

HONORS PAPERS

CAROLINA DAY SCHOOL

2025-26



**Honors Papers 2025-2026**  
**Selected Authors**

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Eliza Bacot  
Eliabeth Beatty  
Catherine Berry  
Noah Bialik  
Evan Bledsoe  
Sawyer Ditty  
Ellie Dukowicz  
Rose Exum  
Cooper Green  
Coleman Hooper  
Aakash Karvir  
Max Posnock  
Michael Quast  
Madeline Roberts  
Kimaya Sivbalan  
Hunter Spalding  
Ally St. Martin

## English Department

### **Ninth: Literature and Composition**

“Compassion vs. Cruelty: Death in Scythe” Elizabeth Beatty

“Therapeutic and Survival Tools for a Castaway” Michael Quast

### **Ninth: Literature and Analysis**

“Language and Reality in *1984*” Kimaya Sivabalan

### **Tenth: Literature and Analysis**

“Isolation, Pain, and Fear” Sawyer Ditty

“The Immoral Efficiency of Weaponized Fear for Control” Ally St. Martin

### **Eleventh: AP Literature and Composition**

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“Gorbachev and Glasnost: How Freedom Led to Collapse” Evan Bledsoe

“Mao Zedong” Coleman Hooper

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“Providence and Polarization: The Religious Fracture of Civil War America” Rose Exum

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“Elections and Polling Accuracy: A Retrospective on the 2024 Presidential Election, Concurrent Public Mood, and Predictions for the 2026 NC-11 House Race” Noah Bialik  
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Cooper Green  
Max Posnock

## Science Department

“The Integration and Consequences of Reinforcement Learning: A Review” Ellie Dukowicz

Elizabeth Beatty

Mr. Kalil

Literature and Composition

25 September 2025

### Compassion vs. Cruelty: Death in *Scythe*

In a world where you can't die, Neal Shusterman's novel *Scythe* explores the age-old question, "What would happen if everyone were immortal?" In a world like this, the population would be a huge problem. To deal with this problem, Scythes are tasked with killing a certain number of people each year. Rowan and Citra, on becoming Scythes, quickly realize that the act of killing someone for the "greater good" is a slippery moral slope. Scythes can quickly become inhumane and enjoy killing, rather than viewing it as something that should be conducted with care. When a character becomes a Scythe, there are two paths they could go down. They could be more prideful, more cruel, and "glean" based on bias. On the other hand, they could have more empathy, more compassion, and glean based on fact. Shusterman is clearly promoting the latter moral values. The characters are just stand-ins for us. It is easy for those in positions of power and privilege to make dangerous moral choices and corrupt others in turn. Power is a very dangerous thing. In order to stay honorable, one must keep important core values, such as making decisions based on fact, practicing humility, and applying empathy.

One of the main rules of the Scythe Code is not to glean based on bias. There are many ways that Scythes can interpret this. Scythe Faraday took the route of using facts. He would spend hours researching the statistics of deaths and making decisions based on the most likely person to die before gleaning. On the other hand, Scythe Curie would simply pick at random. In

crowds, she would search for someone who looked ready to go. Both of these methods are valid and depend on the Scythe's preference. But what is not valid is gleaning from bias. "And if your little girlfriend is trying to make a case for foul play, she'd better think twice before accusing me, because I could glean her whole family the day their immunity expires" (Shusterman 313).

Scythe Goddard clearly gleans from bias. When he has a prejudice against someone, he simply kills them. A good Scythe honors those they kill. When someone dies, they deserve to be remembered, and not simply killed off at whim or a feeling. There has to be careful consideration and reverence around death, especially if you have caused it. The no-bias rule came about for good reason and allows for Scythes to be as righteous as possible.

Scythes often get whatever they want and lose humility in the process. People will kneel at their feet, hoping that perhaps today, the Scythes will ignore them. Every time they go out in public, they are bombarded with people offering them gifts, stares, and praise. Whether it's from fear or admiration, this amount of acknowledgment from others will soon lead to an inflated sense of importance. When Citra and Rowan go to different mentors, Shusterman shows a stark difference in how the Scythes handle self-pride. "...Then he stood up and threw himself into the pool, gold adornments and all" (308). Scythe Goddard often held parties to fuel his ego. During these parties, he actively embarrasses other Scythes, like Scythe Xenocrates. He demeans them by making them do absurd tasks, just to make himself feel better. He puts others down to prove to himself that he is superior. This speaks volumes about his character. Good Scythes should respect those they glean. Scythe Goddard does this because he is insecure in himself. When compared with Scythe Curie, the difference in his character is clear. Every night, Curie gives up her "power" (fear) to properly mourn those she kills. She sits with their family and truly learns

about them. Some people don't deserve the responsibility of being a Scythe, especially if they lack humility and respect for those they glean.

Finally, a Scythe's integrity can be shown by their cruelty or empathy. Scythe Goddard kills giant crowds for pleasure. He has no remorse for those he gleans, often gleaning children without a second thought. He has gone too far down a moral decline, and now he views gleaning as something to enjoy. He takes pride in how many people he can glean at a time, and views it as a sport or game. "Take great satisfaction and pleasure in this, Rowan." said Scythe Goddard, "or you will be nothing more than a killing machine" (241). There is a fine line between gleaning and murder. If a Scythe has no empathy for those they glean and doesn't even think twice about it, then it's not gleaning anymore. It's a cold-blooded murder. At the beginning of the book, upon being asked how he picks apprentices, Scythe Faraday explains how he can't, in good conscience, choose someone who *wants* to be a Scythe. No one should take the job with the pretense of enjoying killing. Scythe Goddard is a perfect example of a Scythe that is not fit for the job, and will take the empathy out of it. In a world already lacking humanity, gleaning is supposed to be people's last salvation, something that allows them to hang on to their last shred of passion. Without the ever-present threat of death, humans lose all urgency. They will feel that they don't have to do anything, because they have infinite "time." Art in every form would be lost. With gleaning, people can have more controlled consequences. But if ending the lives of others turns into a game, there is only room for cruelty in the world.

Most untrustworthy Scythes glean based on a whim, are dishonorable, and have no empathy. Shusterman is clearly trying to draw connections between today and his novel, *Scythe*. If corrupt people are let into power, everyone around them will suffer. Whether it is their direct

actions or simply people idolizing them, bad people create more bad people. Scythe demonstrates how important it is to have trustworthy people in positions of influence. Although Scythes may not be leaders, they are still idolized by many. They are absolutely essential to this “new world” by creating real consequences for the people. Without these boundaries, nothing would ever get done, and there would be no motivation. Because this role is so important, it is crucial that the Scythes have impeccable moral character.

Michael Quast

Jeffrey Kalil

Literature and Composition

11 September 2025

### Therapeutic and Survival Tools for a Castaway

To cope with difficult events, people often make up an alternative reality to sustain their sanity. Yann Martel explores this phenomenon in his novel *Life of Pi*. The main character, Pi, has to create his own version of the past to cope with traumatic events, and control his overwhelming guilt and fear. These traumatic events include murder, which Pi unfortunately took part in, his mother's death, and acts of cannibalism. In order to ensure his survival, Pi chooses to deal with traumatic situations through creating figments of his imagination, learning important survival techniques from one of these figments, and finding love and hope in religion.

Without his imagination, Pi might have never kept his will to live, and have fallen into a state of fear and depression from the horrifying events that likely took place at the beginning of his adventure. At the end of the book, Pi relates a story that aligns with the events that took place on the life boat, but with humans instead of animals. This means that humans were gruesomely killing, and even eating, one another in hopes of survival. This also means that Pi created and convinced himself of the story that included the animals. On page 311, the two men that were investigating the sinking of the ship, Mr Okamoto and Mr Chiba, respond to Pi's alternate story, saying "So the Taiwanese sailor is the zebra, his mother is the orangutan, the cook is... the hyena – which means he's the tiger!" (Martel 311). Mr. Chiba, after hearing both of Pi's stories, connects them both by finding similarities in the characters. This hints at the idea that Pi created the story that included the animals, so he could overcome his guilt and fear of killing the cook

and focus on surviving in the vast Pacific Ocean. Pi only killed the cook because the cook both murdered and ate his mother in front of him, scaring Pi into killing him and then mentally denying the story. If Pi didn't control his emotions, he would have most likely died on the life raft because he would be more focused on the past rather than his survival in the present. After the traumatic events on the life boat occurred, Pi had to create his own story to handle the guilt and fear, and ensure his survival.

Richard Parker was the symbol for a wild version of Pi that he has to learn from and use for his survival, since his animalistic instincts help Pi use the cruel environment he is stuck in to his advantage. While Pi is on the life raft with Richard Parker, he is thinking about his family, the value of religious faith, and how the ship sank. Meanwhile, Richard Parker acts out unreasonably for food and water. An example of this is when he killed the hyena. Since Richard Parker symbolizes Pi, this shows that he might symbolize the wild version of Pi required for his survival. On page 164, Pi states "I had to tame him. It was at that moment that I realized this necessity. It was not a question of him or me but him *and* me" (Martel 164). Pi realizes that in order to survive, he has to tame and use Richard Parker. While he says the reason is to trick Richard Parker into dying first, this can also mean that Pi has to learn to use his wild side to survive. Through training and using Richard Parker, or Pi's wild side, he is able to survive and learn how to thrive in the wild. Actions that would seem hard to him, like drinking turtle blood, or filleting a fish, now come with ease, since he has learned not to hesitate. Through training and using Richard Parker, Pi learned to apply a beastly part of himself, which helps him quickly acquire and use survival skills.

Lastly, Pi also finds mental comfort and protection for his sanity in multiple religions, since he believes all faiths can be tools for finding and loving God. At the beginning of the book,

before Pi becomes a castaway, he tries many different religions because they all fascinate him. When he is confronted by the multiple types of priests that he visited and is forced to choose a religion, he states “Bapu Gandhi said, ‘All religions are true.’ I just want to love God” (Martel 69). Pi shows his love for all religions through this quote, explaining that he loves all faiths equally and just wants to use all of them for the same purposes; to love a higher power and take comfort in the fact that he is being watched over. Pi takes advantage of religion on the life boat by praying, giving offerings for worship, and yelling out to the wide open ocean that god owns everything around him. All of these actions help lift Pi’s morale, expel his despair, and comfort him with the idea that he is being looked after. Using religion as a therapeutic tool, Pi is able to control his fear of death, and find hope and love in faith.

Using these three tools for both his physical and mental survival, Pi is able to survive for two-hundred twenty-seven days at sea, and finally make his way to land which turns out to be Mexico. Using his imagination, Pi creates his own story of the traumatic events, and then tries to learn survival techniques from a figment of his imagination that symbolizes himself. Once tamed, Pi uses his wild self to carry out actions that are required for his survival he otherwise never would have done, like eating meat since he was vegetarian, or killing fish. Another useful tool that Pi turns to in moments of despair is religion, which helps Pi emotionally, and allows him to “... go on loving [God]” (Martel 209). Being able to mentally create and then control our environment, and use faith traditions to find love and hope, can be useful therapeutic and survival tools for anyone struggling with a difficult reality, no matter how minor or major the situation may be.

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Kimaya Sivabalan

Ms. Pyeatt

Literature and Analysis

13 March 2026

### Language and Reality in *1984*

The control of language is the control of thought, and the control of thought is the control of reality. In George Orwell's *1984*, the totalitarian government known as The Party uses various methods of control to gain absolute power over the people, monitoring every aspect of the civilians' lives in an attempt to rule their realities. In this world, the truth is not what is logical; it is what the Upper Party wants its members to believe. Winston, the main character, is a case study for what happens when somebody attempts to resist these systems. The reader sees just how well The Party executes its scheme, maintaining its omnipotent power and effectively eliminating any threats to its regime. The Party utilizes *Newspeak*, propaganda, and *doublethink* to fabricate the truth for its own benefit, as people's thoughts, behavior, and perception of reality are shaped by language.

*Newspeak* is the primary method of language control. As a fabricated language, it has been created with a limited vocabulary to ensure the least amount of independent, unauthorized thinking or *thoughtcrime* possible. *Thoughtcrime* is impossible without the words to think it. The government understands that although it can force citizens to do what it wants physically, it has no power over them mentally. Their thoughts are still their own, and if the government wants to keep up this extreme totalitarian society, that had to change. The reason behind *Newspeak*, as Syme tells Winston, is "to narrow the range of thought[.] In the end [...] thoughtcrime [will] literally [be] impossible, because there will be no words" (Orwell 52). Vocabulary designed to

limit and dull the articulation of thoughts encourages citizens to feel only what the Party members want them to feel, dumbing down emotions and qualities and turning them into simpler versions, such as “*ungood*” for bad and “*plusgood*” for something stronger than good (51).

Newspeak eliminates the vocabulary to resist, but some thoughts persist.

Where *Newspeak* minimises thinking, the Party’s obscene amount of propaganda directs people's beliefs and perceptions of events. The “Two-Minutes Hate” is a glaring form of propaganda. The Party constantly pushes out false information until the citizens accept it as truth or simply get brainwashed into believing it. Civilians are forced to assemble every day to pour hatred onto Goldstein, the Party's public enemy. Winston acknowledges that “the horrible thing about the Two Minutes Hate was not that one was obliged to act a part, but that it was impossible to avoid joining (14).” The brutality and violence is shocking; Winston admits that “[the] hideous ecstasy of fear and vindictiveness, a desire to kill, to torture, to smash faces in with a sledge-hammer”(14) is the norm, cultivated by the Party with the end goal of loyalty in mind. The hatred does not stop there; the Party also has a festival called Hate Week, in which war songs and chants are publicly sung, and the hanging of “criminals” is celebrated. An eloquent public speaker is sent out to rally the people to support the Party: “It was almost impossible to listen to him without being first convinced and then maddened” (181), reaffirming the government's penchant for manipulating language to appeal to the people. Propaganda forces beliefs onto citizens, but *doublethink* mandates the acceptance of them.

While reading *1984*, one starts to notice the Party's affinity for contradictory statements, which is to normalize the concept of *doublethink*. *Doublethink* is reality control, a practice of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them at once. “The Party intellectual knows [...] his memories must be altered, he therefore knows he is

playing tricks with reality, but by the exercise of *doublethink* he also satisfies himself that reality is not violated” (214). The Party’s slogan “WAR IS PEACE, FREEDOM IS SLAVERY, IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH” (26) is repeated multiple times, on posters, cigarette packs, banners, and more, ingraining the concept of doublethink into the citizens' subconscious. This practice allows the Party to manipulate any part of reality and justify it. Goldstein exposes this plan in the book he allegedly wrote, where he states that “even in using the word *doublethink*, it is necessary to exercise *doublethink*”(214), effectively admitting that even acknowledging this practice means you have played into what the Party’s goal was. When “one admits that one is tampering with reality; by a fresh act of *doublethink* one erases this knowledge; and so on indefinitely, with the lie always one leap ahead of the truth” (214). The effect of this cunning tactic becomes blatantly obvious when, in Hate Week, the Party suddenly changes the nation's enemy, claiming that they have always been at war with Eastasia, instead of their previous long-time enemy, Eurasia. There is no publicly voiced confusion about the drastic switch-up, and after a hasty bit of redecoration, the Party quickly erases the past years the of Oceania-Eurasia conflict, showing how far gone the people are. If *doublethink* is pushed onto people enough, then words do not make logical sense, and reality becomes flexible for the Party to manipulate. When the Party manages to do that, not even reality is real.

In order to eliminate resistance and maintain power, the government in 1984 weaponizes *Newspeak*, propaganda, and *doublethink*, leaving people powerless as their thoughts, behavior, and perception of reality are manipulated by language. Thus, the novel serves as a powerful warning for every generation. Individuals rarely appreciate the freedom of choice, speech, and thought until it is taken away. Orwell highlights the importance of language and its impact on our perceptions of reality. The dangers he mentions in his book foreshadow the present day. Media

pushed out by political candidates is constantly consumed, and, whether on the left or right, it becomes easy to buy into and feel so strongly what a party claims as to endanger others, as seen during the January 6th storming of the U.S. Capitol. The Hate Week rallies in *1984* that parallel this political tragedy that resulted in the deaths of eight people (Britannica), were triggered by false claims on social media about the 2000 election being rigged. Because of the sheer volume of content they interact with, people sometimes blindly accept what they read and hear without understanding the consequences. Although the ending isn't a happy one, one comes away from the rollercoaster that is *1984* with the feeling of having their eyes opened. While not immediately evident, a critical reader starts to recognise more and more of the parallels between Orwell's predictions and current events. This story remains an important reminder to exercise your rights as much as possible and educate yourself on facts, because when a government starts pushing the boundaries between what they should be allowed to control and what they should not, the truth becomes so distorted that you can't tell what is real anymore.

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Sawyer Ditty

Literature and Analysis

Mr. Henry

3 March 2026

### Isolation, Pain, and Fear

When the mind, spirit, and heart are broken, the human being is left with nothing. In the oppressive state of Oceania from *1984*, all people live in a constant state of fear and isolation. No one has friends, only “comrades,” and the threat of brutal violence by the thought police looms over everyone. Parents even fear their very own children denouncing them for thoughtcrime. Winston, the main character of this book, is slowly broken down and crushed by the pain, isolation, and fear; exactly what the Party intended. In *1984*, George Orwell demonstrates that human morality is vulnerable when faced with isolation and the loss of individuality that hollows out the spirit, pain that destroys the body and mind, and fear that poisons the heart, ultimately leading to a betrayal of one's own conscience and those whom one loves.

Isolation hollows out Winston's spirit, leaving him without an understanding of who he is and vulnerable to being filled with the Party's own ideas and lack of morality. If the people cannot tell themselves apart from dirt and humans, then the boot of the Party can eternally step on them. The Party uses newspeak and propaganda to make people lose a sense of what they actually believe in, and removes the idea of friendship and intimacy by getting rid of friends and replacing them with comrades. The text states, “He was a lonely ghost, uttering a truth that nobody would ever hear” (Orwell 27). Winston lacks a human connection, both physically and mentally. Without anyone to hear and confirm his truth, he questions his own identity because no one is around to acknowledge or validate his thoughts. The text says, “We shall squeeze you

empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves” (Orwell 256). The Party will define and determine your identity. The Party also uses Newspeak to isolate people. Syme, a comrade of Winston whose job is refining Newspeak, states: "Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it” (Orwell 52). By using Newspeak, the party is able to get rid of communication through language, isolating people from each other and even their own thoughts inside their heads. The spirit will be stripped away, leaving only a vessel unable to carry the values of humanity, and one will only be an empty vessel to be filled with the ideas of the Party.

Pain breaks down the mind until one can not tell the difference between truth and lies. The Party does this to Winston, turning his mind into mush that they can mold into whatever shape they want. O'Brien's session with Winston in the Ministry of Love shows exactly how he manipulates Winston's brain and how Winston folds under the pain. The text says: “How many fingers, Winston?’ ‘Four! Stop it, stop it! How can you go on? Four! Four!’ ‘How many fingers, Winston?’ ‘Five! Five! Five!’ ‘No, Winston, that is no use. You are lying. You still think there are four. How many fingers, please?’ ‘Four! Five! Four! Anything you like. Only stop it, stop the pain!’ (Orwell 250). Winston is broken down to the point of believing whatever O'Brien wants him to believe in order to stop the pain. All logic immediately disappears, and all the mind can focus on is the end of the suffering. Winston acknowledges this, stating: “Of pain you could only wish for only one thing: that it should stop” (Orwell 239). This shows how all complex understanding goes away when a human is put under extreme pain, and they are reduced to the primal state of only desire for it to end. Once in that primal state, they are a shell ready to be filled with whatever the Party wants.

Fear destroys the heart, getting rid of love and morals and allowing the Party to replace them with love for only Big Brother. When Winston is faced with his worst fear, the fear of rats, he immediately loses his love for Julia and begs that they inflict the fear on her instead. The fear poisons his heart, getting rid of the care he has for his loved ones. The text demonstrates: “But he had suddenly understood that there was just one person to whom he could transfer his punishment—one body that he could thrust between himself and the rats. And he was shouting it frantically, over and over: ‘Do it to Julia! Do it to Julia! Not me! Julia! (Orwell 286). This quote shows that when faced with his worst fear, Winston’s morals and love instantly go out the window, and he begs to be replaced by the person he loves most, despite being fully aware of the pain and fear she would then have to face. Simply, this moment completely removes his love for Julia, exactly what the party intended. When Julia and Winston meet again, things are not the same: “‘I betrayed you,’ she said badly. ‘I betrayed you,’ he said” (Orwell 292). The love that they once had for each other is gone at the hands of O’Brien. Simply by putting one against the threat of what they dread most, the Party is able to crush morals, love, and friendship, so that the only love people can feel is love for Big Brother.

In the state of Oceania, the only things people have left to hold on to are their spirit, mind, and heart. However, the Party knows exactly how to crush all three of those things and turn the human being into a hollow shell to be filled with INGSOC. They have mastered the art of removing the humanity from the human, carefully destroying each thing that people have left to hold onto: using isolation to break the spirit, pain to break the mind, and fear to break the heart. Winston is a perfect example of how the Party executes this, and he, too, loses these three core pieces of humanity. Sitting alone in the Chestnut Tree cafe, he finally loves Big Brother.

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Ally St. Martin

Ms. Pyeatt

Literature and Analysis

12 February 2026

### The Immoral Efficiency of Weaponized Fear for Control

In the heavily dystopian society George Orwell portrayed in *1984*, citizens of the Party live in a fog of false admiration and obedience. However, the main character, Winston Smith, sees through the lies and tries for resistance and change. Through the application of imposed danger, propaganda, distrust, and even the creation of a new language bent on limiting revolutionary thought through old word destruction, the authorities are able to shut down his and others' attempts of individual rebellion. With morals and justice long since eradicated in methods of control, Ingsoc, commonly known as the Party, accomplishes its sustainable goal of oppressive governmental rule. The Party successfully maintains power by prioritizing fear over loyalty or force through constant surveillance and threat of punishment, resulting in lasting hopelessness that prevents resistance and uprising.

The constant surveillance creates paranoia and obedience from Party members. In Oceania, every enclosed room, hallway, and public space, including homes of the Party members, houses a telescreen. It is active around the clock, monitoring through a camera and audio recorder to pick up any evidence of perceived treason or dissent. With this subliminally beaten into the citizens' minds, they know it would be "terribly dangerous to let [one's] thoughts wander when [they] were in any public place or within range of a telescreen. The smallest thing could give [them] away" to the government (Orwell 62). To not cheer for the hatred of the ever-secretly-changing enemy nation or to utter a vengeful comment often results in punishment.

Public places or private ones with a telescreen lurking left no room for ensured privacy, so people had to remain in a toxic state of self-discipline at all times. Everyone knows they “[have] to live— [and do] live, from habit that became instinct – [under] the assumption that every sound [they make] is overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized” (Orwell 3). The slightest wrong action could result in sudden disappearance, known to the citizens as vaporization. This disappearance comes from reports to the Thought Police, who, as assumed by all citizens in an unspoken fashion, would then torture or kill the perpetrator. Winston and his fellow Party members live “from birth to death under the eye of the Thought Police. Even when [they are] alone [they] can never be sure that [they are] alone” (210). No one rightfully feels free from the prying eyes looking for reasons to cleanse or murder them if they don’t appear to be following orders.

