
Original Article

The fragmenting of the civil sphere: How partisan identity shapes the moral evaluation of candidates and epistemology

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Abstract The 2016 U.S. presidential election upended a number of scholarly expectations about electoral politics. Many academics and pundits predicted that president Donald Trump's flaunting of democratic norms, from his rhetoric on the campaign trail to his financial conflicts of interest, would undermine his candidacy. How do we explain Trump's appeal to his core supporters and Republicans more generally? First, this paper argues that Trump was able to exploit partisan identity becoming the key basis for moral evaluation among the democratic public. Second, this paper argues that partisan identity has fractured civic epistemology, the basis upon which people understand and agree upon political facts and truths.

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During the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, then candidate Donald Trump violated a number of long-held norms of political discourse. *Newsday* (2016) chronicled what in its estimation were the president's most offensive comments shortly after the election. Trump opened his campaign with a speech that referred to Mexican immigrants as "rapists." He demeaned John McCain by suggesting he was a war hero only because he was captured. Trump said of the FOX News anchor Megyn Kelly: "You could see there was blood coming out of her eyes, blood coming out of her, wherever." Trump lied about witnessing "thousands of Muslims cheering" when the Twin Towers fell on 9/11. He called for a "complete and total shutdown of Muslims from entering the United States." On torture, he said that "I'd bring

back a hell of a lot worse than waterboarding.” He accused rival Ted Cruz’s father of plotting with Lee Harvey Oswald to kill John F. Kennedy. He insinuated that Gold Star father Khizr Khan would not let his wife speak in public. And, Trump stated that a judge of Mexican American descent was not qualified to hear a case involving Trump University because of his race. Along the way, Trump also praised autocrats, such as Vladimir Putin, threatened violence and the possibility of locking up his opponent, and refused to initially state whether he would accept the election result.

Despite all of this, or maybe because of it, Trump emerged victorious in the Electoral College on Election Day. The president’s victory was surprising precisely because it violated a number of theoretical expectations that political scientists and sociologists have for how political discourse works in the United States. Among them is the focus of this article: Jeffrey Alexander’s extensive work on democratic solidarity in the ‘civil sphere,’ the realm of democratic culture and regulative institutions that makes self-governance possible. Central to Alexander’s account of the civil sphere is that there are enduring undercurrents of meaning that course through democratic life that are premised on liberty, equality, and justice. In Alexander’s (2006) and others’ accounts (Mast, 2012), these cultural discourses provide the basis for democratic solidarity, fueling the imagination of inclusive peoplehood that enables citizens to stand side-by-side, recognizable to each other and with mutual obligations and common aims. In his empirical work, Alexander (2010) has argued that presidential candidates win when they become a collective representation for citizens, projections of the democratic hopes, dreams, and values they hold most dear. To do so, Alexander demonstrates, candidates try to align themselves with all that is on the civil side of the moral binary of the civil sphere so they can become a symbolic democratic vessel, all the while attempting to morally pollute their opponents.

And yet, Donald Trump explicitly disavowed the civil side of the moral binary in his rhetoric, refusing to perform the cultural ideals that seemingly lie at the deep background of democratic life. Trump rejected the language of democratic inclusion and equality and, in the process, the cultural codes of pluralistic, multi-cultural democracy. Trump rhetorically disavowed the liberty of expression and association of his detractors, and eschewed the idea of justice under the law for his political opponents. And while Alexander (2010) has argued that candidates have to gingerly walk the boundaries of gender, race, religion, and family, Trump famously said he did not ask God for forgiveness and had three marriages. All of this provoked moral condemnation across the political spectrum throughout the Republican primaries, as elite actors in the civil sphere including statesman Mitt Romney rose to condemn him on civil grounds:



Mr. Trump is directing our anger for less than noble purposes. He creates scapegoats of Muslims and Mexican immigrants. He calls for the use of torture. He calls for killing the innocent children and family members of terrorists. He cheers assaults on protesters. He applauds the prospect of twisting the Constitution to limit First Amendment freedom of the press. This is the very brand of anger that has led other nations into the abyss. Here's what I know. Donald Trump is a phony, a fraud. (Romney, 2016).

