

**LAPDOGS, ATTACK DOGS, OR WATCHDOGS?
NEWS MEDIA'S ROLE IN STATE GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS**

by
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Abstract

What is the news media's role in influencing political engagement, participation, and polarization at the state level? This thesis reviews existing literature on the history of journalism in the United States, the relationship between media consumption and political behavior, and the relationship between media consumption and political polarization. Case studies examine three states selected by a formula measuring population, length of legislative session, and political diversity in presidential elections. The first chapter studies the relationship between the size of statehouse press corps and voter participation in Massachusetts, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin, finding no significant effect on turnout. The second examines the influence of partisan news on political attitudes in the same three states. Findings support existing theories that increased availability of partisan news is connected to heightened political engagement, along with heightened polarization. The final chapter brings a sharp focus to the state of Wisconsin—ranked by several measures as one of the most polarized states in the country—assessing a set of factors that have contributed to deepening divisions in an effort to better understand media's role in polarization. Findings indicate that a changing media landscape does influence polarization, but its effects are intertwined with other factors. Government-based and industry-based solutions are recommended to build trust in news media and bridge political divides.

Readers: Pamela Prah and Matt Laslo

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Jim and Becky Opoien, and to Hildy. Your unwavering love, patience, and support continues to keep me afloat.

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Introduction

The reporter, “as much as anyone, and more than a great many, helps to shape the course of government,” wrote Douglass Cater (journalist and, later, aide to President Lyndon B. Johnson) in his 1959 analysis of the journalism industry, *The Fourth Branch of Government*.¹ Whether journalism in the United States is an industry that operates within the confines of corporate interests, an independent venture that casts a watchful and critical eye on the government, or a quasi-governmental operation best classified as the “fourth estate” or a “fourth pillar of democracy,” it is indeed a cog in the wheel of the country’s political system. In fact, some observe, as mass communication and political science scholar Timothy E. Cook did, that the “American news media today are not merely part of politics; they are part of government.”²

In spite of this inextricable link between journalism and government, the relationship between the two institutions is rarely a cozy one. Although the contemporary news media are “much less deferential” to institutions and power than they once were, tensions between journalists and elected officials date back to the United States’ fledgling days.³ While anti-press attitudes are not new to the nation, trust in the news media fell to a record low in 2016, and has not risen above 50 percent since 2005.⁴ As media scholar Amanda Darrach put it, “The media’s credibility problem certainly didn’t start with Donald Trump. It’s as much a part of the history of the press as

¹ Cater, Douglass. *The Fourth Branch of Government*, 7. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959.

² Cook, Timothy E. *Governing With the News: The News Media as a Political Institution*, 3. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

³ Schudson, Michael. “The Fall, Rise, and Fall of Media Trust.” *Columbia Journalism Review*, 2019. https://www.cjr.org/special_report/the-fall-rise-and-fall-of-media-trust.php.

⁴ Brenan, Megan. “Americans Remain Distrustful of Mass Media.” Gallup, November 9, 2020. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/321116/americans-remain-distrustful-mass-media.aspx>.

ink and paper.”⁵ However, there is no question that Donald Trump, as a candidate and as president, has thrown gasoline onto the anti-media fire and continued to fan the flames at every opportunity—referring to journalists as “the enemy of the people” and the “opposition party,” dismissing unflattering coverage as “fake news,” and publicly ridiculing individual journalists and news outlets.⁶

As of January 2019, 11 percent of Trump’s (frequent) tweets to his tens of millions of followers were insults or condemnations of journalists, publications, and the news media as a whole.⁷ It is not uncommon at Trump rallies for the crowd to break into a “CNN sucks” chant, or for individuals and groups of supporters to approach the penned-in workspace for press shouting insults or taking photos of individual reporters.⁸ As a journalist who has covered Trump rallies in several Wisconsin cities, I have experienced both.⁹ In 2016, a man was photographed at a Trump rally wearing a shirt advocating the lynching of journalists; the shirt was available for purchase for a brief time from Walmart—one of the largest retailers in the world.¹⁰ After the June 2018 mass shooting at *The Capital Gazette*, a newspaper in Annapolis, Maryland, the Committee to

⁵ Schudson. “The Fall, Rise, and Fall of Media Trust.”

⁶ Sugars, Stephanie. “From Fake News to Enemy of the People: An Anatomy of Trump’s Tweets.” Committee to Protect Journalists, January 30, 2019. <https://cpj.org/2019/01/trump-twitter-press-fake-news-enemy-people/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Wilstein, Matt. “CNN Cuts Away From Trump Rally After ‘CNN Sucks’ Chant Breaks Out.” *The Daily Beast*, June 19, 2019. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/cnn-cuts-away-from-trump-rally-after-cnn-sucks-chant-breaks-out>.

⁹ Opoien, Jessie. Twitter post, October 8, 2016, 3:53 p.m. <https://twitter.com/jessieopie/status/784859406672334848>; Opoien. Twitter post, October 8, 2016, 3:57 p.m., . <https://twitter.com/jessieopie/status/784860377720819712>; Opoien. Twitter post, October 8, 2016, 3:57 p.m.. <https://twitter.com/jessieopie/status/784860238277074944>; Opoien. Twitter post, October 8, 2016, 3:56 p.m.. <https://twitter.com/jessieopie/status/784860015395909632>; Opoien. Twitter post, October 8, 2016, 2:28 p.m.. <https://twitter.com/jessieopie/status/784837956611641344>.

¹⁰ Zadrozny, Brandy. “The Man Behind ‘Journalist, Rope, Tree.’” *The Daily Beast*, November 9, 2016. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-man-behind-journalist-rope-tree>; Perrigo, Billy. “Walmart Removes ‘Rope. Tree. Journalist.’ Shirt from Store.” *Time*, December 1, 2017. <https://time.com/5044596/rope-tree-journalist-walmart-shirt-removed-threatening/>.