Additionally, the Party’s threat of punishment prevents or demolishes plans for revolution. Despite possible internal turmoil, the government understands and abuses the theory that people inherently value their lives more greatly than any cause they desire. As articulated by O’Brien, the Party promises dissenters that they “do not merely destroy [their] enemies, [but they] change them” on the inside through outer infliction of pain with no limits (166). In the face of near-death, a desire for freedom often becomes out of the question. Upper Party members are aware that humans’ innate fear of death, despite beliefs, overrules passions, and they exploit it. They know that if they “threaten [someone] with something— something [they] can’t stand up to, can’t even think about... [they will] say, ‘Don’t do it to me, do it to somebody else, do it to so-and so’” (292). They weaponize terror of pain and suffering to cut family ties and divide loyalties. Winston himself, when confronted with terror, betrays Julia, his only confidant and support system. Plausible threats cause the innate selfishness from fear to surface, tearing apart

who connection-driven and loyal people believe they are in identity. Moreover, the Party separates the individual from trusting others. Since everyone is afraid of being caught appearing in disagreement with the government, it allows one to believe they likely do not have anyone else who agrees with their opinions, like Winston, or at the very least no one to confide in and nowhere to do so. The isolation that comes from distrust of fellow citizens often prevents revolution initially. But when pain shifts from rational fear to imminent reality, it demolishes rebellion at the source for good.

Consequently, Party members' fear of and exposure to governmental threats and actions lead to psychological discomfort and submission which prevents any successful revolution. Those who do not willingly follow the directives are sought out and indoctrinated into the false 'fact' system about the world around them. Those who are inclined to reject the propaganda and develop their own beliefs, such as Winston, know that they are fighting a losing battle. For example, when Winston attempts to argue his case to O'Brien, a man of the Inner Party who he had once trusted but been betrayed by, he felt a surge of hopelessness at realizing the man had been much too set in the Party's ways to change his own thoughts. He wondered what he could do "against the lunatic who is more intelligent than [himself], who gives your arguments a fair hearing and then simply persists in his lunacy?" (262). The lever O'Brien uses to inflict pain as punishment for insufficient answers specifically sways Winston to give up on arguing his cause. When exposed to increasingly large amounts of pain through torture and starvation, he begins to black out, lose the strength of his sanity, and hence, submit, effectively allowing the Party all they wanted from him. After the end of his time in the Party's violent, remedial 'Room 101' and his probationary release back out into the world, he fully accepts and even loves Big Brother, with all resistance removed from his conscience. Furthermore, around a decade prior to the year

1984, Winston had seen Jones, Rutherford, and Aaronson, who were known counter-revolutionary survivors of Big Brother's rise to power. He recounted quietly sitting across the cafe he often frequented, taking notice of his recognition of them from past news. The once powerful and capable men had become deflated and gutted by the Party's methods. Winston takes special interest in Rutherford's appearance, observing that in the past he "must have been immensely strong; now his great body was sagging, sloping, bulging, falling away in every direction. He seemed to be breaking up before one's eyes, like a mountain crumbling" (77). What Winston sees in the cafe is not a consequence of age, but of years of futile resistance punished by violence wearing him down and hollowing him. Figures impassioned enough to be counter revolutionaries suddenly had a "ruinous face...[with] eyes [that] were full of tears...[and] broken noses" (77). Even the strongest of resistors succumbed to the government's inhumane, machine-like efficiency.

In the true year 1984, many people still lived with rights, privacy, and freedoms, but Orwell's warning remains relevant. In his *1984* society, fear became the dominating feeling that overwhelmed and hindered any ability or desire for free will. Today, the protection of people's "inalienable" liberties and their resistance to oppression and injustice are fallible. Orwell argues that if a society does not catch the warning signs of a government gaining power over people's lives, it is easy for the oppressive system to gain traction and for people's lives to become not their own at all. Had Winston's ancestors and past citizens of Oceania seen the red flags early and prevented further damage, 'Big Brother' would never have been watching them.

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Rose Exum

Ms. Susan White

AP Literature and Composition

29 January 2026

FRQ3 PROMT (written without access to the novel)

2016. Many works of literature contain a character who intentionally deceives others. The character's dishonesty may be intended either to help or to hurt. Such a character, for example, may choose to mislead others for personal safety, to spare someone's feelings, or to carry out a crime.

Choose a novel or play in which a character deceives others. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze the motives for that character's deception and discuss how the deception contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.

Performative Perfection: A Critique of Aestheticized Culture and Idealized Youth

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* investigates a Victorian culture that conflates outward beauty with virtue, privileging youth and the Romantic ideal above moral responsibility. At the center of Wilde's Faustian narrative is Dorian Gray, whose mystically preserved youth and refinement render him an object of admiration. Dorian's sustained deception of society—through beauty, aesthetic performance, and his embodiment of idealized youth—enables him to evade moral accountability, ultimately revealing Wilde's critique of a culture that mistakes artifice for virtue and appearance for innocence.

Dorian's deception ultimately succeeds not because he lies overtly, but because society, seduced by his beauty and youth, refuses to acknowledge his inherent capacity for corruption. Despite contributing little to society compared with his friends and associates—artists, chemists, professionals, and philosophers—Dorian is nevertheless elevated above them. He employs his romanticized reputation as an Adonis to achieve his desires and manipulate young women, who

are fooled by his superficial charm. Dorian tells them no lies; he is the incarnation of his deception. This is demonstrated by Basil Hallward's rejection of the rumors accusing Dorian of debauchery, wickedness, and hedonism shortly before Basil's murder. The artist insists that "sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face" and thus "cannot be concealed," articulating the logic that shields Dorian from accountability. Lord Henry and Dorian's other acquaintances likewise excuse his actions through their ongoing association with him; Lady Narborough considers him an "especial favorite" and regularly hosts him at dinners and salon gatherings. In the conservatory at Selby Royal, the Duchess of Monmouth intellectually quarrels with the orchid-procuring Dorian. Her brother, Sir Geoffrey, also enjoys Dorian's company before accidentally shooting the brother of Sibyl Vane. Few interpret the connection between Dorian and these frequent misfortunes as more than coincidence. While the chemist Alan Campbell condemns Dorian for his narcissism and hedonistic decline, others remain deluded by his beauty and grant him a moral exemption. "Prince Charming's" youth operates as a social alibi. Because moral decay cannot exist beneath perfection, his attractiveness serves as reassurance of his authenticity. Thus, the deception becomes a collaborative rather than merely isolated effort, as societal interpretations of Dorian's appearance shield him from consequences.

Additionally, Dorian's cultivated aestheticism operates as a diversion. While his magnetic allure and youth charm society without active intervention on Dorian's part, his façade of Romantic idealism demonstrates active deception. He immerses himself in art, collecting the finest perfumes, textiles, jewels, and musical instruments, and saturates himself in their associated mythologies. In doing so, Dorian manufactures apparent artistic depth while using art for nothing more than sensory fulfillment and confirmation of his innocence. Pleasure replaces conscience, and artistic sensibility evermore masks his growing cruelty and wickedness. Art is a

particularly tempting form of absolution for Dorian, because *through* art, he need not confront his inner ugliness and decay. Lord Henry's disingenuous philosophizing only influences Dorian because the seed of this decay already existed within him, expressed through selfishness, narcissism, nihilism, and, most significantly, indulgence in art as a form of moral anesthesia. Furthermore, Lord Henry's mention of his wife abandoning him for a man who "played Chopin exquisitely" exemplifies the seductive power of art when used to evade ethical responsibility. At the expense of his empathy, Dorian allows beauty to numb the very moral compass that should make his decline into corruption excruciating. Beauty is Dorian's substitute for virtue. He is absolved of the consequences of his actions, and so art becomes a more insidious poison than his prior deceptions of appearance, youth, and elegance: it deceives Dorian himself.

Dorian's deception ultimately succeeds because society fails to hold him accountable. Dorian is no anomaly; in fact, he is the product of a society that worships beauty, excuses corruption, and prefers the comfortable illusion to the truth. In the preface, Wilde warns that "those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril," an adage that defines both Dorian and the broader society around him. Ultimately, the novel suggests that when a culture equates beauty with virtue, it creates the very corruption it claims to fear. By allowing beauty and artifice to stand in for moral responsibility, societies not only tolerate corruption, but actively enable it—so long as it remains aesthetically pleasing.

Ellie Dukowicz

Dr. Husemann

AP Language and Composition

May 2, 2025

### Influencing Intake and Ideas: A Call for Regulations of Celebrity and Athlete Endorsements

What makes the Shaq-A-Roni pizza from Papa John's more desirable than its cheese-and-pepperoni covered pizza competitors? While some may claim that it is truly much more delicious than any other pizza, the Shaq-A-Roni pizza gained its fame and popularity from celebrity endorsement. Shaquille O'Neal has been a partner with Papa John's Pizza for many years, launching his own endorsed pizza and appearing in many commercials for this company's products. Now, when people think about Papa John's Pizza, they also think of O'Neal, a former professional basketball player known for his impressive career. While endorsements similar to O'Neal's may seem harmless or even silly, in reality, they can have an immense impact on an individual's physical and mental health, making unregulated celebrity endorsements dangerous to the public. In order to promote an authentic portrayal of food and health, celebrities and professional athletes have an ethical obligation to regulate their endorsements and sponsorships with food companies as well as their rhetoric surrounding food.

Celebrity and athlete endorsements of food products have been prominent in food advertising for centuries. The origins of celebrity endorsements have been traced back to the "1800's, when Queen Victoria's laundress was used to endorse Glenfield Patent Starch, and Mark Twain's face appeared on a bag of flour and two different kinds of cigar boxes" (Renton 44). However, this was only the beginning, and, as advertising and corporations grew in size and influence, the amount of celebrity endorsements also increased dramatically. For example, in the

1930's, Johnny Weissmuller was featured on the Wheaties cereal box (Renton 44). Continuing since these early examples, the number and prominence of celebrity endorsements has grown significantly, especially within the food and beverage industry.

However, from this growth, ethical concerns over these marketing practices have arisen over time, leading to various legal regulations that intend to ensure an authentic connection between the celebrity and the endorsed product. The current restrictions that exist in the United States are outlined by the Federal Trade Commission in their "Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising":

Endorsements must reflect the honest opinions, findings, beliefs, or experience of the endorser...An advertiser may use an endorsement of an expert or celebrity only so long as it has good reason to believe that the endorser continues to subscribe to the views presented...When the advertisement represents that the endorser uses the endorsed product, the endorser must have been a bona fide user of it at the time the endorsement was given.

Through these guidelines, celebrity and athlete endorsements have become more regulated, increasing the genuineness of these endorsements.

While these regulations have improved the authenticity of endorsements, celebrities impact both what individuals eat and how they perceive food, leading to a multitude of consequences when their endorsements inaccurately portray or promote unhealthy foods. Celebrities are widely regarded as role models, as the public pays more attention to their lives than the average human. In fact, they are often the subject of extensive admiration. Therefore, celebrities are more prone to influence the behavior of others because more people are noticing their actions and "admiration is often accompanied by a desire to emulate the person being

admired” (Archer and Robb 129-130). This factor plays an important role in the impact of celebrity endorsements, as they influence what consumers intend to purchase as well as their eating behavior. According to Ph.D. Marketing Professor Cristina Calvo-Porrall et al., “Consumers are more likely to purchase and pay premium prices for food products because of the credibility, congruence and trustworthiness of the celebrity endorsers.” Therefore, celebrity endorsements are successful at convincing the public to purchase food products because of the public’s trust in and hope to mimic celebrities. In addition, food endorsements made by athletes have an especially large impact on consumer purchase intentions, as they can warp the perceived nutritional value of food, making them seem healthier because of their association with athletics. According to Rebecca Peake et. al, “Participants [in a study] perceived that the meals were lower

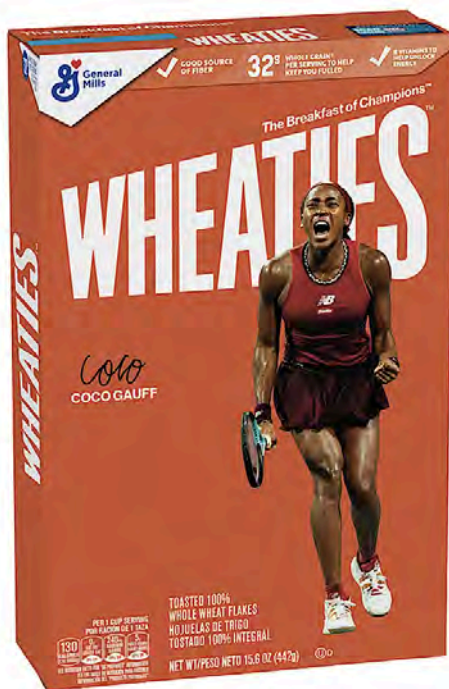


Figure 1: Wheaties Box

in calories, fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt in the athlete endorsed condition compared to the control and public endorsed conditions.” Furthermore, researcher Dr. Marie Bragg states, “Research shows that food and beverage products associated with sports generate positive feelings, excitement, and a positive self-image among adults and children” (5). Food products endorsed by professional athletes not only have an impact because athletes are seen as role models but also because products associated with sports, especially professional athletics, generate positive feelings,

convincing consumers to purchase these products. One example of a brand that has used this strategy is Wheaties, a cereal company that highlights professional

athletes on the covers of its boxes; this association with athletics has become a recognizable and distinguishable aspect of Wheaties' image (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> However, the change in consumers' perception of products that results from endorsements can lead to consequences for the public's health, as they cause consumers to purchase products that they would not typically buy if they were not endorsed by a celebrity or an athlete. Because athlete endorsements often promote "energy-dense, nutrient-poor products," increased consumption of these foods is dangerous for public health ("Marketing Food" 5). By adding endorsed products into their diet, which are often unhealthy, consumers face more health problems as a result of the increased intake of these foods. For example, if a consumer were to replace their breakfast of fruit, yogurt, and granola or a bagel and eggs (or any fulfilling meal) with Wheaties because of its association with athletics, the consumer would have a much less healthy diet, solely because of endorsements. By influencing how individuals eat, celebrity endorsements can have dramatic effects on individuals' health, leading to possible risks and consequences.

Celebrity endorsements can also be harmful to the public because they influence how consumers think about food, which can have a positive or negative impact based on the messages celebrities choose to spread. For example, Taylor Swift has been outspoken about her struggles with an eating disorder, and the messages that she spreads about body image promote a healthy relationship with food, which, in turn, has helped her fans with both their physical and mental health. According to Pope and Rose, "Overall, Swift's disclosures of her own eating/body image struggles positively influenced her fans' relationships with their eating behaviors and body

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, when I was younger, I had a humorous encounter with a Wheaties box when my family was shopping at a grocery store. At this time, my younger brother Max loved watching the NBA, and he was a staunch Celtics fan. While we were walking through the cereal aisle, Max caught sight of a Wheaties box with an athlete on the Celtics featured on the front of the box, and he immediately burst out saying, "Mom! Mom! Can we buy this box of Wheaties?" The only issue with this question was that both Max and I had been diagnosed with Celiac Disease many years prior to this encounter. Regardless, just the idea of eating a cereal that his favorite athlete endorsed made Max forget his allergy in an instant. Obviously, my mom firmly told him that we could not buy the Wheaties, but this story serves to show how susceptible children are to the influence of athlete endorsements.



**Figure 2: Kim Kardashian's Instagram Post Promoting Diet Lollipops**

image.” The widespread impact of Taylor’s words demonstrates how influential celebrity advice and endorsements can be. However, this advice can become dangerous when unhealthy practices or ideas are promoted. An example of this harmful advice is Figure 2: Kim Kardashian’s promotion of “Appetite Suppressant Lollipops” via Instagram (“Instagram to Limit”).<sup>2</sup> Her post promoted a variety of unhealthy ideas surrounding food, such as that there are benefits to suppressing your appetite and eating less. This rhetoric can have repercussions on the

public both physically and mentally, as it promotes a diet culture that may not meet the nutritional necessities of individuals; furthermore, in effect, this post (while not intentionally) promoted eating disorders, as some consumers would hope to emulate Kim’s behavior. Because celebrity advice and endorsements influence how individuals perceive food, they can lead to dangerous repercussions in both the mental and physical health of the public.

Due to the substantial consequences that their endorsements can have on consumers, celebrities have an ethical obligation to manage their endorsements and the ideas they promote about food. Celebrity endorsements of fast food and sugary drinks are common; for example, Justin Timberlake famously endorsed McDonald’s, even recording a song for the company, and LeBron James has endorsed Sprite, appearing in multiple advertisements. Unregulated endorsements and promotions of unhealthy foods, such as the ones described above, have

<sup>2</sup> This post has since been deleted from Instagram, and Kim Kardashian has faced immense backlash over the product and message she spread.

dangerous side effects when consumers choose to eat these foods. Therefore, it is necessary for celebrities to strictly control their endorsements such that they promote only nutritious products or those that they regularly consume. For example, celebrities such as Kristen Bell, who has endorsed PLEZi and co-founded This Saves Lives,<sup>3</sup> and Jay-Z, who has endorsed Partake and Impossible Foods, have chosen to endorse healthier food products. If celebrities were to endorse more nutritious foods, similar to Bell and Jay-Z, consumers would be more likely to choose to eat these healthier foods, therefore improving public health instead of increasing health concerns. Furthermore, when celebrities promote foods that are less nutritious, it must be a product that they regularly consume; therefore, the public is able to make an informed decision based on accurate information of the celebrity's diet when purchasing food. The products that celebrities endorse and the ideas they espouse surrounding food can also have a negative effect on what the public believes about food. By sharing unreliable information claiming that some foods are "healthy" while others are not, celebrities can create myths about food that impact individuals' relationship with food and lead to unhealthy eating patterns. Hence, it is necessary for celebrities to control what advice they give about food in order to only promote truthful and helpful information; without this regulation, the consequences of unrestricted advice become dangerous. Therefore, in order to promote a more healthy and safe lifestyle for the public, celebrities should regulate what they endorse and promote in relation to food.

However, some celebrities insist that they have no responsibility to regulate their endorsements or discussions. Celebrities such as Kylie Jenner and Bella Thorne have argued that they do not have the responsibility of being a role model and that they do not need to change

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<sup>3</sup> This Saves Lives has since been acquired by GOOD Worldwide, and is now called ALL IN. Other than just using quality organic ingredients and selling products that are high in specific nutrients, this company also donates a portion of its proceeds to partner organizations that work to increase access to healthy food in America. This company is a perfect example of brands that celebrities should be endorsing because of its nutritious products and commitment to improving public health in America.

their behavior because of their fame. Kylie Jenner stated, “I never feel pressure to be a good role model ... I always try to do my best to inspire people ... but I just can't live my life always trying to be a good role model.” Similarly, Bella Thorne said, “I don't like to look at myself as a role model because when you're trying to constantly do the right thing you end up making other people happy and not yourself” (Gavilanes). Celebrities have directly put themselves in the center of the public’s attention, and they therefore inherently take on the responsibility of being a role model. While both Jenner and Thorne argue that they should not focus their entire life on being a role model, it is still true that they have a duty to attempt to be a positive model for the public because of the immense influence they have over the behavior of others. According to Archer and Robb, celebrities have the duty of being a positive role model because “Being in a special position to help other people plausibly generates a special responsibility to do so, regardless of whether one has chosen to be in that position.” In relation to endorsements, celebrities should not be allowed to endorse any product they want, as, in many cases, it could lead to them not being positive role models. Regardless of their opinions, celebrities have an obligation to be positive role models for the public, and therefore regulate their endorsements.

In order to foster a healthier lifestyle for the public, governments around the world should establish and enforce more strict regulations on celebrity endorsements, and celebrities should manage what information they spread about food. Specifically to achieve this goal, governments must require that any food or beverage product endorsed by celebrities be either nutritious or something that the celebrity consumes on a regular basis. Therefore, the bias that the public has towards products endorsed by celebrities would be beneficial, as consumers would be more likely to purchase and eat healthier foods. Furthermore, if a celebrity endorses something unhealthy, by being a food that they regularly eat, they promote an authentic image of the

product that does not create a false correlation between a celebrity and product. While there are no methods to directly control what celebrities say, the public should attempt to hold celebrities responsible for making false or misleading claims regarding food. By following these guidelines, the harm that celebrity and athlete endorsements create in the world would decrease substantially, allowing the world to be a healthier space.

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Max Posnock

Dr. Husemann

AP Language and Composition

May 2, 2025

### Miracle or Misinformation?

#### Contributing Factors and Implications of Dietary Misinformation on Social Media

Social media has a misinformation problem. While this is evident in most if not all social media communities,<sup>1</sup> misinformation and disinformation have found a common home: dietary and nutrition focused channels. Consumers of this content, which can be found on Tik Tok, Youtube, Instagram, and other short-form video sites, are specifically attracted to catch-all fixes that claim to be far more effective than they actually are. This kind of narrative is common on social media: creators making broad claims (with questionable scientific accuracy) about their recipes or diet suggestions. This trend is a key contributor to the prodigious amount of misinformation that exists on food and dietary related social media circles at the moment. In one study, researchers from the University of Glasgow found “just one out of nine leading UK bloggers making weight management claims actually provided accurate and trustworthy information” (Forrest). The issue of dietary misinformation has wide-ranging implications to public health and also represents themes that have existed for millennia.

Humans have a long history of spreading dietary misinformation through public and social platforms. Social circles and word of mouth communication have always been primary sources of true and untrue food related information, as Italian anthropologists Caposaca and Venier affirm: “Long before the invention of television and the worldwide web, word of mouth

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<sup>1</sup> One MIT study found that “Tweets containing falsehoods are 70% more likely to be retweeted than truthful tweets” (Langin).

worked well for ‘food mythology’ to reach a large audience.” Closeness and strength of relationship play especially important roles in establishing dietary ethos (Brown). Examples of misinformation fermented through this social dynamic are common throughout our history. Older examples include misinformation about tomatoes summoning werewolves and potatoes causing deadly diseases when those foods were first brought to Europe (Seigel). While these medieval examples might be expected before the advent of contemporary science, many modern examples exist; claims that many self-proclaimed nutrition experts make about foods or diets that will provide unattainable health or physique are common in today’s age. These claims have been recognized as a major issue for some time -- in a nutrition pamphlet from 1988, food scientist Charlotte Brennand described food-related misinformation as “the largest nutrition-related problem in the United States.”<sup>2</sup> These examples demonstrate a consistent trend of dietary misinformation through our history. As such, the problem of misinformation on social media simply represents a continuation of this trend, and should be expected, as social media is a major aspect of human communication in the digital age. However, some qualities of social media and consumers of content make it especially fecund ground for spreading dietary misinformation. Food-related misinformation has spread so readily on social media because of the ease of establishing false ethos, a natural attraction to miracle cures, the positive feedback loop caused by algorithms, and modern distrust towards traditional forms of dietary expertise.

Social media influencers can rapidly establish a false sense of ethos by appearing to be trustworthy. Having trust, or a brand that people think they can trust, is a fundamental aspect of influencing opinions, especially on social media, where influencers make a literal platform for

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<sup>2</sup> Brennand mostly writes about authors who claim to be dietary experts; her descriptions nevertheless share a shocking similarity with the social media gurus of today. Consider this quote: “It is amazing how many people who write nutrition books or claim to be ‘world famous nutritionists’ have no valid credentials whatsoever.” Or this one: “An author who appears on television or consults with famous athletes is not necessarily a source of reputable information.”

their ideas. In a study determining the role of influencers on the Portuguese restaurant industry, researchers Anjos et al. found that “the fact that influencers are brand ambassadors who make a more quickly[sic] impact on the audience, leads them to be part of an infallible technique when the objective is to promote a brand.” Influencers are skilled at creating a persona for viewers to connect and relate with, often creating a false sense of ethos with viewers. This is commonly born out of the belief of untrue or exaggerated claims. The ease with which influencers are able to acquire large amounts of followers gives people who might not be actually qualified a prominent and widespread voice ability to claim expertise. The consequences of this are outlined by a team led by Washington University nutrition expert Connie Diekman.