Why was Donald Trump ultimately successful at capturing the White House despite these violations of the cultural values that underlie American democracy, and indeed make it possible? In this article, I discuss contemporary partisanship and the ways it cuts against the civil solidarity and civic epistemology at the heart of democratic culture. While a number of scholars have addressed various aspects of contemporary partisanship, in this article I seek to make two primary contributions. First, I make an argument for how partisanship works *culturally* in the context of providing a framework for democratic moral evaluation. In doing so, I hope to bring a fuller discussion of contemporary partisanship to Alexander's civil sphere theory and a deeper understanding of the culture of partisanship to the existing literature on partisan identification. Second, I analyze how partisanship works to shape *epistemology*, broadly understood as the things members of the democratic public accept as true in political and social life. Alexander's work on the civil sphere, but also much of the self-understanding of journalists more generally (Graves, 2016), posits that journalism has legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of the public on empirical grounds. And yet this election, and a spate of recent research work on "civic epistemology" (Jasanoff, 2011), "motivated reasoning" (Kahan, 2016), and socio-cultural factors of perception (van der Linden, 2015), clearly demonstrate that cultural and social identities, including partisanship, shape what people accept as true, including the work of independent and objective professional journalism.

What does this mean for the theories and workings of the civil sphere? These developments – the renewed strength of partisan identity which gives rise to a new basis for moral evaluation and the erosion of journalism as a communicative institution – reveal the historical contingency and ultimate fragility of the cultural structures of the civil sphere. Evaluations of the civic morality of candidates are increasingly made on the basis of partisan in-group affiliation, not universalistic democratic codes. When journalism's empirical basis as a core communicative institution of democracy is undermined, there are fewer legitimate ways of policing matters of fact and violations of the moral order, or indeed, of determining what that moral order consists of (Ettema and Glasser, 1998).

Partisan Identity, Civil Evaluation, and Civic Epistemology

Civil evaluation on partisan terms

Jeffrey Alexander (2006, p. 4) conceptualizes the civil sphere as “a world of values and institutions that generates the capacity for social criticism and democratic integration at the same time.” In Alexander’s theory, spheres consist of durable structures of cultural and moral meaning that give shape to distinct domains of social life, as well as the institutions that organize and regulate them. The democratic values of the civil sphere consist of equality, liberty, and justice. It is the charge of the civil sphere’s communicative (such as mass media and technologies of public opinion) and regulative (such as political parties, electoral rules, offices, and the law) institutions to protect as well as give shape to these values. The civil sphere encompasses the moral understandings, values, and meanings that animate democratic life and provide the grounds for civil solidarity, as well as the institutions that give equality, liberty, and justice communicative shape and regulative force. A cultural, moral code of democratic life underpins and gives rise to the possibilities for social and symbolic action through orienting the discourse and action of political actors, in addition to providing the criteria of evaluation for what citizens consider legitimate in democratic life.

Alexander (2006, p. 130) argues that partisanship is a cultural structure bounded by civil solidarity. Partisanship is, for Alexander, a potent and powerful force in politics, but it cannot capture the democratic imaginations of a majority of the body politic. Even more, after elections, partisans have to claim to represent all Americans: “Individual parties demonize one another, but the system of party conflict itself is purified; it is constructed not in terms of repression but liberty.” For example, in *The Performance of Politics*, Alexander’s empirical application of civil sphere theory to the 2008 electoral cycle, he argues that candidate appeals to raw partisanship are ultimately too narrow to capture the White House. As Alexander (2010, p. 259) argues:

In the closing weeks of the general election, the [Republican] party’s standard-bearers move back to the type of intraparty representation normally reserved for primaries. They play to the most conservative, convinced-no-matter-what base.... This more circumscribed audience is less interested in civil repair and more inclined to build walls that repel calls for change. Rather than expanding solidarity and demanding that obligations to others become more universal, these more partisan conservatives draw the line between inside and outside more starkly, harkening after a national community of a more primordial and less civil kind.



Writing in the context of 2008, for instance, Alexander argues that Sarah Palin's appeal as a vice presidential candidate to the base of the Republican Party was indeed resonant but ultimately *narrow*. It was only the most partisan conservatives who bought into Palin's othering of Obama as a dangerous anti-civil candidate.

