

Objectivity in an Age of Dissensus: Partisanship and political news, 1958-2009

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This paper looks at how mainstream national news has responded to the polarization and partisanship that have characterized the U.S. political sphere since the late 1970s. The literature is mixed: on the one hand, based on mainstream journalism's professed objectivity, one would expect a fairly faithful record of growing partisanship in the form of a linear increase in contradiction between the two parties. However, the few existing studies of mainstream coverage of partisan discourse find that everyday political news is heavily influenced not by external political conditions, but by longstanding journalistic practices and standards of newsworthiness, which refract and even obscure political reality. Through a combination of socio-historical and content analysis, I look at one indicator of partisanship in the news: contradiction, defined as a contradictory statement within the same story. I find that while contradiction has indeed increased over the years, the pattern undulates, reflecting intra-party conflict as well as the linear, cross-party trend we would expect if news only reflected the macro-level trend of polarization. I therefore conclude that journalistic considerations weigh heavily on the reporting of partisan discourse. I also find that journalists are increasingly adjudicating partisan discourse by presenting multiple contradictory statements against one "root" statement within a story. I put these findings in the context of the numerous other ways that journalists at national outlets are dealing with the epistemological challenges to objectivity posed by persistent and pervasive partisanship.

Introduction

According to the mandate of objectivity – which national journalist associations and reporters at all levels still profess to follow – the news should exhibit “detachment, nonpartisanship, a style of writing called the ‘inverted pyramid,’ facticity, and balance” (Mindich, 1998, p. 2). These practices of objectivity mandate that the news should provide the facts, should not take sides when there is partisanship, and should not give undue weight to one side of an issue versus another. Despite decades of critique from people within the journalism profession and without, the dogged adherence to objectivity rests on the argument that, if the main goal of journalism is to convey to an audience information about some event or issue which the audience did not witness directly, in a way that is impartial and fair, the practices of objectivity still constitute the best way to do so. Therefore most observers do not see the paradigm of objectivity being replaced anytime soon (e.g. Rosen 2014).

Assuming that they are correct, and that the news strives to more or less reflect political reality, what would we expect if we looked at how it has reflected the polarization and partisanship that has characterized the U.S. political sphere for more than three decades? This paper provides a preliminary answer to that question.

A brief history of the late 20th-century U.S. political sphere

The solidification of objectivity as U.S. journalism’s dominant paradigm coincided in the political sphere with a long period of relative political consensus, coupled with a strong liberal-centrist mainstream. From roughly 1940 to 1980, a confluence of major international events (World War II, Communism, the Cold War), improvements in

communication and transportation technologies (Briggs & Burke, 2009; Hobsbawm, 1994), virtually uninterrupted economic growth (Brenner 2002; Cohen 2003), and the expansion of higher education (Kim & Rury, 2007; Lazerson, 1998), combined to create a strong national feeling (Hallin, 1994, chap. 9; Hodgson, 2005 [1976]; Igo, 2007; Wall, 2009). “Faith in a mass consumption postwar economy hence came to mean much more than the ready availability of goods to buy,” Cohen (2003: 127) writes. “Rather, it stood for an elaborate, integrated ideal of economic abundance and democratic political freedom, both equitably distributed, that became almost a national civil religion from the late 1940s into the 1970s.” At the same time, “The nature of the American mass media was changing [after World War II]. The changes were a function of both technology and affluence. Improvements in communication led to the development of [outlets] with large national audiences, while the development of the jet airplane, universal automobile ownership, and a national highway system contributed to the breakdown of regional differences and isolation” (Lichter, Rothman, & Lichter 1986, p. 7).

In politics, Democrats and Republicans alike largely agreed on the virtues of pragmatism and a strong federal government. There was “a strange hybrid: liberal conservatism,” says Hodgson (2005 [1976]: 73). “It stretched from Americans for Democratic Action – which lay at the leftward frontiers of respectability and yet remained safely committed to anti-communism and free enterprise – as far into the board rooms of Wall Street and manufacturing industry as there could be found a realistic willingness to accept the existence of labor unions, the rights of minorities, and some role in economic life for the federal government.” Yet, at least at the federal level, the center tilted left: between 1933 and 1995 – from the 73rd to the 103rd Congress – Republicans

