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Synthesizing Research Methods

Introduction & Research Questions

Human perception acts as a filter for truth. What we call "fact" is never entirely objective, but instead shaped by cognition, bias, and lived experience. Two people can witness the same event and still inhabit entirely different realities (Ross, 1977, p. 174). American politics, once grounded in reason and logic, has evolved into a landscape shaped by perception and rising individualism, where numerous competing "truths" struggle to even take hold (Kelkar, 2019, p. 87). This increased polarization ultimately threatens dialogue, trust, and the foundations of democratic life (Kelkar, 2019, pp. 99-101).

Political psychology has long examined how individuals form beliefs and act on them, and more recently, how the rise of social media has expanded these influences to deepen confirmation bias and limit exposure to opposing views (Cottam et al., 2022). Studies on media and political participation highlight how online platforms fuel everyday activism, enabling rapid information-sharing, collective action, and large-scale social movements (Boulianne, 2020; Biswas et al., 2014; Dewenter et al., 2019). Yet, most of this research focuses on elections and voter behavior (or intentions) rather than on the perception of political issues (Cottam et al., 2022). What remains understudied is *how* these divided perceptions shape Americans' ability to have dialogue, to trust, and to coexist across differences. New research must address the conditions that could help rebuild common understanding, "heal our deeper rifts, and remember that we are one people" (Groberg, 2024). This shifts the lens from simply examining political participation to asking what sustains justice, peace, and empathy.

This gap raises several questions. First, *how have fragmented media and individualism altered the public's ability to form shared perceptions, and what factors sustain the few shared "truths" that remain, if any*? *Are any non-partisan cultural touchpoints left, and what can they teach us about creating new ones*? Finally, *what role do shared emotional experiences (collective grief, celebration, crisis) play in temporarily rebuilding common perception in a fractured media environment*? Together, these point to a guiding inquiry: *how can common truths be rebuilt in a time defined by fragmented perception?*

Methods

The foremost method that could address this problem, specifically the first research question, is qualitative interviewing. Interviews can directly display how fragmented media and individualism shape the formation of shared or divergent perceptions by exploring how participants interpret the same political clip or news article. Participants would be asked what they think the message is, how credible they find it, what emotions it evokes, and whether they believe the "other side" would interpret it differently. This design exposes the mechanisms behind perception: how people make meaning, the reasoning behind their interpretations, and how lived experience and media habits filter "truth" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 5).

Interviews allow for self-reflection and narrative work that quantitative measures cannot capture; for example, a numerical response cannot convey what a "5" means in someone's internal logic (Sampson et al., 2019, p. 547). However, interviews have limitations: findings may not generalize, causal claims cannot be made, social desirability bias may shape responses, and researcher coding influences thematic patterns (Ely et al., quoted in Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 7).

Thus, interviews can explain the reason behind perception and help identify conditions that sustain shared truths, but they cannot claim broad representativeness on their own.

The second method to address these questions, especially whether any non-partisan cultural touchpoints remain and what they can teach us, is quantitative surveying, which would identify broad, generalizable patterns in how perception divides form (Goodfellow, 2023, p. 1309). A survey using a sample stratified by political party and digital media habits would allow participants to evaluate the same healthcare bill, with half of each partisan strata told it was written by Democrats and the other half told it was written by Republicans; the same procedure would be repeated to ensure each participant received a bill authored by an in-group politician and an out-group politician. Comparing reaction, credibility, and intention ratings could reveal whether political perceptions shift based on who is believed to have authored the policy (Ross, 2018, pp. 756–757). Additional questions on media consumption, outgroup perceptions, and everyday empathy would help identify whether any issues, values, or emotional responses remain non-partisan, offering insight into what kinds of shared touchpoints could be strengthened or recreated today.

Surveys are valuable because they show whether divides are systemic rather than anecdotal, and whether specific characteristics predict openness to dialogue (Goodfellow, 2023, p. 1309). They are also scalable due to digitization (Zimba & Gasparyan, 2023, p. 2). However, surveys "hardly contribute to generating robust qualitative data," capturing what participants think rather than how those views form (Zimba & Gasparyan, 2023, p. 6).

A third and final method is qualitative case studies of collective emotional experiences, and how those may help rebuild common perception. Focusing on when and how shared understanding reappears in American society requires examining historical and contemporary

examples that reveal the conditions under which unity forms. This approach would analyze contemporary phenomena, such as 9/11 collective mourning (Mills & Silver, 2021), national celebrations like the Women's World Cup win, and historical moments like the Apollo 11 landing, that became moments of shared cultural meaning (Chopard & Przybylski, 2021, p.1). Case studies work well for rigorously theorizing when and how common truths are briefly re-formed, allowing space to discuss both personal experience and broader systemic narratives (Chopard & Przybylski, 2021, p.3). However, shared emotional moments in one era or community may not carry over to another, and many cultural forces are at play at once, making causation difficult to separate.

