

Americans Value Critical Thinking But Choose Not To Practice It

Only 25% of people are willing to regularly have debates with people who disagree with them, according to a new study.

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Critical thinking can feel in short supply these days. Politics is more [polarized than ever](#), the president regularly dismisses his opposition as enemies, losers, or phonies, while critics of the president cannot bear the thought of ever entertaining support for his ideas or actions.

If a lack of civility in public discourse is the problem, a lack of critical thinking may be partly to blame. A [recent study](#) by the Reboot Foundation, which was founded to fund research on critical thinking and develop resources for parents and schools, concluded that while the American public claims to engage with opposing views, people don't actually do so in practice.

Only 25% of people are willing to regularly have debates with people who disagree with them; roughly the same share says that they regularly *avoid* talking to people with opposing views. It is hard to build critical-thinking muscles when they are engaged simply to confirm one's own existing beliefs. Men are particularly poor at seeking discussions with people with opposing views: they are about 20 percentage points more likely than women to avoid people with whom they disagree.

The study surveyed more than 1,000 people online and weighted the results along demographic lines. The Reboot Foundation defines critical thinking as, "reflective thought that requires reasoning, logic and analysis to make choices and understand problems." Key elements, it noted, include seeking out opposing viewpoints, using evidence, and engaging in debate.

Critical thinking is buzzy in educational circles. Some think it's a skill that has existed forever (Socrates: "The unexamined life is not worth living") and is being [merely rebranded](#) for the 21st century; others believe that automation and the warp-speed pace of technological change make it [more urgent](#) for kids to be able to think, reason, dissect, and analyze with greater rigor than in the past.

For example, P21 (The Partnership for 21st Century Learning), an advocacy group founded to figure out how schools can prepare kids with "21st century skills," [developed a framework for learning](#) that put critical thinking at the center of everything.

Reboot's research reveals the need to bolster society's capacity for critical thinking. Only a fifth of parents asked their kids frequently or daily to consider an opposing view; only a quarter of parents frequently help their children evaluate evidence, an essential skill to honing one's reasoning abilities; and only a third of parents have their children regularly discuss issues without a right or wrong answer.

Intellectual TakeOut

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Why Americans Can No Longer Think For Themselves

By [Annie Holmquist](#)

American lingo continually seems to be filled with new words and catch phrases. One of the more recent ones is "fake news."

Fake news became a rising buzzword following the [2016 presidential election](#). According to the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, blame for fake news is largely placed at the feet of social media, which enables information to "be relayed among users with no significant third party filtering, fact-checking, or editorial judgment."

Yet as the *Washington Post* [points out](#), social media is not the sole purveyor of fake news. In fact, the traditional press may be just as much to blame because "the uncared reader may easily imbibe [inaccurate facts] without realizing it, so subtle is the misinformation and so authoritative the source."

So how did we get to such a state?

Interestingly, the answer to that question was put forth nearly 200 years ago by Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville found much to praise in American society and government when he visited the U.S. in the years before the Civil War. However, he also recognized that some of the benefits of America's democratic form of government could also lead to its downfall. Writing in *Democracy in America* he [noted](#):

"In democratic nations the public therefore possesses a singular power, of which no aristocratic nation can even conceive. **Rather than persuade people of its beliefs, it imposes them**, it permeates men's souls with them through the powerful pressure that the mind of all exerts on the intelligence of each."

The outcome of such a state is that individual citizens no longer think for themselves:

"In the United States, **the majority takes it upon itself to provide individuals with a range of ready-made opinions and thus relieves them of the obligation to form their own**. People there adopt a large number of theories in philosophy, morality, and politics without examination, on faith in the public at large."

Ironically, it is the prized trait of equality which Tocqueville believes is at the root of this problem. Although he believes equality is a wonderful thing, he also recognizes that used improperly, it can lead to avenues which dim intellectual ability:

“I see two very clear tendencies in equality: one impels each individual toward new ways of thinking, while the other would induce him to give up thinking voluntarily. And I see how, under the sway of certain laws, democracy might snuff out the intellectual freedom that the democratic social state encourages, so that the human spirit, having smashed all the shackles once placed on it by classes or individuals, would tightly chain itself to the general will of the majority.”

Today’s society places great emphasis and value on equality, but given Tocqueville’s words, is it the wrong kind? Does the modern quest for equality dumb down individual thinking to such an extent that it becomes increasingly susceptible to propaganda and “fake news”?