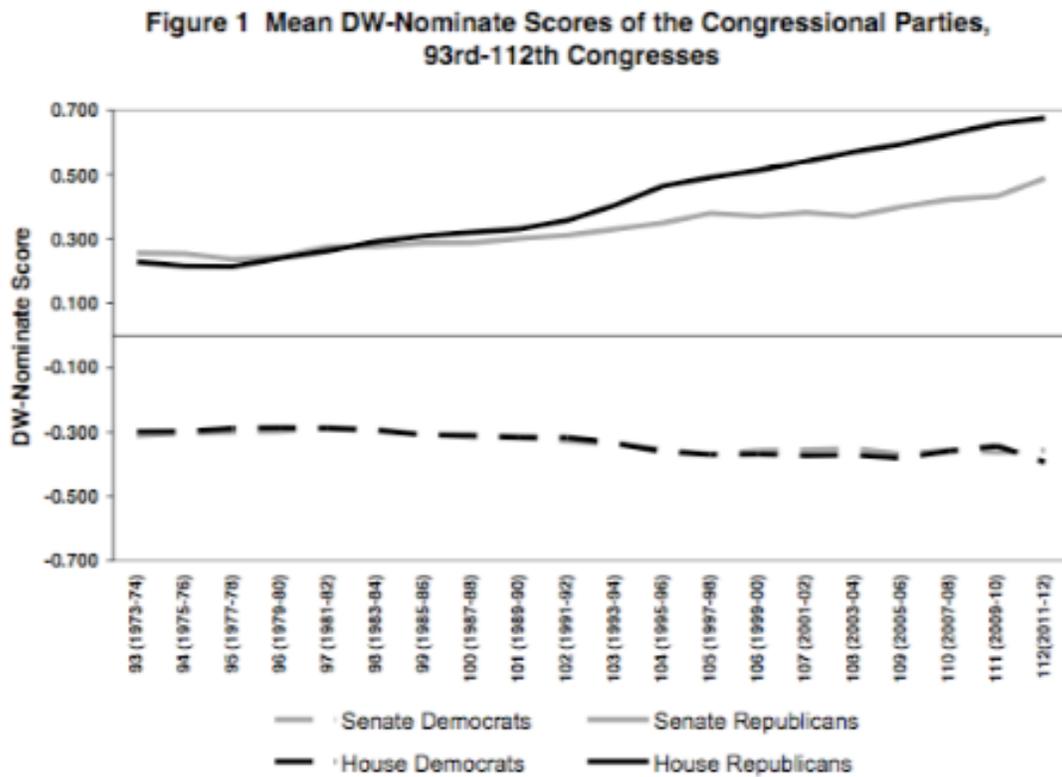
had a majority in both the Senate and the House of Representatives only twice: from 1947-49, and from 1953-55. Excepting these, the Democrats had either a majority or a supermajority in both houses of Congress for more than sixty years.

It is important to point out that not every American was always able to participate in the mainstream ideal, most notably African Americans (Chin 2001; Cohen 2003). It is likewise quite obviously incorrect to characterize the entire period, from roughly 1940 to 1980, as one of national unity (one need only to think of Vietnam). However, the ubiquity of the mainstream message, and the widespread belief that the middle class was attainable by nearly everyone, coupled with real increases in profit and income, made the norms and habits of the liberal-centrist mainstream the defining cultural mode during this period. I argue that journalistic objectivity was particularly well-suited to this socio-political formation, as I discuss in more detail below.

Since the late 1970s, U.S. politics has grown steadily more polarized and more partisan (e.g. Brewer, Mariani, & Stonecash, 2002; Hetherington, 2001; Jacobson, 2005; Poole & Rosenthal, 1984). When long-time Democratic Senator Ted Kennedy died in 2009, a former Republican Senator from Alaska, Ted Stevens – who joined the Senate in 1968 – remembered their early years together in the Senate: “It was a sharing Senate at the time, without regard to politics. It was a family. It’s not a family anymore” (Stolberg, 2009). “The Senate today is far different from the one Mr. Kennedy joined in 1962,” a news article said. “Like the nation itself, it has become courser, more partisan and, many scholars and politicians argue, more dysfunctional” (Stolberg, 2009).

Poole and Rosenthal (1984; 1985; 2001; McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006) have conducted what are perhaps the best-known studies of congressional polarization,

looking at roll-call votes using a method called D- (later DW-) NOMINATE, which measures polarization according to each parties' distance from zero; 1.0 is perfectly conservative, while -1.0 is perfectly liberal (the same method used in the Hefindahl-Hirschman Index). Jacobson (2013) provides, based on Poole's data, a graph of the DW-NOMINATE scores from 1973 to 2012:¹



Note that while Congressional Democrats have grown only slightly more liberal, moving from -.3 to -.4, Congressional Republicans – especially House Republicans – have diverged sharply, from .25 in the early 1970s (closer to the center than Democrats) to almost .7 in 2012 (with a decisive shift in the mid-1990s).

¹ Permission for use of this graphic has not yet been obtained.

It is not only that policymakers have become more polarized; politics has also become more *partisan*. Whereas polarization usually refers to the distance between parties based on Congressional voting, partisanship refers to the “way the game is played.” Fleisher and Bond (2000: 2) remark that:

In earlier days, the end of policy battles meant that both sides had accepted the compromise because the game had been played the way the Framers had intended. ... Today, every new struggle seems to be viewed as another sortie in a partisan war, with each party seeking to use its control of a seat of government power to demonize the other for partisan advantage.

“It is hard to exaggerate how much House Republicans and Democrats dislike each other these days,” wrote veteran political reporter Juliet Eilperin in 2006. “The much-discussed red state-blue state divide captures the duality, but not the animus, of this relationship. They speak about their opponents as if they hail from a distant land with strange customs, all of which are twisted” (p. 6). Mickey Edwards, a Congressman from Oklahoma from 1977 to 1992, was asked in a 2011 talk at the Aspen Institute titled, “What’s Wrong With American Politics?” whether politics today are really more partisan than in previous decades, especially compared to the tumultuous 1960s. He stated:

The difference is that what happened then was this kind of animosity would arise on *an* issue. It might arise on abortion, it might arise on Vietnam, now it arises on everything all the time. It’s about the president, and [the nominations of Supreme Court Justices] Sotomayor, and Kagen, and the health care bill, and T.A.R.P., and the stimulus, and for everything it’s just one side is evil and the other side is good, whichever side you’re on. So I think it’s a much more toxic environment.