Protect Journalists and other press freedom advocates urged the president to be more careful with his rhetoric; however, five days later he referred to the news media as the “opposition party,” and 17 days after that, he reiterated that “much of the news media is indeed the enemy of the people.”¹¹

Up until the November 3, 2020 presidential election, some may have argued (particularly the Republican senators who have made a policy of refusing to comment on them), unconvincingly, that the president’s tweets do not have the same bearing on the function of our government as speeches and other rhetoric.¹² But that argument went out the window when Donald Trump, with the support of a majority of elected Republicans, refused to accept that Democrat Joe Biden had defeated him both in popular and Electoral College vote totals. Weeks after The Associated Press and every major television news network declared Biden to be president-elect, Trump had still not conceded and was instead sowing doubts about the integrity of U.S. elections and the U.S. press. On the day the race was called for Biden, Trump tweeted: “Since when does the Lamestream Media call who our next president will be?”¹³ The answer is “since 1848.”¹⁴ In actuality, a call from The Associated Press and other major news networks

¹¹ Sugars. “From Fake News to Enemy of the People”; Capital Gazette Staff. “Capital Gazette Shooting: What to Know about Fatal Newsroom Attack and the Man Who Was Found Guilty in It.” *Capital Gazette*, October 28, 2019. <https://www.capitalgazette.com/news/crime/ac-cn-capital-gazette-trial-updates-20191028-kuhqs55b5a17aenqwangehbsa-story.html>.

¹² Kapur, Sahil, Frank Thorp V, and Julie Tsirkin. “Haven't Read the Damn Thing': Republican Senators Dodge Questions about Trump's Conspiracy Tweet.” NBCNews, June 9, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/haven-t-read-damn-thing-republican-senators-dodge-questions-about-n1228591>; Cochrane, Emily. “That Trump Tweet? Republicans Prefer Not to See It.” *The New York Times*, June 9, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/09/us/politics/trump-twitter.html>; Azari, Julia. “Trump Should Keep Tweeting.” *Vox*, June 30, 2017. <https://www.vox.com/mischiefs-of-faction/2017/6/30/15900538/trump-tweeting-transparency>.

¹³ Trump, Donald J. Twitter post, November 8, 2020, 12:52 p.m.. <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1325511603157159942?lang=en>.

¹⁴ Olson, Alexandra. “Explainer: Why Do the Media Call Races in US Elections?” AP NEWS. Associated Press, November 11, 2020. <https://apnews.com/article/why-does-media-call-races-us-elections-20e9b5688aa0b7404648ea74b1c2f4dc>.

has been accepted by candidates as a legitimate declaration since the organization declared the election of Zachary Taylor as president, even though the declaration is not legally binding.¹⁵

A closer look at attitudes toward the news media illustrates the troubling phenomenon of growing polarization among Americans. In 2015, the percentage of Democrats who expressed either a great deal or a fair amount of trust in mass media was 55 percent; for Republicans it was 32 percent—a 23-point gap.¹⁶ In the years that followed, the division has precipitously widened, as Democrats' trust continued to grow and Republicans' diminished, to a record 63-point gap between parties in 2020.¹⁷ The effects of polarization are felt in Congress and in state legislatures across the country, leading to more gridlock and less compromise—exacerbating many voters' feelings that elected officials aren't working for them and, in turn, providing more fuel for mistrust of institutions like government and news media.

This thesis analyzes, at a broad level, the relationship between news media, government, and polarization, with a particular focus on state government—a level that holds great importance and more immediately observed effects than the federal level—and identifies opportunities for future research and potential solutions to the growing divide. Recommendations are made for solutions based both in government and the journalism industry.

Despite the general expectation that journalists serve as a conduit between citizens and their government, traditional coverage of state governments has been in

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Brennan. "Americans Remain Divided."

¹⁷ Ibid.

decline since at least the 1980s.¹⁸ For example, nearly 1,800 local newspapers have folded since 2004, and overall newsroom employment throughout the U.S. has declined by 45 percent.¹⁹ This reduction raises questions about a number of possible residual effects. With fewer reporters employed, resources are stretched and fewer bodies are available to cover state government, which can lead to fewer stories being covered or to stories being given a shallower treatment than they would receive with more time and resources. The dearth of traditional reporters also opens a gap that, in some cases, has been filled by less traditional—and sometimes more partisan—blogs, magazines, and other sources.²⁰

Research that could shed light on what those declines might mean for participation in democracy has focused largely on the relationship between media coverage and local governments or media coverage and national government, but little attention has been paid to how declining statehouse coverage affects civic engagement at the local level. Former *Governing* executive editor Alan Ehrenhalt has advocated for bridging the gap between political science and journalism, particularly with a focus on state government, with an argument distilled into an aphorism. He said: “A political scientist is somebody who knows all the right questions but has trouble getting the answers. A reporter is somebody who's great at getting answers but has no idea what the questions are.”²¹

¹⁸ Layton, Charles, and Mary Walton. "Missing the Story at the Statehouse." *American Journalism Review*, vol. 20, no. 6, 1998, p. 42.

¹⁹ Abernathy, Penelope Muse. *The Expanding News Desert. Report*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Ehrenhalt, Alan. "Political Science and Journalism: Bridging the Gap." *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 1 (2003): 127-30. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3687819>.

The first chapter of this thesis assesses the current body of literature, exploring the role of journalists, reductions in the industry, and the relationship between journalism and political participation. Assessing participation through the lens of voter turnout in the first chapter lays the groundwork for more nuanced analyses of voter attitudes and polarization in chapters two and three. This chapter offers a historical summary of journalism's shifts between partisan influence and objectivity—with a focus on the relationship between journalism and government—an overview of reductions in the journalism industry, and an analysis of the role of journalism in civic engagement and polarization.

Through a set of three case studies—Massachusetts, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin—I examine trends in statehouse coverage and voter turnout in each state. I selected these states by applying a set of criteria that valued similarity in population and length of legislative session while allowing for the inclusion of one “red” state, one “blue” state, and one “purple” state.²²

This analysis finds no conclusive evidence of a link between voter turnout and the number of reporters assigned to cover a state capitol, in part due to insufficient available data to form a conclusion about two of the states. Further research would benefit from a wider sample of states, especially states with more extensive data on press coverage and turnout. Additional measures of participation outside of turnout could provide more enlightening information.

The second chapter explores the relationship between partisan and ideological news media and political engagement of its consumers. Since the late 1980s, the

²² See p. 23 for more explanation on how I selected these three states.

United States has seen a surge in the availability and consumption of partisan and ideological news coverage.²³ While this shift toward partisan news is relatively new to contemporary media, it is not a first for this country. In particular, the second section explores whether the presence of partisan and ideological media influences people's participation in the political process today when compared to periods of more objective reporting, and how polarization factors into engagement and political behavior.

