

SUBSCRIBER-ONLY NEWSLETTER

**David French**

# I Was a Republican Partisan. It Altered the Way I Saw the World.

May 16, 2024



By David French

**You're reading the David French newsletter, for Times subscribers only.** Reflections on law and culture, war and peace, and the deeper trends that define and divide America.

I'm having the strongest sense of déjà vu.

In 2012, I was a Republican partisan. This was when I was a conservative constitutional litigator and occasional Republican Party activist, before my journalism career. I'd helped form a group called Evangelicals for Mitt all the way back in 2005, hoping to persuade evangelical Republicans to support a Mormon for president. We'd done our small bit to help push Romney over the finish line in the primaries, and most conservatives seemed convinced that he should win. Republicans had swept the 2010 midterms, the unemployment rate remained high, and Barack Obama's approval rating was below 50 percent.

But there was a problem: The polls were bad. Almost all of them showed Romney losing to Obama, and so conservative media started a movement to unskew the polls. There was even a website created, Unskewed Polls, that purported to fix the polling errors, and unskewed polls showed Romney winning.

Conservatives believed that pollsters were deliberately undercounting Republican votes to discourage Republican voters and sway the results of the election. So to unskew the results, they reweighted the samples to include a higher percentage of likely Republican voters. Conservatives thus created a parallel universe where Romney was leading, and many people at most senior levels of the campaign believed that mainstream polls were wrong and Romney would win — including, reportedly, even the candidate himself.

I was in Boston at the Romney party on election night, and when Fox News called Ohio for Obama, there was a palpable sense of shock, followed almost immediately by denial. I remember fielding emails in the days and weeks after the election from angry Republicans who wondered, even then, if Obama had cheated.

I thought of 2012 when I read in an Axios report this week that "President Biden doesn't believe his bad poll numbers, and neither do many of his closest advisers." That belief isn't absurd on its face. After all, polling is difficult, and there have been a number of recent polling misses. As Axios notes, Donald Trump overperformed his polling in 2016 and 2020, and Democrats overperformed in 2022. And the sampling process is tricky as well.

For example, as The Times's Nate Cohn noted on X, there is a stark difference between high-propensity voters, who are more likely to support Biden, and low-propensity voters, who are more likely to support Trump. Some percentage of those low-propensity voters will turn out. The key question is how many. But it's one thing to criticize any given poll,

and it's another thing entirely to dismiss aggregated results, taken over months, that show the same thing: a race that is incredibly tight, far too tight for Biden's comfort.

The purpose of this newsletter isn't to adjudicate the polling dispute but to show an example of how the partisan mind works and how partisans process negative information. I could use any number of other examples. In a column last week, my colleague Ross Douthat rightly observed that "we are constantly urged to 'stand with Israel' when it's unclear if Israel knows what it's doing."

Again, there are echoes of the past. I remember when supporters of Operation Iraqi Freedom constantly hyped good news from the battlefield and minimized bad news — right until the bad news became so overwhelming that the need for a radical strategy change was clear to everyone, from the soldier walking the streets of Baghdad to President George W. Bush and his team of national security advisers.

Before Bush changed tactics and reinforced American troops during the surge in 2007 and 2008, it sometimes felt disloyal in Republican circles to criticize the course of the war. To this day, I wonder how much Republican loyalty actually harmed the cause. Could we have changed our military tactics sooner if we had been able to see the battlefield more clearly? Did paradigm blindness — the unwillingness or inability to accept challenges to our core ways of making sense of the world — inhibit our ability to see obvious truths?

I write often about American polarization, including about how the red-blue divide is perhaps less illuminating than the gap between engaged and disengaged Americans, in which an exhausted majority encounters the highly polarized activist wings of both parties and shrinks back from the fray. This dynamic helps explain why our political culture feels so stagnant. The wings aren't changing each other's minds — hard-core Democrats aren't going to persuade hard-core Republicans — but they're also not reaching sufficient numbers of persuadable voters to break America's partisan deadlock.

Even worse, partisans don't realize they're part of the problem. Their zeal isn't persuasive; it's alienating, and the examples above help illustrate why.

In 2020, when I was doing research for my book about the growing danger of partisan division, I began to learn more about what extreme partisanship does not only to our hearts but also to our minds. It can deeply and profoundly distort the way we view the world. We become so emotionally and spiritually invested in the outcome of a political contest that we can inadvertently become disconnected from reality.

To put it another way: Our heart connects with our mind in such a way that the heart demands that the mind conform to its deepest desires. When a partisan encounters negative information, it can often trigger the emotional equivalent of a fight-or-flight response. This applies not just to negative arguments but also to negative facts. To deal with the emotional response, we seek different arguments and alternative facts.

Is there bad polling news? Let me find the piece that's going to explain all the sampling errors. An Israeli strike might have killed dozens of civilians? Here's a social media thread about how Israel's rules of engagement are more restrictive than America's. Did I read that pro-Palestinian demonstrators were physically intimidating Jewish students? Here's a video of a peaceful teach-in at the same campus, and how dare you paint the protesters with a broad brush. Most voters think Biden is too old to be president? Have you seen the latest video of Trump slurring his words?

