We often hear claims that the media are biased—that what they report and how they report it reflect an obvious or hidden political agenda. I am not so naïve as to deny this. No doubt there are numerous instances on both the left (MSNBC) and right (FOX) confirming this assertion. Nevertheless, as a scholar of communication who for over 40 years has studied political language, I believe this is not and need not be an inherent problem in journalism.

For example, Chris Wallace of Fox News illustrates how good journalism can be devoid of political bias. On Sunday, October 20, Wallace interviewed President Donald Trump’s acting chief of staff Nick Mulvaney. Using his own words, Wallace showed how Mulvaney explicitly admitted to a quid pro quo—documenting that Mulvaney did indeed say that congressionally appropriated money was withheld from Ukraine pending Ukraine’s investigation of Hunter and Joe Biden, as well as a debunked conspiracy theory about the Democratic National Committee server in 2016.

No matter how much Mulvaney wiggled and protested, Wallace held him accountable for his words and exposed the truth. This occurred totally independent of and separate from Wallace’s own political views.
Wallace’s questioning of Mulvaney is reminiscent of his interview several weeks earlier of Stephen Miller, a senior policy advisor for Donald Trump, on the President’s conversation with the Ukraine leader, the whistleblower complaint (which Trump’s hand selected Inspector General Michael Atkinson found “credible” and an “urgent concern”) and allegations of a cover-up.

Despite fair and straightforward questions, Wallace allowed Miller’s words to speak for themselves, revealing how he refused to answer questions, evaded the issue, obfuscated and just kept repeating his talking points. As with the Mulvaney interview, Wallace’s politics played no detectable role in the exchange.

Other examples of the media’s ability to bracket and eschew political bias abound. Consider Jake Tapper’s (CNN) recent interview of Ohio Representative Jim Jordan, continually reminding him that his answers were based on disproven theories about corruption and Biden.

Witness as well Scott Pelley’s (CBS) holding House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy accountable for his intentional or unintentional omission of the exact words from the transcript of Trump’s telephone conversation with Ukraine’s President.

And, of course, George Stephanopoulos’s (ABC) interview with Trump’s personal attorney Rudy Giuliani provides a good illustration of how a journalist can hold an interviewee’s feet to the fire by quoting their own words rather than offering a partisan accusation.

To be sure, Wallace’s interviews—as well as the interviews conducted by other journalists—were not simply “gotcha” moments strategically designed to score points against an adversary. To the contrary. This is the best of journalism where there are no adversaries. Wallace and
other respected journalists vividly exemplify the media’s truth seeking mission, something that can be fulfilled independent of political bias.

Cherwitz is the Ernest A. Sharpe Centennial Professor Emeritus in the Moody College of Communication, The University of Texas at Austin