This chapter offers a historical overview of the origins of partisan press in the United States, the shift toward objectivity, the emergence of new partisan media, and information about people's news consumption preferences. A review of existing literature finds that partisan media encourages the most extreme partisan voices to participate in the political process, potentially at the expense of more moderate voices—and that, while polarized voters are more likely to participate in politics, they are also less likely to consider competing perspectives. I note that factors involved in this area of study are rapidly changing, and we are only just beginning to amass a body of research that identifies the most recent effects.

For the sake of consistency, this chapter uses case studies in the same three states as the first chapter. The three states' trends are also presented in the context of similar measures at the national level. In each state, I provide an overview of the presence of partisan news media, turnout in midterm and presidential elections, and survey data on attitudes toward news media and government. Data included in this chapter show that Democrats and Republicans are polarized in their views toward news media, with Republicans far more likely to hold negative attitudes.

²³ Cook. *Governing With the News*.

At the end of the second chapter, I revisit the premise that the prevalence of partisan media leads to increased political engagement, but also increased polarization, and find that my case studies neither confirm nor deny the theory. Once again, Wisconsin has far more data points available than Massachusetts and Oklahoma. I find there does not appear to be a strong connection between partisan media and election turnout. I also reiterate that the overall level of trust and value in traditional news media is on a downward trajectory, with the strongest negative perceptions held by Republicans—and while both parties favor local news over national publications, local newsrooms continue to shrink.

One of the biggest questions that remains is whether partisan media has driven polarization, or has emerged in response to a widening chasm between parties. It would also be useful in future research to assess whether voters value objectivity over reinforcement, and whether they wish to be exposed to perspectives that differ from their own. As before, additional research on this front would benefit from a larger sample of states, especially states with more available data.

The final chapter of this work focuses solely on the state of Wisconsin for several reasons: 1) Of the states in my case studies, Wisconsin consistently had the most available data; 2) Wisconsin is consistently ranked among the most polarized states in the country; 3) Wisconsin is a swing state, with a history of elections being decided by less than 1 percentage point; and 3) My experience as a journalist in Wisconsin for the last decade, covering the state capitol for most of that time, gives me a unique insight into the state's political and media dynamics.

While acknowledging other significant events and factors, this chapter assesses the role that changes to the state's media landscape may have played in Wisconsin's ascent to one of the country's most polarized, least active state governments.

In this chapter, I note Wisconsin's historical tradition of electing candidates from the far left to the far right, at times even in the same year. That phenomenon appears to be reflected in the state legislature, where the ideological gap between the two parties—which was already wide—has continued to grow over time.

Drawing from my experience covering state government, I highlight recent incidents that demonstrate the extent to which polarization has affected the state capitol. As a political journalist in Madison, I have witnessed a growing level of dysfunction in Wisconsin's state government; however, I do not rely solely on my own assessment. This chapter features both anecdotal and quantitative analysis to make clear that Wisconsin's legislative polarization has led to serious inaction—particularly in the case of government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It also examines historical election trends dating back to the early 1990s—a period marked by two prominent statewide candidates (one Democrat, one Republican) who earned significant support from both parties.

An intensely debated piece of legislation passed in 2011 was a significant turning point for political attitudes and participation in Wisconsin. The passage of "Act 10," a law curtailing collective bargaining rights for most public employees, serves as an important point of reference as I examine the factors that have contributed to polarization in

Wisconsin—which national media referred to as “the most polarized state in the country” in 2012.²⁴

This chapter makes extensive use of polling data to observe trends in Wisconsinites’ views about government, views of specific political figures, news media consumption, and political communication habits. It also taps into observations from a recent effort by University of Wisconsin-Madison researchers to “understand the state of politics and communication in Wisconsin over the last decade using ongoing public opinion research, computational content analysis of media, and qualitative fieldwork and interviews of citizens and elites.” The goal of this research, as stated by Michael W. Wagner, is nearly synonymous with the goal of this thesis:

“We want to understand what we can do to help ease that polarization and encourage more productive political processes in the legislature and between citizens across lines of political difference. The fracturing in Wisconsin is a problem because democracy requires cooperation and compromise across lines of political difference.”²⁵

In my assessment of polarization factors related to news media, I note the significant consolidation of media ownership, both in Wisconsin and throughout the country, along with the diminished presence of local journalism—and find that media ownership both influences content and affects readers’ trust and perception of a publication. I also delve into the history and political effects of conservative talk radio in

²⁴ Cillizza, Chris. “Scott Walker and the Most Polarized State in the Country.” *The Washington Post*, April 4, 2012. https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/post/scott-walker-and-the-most-polarized-electorate-in-the-country/2012/04/04/gIQAalBnvS_blog.html.

²⁵ “UW Scholars Receive Major Funding to Study Polarization and Civic Renewal.” News. UW-Madison, July 22, 2019. <https://news.wisc.edu/uw-scholars-receive-major-funding-to-study-polarization-and-civic-renewal/>.

Wisconsin, including reflections from an interview with one of the state's most influential radio hosts who has since left the airwaves.

A study of news consumption habits finds that, in recent years, the percentage of voters who read a newspaper or watch local TV news every day has decreased, while the percentage who say they never do these things has increased. Polling also indicates that voters' conversations about politics are likely more homogeneous than not—a noteworthy observation with the knowledge that voters with more diverse information diets are more likely to split their tickets.

With the recent 2020 presidential election results, I also seek to place this research in the context of Wisconsin, which delivered a razor-thin victory to Joe Biden only four years after Donald Trump narrowly won the state. This context includes the notable observation that only one Republican member of the state legislature had publicly acknowledged Biden as president-elect nearly a month after the election was called (however, it should be noted that a Republican leader in the state Assembly said the caucus would not become involved in efforts to change the selection of the state's electors).²⁶

²⁶ Vetterkind, Riley, and Mitchell Schmidt. "Only One Elected Republican in Wisconsin Has Acknowledged Joe Biden Is President-Elect." *Wisconsin State Journal*, November 15, 2020.

https://madison.com/wsj/news/local/govt-and-politics/only-one-elected-republican-in-wisconsin-has-acknowledged-joe-biden-is-president-elect/article_b7278198-c417-5408-ac4c-4e0b0e64edfa.html;

Steineke, Jim. Twitter post, Nov. 29, 1:24 p.m. November 29, 2020.