Low barriers to entry also mean that anyone claiming expertise can develop a website and derive value by attracting attention regardless of credentials... The consequence of this can be the perpetuation of misinformation, which undermines a well-functioning democracy, lowers the acceptance of science, and diminishes support for policies that are science or evidence based. (Diekman et al)

These false claims of expertise also undermine the actual expertise and ethos of real nutrition experts, as consumers find it harder to distinguish between true experts and snake oil salesmen. The use of branding to create narratives of fake prowess gives consumers conflicting information by sources who all claim reliability. Consumers are left confused and unsure who to trust, contributing to the overall environment of misinformation and distrust. Influencers, who are professional marketers, are able to better convince consumers to believe their claims than scientists, who do not put as much emphasis on and are not as skilled at persuasive communication skills. This creates a climate in which consumers are commonly left trusting

pseudo-experts over true nutrition scientists, further increasing the spread of social media misinformation.

Social media content creators often use this false sense of ethos to create videos featuring “miracle cure-all” claims, which consumers are very drawn to.<sup>3</sup> In a short form video from 2024, cancer survivor and health food content creator @chloeskitchen made her recipe for “Miracle Broth,” which she describes as “a super healing, nourishing, and just all round magical elixir” (Crampton). Chloë-Charlotte Crampton, the cook behind chloeskitchen, details how the recipe helped her through her chemotherapy process and how she now recommends the recipe to everyone -- from new mothers to people with colds. It is clear in

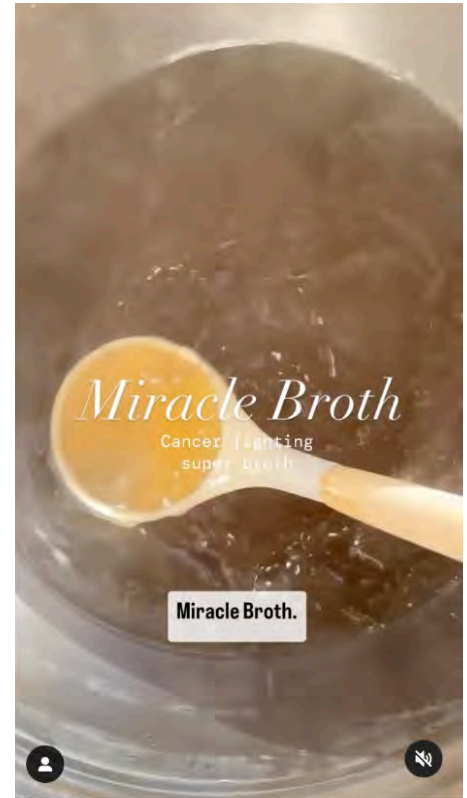


Fig 1- Miracle Broth

Figure 1 how Crampton openly markets this recipe as a possible cancer cure that causes actual miracles. Her personal experiences, combined with her claims about the recipe’s effectiveness, creates a compelling narrative: this recipe was a miracle when she was going through chemo, so naturally it would be the same for all of her followers. Though telling your followers to drink broth when sick might not appear to be harmful on the surface, these claims are commonly made of foods and diets with greater risks attached, such as high protein or ultra low calorie diets. These diets, framed similarly to Crampton’s miracle broth, could lead to severe health consequences, such as gallstones, ketosis, and other health issues (Mandal). Reporter Jessica Steir points out this pattern: “People respond more strongly to all-or-none statements about what is good or bad for us. It’s easy, it’s actionable — and it gives people a sense of control over their

<sup>3</sup> These commonly include miracle foods and diets, as well as foods that will become a miracle cure if one quits it. Some diets include high protein diets, carnivore diets, liquid diets, as well as diets such as cider vinegar and lecithin diets which include only one or a few foods. (Mandal).

health.” These absolute, extreme statements attempt to give consumers an easy, simple fix for their problems, efficacy aside.<sup>4</sup> Their power comes from the ability to spin a compelling narrative rather than any real authority or dedication to improving health, as Diekman et al. corroborate: “These health and wellness ‘gurus’ are especially powerful because they monetize content and attract followers by sharing compelling narratives, often with no consequence or recourse for sharing misinformation or disinformation.” These narratives and created sense of expertise, whether accurate or not, could create consumers who are unwilling to conduct further research before attempting the ideas in the content. It also could lead consumers to cease consuming a food when it doesn’t live up to their sky-high expectations, even if it is actually benefiting them.

One cause for consumers’ attraction to these posts is a low level of baseline knowledge. The complexity and variance of dietary science means that consumers are not always able to discern between accurate and inaccurate or distorted information, especially when the misinformation is presented in an attractive format. Caposaca and Veneir add, “The spread of fake news is due to the lack of scientific knowledge that is needed to distinguish which is a reliable information and which should be taken as a joke. .... they [consumers] may be vulnerable and become easily persuaded to make wrong and even harmful choices. The lower the knowledge, the greater the vulnerability[sic].” Consuming misinformation or conflicting information further reduces accurate knowledge with which to make future decisions, creating a more vulnerable populace which might be more likely to fall for future “miracle cures.” This combination of mental vulnerability and desire for actionable steps makes social media consumers prime targets for misinformation and disinformation.

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<sup>4</sup> I have also been exposed to such tactics on my feed -- while I don’t consume dietary content, much of my feed is made up of cooking, restaurant, and foodie related videos. These creators use similar hooks and tactics; I commonly click on videos that might say “you’ll never cook turkey any other way after trying this recipe” and similar titles. While most of the recipes I’ve tried by my favorite creators have been delicious, they are prone to severe exaggeration, just like creators in every social media field.

Furthermore, social media algorithms naturally push consumers towards more extreme content, making it harder to escape the pattern of misinformation. Across many video genres, consumers are more likely to watch videos with more extreme or shocking content, which algorithms are able to take advantage of to feed consumers. Research backs this up, as Simmons found that “platforms’ algorithms funnel users towards more and more extreme diet content.” While not directly related to food, a prominent and common example of “algorithmic radicalization,” as this trend is entitled, is the pushing of young men towards extreme right wing and “manosphere” online content. In one example, journalist Brock Wilson writes about Reid Brown, who, as a young adult, was exposed to creators such as Ben Shapiro and Andrew Tate. Throughout his teenage years, he then was provided with more and more extreme right wing content, leading him to view highly misogynistic and transphobic videos, and join right wing discord servers, all prompted by algorithmic recommendations from milder content creators. This example is easily extrapolated to dietary misinformation -- a consumer watches a couple videos about protein shakes, and suddenly the algorithm recommends them videos that advocate for a keto diet. Social media algorithms create a positive feedback loop of misinformation: the more misinformation one views, the more likely it is that the algorithm will feed similar content, and often more extreme content. It also creates an insulated environment for the consumers- instead of being exposed to a diversity of viewpoints and opinions, algorithms create a sounding board, where consumers are prompted to view more and more extreme versions of the content they commonly view. This pushes already vulnerable people further into more extreme misinformation, worsening possible harm to the health and safety of consumers.

Despite the clear downsides of the online diet culture, influencers do often draw on actual concerns or woes people have within the health and dietary system, often exposing flaws in the

health system. Influencers make claims that people want to hear -- their ability to effectively market and appeal to their consumers' complaints creates their popularity. "They appeal to women suffering from painful hormonal conditions... They speak to men... offering them politicized promises that the perfect diet will lead them back to a golden age of dominant masculinity. They also legitimately point out our broken food systems and the influence of corporate interests" (Simmons). A common theme throughout consumer woes is a distrust of the health system, leading people to explore alternative advice sources, even if the information is false. This distrust is another factor for why people turn to online dieticians, who often provide information that differs from traditional knowledge streams and who often promise more optimistic and less realistic results than nutrition scientists. This perhaps points out a failure in the health system -- professionals and dieticians might not be doing a good enough job of marketing accurate ideas to consumers. If health professionals want to be able to effectively convince consumers to follow accurate dietary advice, they should attempt to create more user-friendly language to allow people without a deep knowledge of the subject to make informed decisions (Caposaca and Venier), as well as communicating that dietary health is a personal and variant science, and effects felt by some people are not felt by all. While consumers have an onus to parse out false information, the health industry must communicate accurate information more effectively to counteract the betrayed feelings many social media consumers feel. Additionally, a greater emphasis should be placed on improving the baseline knowledge of dietary science in the population to allow people to make informed decisions in the future.

These variety of causes reflect an incontrovertible fact of social media: it is remarkably effective at circulating false information, especially in food circles. Assisted by friendly algorithms and a culture filled with distrust over traditional expertise, influencers employ

persuasive but questionable or false information to convince consumers to swear on or off certain foods with the promise that the decision will improve or cure various aspects of their health.

While all misinformation causes societal ills, food-related misinformation is especially damaging to the public, as decisions about health and wellness can make serious long-term impacts on the health and well-being of consumers. Both consumers and health professionals have a role to play in stopping the spread of such news; consumers have to be more aware of the tactics, whether malicious or not, that creators use to persuade consumers, and health professionals must do a better job in creating clear and effective communication to increase trust between the populace and professionals. Ultimately, an increase in trust and clarity between those seeking advice and those who are actually qualified to give such advice will be the single most important factor in creating a culture of using dietary science that makes a real and meaningful difference in consumers' health and well-being.

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Eliza Bacot and Madeline Roberts

Honors Journalism

Mr. Henry

“The First Casualty of War is Truth”

The Vietnam War (1955- 1975) did not just change how the United States fought wars; it fundamentally changed how wars are covered in the media. Unlike previous conflicts, the Vietnam War was broadcast directly into American homes via television. For the first time, the realities of war were widely visible to the public without strict government control. While Vietnam demonstrated the power of unrestricted media to shape public opinion, later conflicts reveal how governments attempted to regain control. Only for that control to be challenged again in today’s social media-driven landscape. We now face a similar and more complex situation in Iran due to the abundance and accessibility of fast-moving information.



War creates headlines, and journalists recognize that “if it bleeds, it leads.” As news outlets, traditional and non-traditional, and corporations hunt clicks over content.

After the shift in war coverage in Vietnam, the Slide Commission, formally known as

the Panel on Military-Media Relations, proposed the creation of the Department of Defense National Media Pool. This system limited journalists’ movement, requiring them to travel in groups and rely on military-approved access to information. Additionally, during the 1991 Gulf

War, the Pentagon managed the press pool, and coverage was more controlled and sanitized. Unlike Vietnam, where journalists operated with relative freedom, this system ensured that coverage was more structured and controlled. Later, during the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the embedded journalist program, a Pentagon-developed policy, was established to gain access in exchange for proximity. This way, journalists get a story, but they are limited to what the unit sees. As a result, a more distant, narrow image of warfare was created for viewers at home, as the assigned unit controlled what was published.

However, the abundance of civilian coverage within a conflict zone allows for information such as troop movements or documented events to be amplified. Cell phones provide a direct, real-time human perspective on a conflict from those suffering its consequences, whether through a mobile app or on widely used social media platforms.

Social media and propaganda have a significant effect on the press pools. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter allow for propaganda and misinformation to spread easily and almost instantly, often reaching millions before it can be verified. The abundance of information makes it difficult to discern what is true or false. This issue arises from the conflict in Iran: conflicting reports and unverified videos frequently surface, making it difficult to determine what is accurate. Did that boat get through the Strait of Hormuz, or was it blown to bits? The Iranian state media and the Western press compete to report on the situation. Especially since it is difficult for journalists to gain access to conflict zones due to access restrictions. This results in a heavy reliance on locals, satellite imagery, AI-generated images, and social media, with verification issues arising across all three sources. Locals may provide valuable information, but their reports can be difficult to independently confirm. Satellite imagery offers a broader view, yet lacks important



context about the event on the ground. Finally, while social media posts are immediate, they are often unreliable and prone to manipulation. Therefore, the public is seeing enough to form opinions, yet not enough to fully understand, which was a situation also seen in Vietnam.

For democracies to make decisions on war and peace, they require the people to be informed. In Democratic societies, public opinion plays a crucial role in shaping policy decisions, including those related to war. Citizens rely on accurate information to hold leaders accountable and make informed decisions. So, reporters and journalists are needed to bridge the gap between fact and fiction, or propaganda and established fact, on the battlefields and to the public. Covering complex events as accessible information. So suppressing journalists does not end conflicts; it ends the trust between the media and the public. Because of a lack of coverage, propaganda fills the gaps.



The reporting of conflict with Iran is a live example of the impact of Vietnam from 50 years ago.

Vietnam proved that journalism can shape the outcome of a conflict, and every military since has tried to manage that lesson. The question is not whether journalism matters in wartime; it does. Iran represents the evolution of this: a war where the

information battle may be as consequential as the physical one.

## **Asheville City Council Tightens Rules on Panhandling**

**By Madeline Roberts**

On August 27, the Asheville City Council voted to expand the existing panhandling ordinance “to ban verbal panhandling along Patton Avenue, Haywood Road, the South Slope, and part of Merrimon Avenue.” These are considered to be high traffic zones and “gestures or spoken words”, from solicitors will now be punished with a misdemeanor and a fine of up to \$50.

The expansion adds to the existing restrictions that prohibit individuals from “asking for money at night, soliciting near bus stops or ATMs, or approaching people in outdoor dining areas.” The goal of this is to improve pedestrian and traffic safety on some of the busiest streets here in Asheville.

The city council first became aware of the issues when it received emails, phone calls, and complaints from the public and business owners. Additionally, Deputy Chief Sean Aadrema proposed expanding the area of high-traffic zones and noted that "The last time those zones had been visited was 2003." "Asheville has changed a lot in 22 years. When [he] started at the police department [in 1999], Haywood Road in West Asheville was... a ghost town." Unfortunately, there were four pedestrian fatalities that occurred on Patton Avenue within the past year, highlighting the risks in areas with increased foot and motor traffic and panhandling activity.

City Attorney Brad Branham emphasized that the expansion aims to balance the autonomy of citizens and unhoused individuals. The First Amendment protects those who solicit, meaning that the city can't outright ban it, but they can regulate where individuals can panhandle."We've got to balance it," Branham said. "We can't take away someone's right to ask for a donation... nor do we want to take away someone's right to offer a donation."

The city pursued many approaches to expand the ordinance while preserving the autonomy of everyone involved. The public had pushback regarding how the city was handling it. Some people thought there should be more regulation, while others thought there should be

none. "The rules are actually designed not to prohibit you from doing it," Branham explained. "They're designed to say, you need to be on a sidewalk. You can't be in the road because if you're going to be in the road, you're putting yourself [and others] in danger."

The ordinance operates within a broader support system for unhoused people. The Police Department, the Fire Department's REST team, homeless advocacy organizations, and mental health support groups are working together to address the various challenges faced by the unhoused. Officers undergo about 8 months of training before they even put on a badge. And then, on top of that, they receive crisis training to meet homeless people with the most empathy, while also making sure they and those around them are the safest. They also carry a resource list in order to connect individuals to shelters, food, and treatment centers. "We're just one cog in a larger wheel," Aardema said. "There's a whole lot of people at the table... and we're just one small part of that." This shows the value of community within Asheville and how even our first responders are doing their jobs with our safety and well-being in mind.

Since the expansion was implemented, there has been a significant reduction in solicitor calls to the Police Department. Deputy Chief Aardema mentioned that at the city's most recent meeting, there has been a 37% decrease in violent crime citywide, which Aardema attributes to both the new regulations and officers being active in these high-traffic zones. Something that has significantly impacted the Police Department is the financial cuts occurring across the United States. Without adequate funding, the department can't retain enough officers, which undermines its ability to protect the city.

City officials acknowledge that enforcement alone cannot solve homelessness. Asheville faces a housing affordability crisis, exacerbated by post-COVID population increases. "If there is a perfect solution out there, I don't think anybody's found it yet," Branham said. "Housing is really expensive, and we don't have enough of it around here." The city is making efforts to help with this issue. Recently, a \$20 million affordable housing bond passed, which will continue to help the city toward its goal of increasing its citizens' resources.

“The ordinance represents just one piece of the city's broader response to homelessness.” “Asheville continues to pair policy decisions with long-term investments in housing, outreach, mental health partnerships, and social services, because true progress requires both immediate safety considerations and sustained support for people in need,” quoted Mayor Esther Manheimer.

Aakash Karvir

AP Literature and Composition

**FRQ2 Passage (Prose Passage Analysis from *Beloved*):**

Sethe knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn't get it right off—she could never explain. Because the truth was simple, not a long-drawn-out record of flowered shifts, tree cages, selfishness, ankle ropes, and wells. Simple: she was squatting in the garden, and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. And the hummingbird wings beat on.

The Language of Instinct in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

In this passage from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sethe tries to explain a traumatic act that once felt instinctive and clear. Through circular structure and violent imagery, Morrison suggests that Sethe's truth is clear and instinctive in action but becomes impossible to articulate in language when forced to explain it.

Sethe's circular narration reveals how direct the moment once was, compared to how tangled it became when she speaks it aloud. She paces around the room in a loop

thinking “the circle she was making around the room... would remain one,” and admits “she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask.” That circular motion mirrors the way her story keeps drifting, unable to land on a single point. Yet she insists that the “the truth was simple, not a long-drawn-out record.” Although her act was immediate, her speech moves in circles. Morrison uses that structural contrast to show how language complicates what her instinct makes clear. Her body understood instantly, but her voice cannot recreate that instinct without breaking it apart.

Morrison also uses violent, animalistic imagery to portray Sethe’s choice as primal protection rather than rational thought. When she recognizes schoolteacher’s hat, she doesn’t think logically, she feels “little hummingbirds [sticking] their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair.” Morrison’s piercing image shows terror flooding her body before she can speak or reason. She “just flew,” gathering “every bit of life she had made” and forced them “where no one could hurt them.” The metaphors of wings and flight show her acting like a desperate creature shielding its young. In the moment, she does not reason or justify; she responds instinctively to danger. Morrison contrasts that raw wordless urgency with the stumbling explanation she now attempts, demonstrating that some truths are felt rather than spoken

Sethe’s struggle to verbalize her decision reflects a larger truth throughout *Beloved*: under slavery, Black motherhood is forced into impossible choices that language cannot contain. Actions taken to preserve dignity or life become twisted when forced into explanation. Morrison shows that trauma can be simple in the moment, but complex in memory, because survival often demands what the world refuses to understand.

**Gorbachev and Glasnost:  
How Freedom Led to Collapse**

Evan Bledsoe

Mr. Lemon

AP World History: Modern

May 20, 2025

The world in 1990 was becoming an increasingly homogeneous place. Relations between the United States and the Soviet Union were getting better and better. This can mostly be traced back to one man, Mikhail Gorbachev, the leader of the Soviet Union. When he came into power in 1985 the world was still heavily divided and life in the Soviet Union for the average citizen was much worse than in the West due to economic difficulty. Gorbachev aimed to fix these problems with his policies of perestroika, meaning restructuring, and glasnost, meaning openness. Glasnost itself was focused on two main points: improving foreign relations, and transparency and openness within the Soviet media. These policies were adored by citizens of the Soviet Union, but the general public weren't the only ones that Gorbachev had to please. Within the government the Communist Party, or CPSU, were the ones in charge, and they hated these new policies of Gorbachev's and attempted to shut them down, leading to half-fulfilled policies that pleased nobody. By 1991, foreign relations had much improved. Gorbachev signed agreements with other countries, shook the hands of their presidents, gave speeches in these other countries, and began to pull the Soviet military out of Warsaw Pact countries. But looks can be deceiving and the chaotic internal affairs of the USSR caused irreversible damage to the political and economic structure of the country that led to its collapse. Gorbachev promised better foreign relations and free speech through glasnost, but that opened the door to criticism from the people that angered the CPSU. By December 1991, it was obvious that the Soviet Union could not yet handle change, so the government, with the people now turned against Gorbachev, ousted Gorbachev leading to the collapse of not only the Soviet Union but also any chance at the continuation of glasnost in Russia.

Gorbachev's ideal internal implementation of glasnost was unrestricted freedom of speech, but the CPSU stood in his way of achieving that, which left the Soviet public unfulfilled

and with only partial change. Gorbachev announced his policies of glasnost and perestroika in April of 1985, soon after becoming the General Secretary of the CPSU. In a speech he said, “We strive for greater transparency [...] People should know both the good and the bad...”<sup>1</sup> Slowly, this idea of transparency began taking hold in the Soviet Union, and Gorbachev got the media involved. Dmitry Strovsky writes, “A special mission to advance glasnost was assigned to the media, who had been under strict state control during Soviet times.”<sup>2</sup> Gorbachev was obviously serious about glasnost as getting the media involved was a big step. Being a communist society, everything was owned by the government including the media, so allowing the media to say what they wanted loosened the government’s control on the public heavily. Now, instead of only the sheltered, cherry-picked information the CPSU wanted them to see, the Soviet public could receive all the news of the world.

This utopia wouldn’t last long, as the CPSU was not a fan of glasnost at all. Opening the media to be able to criticize the government led to criticism of the government that worsened the anxieties of the CPSU. Strovsky writes, “During the implementation of glasnost, many officials felt a threat to their personal security.”<sup>3</sup> Members of the CPSU felt not only that their influence was threatened by this new freedom of speech, but also their security. They feared giving the ability to the public to dissent and spread dissenting views could lead to revolution, so many of the key supporters Gorbachev needed to enact his policies began to back down or at least work more cautiously with Gorbachev.

Rising tensions were also aided by continued secrecy during glasnost. The Chernobyl disaster was a particularly notable challenge to the policies of glasnost. Lilita Dzirkals describes

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<sup>1</sup> Dmitry Strovsky and Ron Schleifer, “Soviet Politics and Journalism under Mikhail Gorbachev’s Perestroika and Glasnost: Why Hopes Failed,” *Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications* 7, no. 4 (2021): 242.

<sup>2</sup> Strovsky and Schleifer, “Perestroika and Glasnost: Why Hopes Failed,” 242.

<sup>3</sup> Strovsky and Schleifer, “Perestroika and Glasnost: Why Hopes Failed,” 244.

that during the disaster, “Soviet sincerity about glasnost was put to a severe test, which it failed to meet in the eyes of many at home and abroad.”<sup>4</sup> The Chernobyl disaster in Soviet Ukraine was the worst nuclear explosion in all of history, and the Soviet media were not allowed to cover the disaster for three days. When they were finally allowed to, the news was still cut down and censored. In this incident Glasnost had failed; the media had still been restricted and whether it was the fault of Gorbachev or other members of government, these failures angered the people who, with their newfound freedom of speech, began to voice their discontent.

Gorbachev's ideal external implementation of glasnost was the creation of a world in which the East and West worked together in scientific, social, and political advances, and though he was successful in easing the tight grip of the USSR on global economics and politics, it led to a power vacuum that the U.S. would come to fill. Gorbachev's grand plan for Soviet foreign policy was much the opposite of past Soviet leaders; he wanted to work together with the rest of the world in most endeavors, more specifically with the United States. Gorbachev said in a speech at Stanford University, “Let us think about the future. Our two countries have more than enough reasons to be partners in building [this new cooperative world] and shaping new security structures in Europe. And in the Asian Pacific region. And also in the making of a truly global economy. Indeed in the creation of a new civilization.”<sup>5</sup> And Gorbachev did truly believe this, as we can see in his policies. He signed many arms reductions deals with the United States and even sided with them during the Gulf War. During the Cold War, the USSR and the US propped up and aided opposing forces in proxy wars around the world in attempts to put down the other's ideology and spread their own. The Soviets also began sharing information with the United States. For example, Dzirkals says, “The Soviets did release data on the troops and weapons of

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<sup>4</sup> Lilita Dzirkals, “Glasnost and Soviet foreign policy.” *RAND*, January 1990: 8.