However, there is the possibility that partisan affiliation now provides the foremost criteria for evaluating the civil qualities of candidates among the democratic public. Over the course of the past thirty years, partisanship has re-emerged (see Schudson, 1998) as an important dimension of political identity that shapes social solidarity, political cognition, and emotion. Many scholars have written eloquently about the enduring presence of partisanship in American political life and its recent resurgence, including from the perspective of normative concern (Fiorina, 2013; Levendusky, 2009; Iyengar *et al*, 2012). Green *et al* (2004) argue that partisanship is rooted in citizens' social identity and is analogous to religious identification. 'Democrats' and 'Republicans' are meta-social identities which voters perceive to be made up of other social groups. As Green *et al* (2004, p. 10) argue: "the terms *Democrats* and *Republicans* clearly call to mind different constituent groups, and how people feel about these social categories has a great deal to do with whether they identify with a partisan group, and if so, which one" (emphasis in the original).

In the view of these scholars, partisanship comes *prior* to political ideology and philosophy, policy preferences, and values, as individuals identify with a party first, learn the outlook and positions of the group, and then perceive themselves to be in alignment with it. Partisanship brings coherence and consistency to politics, bridging local and national politics while also driving polarization. As political scientists Abramowitz and Webster (2016) demonstrated, all politics is national when partisan identities map onto other racial, cultural, and ideological cleavages in American society, which in turn drives perceptions of difference and negative opinions of the other side and ultimately strong partisan loyalty and straight-ticket voting. Meanwhile, partisanship makes electoral politics stable, as party identification is both widespread and 'team' identification drives people to care about the leadership of their party, electoral winners and losers, and their own participation.

Partisan identity is not static – what it means to be a Republican or a Democrat changes over time through a historical, collective process of meaning making. Political scientists rarely discuss the more cultural aspects of partisanship, namely how identity is constructed, performed, and maintained in time; how partisans come to adopt certain issues, political styles, and forms of expression; and how they reconcile their identities with being a member of a pluralistic polity. Future research on these things is necessary, including on how Trump likely both extended and reconstituted aspects of what being a Republican means in important ways (see Hochschild, 2016; Mast, 2016).

Here, I focus on how partisanship works culturally in terms of the civil codes that structure democracy.

Alexander's cultural account of democracy can be brought together with this literature on partisanship to reveal the ways partisanship works culturally to shape moral evaluations of civil and anti-civil candidates. If partisan identity is structuring in the same way as religious identity (Green *et al*, 2004) and lies behind negative affect towards members of the other side, then it should give rise to evaluations of candidates precisely according to the moral binaries that Alexander details. For example, Alexander (2006, p. 43) argues that structuring cultural ideals, values, and codes lead citizens "willingly and without coercion, to uphold rules whose utility they scarcely understand and whose effect may be detrimental to their self-interest." These codes are organized along a binary distinction of civil and anti-civil meaning, and apply to the motives of political actors vying for civil power at the ballot box, the types of relations seen as legitimate and desirable in democracy, and the values that democratic institutions have and uphold (for how these provide performative criteria for civil evaluation, see Kreiss, 2016).

While appealing narrowly to partisanship was ultimately a losing strategy in 2008, in 2016 partisanship as a core democratic identity and viable electoral strategy was on full display. In a world featuring the rise of "negative partisanship," where partisans loathe the other side (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016) and may even see their opponents as a threat to democracy itself, partisan identity among Republicans was so strong that it outweighed such extraordinary concerns over Trump voiced by party leaders such as Mitt Romney. As such, the 2016 cycle reveals how *civil* evaluations were largely made on *partisan* grounds. In other words, the performances of candidates were interpreted through the lens of partisan identity. Even more, civil moral codes were interpreted and applied through the lens of group identity affiliation, which in turn was also a process of civil differentiation as partisans claimed democratic righteousness. As Mast (2016, p. 269) argues, conceptualizing "political parties as solidarity spheres":

Solidarity stems not just from identification with a party, however. It is also fueled by the desire to perform and reiterate difference; it is cultivated, and may be mobilized against, powerful symbols of that which people oppose. In the US, this means symbols of what is undemocratic or anti-American, and for the Right, the material repository of these meanings and sentiments is Hillary Clinton (*ibid.*, pp. 271–272).

These dynamics were apparent in 2016 in a number of different ways. On one level, Trump's committed supporters were in the thrall of the soon-to-be president and fueled his massive rallies and Facebook Live broadcasts (the resonance of the candidate is undeniable, with Trump routinely drawing 2–3



million viewers on the platform for regular speeches and 9 million viewers for the third debate). More importantly, however, was the fact that despite the candidate's expressly anti-civil rhetoric, and withering critiques from statesmen in his own party, Trump was able to successfully appeal to Republicans less committed to him as a candidate. The fact that 90 per cent of Republicans voted for Trump and 89 per cent of Democrats voted for Hillary Clinton (New York Times, 2016) reveals the degree to which partisanship is an identity that gives shape to democratic performative evaluation. In essence, Trump was able to capitalize on party loyalty even though the candidate's policy stances conflicted with party orthodoxy on a number of important grounds.