Recent book titles – *Fight Club Politics: How Partisanship is Poisoning the House of Representatives* (Eilperin, 2006); *Party Wars: Polarization and the Politics of National Policy Making* (Sinclair, 2006); *The Second Civil War: How Extreme Partisanship Has Paralyzed Washington and Polarized America* (Brownstein, 2007); and *Winner-Take-All*

Politics (Hacker and Pierson, 2010) – confirm what any regular political observer knows: the trend continues into the twenty-first century.

Mainstream news coverage of the political sphere

Given these developments in the political sphere since the 1970s, we might expect to be awash in studies looking at how mainstream news has responded to polarization and partisanship. Yet, there are relatively few. Several researchers have looked at the characteristics of partisan political discourse in new partisan and niche media outlets, or at the effects of the new partisan news (e.g. Coe et al., 2008; Jamieson & Capella, 2008; Iyengar & Hahn, 2008; Prior, 2013; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). Others have analyzed the content of mainstream national outlets for evidence of the outlets' own political bias (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010; Groeling, 2008; Groseclose & Milyo, 2005; Ho & Quinn, 2008), finding mostly that the news in national mainstream outlets is consistently moderate, far more moderate than the politicians they cover (Prior, 2013: 103). To put a finer point on it: a keyword search of the journal *Political Communication* for the words “partisan AND news” between the years 1994 and 2014 returns only sixteen articles (“partisanship AND news” returned only seven), six of which look at the effects of partisan news, three that look at the political bias of journalism itself, two that look at the effects of partisanship on news exposure, and three which are only tangentially related.

The remaining two are by Kaplan (2006) and Schaefer (1997). Kaplan uses a new institutionalist approach to argue that the changes in the political sphere were the main reason that journalism abandoned overt partisanship and embraced objectivity: “These transformations in journalism’s mission reflected and refracted more overarching shifts in

the American political system” (p. 173; see also Kaplan, 2002). This is not unlike the argument made by Michael Schudson (1978) in *Discovering the News*, which was that watershed events in culture and politics – namely, the discovery of relativity in science and philosophy, and the use of propaganda and advent of public relations around World War I – produced in journalists who were in the early twentieth century “naïve empiricists” “an allegiance to rules and procedures created for a world in which even facts were in question” (p. 7). In addition, Mindich (1998), Baym (2010), and Williams & Delli Carpini (2011) all argue for various impacts on journalistic practice of changes in the wider cultural milieu. I will return to the implications of these studies for my findings in the Discussion section, below.

Schaefer (1997) analyzes mainstream news coverage of a specific type of partisan discourse: presidential speeches. He tests hypotheses about the various forces that influence coverage of the president, including: external reality (e.g. state of the economy), a conservative bias based on a preference for the status quo, and elite approval or disapproval of the president (i.e. indexing). He finds marginal support for the editorial bias of the news outlet and the standing of the president vis-à-vis public opinion polls, but finds that “Editors apparently do not follow ‘real-world’ cues, a straight ‘conservative’ bias, or elite assessments of presidential performance” (p. 104). “The ‘power of the pulpit,’” he concludes, “may be diffused or even stunted by the ‘power of the pen’” (p. 98).

Another study that looks explicitly at mainstream news coverage of partisan discourse is Groeling (2010; see also Groeling & Kernell, 2000). Groeling looks at the types of “everyday” (i.e. not only within the context of a speech or a campaign) political

messages most likely to make the news, categorized based on whether they are by a Democrat or Republican, whether they take the form of praise or criticism, and whether they are directed at one's own party or the other party. Contrary to any expectation of the news mirroring actual events, Groeling repeatedly finds evidence that well-established standards of newsworthiness (novelty, conflict, balance, and a preference for authority) outweigh even observed reality; in a wider sense, journalists have a number of boiler-plate narratives to which they write most news (see also Molotch & Lester, 1974; Tuchman, 1972).

In terms of reflecting the Liberal/Democrat-versus-Conservative/Republican divide shown in the political science literature, Groeling finds that the news is far more likely to showcase intra-party conflict (which is both novel and displays conflict) than conflict between parties (chap. 2). He also finds that messaging considered most “costly” to politicians’ brands (i.e. intra-party conflict) is considered most authentic by the audience, making it even more attractive to journalists (chap. 5). Therefore, based on Schaefer and Groeling, we would not necessarily expect the news to reflect polarization in a linear fashion.

Two other subsets of literature bear on the analysis here: that on “indexing,” and that on the “adversarial turn,” which argues that journalists became more adversarial toward their official sources beginning around the late 1960s/early 1970s. Proponents of an adversarial turn include Clayman et al. (2010), who found beginning in 1969 a marked increase in adversarial questions during presidential press conferences. They track this data through 2001, finding fluctuations but never a decrease to pre-1969 levels. Likewise, Patterson (1993) contends that the press-politics relationship has gotten “out of order,”

with journalists, rather than politicians, now driving campaign coverage. Patterson finds that, from 1960 to 1992, positive news about presidential candidates went from seventy-five percent of coverage to forty percent, while negative news went from twenty-five percent to sixty percent (p. 20). Kerbel (1999) argues that, after the 1970s, “No longer would journalists give officials the benefit of the doubt or assume their political or policy motives were pure, as they might have in the past. In subsequent years, the operating assumption would be that politicians were not to be trusted, and the good journalist was one who could expose the wicked truth lurking beneath their public statements” (p. 50) (see also Bradley, 2009; Burriss, 1989; Rozell, 1994).