<sup>5</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, “Address by President Gorbachev,” C-SPAN, June 4, 1990, <https://www.c-span.org/program/public-affairs-event/address-by-president-gorbachev/130214>.

the Warsaw Pact alliance.”<sup>6</sup> Secrecy was a defining feature of the Cold War. The sharing of information between the USA and USSR along with their agreement in the Gulf War marked major steps forward in global cooperation and showed Gorbachev was serious about these reforms.

Through the actions of Gorbachev, the USSR would fulfill his promise of shaping new security structures in Europe by pulling troops out of Warsaw Pact countries and allowing these countries to make some of their own political decisions. In a 1988 speech Gorbachev announced heavy disarmament of the USSR along with “withdrawing six tank divisions from the GDR, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, and to disband them by 1991. ... The Soviet forces situated in those countries will be cut by 50,000 persons, and their arms by 5,000 tanks”<sup>7</sup> By withdrawing these troops and tanks Gorbachev was taking a big step in ending Soviet control of Eastern European politics. With these actions he was also beginning to implement the ideas he presented earlier that every country has the right to decide things for themselves, and that interstate relations should be de-ideologized. This idea is important to the goal of global unity Gorbachev was presenting as de-ideologizing interstate relations would mean forming relations with other states that focus on helping the people rather than spreading and containing political ideologies. He was successful in putting these ideas into practice and by 1991 he had, as William Taubman says, “allowed Eastern European nations to become their own masters.”<sup>8</sup> But this led to an irreversible shift in global power. When the Warsaw Pact countries began having free and fair elections, they did not vote for communist or Soviet friendly politicians. This decreased Soviet influence in Eastern Europe and inspired the republics within the USSR to call for their own free

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<sup>6</sup> Dzirkals, “Glasnost and Soviet foreign policy.” 30.

<sup>7</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, “Gorbachev’s Speech to the U.N., December 7, 1988,” Temple University, <https://sites.temple.edu/immerman/gorbachevs-speech-to-the-u-n-december-7-1988/#top>.

<sup>8</sup> William Taubman, *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2017), 688.

and fair elections. Though Gorbachev was successful in creating a world where countries were politically independent of each other and cooperated willingly, these countries used their newfound independence to turn away from communism, leading to a major shift in global power away from the Soviet Union.

The failure of glasnost internally and its implementation in foreign relations spawned criticism of Gorbachev from both the government and the public that led to the fall of the Soviet Union. William Taubman describes in his biography of Gorbachev, “As tensions rose, glasnost would cut several ways. It boosted Gorbachev's popularity. It alarmed most of his colleagues. It allowed the failure of Gorbachev's policies to be widely publicized, eventually prompting critics on both sides (those who feared he was going too far, and those who wanted to go further) to aim their fire directly at him.”<sup>9</sup> CPSU members saw the potential negative effects of all this criticism and told Gorbachev to suppress these dissenting ideas, but he could not as he would be going against the very policies that he put in place. But Gorbachev did not hold all the power and the CPSU began to cut back glasnost in some places which angered the people more, so they spoke out and that just angered the government more. The outrage of the public combined with the failure of glasnost in the foreign realm, led to sharp disapproval of Gorbachev within the government of the USSR. Strovsky summarizes how the State Committee on the State of Emergency, aka the GKChP, “In August 1991 ... planned to remove Gorbachev from power and to take responsibility for further reforms. At the same time, it's statements ... confirmed that the[y] sought to stop many laws passed in previous years and to introduce strict censorship.”<sup>10</sup> These actions by the GKChP of backtracking Gorbachev's policies show the discontent within the Soviet government towards Gorbachev's progressive policies. Soviet politicians didn't like

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<sup>9</sup> Taubman, *Gorbachev*, 251.

<sup>10</sup> Strovsky and Schleifer, “Perestroika and Glasnost: Why Hopes Failed,” 251.

these policies as they drained the government's power and control, so when Gorbachev was ousted, they got rid of these policies. The end of the Soviet Union was not a revolution of the people but of the politicians. The presidents of the individual Soviet Republics led the movement. They all came together and signed a document declaring their secession from the Soviet Union and the end of the USSR and presented it to Gorbachev themselves. Glasnost, designed to strengthen and help the Soviet Union had failed, and so spectacularly that it led to the fall of the Soviet Union.

Gorbachev's attempt at free speech and better foreign relationships for the USSR through glasnost led only to the ensured loss of these freedoms going forward. By 1991, the public had been speaking out against Gorbachev and his policies for a long time. When then President of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic, aka RSSR, Boris Yeltsin listened and helped them by spearheading the movement that split up the USSR his popularity consequently shot up. Yeltsin was well known in Soviet politics; he served as a member of the CPSU before becoming RSSR president and was Gorbachev's political rival. So when Russia held its first election, they elected Yeltsin to be their first president. But soon he turned the position into a dictatorship, and by 1999 he had enough sole power to give the position to his chosen successor, Vladimir Putin. The Russia we see today is run by a dictator and this is directly a cause of the backlash spawned by the failures of Gorbachev's progressive policies. Russia has always and historically been authoritarian, so when Gorbachev introduced the policies of glasnost and perestroika that gave more freedom and influence to the people, the Russian elite stopped him. But the people, who were excited by these reforms saw their failures and, with the little free speech they gained, spoke out and blamed Gorbachev. So the government, with the people on their side, ousted the progressive Gorbachev, ensuring the continuation of the authoritarian state of Russia.

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Coleman Hooper

Michael Lemon

AP Modern World History

20 May 2025

### Mao Zedong

In 1911, the Qing Dynasty and the dynastic cycle collapsed in China. In the wake of the dynastic cycle finally collapsing, the Republic of China, also known as the Kuomintang (KMT), was established and took control of the state. The KMT would go on to become the primary political party for the Chinese nationalists and would be the main political group, but they were not the only party established within China. The Chinese Communist Party, established in 1921 in Shanghai, also wanted control over the government and to shape the nation to their ideologies and beliefs. As tensions between the two parties grew and conflict emerged, Mao Zedong emerged as a key leader and began gaining loyalty and reshaping the communist ideology of the CCP. These two parties fought for around 22 years, only stopping to ally against the Japanese in WWII. After WWII, the conflict resumed in a full-fledged civil war between the two groups, which ended on October 1, 1949, when Mao Zedong declared the creation of the People's Republic of China and outlawed all other political parties but the CCP. This declaration would also be the moment Mao Zedong officially became the leader of the CCP and China. Mao began his rule by launching the Five-Year Plan in 1953, modeled after the Soviet Union, which was focused on rapid industrialization and increased agricultural production. However, this plan would ultimately fail and would result in many problems with economics and agriculture for a number of his citizens. By the end of the Five-Year Plan in 1957, the public's view of Mao's leadership was declining due to his failure with the plan. Fearing revolutions similar to those in

Eastern Europe under the Soviet Union, Mao began welcoming constructive criticism from the intellectuals, citizens such as professors and scholars, of his time.<sup>1</sup> This new desire for criticism became known as the Hundred Flowers Campaign. While some historians argue that the campaign may have begun as a sincere attempt to allow open criticism, there is more evidence to support that Mao created it as a plan to expose dissenters due to his prior nature of crushing dissent and his discomfort towards criticism. Mao created the Hundred Flowers Campaign as a political trap by encouraging criticism only to identify, target, and crush dissenters who challenged his authority during the subsequent Anti-Rightist Movement.

The Hundred Flowers Campaign appeared to be a genuine desire for critique and constructive criticism of the government, but it was a ploy by Mao to stamp out dissenters. The origins of the Hundred Flowers begin with Mao's speech "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People" in 1956. In his speech, he claimed that he learned from the mistakes of the Soviet Union, which had killed too many people, and the mistakes of the Hungarians, who had executed too few people.<sup>2</sup> Mao feared what intellectuals would do when they heard about the Hungarian revolution, which led to him creating this false movement to encourage talk of reform before the people demanded it themselves. Mao asked for non-destructive criticism and famously said, "Let a hundred flowers bloom together and let a hundred schools of thought contend."<sup>3</sup> Originally, Chinese citizens were reluctant to answer

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<sup>1</sup> Zhu Dandan, "The Hungarian revolution and the origins of China's Great Leap policies, 1956–57," *Cold War History* Vol. 12, No. 3, August 2012, 451–472.

<sup>2</sup> Gilbert King, "The Silence that Preceded China's Great Leap into Famine," *Smithsonian Magazine*, Last modified 26 September, 2012, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-silence-that-preceded-chinas-great-leap-into-famine-51898077>

<sup>3</sup> Mao Zedong, "Let a hundred flowers bloom: The complete text of "On the correct handling of contradictions among the people"" (1957). *Van Sickle Leftist Pamphlet Collection, 1900-1993*. 483. <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/prism/483>

Mao's call because citizens were aware that Mao was a leader who crushed dissent and did not tolerate criticism. Therefore, the reluctance of citizens was very high. However, as time progressed and Mao kept discussing this idea of accepting criticism, primarily intellectuals began sending letters about their problems with Mao's government. Criticism began as a small stream, but quickly, a roaring river of criticism that swept through the country.

After Mao created and encouraged the Hundred Flowers Campaign, many Chinese citizens began discussing topics that showed Mao in a negative light. Normal citizens, but importantly, the educated, began criticising Mao and his government. Common topics of criticism from the people were complaints about corruption within the CCP, censorship, violations of free speech, and unpopular economic decisions.<sup>4</sup> Complaints about censorship revolved around the freedom of education at universities and other scholarly establishments. The people were also upset with the actions of the CCP members and their corruption, saying that they believed they did not represent them and that they were using their power for selfish reasons. Because Mao had tricked these citizens into believing he truly wanted criticism, many spoke up very publicly. The public nature of the criticism led to critics becoming easy targets for another plan Mao had been developing to smush the dissenters he had led into his trap. After he had lured the disloyal citizens out, Mao began the persecution and punishment of dissenters. Mao began savagely turning against the intellectuals and critics, whom he felt were a threat to his rule and government.<sup>5</sup> After allowing criticism from the intellectuals and allowing them to be front and center with their voices, he crushed them and their dissent in what has now been labeled the Anti-Rightist Movement.

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<sup>4</sup> Maurice Meisner, *Mao Zedong*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Schram, "Hundred Flower Campaign," *Britannica*, Last modified April 15, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Hundred-Flowers-Campaign>

After luring out dissenters during the Hundred Flowers Campaign, Mao began the Anti-Rightist Campaign and began persecuting so-called dissenters. Over a few years, over half a million citizens who spoke out against Mao and other educated citizens had been labeled “rightists”. Members of the CCP who spoke out at all against Mao’s actions or ideas would also be labeled as rightists and stripped of their power. The rightists were either jailed, sent to labor camps, or sent to rural villages where they would be reeducated in the ways of Mao and his increasingly radical government.<sup>6</sup> After the relocation of these dissenters, Mao aimed to strengthen the ideological grip he had on society. Mao began taking more control of the media, sparking paranoia among rightists and demonizing them as the largest threats to the development and strengthening of China. This state-run media heavily exaggerated and twisted basic critiques into calls for violence and revolution, further strengthening the public's paranoia of rightists inciting violence. Mao also instilled fear of citizens being taken from their families by saying that anyone who voiced any opposition to his rule was an enemy and should be handled as such. The result of the Hundred Flowers Campaign was the extreme Anti-Rightist Campaign and the use of more manipulative tactics to control the population.

The Hundred Flowers Campaign was a ploy utilized by Mao to lure dissenters into the open and then persecute those who spoke out against him. The campaign marked a turning point in Mao’s leadership and paved the way for Mao to use manipulative methods to stamp out dissent.<sup>7</sup> The trap Mao laid when he encouraged the criticism and the subsequent Anti-Rightist

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<sup>6</sup> Zhaojin Zeng, “The price of persecution: The long-term effects of the Anti-Rightist Campaign on economic performance in post-Mao China,” *World Development*, 2018, Volume 109, Pages 249-260.

<sup>7</sup> Kallie Szczepanski, “Mao’s Hundred Flowers Campaign in China,” Last modified April 17, 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/hundred-flowers-campaign-195610>

Campaign was an important step in his consolidation of power. This consolidation of power and the fact that his officials were now only those who were loyal to him allowed him more freedom and paved the way for the campaigns of the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution. These campaigns heavily focused on further eradicating the remaining dissenters within the population and creating an even more loyal society than before. These events and the creation of this cult like following that Mao created would not have been possible without squashing early dissent during the Hundred Flowers Campaign. The Hundred Flowers campaign might not seem like a major event in the rule of Mao, but it would mark the decisive turning point toward Mao's extreme authoritarianism, which would continue as he increasingly desired power and control over his citizens. Mao purposefully created the Hundred Flowers Campaign as a way to consolidate power by exposing and eliminating those who disagreed with him.

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Hunter Spalding

Mr. Lemon

AP Modern World History

2 May 2025

### Polish Solidarity: A Fight For Rights

Lech Wałęsa was no ordinary leader; he was a man of unfathomable loyalty and determination. He was an advocate of peace. He was a person who believed in equal rights for all people. Wałęsa was the face of the Solidarity movement in Poland throughout the 80's and 90's.<sup>1</sup> During the post World War II era, Poland was oppressed by the extreme dictatorship of the Soviet Union. The country was an afterthought; they were in constant neglect, but even with this, much of the Polish community stayed strong. Famine and economic crisis ravaged the people, making life so miserable that it became unbearable.<sup>2</sup> Lech Wałęsa saw this and recognized that Poles deserved a better life. They deserved freedom and dignity—and Wałęsa made it his mission to turn that vision into reality. He delivered powerful speeches, led major protests, and negotiated directly with Soviet-backed leaders.<sup>3</sup> As his days as a revolutionary went on, he received prizes such as the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983,<sup>4</sup> as well as becoming the first democratically elected president of Poland in 1990 by a landslide.<sup>5</sup> Wałęsa encountered many challenges from his oppressors throughout his fight for independence, but he always stayed calm

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<sup>1</sup> Danielle Lussier, "From Solidarity to Division: An Analysis of Lech Wałęsa's Transition to Constituted Leadership," *The Leadership Quarterly* (2010): 472–488, [https://www.academia.edu/37191184/From\\_solidarity\\_to\\_division\\_An\\_analysis\\_of\\_Lech\\_Wa%C5%82%C4%99sas\\_transition\\_to\\_constituted\\_leadership](https://www.academia.edu/37191184/From_solidarity_to_division_An_analysis_of_Lech_Wa%C5%82%C4%99sas_transition_to_constituted_leadership).

<sup>2</sup> Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, trans. Jane Zielonko (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), 63.

<sup>3</sup> "Polish Government Signs Accord with Gdańsk Shipyard Workers," *History.com*, originally published September 22, 2010, last updated March 12, 2025, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/august-31/polish-government-signs-accord-with-gdansk-shipyard-workers>.

<sup>4</sup> Lech Wałęsa, "Nobel Lecture," *The Nobel Prize*, December 11, 1983, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1983/walesa/lecture/>.

<sup>5</sup> "Lech Wałęsa," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified January 3, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lech-Walesa>

and persistent, and continued to lead Poland to what it is today. Lech Wałęsa's leadership in the Solidarity movement contributed to the fall of communism in Poland in the late 1980's by standing up to the oppressive government through mass activism and formal negotiation, making outside connections to gain support for the movement, and empowering and inspiring freedom and equality in the minds of the Polish people through his charisma and the use of nonviolence.

To understand why such a strong leader like Wałęsa could emerge from Poland, we must first understand the mindset and horrific conditions the Polish people were forced to live under. From the 1950s through the early 1980s, Poles were under constant supervision. Government employees had eyes on them at all times, especially while they were working.<sup>6</sup> They were in ongoing fear of being reported by their friends or neighbors to the government for anti-communist wrongdoings, all in exchange for some extra food or small privileges. Children were educated and encouraged to tell on their parents if they noticed any suspicious behavior.<sup>7</sup> There were extremely harsh punishments for any form of dissent or independent thought. Guards would send you to a labor camp for years on end just for selling a few eggs to your starving friend. Organizing a strike was considered treasonous—many were imprisoned or executed without trial.<sup>8</sup> The minds of many men and women slowly decayed as their morals and hope disappeared, but a select few resisted. This small number of people possessed a specific set of character traits that empowered them. Lech Wałęsa was a person of courage, integrity, and resilience. He attained these powerful attributes that made him perfect for the job; the job of leading a movement. In a country pushed to the edge, such conditions made revolution not just likely, but inevitable.

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<sup>6</sup> Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, 116.

<sup>7</sup> Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, 133.

<sup>8</sup> Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, 148.

Lech Wałęsa led many forms of mass activism such as protests and strikes throughout Poland during the time of Solidarity, but one pivotal event took place at Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk. In August of 1980, wages were being curbed at the same time as food prices were increased by the government. Poles were struggling; many were now unable to purchase food and provide basic necessities for themselves and their families. In the midst of this tension, a forklift and crane operator by the name of Anna Walentynowicz was fired. This was the final straw that set off a tsunami of strikes that swept through the country. Wałęsa, being previously fired from the same shipyard 4 years ago, climbed over the factory wall to lead 17,000 people in protest at Lenin Shipyard.<sup>9</sup> He was then promoted to lead the Interfactory Strike Committee, where he helped create 21 specific demands directed at the Soviet-backed Polish government. Included in these worker demands was the right to organize independent trade unions, the right to strike, the release of political prisoners, and increased freedom of expression. For over a fortnight, workers stood their ground and fought hard, and eventually the communist government caved. Wałęsa, along with many high-ranking government officials such as the Polish Prime Minister and Deputy Premier Mieczysław Jagielski, met to finalize an agreement in which all 21 demands were approved.<sup>10</sup>

Following the Lenin Shipyard strike, the Interfactory Strike Committee decided to establish one independent trade union known as Solidarity. This union grew to include over 10 million workers in 16 months, with one man as their leader: Lech Wałęsa. In 1981, Solidarity was outlawed under martial law, officially enacted through the Decree of the State Council on the Introduction of Martial Law. Curfews, military control, and suspension of civil liberties were all enforced by the government in an attempt to eliminate the Solidarity movement. This made it

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<sup>9</sup> "Polish Government Signs Accord."

<sup>10</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 75.

extremely difficult to fight back against the Polish government, and along with the ban, 6,000 people, including Wałęsa, were imprisoned for a year.<sup>11</sup> Even with this, they were still able to harness western media attention in Europe and America which helped gain support for Solidarity from outsiders. After years of restrictions, a second series of strikes arose in Gdańsk in 1988. Then, the political party and communist regime in power, the Polish United Workers' Party, suggested the Round Table Negotiations, and Wałęsa agreed to participate. This was another chance for Wałęsa to show his strength and loyalty to fight the voice of the government. They debated with each other and finally came to an agreement to relegalize Solidarity and grant free elections for a limited number of Polish Parliament seats.<sup>12</sup> The workers finally had a voice.

Though Solidarity was strong within Poland, international backing from foreign governments and leaders helped increase the movement's recognition on the global stage. Lech Wałęsa played a key role in establishing these connections, which empowered the Polish people, gained critical outside support, and put more pressure on the communist regime. Pope John Paul II was an important figure that Wałęsa frequently met with. The Pope was born in Poland which made it easy for Wałęsa to gain his trust through a shared heritage.<sup>13</sup> They both believed in the same ideology; they were fighting a common enemy, the Soviets and communist, and they used that to their advantage. The Pope used his global influence to attract international media attention to Solidarity. This helped get talk of the movement out into the world where it was supported by many people across many countries. Other world leaders such as President Ronald Regan and Vice President George Bush also played significant roles in Solidarity. Reagan imposed economic sanctions on Poland to hurt the communist regime, and these were quite effective.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "Polish Government Signs Accord."

<sup>12</sup> Lussier, "From Solidarity to Division."

<sup>13</sup> Lussier, "From Solidarity to Division."

<sup>14</sup>"Polish Government Signs Accord."

Wałęsa met with George Bush after an increase in Western media attention to the movement.<sup>15</sup>

This was a demonstration of Polish resistance; it sent a direct message to the regime about who the Polish workers preferred: the West.

Lech Wałęsa was a man of nonviolence. He was in strong favor of peaceful protest and he publicly announced this many times, but most significantly in the writing of his Nobel Peace Prize speech. In his lecture, he stated “The defense of our rights and our dignity, as well as efforts never to let ourselves to be overcome by the feeling of hatred – this is the road we have chosen.”<sup>16</sup> Wałęsa believed that to hate his enemies would be to become like them. If he and his followers had embraced hatred, it would have clouded their judgment, provoked violent action, and derailed their mission: justice and equality for all. In the first fifteen months of the legal Solidarity movement, not a single person was killed or injured, yet many laws were passed that granted the working class rights.<sup>17</sup> This was proof that even with nonviolence, activists could still gain support and success, and that peaceful movements were in fact effective. Wałęsa’s dedication to peaceful activism was deeply influenced by his Catholic faith, which emphasizes peace, forgiveness, and the sanctity of life.<sup>18</sup> This encouraged him to follow the principle that they could only stop violence if they didn’t commit it themselves. He thought that “only peace built on the foundations of justice and moral order can be a lasting one.”<sup>19</sup> If they were able to eliminate the violence of the communist through violence and hate, success would only be temporary, as the new state would then also fall victim to another violent uprising of people unhappy with injustice. To Wałęsa, lasting change could only come through justice, not vengeance. He used his strategy of nonviolence to promote Polish sovereignty and equality for

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<sup>15</sup> Lussier, "From Solidarity to Division."

<sup>16</sup> Wałęsa, "Nobel Lecture."

<sup>17</sup> Wałęsa, "Nobel Lecture."

<sup>18</sup> Lussier, "From Solidarity to Division."

<sup>19</sup> Wałęsa, "Nobel Lecture."

all. In most of his speeches and peaceful protests, he talked of a Poland that was free, united, and respectful of the rights and dignity of all its citizens.

Wałęsa's credibility among Polish workers came from the fact that he was one of them. He wasn't a distant leader or some high level politician—he had only primary education and attended trade school to become an electrician.<sup>20</sup> This background made him extremely relatable. Workers didn't see him as someone above them, but as one of their own, which earned him their trust and loyalty. He then used their trust to show them freedom. He introduced the people to equality through activism; he inspired them by fighting for them and showing Poles what was possible through resistance. Instead of taking all of the credit for Solidarity's wins, he praised the people for their determination, effort, and fight. He said that the movement was not just about the current pain and struggle they were facing now, but that it was also a tribute to all who lost their lives to the brutality of the communist dictatorship. Lech Wałęsa appealed to the people because of his background and all that he stood for, and this was necessary for him to be able to show Poles how great their country could be.

Lech Wałęsa was no ordinary leader, and his legacy proves it. In a time when Poland was abused by dictatorship and totalitarianism, he rose with courage, dedication, and a vision of freedom. Through mass activism, legal resistance, empowerment, and global outreach, Wałęsa was able to help end the totalitarian regime that ruled Poland and its people from after WW2 up until the early 90's.<sup>21</sup> He was a strong speaker, but even more than that, he knew how to use peaceful action to fight for what was right, and he didn't give up. Poland is now free. Lech Wałęsa made that happen.

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<sup>20</sup> "Lech Wałęsa."

<sup>21</sup> Ash, *The Polish Revolution*, 222.

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Catherine Berry

Carl Najdek

AP United States History

December 19, 2025

### The Realities of Wartime Inflation

The Civil War was an influential period filled with military conflict, political questions, and economic hardships. Through firsthand accounts from soldiers and families, the varying economic struggles and successes become evident. While some experience abundant pay, adequate daily rations, and low prices of goods, others undergo the struggles of little to no pay, limited food sources, and skyrocketing prices. Due to Northern attempts to cut the supply lines of the Confederate states, Union Soldiers generally had greater access to pay, food, and supplies during the Civil War, while Confederate soldiers struggled with shortages and skyrocketing prices. Subsequently, these differences reflected the industrial capacity that allowed the Union to sustain its armies in contrast to the Confederacy's weaker industry and smaller farms.