<https://twitter.com/jimsteineke/status/1333129677641306114>; Van Wagtendonk, Anya. "Could Lawmakers 'Mess' with Wisconsin's 10 Electoral Votes? Possibly." *Wisconsin State Journal*. Wisconsin Watch, November 30, 2020. https://madison.com/wsj/news/local/govt-and-politics/elections/could-lawmakers-mess-with-wisconsin-s-10-electoral-votes-possibly/article_6bbf8b5b-dd4d-50da-b5ea-3626be99224e.html.

At some point in the future, researchers should examine in more detail how elected officials, journalists, and voters responded to the coronavirus pandemic. A set of in-depth interviews with current and former elected officials also would likely prove to be enlightening.

This work concludes that journalism does have a relationship with polarization, but it is difficult to separate any one factor in polarization. Consumption of partisan content does, in many cases, bolster engagement; however, it empowers the most extreme voices while shutting out more moderate perspectives. As partisan outlets fill the gaps where traditional publications disappear, news consumers' negative attitudes toward competing views are reinforced, and lawmakers lose incentives to compromise. Policy negotiations become a zero-sum transaction, and little is accomplished—reinforcing voters' negative attitudes toward government and institutions in general.

Further research should expand this analysis to study the country's most and least polarized states, and their corresponding media landscapes, to determine trends in each category. Efforts to restore journalism resources and build trust with audiences will involve trial and error, but all such efforts should be implemented with the aim of increasing transparency and decreasing polarization. To preserve journalism's role as the "fourth estate," government-based solutions should be limited in favor of industry-based efforts; however, several promising regulatory proposals offered by members of Congress are worth pursuing.

In spite of the discouraging trends of mistrust and discord, an overwhelming majority of voters believe journalism is "critical" or "very important" to democracy, and that journalists can play a role in healing the country's political divisions. The opportunity

offered by those beliefs should not be squandered. Further efforts to understand how the news media can gain the trust of the public and how the ideological gap can be narrowed are imperative to the survival of our democracy.

Chapter One: Journalism and Political Participation

The Role of Journalists

Journalism in the United States began as a partisan venture. It was later driven toward a standard of objectivity, spurred by technology and market forces. The most recent ideological shift came first with the advent of partisan—and mostly conservative—talk radio in the early 1990s, and ideologically-influenced cable television programming in the late 1990s. Since then, the country has seen this carried through to the internet, its natural extension.²⁷

Although the presumption of objectivity has governed traditional journalism for centuries, the press was born in the United States as a political entity. The country's first newspapers were founded as a means to accomplish partisan goals—more lapdog, or perhaps attack dog, than watchdog—and often funded with government subsidies.²⁸

The newspaper publishers of the 18th century did not seek to present an objective truth; they sought to make the best case for their parties, candidates, and causes. To that end, newspapers within the same political party supported each other through advertisements and shared subscriptions, and often reprinted news from other like-minded publications.²⁹ To newspaper editors and publishers of the 18th century, the concept of objective and detached journalism was misleading and disingenuous. They sought not to present an objective truth, but to make the case for “right” over “wrong.”³⁰

²⁷ Stewart, Donald H. *The Opposition Press of the Federalist Period*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1969; Sheppard, Si. *The Partisan Press: a History of Media Bias in the United States*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008; Cook. *Governing With the News*.

²⁸ Cook. *Governing With the News*.

²⁹ Stewart. *The Opposition Press of the Federalist Period*.

³⁰ Sheppard. *The Partisan Press*.

In 1870, nearly 90 percent of the country's daily newspapers were affiliated with a major political party. Thirty years later, the partisan affiliation share had been cut in half.³¹ By the end of the 19th century, newspapers no longer operated as an extension of political parties and had instead become "enormous enterprises free of political and financial sponsorship by government."³²

Federal patronage of newspapers—a standard that began in the late 1700s and reached its apex under Andrew Jackson³³—ended in the late 1800s. Around the same time, technological advances allowed newspapers to expand their circulation and reach a new kind of audience. The press evolved from a political operation to a commercial one, supported by advertisers rather than political parties and the federal government.

As audiences grew, the scope of the subject matter covered by the press expanded. So, too, did the resources dedicated to original reporting. With the advent of the cheaply produced "penny press" came the practice of newspapers sending their own reporters to cover proceedings in Washington, D.C.³⁴ Within the same time frame, Congress stopped regulating access to its proceedings, turning over the responsibility to reporters. This was a subtle acknowledgment of journalism as an independent industry, rather than a function of government.³⁵ The U.S. House Press Gallery, which "assists credentialed members of the daily print and online news media and enforces the rules for coverage of the U.S. Congress," and the U.S. Senate Press Gallery, which does the same for reporters covering the U.S. Senate, operate "under the stewardship of the

³¹ Iyengar, Shanto, and Jennifer A. McGrady. *Media Politics: A Citizen's Guide*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007.

³² Cook. *Governing With the News*, 36.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Iyengar and McGrady. *Media Politics*.

Standing Committee of Correspondents, created in 1879.”³⁶ The correspondents who serve on this committee are elected by their peers in the Congressional Press Galleries.³⁷

With the Progressive era of the early 1900s came the birth of the muckraking journalist—reporters who sought to dig up dirt, exposing wrongs and provoking societal change. Although the term “muckraker” was meant by President Theodore Roosevelt as an insult, reporters embraced it and continue to apply it to a variety of forms of investigative reporting, public journalism and advocacy journalism.³⁸ Since the golden age of muckraking, it has taken on new forms—although some have argued the field veered away from public service journalism and toward “irresponsible scandal coverage” in the late 1990s and 2000s.³⁹ Even the modern tendency to fixate on juicy scandals can trace its roots back to the sensationalist “yellow journalism” promoted by William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer as they competed for market domination in the late 1800s.⁴⁰

The two values that dominate modern journalism are objectivity and autonomy.⁴¹ Journalists placed an increased value on autonomy—that is, interpreting the story rather than recycling and restating candidates’ talking points—in the aftermath of the 1988 presidential election, in particular. This shift was triggered in part by George W. Bush’s

³⁶ “About the Gallery.” House Press Gallery. U.S. House of Representatives, October 1, 2018. <https://pressgallery.house.gov/about-the-gallery>; “Gallery History.” U.S. Senate Press Gallery. Accessed April 22, 2020. https://www.dailypress.senate.gov/?page_id=81.

