



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on August 9, 2018

Poll: 43% of Republicans Favor Giving President Power to Close News Outlets

The First Amendment is under assault in manifold ways, and there's a fresh attack lurking in the results of a recent survey of American opinions of the news media.

Research conducted by Ipsos revealed that 43 percent of self-identified Republicans believe that "the president should have the authority to close news outlets engaged in bad behavior." A shocking 26 percent of respondents overall agree with that statement, as well.



Regardless of the remarkable nature of such widespread disdain for the press, the percentages produced by this poll are perhaps the predictable harvest after months of sowing the seed of mistrust and misinformation. Everyone is familiar with the "fake news" label regularly applied by the president to those news agencies he believes are biased against him, and now it seems his rhetoric is affecting the attitudes of Americans regarding the appropriate way to balance the scale between newsmaker and news publisher.

The lack of respect for the news media is understandable, and knee-jerk reactions, while not rational, are certainly comprehensible.

What is nearly unbelievable and unacceptable, however, is that more than four out of every 10 members of the Republican Party who responded to this survey felt that the best way to push back against the press is to give the president the power to shut down those outlets he considers bad actors.

In fairness, there is no effort made in the poll to discern who those respondents in favor of presidential power over the press believe should decide what qualifies as "bad behavior." That's a very vague standard and one that could lead to great abuse.

The definition of "bad behavior" may not have been identified, but a question asked of survey-takers did identify some of those media companies that people counted among those that should be subject to presidential approval.

Twenty-three percent of Republicans and 13 percent of Americans overall agreed that "President Trump should close down mainstream news outlets such as CNN, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times*."

Wow.

Ostensibly, Republicans are conservative and conservatives are friends of the Constitution. Sadly, this poll reveals otherwise.

The fascination with faction is splintering this country. Republicans praise President Trump for doing something for which they pilloried his predecessor. Democrats, likewise, lambast the president for many things that former President Obama did to their raucous applause.



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We live, it would seem, in those days described by the influential German professor of natural law Samuel Pufendorf. In his book *An Introduction to the Principal Kingdom and States of Europe*, Pufendorf warns of the dangers of political parties, writing, “Being divided into Factions, they are more concern’d to ruin their Rivals, than to follow the Dictates of Reason.”

How prescient!

There is a sizable bloc of Americans who want to give the president (who for the time being is of their same political stripe) power over the press. That is certainly a demonstration of preferring party over principle.

The notable French philosopher Benjamin Constant put an even finer point on the issue of government censorship of the press, warning of what happens when a people place such immense power in the hands of one man:

By authorizing the government to deal ruthlessly with whatever opinions there may be, you are giving it the right to interpret thought, to make inductions, in a nutshell to reason and to put its reasoning in the place of the facts which ought to be the sole basis for government counteraction.

This is to establish despotism with a free hand. Which opinion cannot draw down a punishment on its author? You give the government a free hand for evildoing, provided that it is careful to engage in evil thinking. You will never escape from this circle.

The men to whom you entrust the right to judge opinions are quite as susceptible as others to being misled or corrupted, and the arbitrary power which you will have invested in them can be used against the most necessary truths as well as the most fatal errors.

To his credit, President Trump has not suggested that he believes that he should be able to shutter any of the organizations he considers to be purveyors of “fake news.”

He hasn’t exactly been tolerant, either. Back in February of 2017 the president told a crowd that the news media was “the enemy of the people” and a “great danger to our country.”

It is easy to see how President Trump could feel that way given the constant battering he takes from many media outlets. What isn’t so easy to see is why he would say these things in public, knowing the influence he has on so many Americans who see him as the leader of their party.

One wonders if the 43 percent of Republicans who said they would give President Trump the authority to shut down bad behaving news media would have said the same thing were Barack Obama still president.

The last word will go to another president — Thomas Jefferson — who faced ferocity from the Fourth Estate to a level that would impress even Donald Trump. In spite of the stream of vitriol aimed at him every day, Jefferson had no thought of closing down the presses that pummeled him. In 1787 he declared: “The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

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