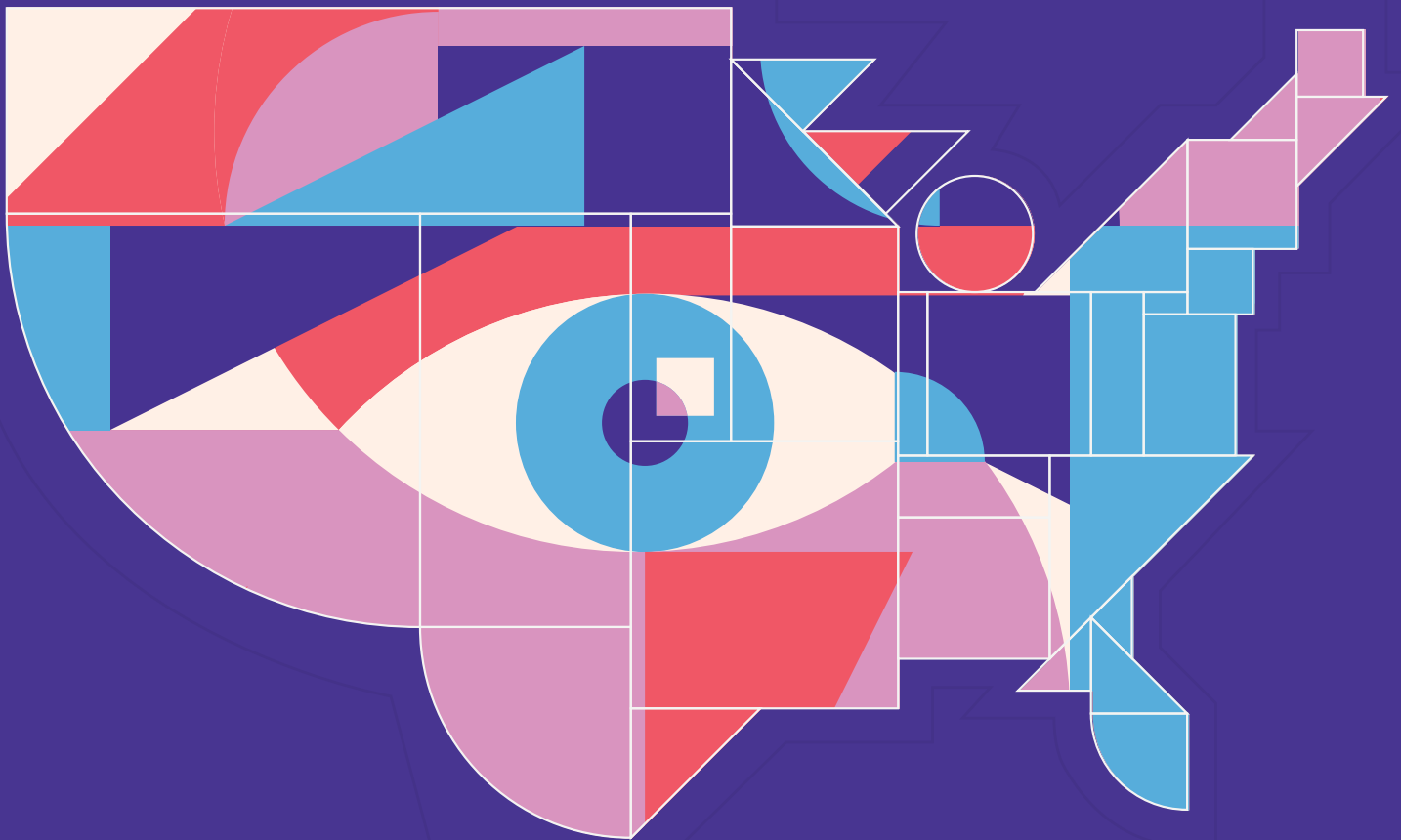


A GALLUP/KNIGHT FOUNDATION SURVEY

# American Views 2020: Trust, Media and Democracy

**A Deepening Divide**



The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation's Trust, Media and Democracy initiative aims to address the decline in trust for journalism and other democratic institutions by examining the causes and supporting solutions.

As part of the multidisciplinary initiative launched in 2017, Knight Foundation partnered with Gallup on a research series to better understand Americans' evolving relationship with the media and to inform solutions to the information challenges of our day.

Knight Foundation is also investing in technologists, journalists, academic institutions and others with strong, innovative approaches to improve the flow of accurate information, prevent the spread of misinformation and better inform communities.

Knight Foundation believes that democracy thrives when communities are informed and engaged.

For more, visit [kf.org/tmd](http://kf.org/tmd).

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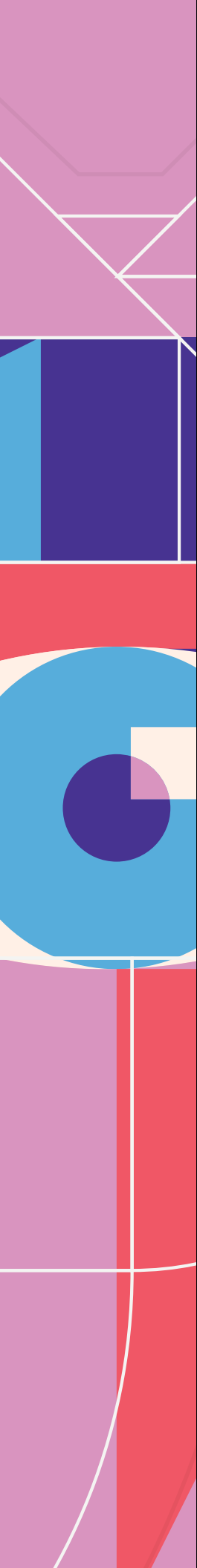
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# Overview

There is a widening gulf between American aspirations for and assessments of the news media. With each passing benchmark study, the American people render deeper and increasingly polarized judgments about the news media and how well it is fulfilling its role in our democracy.

In 2018, Gallup and Knight Foundation published the inaugural *American Views* report as part of their Trust, Media and Democracy research program. This landmark study of Americans' attitudes toward the news media and its role in our democracy is part of the ongoing Gallup/Knight research effort. The 2018 report found that while Americans valued the role of the news media as an important institution in a free society, they did not believe it was fulfilling its democratic roles well. Political party was the primary determining factor driving Americans' opinions of and trust in the media.

For the 2020 *American Views* survey, Gallup and Knight polled more than 20,000 U.S. adults and found deepening pessimism and further partisan entrenchment about how the news media delivers on its democratic mandate for factual, trustworthy information. Many Americans feel the media's critical role of informing and holding those in power accountable is compromised by increasing bias. As such, Americans have not only lost confidence in the ideal of an objective media, they believe news organizations actively support the partisan divide. At the same time, Americans have not lost sight of the value of news — strong majorities uphold the ideal that the news media is fundamental to a healthy democracy.

Gallup and Knight publish these sobering findings at a moment when America's media landscape is increasingly shaped by the financial exigencies of the attention economy — and when journalism, like other democratic institutions, is growing more vulnerable to polarization and eroding trust.<sup>1</sup>

As evidenced in this study, party affiliation remains the key predictor of attitudes about the news media. Republicans express more negative sentiments on every aspect of media performance compared to Democrats and independents. Attitudes also differ by age — likely a reflection, in part, of generational differences in news consumption, as this study documents a concerning negative trend in young Americans' opinions of the news media.

This report is based on data collected between Nov. 8, 2019, and Feb. 16, 2020, just before the novel coronavirus became a global pandemic and the burgeoning movement for racial justice swept the nation. The low levels of public trust in the nation's polarized media environment have left open the possibility for dangerous false narratives to take root in all segments of society during these emergent crises. At a time when factual, trustworthy information is especially critical to public health and the future of our democracy, the striking trends documented in these pages are cause for concern. *American Views* offers new insights into how the public is responding to these challenges in their own media consumption and their thoughts about how to address them.

1 Gallup, Inc. (n.d.). *Confidence in institutions*. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>

# Executive Summary

## 1 Americans still value the media's traditional roles in society, such as providing accurate news and holding powerful interests accountable for their actions.

- The vast majority of Americans (84%) say that, in general, the news media is “critical” (49%) or “very important” (35%) to democracy.
- Americans are more likely today to say the media's role in democracy is “critical,” up five percentage points since 2017.
- Large majorities say it is “critical” or “very important” for the news media to provide accurate and fair news reports (92%), ensure Americans are informed about public affairs (91%) and hold leaders accountable for their actions (85%).
- More Americans say the media is performing poorly rather than well in accomplishing these goals than did in 2017.

## 2 However, Americans see increasing levels of bias in the news media; majorities see bias in the news source they rely on most.

- A majority of Americans currently see “a great deal” (49%) or “a fair amount” (37%) of political bias in news coverage. The percentage seeing a great deal of bias is up from 45% in 2017.
- Most Americans see bias in their go-to news source; 20% see “a great deal” and another 36% see “a fair amount” of bias in the news source they rely on most often.
- Given the choice, however, more Americans say they are concerned about bias in the news other people are getting (69%) than say they worry about their own news being biased (29%).
- Nearly three-quarters of Americans say they see too much bias in the reporting of news that is supposed to be objective as “a major problem” (73%), up from 65% in the 2017 study.

## 3 Americans suspect inaccuracies in reporting are designed to push a specific agenda.

- Americans perceive inaccurate news to be intentional — either because the reporter is misrepresenting the facts (54%) or making them up entirely (28%).
- Nearly 8 in 10 Americans (79%) say news organizations they distrust are trying to persuade people to adopt a certain viewpoint, while 12% say they are trying to report the news accurately and fairly but are unable to do so.
- Eight percent of Americans say distrusted media are trying to ruin the country, driven largely by the 1 in 5 Americans who identify as “very conservative” and 1 in 10 Republicans who feel this way.

4

#### **Differences in Americans' opinions of the news media are most pronounced by political party affiliation.**

- Almost three-fourths of Republicans (71%) have a “very” or “somewhat” unfavorable opinion of the news media, compared to 22% of Democrats and 52% of independents.
- Democrats and Republicans differ greatly in their ratings of the media on every aspect of performance, including providing objective news reports, holding political and business leaders accountable for their actions and helping Americans stay informed about current affairs.
- Sixty-nine percent of Americans, including 61% of Democrats, say the increasing number of news sources reporting from a particular point of view is “a major problem.” In contrast, 77% of Republicans say the same.
- While a majority of Americans across the political spectrum (80%) say the media is under attack politically, they are divided as to whether those attacks are merited. Whereas 70% of Democrats say the media is under attack and those attacks are not justified, 61% of Republicans say such attacks are justified.
- In addition to partisan differences in media attitudes, views also vary by age, with older Americans generally more favorable toward the news media than younger Americans. Whereas 44% of Americans aged 65 and older have “very” or “somewhat” favorable views of the media, less than 1 in 5 Americans under age 30 (19%) say the same.

5

#### **Majorities of Americans say news organizations should diversify their reporting staffs, but they differ — largely by politics — on the focus of diversity efforts.**

- A strong majority of Americans (79%) say news organizations should hire to increase the diversity of their reporting staffs. However, while majorities say it is important for the news media to reflect the diversity of America, this ranks lowest of the priorities among the roles for media to play in society.
- The priorities cited by Americans who say news organizations should hire for more diversity differ greatly by race and political party. Democrats (49%) and Blacks (60%) prioritize racial/ethnic diversity in hiring, while Republicans (51%) and whites (35%) are most apt to prioritize diversity in political views.

6

#### **Americans commonly feel overwhelmed by the volume and speed of news, but say misinformation online is media's greatest problem. Those overwhelmed are most likely to turn to one or two trusted news sources as a solution.**

- Four in five Americans (78%) say the spread of misinformation online is “a major problem,” exceeding all other challenges posed by the media environment.
- Seventy-three percent of Americans want to see major internet companies find ways to exclude false/hateful information online.

- More Americans say it is harder (62%) rather than easier (36%) to be well-informed because of all the sources of information available. In 2017, 58% said it was harder to be informed.
- Reasons Americans who say it is harder to stay informed cite for feeling overwhelmed include the mix of news interspersed with non-news on the web (72%), followed by the pace or speed of news reporting (63%) and the increased number of organizations reporting the news (63%).
- More Americans (54%) say there are enough media sources to sort out the facts than say there is so much bias it's difficult to sort out the facts (43%), an improvement from 2017 when the split was 50% to 47%, respectively. Republicans (65%) are much more likely than independents (48%) and Democrats (21%) to say there is too much bias to sort out the facts.
- In response to feeling overwhelmed, 41% of Americans say they only pay attention to one or two trusted sources; 31% try to consult a variety of sources to see where they agree; 17% go to the extreme of ceasing to pay attention to news altogether; and 8% rely on others to help them sort out what they need to know.

### **7 Local news plays a key role in political and civic engagement.**

- Thirty-one percent of Americans say they follow news about issues affecting their local community “very closely,” an increase from 25% in 2017. However, most Americans are not very confident in their knowledge relating to public affairs in their community.
- Americans who follow local news closely are more likely to vote in local elections and to feel attached to their communities. They are less likely to say that “people like me don’t have any say in what the government does.”
- Americans who primarily access their news online — predominantly, younger Americans — are less likely to be knowledgeable about their local communities and to feel attached to their communities.

### **8 In a deeply divided nation, majorities of Americans say the media bears blame for political division. But they also see the potential for the media to heal the divide.**

- Forty-eight percent of Americans say the media bears “a great deal” of blame for political division in this country, while 36% say they bear “a moderate amount.”
- But nearly identical percentages say the media could do “a great deal” (49%) or “a moderate amount” (35%) to heal those divisions.

# Detailed Findings

## 1 Media Trust, Bias and Attempts to Push an Agenda

The latest Gallup/Knight *American Views* survey finds increased concern with media bias in a variety of forms among Americans across the political spectrum. As the country's partisan divide has intensified, more Americans are losing faith in the media's objectivity and believe the media is an active participant in the ideology wars. And yet, strong majorities continue to insist that an independent media is "critical" or "very important" to a functioning democracy.

### Declines in Media Trust Parallel Increased Perceptions of Bias

Gallup and Knight's Trust, Media and Democracy studies have found that distrust of the media is most often fueled by perceived bias and lack of transparency.<sup>2</sup> Americans' trust in the news media has fallen significantly over the past 20 years, and concerns about bias dominate the major problems people see with news organizations today. A long-term Gallup trend shows that the proportion of Americans saying they have "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of confidence in the mass media to report the news "fully, accurately and fairly" fell from 55% in 1999 to 32% in 2016, before recovering slightly to 41% by 2019.<sup>3</sup> This overall decline in Americans' trust in media parallels their confidence in institutions in general over the past decade and has largely been driven by falling confidence among Republicans, though Democrats' confidence fell consistently between 2005 and 2015 before surging upward in 2017.

Americans' decline in media trust is related to the growing perception of political bias in the news media. Over 8 in 10 Americans currently see "a great deal" (49%) or "a fair amount" (37%) of political bias in news coverage. Perceived bias in the news media has risen substantially in recent years, from 62% in a 2007 Pew Research Center telephone survey to 86% in the current study.<sup>4</sup>

**As shown in previous Gallup/Knight studies, Americans are more likely to trust local news than national news and to perceive less bias in local reporting than what they see nationally.<sup>5</sup> While this survey asked about "the news media" in general, people commonly understand this to refer to national media outlets, a point reinforced by a methodical examination of closed- and open-ended responses.**

2 Knight Foundation & Gallup, Inc. (2018). *Indicators of news media trust*. <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/indicators-of-news-media-trust/>

3 Brenan, M. (2019, September 26). *Americans' trust in mass media edges down to 41%*. Gallup.com. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/267047/americans-trust-mass-media-edges-down.aspx>

4 Pew Research Center. (2008, January 11). *Internet's broader role in Campaign 2008: Social networking and online videos take off*. <https://www.people-press.org/2008/01/11/internets-broader-role-in-campaign-2008/>

5 Knight Foundation & Gallup, Inc. (2019). *State of public trust in local news*. <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/state-of-public-trust-in-local-news/>

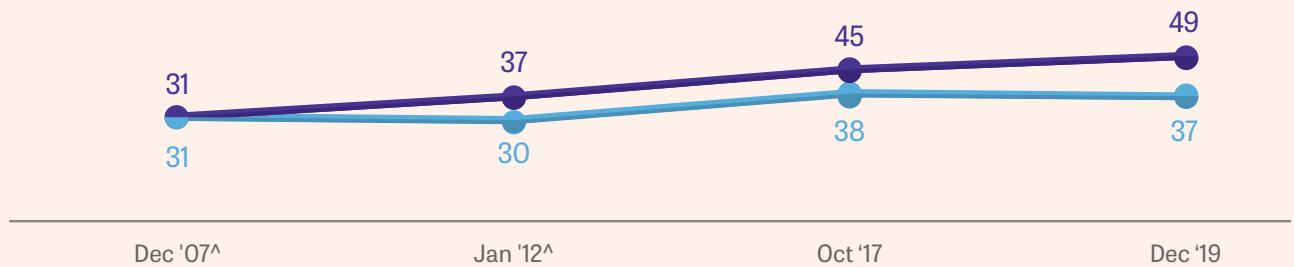


FIGURE 1

## Americans' Perceptions of Political Bias in News, 2007-2019

To what extent do you see political bias in news coverage?

■ % A great deal   ■ % A fair amount



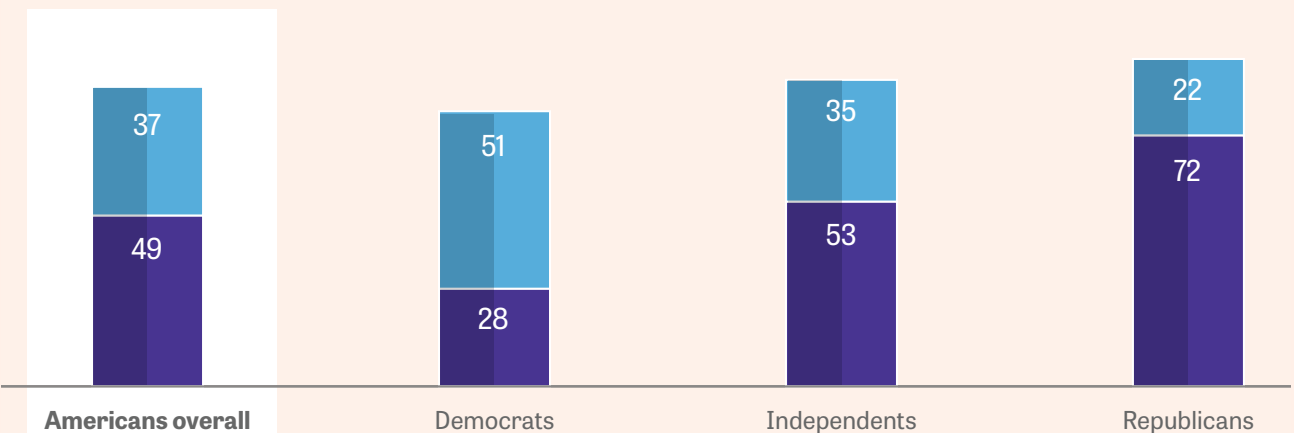
Note: "No answer" percentages not shown.  
<sup>^</sup> Telephone survey conducted by Pew Research Center

There is a wide partisan gap in perceptions of political bias, which seems to reflect a general interpretation that questions about the news refer primarily to traditional (e.g., not explicitly right-leaning) sources. Almost three-fourths of Republicans (72%) see "a great deal" of bias in news coverage, versus 28% of Democrats and only about half of independents (53%). However, large majorities in each partisan group — including almost all Republicans (94%) — say there is at least a fair amount of bias in news coverage.

FIGURE 2

## Americans' Perceptions of Political Bias in News, by Political Party

■ % A great deal   ■ % A fair amount



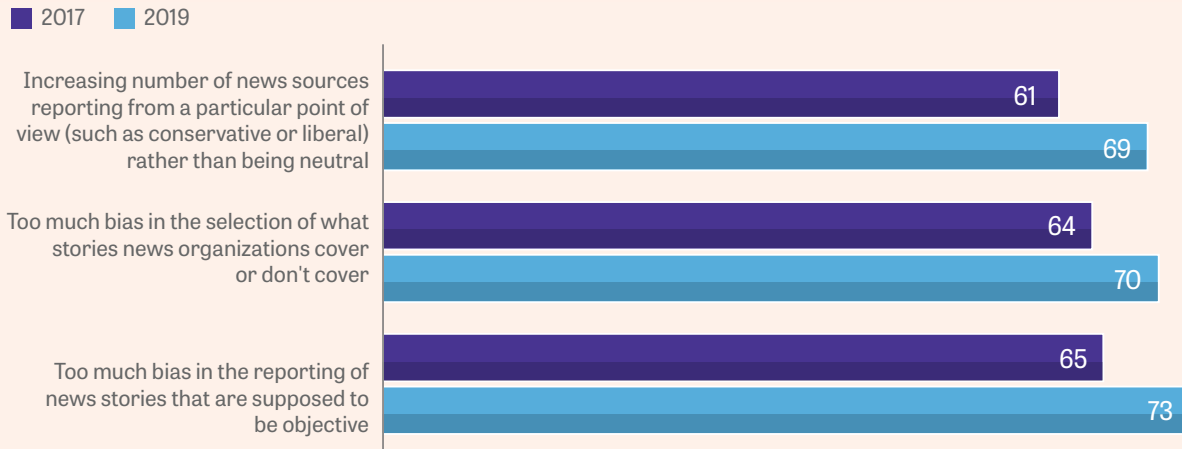
Americans' concerns about bias in the media have grown increasingly prevalent. Roughly 7 in 10 Americans consider three specific forms of bias in news coverage to be "a major problem":

- too much bias in the reporting of news stories that are supposed to be objective (73%)
- too much bias in the selection of what stories news organizations cover or don't cover (70%)
- an increasing number of news sources reporting from a particular point of view (such as conservative or liberal) rather than being neutral (69%)

FIGURE 3

### Percentage of Americans Who Consider Each Form of Bias "a Major Problem," 2017-2019

Would you say each of the following is a major problem, a minor problem, or not a problem with news coverage today?



Americans' likelihood to perceive most news coverage as biased differs widely among Republicans, Democrats and independents. Republicans (77%) are more likely than Democrats (61%) to say increasing numbers of news sources reporting from a particular point of view is "a major problem." Thus, regardless of their political leanings, Americans see media partisanship as inappropriate. However, despite their opposition to political bias in the news, many tacitly support it by gravitating toward sources that align with their political views.