³⁷ “Standing Committee of Correspondents.” www.dailypressenate.gov. Accessed April 30, 2020. https://www.dailypress.senate.gov/?page_id=23.

³⁸ Feldstein, Mark. “A Muckraking Model: Investigative Reporting Cycles in American History.” *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 11, no. 2 (April 2006): 105–20. doi:10.1177/1081180X06286780.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Iyengar and McGrady, *Media Politics*.

race-baiting “Willie Horton” campaign ad, which left many in the media feeling as if their objective reporting was held “captive” by the agenda of campaigns and their consultants.⁴² Rather than simply repeating and elevating talking points, many reporters started to seek a more analytic approach. It is argued that this shift toward interpretive reporting has made reporting more about the theatrics of politics and less about the ideas being debated.⁴³ Further, the apex of objective news reporting arrived when Walter Cronkite led the anchor desk at CBS News in the 1960s and 1970s.⁴⁴

The symbiotic relationship between the press and the political system is no longer directly financial, but it is still present as the press is “increasingly incorporated into the activities of the constitutional three branches, without becoming a mere extension of any one of them.”⁴⁵ Elected officials disseminate their message and curry public favor through media coverage. Media coverage, in turn, can make or break a policy proposal.

Even journalists who strive to report with objectivity should be considered political actors.⁴⁶ In fact, as Cook posited, the media’s “political influence may emerge not in spite of, but because of, their principled adherence to norms of objectivity, deference to factuality and authority, and a let-the-chips-fall-where-they-may distance from the political and social consequences of their coverage.”⁴⁷

Not every scholar unflinchingly accepts the “fourth estate” classification for journalism. “Journalism, for all its occasional lofty pretensions, sits awkwardly in a

⁴² Ibid, 73.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Sheppard, *The Partisan Press*.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Cook, *Governing with the News*.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

discussion about stewards of democracy,” wrote journalism professor Michael Schudson, arguing that journalists play the role of “reluctant stewards.”⁴⁸ Not only do journalists sometimes fall short of the democratic ideals ascribed to them; they may also fail to understand how to support those ideals. However, there still is a role for journalists to play in a healthy democracy, and an ambiguous definition of stewardship can be beneficial to the industry by leaving room for experimentation and innovation.⁴⁹

Yet another school of thought considers the role of “public journalism” or “civic journalism.” Should journalists operate from a detached, view-from-nowhere perspective, or should they strive to encourage citizens to participate in the democratic process? “Civic journalists” work toward the latter.⁵⁰ A comparison can be drawn between newspapers and educational curriculum—both “designed to facilitate learning and development and to impose meaning on experience.”⁵¹

In 2020, the concept of “public journalism”—that is, journalism executed with the goal of “encouraging and improving public deliberation”—might not seem radical, but 18 years ago, political science professor Albert Dzur wrote of its controversial nature.⁵² Public journalism differs from traditional journalism by “advocating public listening in newsgathering, by producing purposeful news, and by encouraging public debate.”⁵³ But it can be argued that traditional journalism outlets cannot substantively achieve the democratic functions they set out to promote when they establish themselves as

⁴⁸ Schudson. "Reluctant Stewards: Journalism in a Democratic Society." *Daedalus* 142, no. 2 (2013): 159-76. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43297240>.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Perry, David K. "Civic Journalism: News as Transactional Pedagogy." *Education and Culture* 20, no. 2 (2004): 25-41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42922525>.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵² Dzur, Albert W. "Public Journalism and Deliberative Democracy." *Polity* 34, no. 3 (2002): 313-36. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3235394>.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 315.

democratic stewards.⁵⁴ Rather than dedicating themselves to promoting democratic participation, journalists might instead approach their craft with the spirit of a public journalist—drawing from the perspectives of ordinary citizens and encouraging civic engagement—and also as a government watchdog, sometimes acting as an adversary to those who would seek to manipulate public opinion.⁵⁵

A Shrinking Industry

The chicken-egg phenomenon of journalism in the last several decades is that both the size of traditional newsrooms and the public's trust in the press as an institution have declined since the 1970s. For example, University of North Carolina researchers have been tracking reductions in the journalism industry for years, finding that more than one in five newspapers has closed since 2004—and, in addition, some newspapers have been cut so drastically that they are effectively “ghosts” of their former selves.⁵⁶ As of 2018, fewer than 12 cities had two competing daily newspapers.⁵⁷ As of 2020, at least 1,800 communities that had their own newspapers in 2004 now have no local news coverage.⁵⁸ Between 2005 and 2020, the U.S. lost more than 25 percent of its newspapers, and half its local journalists.⁵⁹ Just between 2018 and 2020, more than 300 newspapers closed and more than 6,000 journalists lost their jobs, while print newspaper circulation declined by 5 million.⁶⁰ The coronavirus pandemic has only

⁵⁴ Ibid; Schudson. “Reluctant Stewards.”

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Abernathy. *The Expanding News Desert*.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Abernathy, Penelope Muse. “News Deserts and Ghost Newspapers: Will Local News Survive?” *The Expanding News Desert*, June 22, 2020. <https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/reports/news-deserts-and-ghost-newspapers-will-local-news-survive/>.

⁵⁹ Abernathy. “News Deserts and Ghost Newspapers.”

⁶⁰ Ibid.

exacerbated this decline.⁶¹ Unsurprisingly, these reductions have resulted in diminished coverage of state and local governments—leaving people to process politics and government primarily through a national lens.⁶² This shift contributes to polarization, driven in part by the intensity and partisan rancor that prevails in national political coverage.⁶³

These cuts have come at the same time that political power has transferred from the federal government to state governments, thanks in part to President Ronald Reagan's efforts toward decentralization. As state governments have grown more powerful, they have attracted more attention from lobbyists who see opportunities to make policy changes away from the nation's capital.⁶⁴ In other words, as the presence of lobbyists has grown in state capitals, the presence of state press corps has shrunk.