In a world where partisan identity is so strong, party label instantly vaults one candidate to the side of civil angels and relegates the other to the polluted side of the moral binary for a majority of voters. Consider summary exit polling data from the 2016 election (New York Times, 2016) regarding the civil and anti-civil attributes of the general election candidates. Neither candidate was particularly popular among the electorate on the whole, but this was an extension of partisan evaluation; Democrats and Republicans were both quite happy with their nominees. For example, 82 per cent of Clinton voters said that Hillary Clinton had the temperament to serve effectively as president, and 89 per cent of Trump voters said she did not. Conversely, 72 per cent of Clinton voters said that Trump did not have the temperament to serve as president, while 94 per cent of Trump voters said he did. Meanwhile, 94 per cent of Clinton voters said she was honest and trustworthy; an identical number of Trump voters said the same about their candidate. Partisan identity also shaped political preferences, cognition, and emotion. Taking their cues from their party's standard-bearers, the Pew Research Center (2017) found significant differences in the policy issues that supporters of the two candidates saw as priorities, with Trump backers fearing illegal immigration, terrorism and crime while also endorsing job opportunities for working class people. Clinton voters feared climate change, gun violence, and the gap between rich and poor. Partisanship even fueled perceptions of the *empirical* state of the economy, the tenure of President Obama, and, after the election, perceptions of Russian president Vladimir Putin and Russian influence during the election (YouGov, 2016).

In other words, Trump's ultimately successful electoral performance was narrow, partisan, and premised on civil cleavage. Unlike Sarah Palin's similarly divisive performance four years earlier (Alexander, 2010), and Patrick Buchanan's twenty years before that, it was enough to capture the electoral college in an election where only approximately 50 per cent of eligible citizens voted and 50 per cent could not be bothered to do so. Moreover, as the Republican Party's collective disregard of repeated violations of the civil codes and values of *office* in the weeks after Trump's election makes clear, partisan identity trumping broad social solidarity now extends to governance as well. In

other words, in our contemporary moment, partisanship is ultimately what civil solidarity is premised upon.

Partisanship and epistemology

If partisan identity is the renewed basis for citizen moral evaluations of performances in the civil sphere, it also shapes epistemology. In this section, I seek to open the question of epistemology in accounts of the civil sphere, drawing in particular on Jasanoff's framework outlining how civic ways of knowing are culturally contingent. That said, in contrast to Jasanoff, I turn from national to sub-national questions to consider how culture and identity, especially partisanship, and civil evaluation shape the knowledge claims that have legitimacy and credibility among the public.

In *Designs on Nature*, science and technology studies scholar Sheila Jasanoff (2011) argues that science – and here I argue by extension journalism – “achieves its standing by meeting entrenched expectations about what authoritative claims should look like and how they ought to be articulated, represented, and defended.” There are, in other words, modes of “public knowing” (ibid.) established in societies that are at once historically, politically, and culturally specific that science has to *perform*. Jasanoff offers a culturally specific way of analyzing what publics understand as reliable ‘facts,’ or knowledge more generally, and proposes multiple “public understandings” of science and technology that are historically and culturally constituted (ibid.). Jasanoff leaves open the possibility for different epistemologies within countries, but she mostly focuses on *country-level* civic epistemologies that encompass five things: “(1) the dominant participatory styles of public knowledge-making; (2) the methods of ensuring accountability; (3) the practices of public demonstration; (4) the preferred registers of objectivity; and (5) the accepted bases of expertise.”

The first relates to the parties involved in the production and contestation of knowledge, which Jasanoff argues is dominated by industries, activists, and academics in the U.S. Methods of accountability entail the means that these actors have to convince their audiences to trust them, which in the U.S. is primarily done through litigation, while public demonstration refers broadly to the ways that facts themselves (not just their sources) need to have credibility among the public. This comes through demonstration projects of facts and technologies in public life. Jasanoff argues that ‘objectivity’ relates to the ways actors convince audiences that they are unbiased (in the U.S. through numbers in particular), and finally the legitimate bases of expertise, including formal qualifications and experience.