FIGURE 4

## Opinions on the Number of News Sources Reporting From a Particular Point of View

Would you say the increasing number of news sources reporting from a particular point of view (such as conservative or liberal) rather than being neutral is a major problem, a minor problem, or not a problem with news coverage today?

■ % A major problem   ■ % A minor problem   ■ % Not a problem



Note: "No answer" percentages not shown.

When it comes to concerns about media bias, demographic differences beyond party affiliation emerge. College graduates are more likely than those with a high school education or less to see bias in the reporting of news that is supposed to be objective as a major problem (76% vs. 57%). College graduates are also more likely to say bias in news organizations' selection of what stories they cover (74% vs. 56%) and the degree to which news sources report from a particular point of view (71% vs. 56%) are major problems.

Race and gender also are related to whether people perceive bias in news coverage as a major problem. The two attributes combined make for even starker differences, with 81% of white men saying this is a major problem, compared to 55% of Black women.

**Men (77%) are more likely than women (68%) to say bias in news stories that are supposed to be objective is a major problem, and whites (77%) are more likely than Blacks (58%) to say the same.**

## Americans See Bias in Their Go-To News Source, but Most Are Concerned About Bias in Other People's Sources

Americans perceive less bias in their top news source than in the media more generally, yet a majority recognize bias in their go-to news source. Over half of Americans see “a great deal” (20%) or “a fair amount” (36%) of bias in the news source they rely on most. Perceptions of bias in one’s own media sources are roughly similar across the political spectrum of outlets. Americans who rely on Fox News (54%) have a similar viewpoint as those who use CNN (56%) in saying their trusted source has a great deal or a fair amount of bias, though Fox News users are more likely than CNN viewers to say their source has a great deal of bias (23% vs. 17%).

Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say they see a great deal or fair amount of bias in the news source they use most often — 63% versus 47%, respectively. However, such perceptions are less common among Republicans whose primary news source is generally seen as right-leaning, such as Fox News, Drudge Report and Breitbart, or programs from conservative commentators Rush Limbaugh, Bill O’Reilly or Sean Hannity.<sup>6</sup>

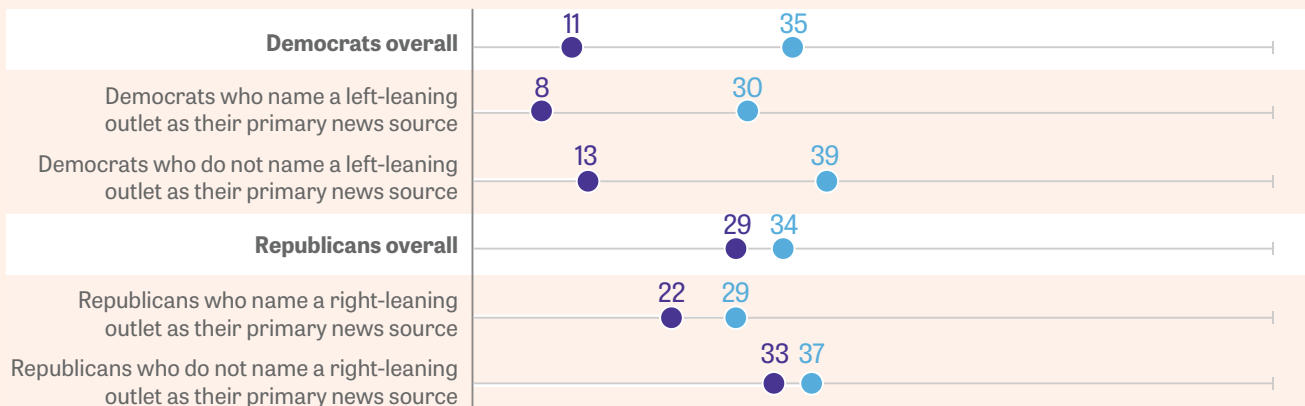
Fifty percent of Republicans who report using a right-leaning source as their primary source of news say it has a great deal or a fair amount of bias, versus 70% of Republicans who name a moderate or left-leaning outlet as their primary news source. Similarly, among Democrats who name a left-leaning outlet as their main news source (e.g., The New Yorker, The Atlantic, CNN), 39% say it has a great deal or fair amount of bias, versus 52% of those who name a moderate or conservative source as the one they use most. Notably, Republicans are more likely than their Democratic counterparts to say they see bias in their own primary news source, regardless of whether it is aligned with their political views or not. These findings indicate that partisans who select news sources that are not aligned with their views may take more of a clear-eyed view toward the media they consume, whereas those who gravitate to media that supports their views may be less attuned to the bias in their top news source.

FIGURE 5

### Perceptions of Bias in Favored News Sources

How much, if any, bias do you believe there is in the news source you use most often — a great deal, a fair amount, only a little, or none at all?

■ % A great deal    ■ % A fair amount



Note: Due to rounding, percentages may sum to +/- 1%; Independents not shown.

<sup>6</sup> The news source people use most often was provided in an open-field entry by respondents and then classified by Gallup analysts as liberal, moderate or conservative based on two independent coding schemes. For more details on how news organizations were classified, see the Appendix on p. 55.

Sixty-one percent of independents say there is a great deal or fair amount of bias in the source they use most often; those who name a conservative media outlet as their primary news source (60%) are more likely to do so than those who name a liberal source (53%).

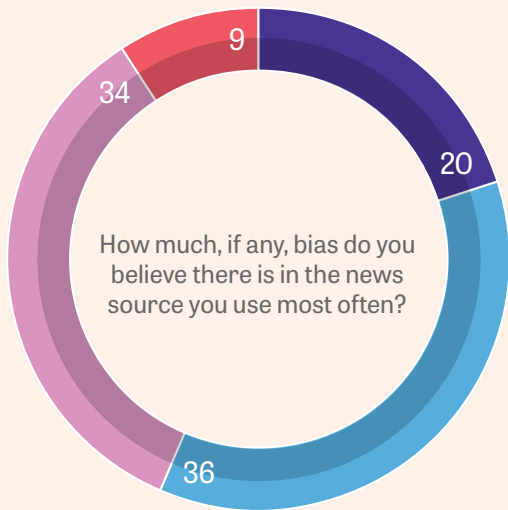
Though Americans express concern about bias in the news media, they are much more likely to worry about bias in other people's news sources than their own. Concerns related to bias in others' news sources are similar among Republicans (68%), Democrats (72%) and independents (69%).

**About 7 in 10 Americans (69%) are more concerned about bias in the news other people are getting than their worry about their own news being biased (29%).**

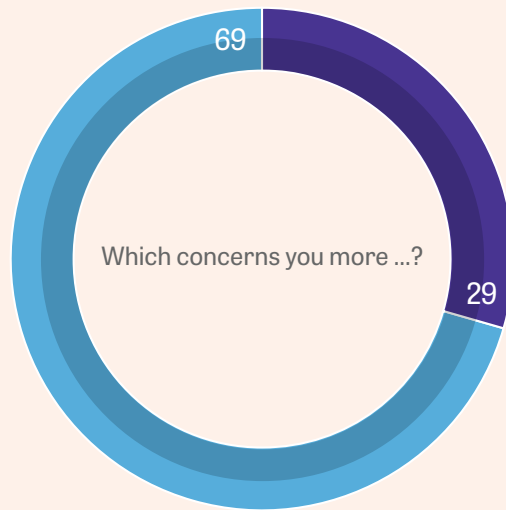
FIGURE 6

**Concerns Around Media Bias in One's Own News Source vs. Others'**

- % A great deal
- % A fair amount
- % Only a little
- % None at all



- % The news that you get might be biased
- % The news most other people are getting might be biased



Note: "No answer" percentages not shown.

Americans trust their favored news sources more — even as they acknowledge bias in them. But their greater concern about bias in other people's media suggests their discontent with the news media lies less in their experience with it than in their perceptions of others' experiences.

## Americans Suspect Media Inaccuracies Are Often Intentional, Designed to Promote a Particular Perspective

More than 8 in 10 Americans say that when they see a news report they suspect is inaccurate, their biggest concern is that the inaccuracy is intentional — either because the reporter is misrepresenting the facts (54%) or making them up entirely (28%). Just 16% say they would be most concerned that the reporter inadvertently made errors that led to the inaccuracies.

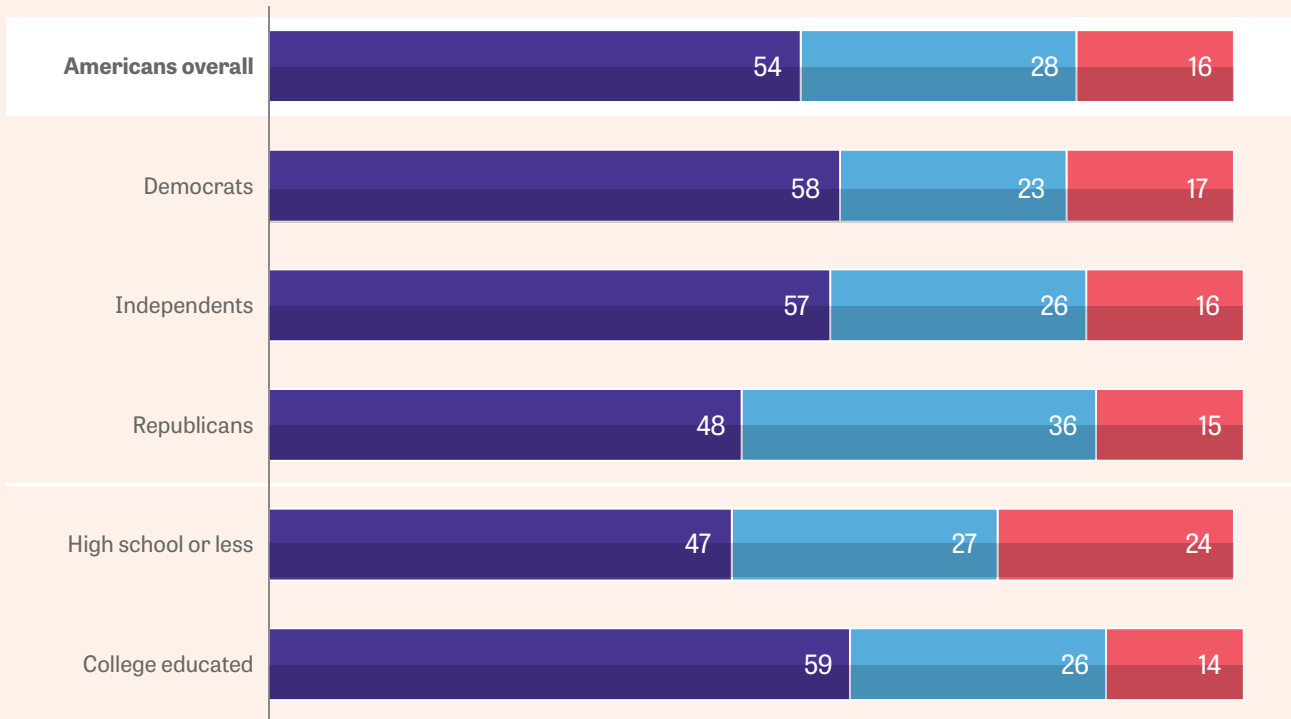
These views hold across gender, age and race; however, differences emerge by party identification and education level. Democrats and independents are more likely than their Republican counterparts to say news inaccuracy is a result of reporters misrepresenting facts rather than facts being made up entirely. College-educated Americans are more likely than those with a high school education or less to say reporters are misrepresenting facts, but they are less inclined to say the facts are wrong due to honest mistakes in reporters' work.

FIGURE 7

### Concerns Regarding Intentionality of Errors in Reporting

Which one of the following concerns you most when you come across a news report you think might be inaccurate?

■ % The facts are correct, but the reporter is misrepresenting them   ■ % The facts might be made up entirely by the reporter   ■ % The facts are wrong because the reporter made errors in his or her work



Note: "No answer" percentages not shown.

When asked about news organizations they personally distrust, 79% of Americans say they feel such organizations are trying to persuade people to adopt a certain viewpoint, while 12% say they are trying to report the news accurately and fairly but can't. Eight percent of Americans go even further and say these media are trying to ruin the country. Women and racial/ethnic minorities are more likely than men and whites to say distrusted news organizations are trying to report news accurately and fairly but are simply not able to do so.

**FIGURE 8**

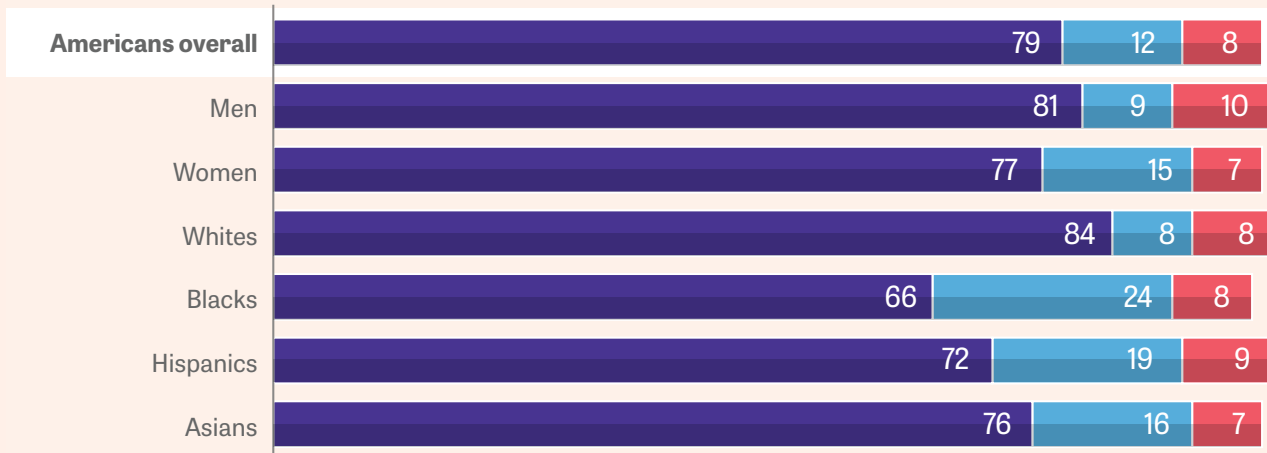
## Americans' Views on News Organizations They Personally Distrust

Which one of the following statements comes closest to your view of news organizations that you personally distrust?

**■** % They are trying to persuade people to adopt a certain viewpoint

**■** % They are trying to report news accurately and fairly but are not able to do so

**■** % They are trying to ruin the country



Note: "No answer" percentages not shown

While most Americans say they do not believe that distrusted news organizations are trying to ruin the country, this study finds differences by party identification and political ideology. Americans who describe their political views as "very conservative" are most likely to say distrusted media are trying to ruin the country, at 22%, compared to 8% of those who identify as "very liberal" and 5% of moderates. Similarly, when it comes to party affiliation, Republicans (12%) are more inclined to think this way than independents (6%) and Democrats (7%).

When respondents' news source is layered into the analysis, people who name a conservative news outlet as their top news source are more likely to say news media they distrust are ruining the country. Nine percent of Republicans who do not cite a conservative outlet as their primary news source say these news media are trying to ruin the country, compared to 17% of those who do identify a conservative outlet as their main news source. Similarly, 13% of independents who name a conservative news outlet as their top source say the same, compared with 5% who do not name a conservative news outlet as a top source.

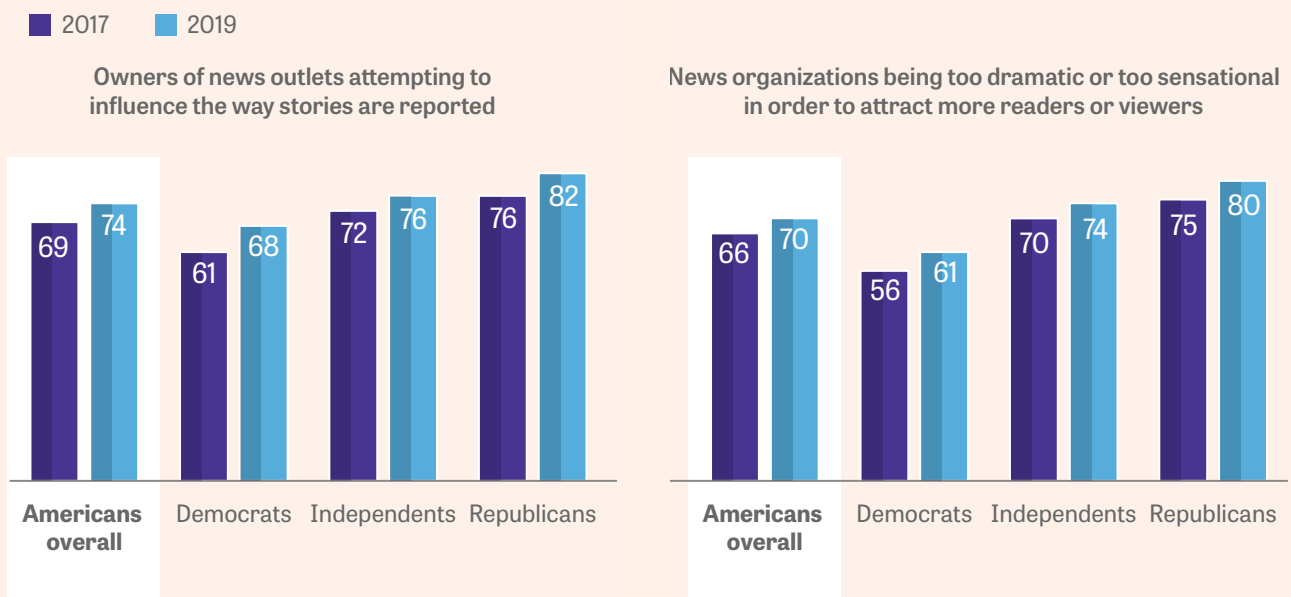
In addition to growing concerns about bias in the news media, Americans are increasingly skeptical of the overt motives of news organizations in attempting to attract and manipulate users. Fully 74% of Americans say “owners of news outlets attempting to influence the way stories are reported” is “a major problem,” up from 69% in 2017. And 7 in 10 (70%) say “news organizations being too dramatic or too sensational in order to attract more readers or viewers” is a major problem, an increase from 66% in 2017. Republicans are more inclined to think these concerns are a major problem than Democrats and independents, with all groups’ concerns increasing by similar amounts since 2017.

FIGURE 9

## Concerns of Content Manipulation by News Outlets, 2017-2019

Would you say each of the following is a major problem, a minor problem, or not a problem with news coverage today?

(Percentage “a major problem”)



## Americans Value Media’s Role in Society, but Its Performance Lags Public Expectations

Current skepticism about bias notwithstanding, Americans continue to value the media’s traditional roles in society, such as providing accurate news and holding powerful interests accountable for their actions. There is widespread agreement that these roles are “critical” or “very important,” with increased proportions calling the media “critical” to democracy.



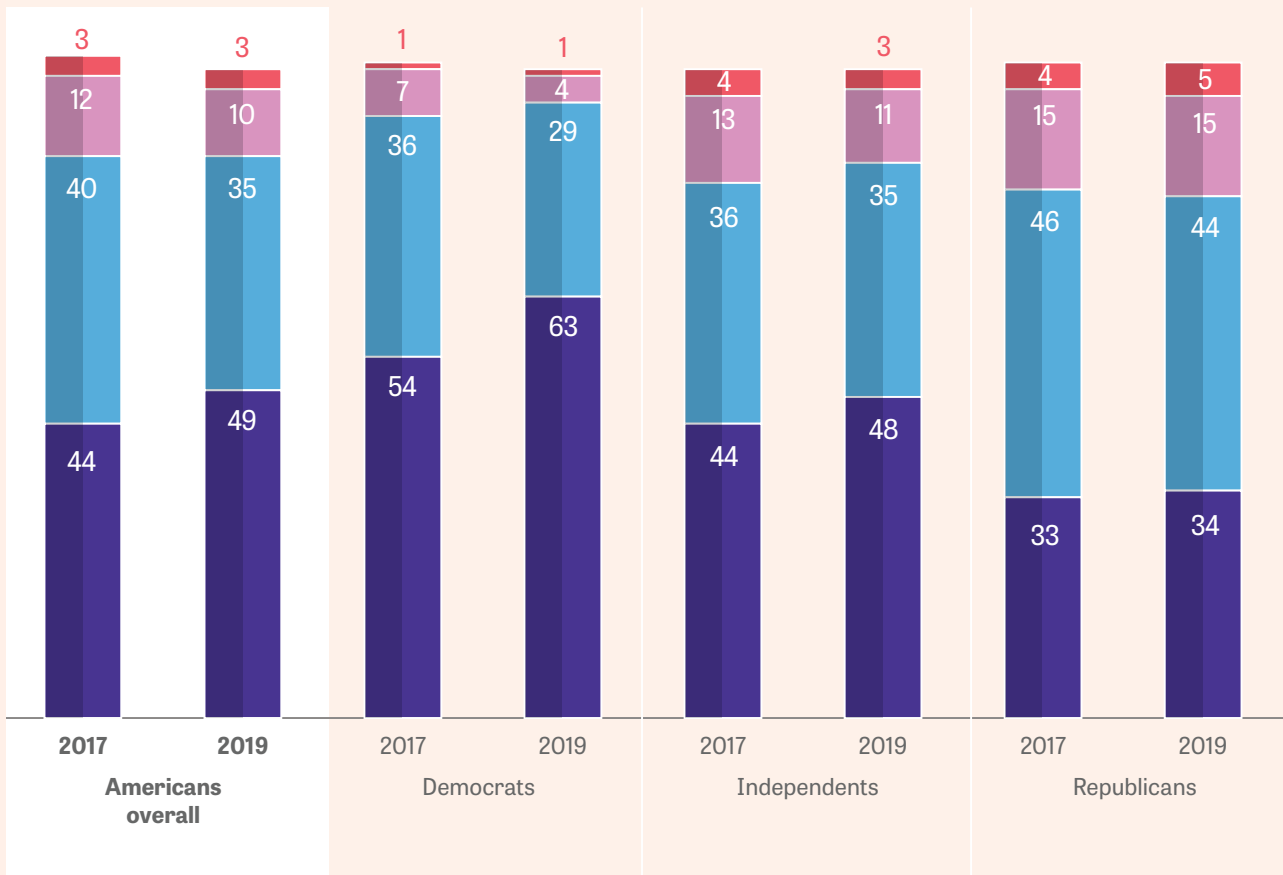
A majority of Americans (84%) say that, in general, the news media is critical (49%) or very important (35%) to democracy. Large majorities of Republicans (78%) and Democrats (92%) share this sentiment, though Democrats are more likely than Republicans to say the media is critical. Notably, while the value placed on media's role in democracy has remained fairly stable among Republicans and increased slightly among independents, Democrats have demonstrated the greatest increase in saying the media is critical in upholding the nation's democracy. This figure also increased significantly among Americans aged 65 and older, from 43% in 2017 to 51% in 2019.