As traditional newsrooms have shrunk, the age and experience levels of the reporters dedicated to covering state and local government have also decreased.⁶⁵

Ehrenhalt weighed the pros and cons of this shift this way:

“This was not entirely for the worse: the old-timers knew everything about everybody but were frequently too close to their sources to put it in the paper. The newer reporters were perfectly willing to publish whatever they knew. The problem was that they rarely knew very much. And so the readers didn't know very much either.”⁶⁶

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Abernathy. *The Expanding News Desert*; Darr, Joshua P., Matthew P. Hitt, and Johanna L. Dunaway. "Newspaper Closures Polarize Voting Behavior." *Journal of Communication* 68, no. 6 (August 20, 2018): 1007-028. doi:10.1093/joc/jqy051.

⁶³ Darr, et al. "Newspaper Closures Polarize Voting Behavior."

⁶⁴ Layton and Walton. "Missing the Story at the Statehouse."

⁶⁵ Ibid; and Ehrenhalt. "Political Science and Journalism."

⁶⁶ Ibid, 129.

At the same time that newsrooms and statehouse coverage have declined, so has public trust in the press.⁶⁷ However, it is worth noting that this decline, with voters becoming “increasingly critical of press performance,” began as early as the mid-1970s—shortly before the documented trend in shrinking newsrooms and political coverage began in earnest.⁶⁸ It is likely that some of this distrust is associated with general negative attitudes toward government and politics, especially if one subscribes to the view of media as a political institution.⁶⁹ Studies have also shown that individuals who feel dependent on traditional media have more trust in the institution, while those who are skeptical of traditional media demonstrate more interest in alternative sources—which have grown more prevalent as traditional sources have declined—and then feel less dependent on traditional sources.⁷⁰

The Relationship Between Democratic Participation and the Press

The relationship between reduced newsroom staffing and political participation is unclear based on existing research. Several recent studies have found relationships between coverage of political issues in specific communities and voting in those

⁶⁷ Gottfried, Jeffrey, Galen Stocking, and Elizabeth Grieco. "Partisans Remain Sharply Divided in Their Attitudes About the News Media." *Pew Research Center's Journalism Project*. October 31, 2018.

<http://www.journalism.org/2018/09/25/partisans-remain-sharply-divided-in-their-attitudes-about-the-news-media/>; Saad, Lydia. "Military, Small Business, Police Still Stir Most Confidence." *Gallup*. June 28, 2018. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/236243/military-small-business-police-stir-confidence.aspx>; and Lee, Tien-Tsung. "Why They Don't Trust the Media: An Examination of Factors Predicting Trust." *American Behavioral Scientist* 54, no. 1 (September 2010): 8–21. doi:10.1177/0002764210376308.

⁶⁸ Robinson, John P. "The Press and the Voter." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 427 (1976): 95-103. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1040740>.

⁶⁹ Jones, David A. "Why Americans Don't Trust the Media: A Preliminary Analysis." *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 9, no. 2 (April 2004): 60–75. doi:10.1177/1081180X04263461.

⁷⁰ Abernathy. *The Expanding News Desert*; Jakob, Nikolaus. "No Alternatives? The Relationship Between Perceived Media Dependency, Use of Alternative Information Sources, and General Trust in Mass Media." *International Journal of Communication* [Online], 4 (2010): 18. Web. 16 Mar. 2019.

communities, and one in particular found that, after the *Ann Arbor (Michigan) News* closed, presidential and gubernatorial turnout was relatively static, but turnout in local elections declined.⁷¹

A 2014 study sought to determine whether the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks would spark a renewed interest in politics among U.S. citizens.⁷² The study found that the attacks had little effect on news consumption, but did lead to increased interest and enthusiasm among Republican voters—and it drew no conclusions about voter turnout.⁷³ This suggests major news events may not necessarily provoke major political action. A study conducted five years later found that, while reductions in revenue and resources result in newspapers assigning fewer reporters to cover politics and government, the primary impact of those staffing cuts is “to reducing the volume of political coverage, rather than to alter how politics gets covered.”⁷⁴

Still, other studies have shown that media reductions and media distrust have an effect on political polarization. A 2018 study found that, in communities where local newspapers were shuttered, the rate of split-ticket voting in national races decreased by

⁷¹ Cavanah, Sarah. “Measuring Metropolitan Newspaper Pullback and Its Effects on Political Participation.” *Measuring Metropolitan Newspaper Pullback and Its Effects on Political Participation*. Thesis, University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy, 2016. <http://hdl.handle.net/11299/182213>; Maestas, Amy. “Ann Arbor: Citizenship and the Local Newspaper,” *Thwarting the Emergence of News Deserts*. Report, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, 2017. <http://newspaperownership.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Symposium-Leave-Behind-Web-Final.pdf>.

⁷² German, Daniel B., and Dragan Stefanovic. “Does the Media Reduce Political Participation?” In *E-Political Socialization, the Press and Politics: The Media and Government in the USA, Europe and China*, edited by German Daniel B., De Landtsheer Christ’l, Farnen Russell F., Dekker Henk, Sünker Heinz, Song Yingfa, and Miao Hongna, 329-40. Frankfurt Am Main: Peter Lang AG, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2t4csq.19>.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Peterson, Erik. “Paper Cuts: How Reporting Resources Affect Political News Coverage,” 28. Working paper, Texas A&M University, January 24, 2019. <https://www.dropbox.com/s/86un38mp12e4mzy/Peterson%20-%20Media%20Decline%20-%20Jan%2024%202019.pdf?dl=0>.

1.9 percent.⁷⁵ The authors argued that voters relied more on national news sources to make political decisions when they no longer had access to local coverage—and, as a result, may have lost sight of some state and local implications.⁷⁶ An earlier study demonstrated that partisan voting gaps grew with respect to increased distrust of the media. When a voter distrusts the press, party identification becomes the most influential factor at the ballot box.⁷⁷

Supplementing these examples of polarization is research that has demonstrated that people who are exposed to more media coverage—regardless of the partisan slant of that coverage—are more likely to vote.⁷⁸ At the same time, questions remain about the value of participation as opposed to deliberation. Several studies have shown that increased political participation might come at the expense of political deliberation. That is, polarized voters may be more likely to participate in the political process, but they may be less likely to consider other perspectives—and voters who are exposed to competing perspectives may be less likely to participate in politics.⁷⁹ If the goal of the press is to encourage both deliberation and participation, the “deliberative-democratic watchdog” model might be most appropriate, as explained by Dzur:

Journalists interested in promoting deliberation would ideally combine the adversarial attitude with the communally engaged standpoint of public journalism.