On the one hand, Union soldiers generally experienced lower prices in food, opportunities for higher pay, and greater resource availability compared to those struggling in Confederate states. Union soldier Franklin Rosenbery explains in his letter to his father and stepmother that, "I ate 3 hard tack-1 loaf of bread-12 sweet cakes-1/2 lb. of cheese and a few apples... no man ever starved in the Army."<sup>1</sup> This demonstrates the abundance of food and resources available for the soldiers and families, highlighting their stable economic state.

Furthermore, Jacob Middows letter to Elizabeth Middows gives a similar perspective, "Ile

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<sup>1</sup> "Franklin County: Franklin Rosenbery to John Abraham Rosenbery (Father) and Probably Mary Jane Snider (Stepmother), December 28, 1863 - Letters - the Valley of the Shadow." - Letters - The Valley of the Shadow, December 27, 1863. <https://valley.newamericanhistory.org/letters/F1117>.

express 1 hundrad 10 dollars... you may get the children what ever tha want” and “I don't want to ceep so mutch money here... I will send it home... I only keep five or six dollars.”<sup>2</sup> Middow further highlights the fact that since the soldiers received high pay frequently, the soldiers had the oppertunity to send large sums home to their families. Finally, Samuel W. North writes to his father and explains that the soldiers, “have been living on the best the government has we have been drawing plenty of our regular pork beans crackers coffee & sugar with occasionally extras of potatoes or rice onions or dry Apples and vinegar.” They, “get more coffee than we can make use of we have at least five pounds of it ahead in our mess... uncle sam pays for it.”<sup>3</sup> As shown in these letters, the Union Soldiers benefited from a strong industry and transportation systems in the North because they allowed food and supplies to remain available and affordable. So, by cutting off Confederate supply lines, the Union indirectly strengthened its own economic position during the war.

Beyond the economic stability of the soldiers, the Union’s larger industrial capacity played a critical role in sustaining its armies and supporting military success. Historian Benjamin T. Arrington gives his insight into the matters regarding the extent to which industrialization was prevalent between the Union and Confederate. He explains that the uneven concentration of industrialization between the North and the South shaped the outcome of the war by allowing the Union to sustain production throughout the war and grow their transportaion industry. Arrington states, “By 1860, 90 percent of the nation's manufacturing output came from northern states,”

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<sup>2</sup> “Franklin County: Jacob Middows to Elizabeth Middows, August 14, 1864 - Letters - the Valley of the Shadow.” - Letters - The Valley of the Shadow. Accessed December 8, 2025.  
<https://valley.newamericanhistory.org/letters/F6064?sp=original>.

<sup>3</sup> “Franklin County: Samuel W. North to His Father, [Date Unknown] - Letters - the Valley of the Shadow.” - Letters - The Valley of the Shadow. Accessed December 8, 2025.  
<https://valley.newamericanhistory.org/letters/F0667?sp=modern>.

and specifically, “the North produced 3,200 firearms to every 100 produced in the South.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, this imbalance of producing wartime materials led to the Union's sustained military strength and ability to sustain its armies throughout the Civil War. Furthermore, Arrington explains that “the North's larger number of tracks and better ability to construct and move parts gave it a distinct advantage over the South.” In fact, the North’s use of railroads was so essential to their success that the War Department created the United States Military Railroads: They were “designed to build rails to carry troops and supplies as well as operating captured Southern rail lines and equipment.”<sup>5</sup> This industrial advancement further highlights the extent to which Union states industrialized and the achievements they experienced in doing so. Ultimately, the Union’s industrial power translated to military strength because it allowed its armies to remain well supplied and mobile throughout the war.

On the other hand, Confederate soldiers frequently struggled to receive sufficient pay, ample daily rations, and experienced soaring prices of everyday necessities, compared to the successes of those in Union states. D. V. Gilkeson explains these struggles in his account to his brother by stating, “harvest hands are going to be scarce” and “John A Gilkeson and I have made arrangements to get ours off He buys a mower and cuts my grass I buy a reaper and cut his wheat will join hands.”<sup>6</sup> This directly shows how labor shortages are making it difficult to complete essential agricultural tasks. Additionally, Samuel Franklin Carson explains to His Brother that resources “are scarce & hard for the officers to get” and “without paying the cash, & this a great

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<sup>4</sup> Benjamin T. Arrington, *Industry and Economy during the Civil War*, National Park Service, accessed January 24, 2026, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/industry-and-economy-during-the-civil-war.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin T. Arrington, *Industry and Economy during the Civil War*, National Park Service, accessed January 24, 2026, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/industry-and-economy-during-the-civil-war.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> “Augusta County: D. V. Gilkeson to Gilkeson’s Brother (Probably Hugh Gilkeson), June 6, 1864 - Letters - the Valley of the Shadow.” - Letters - The Valley of the Shadow, June 6, 1864. <https://valley.newamericanhistory.org/letters/A1104>.

many can't do at present as they have failed to pay us for some time.”<sup>7</sup> This shows that soldiers are not being paid regularly, and this is a direct economic strain. So, even when goods are available, soldiers can not buy them because money is scarce. Finally, an unknown soldier writes to Annie Harris and states that, “Apples the size of [unclear: milled] walnuts sell at a \$1 per day. Half moon [unclear: pris] with two cherries in 75 cents a piece, other things in proportion. [unclear: Passed] from two four dollars per [unclear: quire] Envelopes [unclear: 1\$] a pack.”<sup>8</sup> This Confederate soldier is highlighting the realities of the exorbitant prices of everyday goods for the soldiers, and the subsequent struggles they are experiencing. Therefore, Union blockades and railroad destruction severely limited Confederate access to goods, leading to shortages and rising prices, causing the Confederacy's inability to pay soldiers to worsen. These conditions made everyday necessities unaffordable, worsening the cost of living for Confederate soldiers and families.

Unlike the developed industries in the North, the Confederacy's limited industrial advancements and reliance on small-scale agriculture greatly constrained its ability to supply soldiers. Benjamin T. Arrington also gives insight into Southern economic challenges, stemming from their limited industrial capacity. He explains that “while the southern states produced two-thirds of the world's supply of cotton, the South had little manufacturing capability, about 29 percent of the railroad tracks, and only 13 percent of the nation's banks.”<sup>9</sup> This highlights that the South did not specialize in large-scale industries or prioritize mobility for their soldiers like the North; rather, they continued with their ways of agricultural production, primarily cotton.

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<sup>7</sup> “Augusta County: Samuel Franklin Carson to His Brother, October 7, 1863 - Letters - the Valley of the Shadow.” - Letters - The Valley of the Shadow, October 7, 1863. <https://valley.newamericanhistory.org/letters/A3009>.

<sup>8</sup> “Augusta County: [Unknown] to Annie Harris, November 27, 1862 - Letters - the Valley of the Shadow.” - Letters - The Valley of the Shadow, November 27, 1862. <https://valley.newamericanhistory.org/letters/A3044>.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin T. Arrington, Industry and Economy during the Civil War, National Park Service, accessed January 24, 2026, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/industry-and-economy-during-the-civil-war.htm>

Additionally, Arrington highlights that “a smaller industrial base, fewer rail lines, and an agricultural economy based upon slave labor made mobilization of resources more difficult.”<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, these specializations lowered their chances of winning the war, because once industrialization becomes a factor for one side, the South’s agricultural economy was unable to compete with producing weapons and fast transportation for their soldiers.

Although the typical narrative portrays the Union as economically stable and the Confederacy as overwhelmed by high prices and resource scarcity, wartime letters reveal that this economic divide was not always absolute. For example, Confederate soldier G. C. Brown explains the luxuries the Confederacy has received in an account to his mother and sister by explaining, “We are daily getting large supplies. All these little Dutch Yankee towns are full of things we require, and we have clothing, shoes, provisions, letter paper, even in great quantities,” and “yesterday I purchased a large lot of dry goods comprising three dresses for H.S.B. & two for Mother.”<sup>11</sup> So, Confederate soldiers also experienced financial and material success, which challenges the common perception that Confederate soldiers solely struggled financially during the war. On the other hand, at times, Union soldiers struggled to receive adequate pay and ample resources while out in war. J. Milton Crawford explains these struggles to his Parents by stating that resources are, “very scarce we only get about five quarts of oats a day and no hay and for grazing there is no grass.” and “this is a dull place we cannot get any papers nor any thing else when you write I want you to send me some stansps for I can't get any here.”<sup>12</sup> Given these

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<sup>10</sup> Benjamin T. Arrington, *Industry and Economy during the Civil War*, National Park Service, accessed January 24, 2026, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/industry-and-economy-during-the-civil-war.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> “Franklin County: G. C. Brown to Sister and Mother, June 25, 1863 – Letters – the Valley of the Shadow.” – Letters – The Valley of the Shadow, June 25, 1863. [https://valley.newamericanhistory.org/letters/\[insert-link-if-available\]](https://valley.newamericanhistory.org/letters/[insert-link-if-available]).

<sup>12</sup> “Franklin County: J. Milton Crawford to His Parents, May 18, 1865 - Letters - the Valley of the Shadow.” - Letters - The Valley of the Shadow. Accessed December 9, 2025. <https://valley.newamericanhistory.org/letters/F0672>.

contrary accounts, it is impossible to draw an absolute conclusion regarding the economic state of soldiers in war because neither side experienced constant success or failure. This is because Confederate soldiers could temporarily access abundant food in Northern territory, while Union soldiers sometimes faced shortages in Southern regions. Therefore, these exceptions show that economic outcomes in war are not always consistent or predictable.

The common narrative portrays the Union's exceptional economic success regarding resource availability, pay for soldiers, and low prices for goods, contrasted with the Confederacy's struggles within the same areas. But, as we come to learn, this conclusion is not always absolute because not all aspects of war are always predictable. It is easy to draw an overarching, stereotypical conclusion, in this case, stating that the Union thrived economically and the Confederacy struggled. But in doing so, it overlooks the contrary side of the story where the Union also struggled with receiving pay and resources, while the Confederacy had an abundance thereof at its disposal. Therefore, it is impossible to draw an indefinite conclusion regarding the successes and struggles of Union and Confederate soldiers and families because, in doing so, half of the story becomes untold.

Providence and Polarization:  
The Religious Fracture of Civil War America

Rose M. Exum

Dr. Najdek

AP United States History

January 26, 2026

By the dawn of the Civil War, the United States was a nation drunk on the legacy of the Second Great Awakening, a movement which elevated the national significance of religious identity and popularized the ideologies of Millennialism<sup>1</sup> and Providentialism. For many residents of the predominantly Unionist Franklin County, Pennsylvania, and the primarily Confederate Augusta County, Virginia, the Civil War was viewed through the lens of these religious beliefs, prompting various interpretations of human duty that ranged from abolitionist eradication of injustices as preparation for the Second Coming to Southern undertakings for the Biblically ordained defense of a “Christian nation” against secularism. While many people within these two counties interpreted hardships through religious conviction and invoked God’s authority to validate their opposing ideologies, Confederates tended both to emphasize divine favoritism and vilify their adversary, whereas Unionists elevated individual moral responsibility.

Despite their diverging political allegiances, written records from both Confederates and Unionists demonstrate a unified interpretation of wartime hardships as divinely guided trials. Shared Christian convictions and theodicy allowed individuals to glean meaning, comfort, and purpose from suffering and thereby elevate it from the realm of randomized misfortune. A series of letters written from Confederate soldier John P. Dull to his wife helps illustrate this worldview, as his letters consistently emphasize faith in God’s wise judgment and protection despite personal suffering. In a letter dated January 14, 1865, Dull declared that he had contracted an illness and lost around 25 pounds very rapidly. Despite personal tribulations, he expressed gratitude for remaining alive and advised his wife, Giney, to “cheer up and trust to the

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<sup>1</sup> This refers specifically to Postmillennialism, which was the most common form among reformers of the era, the belief that Christians must morally purify or improve the world *before* the “Thousand Year Reign” of Christ. In the Civil War context, this ideology drove Unionists to view the abolition of slavery and the preservation of the Republic as essential acts of justice necessary to prepare the foundation for God’s imminent kingdom on earth.

Lord for the better though things look glo[omy] every where.”<sup>2</sup> This sentiment, together with his statement that “though things seem to go hard here it is our lot and it becomes us to endeavor to submit to it trusting in him,” precedes Dull’s assertion of the necessity to minimize attachments to the “fleeting world” in favor of faith in God’s wise supervision<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, Confederate soldier Robert Yates Ramsey wrote from Prisoners’ Camp in Point Lookout, Maryland in 1864 to inform an unspecified acquaintance that, despite incarceration and banishment from the company of his friends, he “rejoices to feel the assurance that God is with [them all].”<sup>4</sup> He portrays imprisonment and alienation from those he loves as a spiritual trial from a loving God. Similar convictions are found in correspondence from Unionists of Franklin County. In a letter written to his daughter in 1862, Union sympathizer Jacob Stouffer describes finding consolation amid suffering with stories from the Bible, as “all true followers and Shepherds of Christ’s little flock have received [trials] through all times.”<sup>5</sup> He advises his children to console themselves during family crises and “gloomy times,” promising “great shall be their reward in heaven.” Stouffer concludes with prayers that God will “bestow upon [them] Strength,” reiterating the scriptural promise of future compensation for present suffering. As with the Confederates, many Unionists espoused Providentialism, believing God actively oversaw and protected them; this belief derandomized suffering, allowing both sides to find meaning and endure.

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<sup>2</sup> Dull, John P. *Augusta County: John P. Dull to Giney Dull, January 14, 1865*. Letter. From Valley of the Shadow, *The War Years|Spring 1861–Spring 1865*. January 14, 1865.

<https://valley.newamericanhistory.org/letters/A6132?sp=modern>

<sup>3</sup> Dull perhaps references Ars Moriendi, a Christian precept originally from the medieval era but commonly adopted during the Civil War as a psychological coping mechanism to process and prepare for the likelihood of death.

<sup>4</sup> Ramsey, Robert Yates. *Augusta County: Robert Yates Ramsey to Maggie, October 17, 1864*. Letter. From Valley of the Shadow, *The War Years|Spring 1861–Spring 1865*. October 17, 1864.

<https://valley.newamericanhistory.org/letters/A1401>

<sup>5</sup> Stouffer, Jacob. *Franklin County: Jacob Stouffer to Catherine Miller, November 2, 1862*. Letter. From Valley of the Shadow, *The War Years|Spring 1861–Spring 1865*. November 2, 1862.

<https://valley.newamericanhistory.org/letters/F6501?sp=original>

Correspondences also yield evidence showing that Unionists and Confederates both invoked God’s authority to validate their opposing ideologies and causes. Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson, a Confederate Major General and military officer, exemplified the rigidity of Providentialism; writing to a friend in 1862, he described his troops as being “entrusted” to him by God and viewed his “military calling” as an instrument for actualizing divine glory.<sup>6</sup> Jackson’s rhetoric emphatically suggests that God’s agenda necessitates a Confederate victory. This sentiment was echoed by George Junkin, a Presbyterian minister in the Fourth Virginia Infantry, who asserted in 1861 that because “God made this government,” he would “not let man destroy it.”<sup>7</sup> Junkin’s claim serves to sacralize the Confederate cause and validate political secession, framing it as the defense of a divinely mandated establishment. Similarly, the use of divine sovereignty to validate political alignment is expressed by Unionists. Franklin Rosenbery, a Union soldier who left an extensive correspondence with his father, frequently wrote about fulfilling God’s will through military service; in a letter from November 15, 1863, Rosenbery stated that he felt “satisfied that [he] is doing the will of God.”<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the aforementioned Jacob Stouffer urged his children to “fulfil[sic] [their] several callings to the honour and glory of God,” thereby implying that living faithfully and serving well, including in a wartime context, aligns with God’s purposes. Neither side believed in God’s neutrality. In fact, each read its own stance as being the one aligned with divine will. By this rationale, not only is compromise sinful, but “spiritual obedience” is used to justify the conflict resulting from split political ideologies.

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<sup>6</sup> Jackson, Thomas J. *Augusta County: Thomas J. Jackson to Francis McFarland, July 31, 1862*. Letter. From Valley of the Shadow, *The War Years|Spring 1861–Spring 1865*. July 31, 1862. <https://valley.newamericanhistory.org/letters/A9511>

<sup>7</sup> Junkin, George. *Augusta County: George Junkin to Francis McFarland, January 19, 1861*. Letter. From Valley of the Shadow, *The Eve of War|Fall 1859-Spring 1861*. January 19, 1861. <https://valley.newamericanhistory.org/letters/A9508>

<sup>8</sup> Rosenbery, Franklin. *Franklin County: Franklin Rosenbery to John Abraham Rosenbery (father), November 15, 1863*. Letter. From Valley of the Shadow, *The War Years|Spring 1861–Spring 1865*. November 15, 1863. <https://valley.newamericanhistory.org/letters/F1111>

Confederates of Augusta County often assumed God's active favoritism toward their cause, a belief rooted in the theology of a national covenant<sup>9</sup>—the conviction that the South was a “chosen people” whose success was divinely guaranteed. By contrast, many Unionists operated under a moral contract, viewing divine favor as contingent on the pursuit of justice. Jackson interpreted his military success through a teleological lens, considering it a providential certainty inherent in the South's national covenant and attributing Confederate victories—and his prediction for their ultimate triumph—to God's orchestration. The key distinction between Unionist Providentialism and Confederate confidence lies in the latter's assumption of divine favoritism, a nuance illustrated quite vividly in the impassioned diary entries of staunch pro-Confederate Nancy Emerson. In one entry, Emerson wrote that God's judgment had been enacted upon the North “because of their declension from him,” and retribution for the Confederacy “[would] most assuredly come” due to God's sacred relationship with the Southerners.<sup>10</sup> Emerson then praises the Lord for sparing Confederates from Unionist “barbarians,” and beseeches God to “cleanse them & deliver them from the doom that hangs over [the] land” of their “ungodly nation.” In asserting that Confederates would be spared God's wrath while the Union would be punished for failing to secure His favor, Emerson articulates a broader Confederate conviction—also evident in the correspondence of Dull and Ramsey—that divine favoritism assured the righteousness and eventual vindication of their cause.

Conversely, many Unionists of Franklin believed individual, personal moral obedience facilitated God's favor toward them. Rosenbery writes that “everything works for good to them

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<sup>9</sup> The national covenant was a theological framework prevalent in the Confederate South that interpreted the Confederacy as an establishment in a divinely sanctioned, covenantal relationship with God. Confederate covenant theology was modeled on the biblical conception of Israel being God's chosen nation.

<sup>10</sup> Emerson, Nancy. *Augusta County: Diary of Nancy Emerson (1862-1864)*. Diary. From Valley of the Shadow, *The War Years*|Spring 1861–Spring 1865. July 4, 1862. <https://valley.newamericanhistory.org/diaries/EmeDiary>

that love God,”<sup>11</sup> implying obedience was necessary to secure God’s approval. In a similar vein, Unionist Stouffer describes himself as being “resigned to [God’s] will.”<sup>12</sup> Stouffer’s emphasis on personal submission demonstrates a clear distinction from Confederate models of faith, revealing a theology grounded in accountability, in which divine favor was understood to be conditional. Furthermore, a diary entry from Union-sympathizer Rachel Cormany, written on June 26, 1863, presents further evidence of the prevailing belief in submission to God’s plan. As a wife living alone on the homefront, Cormany documented her observations of Confederate troops and cannons passing by her location and noted the futility of escape, declaring that she would take her chances and “trust in God as [their] savior.”<sup>13</sup> Despite documenting anxiety regarding the whereabouts of her husband, Cormany prioritized humble dependence on God and her faith. Thus, Union emphasis on moral obedience and supplication fostered resilient, individualized endurance, while Confederate assumptions of divine favoritism fortified triumphalism.

A final distinction between the Confederate and Union residents of Augusta and Franklin counties emerges in their moral evaluation of the enemy: Confederates often adopted a posture of religious absolutism, using faith to vilify the Union, while Unionists expressed restraint, focusing on a moral critique over purely theological condemnation. The aforementioned Emerson directed her vitriol toward the people of “Yankeedom” for their presumed disobedience and theological pride alike, castigating Northerners for having attempted to be “wise above what is written” and declaring that they subsequently have “throw[n] away” the Bible.<sup>14</sup> In addition to absolutism on religious grounds, Emerson’s entries reveal a belief that the Civil War itself was a punishment from God upon the North for its moral deterioration. Finally, in an entry from March 6 of the

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<sup>11</sup> Rosenberg, Franklin. *Franklin County: Franklin Rosenbery to John Abraham Rosenbery (father) and probably Mary Jane Snider (stepmother)*. December 25, 1863. <https://valley.newamericanhistory.org/letters/F1116>

<sup>12</sup> Stouffer, Jacob. November 2, 1862. <https://valley.newamericanhistory.org/letters/F6501?sp=original>

<sup>13</sup> Cormany, Rachel. *Franklin County: Diary of Rachel Cormany (1863)*. Diary. From Valley of the Shadow, *The War Years|Spring 1861–Spring 1865*. Year 1863. <https://valley.newamericanhistory.org/diaries/FD1006>

<sup>14</sup> Emerson, *Augusta County: Diary of Nancy Emerson (1862-1864)*.

same year, she wrote that their land “had been desecrated & desolated by the ruthless Yankees,” framing Unionists as atheistic, brutal, and doomed in a demonstration of religious superiority and moral absolutism. Emerson’s rhetoric suggests that many Confederates viewed their mission as a spiritual exorcism intended to purge the nation of what was perceived to be an ungodly presence. These attitudes were not limited to Confederate civilians—further evidence appears in the letters of Augusta County soldier Clinton Hatcher. In a letter to Mary Anna Sibert, a potential love interest, Hatcher wrote, “You ask if I do not think a just God will forgive those who kill the enemies of the South,” and immediately answered in the negative: he claimed no forgiveness was necessary for “ridding the earth of such as in defiance of justice and religion.” Hatcher continued with martial zeal, echoing his comrade Pendleton; “God have mercy on their sinful souls, and may this volley kill a thousand; fire boys.”<sup>15</sup> Hatcher’s words reveal an ideology whereby killing Unionists was a religious duty, divinely excused. By contrast, many residents of Franklin county demonstrated greater restraint in their assessments of the Confederates and their faith. For example, Cormany wrote about her trust in God during the Confederate advance without any vilification of Southern faith. Rosenberg wrote about deserters as being “worse than rebels,” but focused on his own duty toward God. This shows a practical critique from Unionists as opposed to purely theological attacks. Confederate vilification weaponized faith to demonize Unionists as atheistic barbarians; conversely, Union restraint highlighted individual piety over rhetoric and theological condemnation of their enemy. While it evades reason to conclude that Unionists never vitriolically criticized Confederates, such critiques appear to focus on practical or moral failings rather than on religious devotion itself; Confederate treason was sufficient ‘sin’ against the sanctified Republic as to render theological antagonization of Southern faith redundant.

