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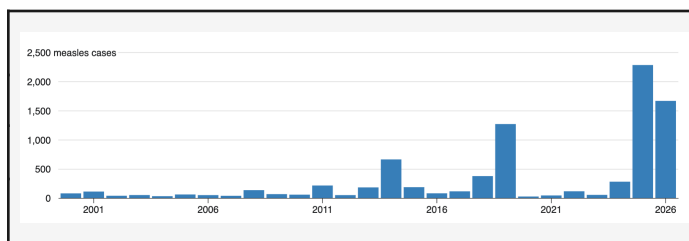
# When Everyone Gets a Vote on the Truth

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BY JACK MOLONEY | APRIL 8, 2026

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In 2000, measles was effectively eliminated from the United States because of the extremely effective MMR vaccine and relative herd immunity. In 1998, Andrew Wakefield and other scientists published a paper linking the vaccine to autism. Although this was later disproven by other doctors, the results have led to a huge increase in children not being vaccinated (Eggertson). Largely due to related anti-COVID vaccine sentiment, 2025 and 2026 have seen the largest number of measles outbreaks by far in recent U.S. history (CDC). The CDC chart below shows measles cases from 2000 until 2026.



**FIGURE 1** Measles cases reported in the United States, 2000–2026. Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The spike is remarkable, not only because it shows the return of a preventable disease, but

because it reveals a deeper cultural problem that many Americans now treat personal suspicion with the same authority as real medical evidence.

In Western culture, many of our customs are based on the assumption that everyone should have a say. There is reasoning behind this that makes sense. The United States was founded under these principles; however, it is possible that we think too democratically in our daily lives in places where it does not belong. I am not making a political argument against representative bodies; rather, I am questioning our deep cultural belief that everyone deserves an opinion on everything. Our issue is not with the idea of democracy as Americans; it is that we have allowed democratic habits to spread places where they are not the right tool.



We take for granted the idea of everyone having a say as a normal thing, but

this is not the case everywhere. America is one of the countries with the highest level of individualism in the world, leading to our feeling that everyone should be heard. Geert Hofstede, a Dutch psychologist, is the creator of the cultural dimensions theory. This has six dimensions which compare countries based on their cultural practices. The two most relevant dimensions here are Individualism vs. Collectivism and Power Distance Index, and the United States and other Western countries are among the highest in individualism and the lowest in Power Distance Index, which is a gauge of how societies accept power inequality (Hofstede). These rankings show that our democratic ideas are not just constitutional but deeply ingrained in our everyday lives. Not every culture in the world currently or in history has lived in this way. This culture of democracy has led to people believing their own opinions are valid in every situation, even topics they know little about.

One very modern text on this exact topic is Tom Nichols' book called *The Death of Expertise* which argues that Americans have started to doubt real expertise increasingly. He says in the introduction:

*Americans now believe that having equal rights in a political system also means that each person's opinion about anything must be accepted as equal to anyone else's. This is the credo of a fair number of people despite being obvious nonsense. It is a flat assertion of actual*

*equality that is always illogical, sometimes funny, and often dangerous (Nichols 5).*

Nichols' point encapsulates the issue with America and, to some extent, the entire Western world in its belief in total equality of opinion. In most cases, equal opinions are low stakes, but this could come into play in decisions of much larger magnitude like investing decisions, major purchases, or medical decisions.

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*"Everyone feels entitled to their own opinion and no longer tries to understand others."*

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This trend in the United States has only been getting more pronounced in recent years. American trust in the federal government is at 22%, down from 77% six decades ago, and trust in the medical system has fallen from 80% to 36% (Pew Research). These are far from the only institutions and experts that we have lost trust in, but it shows a huge trend towards general distrust in favor of personal opinion. There are a number of reasons for this erosion of trust, so these stats are certainly not unfounded; however, the impact has led to many negative consequences and a general attitude from the United States that is imperfect. Everyone having a say can be positive when it comes to political rights or social dignity, but it can be harmful on issues of technical knowledge or medical judgement.