We can apply this framework of civic epistemology to sub-national fields such as journalism. For example, ‘facts’ need to be performed in the process of an election by journalists as much as scientific findings do in the policy making



process. In *The Civil Sphere*, Alexander does not explicitly address the role of ‘facts’ in democracy; his argument is that the political is a realm of meaning and values not rational policymaking processes. Alexander does, however, note that journalism, as a communicative institution, is premised upon a performance of objectivity and disinterestedness born of the early market society and has a close tether to the empirical world. As such, as an institution, journalism is responsible for providing the underlying empirical basis for moral evaluations of the political world: the raw materials for the shared basis upon which people create and derive meaning from political processes and police violations of the moral order (Alexander *et al*, 2016; Ettema and Glasser, 1998).

For example, historians have traced the development of journalism as a knowledge-producing institution (Schudson and Anderson, 2009) through the idea and performance of objectivity (Schudson, 1981). This includes the journalistic deployment of objectivity as a strategic ritual in the context of partisan warfare (Tuchman, 1972), and the new epistemic mode of ‘fact-checking’ as a response to the rise of false equivalence and the problem of balance in a more partisan public sphere (Graves, 2016). Journalists claim objectivity to fend off partisan attacks, and ultimately to try and convince the public as to the legitimacy of their version of the truth and role in a democratic society. These performances are particularly important given journalism’s imbrication with the political field (Cook, 1998), weak professionalization (Schudson and Anderson, 2009), lack of professional boundaries and jurisdiction (Carlson and Lewis, 2015), and lack of autonomy (Deuze, 2005) compared with other professions.

Accounts of what journalism does, however, say little about what citizens actually understand as being a ‘fact’ or knowledge itself, or whether journalism or science have the legitimacy to make claims on truth for the public. Indeed, journalists themselves have a very thin theory of citizenship. As Lucas Graves (2016, p. 180) points out in his study of the fact-checking movement in journalism, to engage in what they do:

Professional fact-checkers need to write for an idealized, information-hungry citizenry – one free to disagree with their conclusions – to resolve the political and epistemological tension at the center of fact-checking. But this image of a truth-seeking democratic public clashes with the audience they encounter every day.

As Graves points out, it is “hostile and unreasoning” partisans (*ibid*, p. 193) that fact-checkers encounter in their work, who often weaponize fact-checks as partisan tools or seek out information hostile to the other side (while critiquing accounts that are unfavorable to their own). Indeed, “fact-checkers insist that the only appropriate mission for journalists is to provide information to a

reasoning public hungry for facts – although they understand as well as anyone how small that public is” (ibid., p. 209).

As Graves (2016) demonstrates, in our contemporary moment, these performances of journalistic authority seem to have little credibility with the public. The rise of professional journalism as a trusted, non-partisan, objective, and civil communicative institution began to take shape during the last decades of the 1800s and came to fruition in the post-World War II era (Ladd, 2011). The post-WWII era was also a time when political parties were ideologically heterogeneous, elites were not as partisan and polarized, and the public was not sorted into different ideological and identity-based partisan camps (Levendusky, 2009). These things changed by the 1970s as a result of decades-long work by the civil rights movement and conservative counter-movement, activists working through state parties, and Nixon’s southern strategy, which split the parties along racial and ethnic lines (McAdam and Kloos, 2014). Despite the changes taking shape around them, journalists have maintained their core professional values, norms, ethics, and practices. As a result of a world that has changed around them economically, technologically, and politically, professional journalists now face multiple crises (Nielsen, 2014), including of legitimacy, particularly among the conservative right in the United States. The conservative right has developed an extensive alternative media apparatus over the course of the second half of the twentieth century (Hemmer, 2016) that routinely advances ideological and identity-based arguments that undermine consensus over political facts and the legitimacy of knowledge-producing institutions in democracy such as science (Oreskes and Conway, 2011) and journalism (Carlson, 2016).