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<sup>15</sup> Clinton Hatcher, *Augusta County: Clinton Hatcher to Mary Anna Sibert, August 26, 1861*. Letter. From Valley of the Shadow, *The War Years|Spring 1861-Spring 1865*. August 26, 1861. <https://valley.newamericanhistory.org/letters/A6517>

Ultimately, religion profoundly affected both the domestic and public spheres of life during the Civil War era, influencing moral judgment, political allegiance, and interpretations of justice. Rising Protestant faith, infused with Second Great Awakening ideals, offered Americans a framework through which they could understand suffering. The construct of religion assigned purpose to the meaningless, the mundane, and the disturbing. In this way, Christianity united American settlers, offering them shared values and allowing them to glean order and comfort from whatever personal tribulations ailed them. However, by encouraging believers to view the United States as a potential instrument of God's kingdom on earth, this religious movement also transformed national issues—such as slavery, secession, and governance—into moral imperatives. As a result, political compromise appeared not merely undesirable but also sinful, as though ignorant and damned mortals were turning their backs on God's wisdom to offer their moral opposition a degree of leverage in the nation's future. Polarization was exacerbated by the Second Great Awakening's spark of Millennialist thought, which preached that Americans had a sacred obligation to ready the country for Christ's Second Coming. By linking moral action to national destiny and emphasizing the eradication of perceived injustices, or even the perpetrators thereof, these beliefs permeated political disputes and transformed the issue of abolition into one that inevitably culminated in a Civil War. The patterns found in this paper—coherent across generals, civilians, soldiers, men, women, and residents of the homefront—complexify faith as being both a unifying and diversifying force. In doing so, they complicate any assumption that faith functioned uniformly, illustrating how a shared religious framework produced divergent moral logics that drew political ideology in opposing directions. Fundamentally, these moral divisions deepened Civil War polarization and transformed political conflict into a holy war in which each side claimed God's mandate, sanctioning irreconcilable visions of nationhood.

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<https://valley.newamericanhistory.org/diaries/FD1006>

**Elections and Polling Accuracy: A Retrospective on the 2024 Presidential Election, Concurrent Public Mood, and Predictions for the 2026 NC-11 House Race**

Noah Bialik, Rose Exum, Cooper Green, Max Posnock  
AP US Government and Politics  
Dr. Carl Najdek  
3 February 2026

## **Table of Contents**

This project has been designed to analyze the national macro-level trends, down to specific local examples, and finally, broad sociological trends.

Section I introduces the topic of this paper, outlining methods used and final goals.

Section II dissects the 2024 presidential election data.

Section III analyzes the predicted polls about the 2026 North Carolina District 11 House race.

Section IV utilizes Gallup Poll Social Series (GPSS) data to find trends and correlations within voter perceptions of various groups (media, government, etc.)

Section V synthesizes data from sections II-IV to provide a final conclusion on the future of political efficacy in the United States.

## I- Introduction

The current landscape of American political forecasting has recently been defined by a growing tension between sophisticated data collection methods and unpredictable outcomes. Following the 2024 election cycle, questions regarding the reliability of public opinion polls have come to the forefront of political discourse, as the final results have not been supported by traditional research methods. This research project offers a multi-dimensional analysis of the reliability of election forecasting and voter sentiment through four distinct lenses.

### **Methods Practiced:**

Our research employs a comparative, longitudinal approach to analyze data from the 2016-2024 election cycles, enabling examination of both the accuracy of specific public opinion polls and their broader trends over time.

- Cross-Sample Evaluation: We contrast results taken from samples of registered voters (RV) and likely voters (LV), finding biases and resulting reliability differences between the two polling groups.
- Comparative, Longitudinal Analysis: We analyze three major publications, Atlas Intel, Morning Consult, and ABC/Ipsos, and their data based on the 2024 Presidential election cycle. This permits us to take “house bias” (systemic biases repeated by an organization) into account and the reliability of their predictions.
- Case Study Application: We applied our previous findings to our local area, providing a glimpse into the reliability of campaign-commissioned polls for North Carolina’s 11th District House election.
- Trend Synthesis: Finally, we use the GPSS to reveal relationships between institutional distrust and evolving issue prominence in response to major events/influences.

### **Our Goals:**

The primary objective of this research project was to move past the superficial results of election cycles, instead focusing on overall American political participation. Specifically, we aim to:

- Identify the most reliable forecasting models by measuring the predictions for the 2024 election cycle against the real results for their respective elections, discovering why groups like Atlas Intel were more successful in their predictions.
- Evaluate shortcomings with in-house early-cycle polling, highlighting how campaign bias can make predictions for the 2026 elections fundamentally unreliable.
- Assess overall American national satisfaction by analyzing polls with topics including economic perception, healthcare satisfaction, and concerns over crime and immigration, to see how specific policies affect the American perception of government and their lives in general.

## II- Longitudinal Polling Data on the 2024 US Presidential Election

The 2024 US Presidential election ended in a decisive victory for Republican President Donald Trump over Democratic candidate Kamala Harris, as seen in Figure 1 below.

### 2024 Presidential Election

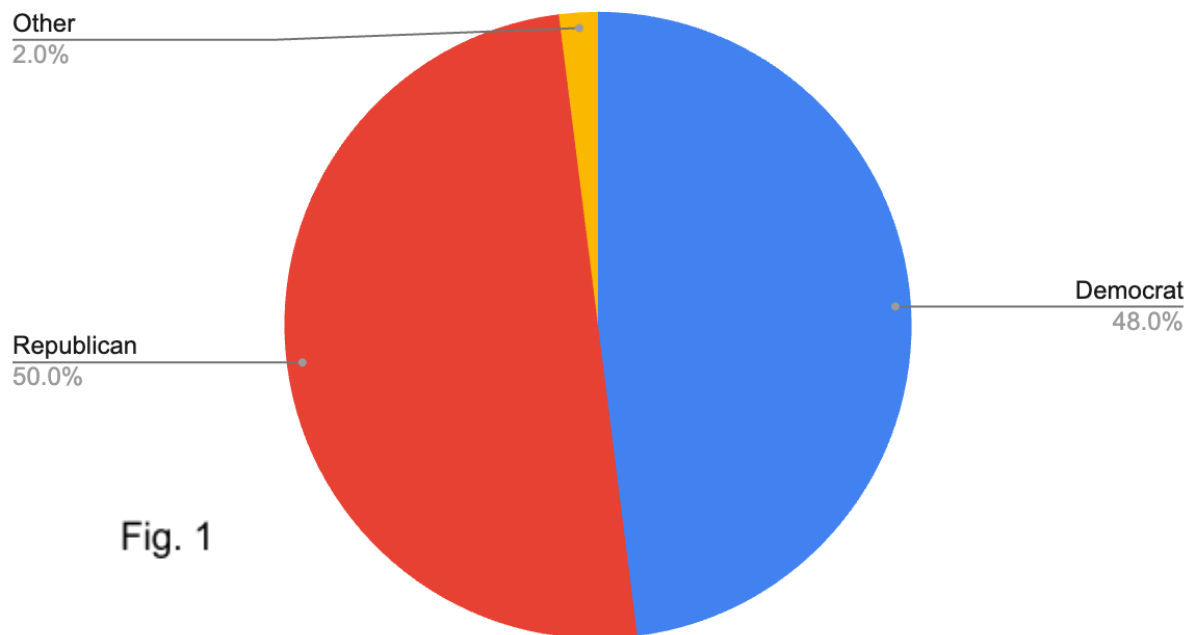


Fig. 1

Many public opinion polls predicted various results throughout the election cycle, with a national average of polls predicting Harris leading by just over a percentage point at the close of the campaign. Below are the longitudinal results and data analysis of three organizations' polls throughout the 2024 election cycle.

### Atlas Intel

Background: Atlas Intel is a Brazilian data collection and analysis company that conducts polls throughout South America, North America, Europe, and Africa. They are regarded by experts as an extremely reliable pollster, and have provided accurate predictions over the last two election cycles, being the most reliable pollster in the 2020 Presidential Election, and were the second most accurate pollster in 2024 (Wikipedia- Atlas Intel).

## 2024 Presidential Longitudinal Poll Data: Atlas Intel

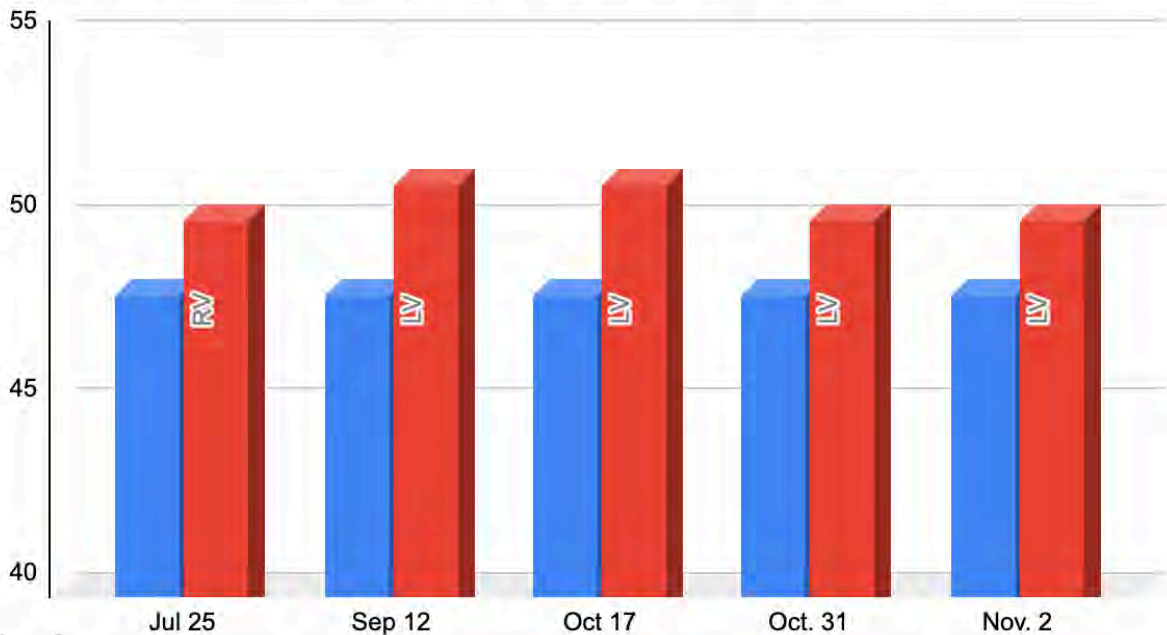


Fig. 2

Polling results and Analysis: As seen in Figure 2 above, Atlas Intel correctly predicted Trump's two-point victory over Harris, not only in the final conducted poll, but throughout the collected longitudinal data. Additionally striking is the continuity that Atlas Intel's polls found; every single poll represented here had Trump at 50 or 51 percent of the vote, and had Harris at 48 percent every single poll. This remained despite polling two different populi: RV (registered voters), used for the July 25th poll, and LV (likely voters- this is generally viewed as the more reliable method), used for the remaining polls. Atlas Intel had a middling sample sizes out of the three organizations used, peaking at 4180 participants for the October 17 poll (see appendix for detailed sample sizes for all polls used). Additionally, its international headquarters could give it a more objective view of the American populace, also perhaps leading to more accurate results. Either way, Atlas Intel did an impressive job in predicting the election results, both close to the election and from afar.

### Morning Consult

Background: Specializing in providing businesses with surveys, data, and news, Morning Consult has branches in NYC, Washington, DC, Chicago, and San Francisco. It performed above average on the 2016 election, though it still predicted Hillary Clinton incorrectly defeating President Trump, and performed below average in the 2018 and 2022 midterms (Wikipedia-Morning Consult).

## 2024 Presidential Longitudinal Poll Data: Morning Consult

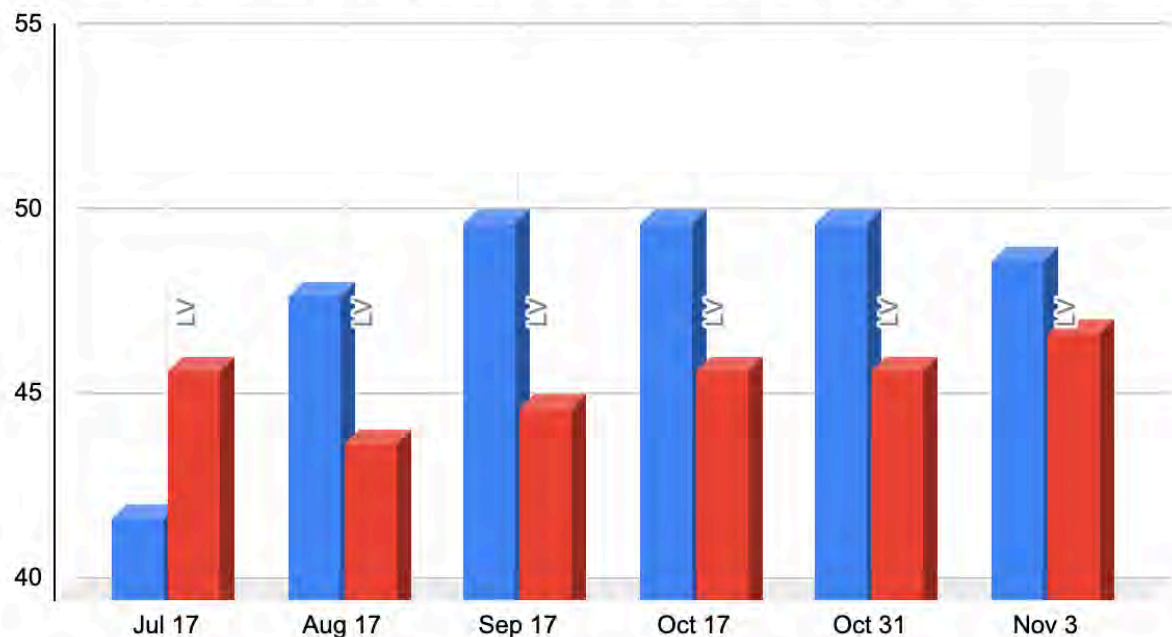


Fig. 3

Polling Results and Analysis: Morning Consult quite thoroughly predicted a Kamala Harris victory throughout the election cycle, but did show Trump gaining steam at the end, with 2 percentage points separating them on election day as compared to the maximum of 5 percentage points in mid-September. One unique feature of Morning Consult's data is that it contains polls before President Joe Biden dropped out of the race on July 21. It is clear the instant momentum that Harris was able to generate in the voter base, with a 6 point increase between Biden's polling numbers right before he dropped out and Harris's numbers a month later. Morning Consult's polling method - running constant polls and using the combined data from the last three days - led to a large sample size of almost 9000 participants in the Nov. 3 poll. This, however, did not lead to an accurate prediction of the election, with the significantly skewed left results matching inaccuracies throughout the 2016 election cycle.

## ABC/Ipsos

Background: Founded in France in 1975, Ipsos is a data supplier and consulting firm for major corporations around the world. Ipsos runs polls for many major news organizations, including Reuters, The Washington Post, and ABC news, where the polls used here were found. (Ipsos-About Us). Ipsos has a strong record of polling accuracy in Europe and the UK, but has found slightly less success in the United States, where they have historically had a slight liberal bias (Media Bias).

### 2024 Presidential Longitudinal Poll Data: ABC/Ipsos 1/2 (LV)

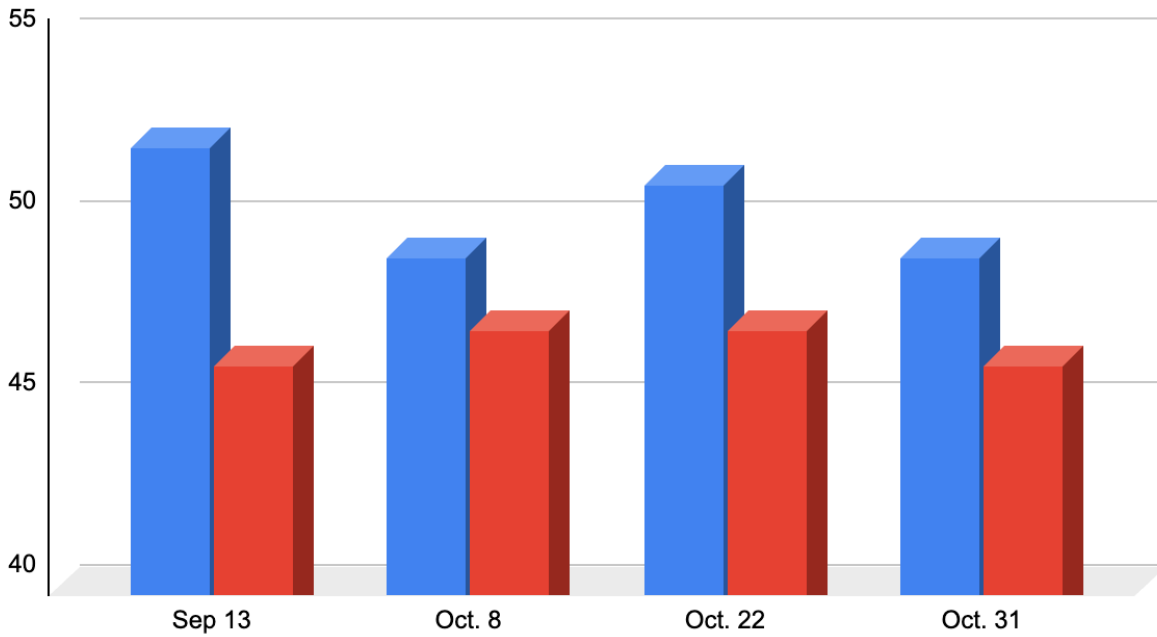


Fig. 4

### 2024 Presidential Longitudinal Poll Data: ABC/Ipsos 2/2 (RV)

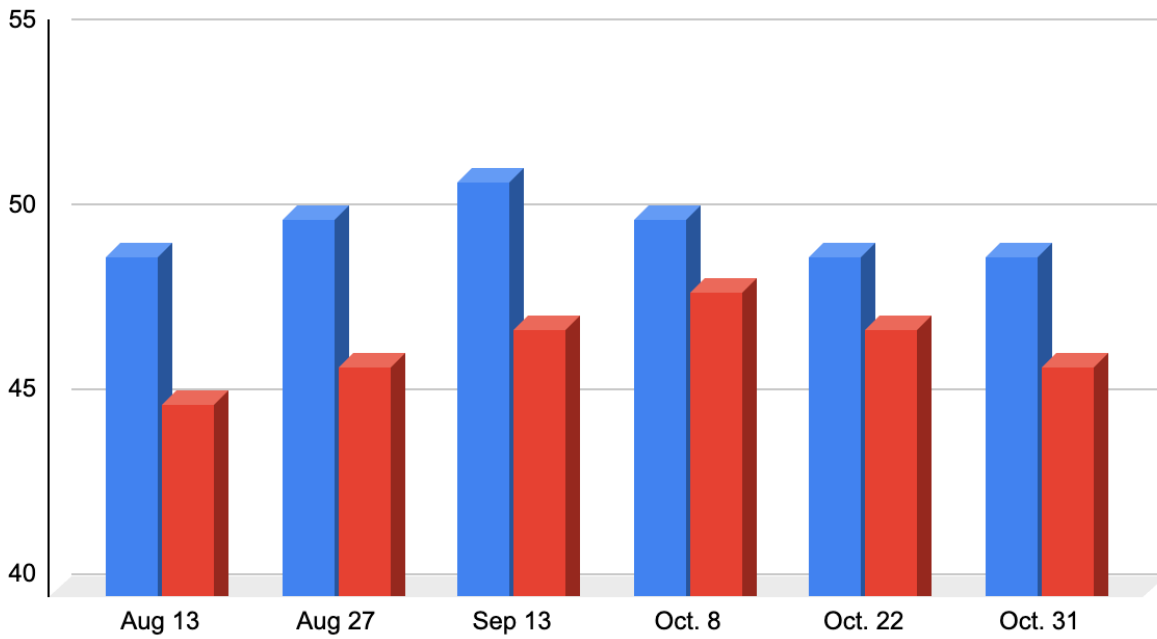


Fig. 5

Polling Results and Analysis: ABC/Ipsos published data for both registered voters and likely voters, allowing for an interesting comparison of the two methods. Both methods had Harris definitively leading Trump for the entirety of the election cycle, however, when comparing the four polls that Ipsos separated into RV and LV, the registered voters were closer to the actual result in 2, the likely voters were closer in 1, and the two polls garnered equal results once. This admittedly small sample size does not show the discrepancy in accuracy that is generally perceived as existing between the two polling methods. The two methods do mirror each other, however, with the biggest gap between the candidates in both graphs occurring in the September 13 poll, and the closest poll was October 8. Similarly to the other polls, Ipsos did show Harris losing momentum at the end of the race, with a campaign low 49 percent for her in both of the final polls.

### Overall and Comparative Conclusions

With the exception of Atlas Intel, each of the other polls we used showed Harris leading by a significant margin throughout the election cycle. By election day, both Ipsos and Morning Consult showed Harris' percentage at 49% of the American vote, a number closely resembling her 48% real election number. The difference, then, was primarily in which way the undecided voters leaned, with both polls reporting 4-5% of their responses were undecided or would vote for someone else. Thus, Trump's ability to capture many voters who were undecided or ready to vote third party, even close to election day, might have played a role in how different his numbers looked from predictive results.

### Some Important Dates

On September 10, Harris and Trump participated in their lone debate of the season. The numbers depict mixed results. Atlas Intel's results remained relatively stable, Trump moved up one percentage point from its previous poll. Both Morning Consult and Ipsos, however, showed a win for Harris, with her polling moving up two percentage points from a month earlier. This could also be that people were simply forming more concrete opinions of which way to lean at this point; both Morning Consult and Ipsos show reduced numbers of undecided or third party voters than their respective previous polls. Post-debate opinion polling did show a comprehensive debate win for Harris, however the relative stability in polling numbers could demonstrate the unimportance of the debates at actually changing minds. Vice President Candidates JD Vance and Tim Walz held their sole debate on October 1, another event that had little effect on overall polling numbers, with no significant changes in any of the sites used.

### III - Longitudinal Data on the 2026 District 11 House Election

Unlike presidential races, early polling for House elections is extremely limited. For North Carolina's 11th Congressional District, as of February 1, 2026, only one publicly available poll exists (Figure 6). This poll has Republican incumbent Chuck Edwards a hair behind the Democratic challenger Jamie Ager, with a tenth of the people remaining undecided (Ballotpedia).

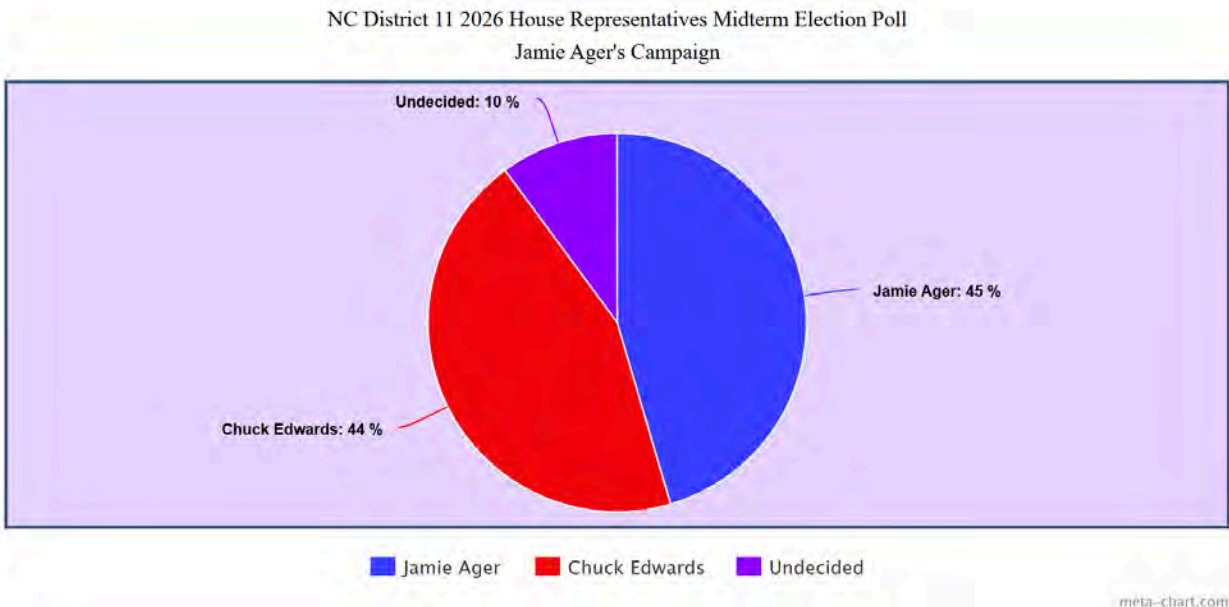


Fig 6

However, this poll is likely an unreliable indicator of what will actually happen, for a number of reasons. The first is the inherent bias that comes with the company that put together the poll: Jamie Ager's Campaign. Since Jamie Ager hasn't even been elected through the Democratic primary to run against Chuck Edwards yet, this poll was likely released as a strategy to gain more support and funding leading up to the primary. This poll could also be inaccurate due to its sample size being both small and unknown. With only 500 people surveyed, we cannot get a completely accurate picture of how people truly feel, and Jamie Ager's Campaign did not release how they found the people to ask. Thus, the poll could be wildly different if repeated again. Finally, this poll was conducted in December of 2025, many months before the election and primaries. This means the results cannot be properly applied to the real midterm election, as it was polled when public awareness and turnout likelihood aren't properly predicted. This single early poll should be interpreted only as an early snapshot of the 2026 NC-11 midterm election, rather than a reliable prediction.