Indexing, on the other hand, sees journalists less as watchdogs, or driving the coverage, and more as stenographers to the daily goings-on of elites and government officials. Bennett (1990) coined the term to highlight what he saw as journalism’s tendency “to ‘index’ the range of voices and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic” (p. 106). Hallin’s (1986) study of Vietnam coverage directly refutes the idea that an aggressive, adversarial press had been the impetus for U.S. withdrawal: “among the growing community of people who have systematically investigated the media’s role in the war, there is an impressive consensus rejecting the notions that the media were adversaries to American policy in Vietnam or a decisive factor in the outcome of the war” (p. x).

To put these two arguments in the present context, if adversarialism has become the dominant journalistic mode, we should expect evidence that journalists have become

more interventionist in the reporting. If, however, indexing more accurately describes coverage, we should see coverage dictated more by external political events.

I build on this work by looking at a specific type of partisan discourse: *contradiction*. I define contradiction as a statement that stands in opposition to another statement in the same story. In theory, contradiction looks similar to traditional journalistic balance. However, historical analysis shows (and my data confirm) that in the relatively consensus-driven political sphere of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, journalists at top national outlets did not routinely see the need to balance, or contradict, their sources within stories. Perhaps the most famous example is the news coverage of Senator Joseph McCarthy's anti-communism campaign. Halberstam (1975) reports the innovative system that *Washington Post* journalist Murrey Marder and his editors worked out so that he could show the weakness in McCarthy's accusations but still remain within the bounds of objectivity:

Doggedly, [Marder] worked out a means of covering McCarthy. Hold him to the record. Not just what he said yesterday, but the day before and the week before. Explain not just this charge, but what happened to the previous charges. Give the people on the other side, the accused or the semi-accused, a chance to answer. Always explain the meaning of the charges. Try above all not to be a megaphone for McCarthy. Expose him to maximum scrutiny.

We know that Marder's coverage was fairly unique in its attempt to contradict McCarthy's claims because the weight of the journalistic field's McCarthy coverage is often invoked now as an early glimpse of the inability of objectivity to adequately deal with partisan discourse (e.g. Davies, 2005; Schudson & Tiftt, 2005). I will argue further that simple contradiction – or balance – has not always been applied equally, as a blanket theory of objective journalism may predict. Rather, contradiction (balance) is a signal of

adversarialism, and is therefore closely related to historically contingent journalistic practice and partisan discourse.

My method allowed for multiple contradictory statements against one “root” sentence, a practice which puts the weight of the argument on one side versus the other; I differentiate this from contradiction, or balance, and define it as *adjudication*. I see adjudication as a more proactive journalistic device which can nevertheless be used under the cover of objectivity. I find that the percentage of sentences that are contradicted only once decreases, while the percentage of sentences contradicted more than once increases, indicating that this practice increased over time, possibly indicating greater journalistic adversarialism, as I discuss below.

A Brief Note on Method

This study combines socio-historical analysis with longitudinal quantitative analysis of news content. The first is necessary because journalistic practices do not take place in a vacuum; scholars can differ as to whether political economic, cultural, or political forces are most relevant, but few would argue that none matter. The second, content analysis, is necessary to establish patterns in content over time. Qualitative political communication research has its obvious strengths: ethnographies, network analysis, interviews, social histories and other theoretical analyses. However it is evermore widely accepted that journalism is a field that interacts with other fields – is influenced by, and in turn influences – culture, politics, and economics. Many excellent studies trace the effects of broad social forces on journalism over time, but too often they fail to couple these socio-historical analyses with randomly sampled news content over the same period. *Only* by

linking patterns in actual news content to broader social forces, especially over time, can we say with greater confidence that the perceived relationships between broader society and news content exist – or do not exist.

My data for the content analysis come from a sample of national mainstream outlets: *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, CBS Evening News, PBS Newshour, CNN.com, and FoxNews.com. I drew the content from the “front pages” of each outlet for one constructed week of randomly selected dates for each year. The years from which content was sampled were: 1958/59 (1963/65 for CBS Evening News²), 1978/79, 1998/99, and 2008/09. The total number of stories was 723; the total number of sentences analyzed was 17,830. Unless noted, stories from the local, national, and international levels are included in the analysis. See Appendix A for detail.

How has mainstream news responded to polarization and partisanship?

As I stated at the outset, because mainstream journalism continues to operate under the standards of objectivity, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the increase in political polarization and partisanship since the late 1970s has resulted in an increase in contradictory statements in the news. However, enough studies have found evidence of the distorting influence of various meso-level forces that I state this as a question:

- RQ1: Has the frequency of contradictory sentences in everyday news increased since the late 1970s?

If there is an increase in contradiction, whom might we expect to be disagreeing?

McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal (2006, p. 3) define polarization as 1) the disappearance of

² Because CBS did not institute its half-hour network nightly news program until 1963. I have indicated where CBS is included with the content from 1958-59; for socio-historical purposes the early sixties are regarded as of a piece with the late 1950s (e.g. Gitlin, 1987; von Bothmer, 2010), however I do not include the 1963/65 CBS content in analyses that require precision regarding who was in political power.

moderates from the political field, and 2) a state in which “conservative and liberal have become almost perfect synonyms for Republican and Democrat.” It follows that disagreement is likely to be highest between Democrats and Republicans. However, as I discuss above, Groeling (2010) has found that the news is most likely to highlight conflict within parties. This would mean that contradiction would be highest between Democrats, and between Republicans, rather than one against the other. Therefore:

- Hypothesis 1: Contradiction will be highest between Democrats and Republicans.
- Hypothesis 2: Contrary to hypothesis 1, contradiction will be highest between members of the same party.