The upshot has been the fragmenting of “civic epistemology” (Jasanoff, 2011), which has undermined journalism’s ability to serve as a communicative institution in the civil sphere that ultimately protects democratic values. The rise of candidates such as Trump and recent success of the Republican Party (both of whom fare poorly in fact-checkers’ evaluations compared to their Democratic opponents) suggests that, at best, most people simply do not care about fact-checking. At worst, it suggests that significant numbers of the public see journalism as lacking the legitimacy to produce objective truth. The latter explanation is more compelling. While journalists (and many journalism scholars) cling to the assumption that there is one shared civic epistemology that underlays public debate, an extensive body of evidence suggests otherwise. The consensus of recent scholarly work is that social identity, and especially partisan affiliation in many contexts (Hersh and Goldenberg, 2016; Flynn *et al*, 2017), shapes what people accept as being a fact. There has been an explosion of psychological work, for instance, on how individuals process information through “motivated reasoning” (Kahan, 2016) that reduces cognitive dissonance and brings new data in line with existing identities, attitudes, and beliefs.



Meanwhile, researchers have also developed a line of work under the label of “cultural cognition” which reveals how individuals process new information in accordance with their existing social identities (van der Linden, 2016), which means “individuals selectively assess evidence in patterns that reflect their group identities” (Kahan, 2015). While these psychological approaches all deal with cognition at the level of the individual, they are consistent with Jasanoff’s sociological framework that suggests different bases upon which the public ‘knows’ truths about the political and social world (for a summary, see Kreiss, 2015).

Even more, Alexander’s work helps us understand how the epistemology of partisans is, in part, premised on civil and moral evaluations. Public epistemologies are premised on partisan identities that validate members of congruent party teams as having civil qualities such as authenticity, trustworthiness, and reasonableness. As such, scholars have shown, on issues ranging from climate change to health care, that citizens judge factual statements in accordance with their own partisan identities (Hart and Nisbet, 2012; Slothuus and de Vreese, 2010), likely because they trust members of their own team, see them as reasonable and authentic in their motives, and have faith in the ends they are pursuing.

For example, as the anthropologist of technology Gabriella Coleman (2016) pointed out in the context of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, in an analysis that dovetails with a considerable amount of recent work in cultural sociology (e.g., Jacobs and Townsley, 2011), drama and spectacle cause people to get involved in politics. Coleman argues that Trump’s credibility and legitimacy for his supporters stem from their perception of his *authenticity* (a civil value). In a sense, Trump performed an epistemology of authenticity, where the veracity of his statements for believers and Republicans more generally was premised on the performance and party affiliation of the source, not the correspondence of these statements with an underlying empirical reality or appeals to the work of knowledge-producing institutions such as science and journalism. That many Republicans found Trump trustworthy given his verified, outright lies and contradictions is striking (Giroux, 2016). Even more, Trump seemingly had the ability to convince Republicans as to what the relevant ‘facts’ at stake in the election were: that Hillary was ‘crooked,’ the system was ‘rigged,’ that he was a successful businessman, that immigrants were to blame for the economic travails of the white working class, and so forth. Regardless of his own lies and untruths, Trump was able to successfully perform his identity as uniquely authentic, in large part given the willingness of partisans to believe, who saw him as a speaker of truth. This is not to say that all Republican partisans believed that Trump spoke the truth, particularly during the primaries (Mast, 2016), but during the general election what was important was the positing of Trump against what partisans saw as an anti-civil Hillary Clinton.

Coleman (2016) points out that Trump's dramaturgy and performance were powerfully oriented around his seeming authenticity and offered a strong contrast to his symbolic pollution of the duplicitous, insincere, and possibly criminal Hillary Clinton – who was punished symbolically for conforming to the norms of the political sphere. Just as with charisma in Weber's analysis, it is not the exceptional person but the audience's willingness to believe that gives rise to perceptions of 'authenticity' (Knorr-Cetina, 2009). The audiences' partisan and social identities, in addition to the reality star's inflammatory style, helped to create the willing suspension of disbelief so central to the evaluation of democratic performances (Alexander, 2010) and facts about the political world (Coleman, 2016). The intersection of source, context, style, identity, and audience resulted in a civic epistemology where significant numbers within the democratic public embraced deliberate falsehoods and Trump's frames about what should be perceived as the salient facts of the election.