## IV - Public Opinion Polling: Evolution of Political Efficacy and National Issues

We begin by analyzing overall satisfaction with the government to establish the public perceptions of the fundamental institution that influences polling results, then we examine trust in individual branches in order to diagnose potential sources of dissatisfaction. We follow up these results with trust in the accuracy of mass media, the intermediary defining how people interpret government performance. From here, we transition to political identity by measuring party affiliation and ideological lean—how Americans align themselves within a system they may distrust. We then pivot to agenda-setting with polls on the most important national issue and which party is seen as best equipped to handle those issues, and finally, we conclude with issue-specific data on the economy, inflation, immigration, crime, healthcare, poverty, unity, and other mentioned issues. All polling data has been collected from Gallup.

### 1. National mood/satisfaction within the country:

Trend – Total figures for “satisfied” and “very satisfied” peak in 2020 at a combined 41% as seen in Fig. 7 below; after that point the data demonstrates rapidly increasing rates of dissatisfaction that have never been restored to pre-2020 levels. The level reporting “very dissatisfied” remains about 50% in 2025.

Likely influences – 2016-2019 polarization and Trump-era conflict; 2020’s brief economic and stimulus optimism before the fallout of Covid-19; 2021 onward marked by pandemic aftermath, record and rising inflation, and political conflict.

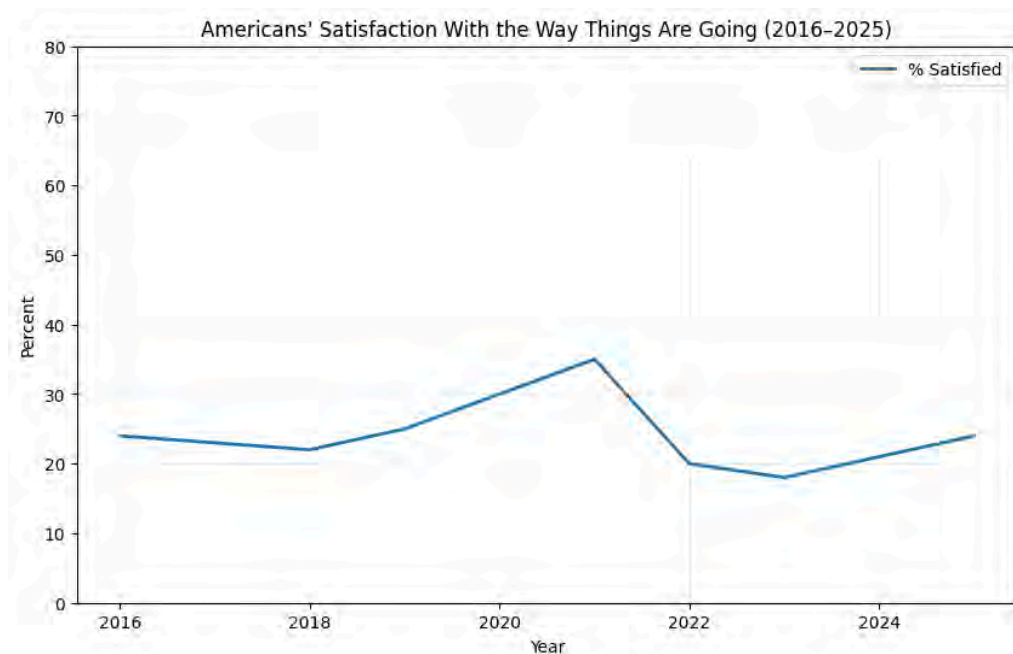


Fig. 7

2. Trust in individual federal government branches:

Trend – There is moderate trust at the start of the period; no measurement above 50% trust by the mid-2020s in any category. Trust in the legislative branch markedly remains the lowest throughout, plateauing to the low-30s by 2025. Trust in the judicial branch is the highest, but drops from high-60s in 2018–2019 downward to 49% in 2025. Finally, trust in the executive branch rapidly drops between 2016 and 2017 and then hovers around the low-40s thereafter. As broader trends, trust in all branches deteriorates. Likely influences – Partisan swings with Trump (2017–2020) and Biden (2021–2024), consistent presidential over-promising and under-delivering, two impeachment cycles (2019 and 2021 respectively), the 2020 pandemic response, the Supreme Court’s high-salience rulings (esp. Dobbs in 2022), and long-term frustration with Congress.

3. Trust in the accuracy and fairness of mass media:

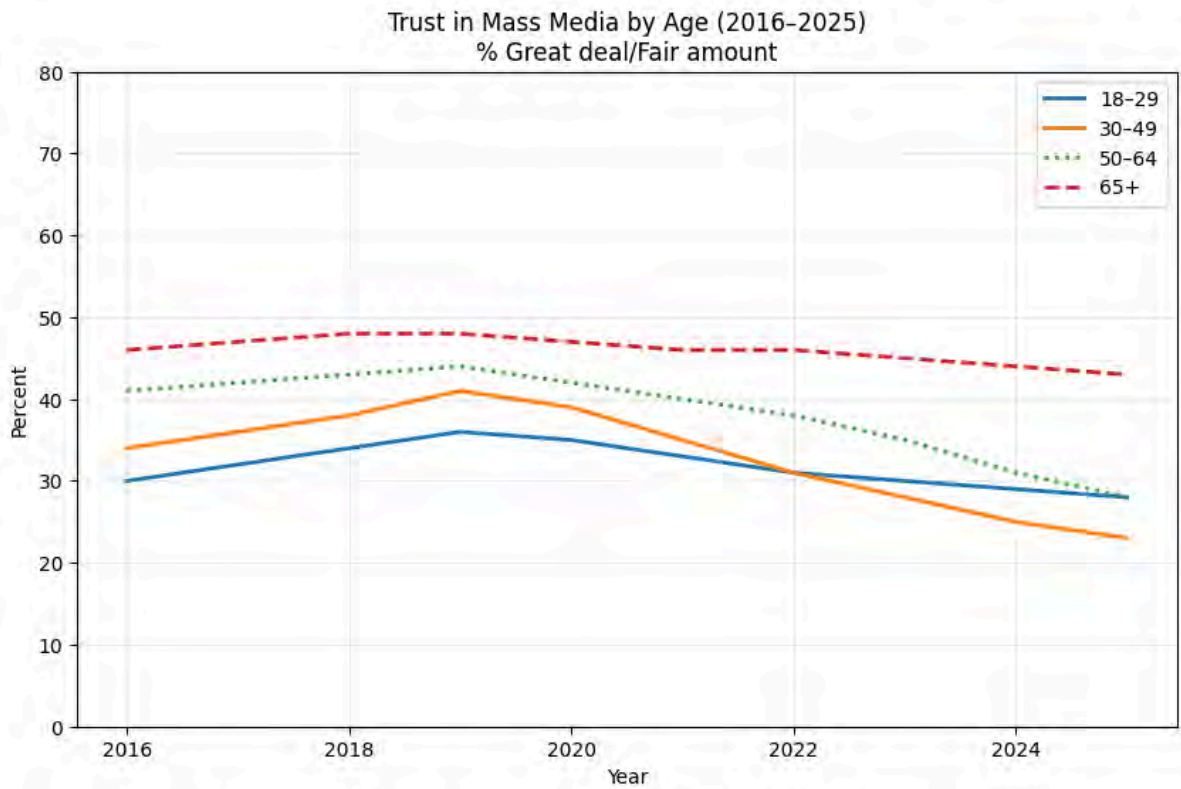


Fig. 8

Trend – Trust declines steadily from 45% (2018) having either a great deal or a fair amount down to 28% (2025), while “none at all” ascends to 39% in 2023 and stabilizes in the 30s. Confidence in accuracy and lack of political bias has decreased. Analyzing by

age demographics, 18-29, 30-49, and 50-64 experienced declining trust in mass media since 2016, although for 65+, trust remained relatively stable as seen in Fig. 8 above. Likely influences – The 2016 election, “fake news” rhetoric, rapidly-spreading social media misinformation, post-2020 election disputes, pandemic misinformation wars, partisan media ecosystems and the prevalence of cable news sources.

4. Party identification, Republican, Democrat, or Independent:

Trend – While the number of Republican-affiliated people has consistently hovered around the range of 26-29%, with minor annual fluctuations, polling demonstrates that Democrat identification gradually decreased down from 31% to 27%, matching Republican identification in 2025 and making way for a rising number of Independents.

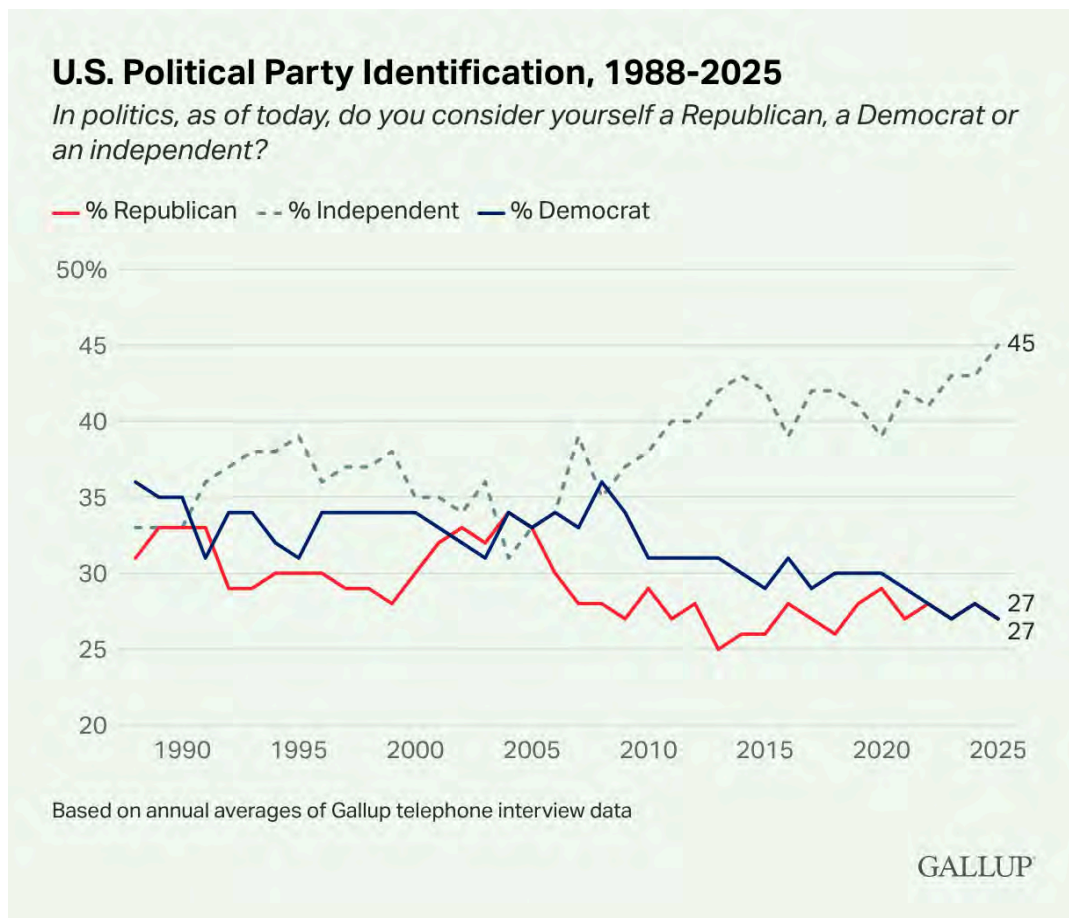


Fig. 9

Likely influences – A lack of political efficacy, rising disillusionment with both parties, negative partisanship, and a sense of “neither party represents me,” especially after multiple highly polarizing cycles and institutional drift.

5. Experimental open-ended “most important problem”:

Trend – Top mentions include government/leadership (mid-20s), immigration (teens to 20%), economy/inflation in low- to mid-teens. “Government/poor leadership” is consistently the single highest-named specific problem (24–28% most months).

Likely influences – Economic uncertainty, inflation, political gridlock, and immigration salience in news and campaigns; broad perception that “the system/government” itself is failing, consistent blame of the opposing side when its members hold political office.

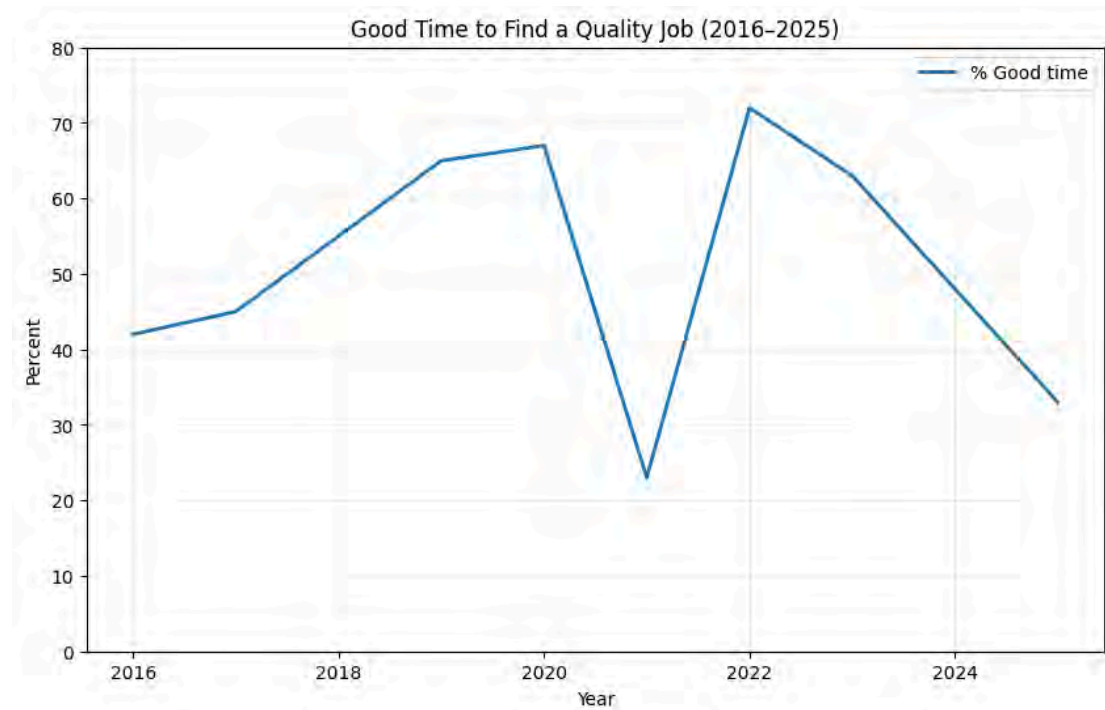


Fig. 10

6. Economic perceptions + governmental interference/role:

Trend – Clear deterioration. In 2019, 55% rated economic conditions positively (excellent or good); only 12% reported poor performance. In 2020, perceptions were mixed; 2025 shows only 21% rating economic conditions positively and nearly 50% reporting “poor.” Major dip in ratings of the job market observable around 2020 (see Fig. 10), likely due to the unprecedented 14.8% surge in unemployment in April of the same year.<sup>1</sup>

Trend – Majority reports government is “doing too much” during the entire period.

Likely influences – Post-2016 polarization, particularly on governmental power, pandemic policy interventions during 2020-2021, inflation and spending debates, and long-term conservative skepticism of federal power.

<sup>1</sup> This is based on statistics from Gene Falk et al., “Unemployment Rates During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” CRS Report No. R46554 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, August 20, 2021).

7. Crime seriousness and gun safety regulations:

Trend – Across the decade, a general majority of Americans say crime in the U.S. is “extremely” or “very” serious. Concern appears to peak in the early 2020s (esp. 2023) and ease by 2025, as more people shift toward “somewhat serious.” As a broad trend, concern regarding crime has reduced from 2016 to 2025.

Trend – A clear majority, usually mid-50s to mid-60s, say that gun laws should be “more strict.” Those saying laws should be less strict remain low, typically single digits to teens, while “kept as now” hovers in the 20s-30s range.

Likely influences – High-profile violence and protest coverage; partial easing may be attributed to flattening crime rates and attention shifts in the media. Regarding gun safety, the prevailing opinion that gun laws ought to be stricter may be attributed to mass shootings, especially in schools, and bipartisan frustration with governmental inaction.

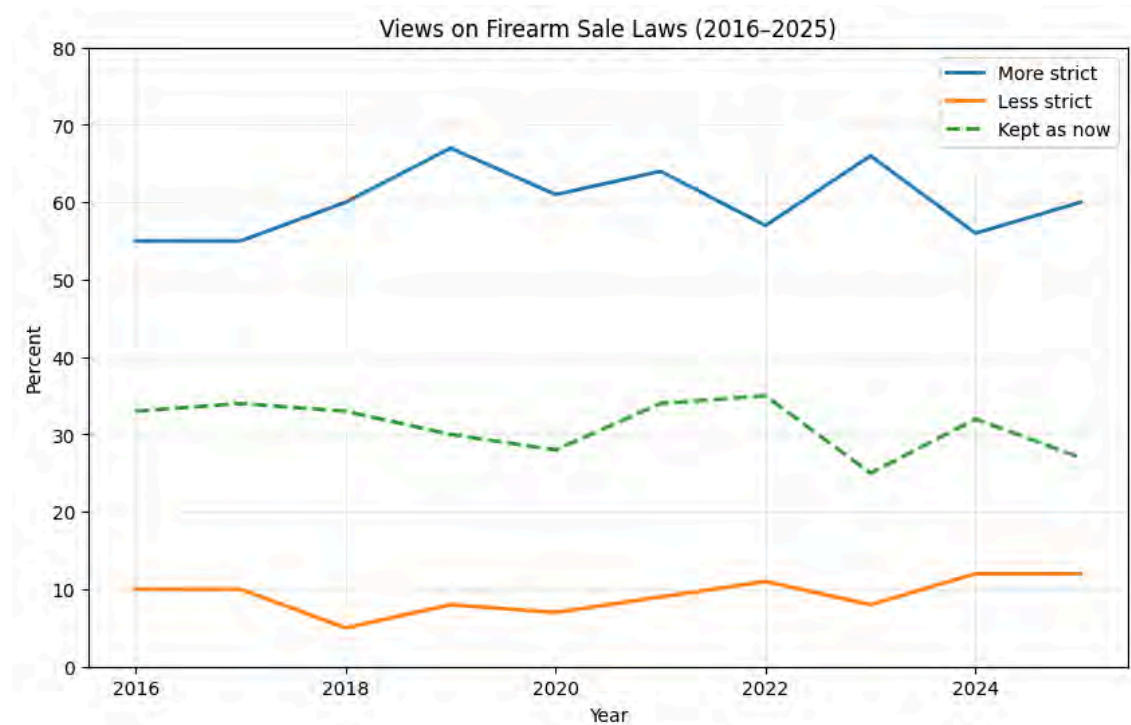


Fig. 11

8. Healthcare costs & opinions on abortion:

Trend – Overwhelming dissatisfaction with the cost of healthcare, trending slightly worse lately (2025). The number of dissatisfied remains consistently in the high-70s to low-80s. 2020 uniquely shows a brief peak at 30% satisfied. Around 2020, positive views of the healthcare industry briefly increase to the majority before returning to the general 35%. Negative views steadily increase to constitute the majority in 2025, as seen in Fig. 13.

Trend – Abortion legality circumstances (any/certain/none) data shows a stable majority<sup>2</sup> for “legal only in certain circumstances,” with 30-35% for “any circumstances” and mid-teens for “illegal in all.” Modest uptick for total illegality during 2019-2020.  
 Likely influences – Rising insurance premiums, drug prices, and partisan stalemate on healthcare reform. Attitudinal stability despite Dobbs v. Jackson; more change in policy than underlying opinion.

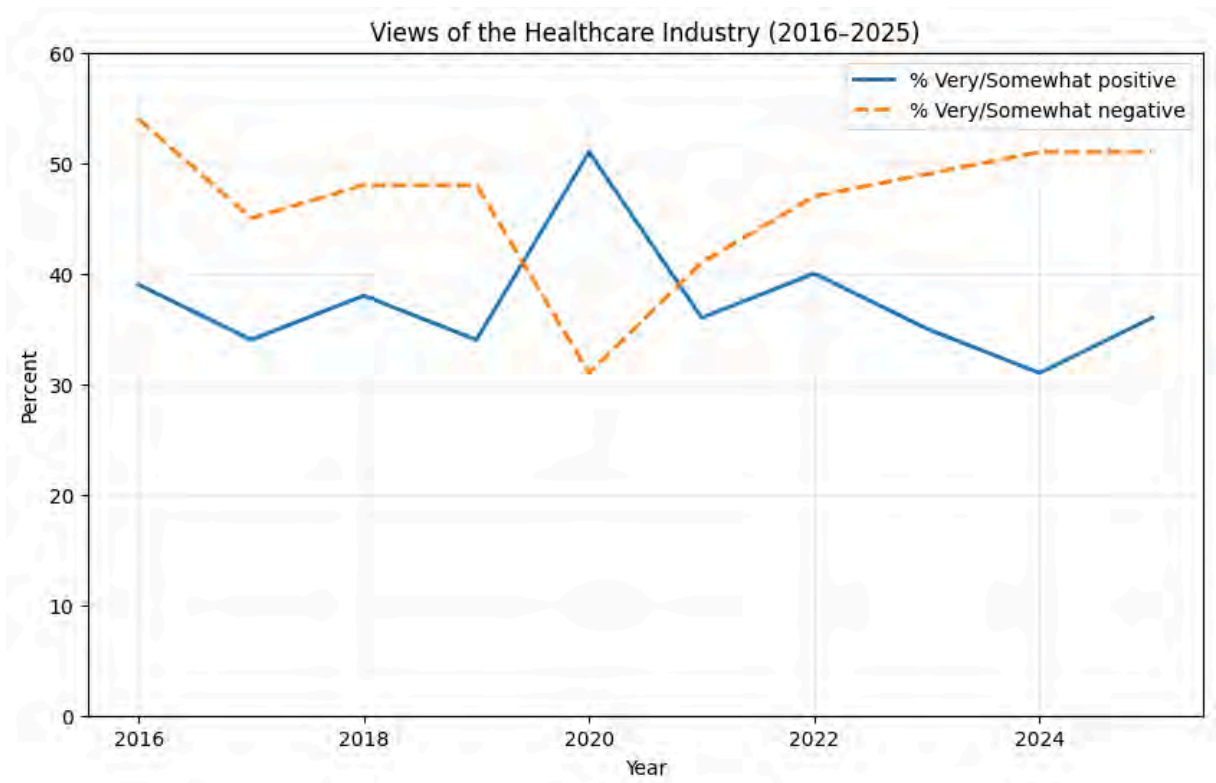


Fig. 12

9. Personal financial situations:

Trend – 2016–2019: Better off > worse off personally. In 2020, there is a positive spike of nearly 60% reporting they are personally better off financially than they were a year prior. From 2023–2025, those worse off surpass those better off (e.g., 38 vs. 44 in 2025).  
 Likely influences – Covid-19 recession and recovery, wage/inflation gap, housing costs rising while minimum wage remains the same, the job market doing poorly; 2020 spike likely reflects stimulus optimism.