Findings

Table 1 shows that, as objectivity would predict, there was a steady increase in contradictory statements from the late 1950s/early 1960s to the 1990s, with a slight decrease in 2008/09 (the correlation is statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level (see Appendix B for detail)). The decrease in contradiction for 2008/09 may be due to the inclusion of the Democratic presidential campaign in the sample, which would have seen a higher-than-normal level of agreement between the Democrats (as we will see).

Table 1: Frequency of contradictory statements in all stories over time

Sentence is contradictory?						Total
		1958-59 & 1963/65	1978-79	1998-99	2008-09	
No	Count	3005	3446	3671	6394	16516
	%	95.3%	93.1%	90.9%	92.2%	92.6%
Yes	Count	148	256	369	541	1314
	%	4.7%	6.9%	9.1%	7.8%	7.4%
Total	Count	3153	3702	4040	6935	17830
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

One sees that even at its highest point, the frequency of contradictory statements never makes up more than ten percent of news content. This confirms Benson and Hallin’s (2007) finding that more than ninety percent of news content in the 1960s and 1990s was neutral regarding criticism. However, when we look at contradiction in national politics stories only (Table 2), we see that contradiction increases from the 1950s to the 1990s, then levels off to the late 2000s. At this point, it is still unclear whether the increase in contradiction in politics stories is accounted for by the journalistic adversarial turn or political polarization.

Table 2: Frequency of contradiction, national politics stories only

Rate of contradictory sentences, national politics stories only						Total
		1958-59 & 1963/65	1978-79	1998-99	2008-09	
Not contradictory	Count	668	533	975	2548	4724
	%	95.8%	93.7%	91.0%	91.1%	92.0%
Contradictory	Count	29	36	96	248	409
	%	4.2%	6.3%	9.0%	8.9%	8.0%
Total	Count	697	569	1071	2796	5133
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 3 shows, however, the source of the contradiction, and here we see that it was politicians who were responsible for the increase in the contradiction in national politics stories, especially beginning in the late 1970s, making it clear that it was politicians, not journalists, who were responsible for the increase in adversarialism in the news.

Table 3: Who is doing the contradicting?

(Contradictory sentences by speaker by topic)			Years				Total
			1958-59 & 1963/65	1978-79	1998-99	2008-09	
National political field ³	Nat'l Culture Stories	Count	2 (of 12)	11 (of 27)	17 (of 50)	31 (of 60)	61
		%	16.7%	40.7%	34.0%	51.7%	
	Nat'l Economics stories	Count	9 (of 33)	27 (of 79)	22 (of 88)	52 (of 95)	110
		%	27.2%	34.2%	25.0%	54.7%	
	Nat'l Politics Stories	Count	12 (of 29)	28 (of 36)	79 (of 96)	210 (of 248)	329
		%	41.4%	77.8%	82.3%	84.7%	
	Total	Count	23	66	118	293	500
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Journalist	Nat'l Culture Stories	Count	0 (of 12)	0 (of 27)	3 (of 50)	10 (of 60)	13
		%	0.0%	0.0%	6.0%	16.7%	
	Nat'l Economics stories	Count	2 (of 33)	10 (of 79)	9 (of 88)	4 (of 95)	25
		%	6.1%	12.7%	10.2%	4.2%	
	Nat'l Politics Stories	Count	6 (of 29)	0 (of 36)	1 (of 96)	9 (of 248)	16
		%	20.7%	0.0%	1.0%	3.6%	
	Total contradictory sentences	Count	74	142	234	403	853
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Whereas there were 1,314 contradictory sentences, there were 602 “root” sentences that were contradicted. Table 4 shows the source of the sentences that were *contradicted*. One sees that the percentage of all politicians in the position of being contradicted rises from nearly forty percent in the late 1950s to sixty-five percent in the 2000s.

³ The category “National political field” includes the President, members of Congress, appointed members of federal government, the judiciary, and representatives of the military.

Table 4: Who is being contradicted? (all stories)

		Years				Total
		1958-59 & 1963/65	1978-79	1998-99	2008-09	
Nat'l Dems and Liberals	Count	9	31	20	54	114
	%	20.0%	43.1%	23.0%	35.1%	31.8%
Nat'l Republicans and Conservatives	Count	8	3	25	46	82
	%	17.8%	4.2%	28.7%	29.9%	22.9%
Combined % for all nat'l politicians		37.8%	47.3%	51.7%	65.0%	--
Nat'l Nonpartisans	Count	8	21	15	28	72
	%	17.8%	29.2%	17.2%	18.2%	20.1%
Journalists	Count	20	17	27	26	90
	%	44.4%	23.6%	31.0%	16.9%	25.1%
Total	Count	45	72	87	154	358
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 4 shows that, in addition to accounting for the majority of the increase in contradictory sentences, as we saw in Table 3, national politicians also account for the increase in those sources who were contradicted. The instance of the journalist him or herself being contradicted was remarkably high in the late 1950s, and declines over time. The high percentage of journalist contradiction in the late 1950s is due to the fact that the style of journalism in the 1950s was such that journalists were less reliant on other sources to make arguments in their stories (e.g. Winfield, 1990), and therefore would have been more likely to play devil's advocate to a source who later contradicted them. This is different from the trend in more analysis and more contextual reporting (e.g. Fink & Schudson, 2013); it was a holdover from the days when FDR forbade journalists from quoting directly any source unless explicitly permitted to do so.⁴ Table 3 also showed a

