident in a few ways; outlets can be partisan (and biased) both in the types of stories they cover or the way in which they frame or emphasize certain aspects of an issue (Baum & Groeling, 2008; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Partisan media can be distinguished from mainstream or nonpartisan news outlets that follow the norms and routines of professional journalism, providing general-interest content that is produced through processes of accurate reporting, fact-checking, editing, and institutional oversight. These often include large national newspapers, broadcast television outlets, and public media. Partisan outlets, in contrast, do not always follow these procedures. Instead, they often market themselves or are perceived by audiences or third parties as correctives to or in opposition to more traditional, mainstream news sources. Much of their content, which often relies on highly opinionated commentary rather than original reporting (Levendusky, 2013), directly challenges or offers a counternarrative to what is provided by more mainstream news outlets (Holt et al., 2019).

Technological changes and widespread adoption of the internet have allowed partisan media to grow over the last thirty years in the United States. Following the success of conservative talk radio hosts like Rush Limbaugh in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the expansion of cable news allowed partisan television networks like *Fox News*, which was launched in 1996, to build an audience and become a prominent voice in American politics (Brock et al., 2012; Hemmer, 2016; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Peck, 2020). Over the past twenty-five years, *Fox News* has become one of the most popular news brands in the United States by offering explicitly conservative partisan content intended to appeal to and attract a right-leaning audience. The data suggests it is working. According to a 2020 Pew Poll, *Fox News* was the most commonly cited source for political and election news among the American public, as 16% of US adults named *Fox News* as their main source for election news and nearly 40% reported getting news from *Fox* in the prior week. Two-thirds of Republicans named *Fox News* as their most-trusted news source (Pew, 2020a; Pew, 2020b). Although not nearly as successful as *Fox News*, liberal partisan outlets like *MSNBC* have also become commonplace in the American media environment.

But partisan media outlets are not limited to cable television brands like *Fox News* or *MSNBC*. On the political right, an ecosystem of influential right-wing media outlets has emerged that do not always adhere to norms of journalistic objectivity or engage in fact and evidence-based reporting (Benkler et al., 2018). These sites have become some of the most popular and influential political information outlets on the internet. In many cases, right-wing media

Angry and Wrong

7

outlets have a comparable (or even more) number followers on social media platforms like Facebook than do more mainstream, national news outlets. For example, the *Daily Caller* (6.2 million) and the *Washington Post* (7.3 million) have roughly similar numbers of followers. On both the right and left, podcasters, influencers, and YouTubers have joined the ranks of popular partisan media. Some of these individuals also have relatively large followings online. Hasan Piker, for instance, is a progressive political commentator who has more than 2.5 million followers on the streaming platform, Twitch. While partisan media have historically been thought of as “news,” the universe of media content that falls under this umbrella is growing, rapidly changing, and, potentially, financially lucrative.

While partisan media exists on both the right and left, conservative and liberal partisan media are not equivalent. As I argue, there are important distinctions in terms of their popularity, content, and effects. Conservative media in particular play an important role in the American political media ecosystem. Starting with the success of Rush Limbaugh and *Fox News*, conservative media outlets have come to explicitly brand themselves as a counter or alternative to more mainstream media, which is often portrayed in conservative media as untrustworthy, liberal, and excessively out of touch with working, middle-class (White) Americans and their values (Brock et al., 2012; Peck, 2020). This populist and angry rhetoric caught on and attracted audiences to conservative media both off- and online (Young, 2019). Although many do not use these sites exclusively, more than six in ten Republicans report getting news from *Fox News* every week (Pew, 2021). No liberal source attracts Democratic audiences in the same way. Conservative news has also become quite prominent online and on social media. Right-wing news sites online have created a tight-knit media ecosystem in which conservative content – including misinformation – is shared and amplified in a way that is insulated from more moderate or centrist news sites (Benkler et al., 2018). This conservative media ecosystem does not have a liberal equivalent or a mirrored system on the left. Such asymmetries in conservative and liberal news exposure are apparent on social media as well. There is evidence of ideological segregation on platforms like Facebook, as sources favored by conservative audiences are more prominent on the platform than liberal ones. Further, a small group of very conservative users tend to frequently use right-leaning pages on the platform, isolating themselves from more centrist content (González-Bailón et al., 2023). As I note later, the popularity and influence of conservative partisan media may have important consequences for audiences’ beliefs about science, health, and politics.

2.2 Who Uses Partisan Media and Why?

As the internet and social media expanded in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, some critics raised concerns that technological changes to the media environment would provide people the opportunity to create news and political information diets that reflect their personal beliefs, partisan affiliations, or political ideologies, while also avoiding sources that challenged their political views or were more politically neutral (e.g. Sunstein, 2007). These concerns – whether called filter bubble, echo chambers, or media balkanization – were based in part on the theory of selective exposure, which suggests that people prefer news and information outlets that reinforce their existing political views because those sources often tell people what they want to hear, while avoiding or downplaying uncomfortable political truths (Stroud, 2011). If taken to the extreme, technology can facilitate the construction of ‘echo chambers’ in which news consumers only expose themselves to news and political information from sources that are politically congenial. Similarly, algorithmic filtering based on political and content preferences could help construct filter bubbles of politically aligned information online (Pariser, 2011). At the center of these processes are partisan media outlets.