FIGURE 10

## Opinions of the Importance of News Media to Democracy, 2017-2019

Regardless of your opinion of the news media today, generally speaking, how important is the news media to our democracy?

■ % Critical   ■ % Very important   ■ % Somewhat important   ■ % Not that important



Note: "No answer" percentages not shown.

In addition to Americans' general appreciation of the role news media should play in helping people participate in their own governance, 76% also agree that democracy only works well when people stay informed on the news, including 32% who "strongly agree." Solid majorities of both Republicans (70%) and Democrats (82%) agree or strongly agree with this sentiment.

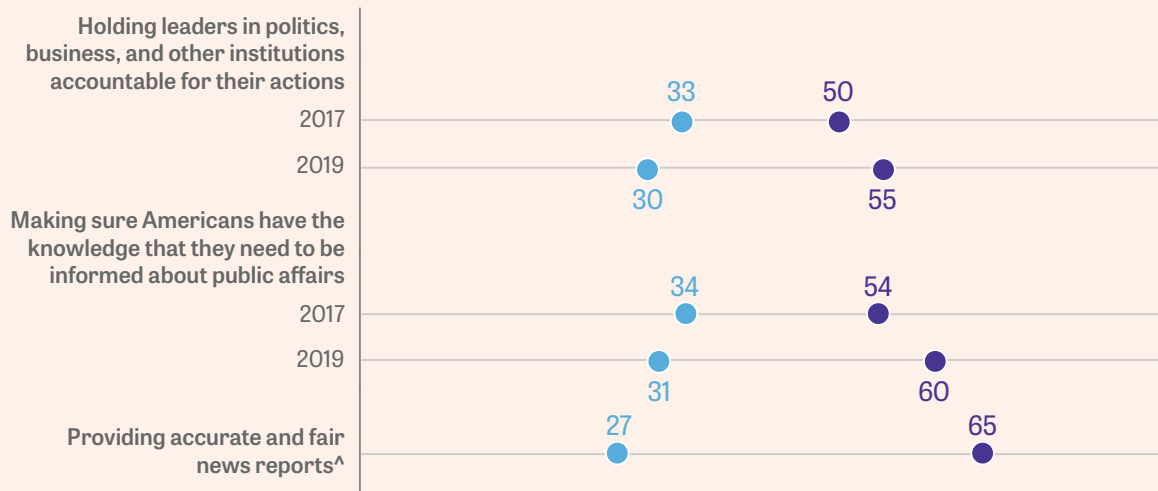
Asked about several more specific media functions, large majorities of Americans also say it is "critical" or "very important" for the news media to provide accurate and fair news reports (92%), make sure Americans are informed about public affairs (91%) and hold leaders accountable for their actions (85%).

**FIGURE 11**

## Views on the Role of News Media, 2017-2019

How important is the role of the news media in accomplishing each of the following goals?

■ % Critical   ■ % Very important



<sup>^</sup> Item wording in the 2019 survey differed from the 2017 question; No comparison is available.

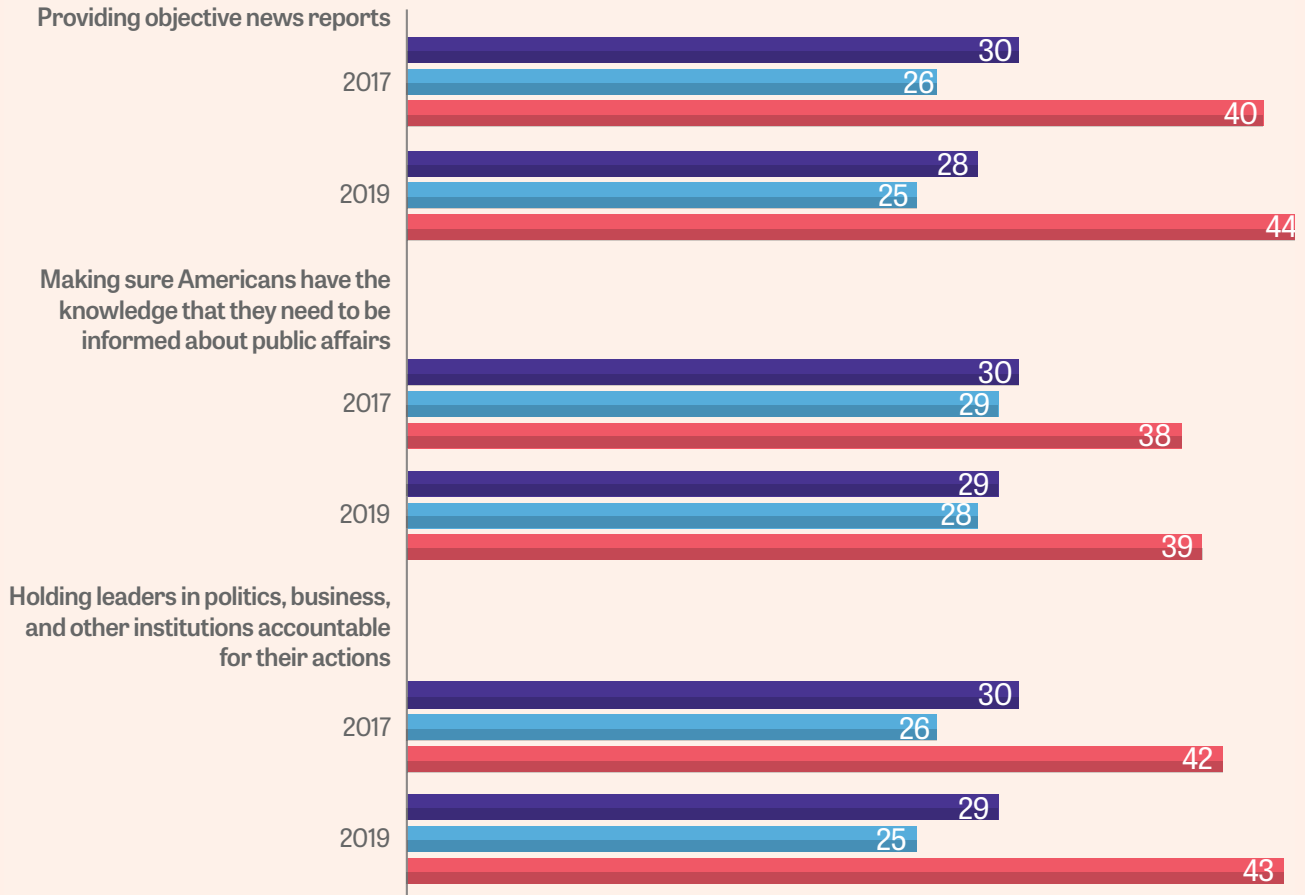
Given widespread perceptions of media bias intended to promote certain perspectives, it follows that more Americans say the media is performing poorly rather than well in accomplishing these key goals. In each of the most valued roles, Americans' performance ratings have inched more negative since this was last measured in 2017.

FIGURE 12

## Perceptions of News Media Performance, 2017-2019

How is the news media performing in each of these [same] areas?

■ % Very well/Well   ■ % Acceptably   ■ % Poorly/Very poorly



Note: "No answer" percentages not shown.

### Online Misinformation Leads Americans' Top Concerns With Media Today

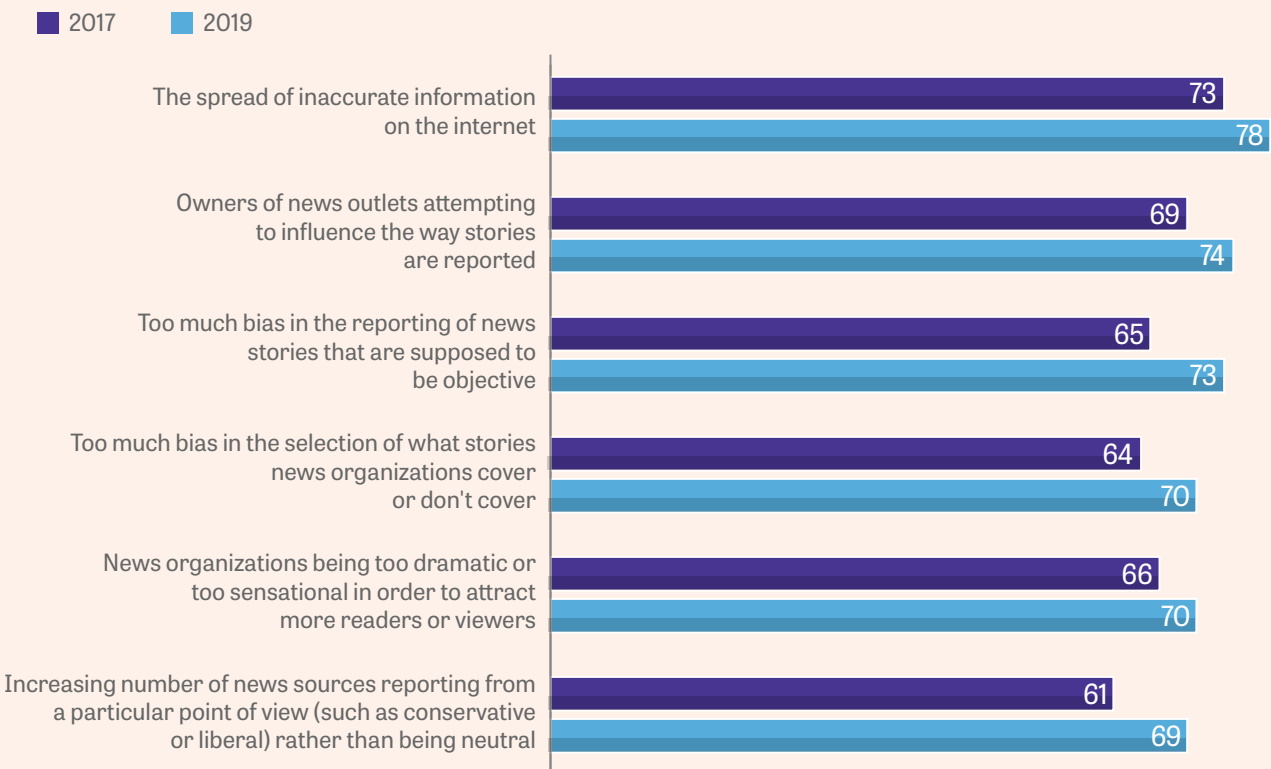
Nearly 8 in 10 Americans (78%) say "the spread of inaccurate information on the internet" is "a major problem," an increase since 2017 (73%). Americans' concerns around the spread of online misinformation eclipses their concerns related to various forms of media bias, inaccuracies or sensationalism, with 74% or fewer Americans saying these challenges represent "a major problem" with news coverage today.

FIGURE 13

## Levels of Concern Regarding Online News Coverage

Would you say each of the following is a major problem, a minor problem, or not a problem with news coverage today?

(Percentage “a major problem”)



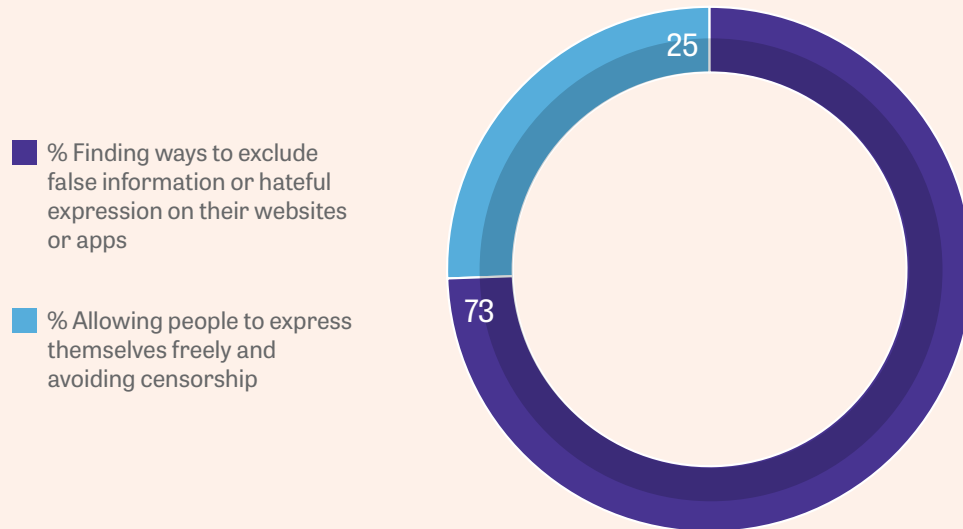
Underscoring Americans' concern about the quality of the information environment, more than 7 in 10 Americans say major internet companies should focus on finding ways to control the spread of false information or hateful expression on their sites or apps. This compares to a quarter of Americans who say these companies should emphasize promoting free expression and lack of censorship.

**Seventy-three percent of Americans say major internet companies should focus on finding ways to control the spread of false information or hateful expression on their sites and apps.**

FIGURE 14

## Preferences for Handling Harmful or Misleading Online Content

Do you think major internet companies like Google, Facebook, Twitter, and others that show news about current events should put more emphasis on ...?



Note: "No answer" percentages not shown.

These findings point to increasing problems posed by the news media environment — primarily, less trust in the media driven by increased perceptions of bias that appears intentional in leading news consumers to a particular position. There is also dwindling confidence among Americans that the news media is doing its job of upholding important societal standards like truth-telling and holding powerful interests accountable. The online news environment poses particular challenges in allowing Americans to sort out what is and is not factual — a problem exacerbated by Americans' increasingly online existence.

## 2 Partisan and Demographic Factors in News Media Perspectives

Opinions of the news media, like many other policy attitudes or evaluations of societal conditions, have become increasingly politicized.<sup>7</sup> Republicans express more negative views on each dimension of the news media compared to Democrats. Political independents fall somewhere between the two, though in most cases, they are closer to Republicans' more negative opinions. In addition to partisan differences, views on the news media vary by age, likely reflecting generational differences and news consumption patterns.

As prior studies have documented, Republican distrust of the mainstream media is not a new phenomenon. Although reporters increasingly identify as political independents, historically, many more have consistently identified as Democrats than as Republicans.<sup>8</sup> Complaints of media bias from conservatives coincided with the rise of conservative talk radio and other avowedly right-wing entities in the 1990s and have been prominently amplified by President Trump.<sup>9</sup>

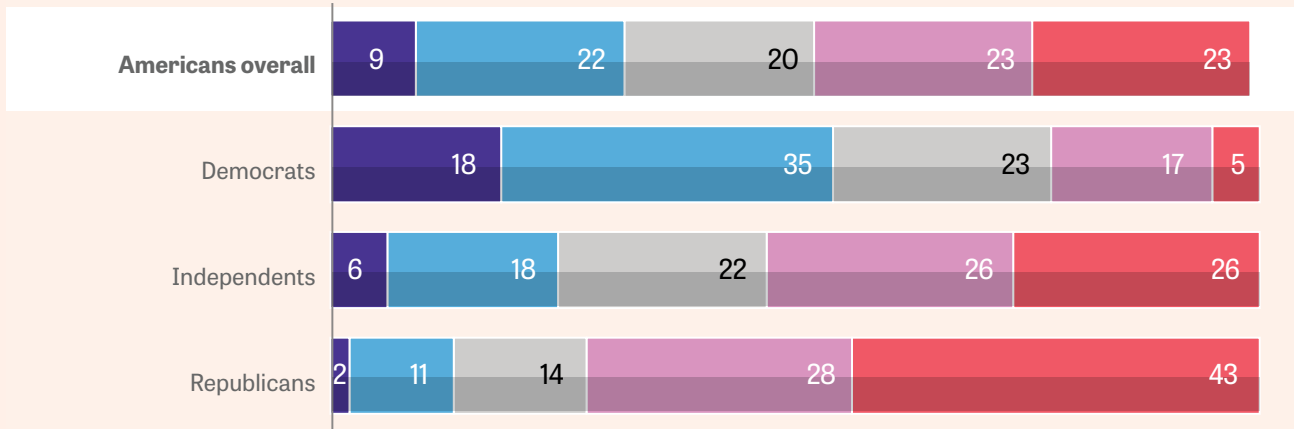
The current study finds that 7 in 10 Republicans (71%) have a very or somewhat unfavorable opinion of the news media, versus less than one-fourth of Democrats (22%) and about half of independents (52%). Overall, Americans view the media more negatively than positively.

FIGURE 15

### Opinions of News Media, by Political Party

What is your overall opinion of the news media in the United States today?

■ % Very favorable ■ % Somewhat favorable ■ % Neutral ■ % Somewhat unfavorable ■ % Very unfavorable



Note: "No answer" percentages not shown.

7 Newport, F., & Dugan, A. (2017, August 3). *Partisan differences growing on a number of issues*. Gallup.com. <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/215210/partisan-differences-growing-number-issues.aspx>; Brennan, M. (2019, September 26). *Americans' trust in mass media edges down to 41%*. Gallup.com. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/267047/americans-trust-mass-media-edges-down.aspx>

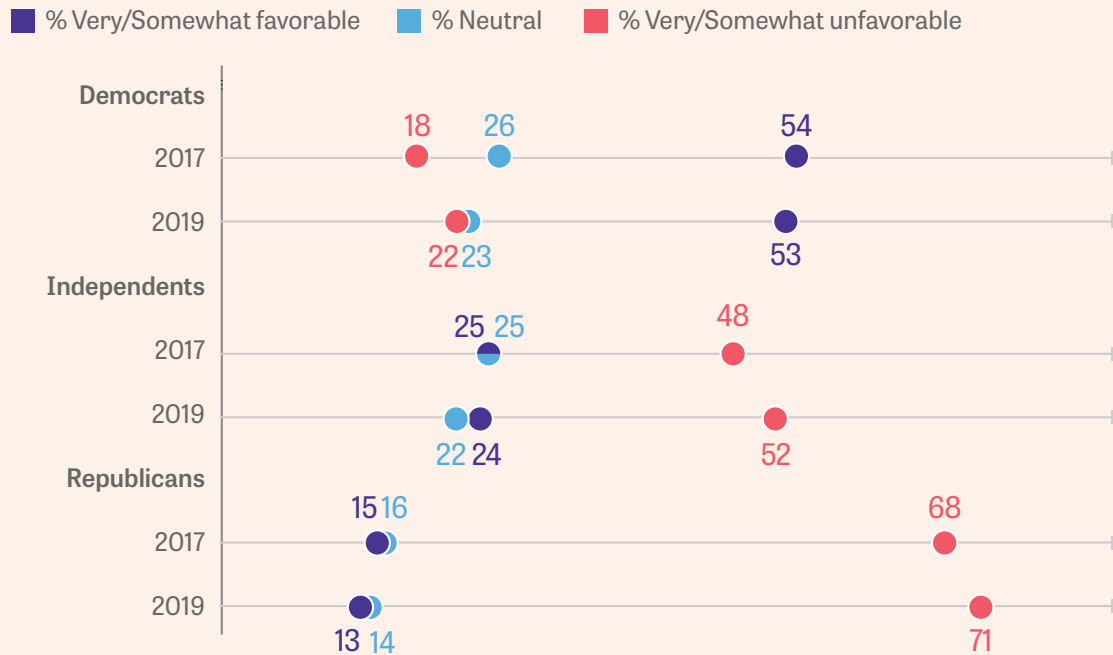
8 Willnat, L., & Weaver, D. H. (2014). *The American journalist in the digital age: Key findings*. School of Journalism, Indiana University. <https://archive.news.indiana.edu/releases/iu/2014/05/2013-american-journalist-key-findings.pdf>

9 Domke, D., Watts, M. D., Shah, D. V., & Fan, D. P. (1999). *The politics of conservative elites and the 'liberal media' argument*. *Journal of Communication*, 49(4), 35-58. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1999.tb02816.x>

Overall, opinions of the media are largely stable since 2017, though slightly more people have a negative opinion now (46%, vs. 43% in 2017). Americans across the political spectrum shifted to a somewhat more negative viewpoint.

FIGURE 16

## Opinions of News Media, 2017-2019



Note: "No answer" percentages not shown.

### Republicans More Likely to Say Media Performing Its Roles Poorly

As shown in the 2017 Gallup/Knight study,<sup>10</sup> there are large partisan differences in views on how well the news media supports democracy. About half of Democrats (50%) say the media supports democracy in the U.S. "very well" or "well," compared to only about a quarter of independents (24%) and just 10% of Republicans.

