'Polarization' is Merriam-Webster's 2024 word of the year

Associated Press

The results of the 2024 U.S. presidential election rattled the country and sent shockwaves across the world — or were cause for celebration, depending on who you ask. Is it any surprise then that the Merriam-Webster word of the year is "polarization"?

"Polarization means division, but it's a very specific kind of division," said Peter Sokolowski, Merriam-Webster's editor at large, in an exclusive interview with The Associated Press ahead of Monday's announcement. "Polarization means that we are tending toward the extremes rather than toward the center."

The election was so divisive, many American voters went to the polls with a feeling that the opposing candidate was an existential threat to the nation. According to AP VoteCast, a survey of more than 120,000 voters, about 8 in 10 Kamala Harris voters were very or somewhat concerned that Donald Trump's views — but not Harris' — were too extreme, while about 7 in 10 Trump voters felt the same way about Harris — but not Trump.

The Merriam-Webster entry for "polarization" reflects scientific and metaphorical definitions. It's most commonly used to mean "causing strong disagreement between opposing factions or groupings." Merriam-Webster, which logs 100 million pageviews a month on its site, chooses its word of the year based on data, tracking a rise in search and usage.

Last year's pick was "authentic." This year's comes as large swaths of the U.S. struggle to reach consensus on what is real.

"It's always been important to me that the dictionary serve as a kind of neutral and objective arbiter of meaning for everybody," Sokolowski said. "It's a kind of backstop for meaning in an era of fake news, alternative facts, whatever you want to say about the value of a word's meaning in the culture."

It's notable that "polarization" originated in the early 1800s — and not during the Renaissance, as did most words with Latin roots about science, Sokolowski said. He called it a "pretty young word," in the scheme of the English language. "Polarized is a term that brings intensity to another word," he continued, most frequently used in the U.S. to describe race relations, politics and ideology.

"The basic job of the dictionary is to tell the truth about words," the Merriam-Webster editor continued. "We've had dictionaries of English for 420 years and it's only been in the last 20 years or so that we've actually known which words people look up."

"Polarization" extends beyond political connotations. It's used to highlight fresh cracks and deep rifts alike in pop culture, tech trends and other industries.

All the scrutiny over Taylor Swift's private jet usage? Polarizing. Beef between rappers Kendrick Lamar and Drake? Polarizing. The International Olympic Committee's decision to strip American gymnast Jordan Chiles of her bronze medal after the Paris Games? You guessed it: polarizing.

Even lighthearted memes — like those making fun of Australian breakdancer Rachael "Raygun" Gunn's performance — or the proliferation of look-alike contests, or who counts as a nepo baby proved polarizing.

Paradoxically though, people tend to see eye to eye on the word itself. Sokolowski cited its frequent use among people across the political spectrum, including commentators on Fox News, MSNBC and CNN.

"It's used by both sides," he said, "and in a little bit ironic twist to the word, it's something that actually everyone agrees on."

Rounding out Merriam-Webster's top 10 words of 2024:

Demure

TikToker Jools Lebron's 38-second video describing her workday makeup routine as "very demure, very mindful" lit up the summer with memes. The video has been viewed more than 50 million times, yielding "huge spikes" in lookups, Sokolowski said, and prompting many to learn it means reserved or modest.

Fortnight

Taylor Swift's song "Fortnight," featuring rapper Post Malone, undoubtedly spurred many searches for this word, which means two weeks. "Music can still send people to the dictionary," Sokolowski said.

Totality

The solar eclipse in April inspired awe and much travel. There are tens of millions of people who live along a narrow stretch from Mexico's Pacific coast to eastern Canada, otherwise known as the path of totality, where locals and travelers gazed skyward to see the moon fully blot out the sun. Generally, the word refers to a sum or aggregate amount — or wholeness.

Resonate

"Texts developed by AI have a disproportionate percentage of use of the word 'resonate,'" Sokolowski said. This may be because the word, which means to affect or appeal to someone in a personal or emotional way, can add gravitas to writing. But, paradoxically, artificial intelligence "also betrays itself to be a robot because it's using that word too much."

Allision

The word was looked up 60 times more often than usual when, in March, a ship crashed into the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore. "When you have one moving object into a fixed object, that's an allision, not a collision. You're showing that one of the two objects struck was not, in fact, in motion," Sokolowski said.

Weird

This summer on the TV news show "Morning Joe," Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz called Republican leaders "weird." It may have been what launched his national career, landing him as the Democratic vice presidential nominee. Though it's a word that people typically misspell — is it "ei" or "ie"? — and search for that reason, its rise in use was notable, Sokolowski said.

