

SENTINEL RESEARCH SOCIETY

Washington, DC

Research Proposal

Title: *Perceptions of American Values and Unity in an Era of Polarization*

Principal Investigator (PI)

Name: [TBD]

Affiliation: Sentinel Research Society

Email: [TBD]

Research Team Composition

Graduate Student Research Assistant (GSRA)

Name: [TBD]

- **Role:** Research integration, methodology coordination, intern oversight
- **Weekly Commitment:** 5–7 hours/week

Undergraduate Research Interns

Number: [TBD, expected 5–10]

- **Disciplines:** Political Science, Strategic Communications, National Security, Sociology
 - **Roles:** Survey implementation, content analysis, transcription, literature review, data visualization
 - **Weekly Commitment:** 5–7 hours/week per intern
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Abstract

This research project, led by the Sentinel Research Society, explores American perceptions of national values, moral distinctiveness, and political unity during a period of heightened domestic polarization and foreign information warfare. As adversarial nations such as the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation deploy coordinated influence operations to weaken U.S. social cohesion, a fundamental question emerges: Do Americans still view their country as a moral leader and a global force for good?

This study will investigate whether citizens believe that foundational American values—freedom, democracy, equality, and liberty—remain relevant to contemporary governance and society, and whether these values still serve to unite Americans across ideological divides. Using surveys, focus groups, content analysis, and an experimental component exposing participants to foreign narratives, the research will analyze the effectiveness of adversarial disinformation in shaping domestic perceptions.

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Findings will offer insights into the resilience of American civic identity and provide strategic recommendations to strengthen national unity. This project will culminate in a public-facing report, academic publication, and a policy brief for stakeholders concerned with information security, psychological defense, and national cohesion.

1. Introduction & Background

Historically, the United States has drawn its global influence not only from economic and military power, but from a shared national identity rooted in democratic ideals and civic morality. However, this identity is under strain. Internal political divisions—exacerbated by foreign disinformation campaigns—threaten the ideological cohesion that has traditionally enabled the U.S. to confront external threats.

This project investigates the current state of American self-perception: whether the population still sees the U.S. as exceptional, whether foundational values remain intact, and whether national unity can withstand both internal strife and external manipulation. It builds on emerging research in strategic communications, information operations, and national identity to assess the durability of the American idea in the 21st century.

2. Research Questions and Objectives

Primary Questions:

1. Do Americans believe that the United States continues to stand for freedom, democracy, equality, and liberty?
2. Do Americans see the U.S. as morally distinct from authoritarian adversaries like China and Russia?
3. How do Americans perceive political and ideological polarization, and what, if anything, continues to unite them?
4. What is the perceived impact of foreign influence campaigns on American identity and unity?

Objectives:

- Assess whether foundational national values still resonate with citizens across demographics
 - Determine how adversarial narratives influence public trust in American institutions
 - Analyze the role of polarization in diminishing moral distinctiveness
 - Provide a data-driven understanding of national unity as a strategic asset
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3. Theoretical Framework

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This project is rooted in strategic communication theory, civic republicanism, and psychological operations (PSYOP) doctrine. It draws on classical theories of American political thought—particularly the works of Tocqueville and Lincoln—while incorporating contemporary research in disinformation studies and identity-based polarization. The concept of "cognitive resilience" informs the experimental component, examining how individuals react to foreign-produced divisive content.

4. Methodology

1. National Survey (Quantitative)

- Sample size: 2,000 respondents, stratified by age, party affiliation, region, and socioeconomic status
- Distribution platform: Free version of SurveyMonkey or equivalent
- Content: Likert-scale and open-ended questions exploring civic identity, trust in institutions, moral distinctiveness, and perceptions of foreign interference

2. Focus Groups (Qualitative)

- Small-group interviews across 4–6 diverse demographic segments
- Discussion topics: National values, polarization, institutional trust, and media narratives
- Conducted via Zoom or in-person sessions

3. Content Analysis

- Corpus: Media narratives, campaign rhetoric, and social media discourse (2014–2024)
- Goal: Track rhetorical shifts and framing of American values, foreign threats, and unity narratives
- Tools: Google Docs, Taguette, or other open-source coding platforms

4. Experimental Component

- A randomized subset of survey participants will be shown curated foreign-generated disinformation (e.g., RT or CGTN narratives)
 - Pre-/post-exposure questions will measure perceptual changes
 - Results will identify the susceptibility of different groups to adversarial content
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5. Project Roles and Workflow

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Team Member	Role	Weekly Commitment	Deliverables
PI (TBD)	Project oversight, strategic framing	2–4 hrs	Final report, academic article, policy brief
GSRA (TBD)	Methodology, survey tool management	5–7 hrs	Literature synthesis, focus group protocol
Interns (5–10, TBD)	Research, data entry, transcription	5–7 hrs each	Survey logistics, media analysis, coding

6. Timeline

All dates TBD pending PI assignment and institutional approvals.

Phase	Task	Lead	Estimated Dates
Phase 1	Literature review and research instrument design	GSRA + Interns	[Month/Year]
Phase 2	Survey launch, focus group recruitment	Interns + GSRA	[Month/Year]
Phase 3	Content analysis and experimental run	GSRA + Interns	[Month/Year]
Phase 4	Data analysis, reporting, publication drafting	PI + GSRA	[Month/Year]

7. Expected Findings and Deliverables

- **Empirical data** on the degree to which Americans believe in foundational values
 - **Identification of vulnerable narratives** and audiences most affected by disinformation
 - **Strategic recommendations** for public diplomacy, education, and civic engagement
 - Deliverables include:
 - Public report with visualized survey results
 - Academic journal article or *Sentinel Journal* submission
 - Policy brief for interagency and nonprofit stakeholders
 - Optional podcast segment or webinar to present findings
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8. Preliminary Bibliography

- Pew Research Center. *Americans' Trust in Government: 1958–2023*
- RAND Corporation. *Truth Decay: The Diminishing Role of Facts in American Public Life*, 2018
- Brookings Institution. *Misinformation and the 2020 Election*
- Nye, Joseph. *The Future of Power*, 2011
- US Senate Intelligence Committee. *Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 Election*, 2019
- Lincoln, Abraham. *Lyceum Address*, 1838