Although a popular media and political narrative suggests that most Americans are creating echo-chambers by self-selecting into like-minded partisan media, *this claim is not supported by the evidence*. Over the past twenty years, hundreds of studies have been conducted to test the extent to which people only expose themselves to politically like-minded partisan news. An abundance of evidence suggests people prefer like-minded content but don’t actively avoid information they disagree with (Garrett, 2009). In fact, many people consume no news at all and few people consistently use only like-minded partisan media (Guess, 2021). Studies that track individuals’ internet use in the United States by evaluating browser histories indicate that less 2% of all website visits online are to news sites and only 0.75% are to explicitly partisan media sites (Wojcieszak et al., 2023). Further, the evidence indicates those who do consume like-minded partisan news tend not to avoid other more neutral or even disagreeable news sources. All told, recent estimates suggest that less than 5% of Americans are in online news echo chambers. For comparison, approximately 30% of Americans consume no online news at all (Fletcher et al., 2021; Jamieson et al., 2023). This is not to say that echo chambers are nonexistent; recent evidence suggests that a small but perhaps growing segment of conservative news audiences exist in echo chambers (Benkler et al., 2018; González-Bailón et al., 2023; Guess, 2021; Jamieson et al., 2023). But little evidence supports the notion that most people exist in partisan echo chambers.

Angry and Wrong

9

While only a very small percentage of the American population exists in echo chambers, this does not mean that people are not at times exposed to partisan media. The contemporary information environment allows people to be exposed to partisan content in a number of ways. Consumers can actively seek out partisan media by watching partisan cable television channels like *Fox News*, visiting partisan websites, or following partisan media sources on social media. In addition to these active approaches, people can also be incidentally exposed to partisan content without purposefully seeking it. While algorithms employed by social media platforms like Facebook or remain a proprietary black box, we do know that they prioritize and amplify content that receives engagement from other users. This amplification of engaged content has enabled partisan media to thrive on social media platforms. Users engage more frequently with content from partisan outlets (relative to nonpartisan outlets) on social media platforms, particularly more extreme conservative pages. Posts from partisan media pages on Facebook receive far more user engagement in the form of likes, comments, and shares than do more mainstream sources. The most popular conservative media outlets on Facebook received, on average, approximately 10,000 likes and 5,000 shares per post. The most engaged mainstream pages, in comparison, received roughly 5,000 likes and 2,000 shares for each post (Hiashutter-Rice & Weeks, 2021). Content from partisan media, especially when it contains angry language, outpaces mainstream media in the number of shares and retweets on Twitter as well (Hasell, 2021). These partisan sites are also shared widely by other, like-minded media outlets, which can expand their reach even further (Benkler et al., 2018). People may also be exposed to rumors and false content from partisan sites via online searches (Weeks & Southwell, 2010). While the majority of people may not actively use partisan media, people clearly still encounter partisan media content through more passive exposure via online social networks (Druckman et al., 2018; Hasell, 2021; Thorson & Wells, 2016).

Such stark differences in engagement between partisan and mainstream media outlets raises the questions of why people are drawn to these outlets and why their content is amplified so widely, despite the relatively small, immediate audience. In terms of exposure, partisan media provide political content that often explicitly appeals to people who share the outlets' political values or worldview. Research on selective exposure indicates that people are often psychologically attached to news sources and information that reinforce their existing political attitudes and beliefs (Garrett, 2009; Stroud, 2011). Although most people do not systematically avoid content or sources that challenge their worldview, they do have a strong preference for like-minded content, which partisan media delivers (Garrett & Stroud, 2014). Many users of

partisan media turn to these outlets likely because they get messages highlighting the positives of their political or social groups, alongside messages that criticize and denounce political opponents, all of which serve to reinforce existing political and social identities (Young, 2023).

Preference for politically like-minded content is not the only explanation for why people use partisan media for political information; partisan media users also tend to find those sources more credible than mainstream sources (Guess et al., 2021; Metzger et al., 2020; Tsfaty & Cappella, 2003). As people increasingly distrust government and institutions (Bennett & Livingston, 2018), there is also a growing perception among many Americans – particularly conservatives and Republicans – that mainstream media are biased, corrupt, or don't reflect the values of certain segments of the population (Holt et al., 2019). Partisan media provide many of these individuals an alternative outlet for political content and information that they find more credible, in part because it often tells them what they want to hear.

2.3 Partisan Media Content

Partisan media are information outlets that tend to cover news and politics in a way that unfairly favors one political party or ideology over others, and that the coverage is opinionated rather than based on facts and evidence (Levendusky, 2013). As previously mentioned, the embrace of one political ideology can emerge either through the political stories outlets choose to cover or how they frame topics (Baum & Groeling, 2008).

In terms of story selection, partisan media can choose to cover and emphasize topics and issues that favor the political party, ideology, or politician(s) with which they are aligned. For example, both Democratic and Republican-leaning outlets tend to provide more coverage of political scandals that involve political opponents than scandals that involve ideologically-aligned politicians (Puglisi & Snyder, 2011). To examine if this trend continued in recent years, I used the Internet Archive for TV news (see archive.org/details/tv) to search cable news transcripts for mentions of two political scandals from the 2020 US presidential election. The first scandal – which was likely more appealing to conservative audiences – involved the unproven claim that President Joe Biden and his son, Hunter, were involved in corruption surrounding business dealings in Ukraine. The second scandal involved the unproven claim that former US president Donald Trump purposely slowed down the US mail system in order to delay mail in ballots, thus giving Trump an electoral advantage. A rough search of the Internet Archive provided evidence of story bias; between September 1 and Election Day (November 3), 2020 *Fox News* mention Hunter Biden significantly