Cognitive

Whether the word was used to raise questions about President Joe Biden's debate performance or Trump's own age, it cropped up often. It refers to conscious intellectual activity — such as thinking, reasoning, or remembering.

Pander

Pander was used widely in political commentary, Sokolowski said. "Conservative news outlets accused Kamala Harris of pandering to different groups, especially young voters, Black voters, gun rights supporters." Whereas Walz said Trump's visit to a McDonald's kitchen pandered to hourly wage workers. It means to say, do, or provide what someone — such as an audience — wants or demands even though it is not "good, proper, reasonable, etc."

Democracy

In 2003, Merriam-Webster decided to make "democracy" its first word of the year. Since then, the word — which, of course, means a form of government in which the people elect representatives to make decisions, policies and laws — is consistently one of the dictionary's most looked up. "There's a poignancy to that, that people are checking up on it," Sokolowski said. "Maybe the most hopeful thing that the curiosity of the public shows, is that they're paying attention."

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Phone 501-776-3838

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1997 Toyota Camry	4T1BG22K2VU078242
2002 Honda Accord	1HMCG56672C017010
2004 Buick Century	2G4WS552841282207
2012 Dodge Caliber	1C3CDWEA6CD509324
2003 Honda Odessey	5FNRL18963B030388
2008 Chevy Malibu	1G1ZJ57768F265818
1999 Lincoln Navigator	SLMRU27AXLJ36936
2011 Mazda 5	JM1CW2BL9C0127221
2016 Dodge Journey	3C4PDCGB2GT106913
2010 Cadillac CTS	1G6DE5EG5A0124078
2009 Chevy Cobalt	1G1AT18H997135857
1985 Honda Traxx	JH3TE1401JK032690

The above-mentioned vehicles are being stored at Stealth Recovery Team, LLC 2221 Shady Pine Street, Bryant, AR 72022. All parties that feel they have any claim to the above-mentioned vehicles must contact Larry Chase at Stealth recovery Team, LLC 501-776-3838 within 10 days of this notice. The owners and lienholders have been notified by certified mail, or are unknown. The vehicle's will be sold by in person by sealed bid at a non-judicial public sale on Tuesday December 17, 2024 at 10:00 am.

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Legal Notices

NOTICE

Notice is hereby given that a hearing will be held by the Planning Commission of the City of Benton, AR on the 7th day of January, 2025 at 6:00 pm at Benton City Hall 114 South East Street on the petition of Tim Fulks for Variance Approval for reduction of side setback lines on following lands to wit:

LEGAL DESCRIPTION: LOT 2, NORTHSHORE AT HURRICANE LAKE ESTATES, PHASE 3, BENTON, SALINE COUNTY, ARKANSAS.

Please contact Hope Consulting, Inc., 129 N. Main Street, City of Benton, Saline County, Arkansas. 501-315-2826 with questions.

Legal Notices

NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING

A public hearing will be held on Monday, January 13th, 2025 at 6:00 P.M. at the Bryant City Office Complex, 210 Southwest 3rd Street, City of Bryant, Saline County, for the purpose of public comment on a conditional use request at the site of 8665, 5415 Northlake Rd, Alexander, AR 72002(address). A legal description of this property can be obtained by contacting the Bryant Department of Community Development.

Lance Penfield
Chairman of Planning Commission
City of Bryant

Legal Notices

NOTICE
IN THE CIRCUIT COURT OF SALINE COUNTY, ARKANSAS
FOURTH DIVISION

ESTATE OF SHEILA K. HARTSFIELD, DECEASED
LAST KNOWN ADDRESS: 53 Loyola Drive
Hot Springs Village, Arkansas 71909
DATE OF DEATH: October 8, 2024
DOCKET NO.: 63PR-24-604-4

AFFP

NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING

Affidavit of Publication

STATE OF ARKANSAS }
COUNTY OF SALINE } SS

, being duly sworn, says:

That she is Lisa McElrath of the The Saline Courier, a daily newspaper of general circulation, printed and published in Benton, Saline County, Arkansas; that the publication, a copy of which is attached hereto, was published in the said newspaper on the following dates:

December 10, 2024

That said newspaper was regularly issued and circulated on those dates.

SIGNED:

Lisa McElrath

Subscribed to and sworn to me this 10th day of December 2024.

Rhonda Overbey, Notary, Saline County, Arkansas

My commission expires: January 29, 2033

RHONDA OVERBEY
Notary Public - Arkansas
Saline County
Commission # 12721758
My Commission Expires Jan 29, 2033

01124611 00182249

Joshua Thompson (28)
44 Isbell Lane
Little Rock, AR 72223

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