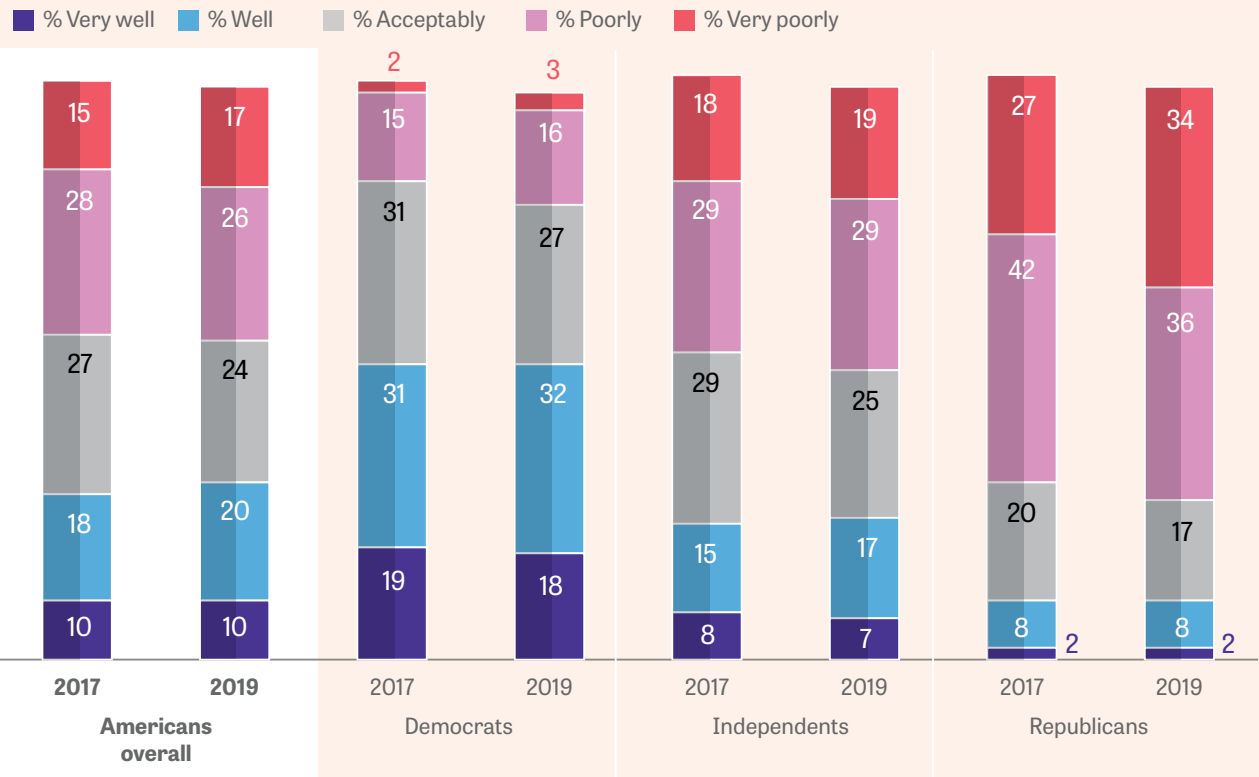
Across the political spectrum, Americans' views on the news media shifted to a more negative viewpoint — three or four percentage points lower than in 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Knight Foundation & Gallup, Inc. (2018). *American views: Trust, media and democracy*. <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-trust-media-and-democracy/>

FIGURE 17

## Opinions on How Well News Media Supports Democracy, 2017-2019

How well is the news media supporting our democracy today?



Note: "No answer" percentages not shown.

There are stark differences in how Americans with different political affiliations rate the news media on every aspect of performance they were asked about, including providing objective news reports, holding political and business leaders accountable for their actions and helping Americans stay informed about current affairs. Notably, independents, similar to Republicans, tend to hold more negative views on every aspect of media performance.

Since 2017, Americans' perspectives on how well the media is performing several roles they consider critical or very important has declined markedly. Six in 10 or more Republicans now assess the media's performance poorly or very poorly in the following areas:

- providing objective news reports (69%)
- holding leaders in politics, business and other institutions accountable for their actions (61%)
- making sure Americans have the knowledge that they need to be informed about public affairs (60%)

Americans' views on media performance across these functions have eroded slightly more among Democrats than among Republicans. The share of Democrats saying the news media is doing "well" or "very well" in helping people feel connected to their communities or the U.S. as a whole dropped slightly more than Republicans and independents, whose views remained fairly stable.



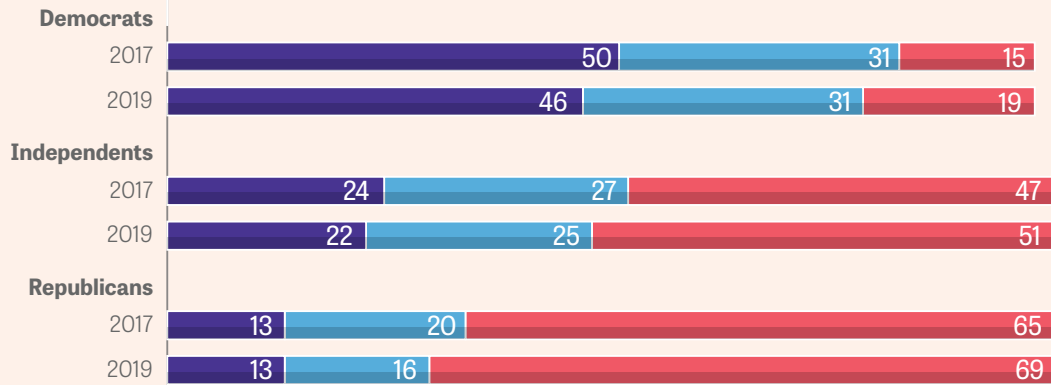
FIGURE 18

## Perceptions of News Media Performance on Achieving Goals, by Political Party

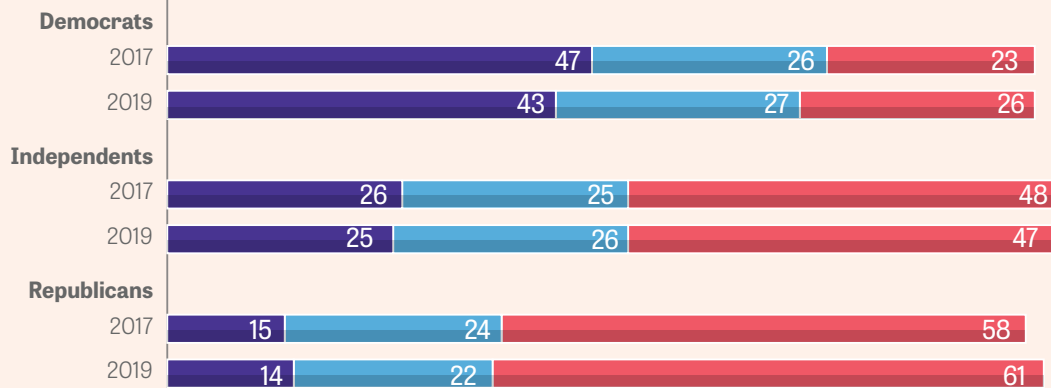
How is the news media performing in each of these [same] areas?

■ % Very well/Well   ■ % Acceptably   ■ % Poorly/Very poorly

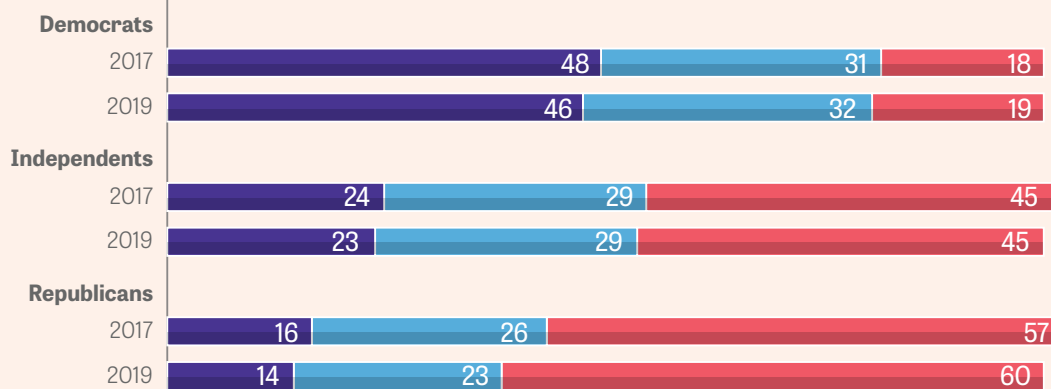
Providing objective news reports



Holding leaders in politics, business, and other institutions accountable for their actions



Making sure Americans have the knowledge that they need to be informed about public affairs



Note: "No answer" percentages not shown.

Partisan differences in views on news media performance also imply a common understanding among Democrats and Republicans that questions about the “news media” in general refer mainly to traditional news sources that represent most of the media establishment — network and cable news sources and national newspapers — and are commonly referred to as “mainstream media” by conservative critics.<sup>11</sup>

### Republicans Say Attacks on Media Are Justified; Democrats Disagree

The media receives as much criticism, if not more, than almost any other U.S. institution — barring Congress — from critics across the political spectrum.<sup>12</sup> Americans widely agree on this point — 80% say the media is under attack politically, including 86% of Democrats, 74% of Republicans and 77% of independents.

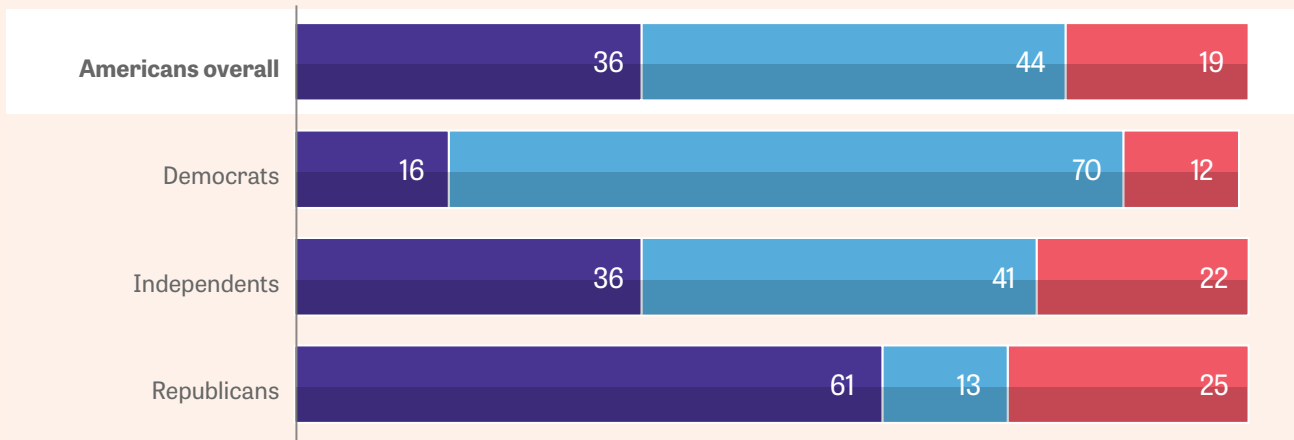
However, the public divides along party lines on the merit of those attacks. Forty-four percent of Americans, including 70% of Democrats, say the media is under attack and those attacks are not justified. By contrast, 36% say the media is under attack, but those attacks are justified; 61% of Republicans hold this view.

FIGURE 19

### Views on Political Attacks on the News Media

Which one of the following statements comes closest to your view?

- % The news media is under attack politically, and those attacks are justified
- % The news media is under attack politically, but those attacks are not justified
- % The news media is not under attack politically



Note: “No answer” percentages not shown.

11 Knight Foundation & Gallup, Inc. (2019). *State of public trust in local news*. <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/state-of-public-trust-in-local-news/>

12 Gallup, Inc. (n.d.). *Confidence in institutions*. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>

## Beyond Partisanship, Age Is an Important Predictor of Favorability Toward News Media

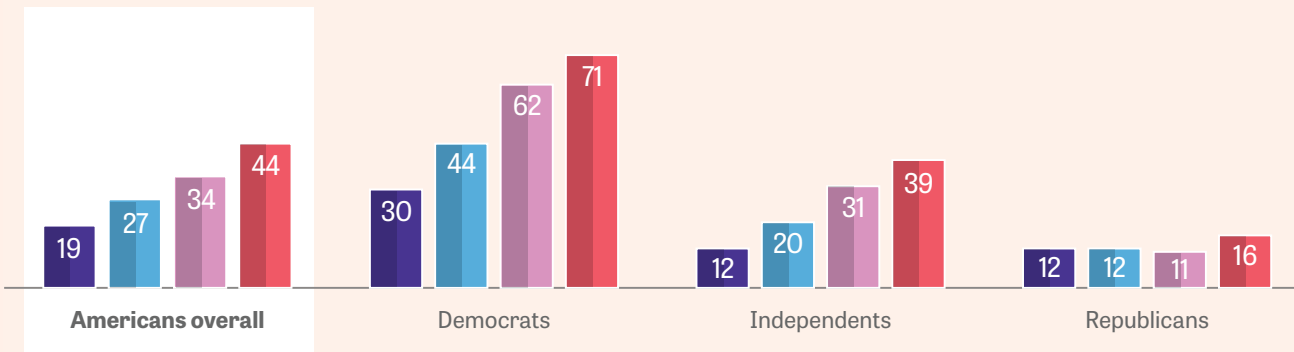
Reinforcing findings from previous Gallup/Knight studies, the current data indicate favorability toward the news media is higher among older age groups. About 1 in 5 American adults under 30 (19%) say they have a “very” or “somewhat” favorable opinion of the news media, versus almost half of those aged 65 and older (44%). Segmenting these age comparisons by party affiliation reveals that most of the variation comes from Democrats and independents. While few Republicans in any age group view the media favorably, Democrats’ opinions depend largely on their age; nearly three-fourths of those in the oldest group have a favorable opinion, versus less than a third of those under 30.

FIGURE 20

### Opinions of the News Media, by Political Party and Age

What is your overall opinion of the news media in the United States today?  
(Percentage “very” or “somewhat” favorable)

18-29 years 30-49 years 50-64 years 65+ years



Americans are differentiated by age in the extent to which they pay attention to news and their knowledge of a range of public affairs issues. Across each age cohort, younger Americans pay progressively less attention to news compared to their elders — spanning topics from local to global affairs — and as such, say they are less knowledgeable about important issues facing both the U.S. and their local communities.

FIGURE 21

## Attention Paid to News, by Age

How closely do you follow each of these different news topics?

(Percentage “very closely”)

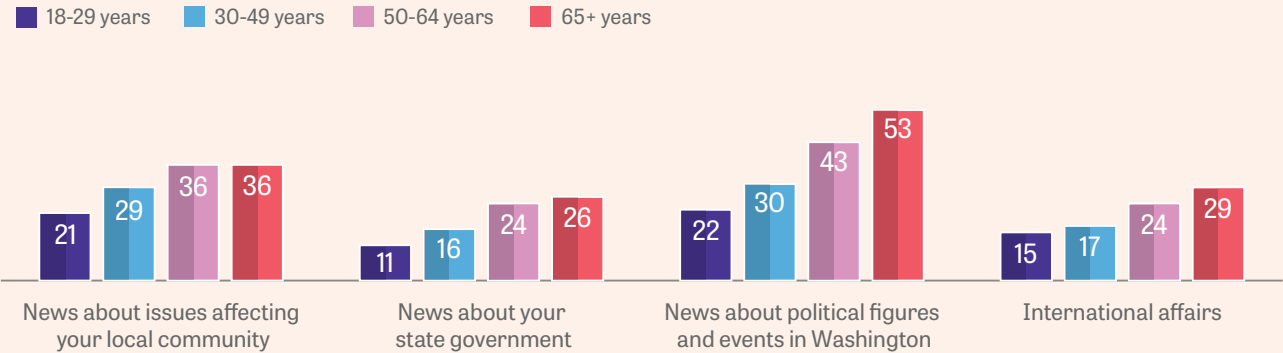
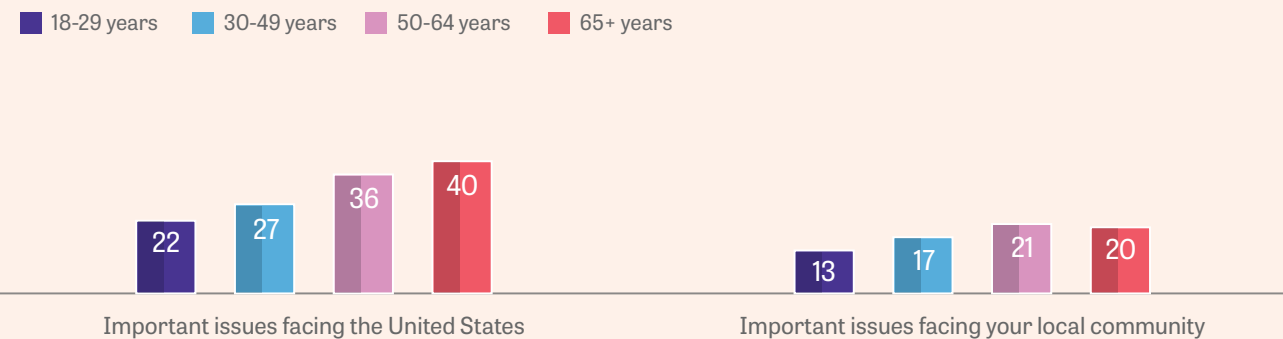


FIGURE 22

## Knowledge About Public Affairs, by Age

How knowledgeable would you rate yourself on each of the following types of issues?

(Percentage “highly knowledgeable”)



Age also comes into play in the extent to which Americans assess how well the media is supporting democracy. Young people are particularly unlikely to say media is supporting democracy “well” or “very well”; 40% of Americans aged 65 and over say this, compared to 22% of those aged 18-29. One-third (33%) of Democrats under 30 respond this way, compared to 54% of Democrats 30 and older. Among political independents, 26% of those 30 and older say the media is supporting democracy well or very well, versus 15% of those under 30. Age does not appear to be a major factor among Republicans harboring these attitudes.

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Younger Americans' current skepticism of the media does not imply they disregard the importance of its traditional functions. Almost half of those aged 18-29 (46%) say the news media is "critical" to democracy, while 37% say it is "very important"; results among those aged 30 and up are similar, at 50% critical and 36% very important. Younger Americans are also no less likely to recognize the importance of the news media's role in providing accurate and fair news, holding leaders accountable for their actions and helping Americans stay informed about public affairs.

In interpreting these results, a previous Gallup/Knight Foundation study found that young people are more likely than older Americans to consider numerous forms of media bias as problematic.<sup>13</sup> This finding may be a function of the media sources younger Americans rely on and their inherent trust in such sources. According to a 2019 Gallup poll, internet news was by far the dominant source for young adults,<sup>14</sup> but in the current survey only 40% say they trust it — among the lowest trust scores of 14 news sources evaluated. By comparison, at least two-thirds of young adults trust news from local or national newspapers, and at least 6 in 10 trust news from local TV stations or the nightly news on national TV networks.

<sup>13</sup> Knight Foundation & Gallup, Inc. (2018). *American views: Trust, media and democracy*. <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-trust-media-and-democracy/>

<sup>14</sup> Brenan, M. (2019, August 22). *In U.S., 40% trust internet news accuracy, up 15 points*. Gallup.com. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/260492/trust-internet-news-accuracy-points.aspx>

### 3 Americans' Response to a Challenging Media Environment

Americans feel that the news media is not working for them due to the sheer volume of news, news mixed with opinion and their increased perceptions of bias in news. Americans — especially Republicans — often feel overwhelmed and unable to sort out the facts. Those feeling overwhelmed have a range of options, from digging deeper across a variety of sources to find the “real” story to abandoning the effort and disengaging from the news entirely. The latter option — news media disengagement — threatens the health of a democracy, as it has been associated in numerous studies with decreased civic and political engagement.<sup>15</sup>

#### Americans Feel Overwhelmed by the Volume and Speed of News, Particularly Online

Most Americans say it is harder (62%) rather than easier (36%) to be well-informed because of all the sources of information. They are slightly more likely to say it is harder than they were in 2017, when 58% said it was harder to be well-informed and 38% said it was easier.

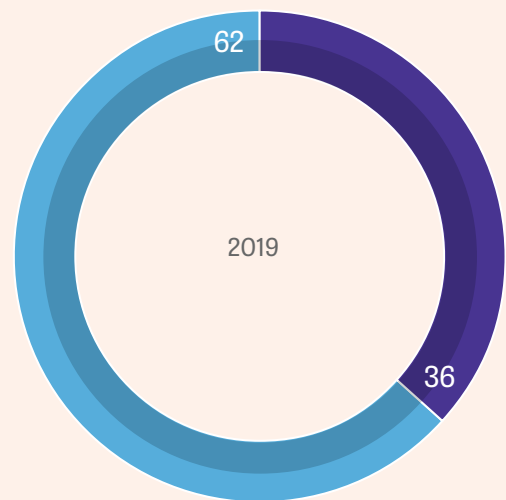
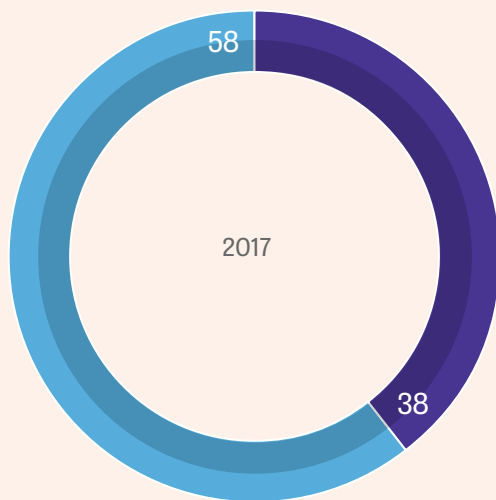
FIGURE 23

#### Perceived Impact of the Increase in Information Available, 2017-2019

Does the increase in information available today make it ...?

■ % Easier to be well-informed because there are more sources of news that are easily accessed through newer technologies

■ % Harder to be well-informed because people have to sort through lots of information to determine what is true or important



Note: “No answer” percentages not shown.

15 Palmer, R., & Toff, B. (2018). From news fatigue to news avoidance. *Nieman Lab*. <https://www.niemanlab.org/2018/12/from-news-fatigue-to-news-avoidance/>

The current study probed further than the 2017 study on what specifically makes Americans feel overwhelmed. Among those who say the increased amount of information available makes it harder to stay informed, Americans who feel overwhelmed are most likely to say news and non-news items mixed together on social media and online sites contribute “a great deal” (43%) or “a fair amount” (29%) to these feelings. Six in 10 (63%) say the pace or speed of reporting and the increased number of news organizations reporting the news contribute to making them feel overwhelmed. They are less likely to feel overwhelmed by technological advances that promote universal news access.

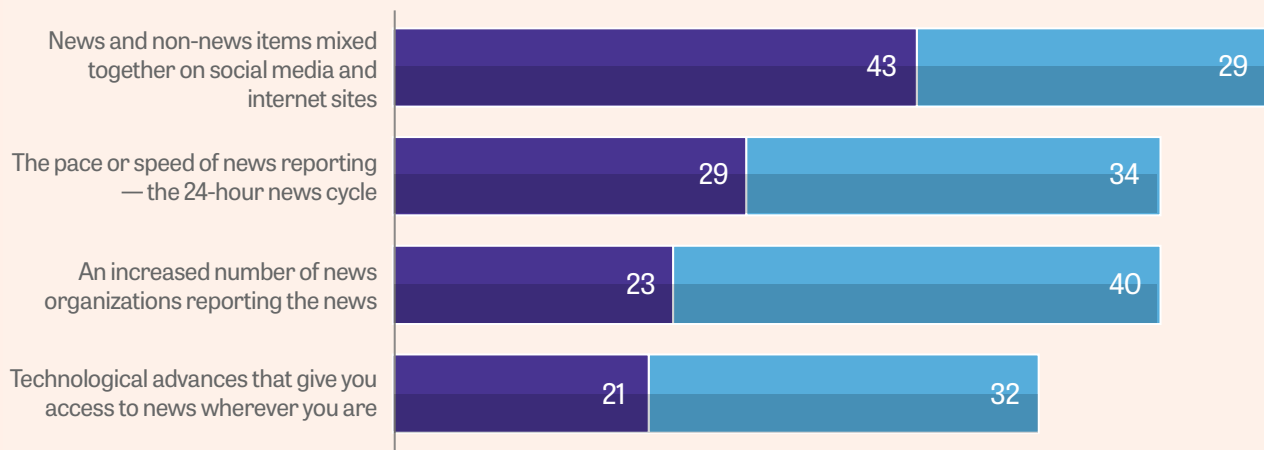
FIGURE 24

## Factors Contributing to Americans’ Sense of Being Overwhelmed by Information

How much, if at all, do each of the following aspects of the news environment today contribute to making you feel overwhelmed by information?