⁴ A typical example from the 1950s of the journalist speaking for his sources reads: "Washington is greatly interested in the quality of the men put into these top posts in the White House Office because, under President Eisenhower's reliance on a version of the military staff system, they have immense power" ("Aide to share job..." 1959, Sept. 29, *The New York Times*).

much higher percentage of journalist contradiction in the 1950s than in any subsequent decade.

I proposed two contradictory hypotheses about the sources and objects of contradiction, the first stating, with the polarization literature, that contradiction between Democrats and Republicans would be highest, the second stating, after Groeling (2010), that intra-party contradiction would be highest. Table 5 shows the source by the source being contradicted, over time.

Table 5:

Source x Source being contradicted			1958/59	1978/79	1998/99	2008/09	Total
Democrats	Democrats	Count %	0 .0%	11 4.8%	2 0.7%	51 11.2%	64 6.2%
	Republicans	Count %	1 2.0%	5 2.2%	12 4.0%	45 9.9%	63 6.1%
	All other sources	Count %	0 .0%	6 2.6%	11 3.6%	9 2.0%	26 2.5%
Republicans	Democrats	Count %	0 .0%		20 6.6%	31 6.8%	51 4.9%
	Republicans	Count %	1 2.0%		18 6.0%	10 2.2%	29 2.8%
	All other sources	Count %	0 .0%		8 2.6%	1 0.2%	9 0.9%
All other sources	Democrats	Count %	1 2.0%	25 10.9%	10 3.3%	51 11.2%	87 8.4%
	Republicans	Count %	4 7.8%	0 .0%	20 6.6%	26 5.7%	50 4.8%
	All other sources	Count %	44 86.3%	183 79.6%	201 66.6%	231 50.8%	659 63.5%
	Total	Count %	51 100.0%	230 100.0%	302 100.0%	455 100.0%	1038 100.0%

We see that contradiction between parties was low during the 1950s, but that contradiction of Democrats increases sharply in the late 1970s. Remarkably – confirming Groeling (2010) – Democrats were more often the targets of the contradiction, and the rate of contradiction by Democrats was double the rate by Republicans. Contradiction of

Democrats by “all other sources” (nonpartisan political actors, as well as various sources from the civil sphere such as experts, by unaffiliated citizens, and by journalists themselves) was the highest of all, while Republicans remarkably logged zero contradictions in the 1970s.

One may recall that the president during the late 1970s was Jimmy Carter, and Democrats controlled both chambers of Congress. But these were not good years for the Democrats politically; “By the end of 1977,” Rozell (1994, p. 82) writes, “it had become evident that the expectations for presidential-congressional cooperation were not going to be fulfilled. Conflicts had erupted over presidential appointments, energy policy, tax policy, pork-barrel projects, and even inter-branch protocol. Press coverage of Congress’s role in the failure of party governance followed the curve of disintegrating harmony.” In addition, “the national economy was in severe distress, suffering from a seemingly incurable combination of high inflation and high unemployment (stagflation),” and this “dismal performance of [managing] the economy undermined the Democratic Party’s New Deal reputation as the party of prosperity” (Meffert, Norpoth, & Ruhil, 2001, p. 954). In a July 15, 1979 speech, President Carter himself diagnosed a national “crisis in confidence,” in what came to be known as his “malaise” speech.

Therefore intra-party partisanship was high, and all Republicans had to do take power in 1980 was stay out of the way. Indeed, Democrats and their policies were in such low regard that in 1980 the country underwent an historic realignment (Meffert, Norpoth, & Ruhil, 2001), electing as president Ronald Reagan, the godfather of the conservative ascendance (Nash 2008). Recall also that the late 1970s touched off the polarization that characterized subsequent decades and continues to this day.

The late 1990s were also bad years for the Democrats, though for different reasons; 1998 was the year that the House of Representatives voted to impeach Bill Clinton, who was embroiled in the Monica Lewinsky scandal. However, Democratic contradiction of Republicans is high for that period, and Republican intra-party contradiction is higher still, which reflects the fact that the Democrats had bounced back by 1999, while Republicans lost five Congressional seats in the midterm elections of 1998. Given the lack of a linear increase in cross-party contradiction, must we reject the hypothesis that the increase in contradiction was due to the increase in polarization and partisanship? I believe the weight of the evidence on this question goes with Groeling (2010) and others who argue for the refracting – sometimes distorting – influence of journalistic norms and imperatives.

Finally, what does the data show in terms of adjudication, which I argue is evidence of journalists proactively throwing the weight of an argument behind one side or another by contradicting one statement multiple times. Table 6 shows that journalistic adjudication indeed increased steadily, while instances of balance, or one contradiction, decreased.⁵

⁵ In this table I include CBS Evening News; Appendix C shows the table without CBS Evening News, the pattern is the same.