⁷⁵ Darr, et al. "Newspaper Closures Polarize Voting Behavior."

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ladd, Jonathan McDonald. "The Role of Media Distrust in Partisan Voting." *Political Behavior* 32, no. 4 (2010): 567-85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40960955>.

⁷⁸ Gerber, Alan S., Dean Karlan, and Daniel Bergan. "Does the Media Matter? A Field Experiment Measuring the Effect of Newspapers on Voting Behavior and Political Opinions." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 1, no. 2 (2009): 35-52. doi:10.1257/app.1.2.35.

⁷⁹ Lawrence, Eric, John Sides, and Henry Farrell. "Self-Segregation or Deliberation? Blog Readership, Participation, and Polarization in American Politics." *Perspectives on Politics* 8, no. 1 (2010): 141–57. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592709992714>.

From the adversarial attitude they would draw keen attention to moves of political strategy and attempts to manipulate the flow of public information. Such attention is needed to assess formal declarations of deliberative norms, such as "I believe this policy is in the best interests of the community, not just my supporters," in political contexts where formal declarations are less costly than attempts to actually live up to the norms. From public journalism they would draw the use of non-elite sources for news, and engagement in the community. Such engagement is needed to determine what and who is left out of public discussions and official decisions.⁸⁰

Methodology

This chapter explores the relationship between statehouse coverage and political participation through a set of case studies. This approach allows for a more in-depth examination of trends in a defined set of states rather than a broad view that favors quantity over nuance. I have selected three states to study. Ideally, this sample would have comprised a "red" state, a "blue" state, and "purple" state (based on partisan voting trends in presidential, gubernatorial, and legislative elections—but weighted primarily toward presidential outcomes) with similar populations and with legislative sessions of similar durations. However, most states with full-time legislatures or nearly full-time legislatures tend to be "blue" states in presidential elections—and even within the classifications of "full-time" and "part-time," there is room for variation.⁸¹ Rather than

⁸⁰ Dzur. "Public Journalism and Deliberative Democracy."

⁸¹ Matsa, Katerina Eva, and Jan Lauren Boyles. "America's Shifting Statehouse Press." Pew Research Center's Journalism Project. Pew Research Center, May 26, 2017. <http://www.journalism.org/2014/07/10/americas-shifting-statehouse-press/>; "Full- and Part-Time

split states into those two categories, the National Conference of State Legislatures classifies states as “green” (full-time, well-paid, large staff), “gold,” (part-time, low pay, small staff), and “gray” (hybrid).⁸² This required me to look beyond legislative session length and to consider population as an additional controlling factor.

Based on population, length of legislative session, and political diversity in presidential elections, the three most appropriate states for this case study are Wisconsin—a “purple” state with a full-time legislature (rated “green lite”); Massachusetts—a “blue” state with a full-time legislature (also rated “green lite”); and Oklahoma—a “red” state with a legislature that is in session an average of four months per year (rated “gray”).⁸³ These three states range in population from 3.7 million to 6.5 million, according to 2012 figures.⁸⁴ Having placed a priority on political diversity, followed by population similarity, followed by length of legislative session, these three states are a useful grouping.

Case Studies

A 2014 Pew Research Center study found 1,592 reporters assigned to cover state capitols; the number of reporters assigned in each state was found to correlate with the state’s population and the length of the state’s legislative session.⁸⁵ This study is the most recent comprehensive assessment of state government coverage across the country, and in many regards the first and only of its kind. Further examination of trends

Legislatures.” National Conference of State Legislatures, June 14, 2017.

<https://www.ncsl.org/research/about-state-legislatures/full-and-part-time-legislatures.aspx>.

⁸² “Full- and Part-Time Legislatures.”

⁸³ Matsa and Boyles. “America’s Shifting Statehouse Press.”

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

in state capitol press coverage requires an assessment of records specific to each state, which are imperfect. For example, the number of reporters listed as credentialed members of the media covering a state capitol may exceed the number of reporters assigned to cover the capitol on a full-time basis. This is illustrated in Wisconsin, where some TV stations obtain credentials for several reporters but only assign one, if any, to a full-time state government beat—nonetheless, all of those reporters are listed in state records as credentialed reporters covering the capitol.

Wisconsin

The 2014 Pew study found that Wisconsin had 39 reporters assigned to cover the state capitol, 19 of whom did so full-time.⁸⁶ Two were assigned to cover the statehouse only during the legislative session, 16 covered it part-time, and two were categorized as students or “others.” Based on the state’s 2012 population of 5.69 million people, Wisconsin had 0.69 full-time statehouse reporters for every 100,000 residents.⁸⁷

Wisconsin’s capitol press corps has expanded and contracted over time. In 1961, 20 reporters—all employed by print publications—were credentialed to cover the state legislature.⁸⁸ Just nine years later, 32 print reporters and 38 TV and radio reporters had capitol credentials.⁸⁹ Press corps membership hit its peak in 1981, with 39 credentialed print reporters and 50 TV and radio reporters, but by 1989 it was down to 25 print

⁸⁶ In my personal, day-to-day experience, 19 is a generous figure; I would place this number closer to a dozen.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ M.G. Toepel and H. Rupert Theobold, eds., *The Wisconsin Blue Book, 1962* (State of Wisconsin, 1962), <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.WIBBlueBk1962>.

⁸⁹ H. Rupert Theobold and Patricia V. Robbins, eds., *The Wisconsin Blue Book, 1962* (State of Wisconsin, 1962), <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.WIBBlueBk1970>.

reporters and 13 in broadcast.⁹⁰ A decade later, the credentialed press corps had 38 total members, split roughly evenly between print and broadcast.⁹¹ In 2009, membership was up to 44, again split relatively evenly between print and broadcast, but with the addition of three internet-based correspondents.⁹² The most recent data available lists 13 print reporters, 18 broadcast reporters, and three internet-based reporters.⁹³

Because the focus of this thesis is on political coverage and participation at the state level, the most relevant elections to study are midterm elections, when the most state-level races are on the ballot: the governor, the entire state Assembly, and half of the state Senate. However, it is important to note for context, Wisconsin's presidential voting history. From 1960 through 2020, Wisconsin voted for a Democratic presidential candidate in 62.5 percent of elections.