(Results among those who said the increase in information today makes it harder to be well-informed)

■ % A great deal   ■ % A fair amount



These findings highlight the challenges posed by online media news sources due to the spread of false information online and the failure of some social media platforms and other sites to distinguish between news and non-news items that include commentary and advertisements.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Knight Foundation & Gallup, Inc. (2020). *Free expression, harmful speech and censorship in a digital world*. [https://knightfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/KnightFoundation\\_Panel6-Techlash2\\_rprt\\_061220-v2\\_es-1.pdf](https://knightfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/KnightFoundation_Panel6-Techlash2_rprt_061220-v2_es-1.pdf)

## Americans Are Divided on Navigating Bias, Who Is Responsible for Determining Accuracy

Americans' understanding of who bears the burden of getting an accurate and balanced picture of the news falls marginally on Americans themselves rather than the news media. A slim majority (51%) say the responsibility is on Americans by virtue of what news sources they use and how carefully they evaluate the news. This finding stands in contrast to 46% of Americans who say the burden falls on news organizations by virtue of how they report the news and what stories they cover. Americans were split on this question in 2017, with an even proportion saying the burden fell on the American populace as said the burden lay with the media (both 48%).

Whereas about half of Americans see it as their responsibility to get an accurate sense of the news, 54% of Americans say there are enough media sources to sort out the facts, while 43% say there's so much bias it's difficult to sort out the facts. These results reflect a decline since 1985, when 66% of Americans said there were enough sources to sort out the facts, and a slight increase since 2017, when 50% of Americans said the same.

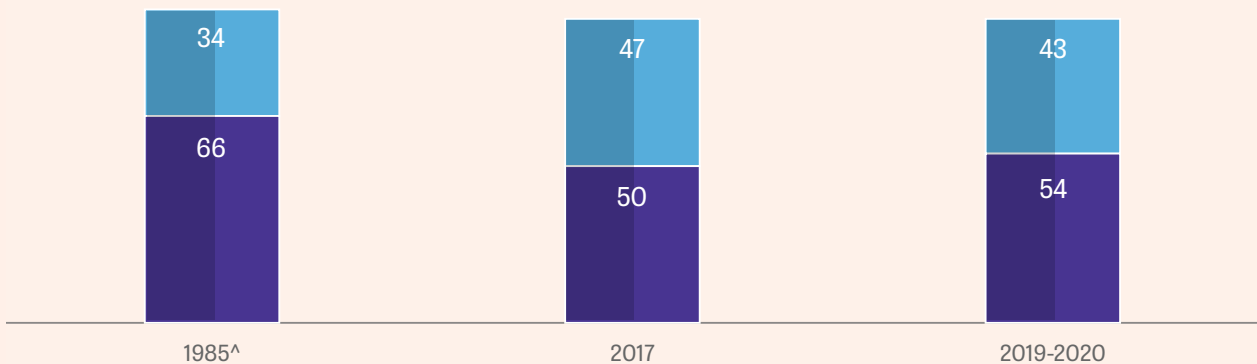
FIGURE 25

### Americans' Ability to Navigate News Media Bias to Arrive at Facts

Please indicate which of these statements comes closer to how you personally feel:

■ % Although there is some bias in the news media, there are enough sources of news to be able to sort out the facts

■ % There is so much bias in the news media that it's often difficult to sort out the facts



Note: "No answer" percentages not shown.

<sup>^</sup> American Society of Newspaper Editors News Credibility mail survey, conducted by MORI Research

Alongside the partisan differences in news media trust and skepticism, Republicans (65%) are much more likely than independents (48%) and Democrats (21%) to say there is too much bias to sort out the facts. Democrats and independents are slightly more likely now than in 2017 to say there are enough sources to sort out the facts, whereas Republicans' views remain stable.

In 2017, Americans aged 65 and older (52%) were more likely to say they can sort out the facts than those aged 18-29 (48%). In 2019, the percentage of older Americans rose even further, with 59% asserting their ability to navigate the media environment (younger Americans rose on average three to four percentage points).



FIGURE 26

## Americans' Ability to Navigate News Media Bias, by Political Party and Age

(Percentage who say there are enough sources to be able to sort out the facts)

	2017	2019	Percentage Point Change
Democrats	72	76	4
Independents	46	49	3
Republicans	31	32	1
18-29 years	48	51	3
30-49 years	50	53	3
50-64 years	50	54	4
65+ years	52	59	7

## Responding to Deluge, Americans Tend to Pick a Few Trusted News Sources

In response to feeling overwhelmed by the abundance of news sources in the current media environment, a plurality of Americans (41%) say they only pay attention to one or two trusted sources, while 1 in 3 (31%) try to consult a variety of sources to see where they agree. About 1 in 6 Americans (17%) opt for the most extreme response, saying they stop paying attention to news altogether, while 8% rely on others to help them sort out what they need to know. Those most inclined to stop paying attention to news altogether include moderates (19%), whites and Hispanics (both 18%).

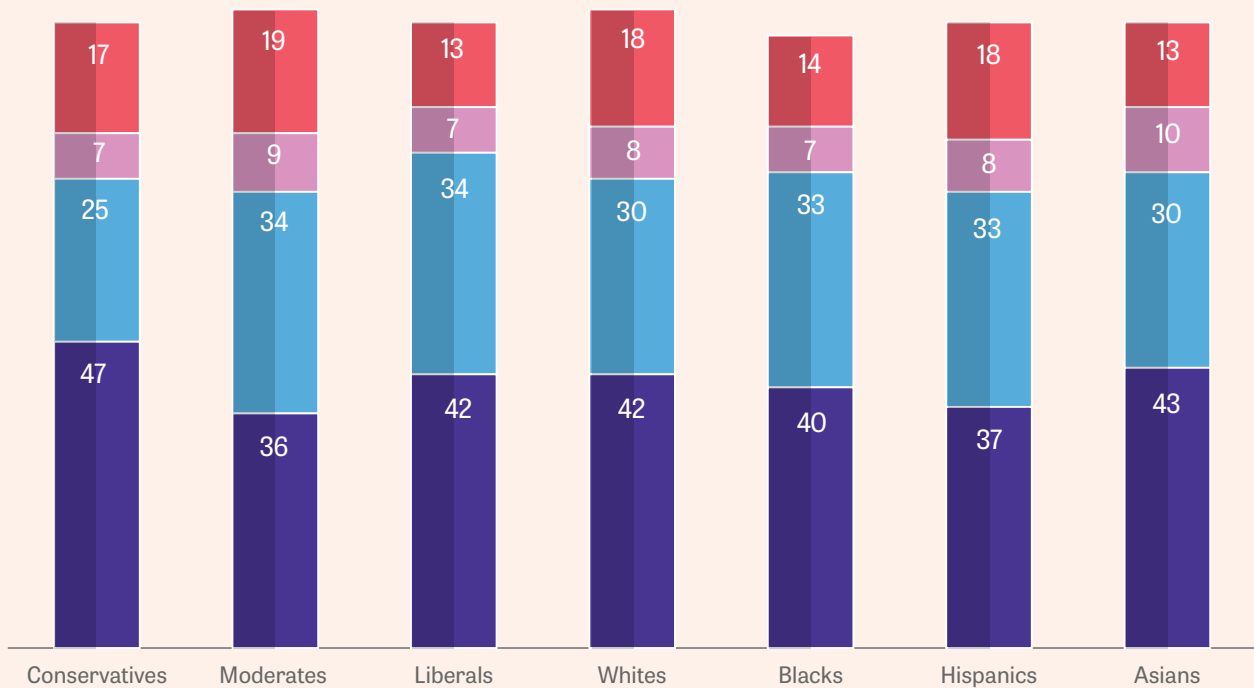
**Forty-one percent of Americans only pay attention to one or two news sources when they feel overwhelmed by the number of news sources available.**

FIGURE 27

## Americans' Response to Feeling Overwhelmed by Information, by Ideology and Race

When you feel overwhelmed by the information you get, what are you most likely to do?

- % Pick one or two sources you trust and only pay attention to those
- % Try and consult a variety of sources to see where they agree on facts
- % Rely on friends, family or others to help sort out what you need to know
- % Stop paying attention to news altogether



Note: "No answer" percentages not shown.

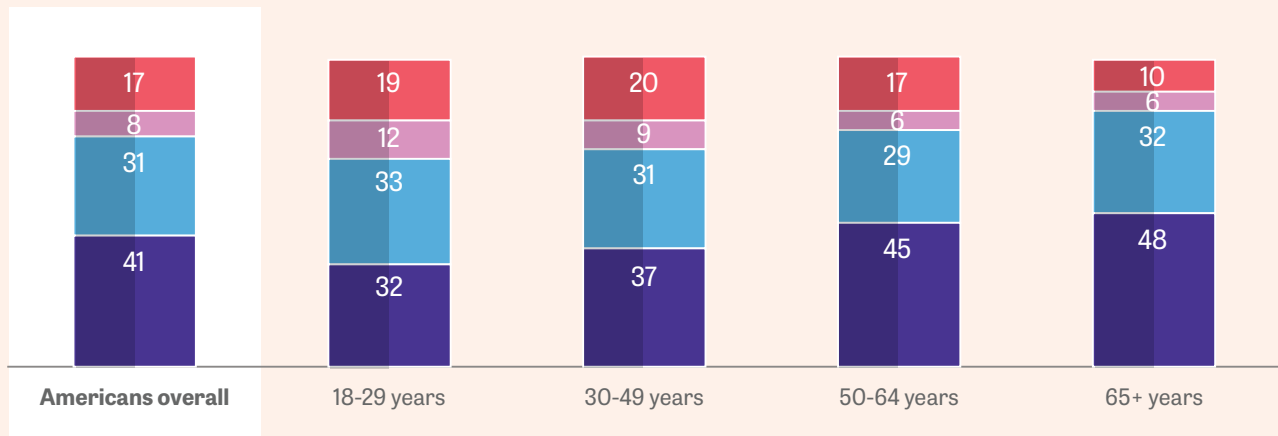
Older Americans are more likely than young people to pick one or two sources, and younger Americans aged 18-29 are just as likely to consult a variety of sources (33%) as they are to pick just one or two (32%) — the only age group for which that is the case. Younger people are more likely than older Americans to stop paying attention to the news altogether and to consult family and friends.

**Nearly 1 in 6 Americans stop paying attention to the news altogether as a response to feeling overwhelmed by the number of news sources available.**

FIGURE 28

## Americans' Response to Feeling Overwhelmed by Information, by Age

- % Pick one or two sources you trust and only pay attention to those
- % Try and consult a variety of sources to see where they agree on facts
- % Rely on friends, family or others to help you sort out what you need to know
- % Stop paying attention to news altogether



Note: "No answer" percentages not shown.

### Conservatives More Likely to Turn to One or Two Sources When Overwhelmed

Picking one or two trusted news sources when overwhelmed is more commonly the choice among conservative Americans (47%) compared to liberals (42%) or moderates (36%).

Given that pattern, as well as the dominance of Fox News as a media source for conservatives and the lack of an analogous news source for nonconservatives, it follows that Americans who rely on a limited number of sources in response to feeling overwhelmed are about twice as likely to cite Fox News as their primary news source than other news outlets.

In all, 17% of Americans who rely on just one or two sources when they feel overwhelmed identify Fox News as the news source they use most often, compared to 9% who rely on a local news program, 8% CNN and 6% National Public Radio.

Among Americans aged 65 and older who just turn to one or two outlets, reliance on Fox News is especially evident. One in four (25%) in this group turn to Fox News, compared to 9% of their same age cohort who cite either MSNBC or a local news program as their main source of news. For Americans aged 18-50 who select one or two trusted sources when overwhelmed, their primary sources are more evenly distributed, yet Fox News is nonetheless their dominant choice. This finding is somewhat troubling, as Americans who are overwhelmed by news seek an arbiter of truth in a news source that Americans, on the whole, consider more biased than other outlets.<sup>17</sup>

17 Rothwell, J. (2018, September 26). Biased news media or biased readers? An experiment on trust. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/26/upshot/biased-news-media-or-biased-readers-an-experiment-on-trust.html>

## Political Engagement Tracks With Media Consumption

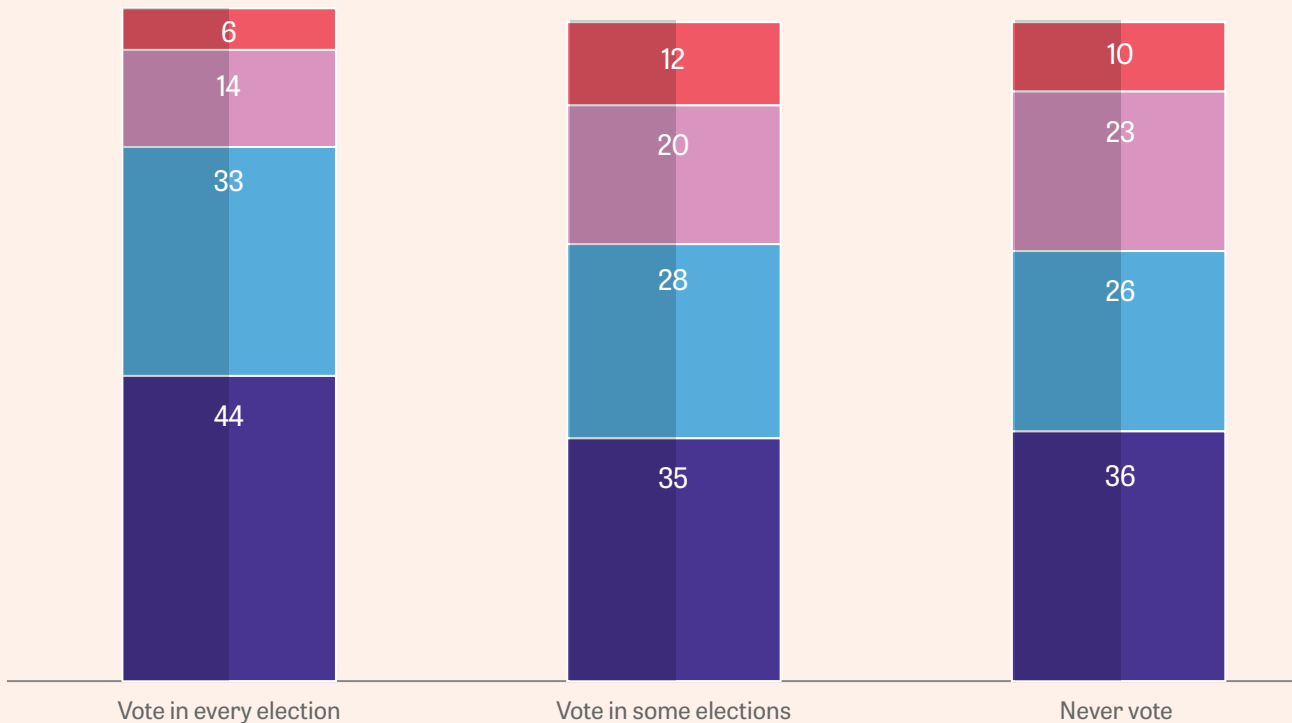
Americans who say they follow political news “very closely” (38%) are almost twice as likely as those who do not follow it closely (20%) to consult a variety of news sources to discern the facts, and they are much less likely than those who do not follow politics to tune out the news altogether (8% vs. 32%, respectively).

Voting behavior is associated with Americans’ response to being overwhelmed by the sheer number of sources and the amount of information they encounter. Those who vote in every election (33%) are more likely than those who sometimes vote (28%) or never vote (26%) to seek a variety of news sources to sort out the facts. Conversely, Americans who always vote are least likely (14%) to tune out from the news altogether, compared to those who vote in some (20%) or no (23%) elections.

FIGURE 29

### Americans’ Response to Feeling Overwhelmed by Information, by Voting Behavior

- % Pick one or two sources you trust and only pay attention to those
- % Try and consult a variety of sources to see where they agree on facts
- % Stop paying attention to news altogether
- % Rely on friends, family or others to help you sort out what you need to know



Note: “No answer” percentages not shown.

## 4 Diversity in News Coverage and in the Newsroom

The study finds that one reason many Americans do not feel well-served by the media is that it does not reflect the array of perspectives and experiences of people like them. However, while Americans in general value diversity and aspire for their news media to be diverse and representative, it is a much lower priority for them than other issues they see with media roles and performance. Notably, these data were collected in the months prior to the waves of protest relating to racial injustice that began sweeping the nation in late May 2020. It is possible Americans may place an even higher priority on diversity in news organizations now, during this period of greater awareness of racial disparities and injustices.<sup>18</sup>

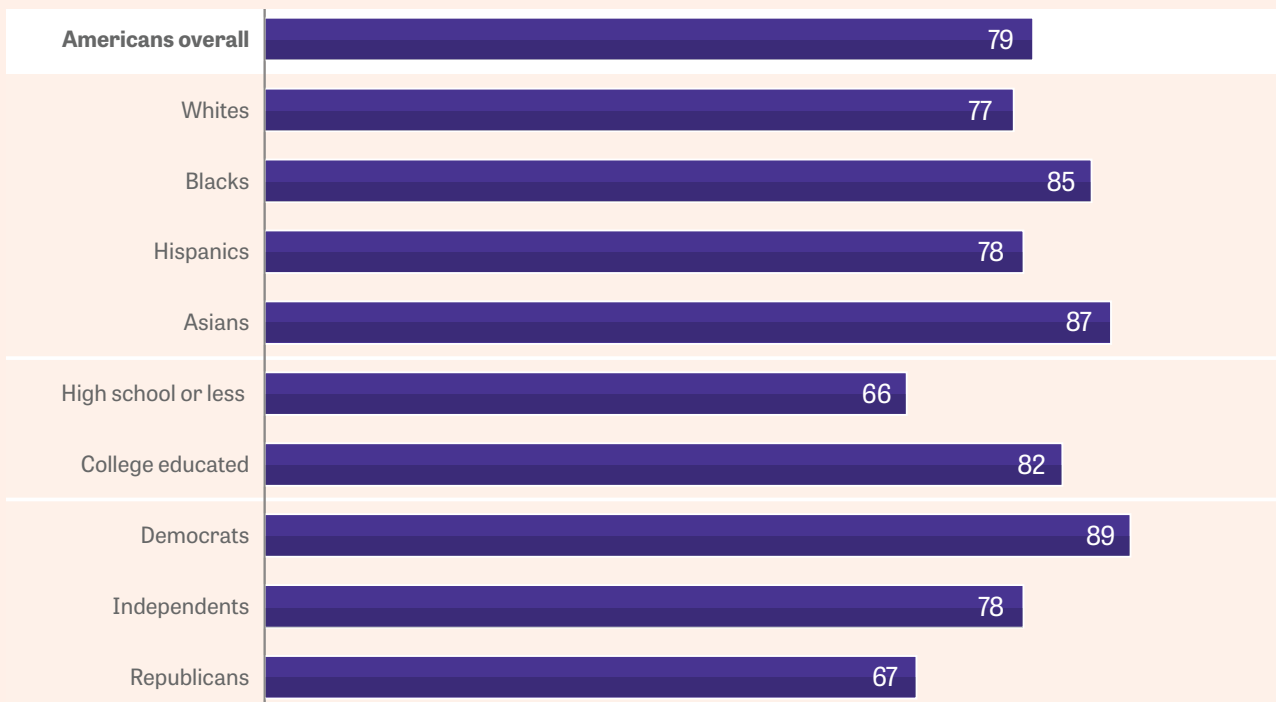
Strong majorities of U.S. adults (79%) say news organizations should hire more diverse reporting staffs. Blacks (85%) and Asians (87%) are somewhat more likely to respond this way than whites (77%) or Hispanics (78%). Partisanship and education reveal an even wider divide than race. For example, Republicans (67%) are less likely than Democrats (89%) and independents (78%) to say news organizations should hire reporters from different backgrounds to increase the diversity of their reporting staffs. And while 82% of college graduates say news organizations should strive to hire diverse staffs, only 66% of those with a high school education or less agree.

FIGURE 30

### Opinions on News Organizations Hiring to Increase Diversity

Do you think news organizations should or should not try and hire reporters with different backgrounds to increase the diversity of their reporting staffs?