A mixed-method exploratory design using a convergent parallel approach is the strongest way to address these research questions. No single method can capture both the scale of perception fragmentation and the lived experience of how people make meaning. Qualitative methods (interviews and case studies) offer depth, context, and insight into the mechanisms behind perception, but they lack generalizability and cannot establish broad patterns. Quantitative surveys, by contrast, reveal large-scale trends and can "validate qualitative research data" (Goodfellow, 2023, p. 1309), but they flatten nuance and cannot explain how interpretations form. In a convergent design, interviews, surveys, and case studies are conducted simultaneously and then compared, allowing triangulation to "transcend the limitations from each method by comparing findings from different perspectives" (Heale & Forbes, 2013, p. 1). This combined approach captures the how, what, when, and why behind shared truths and human connection across divides.

Conclusion

Americans used to live in a media environment where most people shared the same cultural touchpoints: three television channels, a few radio stations, and the Billboard Top 100, which created a common cultural vocabulary even among people who disagreed (Lowenthal, 2022; Markert, 2023). Today, however, media is fragmented across countless platforms, from Netflix and Hulu to Spotify and personalized playlists, with algorithms further intensifying this divide by trapping individuals in echo chambers that reflect their existing beliefs (Reynolds, 2019). As a result, scholars still lack answers about how media now shapes political life: how shared emotional experiences spread online without shared physical presence, how platform-level structures influence division, and what emotional patterns create or dissolve shared truth. These gaps point toward the need for further methods, such as computational social network analysis, platform-level data tracking, sentiment analysis of viral moments, or digital ethnography, to understand how, in a fractured media environment, common perception is formed, lost, or fleetingly rebuilt.

Ultimately, what is missing in the current state of knowledge is not just more information about polarization itself, but a deeper understanding of perception: how people interpret the same information differently, and how those interpretations either fracture or rebuild shared meaning. The recent political state makes this absence unmistakable. As digital media systems fracture collective attention and algorithms tailor information to personal preference, individuals increasingly inhabit distinct perceptual worlds. Political identity now functions as a lens that filters evidence, shapes credibility judgments, and determines whether a message is interpreted as threatening, legitimate, or even real. This shift has produced what researchers describe as a "perception divide," where the disagreement is no longer merely over policy outcomes but over

the basic contours of the event or issue itself (Cottam et al., 2022; Kelkar, 2019). Without shared perceptual anchors, the foundational conditions for dialogue, trust, and democratic decision-making begin to erode.

Research Process

I began my research process by outlining my individual presentation directly from the rubric, using my Giants and PQMA assignments to guide my framing. From there, I condensed my earlier Giants research into the most essential ideas for my bullet points and incorporated material from my previous work in political psychology to fill in conceptual gaps and inspire the questions I wanted to explore.

After drafting my research questions, I selected my research methods, drawing on what I have learned in my other Research Methods course this semester for Justice and Peace Studies, including sources that clarified how different methods are typically applied. Once I chose my methods, I conducted targeted searches for articles demonstrating how each method is used in practice, especially within psychology, and reviewed their strengths, limitations, and common applications.

I also used my presentation outline as the foundation for my written paper, since the outline ended up being too long for the presentation itself and therefore contained much of the analysis and structure I needed for the paper. Because I had already done a majority of the intellectual work while preparing the presentation, writing the paper mainly involved expanding and deepening the methods section based on my additional methods research. I did not rely on AI for my research or writing; the only way I used it was to help clarify a few dense concepts in academic articles, not to generate ideas or content.