Table 6:

Adjudicated versus not adjudicated; count is number of sentences that are contradicted (all stories)		Years				Total
		1958-59 & 1963/65	1978-79	1998-99	2008-09	
Balance/Contradiction	Count	46	73	69	96	284
(contradicted only once)	%	58.2%	54.1%	44.8%	41.0%	47.2%
Adjudication	Count	33	62	85	138	318
(contradicted more than once)	%	41.8%	45.9%	55.2%	59.0%	52.8%
Total	Count	79	135	154	234	602
	% within	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	Years					

How can we understand this finding in light of the data above, which show that journalists were not responsible for the increase in contradiction in politics stories? I believe that, rather than supporting the adversarial turn hypothesis, the increase in adjudication shows journalists responding to the broader epistemological challenge of partisanship, by trying to minimize the relativization of facts that results from persistent dissensus.

Discussion

I see contradiction as a key problem for democratic discourse because most citizens do not have the time or the motivation to make sense of contradictory facts in the news. Studies have shown that when there are contradictory facts, the audience will fall back on its existing ideological biases to choose which side is correct (Coe et al., 2008; Iyengar and Hahn, 2009), thereby reinforcing partisanship and further eroding a common base of understanding on which to operate. Pingree (2011) showed, on the other hand, that for readers with high levels of interest in political issues, journalistic adjudication of

contradictory facts resulted in higher levels of political understanding and feelings of political efficacy.

It is precisely because objective news must provide both, or all, sides of a story, even in situations where one or more of the sides is clearly dissembling, spinning the facts, or otherwise defying the bounds of logic, that it falters (cf. Rosen 1993). Consider the following example, from the 2011 debt-ceiling debate, in which U.S. politicians brought the global economy to the brink of collapse by nearly missing the deadline to raise the debt ceiling. The centrist but right-leaning *Economist* magazine (2011, July 9-15) described it thus:

There is no good economic reason why this [debt ceiling debate] should be happening. America's net indebtedness is a perfectly affordable 65% of GDP, and throughout the past three years of recession and tepid recovery investors have been more than happy to go on lending to the federal government. The current problems, rather, are political. ... It is because the vast majority of Republicans, driven on by the wilder-eyed members of their party and the cacophony of conservative media, are clinging to the position that not a single cent of deficit reduction must come from a higher tax take. This is economically illiterate and disgracefully cynical.

Liberal newspaper columnist Paul Krugman (2011, July 28) focused on the failures of the mainstream media:

The facts of the crisis over the debt ceiling aren't complicated. Republicans have, in effect, taken America hostage... Yet many people in the news media apparently can't bring themselves to acknowledge this simple reality. News reports portray the parties as equally intransigent; pundits fantasize about some kind of 'centrist' uprising, as if the problem was too much partisanship on both sides. Some of us have long complained about the cult of 'balance,' the insistence on portraying both parties as equally wrong and equally at fault on any issue, never mind the facts. I joked long ago that if one party declared the earth was flat, the headline would read, 'Views Differ on Shape of Planet.'

More and more commentators have been calling this phenomenon "false equivalency."

Journalists in these cases are in the unenviable position of either simply transmitting conflicting statements, or of adjudicating the contradiction and opening themselves up to charges of bias or retribution from their powerful sources. The implied solution is that

journalists should sometimes act as judge and jury of political discourse, deciding which side's claim is correct when there are conflicting truth claims. But classic objective journalism disallows that kind of intervention. Yet, as my results show, it is also unlikely that journalists have sat idly by as recognition of the problem has increased. Rather, they have tried to deal with the increase in macro trend of partisanship and increase in contradiction between politicians by adjudicating, or showing through the use of multiple contradictory sources that one side is incorrect.

These results are part of a small but growing body of findings showing how mainstream news is responding to the challenges posed by increased polarization and partisanship. One way is to provide more context (Fink & Schudson, 2013). For example, on March 14, 2010, a window of the building that houses U.S. Representative Eric Cantor's (R-VA) Richmond campaign office was broken by a bullet. The next day, Cantor made a statement, accusing Democrats of inciting violence against Republicans. "A bullet was shot through the window of my campaign office in Richmond this week, and I've received threatening e-mails," he told reporters. He further attributed the shooting to the fact that he is Jewish and the second-ranking Republican in the House. However, the Associated Press article that ran in the local Virginia news was titled, "Bullet that hit Cantor office was randomly fired" (2010), and – after quoting Cantor – paraphrased a news release from the Richmond police by saying that "[the bullet] finished its random arc back to earth at a sharp downward trajectory, breaking a window pane on the bottom floor of the two-story brick building where Cantor's campaign leases the top floor."

The article went on to specify that "the spent bullet hit the floor about one foot

inside the shattered pane. No one was in the building at the time.” Further, “The pastel green structure with a purple door resembles a town house, and from the outside it is difficult to distinguish whether it is a business or residence. Except for a brass plate by the door identifying it as The Reagan Building, nothing outdoors links it to Cantor or to the GOP.” And finally, “Richmond has struggled for years with high rates of gun violence in some neighborhoods. While the building housing Cantor’s office is one of the city’s safer downtown areas, some of the more dangerous neighborhoods lie one-half mile to a mile away.” Fink and Schudson (2013) found that during the same period I look at here – the 1950s to the 2000s – “contextual reporting” of this variety has gone from under ten percent of front-page stories, to forty percent in 2003.