(Percentage “should”)



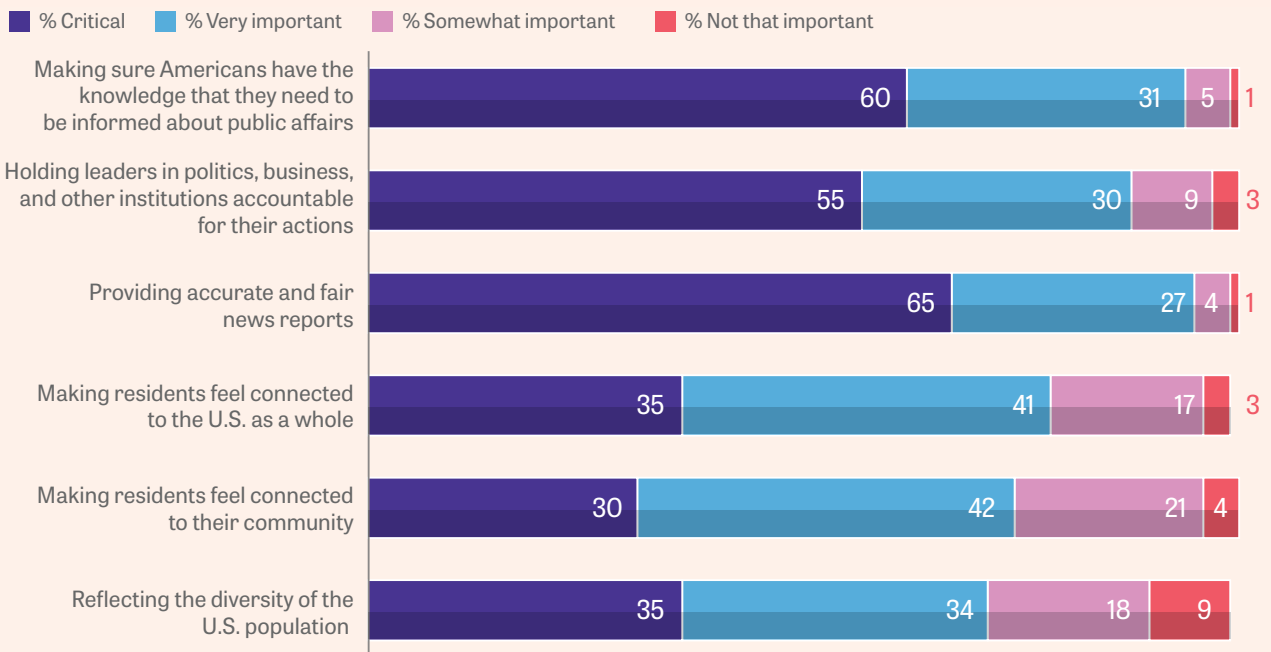
<sup>18</sup> Gallup, Inc. (n.d.). *Most important problem*. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1675/most-important-problem.aspx>

A majority of Americans say reflecting the diversity of the U.S. population is a “critical” (35%) or “very important” (34%) role for the media. However, when compared to the importance of other roles, Americans place the lowest priority on media reflecting the diversity of the U.S. population.

FIGURE 31

## Views on the Role of News Media

How important is the role of the news media in accomplishing each of the following goals?



Note: “No answer” percentages not shown.

Blacks (50%), Hispanics (43%) and Asians (41%) are more likely than whites to say the media’s role in reflecting diversity is “critical.” And while 48% of Democrats say the same, just 33% of independents and 22% of Republicans agree.

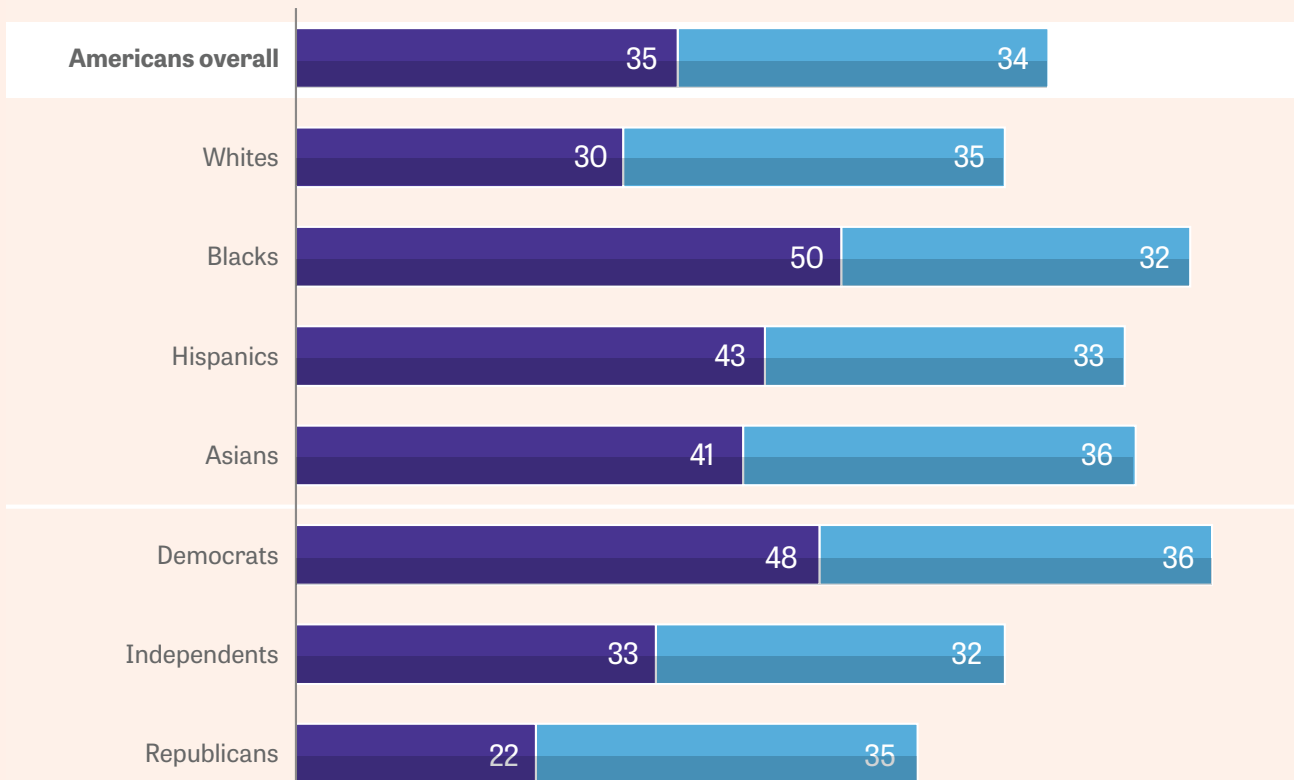
**Blacks (50%), Hispanics (43%) and Asians (41%) are more likely than whites to say the media’s role in reflecting diversity is “critical.”**

FIGURE 32

## Views on the Importance of News Media Reflecting the Diversity of the U.S.

How important is the role of the news media in reflecting the diversity of the U.S. population?

■ % Critical   ■ % Very important



Less than half (47%) of Americans say lack of diversity in the news media is “a major problem,” ranking last among nine specific problems or concerns Americans may harbor against the news media. By comparison, at least 7 in 10 Americans consider various forms of bias and misinformation to be a major problem. Whites (44%) are less likely than Blacks (54%), Hispanics (51%) and Asians (55%) to say lack of diversity is a major problem, as are Republicans compared to Democrats and independents.

### Views on What Kind of Diversity Matters Most Differ by Political Party and Race

While majorities of Americans say they value diversity in their news organizations, they disagree as to what kind of diversity they would like to see. Among Americans who say news organizations should hire for greater diversity, the highest priority for diversity is based on race/ethnicity (35%) or political views (30%), followed by income or social class (18%), age (9%) and gender (5%).

The priorities Americans place on the kind of diversity they would most like to see differ greatly by race and political leaning. Racial minorities are more likely to place priority on racial/ethnic diversity compared to whites. Six in 10 Blacks and more than 4 in 10 Hispanics and Asians most want to see increased racial diversity in news organizations, compared with just 27% of whites.

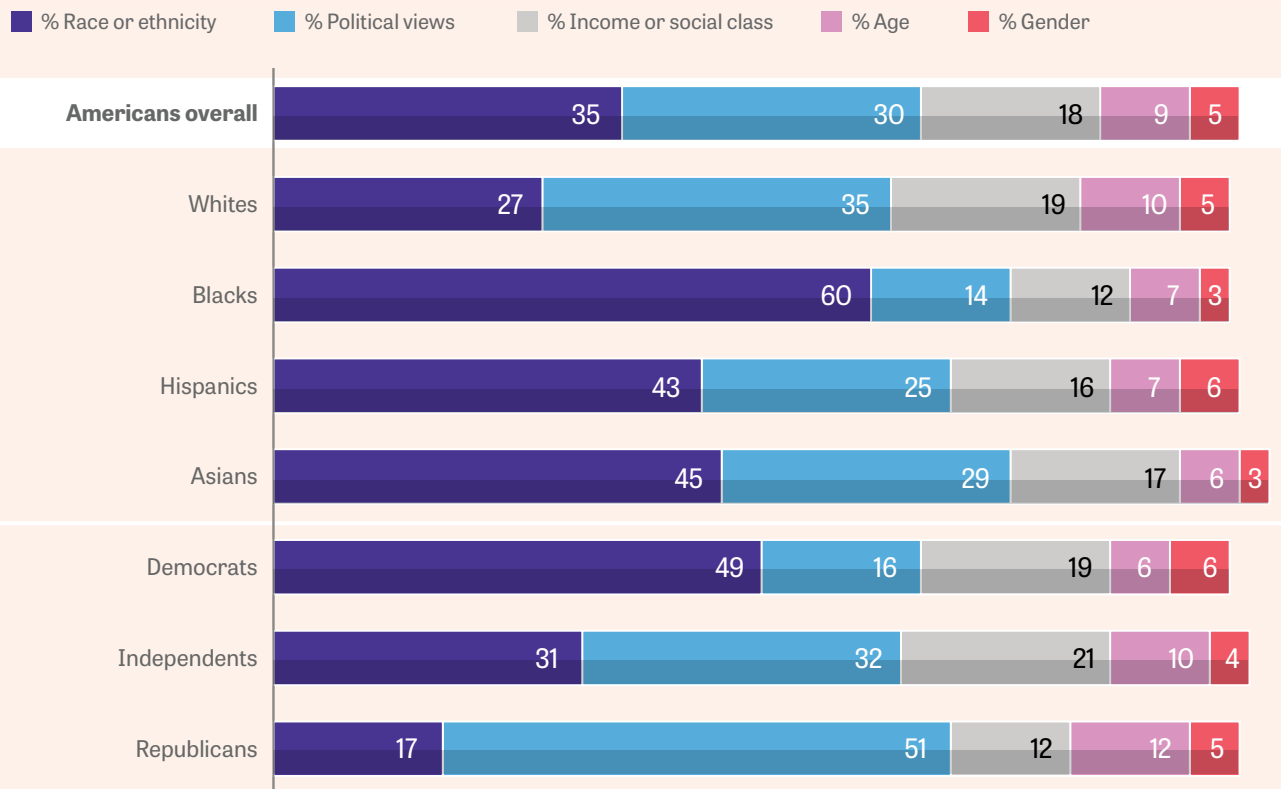
The partisan divide in these responses is also striking. About half of Republicans (51%) say political diversity is most important, while 17% say racial/ethnic diversity matters the most. Conversely, about half (49%) of Democrats say racial/ethnic diversity matters to them the most, while 16% say political diversity is the greatest priority.

FIGURE 33

### Opinions on How News Organizations Should Hire to Increase Diversity

Which one of the following is the area in which news organizations most need to hire different types of reporters to increase the diversity of their reporting staffs?

(Percentages among those who think news organizations should increase diversity in their staffs)



Note: "No answer" percentages not shown.



The public has a mixed reaction when it comes to how well the media is doing with diversity efforts. About a quarter of Americans (23%) think newsrooms are doing “very well” or “well,” while about 4 in 10 (39%) think the media are doing poorly.

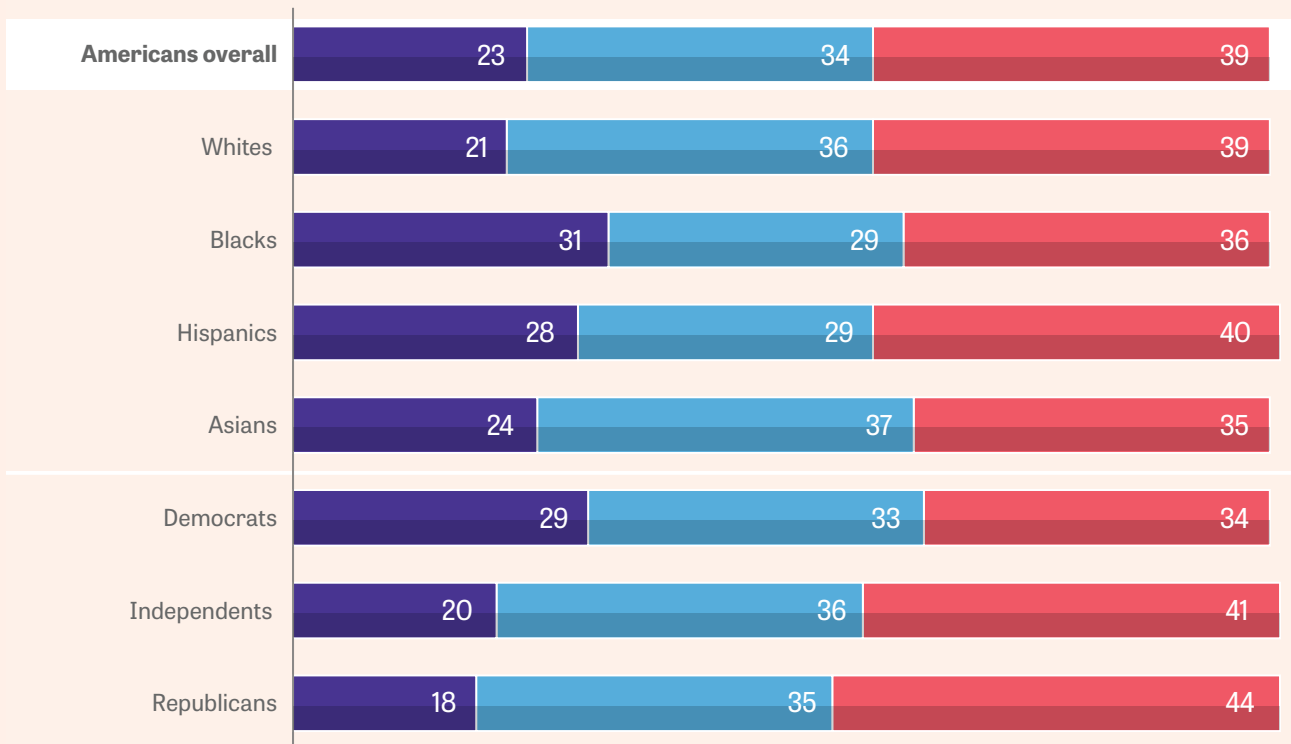
All partisan, racial and ethnic subgroups are more likely to say the media is doing poorly rather than doing well in reflecting U.S. diversity. Blacks and Democrats are somewhat less negative in their assessment.

**FIGURE 34**

## Perceptions of News Media Performance on Reflecting Diversity

How is the news media performing in reflecting the diversity of the U.S. population?

■ % Very well/well   ■ % Acceptably   ■ % Poorly/Very poorly



Note: “No answer” percentages not shown.

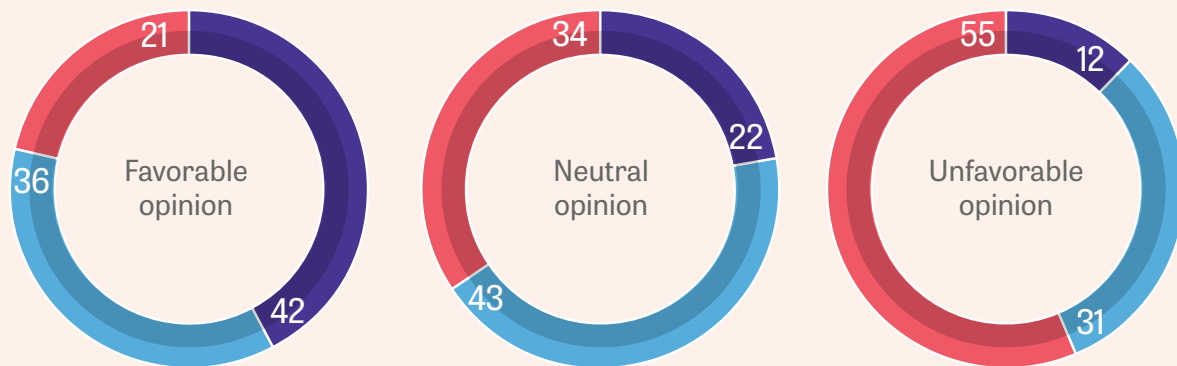
The differences by race and partisanship flow from those groups' overall opinion of the media — those who have favorable views of the news media overall are more positive than negative about how well it reflects U.S. diversity, while those who view the media unfavorably are most negative on its reflection of the nation's diversity.

FIGURE 35

## Perceptions of News Media Performance on Reflecting Diversity, by Overall Opinions of News Media

How is the news media performing in reflecting the diversity of the U.S. population?

■ % Very well/Well   ■ % Acceptably   ■ % Poorly/Very poorly



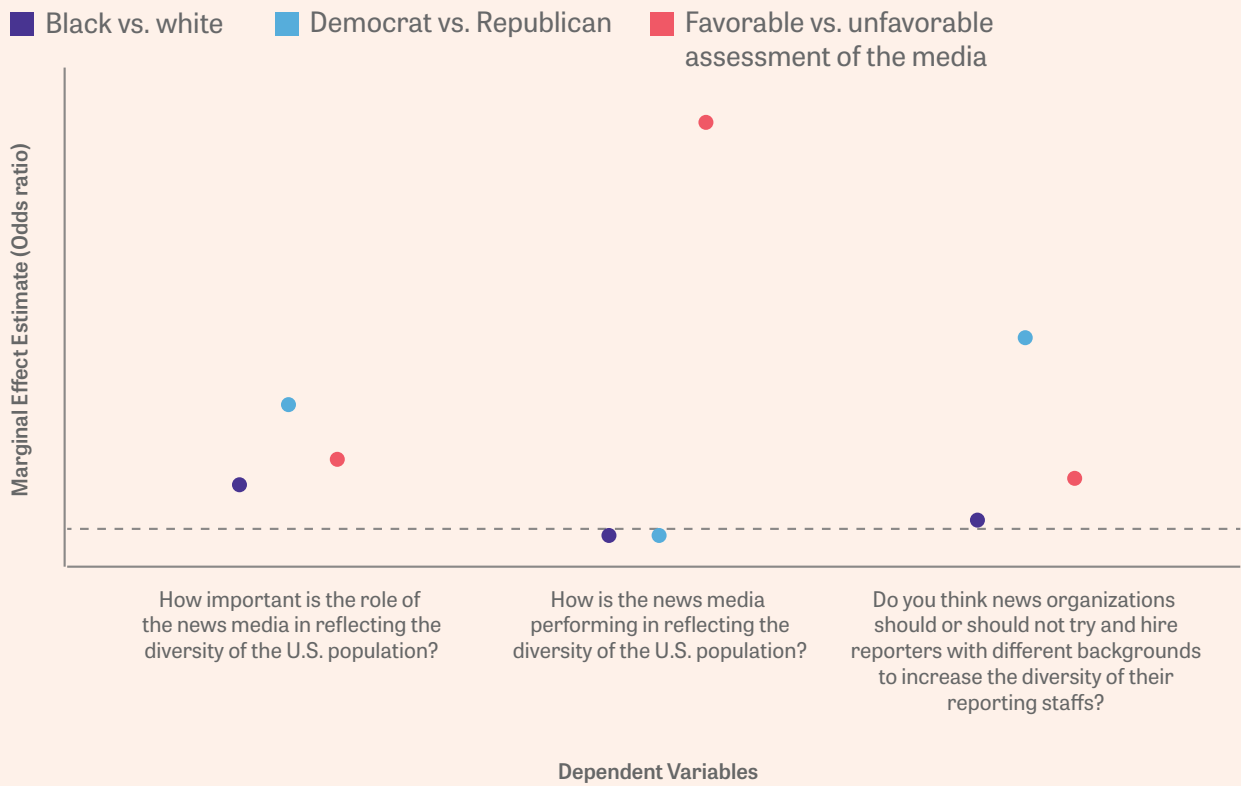
Note: "No answer" percentages not shown.

A statistical model taking into account a variety of demographic and attitudinal factors (e.g., age, education, gender, race/ethnicity, etc.) finds that opinions of the news media overall are what drive people's ratings of how well it reflects diversity. While political party has a small effect on people's perceptions of how well the media reflects the country's diversity, it is dwarfed by the effect of people's overall opinion of the media on this outcome. Race has no independent effect.

**The results of more rigorous statistical modeling reveal that — controlling for a variety of factors that include race/ethnicity, age, education, gender and political party — Americans who view the media favorably have six times increased odds of thinking they are performing well in reflecting the country's diversity. This effect negates any apparent superficial impact of race/ethnicity on this perception.**

FIGURE 36

## Independent Effects of Race, Partisanship and Media Opinion on Diversity Issues



## 5 Impact of Declining Local News on Democratic Participation and Community Connection

One of the most troubling trends in the country's news media environment is the decline of local news in places where it has become financially untenable. This is particularly the case in America's smaller cities and rural areas, many of which have been described as "news deserts" for their lack of local newspapers.<sup>19</sup>

Although not judged to be one of their most important functions, 7 in 10 Americans say the news media play a "critical" (30%) or "very important" (42%) role in making residents feel connected to their local community.

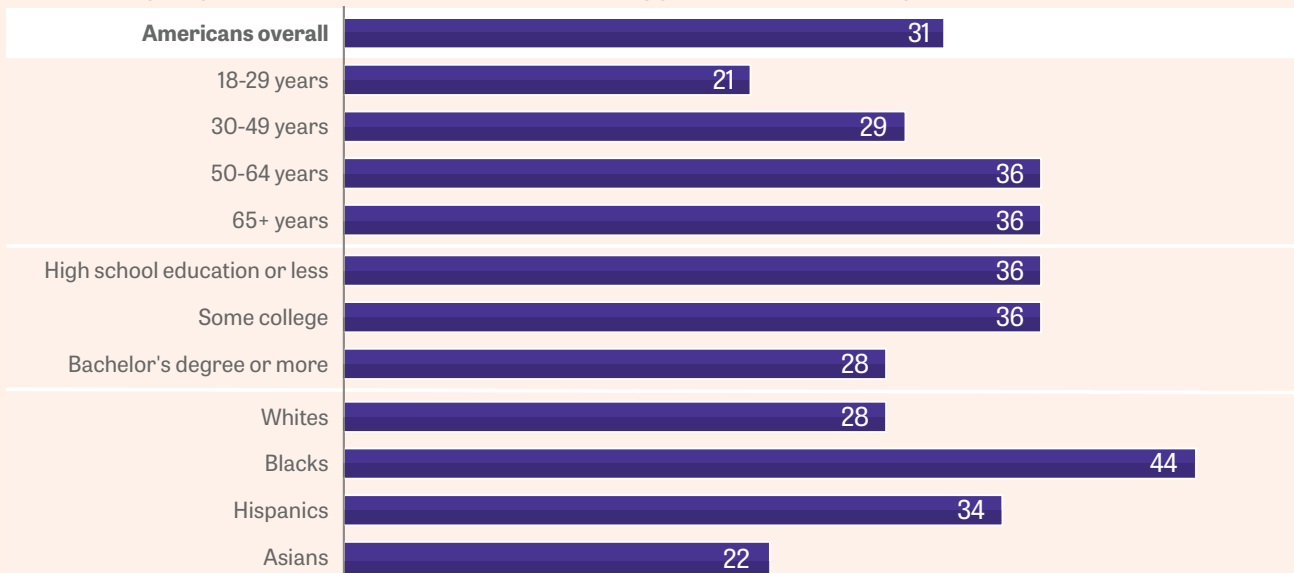
The public is evenly divided as to whether the media is doing well (26%) or poorly (29%) in this area, with 41% saying it is performing "acceptably." While not overly positive results, it is the only one of six news media functions for which Americans are not significantly more negative than positive.

