

Real vs. Manufactured Controversy

Not every "two sides" debate actually has two sides.

Some genuinely do — questions of values, priorities, or judgment where thoughtful, informed people land in different places for defensible reasons. Tax policy. Immigration levels. How to balance liberty and security. These are real disagreements, and pretending otherwise doesn't help anyone.

But some debates that get presented as "controversial" aren't actually close calls among people who study the question. They just look that way from the outside — because a few loud voices, a media incentive for conflict, or a motivated interest have manufactured the appearance of a fight that mostly isn't happening among the people who'd actually know.

The test is simple to state and harder to apply: is this a genuine disagreement among people with relevant expertise and no conflicting stake in the answer — or does it only look disputed because of who's disputing it?

What Real Disagreement Looks Like

Real controversy tends to have a shape. Experts across institutions, countries, and ideological starting points land in different places. The disagreement holds up over time instead of collapsing once you look closely. And crucially, people with a financial or political stake in one answer aren't the only ones defending it — the position also has support from people who have nothing to gain from being right.

Take the minimum wage. Economists have studied its effect on employment for decades, using different countries, different time periods, different methods — and they still don't agree, not just on the answer but on how to summarize what the evidence even shows. Some studies find real job losses at the margins; others find effects close to zero. Advocates on each side tend to lean on the studies that fit their priors, the way people usually do — but the underlying research disagreement is real, published in the same journals, argued in good faith by people with no financial stake in the outcome either way. That's what a real disagreement looks like.

Debates like this deserve to be treated as genuinely open — presented fairly, without a thumb on the scale, because they are, honestly, unresolved.

What Manufactured Controversy Looks Like

Manufactured controversy has a different shape. The doubt is disproportionately funded or amplified by people with a direct stake in the outcome, rarely the ones with the most relevant expertise, and it survives no matter how much evidence accumulates — because its purpose was never to be tested. Its purpose was to create enough hesitation that no one acts.

This pattern isn't tied to one side of the aisle. Doubt about tobacco's health effects and doubt about vaccine safety both fit this shape — funded or amplified by people with a stake in the outcome, unsupported by the researchers who actually study the question.

Evolution is maybe the clearest case. For decades, an advocacy group pushed "teach the controversy" campaigns, arguing schools should present evolution as scientifically contested. A federal court eventually examined the claim directly and found there was no such controversy within biology — the dispute lived entirely outside the field, among people with a religious or political stake in the outcome, not among biologists. The science was never actually in question. Only the appearance of a fight was manufactured, and it worked well enough to shape textbooks and school board elections for years.

The Same Skepticism, Both Directions

It's easy to apply this test only one way — scrutinizing sources you already doubt, waving through the ones that tell you what you already believe. But the same failure runs in reverse too: early in the COVID-19 pandemic, the possibility of a lab origin was treated by much of the press as fringe conspiracy, even though the question remains genuinely unresolved today. Manufacturing false certainty is the same failure as manufacturing false doubt, just pointed the other way.

The question isn't "does this source support my side." It's "would I trust this method, this funding, this level of independence, if it had produced the opposite conclusion."

A lot of rejected data isn't actually being evaluated — it's being rejected on sight because of who produced it. And a lot of accepted data isn't actually being evaluated either — it's being accepted on sight for the same reason, just in reverse. Both are the tribe test wearing a lab coat.

None of this means experts are infallible, or that expert consensus can never be wrong, or that skepticism toward institutions is always misplaced. Expert consensus has been wrong before, and healthy skepticism is part of thinking clearly, not an obstacle to it. The test isn't "trust every expert automatically." The test is noticing when the loudest doubt is coming from people who benefit from the doubt itself, rather than from people whose job is simply to find out what's true.

A Question Worth Asking

When a topic is presented as controversial, it's worth pausing to ask:

Controversial among whom? Among people with relevant expertise and no stake in the answer — or among people with a stake in the answer and no particular expertise?

If the disagreement holds up under that question, it's probably a real and legitimate debate, deserving real and legitimate treatment as one.

If it doesn't — if the "controversy" turns out to live mostly among people who benefit from the confusion — that's worth knowing before treating both sides as equally credible.

Fair-mindedness doesn't mean treating every claim as equally uncertain. Sometimes fairness means accurately reporting that one side of a manufactured dispute is simply better supported than the other — and saying so plainly is not the same as taking a political side.