Another way journalists have adapted to the polarized and partisan political sphere is to “fact-check.” When National Public Radio in 2012 revised its guidelines, the revision was framed as a shift from finding “balance,” to “prioritizing truth,” and the main way to do that, NPR said, was to encourage its reporters to more aggressive in fact-checking false statements within stories (Jaffe 2012). In 2013, *New York Times* Public Editor Margaret Sullivan stated: “What readers really want is reporting that gets to the bottom of a story without having to give opposing sides equal weight. They also want reporters to state established truths clearly, without hedging or always putting the words in a source’s mouth. They’re most interested in truth.” Graves (2013) documented the rise of a “fact-checking movement,” centered in mainstream news outlets and digital-native news outlets, and argued that they “endeavor to do what most troubles conventional journalism: to assess and very often to contradict official accounts” (p. 15).

Finally, some veterans of mainstream (sometimes called “legacy”) outlets have simply given up and migrated to new media. For example, a reporter who left *The New York Times* for *The Huffington Post* in 2010 stated that his reason for leaving was that, “with the dysfunctional political system, old conventional notions of fairness make it hard to tell readers directly what’s going on” (Kurtz, 2010).

My own findings show that mainstream journalists at top national outlets have begun to push back, by increasingly adjudicating within news stories. My data on the source and object of contradiction likewise show that journalists are very much influenced by meso-level (field and organizational) imperatives in their coverage, and they often choose to highlight intra-party partisanship rather than the cross-party conflict we might expect. Yet in important ways the news is also indexed to political reality; the general trend of polarization is documented in the overall increase in contradiction in all types of stories, and I find that contradiction between politicians is reflected where we would expect it to be most likely: in stories about national politics. I have therefore offered some tentative conclusions as to the response of mainstream news to the polarization of U.S. politics, though there is clearly much research still to be done.

APPENDIX A: Content analysis sample

1958/1959	1978/1979	1998/1999	2008/2009
New York Times	New York Times	New York Times	New York Times
Wall Street Journal	Wall Street Journal	Wall Street Journal	Wall Street Journal
CBS Evening News*	CBS Evening News	CBS Evening News	CBS Evening News
	PBS Newshour**	PBS Newshour	PBS Newshour
			CNN.com***
			FoxNews.com***

*CBS Evening News was coded for 1963 and 1965 rather than 1958 and 1959 because it did not take on its contemporary incarnation as a 30-minute program until 1963. I had to sample from 1963 and 1965 in order to obtain enough content – the microfilm transcripts were often in poor condition (unreadable) or incomplete. Tables that include CBS for these years are indicated as such; otherwise they use only The New York Times and the Wall Street Journal for 1958/59.

**Began broadcasting in 1975.

***The online archive for these websites, archive.org, goes back only to 2000 for CNN.com and, though it technically begins in 1996 for FoxNews.com, only has enough content from which to sample beginning in 2001.

I coded one constructed week per year, the dates for which were generated randomly; in total I coded 17,830 sentences from 723 stories. From each outlet, I coded only “front page” content; for outlets that were not newspapers, I approximated the front page (e.g. for CBS I acquired the “rundown,” and chose the first five stories that were about politics, culture, science, religion, or economics). In general I left out stories that were about crime, sports, entertainment, or general human interest. For all outlets I tried to have an even mix of local, national, and international stories.

PBS *Newshour* in the 1970s focused on one topic only for the entire show, so I averaged the number of sentences of all stories coded to that point (24), then tripled it to account for the average number of stories per outlet, resulting in 72, which I then rounded up to 100 because I wanted to be sure to have a roughly equal number of sentences for each outlet. By 1998 *Newshour* had switched to including multiple segments and stories per show, usually with a short summary of each story at the beginning; I then coded a combination of summaries and longer, guest-centered segments. For CNN.com I chose the first five relevant stories in terms of headline size, and for these I coded the entire story because I had a relatively small sample from these outlets.

Appendix B: Tests of Significance

Table 1:

		Years	Contradictory?
Years	Pearson Correlation	1	.041**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	17830	17830
Contradictory?	Pearson Correlation	.041**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	17830	17830

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2A: Frequency of contradiction in national politics stories only

Frequency of contradiction in national politics stories only		1958/59	1978/79	1998/99	2008/09	Total
		No Contradictory Sentences	Count 323 98.2%	Count 533 93.7%	Count 975 91.0%	
Contains Contradictory Sentences	Count 6 1.8%	Count 36 6.3%	Count 96 9.0%	Count 248 8.9%	Count 386 8.1%	
Total	Count 329 100.0%	Count 569 100.0%	Count 1071 100.0%	Count 2796 100.0%	Count 4765 100.0%	

Correlation, Table 2A

		Years	NatIPolStories wContradiction
Years	Pearson Correlation	1	.060**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	16434	4765
NatIPolStories wContradiction	Pearson Correlation	.060**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	4765	5133

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Appendix C: Table 6 without 1960s CBS Evening News

Adjudicated versus not adjudicated; count is number of sentences that are contradicted (all stories)						Total
		1958/59	1978/79	1998/99	2008/09	
Balance/Contradiction (contradicted only once)	Count	20	73	69	96	258
	%	60.6%	54.1%	44.8%	41.0%	46.4%
Adjudication (contradicted more than once)	Count	13	62	85	138	298
	%	39.4%	45.9%	55.2%	59.0%	53.6%
Total	Count	33	135	154	234	556
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

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