This survey was conducted prior to the U.S. coronavirus crisis that led to an increase in U.S. news attention, though higher media consumption had largely subsided by the time this report was written.<sup>20</sup> In late 2019 and early 2020, less than a third of Americans overall (31%) said they follow news about issues affecting their local community "very closely," though 44% said they follow such issues "somewhat closely." Older Americans and those without a bachelor's degree are more likely to say they follow local news very closely. Blacks (44%) are twice as likely to follow local news very closely compared to Asians (22%).

FIGURE 37

### Percentage of Americans Who Follow Local News "Very Closely"

How closely do you follow news about issues affecting your local community?



<sup>19</sup> Knight Foundation & Gallup, Inc. (2019). *Putting a price tag on local news*. <https://knightfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Putting-a-Price-Tag-on-Local-News-final-updated.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Jones, J. M. (2020, May 7). *Attitudes about local news mostly stable amid COVID-19*. Gallup.com. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/310013/attitudes-local-news-mostly-stable-amid-covid.aspx>

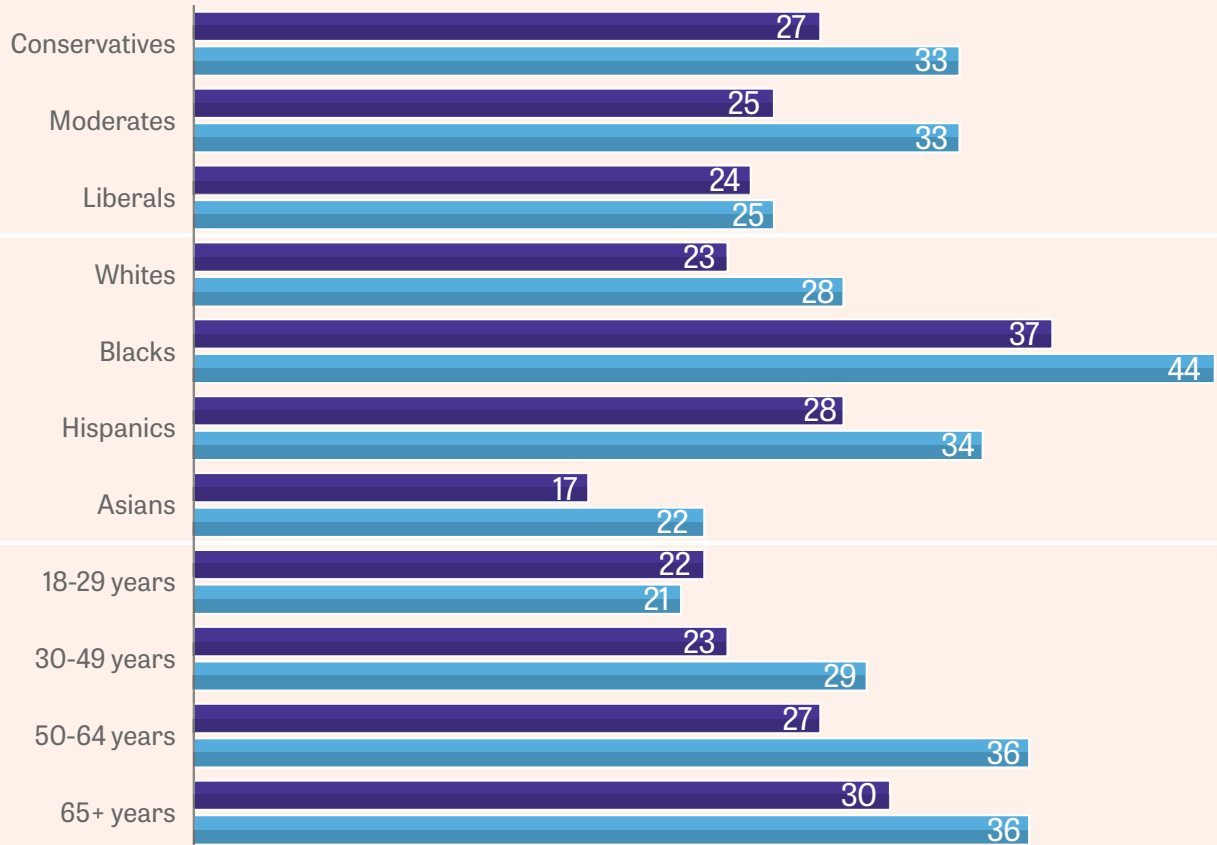
Women (34%) are slightly more likely than men (28%) to follow the local news very closely. And while there are few partisan differences in those who follow local news very closely, Americans who identify as liberal (25%) are less likely to do so than moderates or conservatives (both 33%). People living in rural areas (35%) and the South of the U.S. (34%) are more likely to follow their local news very closely than those living in the suburbs of a big city or in the East of the U.S. (both 28%).

Americans reported paying more attention to local news in late 2019/early 2020 than in 2017, when 1 in 4 Americans (25%) said they followed their local news “very closely.” This finding was particularly true for older Americans, Blacks and Hispanics, moderates and conservatives compared to their counterparts. Americans aged 18-29 were the only prominent subgroup not paying more attention to local news since 2017.

**FIGURE 38**

**Percentage of Americans Who Follow Local News “Very Closely,”  
2017-2019**

■ 2017 ■ 2019



Americans are slightly more likely to say they “very closely” follow multiple news topics since 2017:

- news about political figures and events in Washington (up from 31% in 2017 to 37% in 2019)
- news about state government (up from 16% to 19%)
- international news (up from 20% to 21%)

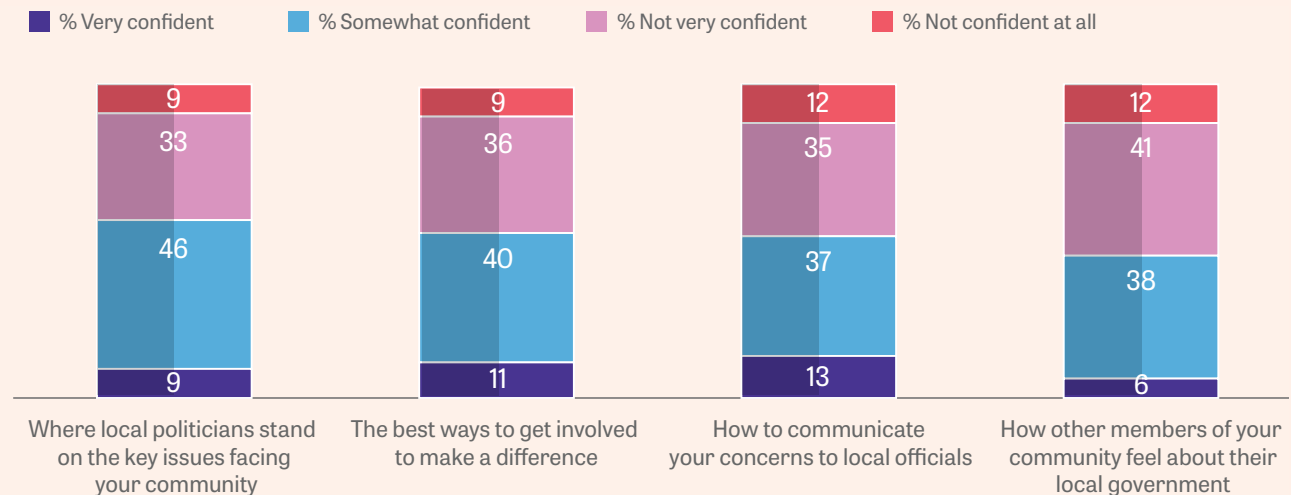
Americans’ knowledge pertaining to important issues facing their local communities increased only slightly since 2017. In the 2019 survey, 18% of Americans say they are “highly knowledgeable,” and 55% say they are “somewhat knowledgeable” about important issues facing their local community. Those saying they are highly knowledgeable remained steady from 2017, while the percentage of those saying they were somewhat knowledgeable increased by one percentage point.

However, Americans are not very confident in their knowledge pertaining to local public affairs. Slim majorities of Americans have confidence in their knowledge of where local politicians stand on key issues facing their community (55%) and on the best ways to get involved and make a difference (51%). Only half feel confident in their knowledge of how to communicate their concerns to local officials, and even fewer (44%) are confident in their knowledge of how others in their community feel about local government.

**FIGURE 39**

## Americans’ Confidence in Their Knowledge About Local Public Affairs

When it comes to information about politics and local government in your community, would you say you feel very confident, somewhat confident, not very confident, or not confident at all about knowing each of the following?



Note: “No answer” percentages not shown.

Americans who pay more attention to local news also are more confident in their knowledge about aspects of their local communities, local politics and engagement.

FIGURE 40

### Americans' Confidence in Knowledge About Local Public Affairs, by Local News Attention

(Percentage "very confident")

	Follow local news very closely	Follow local news somewhat/not too closely	Do not follow local news at all
Where local politicians stand on the key issues facing your community	17	7	4
The best ways to get involved to make a difference	19	9	5
How to communicate your concerns to local officials	21	10	6
How other members of your community feel about their local government	11	4	3

### Local News Use Linked to Civic Engagement

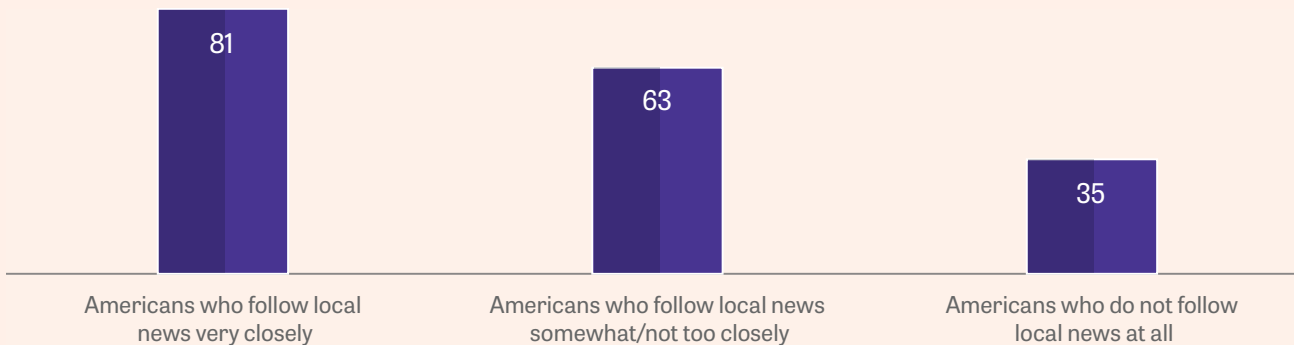
Lack of exposure to or interest in local news has also consistently been linked to lower levels of local political participation. In the current study, those who follow local news "very closely" are more than twice as likely as those who do not follow local news closely at all to say they "always" or "nearly always" participate in local elections — 81% versus 35%, respectively.

FIGURE 41

### Voting Behaviors of Americans, by Local News Consumption

How often would you say you vote in local elections?

(Percentage "always" or "nearly always")



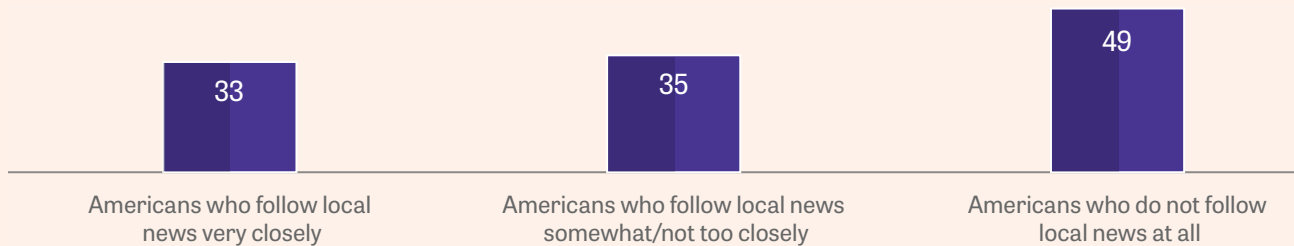
Correspondingly, those who say they do not follow local news at all are more likely to express a sense of futility about political participation — close to half (49%) agree that “people like me don’t have any say about what the government does.” This figure drops to 35% among those who follow local news at least a little and 33% among those who follow it very closely. Such findings are consistent with a 2020 study of 12,000 chronic non-voters in the U.S., which found they are both less engaged with the news and more likely to doubt the impact of their votes.<sup>21</sup>

FIGURE 42

### Political Efficacy, by Local News Consumption

Please say whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: “People like me don’t have any say about what the government does.”

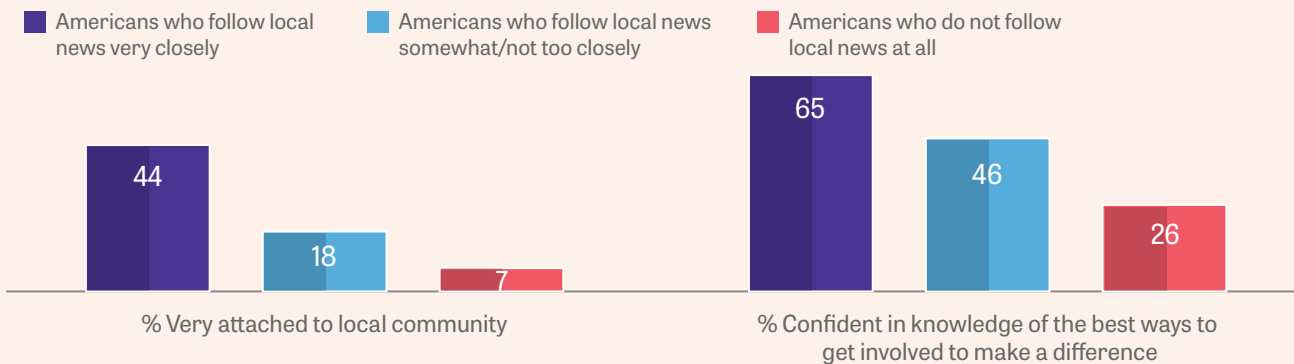
(Percentage “agree”)



These differences are also seen in measures of civic engagement beyond direct political participation. Those who follow local news are also much more likely to say they feel attached to their local community and that they know the best ways to get involved to make a difference.

FIGURE 43

### Attachment to Community and Knowing How to Get Involved, by Local News Consumption



Note: “No answer” percentages not shown.

<sup>21</sup> Knight Foundation. (2020). *The 100 million project: The untold story of American non-voters*. [https://knightfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/The-100-Million-Project\\_KF\\_Report\\_2020.pdf](https://knightfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/The-100-Million-Project_KF_Report_2020.pdf)



These results reinforce previous findings, including those from a 2016 Pew Research Center study of civic engagement and local news habits.<sup>22</sup>

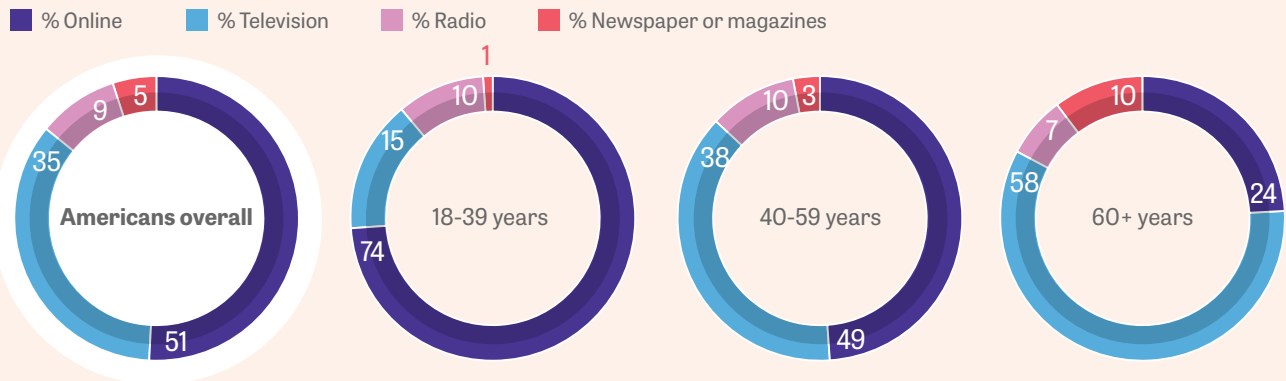
### Americans Who Primarily Get News Online Know Less About Local Issues

The advent of online news distributed via huge web-based media organizations like Google and Facebook has posed a critical challenge for local news.<sup>23</sup> In the current study, about half of U.S. adults (51%) say they get most of their news online, while 35% say their primary source is TV, 9% say it is radio and 5% newspapers or magazines. Among adults under 40, the proportion who get most of their news online climbs to 74%, while just 15% say they primarily use TV news.

FIGURE 44

### Where Americans Are Getting Their News

In which format do you get most of your news?



Note: "No answer" percentages not shown.

Media use habits also vary significantly by another important demographic variable: education. Among Americans under 40, 77% of those with a four-year bachelor's degree or more get most of their news online, versus 60% of those with a high school degree or less.

Overall, about 1 in 5 Americans (18%) say they are "highly knowledgeable" about important issues facing their local community. The current study finds that Americans who primarily access news online are less likely than those who mostly rely on newspapers or TV to say they are highly knowledgeable about issues facing their local community (15% internet vs. 26% newspapers and 22% TV). Differences by media platform are smaller or nonexistent when people are asked how knowledgeable they are about issues facing the country as a whole.

22 Barthel, M., Holcomb, J., Mahone, J., & Mitchell, A. (2016, November 3). Civic engagement strongly tied to local news habits. *Pew Research Center's Journalism Project*. <https://www.journalism.org/2016/11/03/civic-engagement-strongly-tied-to-local-news-habits/>

23 Hendrickson, C. (n.d.). Local journalism in crisis: Why America must revive its local newsrooms. *Brookings Institute*. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Local-Journalism-in-Crisis.pdf>

FIGURE 45

## Americans' Knowledge of Local Issues, by Primary News Format

How knowledgeable would you rate yourself on important issues facing your local community?  
(Percentage "highly knowledgeable")



Those who get most of their news online are less likely than those who get news primarily from TV or print publications to be confident they know about specific aspects of local politics and community affairs, including how to contact local officials and how to make a difference in the community.

FIGURE 46

## Confidence in Knowledge About Local Civic Matters, by Primary News Format

When it comes to information about politics and local government in your community, would you say you feel very confident, somewhat confident, not very confident, or not at all confident about knowing each of the following?

(Percentage "very" or "somewhat" confident)

	Americans Overall	Get most of their news online	Get most of their news from radio	Get most of their news from TV	Get most of their news from print publications
How to communicate your concerns to local officials	50	47	51	52	56
The best ways to get involved to make a difference	51	48	49	57	59

Further, 21% of Americans who get most of their news online say the news media is doing “well” or “very well” at making residents feel connected to their community — significantly below the 35% of those who primarily use TV news and the 35% who mainly use print publications. Those whose main source is radio news are similar to online news users, at 23%.

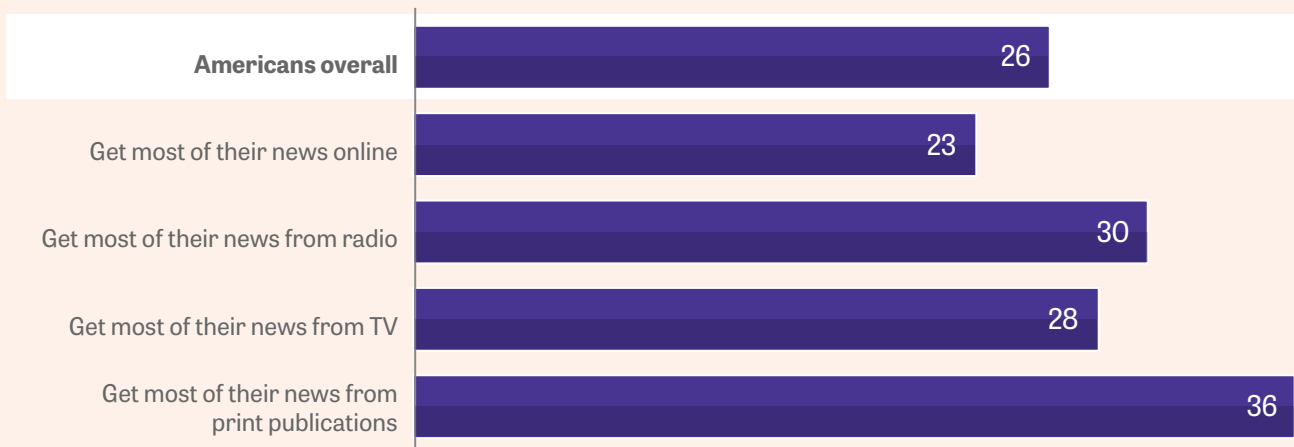
Online news access is also associated with lower levels of connection to one’s local community, a troubling indicator of social cohesion in a post-pandemic America.<sup>24</sup> Americans who primarily get their news from print publications (36%) are much more likely than those who get most of their news online (23%) or from TV (28%) to feel “very attached” to their local community.

FIGURE 47

### Levels of Community Attachment, by Primary News Format

In general, how attached do you feel to your local community?

(Percentage “very attached”)



### Americans Who Follow Local News Are More Favorable Toward News Media in General

Recent studies have suggested the loss of local news coverage in many areas may be a factor in Americans’ current level of political polarization, as national news outlets tend to focus more on issues that have a partisan angle or include partisan conflict.<sup>25</sup> This shift toward a predominantly national news diet may lead many Americans to view the news media less favorably.

The current study supports this idea, as those who say they pay attention to news about issues facing their local community are more likely to have a favorable overall opinion of the country’s news media.