Jonathan Haidt wrote an Atlantic article in 2022 titled “Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid” that makes the claim Americans have made major changes for the worse in recent years, largely driven by social media. He compares the country to the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel where the people of earth try to build a tower to heaven, but they become confused and unable to understand each other’s languages along the way. Our situation is similar in the sense that everyone feels entitled to their own opinion and no longer tries to understand others. The American people have not become less intelligent, but our culture has shifted the wrong direction in terms of our outlook on personal viewpoints. We are failing to acknowledge correctness and thinking it is more democratic and therefore beneficial to our society. In reality, this leads to a culture where truth becomes personal opinion, which does not benefit anyone.



I spoke with Claude about this issue to better understand some of the nuances, and it brought up a great point in that it is difficult to accurately describe who is actually an expert. Additionally, people considered experts have been wrong time and time again on very important issues. Economists were not able to predict the 2008 Financial Crisis. Western intelligence made the false claim that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. Time and time again, people have seen experts be incorrect,

and their failures have led the population to be doubtful. While this doubt is understandable, the better action is for society to have stronger accountability systems for important incorrect information. I initially assumed that it was just social media and an increase in personal freedom that made people think more this way, but this complication gives me a better understanding of why people choose to question so much. This discourse helped me understand that the problem is not with the idea of democracy but rather our overapplication of its principles. Individual voices are being heard in places where they were never in the past; generally, this is viewed in a positive light. However, we fail to acknowledge the negative consequence that truth has become less valued.

Additionally, this argument is also not new, and great minds have been debating similar ideas for a long time. In the 1920s Walter Lippmann and John Dewey argued about the place of a modern democracy in a complex society. Lippmann was doubtful that the public alone could handle modern complex political issues, while Dewey resisted handing over decision-making purely to experts. Lippmann later argued that experts should not themselves be rulers but rather advisers directly to government officials, which is largely what we have in place today (DeCesare). The discourse shows evidence this is a question that is not fully answerable and will always be debated; even so, the debate feels newly relevant today where distrust is higher than ever, and we no longer have a clear

process for deciding who deserves trust. Their argument was mainly about the best way of governance, and we have certainly moved in the way of Lippmann with far increased bureaucracy since. Nonetheless, our cultural views have moved in the way more towards equal say on every topic and expertise becoming less and less valued. While their argument was about government, it is relevant to the modern cultural phenomenon we are seeing.

There are many things where everyone should have a say and the distinction of expertise does not matter; however, we have

started to blur the line on where everyone deserves a say. The distinction between fair questioning and unfair dismissal of institutions is one that our society struggles with. It is clear, based on all the information presented, that we have gone further towards the questioning side, even on matters of objective truth; consequently, the general public has less trust than ever in experts on their subject matter. Our democratic ideals are great for government, media, and many things; however, on topics like medicine, technical arguments, and purely objective facts, there is no place for everyone to have an equal voice.

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## Reflection on AI

My main source of AI for this project was Claude, and I used it to work on an outline and give me feedback at times as I went. I also used Perplexity a bit for searching for sources. My main prompt to Claude to start our conversation was:

*“Claude, I am writing a paper on democratic ideas, and my thesis is that as a western culture we have become too democratic in our daily lives. This is not an argument about political systems but rather about how it feels like everyone thinks anyone can have an equal say on any topic. What do you think about this? And also what are counterarguments?”*

This led to conversation which brought up new pieces and counterarguments that I had not yet thought of, and I included pieces of this in my complication portion. Finally, I used Gemini and Claude for proofreading and making sure there were no major errors. My prompt for that was pasting the paper and saying “Please search this paper for any glaring grammatical or spelling errors.”

In revision for this paper, I used Claude to help me with formatting to be more similar to an Atlantic article. I also used Claude for revision and making sure that my logic was as good as possible.

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