References

Biswas, A., Ingle, N., & Roy, M. (2014). Influence of Social Media on Voting Behavior. *Journal of Power, Politics & Governance*, *2*(2), 127-155. https://jppg.thebrpi.org/journals/jppg/Vol_2_No_2_June_2014/7.pdf

→ This article examines how social media influenced voting behavior among young Indian voters during the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, arguing that digital platforms have become powerful tools for political engagement. I used this source to help identify gaps in existing research and to inform the development of my own research question, especially regarding how digital media engagement differs across demographic groups

Boulianne, S. (2018). Twenty years of digital media effects on civic and political participation. *Communication Research*, *47*(7), 947-966. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650218808186

→ This meta-analysis synthesizes over 300 studies from more than 50 countries to trace how digital media use has influenced civic and political participation over the past twenty years. As a comprehensive overview of the field, this was one of the most influential sources in shaping my research questions, allowing me to see where scholars have concentrated their efforts, where significant gaps remain, and how political psychologists are currently interpreting digital media's role in American political life.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

→ This article outlines thematic analysis as a flexible, rigorous method for identifying patterns across qualitative data, emphasizing clear coding procedures, reflexive interpretation, and transparency in analytic decision-making. I used this meta-methodological source to understand how political psychologists justify qualitative

interviewing, to identify gaps around how perception is studied in American politics, and to strengthen my rationale for interviews as a means of exploring how people construct political meaning.

Chopard, K., & Przybylski, R. (2021). Methods Brief: Case Studies. *Justice Research and Statistics Association*. https://justiceresearch.dspacedirect.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/f81e3f51-951d-4032-a9ff-55a38f3b9617/content

→ Chopard and Przybylski provide a clear methodological overview of case studies as a research strategy, defining them as empirical inquiries that investigate real-world phenomena using multiple data sources, thick description, and contextual interpretation. I used this source to ground my proposed method of analyzing collective emotional experiences to identify where gaps remain in political psychology research on how shared emotional moments briefly rebuild common perception in American politics.

Cottam, M. L., Mastors, E., Preston, T., & Dietz-Uhler, B. (2022). *Introduction to Political Psychology* (4th ed.). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

→ Cottam et al.'s Introduction to Political Psychology provides a comprehensive overview of the psychological processes underlying political behavior, covering topics such as media influence, leadership, political perception, intergroup conflict, and collective identity formation. The textbook integrates empirical research with real-world case studies, illustrating how psychological theories operate in practice. I used this source to understand the foundational scholarship in political psychology, identify what has already been extensively researched, and ground my project in reliable, well-established frameworks.

Dewenter, R., Linder, M., & Thomas, T. (2019). Can media drive the electorate? The impact of media coverage on voting intentions. *European Journal of Political Economy*, *58*, 245-261. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2018.12.003

→ This study analyzes 14 years of human-coded media data and German Politbarometer surveys to show that positive media coverage significantly increases a party's voting intentions. I used this source to understand how rigorous quantitative research links media tone to political behavior and to identify gaps in U.S.-focused political psychology, particularly around how media environments shape short-term perceptions and electoral decision-making.

Goodfellow, L. T. (2023). An overview of survey research. *Respiratory Care*, *68*(9), 1309-1313. https://doi.org/10.4187/respcare.11041

→ Goodfellow provides a concise introduction to survey research, outlining key components such as instrument design, sampling strategies, validity and reliability testing, and best practices for collecting and reporting quantitative data. I used this source to strengthen my understanding of when surveys are methodologically appropriate in political psychology and to see where survey-based studies succeed, and fall short, in addressing questions about perception, attitudes, and media effects.

Groberg, F. (2024, November 5). *Let's Reclaim the Value of National Unity*. The Atlantic. Retrieved November 10, 2025, from https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2024/11/white-house-medal-of-honor-recipient/680525/

→ Groberg argues that the United States must reclaim a sense of national unity by prioritizing shared purpose over partisan hostility, drawing on his combat experience. I

used this source to develop my own thinking about whether shared truths can re-emerge during moments of crisis, and to consider how unity functions not as agreement but as a practiced commitment to one another as citizens.

Heale, R., & Forbes, D. (2013). Understanding triangulation in research. Evidence-Based Nursing, 16(4), 98. https://doi.org/10.1136/eb-2013-101494

→ I used this article to justify the mixed-methods, convergent parallel design of my study and to explain why triangulation strengthens research on perception and shared truth. Heale and Forbes clarify how combining qualitative and quantitative approaches allows each method's limitations to be compensated for by the strengths of others. Their argument directly supported my rationale for integrating interviews, surveys, and case studies to capture both the breadth and depth of perception fragmentation.

Kelkar, S. (2019). Post-truth and the search for objectivity: Political polarization and the remaking of knowledge production. *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society*, *5*, 86-106. https://doi.org/10.17351/ests2019.268

→ Kelkar analyzes the rise of the American "post-truth" era, arguing that political polarization and the growth of alternative media ecosystems have eroded shared realities and reshaped how knowledge and objectivity are constructed. I used this article to clarify how perception functions in a post-truth society and to inform my thinking about what it means to live without common truths.