24 Knight Foundation. (2020). *Community ties: Understanding what attaches people to the place where they live*. <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/community-ties-understanding-what-attaches-people-to-the-place-where-they-live/>

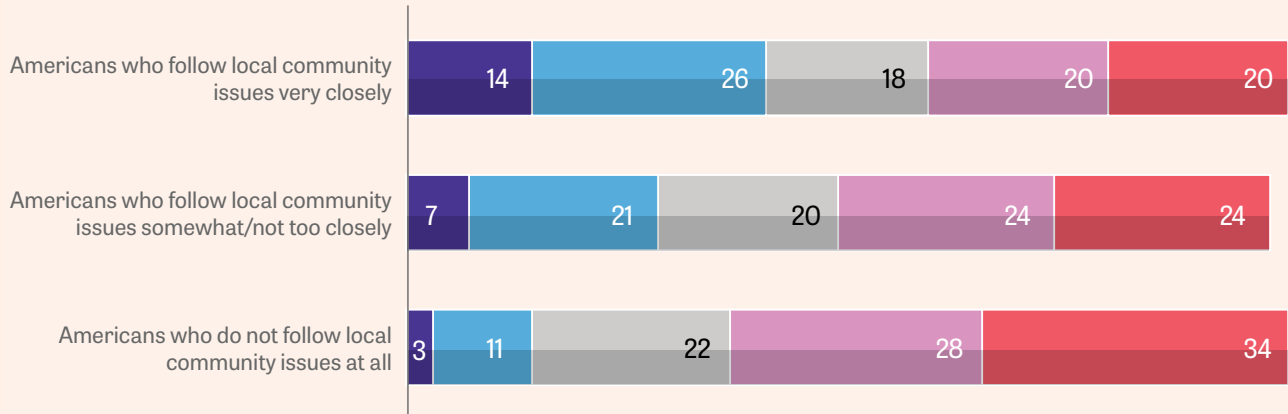
25 Hendrickson, C. (n.d.). *Local journalism in crisis: Why America must revive its local newsrooms* (p. 2). *Brookings Institute*. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Local-Journalism-in-Crisis.pdf>

FIGURE 48

## Opinions of News Media, by Local News Consumption

What is your overall opinion of the news media in the United States today?

■ % Very favorable   ■ % Somewhat favorable   ■ % Neutral   ■ % Somewhat unfavorable   ■ % Very unfavorable



Note: "No answer" percentages not shown.

The relationship between attention to local news and positive opinions of the news media cannot be explained on the basis of partisanship, since Republicans and Democrats pay similar levels of attention to local news. However, the relationship appears to be largely driven by age, as older people are more likely to pay attention to local news and to view news media positively. Still, within the same age group, there is a positive relationship between attention to news and opinions of the news media.

### Implications

The internet and digital technologies have disrupted countless business models in virtually every industry — but perhaps none more so than the media industry. Online platforms with huge user bases have, to some extent, nationalized news dissemination and consumption, with adverse effects not just on local news organizations but on news consumers who may be less involved in their communities as a result. Moreover, attention to local news is less common among younger and better-educated Americans, who are most likely to be future community leaders.

To the extent that local news startups can find new revenue streams and new means of reaching online audiences while maintaining a strong public-service orientation, they may help restore social capital to communities that sorely need it. They may also help improve Americans' overall opinion of news media in the process.

## 6 Media's Role in Creating — and Healing — Political Divisions

Another concern Americans have with the media is that, in addition to being biased and not diverse, it creates political divisions. More than 8 in 10 Americans say the news media bears “a great deal” or “a moderate amount” of blame for the political divide. Importantly, though, they also believe the news media has the ability to heal such divisions.

About half of Americans (48%) say the media bears “a great deal” of blame for the political divisions in the U.S. More than a third (36%) say the media is to blame “a moderate amount” for such divisions, while 12% say “not much” and 3% say “none at all.”

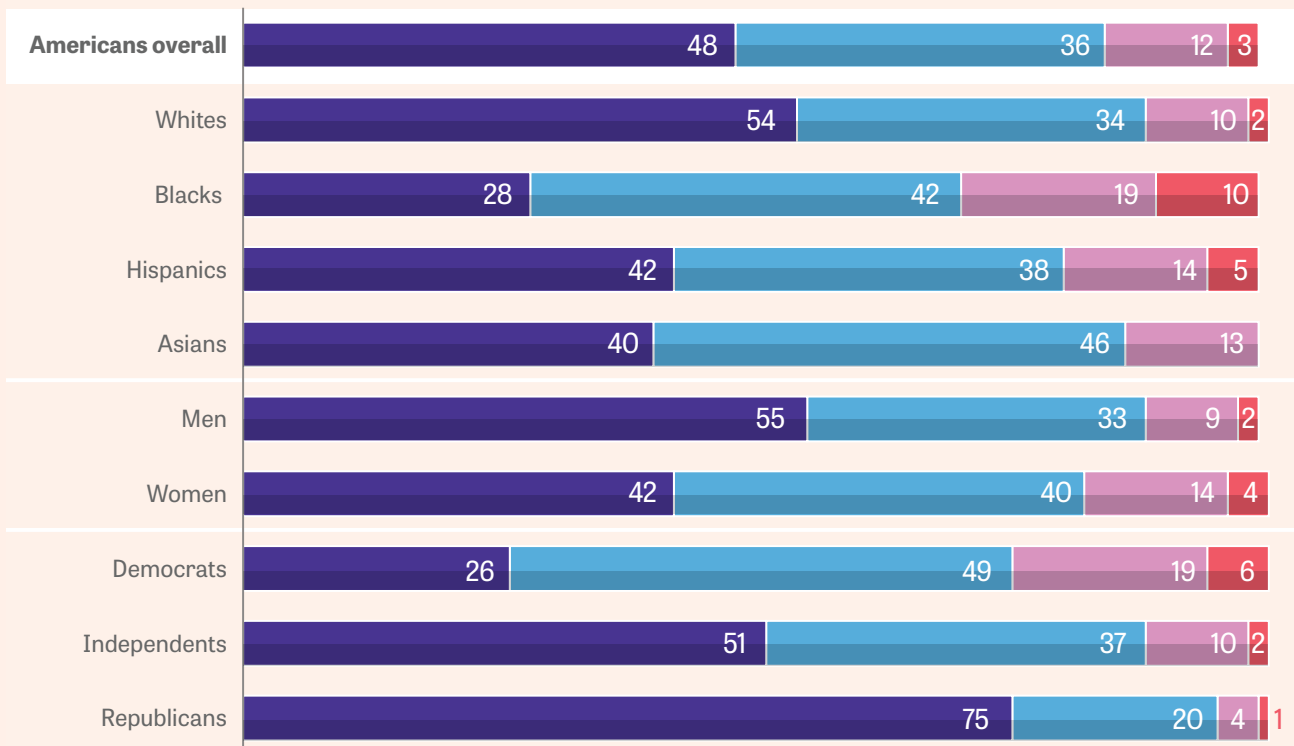
Such assessments vary considerably by race and party, and to a lesser extent, gender and primary news format. Across these groups, whites, men, Republicans and those who primarily get their news from radio are more inclined to say the media bears a great deal of the blame for the division in the country than their counterparts. This finding is consistent with the greater inclination among these groups to say bias in news reporting that is supposed to be objective is “a major problem.”

FIGURE 49

### Opinions on the News Media's Responsibility for Political Divisions

How much blame does the news media deserve for political divisions in this country?

■ % A great deal   ■ % A moderate amount   ■ % Not much   ■ % None at all



Note: “No answer” percentages not shown.

Attitudes on the degree of blame borne by the media for the country's political divisions are much less variable according to age or how closely people follow national political news. Those who have a high school education or less (41%) are less likely to say the media bear a great deal of blame compared to Americans with any college education (51%).

Despite the blame many place on the news media for the political divide, more than 8 in 10 Americans (84%) place confidence in the media's ability to serve as a healing force. In a similar pattern to the extent to which Americans blame the media for political divisions, about half (49%) say the media could do "a great deal" to heal the country's political divisions and about one-third (35%) say they could do "a moderate amount."

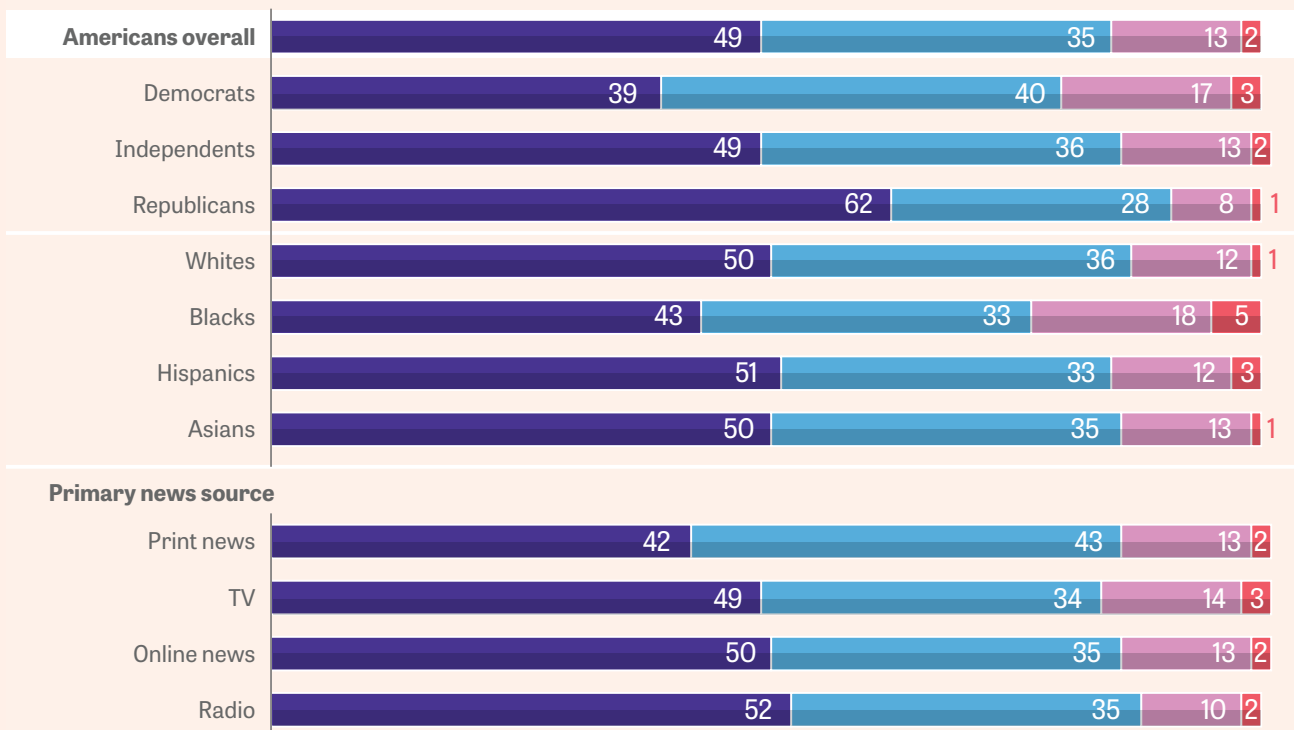
However, in contrast to the findings related to media blame, there is less variability among subgroups in Americans' attitudes related to the media's ability to heal. The largest differences in views on the media's healing power relate to political party. Republicans are much more optimistic than Democrats and independents about the media's ability to heal political divisions.

FIGURE 50

## Opinions on the News Media's Ability to Help Heal Political Divisions

How much do you think the news media could do to heal political divisions in this country?

■ % A great deal   ■ % A moderate amount   ■ % Not much   ■ % Nothing at all



Note: "No answer" percentages not shown.

## Americans Support Several Ways the Media Can Heal the Political Divide

Just as important a question as whether news media can heal political divisions is how it could do so. A separate Gallup/Knight Foundation web survey conducted in December 2019 asked Americans how effective they think various actions aimed at healing political divisions could be.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Survey administered to 1,682 Americans in December 2019.

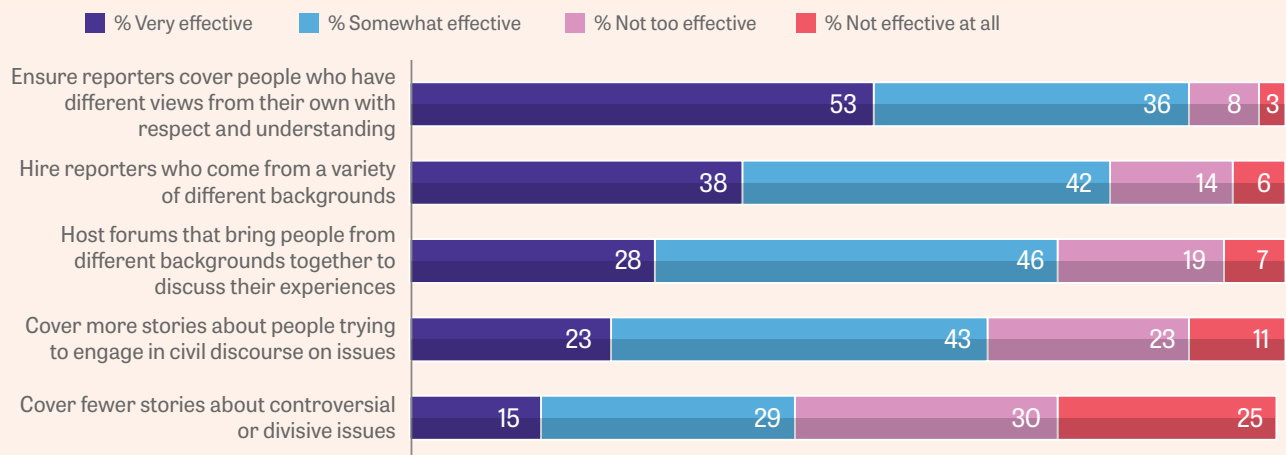
Americans are most likely to say ensuring reporters cover people who have different views from their own with respect and understanding would be effective (89%), followed by hiring reporters who come from a variety of different backgrounds (80%) — college graduates, Democrats, nonwhite Americans and women are all more likely to say this measure would be “very effective.” About three-quarters of Americans (74%) think hosting forums that bring people from different backgrounds together to discuss their experiences would be effective, and 66% say the same for covering more stories about people trying to engage in civil discourse on issues.

Americans hold out the least hope for covering fewer stories about controversial or divisive issues (44%), with 25% saying this would not be effective at all.

**FIGURE 51**

## Views on Potential Actions by News Media to Heal Political Divisions

Please indicate how effective you think each of the following actions that news organizations could take would be in healing political divisions.



Note: “No answer” percentages not shown.  
Data from Gallup/Knight Foundation survey conducted Dec. 3-15, 2019.

In general, Americans’ views on the effectiveness of these solutions are fairly stable across most subgroups, with some exceptions.

Regarding reporters respectfully covering people with different views from their own, Republicans are more likely to say this would be “very effective” than Democrats and independents, and women are more likely than men to say the same. On the issue of hiring reporters who come from a variety of different backgrounds, college graduates, Democrats, nonwhite Americans and women are all more likely to say this would be “very effective.”

Americans with some college education and younger Americans aged 18-34 are more likely than their counterparts to say “hosting forums that bring people from different backgrounds together to discuss their experiences” would be very effective. Democrats and Americans with some college education are more likely than others to say “covering more stories about people trying to engage in civil discourse on issues” would be very effective. Americans are relatively unified across subgroups in their estimation of the effectiveness of covering fewer stories about controversial or divisive issues.

# Conclusion

Americans' views on the media have been negative for quite some time but have become slightly more so over the past few years. Americans perceive more — often political — bias in the news media and suspect it intentionally pushes a particular perspective. With a highly fragmented news ecosystem, the public faces real challenges sorting out what is “real” from “fake news.”

Much of how Americans view the news media is a reflection and result of our divided and partisan society. Feeling overwhelmed and overburdened by the sheer volume and speed of news, Americans — and in particular, Republicans — are more likely to turn to one or two sources. The increasingly polarized news media landscape further entrenches America's political divide — a particularly pernicious challenge in a presidential election year with dramatic implications for the lives of Americans.

There are also troubling indicators when examining age as a differentiator of Americans' views. Younger Americans harbor less favorable attitudes toward the media that transcend partisanship. These negative perceptions are likely a function of their increased sense of bias in the news. Young adults pay less attention to news, including local, national and international issues, resulting in lower levels of knowledge regarding global to local public affairs. While younger Americans may have a healthy skepticism toward news given the modern media environment, these patterns are nonetheless an arguably disquieting harbinger of Americans' future civic and political engagement.

However, the future is not hopeless. Americans of all ages and political affiliations increasingly see the media as playing a critical role in upholding a healthy and vibrant democracy. And even as Americans believe the media is to blame for the political divide in the country, they largely see a role for the media in healing that divide. As America now faces a catastrophic and deepening health and financial crisis and crescendo cries for racial justice that test our social cohesion, finding shared, fact-based narratives in the media will be more important than ever.



# Methodology

Results are based on self-administered mail surveys with a random sample of 20,046 U.S. adults, aged 18 and older. Gallup used a random, addressed-based sample of 137,000 U.S. households in all 50 states, purchased from Dynata. Gallup oversampled households known to include harder-to-reach respondents, specifically Blacks, Hispanics and young adults.

Results are based on mail interviews collected between Nov. 8, 2019, and Feb. 16, 2020.

Each sampled household was mailed an English and a Spanish version of the survey, along with a prepaid \$1 cash incentive and a postage-paid return envelope. Within households, respondent selection was done using the “birthday method,” asking the household member with the next birthday to complete the questionnaire. Half of the households in the young adult oversample were instructed to have the youngest adult household member complete the survey.

The computed response rate for valid surveys, excluding undeliverable packets, was 16%.

Gallup weighted the obtained sample to correct for unequal selection probability and nonresponse. Nonresponse adjustments were made by adjusting the sample to match the national demographics of gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education, region and population density. Demographic weighting targets were based on the 2019 Current Population Survey figures for the aged-18-and-older U.S. population. Population density targets were based on the 2010 census. For results based on this sample of U.S. adults, the margin of sampling error is  $\pm 1$  percentage point at the 95% confidence level. Margins of error for subgroups are higher.

All reported margins of sampling error include the computed design effects for weighting.

In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

The full questionnaire, topline results, detailed cross tabulations and raw data may be obtained upon request. For questions about how the survey was conducted, please contact [galluphelp@gallup.com](mailto:galluphelp@gallup.com).

# Appendix: Classification of Media Outlets: Liberal, Moderate and Conservative

Gallup recognizes that no classification of Americans' news consumption is perfect. Reasonable people could disagree on what constitutes a liberal, moderate or conservative news source and to what bucket each specific news source should be assigned. To ensure the results derived from news diet are not the artifact of subjective decisions by the analyst, Gallup adopted the following procedure:

- 1) Each respondent in a recent series of Gallup/Knight Foundation surveys answered the following open-ended question: "Please write the name of the specific news source you use most often; this could be the name of a television channel or program, a newspaper, a website or app, a radio program, magazine or other source. Please be as specific as possible."
  - a. A coder then assigned these open-ended responses to a specific news outlet.
  - b. Another coder reviewed the initial coding to ensure correct assignment of each source.
- 2) Two independent coding schemes — Media bias/Fact check (MBFC) and Allsides (AS) — were used to assign each source as liberal, moderate or conservative.
  - a. MBFC and AS code the ideological leaning of news outlets in the following manner:
    - MBFC — Left; Left-Center; Least biased; Right-Center; Right
    - AS — Left; Lean left; Center; Lean right; Right
    - These codes were then assigned numeric values:
      - 1) Left
      - 2) Left-Center, Lean left
      - 3) Least biased, Center
      - 4) Right-Center, Lean right
      - 5) Right

- b. For some sources, AS distinguishes between news and opinion and assigns one source two scores. For instance, The New York Times (NYT) receives a score of 2 (lean left) for news articles and a score of 1 (left) for opinion articles. When this occurs, the average score is calculated so that NYT gets a score of 1.5 from AS.
  - c. MBFC and AS often assign sources the same value, but sometimes there are small discrepancies between MBFC and AS. For such cases, the average score is calculated. For instance, MBFC assigns NYT a score of 2 (left-center). As discussed above, the AS score for NYT is 1.5. Therefore, the final score for NYT is 1.75.
  - d. For less-frequently used sources, only AS or MBFC may assign a rating. In such cases, that rating is the final score. For instance, MBFC assigns Conservative Tree House with an ideological lean of “right-bias,” whereas AS does not rate the source. So, Conservative Tree House receives a score of 5.
  - e. What did not receive a score?
    - Local TV stations and small local newspapers
    - General sources (TV, newspaper, internet, Google, etc.)
- 3) After each source had a score, a news source was assigned as liberal, moderate or conservative (see Table 1).
- a. Liberal = 1 to 2.49
  - b. Moderate = 2.5 to 3.5
  - c. Conservative = 3.51 to 5
- 4) A respondent was then categorized into a news diet:
- a. “Conservative news diet” describes those who cite only conservative news sources (Fox News, Breitbart, One America News, the National Review, etc.) as top sources.
  - b. “Liberal news diet” is assigned to those naming only liberal news sources (CNN, MSNBC, New York Times, Vox, etc.) as top sources.
  - c. “Mixed news diet” includes those who name multiple sources that cut across partisan lines or include neutral sources (e.g., Associated Press, USA Today, The Economist).
  - d. “Undesignated” refers to those who only provide generic categories (e.g., internet, TV, newspaper) or did not answer the open-ended question.

TABLE 1

**Most Commonly Named Sources, by Ideology Classification**

Ideology	Score	News source		
Liberal	1	Crooked Media	Daily Beast	Daily Kos
		Democracy Now	Huffington Post	MSNBC
		New Yorker	Slate	Talking Points Memo
		The Intercept	The Young Turks	Vox
	1.25	CNN		
	1.5	Buzzfeed	Mother Jones	Vice News
	1.75	New York Times	The Week	
	2	ABC	Al Jazeera	CBS
		Los Angeles Times	The Atlantic	The Guardian
		Time Magazine	Washington Post	
2.25	NPR			
Moderate	2.5	Axios	BBC	Bloomberg
		Business Insider	CNBC	The Economist
		PBS	Politico	USA Today
	3	AP	Ars Technica	C-SPAN
		Financial Times	NBC	Reuters
	3.5	Chicago Tribune	Real Clear Politics	The Hill
Conservative	3.75	Wall Street Journal		
	4	American Family Radio	Reason Magazine	Washington Times
	4.5	Drudge Report	New York Post	One America News
	4.75	Fox	Newsmax	
	5	ACLJ	Daily Caller	Daily Mail
		Daily Signal	Daily Wire	EIB Network
		Epoch Times	EWTN	National Review
The Blaze		The Federalist		



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