<sup>2</sup> Use of the word majority indicates a figure greater than 50% in the context of the data.

10. Personal life satisfaction:

Trend – Total satisfaction (very + somewhat) stays around mid-80s+ in nearly all years. 2020 is extremely high (90%). 2025 is very high overall (81% satisfied) yet shows a record-low 44% of Americans reporting they are “very satisfied” with their personal life.

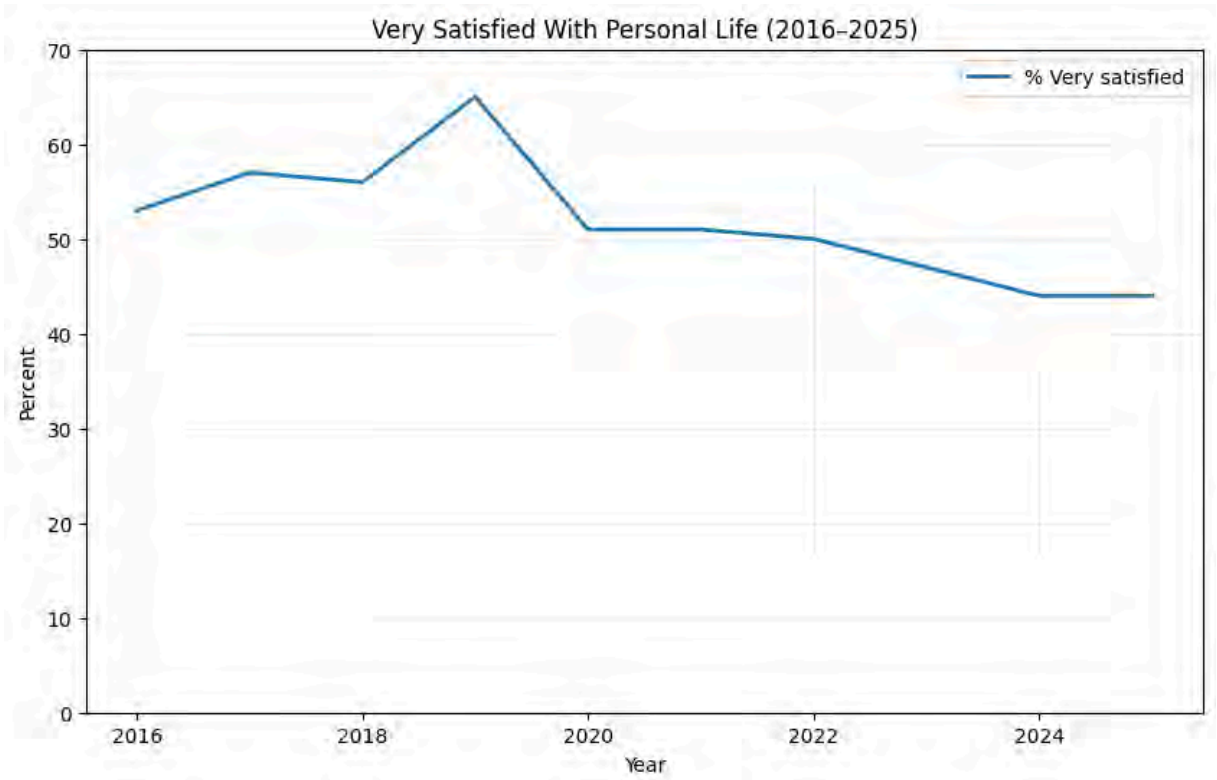


Fig. 13

Likely influences: Divergence between evaluations of “country” vs. “self/family” leading to people feeling their own lives are okay despite being pessimistic about national politics, institutions, and the economy; lack of attachment to America’s institutions.

Gallup Background – Introduced in 2001, the Gallup Poll Social Series (GPSS) comprises 12 annual telephone surveys (1,000 U.S. adults 18+, all 50 states/DC) monitoring economic, social, and political trends. Each month’s thematic survey (Jan: National Mood; Feb: World Affairs; Mar: Environment; Apr: Economy; May: Values; June: Minority Rights; Jul: Consumption; Aug: Work/Education; Sep: Governance; Oct: Crime; Nov: Health; Dec: Lifestyle) repeats essential questions regarding trends in identical order to eliminate question bias/seasonal effects. Some trends and data collection questions date to the 1930s.

Gallup Methodology Process – Dual-frame random digit dial (RDD) sampling from landline/cellphone frames (80% cell/20% landline quota since 2023), random respondent selection within households, Spanish communication capability. Weighting of samples corrects for unequal selection probability and matches Census demographics (age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, region, population density, phone usage). Margin of error  $\pm 4\%$  at 95% confidence.

Accuracy Record – GPSS preserves methodological continuity by rejecting web panels after mode effect testing revealed potential inaccuracies of self-administered surveys. Since January 2024, telephone interviewing has been outsourced to ReconMR after house effect equivalence tests, maintaining 90-year trend integrity. Roper Center archives 4,000+ Gallup studies (1930s-2020s), calling data “impeccable.”<sup>3</sup> In addition, Gallup has been ranked “least biased” in credibility checks and assigned a “high credibility” MBFC rating<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> “The Gallup Data Collection,” Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Cornell University.

<sup>4</sup> “Gallup.” Media Bias/Fact Check.

## V - Comparisons and Conclusions

The primary focus of this research project was not to mindlessly compile data, but rather distinguish between reliable and unreliable information within an increasingly polarized political landscape. By synthesizing raw data from the 2024 election cycle, the early predictions for the North Carolina District 11 House election, and public opinion trends dating from 2016 to 2025, we can draw a definitive conclusion about the current state of certain fields surrounding the state of American political research.

### **Quantity Vs. Quality: The Data for the 2024 Presidential Election**

Our longitudinal analysis of the 2024 election cycle revealed that sample size and reputation of the polling source were not always indicators of accuracy. Despite their sample size of over 9,000 participants, Morning Consult maintained its prediction of a Harris victory, following a historical trend of underestimated Republican support in 2016 and 2018. Conversely, Atlas Intel was the most accurate predictor. Their data maintained a Trump victory with 50% to 51% in his favor across all polls, including RVs and LVs, even though their sample size was lower, ranging in the 2000s. This suggests that their international perspective was more able to account for “house biases” that may have led Morning Consult and ABC/Ipsos to overestimate a Democratic advantage; the audience that participates in the poll is more important in dispelling biases than the number of participants, as long as the number itself does not promote biases.

### **Predictions for District 11: Contextualizing Early Data**

Our best attempts to analyze North Carolina’s District Eleven House race perfectly demonstrate why in-house early-cycle snapshots of results must be viewed skeptically. With only one poll conducted that shows Democrat Jamie Ager slightly ahead of Republican Chuck Edwards, we examined multiple factors that make this a potentially unreliable source:

- Campaign bias: The poll was commissioned by Ager’s campaign, likely as an attempt to gain further funding and support.
- Sample size and method: The sample size was small (only involving around 500 participants), and the polling firm did not release any information about their method of polling.
- Timing: This poll was conducted in December of 2025, months before the actual primaries and general elections. Meaning, the data, in this context, reveals its true role as an early snapshot, not as an accurate indicator of final electoral results for the midterm.

### **Public Opinion and the Evolution of Institutional Distrust**

The 2016-2025 data from GPSS provide vital context for modern polling results, allowing us to see how individual issue importance drives broader political trends. By examining longitudinal shifts across our data set, we were able to identify significant inconsistencies between personal life evaluations and faith in national systems.

### **Final Conclusion**

With the rise of the independent voter, many traditional forms of polling seemingly fail to capture this group of swing votes. Moving forward, traditional polling methods will need to adapt to the modern-day political landscape with increasing polarization, leaving moderate voters unrepresented. Moving forward, political research must move beyond party affiliation and registered voters. Instead, it must now focus on the independent voter and the institutional distrust that American voters increasingly identify having. The future reliability of political research in the United States depends not on the quantity of data collected, rather the ability for researchers to break through the impenetrable force-field around the moderate voter's opinions.

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The Integration and Consequences of Reinforcement Learning: A Review

Ellie Dukowicz

Carolina Day School

February 11, 2026

## The Integration and Consequences of Reinforcement Learning: A Review

### **Introduction**

One of the most important questions facing society today is what the future of artificial intelligence and machine learning will look like, and how these applications will impact and alter the world. From this question rises another: Is there a way to work together with these applications to improve outcomes without harming humans?

A branch of machine learning that is becoming increasingly popular in research is reinforcement learning (RL), a paradigm in which an agent makes decisions in an environment in order to maximize a reward and through this determine an optimal policy. This method of learning through “trial and error” makes RL the form of machine learning that is closest to how humans and animals learn. RL is also unique in that it is closed-looped, it is different from both supervised and unsupervised learning (i.e. the agent is not fed labeled data to learn nor is it fed unlabeled data to find patterns), the effect of the agent’s actions happen over extended time periods, and it is inherently goal-oriented. Another distinguishing characteristic of RL is that agents must consider the trade-offs between exploration and exploitation; namely, the agent must determine whether to exploit its current knowledge to maximize its reward or to explore other possibilities in order to potentially receive better rewards in the future. RL has gained attention from researchers because of its potential applications in many fields, including economics, engineering, science, and more. Currently, there are many limitations to applying RL in the real world; however, progress has been made recently to tackling some of these problems (Sutton & Barto, 2015).

It is becoming increasingly important to understand how reinforcement learning can be integrated into formal human decision making processes to improve strategies or policies, as well

as when using reinforcement learning is inefficient or unsuitable. This literature review will explore four main topics: when reinforcement learning is recommended in solving problems, human-reinforcement learning interaction, applications of reinforcement learning, and negative consequences of employing reinforcement learning.

Before discussing the use and applications of reinforcement learning, it is important to understand how reinforcement learning works. A RL agent senses the environment it interacts with, and it receives information about the “state” of the environment at a given period of time as an “observation.” Based on its observation, the agent will make a decision by taking an “action” that will then impact the environment. The agent’s policy determines how it behaves in the environment by mapping the environment’s state to actions the agent can take. Throughout this process, the agent has a goal (related to the state of the environment) which is defined by the reward function. After each action, the agent receives a reward signal, which is a single number representing the “reward” the agent receives as a result of its action. The agent seeks to maximize this reward through its actions, and the agent’s policy updates in response. In addition, some RL algorithms contain a value function, which determines how beneficial an action is in the long run by considering potential future rewards. The way that reinforcement learning algorithms work distinguish them from many other forms of machine learning, and it is essential to their applications (Sutton & Barto, 2015).

### **Recommended Use of Reinforcement Learning**

Reinforcement learning can only be used in solving problems with specific characteristics. Furthermore, research has shown that the structure of the problem influences the success of RL algorithms, making RL better than humans at some specific tasks, and vice versa. Reinforcement learning algorithms are only suitable for problems where sequential

decision-making occurs; if the solution to a problem does not involve sequential decision-making, RL is not applicable. Furthermore, researchers such as Pulkit Agrawal and Cathy Wu (2021) recommend using RL compared to human learning or other forms of machine learning when there is no existing model or framework for solving the problem or the aim is to improve upon an existing strategy. They also recommend RL over other forms of machine learning when there is little information known about the “users” or “audience” of the program.

From a different standpoint, a group of scholars (Pulick et al., 2024) recommend using reinforcement learning only when a RL algorithm would outperform or be more efficient than humans. These researchers have found that task structure influences the performance of humans and RL agents in different ways. Through “the Game of Hidden Rules,” in which the subject seeks to complete a “sorting” game without knowing the rules, the researchers discovered that the performance of RL algorithms varied with task structure, and that humans and RL algorithms had different “difficulty rankings” for tasks. Overall, the researchers observed that as the rules about how to perform a task became more general, RL algorithms found them easier whereas humans found them more difficult. Thus, the researchers argue that task structure can help determine whether humans or RL agents should solve specific problems, and that their individual strengths can be exploited together to optimize performance.

There are differing perspectives on whether elements of task structure influence whether RL should be used. While considering task structure when determining whether to use RL may be considered more “in-depth” and may allow for more successful outcomes, it is much more complex. The research done thus far on the impacts of task structure has been limited, and therefore there are very few concrete recommendations that have come from them. Regardless,

the information learned thus far is still important, and it can be utilized in determining whether to use RL or not, even though more research is needed.

### **Human-Reinforcement Learning Interactions**

A promising avenue in employing reinforcement learning and artificial intelligence algorithms is human-reinforcement learning and human-AI collaboration, in which both humans and algorithms contribute to a sequential decision-making process. These systems are attractive both because they maintain some human autonomy and are often more efficient compared to human work alone. While there are many ways for this to be executed, one method of this process that has been researched is human-RL collaboration in which an RL program gives humans tips, which the humans subsequently choose to take or not to take. In a study conducted by researchers Bastani et al. (2025), a RL agent designed to give human participants “tips” was employed in a virtual kitchen management game. These tips were designed to “bridge the gap” between the human policy (estimated through trace data) and the optimal policy; therefore, the agent’s tips did not merely seek to mimic the optimal policy, but rather make tips that would improve human performance. The results of this study found that human performance improved with the tips when compared to not having been given the tips; in addition, human participants did not blindly accept tips, but rather chose to use them increasingly as the game progressed. Furthermore, the authors found that merely complying with tips does not significantly improve long-term performance; the increase in success occurred because the human participants began to learn parts of the optimal policy. The authors of this study note the success of the algorithm, but also that this is a novel approach; therefore, they emphasize the potential for this study to inform future algorithms. However, it is important to note that there has been less research done on this type of human-RL interaction. The main goal of this algorithm is to improve upon sub-optimal

policies that humans make, especially when beginning something new (i.e. starting a new job). Furthermore, in this form of human-RL collaboration, humans are the ones who ultimately decide whose idea (theirs or the algorithm's) to implement.

On the contrary, another method that has been researched is the “learning to defer” framework, in which an algorithm contains one neural network focusing on choosing a decision for a specific task and a separate neural network deciding whether to defer the decision to humans based on the model's confidence and the predicted performance of humans. In this form of human-AI collaboration, the algorithm is the one that ultimately decides whose idea (its own or the human's) to implement. These algorithms aim to be used in situations in which aiding human decisions at every “step” would be extremely inefficient due to the large volume of information; therefore, they aim to be used in situations where using the previous method (described in the paragraph above) would be inefficient. However, due to the volume of research on the learning to defer framework, scholars have highlighted limitations within this method that restrict its application. For example, in traditional learning to defer methods, human predictions are required for every instance in the training set, which can be difficult to acquire and inefficient. It is also difficult for these algorithms to deal with multiple decision makers (especially with varying levels of expertise) and for it to adapt to environmental changes. In addition, due to how specialized the algorithms have to be, they tend to be less robust and more susceptible to challenges (Leitão et al., 2022).

Fundamentally, the difference between the two methods outlined above is who determines which decision to use, the human or the algorithm. The “tips” algorithm allows for more human autonomy than the learning to defer framework, because humans are ultimately making the decision. However, this comes with its own set of challenges; according to Bastani et

al. (2025), the agent has to focus on making the tips actionable and interpretable so that humans understand and trust algorithms more. On the other hand, the learning to defer framework prioritizes efficiency by not including human decisions in every step, but rather only in steps that the algorithm determines are best. Both algorithms are very complex, and thus face challenges in their creation and design. In addition, both methods require data (for example, trace data) that can be used to make predictions of human behavior; without this, the algorithms can not function. While this data is available for many regions, this characteristic does limit the scope of these methods.

Depending on the structure of the task, human-RL collaboration with “tips” and the “learning to defer” framework are potential avenues towards the implementation of reinforcement learning; however, much research and many improvements and refinements still need to be made to both methods before these they can be consistently employed in the real world.

### **Applications of Reinforcement Learning**

Researchers have explored many possible and promising real-world applications of reinforcement learning. However, these applications are often limited due to the structure of RL (that makes mimicking real-world happenings difficult) or due to the need for more research. Research in RL has revealed many current and potential applications; some of these applications, such as algorithms that seek to complete games, have shown a lot of success in their employment. However, other applications, such as automated vehicles and energy management, while still showing a lot of progress and potential, are currently unable to be successfully employed due to the need for more research. In a literature review of 127 publications, a group of researchers reviewed applications of RL in “marketing, robotics, gaming, automated cars,

natural language processing (NLP), internet of things security, recommendation systems, finance, and energy management” (Sivamayil et al., 2023). Novel methods for recommendation systems (especially course recommendations, user-commodity interactions, and personalized learning experiences) using RL have been proposed and have shown success. Gaming is a very successful and highly researched application, and RL algorithms have learned to play a large variety of games; a notable example of this is AlphaZero, an RL program created to learn to play chess, go, and shogi, which defeated the reigning world champions in all of these games. Another highly successful application of RL has been in robotics (where robots learn to complete tasks or interact with humans), which is considered the most popular application field. In both Natural Language Processing (in which a computer recognizes human language and responds) and internet of things security, RL has shown potential in very specific areas, but more research needs to be conducted. In finance, RL has shown success in managing portfolios and it has been proposed for use in trading; lots of research has been done in this sector and much research is still currently happening. Researchers Sivamayil et al. (2023) have named a few “critical application areas” of RL: automated vehicles, healthcare, and energy management. RL has been introduced in research in automated vehicles to overcome issues that have arisen from using deep learning and supervised learning; however, this way of learning can lead to error, and while methods to avoid this have been proposed, much research still needs to be done. In healthcare, diagnosis systems and dynamic treatment recommendation systems have been proposed, and precision medicine is a critical area of RL; however, more research is needed. Finally, energy management systems are becoming increasingly important in society due to the climate crisis, and RL has been proposed in control of smart grids and HVAC systems, reducing energy consumption of electric vehicles, and integrating renewable energy sources. These applications

have shown success, but may encounter real-world problems.

Furthermore, researchers Henderson et al. (2022) have also explored the potential applications of reinforcement learning algorithms to the public sector, including government and law. These researchers surveyed potential applications of sequential decision-making (SDM) algorithms, including RL, in public health, environmental protection, tax administration, occupational safety, and social welfare (Henderson et al., 2022). While researchers argue that these algorithms could have positive impacts, including increased efficiency of governmental processes, increased transparency, and improved adaptive policymaking, there are many potential sources of concern that make these applications incredibly difficult to employ successfully (for example, it can be difficult for an algorithm to adapt to many environmental changes). The current opinion of scholars is that SDM algorithms and RL in their current state should not be applied to the public sector due to the potential for harm; however, with more research, there is a potential for applications of RL to specific problems in the public sector. In order for this to happen, researchers need to specifically address the challenges that arise when using these algorithms in the public sector. Overall, while researchers have found many promising applications of reinforcement learning to the real world, continued and expanded research is the most important step towards improving current programs and discovering new applications.

### **Negative Effects of Reinforcement Learning**

Despite the promising applications of reinforcement learning algorithms, there are many negative consequences that could occur with its widespread deployment. The structure of RL can inherently cause many negative effects. For example, an agent “exploring” in the real world can lead to damage and harm when sub-optimal decisions are made in high-stakes environments. In

addition, the nature of reward function design can lead to unintended and unpredictable consequences when the design is faulty (the program can optimize something other than the intended goal) (Whittlestone et al., 2021).

In addition, the use of reinforcement learning can raise ethical concerns. For example, individuals prioritizing the efficiency of their algorithm can cause harm to the public when their goals do not align with those of the public. Furthermore, if employed in the public sector without proper care, the use of RL algorithms could encourage government overreach, lead to unintended bias in policies, and result in policymakers neglecting strong oversight or governance in favor of algorithms (Henderson et al., 2022). The nature of reward function design can lead to dangerous consequences when the design is biased or purposefully prioritizes one group over another. Furthermore, the amount and type of data needed to train RL agents creates incentives for increased data collection that can lead to more widespread surveillance, gathering of sensitive data, and the exploitation of sensitive groups, which can lead to many ethical concerns (Whittlestone et al., 2021).

Due to the growth of artificial intelligence, researchers Whittlestone et al. argue that “it is necessary to think ahead about standards and forms of governance needed to prevent negative outcomes.” Overall, they recommend “find[ing] ways to track progress in DRL and its applications...consider[ing] the implications of DRL progress for existing AI governance initiatives, including standards and regulation...[and] establish[ing] notions of responsible DRL development.” They also argue that human oversight of RL programs is crucial, especially because it maintains human autonomy in the system. This opinion is supported by the Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI report published by the European Commission’s High Level Expert Group on AI in 2019 (Whittlestone et al., 2021). However, incentives to increase

efficiency of programs (in order to increase productivity, profit, etc.), a lack of definition for oversight, and difficulty in monitoring continually learning systems present challenges in having widespread human oversight. Furthermore, these researchers address solutions to specific problems. To promote safe exploration, continual monitoring and using simulated environments is recommended, even though it is currently accepted that there are no methods to consistently ensure safety and reliability. Standards for responsible reward functions designs need to be established and enforced, and advances that can lead to increased data collection need to be monitored closely (Whittlestone et al., 2021). In addition, researchers Henderson et al. (2022) emphasize that sequential decision making system be employed with care, and that, especially when applied to the public sector, oversight and continual monitoring, cost-benefit analyses, robust tests, and incremental deployments are necessary to help mitigate the associated problems with these types of algorithms. Without taking the necessary precautions, the widespread deployment of reinforcement learning could lead to many negative consequences for society; thus, scholars argue that oversight, increased research, and regulations are important in mitigating the harmful effects of reinforcement learning algorithms.

### **Conclusion**

Reinforcement learning is a machine learning topic that has been increasingly researched in the last few years, and many areas of this subject have been viewed differently by scholars. An important step towards employing reinforcement learning algorithms is determining when they should be used; some scholars' response to this question is solely based on whether RL, due to its framework, is a suitable method to solve a given problem, whereas others consider the influence of task structure (and RL's estimated performance in comparison to humans) in recommending RL. Human-AI interaction is another important subtopic within machine learning

research, and scholars have argued in its favor as it maintains some level of human autonomy in the decision making process. Both interactions including “tips” (in which humans ultimately make the decision) and the “learning to defer” framework (in which the algorithm ultimately makes the decision) have been researched and recommended for distinct problems. Applications of RL have also been reviewed in the current literature, and scholars have both highlighted areas that are currently seeing success (such as robotics and gaming) and other areas that have the potential to see success in the future (such as healthcare and energy management). However, scholars have also noted application areas that are not as likely to see success, namely the public sector. Furthermore, researchers have reviewed the most significant challenges, negative effects, and ethical concerns that arise from the employment of RL algorithms, as well as potential solutions and regulations to help resolve these problems.

Overall, in reinforcement learning literature, there is a collective call for more research into specific problems. Within this literature review, there have been calls for more research surrounding how task structure impacts RL performance, human-RL interaction, various applications of RL, and how to deter negative effects. In a society where machine learning is becoming increasingly widespread, reinforcement learning and its applications deserve more attention.

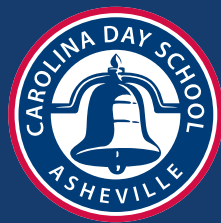
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1345 Hendersonville Road  
Asheville, North Carolina 28803

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