Lowenthal, R. (2022, June 3). Terminal Individualism and the Accelerating Collapse of American Society. *Medium*. https://medium.com/@richelow/terminal-individualism-and-the-accelerating-collapse-of-american-society-43fa2bab152b

→ Lowenthal argues that the rise of "hyper-individualism" in the United States has eroded community life, weakened shared responsibility, and accelerated political and social fragmentation. I used this article to think more critically about how extreme individualism undermines shared truths and national unity, helping me connect cultural psychology to the broader collapse of common perception in American politics.

Markert, J. (2023). *Decline of the Big Three Networks*. EBSCO. Retrieved November 10, 2025, from https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/decline-big-three-networks

→ This article traces how ABC, CBS, and NBC lost their near-total dominance of American television beginning in the 1980s due to the rise of cable, niche programming, VCR technology, and new competitors like Fox, resulting in a fragmented media environment and the collapse of a unified mass audience. I used this source to understand how structural media fragmentation eroded shared national narratives, helping me contextualize today's divided information ecosystem and its impact on collective perception.

Mills, K. (Host), & Silver, R. C. (Narr.). (2021, September). Speaking of Psychology: Twenty years after 9/11, what have we learned about collective trauma? With Roxane Cohen Silver, PhD (No. 157) [Audio podcast transcript]. In Speaking of Psychology. American Psychological Association. https://www.apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/9-11-twenty-years

→ I used this source as a primary case study to examine how large-scale emotional events like 9/11 can temporarily rebuild shared perception in an otherwise fragmented society. Mills and Silver's analysis of 9/11 highlights how the attacks produced a rare moment of collective grief and trauma in the United States, one experienced simultaneously across

communities, political identities, and demographic groups. Their work shows that millions witnessed the event in real time, and that the psychological impact was not limited to those directly affected but extended nationwide.

Reynolds, S. (2019, December 28). *'Streaming has killed the mainstream': the decade that broke popular culture*. The Guardian. Retrieved November 10, 2025, from https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2019/dec/28/overload-ambush-and-isolation-the-decade-that-warped-popular-culture-simon-reynolds

→ Reynolds argues that streaming platforms have shattered the old cultural "mainstream" by offering endless individualized content, erasing shared cultural touchpoints, and accelerating a sense of temporal overload. I used this article to understand how digital abundance and personalized algorithms contribute to cultural fragmentation, helping me connect media consumption patterns to the broader erosion of common experiences and shared perception.

Ross, L. (1977). The intuitive psychologist and his shortcomings: Distortions in the attribution process. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 173-220. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0065-2601(08)60357-3

→ I used this study to describe Ross's early experiments that revealed biases in how people attribute causes to behavior. It provided foundational evidence for his later theory of the Fundamental Attribution Error. This was a valuable primary source because it demonstrated the empirical basis of Ross's psychological research and how it shaped the field of psychology.

Ross, L. (2018). From the fundamental attribution error to the truly fundamental attribution error and beyond: My research journey. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *13*(6), 750-769. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691618769855

→ This autobiographical article provided an overview of Ross's career and explained how his research questions and methods evolved over time. It was essential for my PQMA analysis because it summarized the progression of his major theories in his own words. This source was especially strong because it offered both personal reflection and scientific reasoning behind his life's work.

Sampson, F. C., Goodacre, S. W., & O'Cathain, A. (2019). The reality of pain scoring in the emergency department: Findings from a multiple case study design. Annals of Emergency Medicine, 74(4), 538-548. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annemergmed.2019.02.018

→ I used this article to illustrate the limitations of quantitative scales and to support the argument that numerical measures often present a false sense of objectivity. Sampson et al. show that even standardized pain scores, commonly treated as objective clinical indicators, vary widely based on personal interpretation, emotional state, and context. This evidence helped me explain why survey responses must be interpreted cautiously and why qualitative methods remain essential for understanding the reasoning and narrative work behind participants' perceptions.

Zimba, O., & Gasparyan, A. Y. (2023). Designing, conducting, and reporting survey studies: A primer for researchers. Journal of Korean Medical Science, 38(48). https://doi.org/10.3346/jkms.2023.38.e403

→ I used this article to help explain both the strengths and limitations of survey-based research within my mixed-methods design. Zimba and Gasparyan explain how digitization has made surveys highly scalable and efficient for collecting large amounts of data from diverse participants, supporting my argument that surveys are well-suited for mapping broad perception divides. This helped me show why surveys alone cannot reveal how shared or divergent perceptions form, reinforcing the need to pair quantitative breadth with qualitative depth.