That an overwhelming number of Republican voters saw Trump as more trustworthy than Clinton despite a mountain of evidence to the contrary should not be a surprise given the insights of civic epistemology, motivated reasoning, cultural cognition, and the civil evaluation of partisans. But this poses an existential threat to journalism, a knowledge-producing institution whose primary jurisdiction and claims toward legitimacy in the political sphere relate to a *process* of producing accounts, more so than a specific area of expertise (Schudson and Anderson, 2009). At its core, journalism has a close relationship to the empirical world, particularly through its valuation of original 'reporting,' which has long defined its internal self-worth and institutional status (Anderson, 2013). The moral work of the press in the civil sphere proceeds from this empirical orientation, with the press's less explicit, but nonetheless real, grounding *in civil values* providing the very motivation for journalistic attempts to discern, verify, and create facts about political life. This spans the press's reporting that holds power to account for ethical violations and vetting candidates in line with democratic moral values (Kreiss, 2016).

During the presidential race, the full weight of journalistic scrutiny as empirical validators (Graves, 2016) and critical spectators (Kreiss, 2016) was directed against Trump for his factually untrue statements and morally uncivil behavior. The professional press was acting in accord with its role as a communicative, empirical institution of the civil sphere. And yet, Trump not only weathered the full weight of scrutiny by the professional press, he thrived on it (Sides and Farrell, 2016). The valence of coverage simply did not matter, as Republicans rallied behind their partisan leader and questioned the very knowledge and moral claims at the heart of journalistic legitimacy and power.



Conclusion

This article has sought to bring a fuller understanding of the contemporary dynamics of partisanship as a powerful collective identity in the civil sphere to Alexander's framework for understanding the cultural and regulative basis for democracy. In doing so, it argues that civil evaluation is now premised on "primordial and less civil" (Alexander, 2010, p. 259) partisan identities, instead of broad democratic solidarity. If democracy, in Alexander's view, is premised upon citizens evaluating the civil moral order and those vying for civil power through the lens of universalistic, not particularistic and partisan, values and identities, then ultimately the rise of partisanship entails the weakening of democratic social solidarity.

In turn, this article also sought to raise the question of partisanship and epistemology in accounts of the civil sphere, drawing on Jasanoff's framework of how ways of knowing are culturally contingent, recent psychological work that posits how identity shapes epistemology, and Coleman's argument of how the evaluation of civil traits such as authenticity shapes the acceptance of facts. In doing so, this article reveals the ways that the workings and power of regulative institutions, such as journalism, are facing unprecedented challenges to their legitimacy in the early twenty-first century as the public changes around them. Partisan identity shapes epistemology in ways that undermine the functioning of the communicative and regulative institutions of the civil sphere. In the end, I argued that there is less basis for shared factual understandings in democracy and, even more, less room for determining the facts that matter on civil grounds in the context of democratic life. As an objective, empirical enterprise, the loss of journalism's legitimacy as a professional way of reliably producing facts about the social and political world means that there is an erosion in the shared public body of facts and knowledge which citizens use as the basis for their moral performative evaluations of candidates.

Importantly, this erosion of the legitimacy and credibility of journalism cannot be conceptualized as an information problem. The outsized concern over "fake news" after the 2016 election has the wrong object in view. In these accounts, the core problem is an informational gap in the public's knowledge between what is empirically true and valid and what is not, and this is exacerbated by fake news. With better and more reliable information, the story goes, the public will come to a better understanding and ultimate acceptance of established facts. There are a number of problems with this view, however, starting with the fact that it posits a very simplistic model of people as dupes of misinformation, instead of people who are reasoning and feeling agents who filter and comprehend information according to their own identities and values. The problem is much more complicated than many journalists and their allies

hope, relating to the ways in which epistemology has itself fragmented along partisan lines.

What all of this adds up to is a civil sphere that is increasingly shaped by partisan, and other, identities that have questioned the very basis of democratic solidarity. As Mast (2016, pp. 281–282) concludes his important interpretative analysis of the 2016 primaries, capturing the rise of partisanship and erosion of solidarity and shared epistemology:

Political power and the practice of politics in the US are in flux and poised to undergo considerable transformation. Party boundaries are straining and threatening to collapse under a strength of forces not seen since the era of the Civil Rights movements and Watergate. Elites' power to diagnose and characterize the social and natural worlds is diminished, and voices of experts – be they of the political, media, social policy, or scientific variety – are increasingly being met with suspicion, resistance, and even disdain. These signals of stress are accompanied by another powerful indicator of flux: sizeable portions of the citizen public are demonstrating not only a tolerance for candidates who bend the norms of political and civil discourse but a will to celebrate such transgressive performative acts.... Boundary troubles, destabilized structures, genre defying performances are the dominant characteristics of the 2016 presidential election drama's opening act, and they indicate that creative and destructive energies are at play.

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