If you are a true partisan, you essentially become an unpaid lawyer for your side. Every "good" fact that bolsters your argument is magnified. Every "bad" fact is minimized or rationalized. When partisanship reaches its worst point, every positive claim about your side is automatically believed, and every negative allegation is automatically disbelieved. In fact, allegations of wrongdoing directed at your side are treated as acts of aggression — proof that "they" are trying to destroy "us."

You see this reality most plainly in the daily Republican theatrics surrounding Trump's criminal indictments. Rather than wrestle seriously with the profoundly troubling claims against him, they treat the criminal cases as proof of Democratic perfidy. They believe every claim against Hunter and Joe Biden and not a single claim against Trump.

The result is a kind of divorce from reality. It's a process that my Dispatch colleague Jonah Goldberg memorably described in 2016 as "the invasion of the body snatchers." "Someone you know or love goes to sleep one night," he wrote, "and appears the next day to be the exact same person you always knew. Except. Except they're different, somehow."

It's easy to blame the exhausted majority for checking out. We have obligations as citizens to cast informed votes, even as we juggle the professional and domestic responsibilities of our busy lives. But we also need to ask why people are checking out, and one reason is that partisans make it so very difficult to engage.

The problem is most pronounced (and often overtly threatening) on the MAGA right, but it's endemic to our partisan wings. In 2020, for example, how many regular people were absolutely pummeled online and in person for suggesting that perhaps defunding the police wasn't a good idea? In 2021, if you were on the right and weren't persuaded that critical race theory was a clear and present danger to your child's education, you were immediately scorned as weak or soft and unable to discern "what time it is."

Then, as partisanship deepens, partisan subcultures can get increasingly weird. They become so convinced of the us-versus-them dynamic that they'll eventually believe virtually anything, as long as it's a claim against the other side. MAGA's Taylor Swift conspiracies, in which her popularity is some sort of liberal psyop, and election denial conspiracies sprang from the same poisonous partisan well. If decades of partisanship have persuaded you that your opponents are evil, have no morals and want to destroy the country, then why wouldn't they hack voting machines or recruit a pop star as a government asset?

George Orwell famously wrote that "to see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle." We can't simply tut-tut against the pernicious effects of pure partisanship; we have to struggle against it, including within ourselves. I have some rules to help temper my worst partisan impulses. Among them: Expose yourself to the best of the other side's point of view — including the best essays, podcasts and books. Also, when you encounter a new idea, learn about it from its proponents before you read its opponents.

And when you encounter bad news about a cause that you hold dear — whether it's a presidential campaign, an international conflict or even a claim against a person you admire, take a close and careful look at the evidence. Your opponent may be right, your friend may be wrong, and your emotions will often lead you astray.

---

## Some other stuff I did

On Sunday, I wrote a Mother's Day reflection about watching my daughter become a mother in the most trying of circumstances. It began like this:

"Dad, I don't think I'm old enough to handle this."

Those words were hard to hear. They were my daughter's words of despair when she received the worst news of her life: The baby she was carrying suffered from grave defects. That sweet baby, named Lila, was diagnosed with gastroschisis, a dangerous condition in which her intestines were developing outside her body. She also had only one healthy kidney, and her very small size indicated that she might have a fatal genetic anomaly.

My daughter's response to that news was brave and beautiful. Please read the whole thing.

On Tuesday, I hosted a written conversation online with Rebecca Roiphe, a former assistant district attorney in the Manhattan D.A.'s office, and Ken White, a former federal prosecutor, to discuss Trump's Manhattan trial and Michael Cohen's testimony. They had a number of interesting insights, and this was one of my favorite exchanges:

**French:** Stormy Daniels's testimony was far more riveting and disturbing than I anticipated. She described a sexual encounter that was fundamentally exploitive and potentially even predatory. In the aftermath, Trump's lawyer moved for a mistrial, claiming that the details of that testimony could prejudice the jury. What was your assessment of her testimony? Did the prosecution make a mistake in asking her to describe the details of the encounter?

**White:** This is all on Trump. He's the one who decided, for ego reasons, to make repeated claims that the sexual encounter never happened. He could have rendered the details irrelevant by keeping his mouth shut, but he had to call her a liar. That makes it relevant. Yes, her description was skin-crawling. She wasn't a great witness — she was argumentative and had trouble answering questions directly — but she did what the prosecution needed her to do.

**Roiphe:** The prosecution was in a difficult position. It needed to establish that this story would have been disturbing, so much so that Trump would find it necessary to suppress it. But the judge had admonished them not to bring out too many details. The media got caught up in the sex scene at the expense of the real point of the testimony, and it's possible that the jury did as well. But I don't think it will ultimately undermine the case.

David French is an Opinion columnist, writing about law, culture, religion and armed conflict. He is a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and a former constitutional litigator. His most recent book is "Divided We Fall: America's Secession Threat and How to Restore Our Nation." You can follow him on Threads (@davidfrenchjag).