From the 1962 election through the 2018 election, Wisconsin elected six Democratic governors and five Republican governors. Republicans and Democrats shared control of the legislature—with one party controlling each chamber—for approximately 26 percent of this time period. Republicans controlled the entire legislature for approximately 39 percent, and Democrats controlled it for approximately 34 percent. Democrats enjoyed their longest period of legislative power from the mid-1970s through the early 1990s, while Republicans have occupied both the legislative

⁹⁰ Theobald and Robbins, eds., *The Wisconsin Blue Book, 1981* (State of Wisconsin, 1981), <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.WIBlueBk1981>; Theobald and Lawrence S. Barish, eds., *The Wisconsin Blue Book, 1989* (State of Wisconsin, 1989), <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.WIBlueBk1989>.

⁹¹ Barish and Patricia E. Meloy, eds., *The Wisconsin Blue Book, 1999* (State of Wisconsin, 1999), <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.WIBlueBk1999>.

⁹² Barish, ed., *The Wisconsin Blue Book, 2009* (State of Wisconsin, 2009), <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.WIBlueBk2009>.

⁹³ "Capitol Correspondents," Wisconsin Legislature (Assembly Sergeant at Arms, November 13, 2018), <https://legis.wisconsin.gov/assembly/asgt/media/1528/capitolcorrespondents.pdf>.

and executive branches almost without interruption since 2011 (see fig. 1). The late 1990s through the late 2000s offered the most instances of shared party control in Wisconsin's capitol.

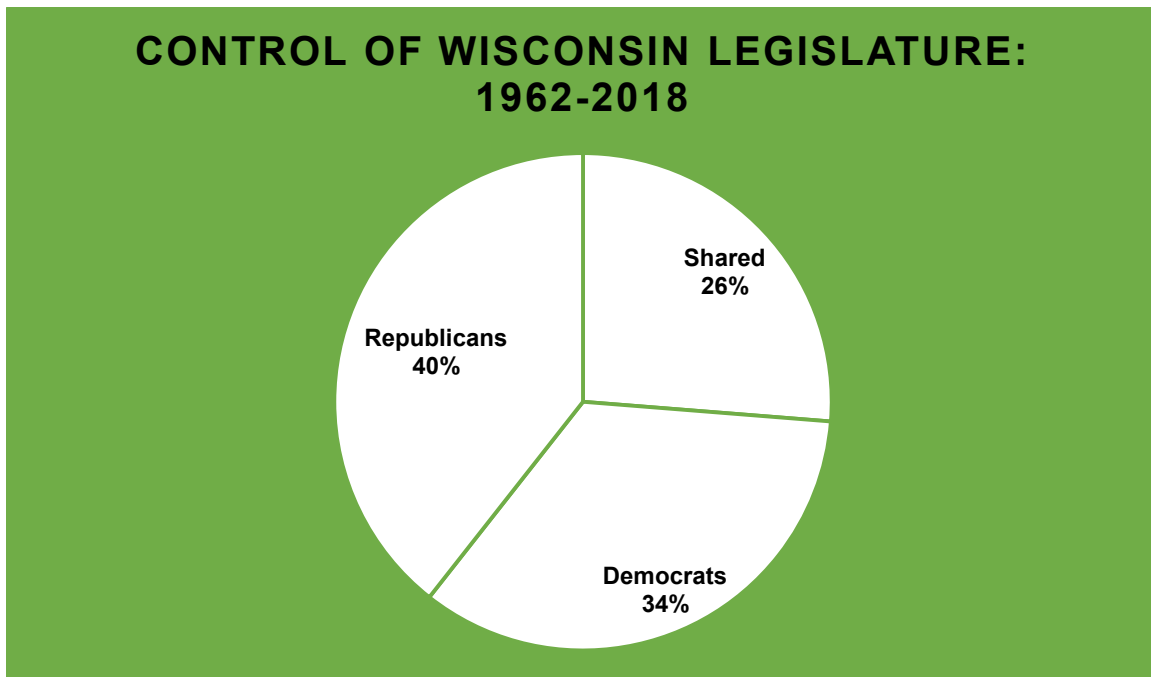


Figure 1. Partisan control of Wisconsin legislature, 1962-2018.

The Wisconsin Elections Commission calculates voter turnout based on the estimated number of eligible voters in the state. Much like the rest of the country, Wisconsin's midterm turnout soared to record levels in 2018, with 61 percent of the voting-age population casting ballots. This followed midterm turnouts of 55, 50, and 51 percent in 2014, 2010, and 2006. From 1986 to 2002, turnout hovered between 39 percent and 46 percent, reaching its high point in 1998. And from 1962 to 1982, turnout ranged to 52 percent in 1962 to 39 percent in 1974.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ "Wisconsin Voter Turnout Statistics." Wisconsin Elections Commission, elections.wi.gov/elections-voting/statistics/turnout; "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2018." Voting and

Massachusetts

The 2014 Pew study found that Massachusetts had 32 reporters assigned to the Massachusetts state capitol, 15 of whom were assigned to cover state government full-time. Seven were categorized as part-time and nine were classified as students, with one categorized as “other.” Based on the state’s 2012 population of 6.5 million, Massachusetts had 0.49 reporters covering state government full-time for every 100,000 residents. From 1960 through 2020, Massachusetts voted for a Democratic presidential candidate in 87.5 percent of elections.

Massachusetts’ state government has not offered a detailed account of its credentialed press corps since the early 2000s, but maintained records in earlier years. For the purpose of this research, I was able to obtain some recent data from reporters currently covering state government. In 1961, 30 reporters were credentialed to cover the state capitol. Ten years later, there were 35. By 1981, Massachusetts listed 36 print reporters and 21 broadcast reporters assigned to the statehouse. In 1991, 31 print reporters had capitol credentials, with 13 broadcast reporters. A decade later, 31 print reporters and seven broadcast reporters were registered with the State House Press Association.⁹⁵ A 2019 count listed a total of 21 credentialed reporters.⁹⁶

Registration in the Election of November 2018, U.S. Census Bureau, 22 Apr. 2019, www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-583.html.

⁹⁵ “Massachusetts State House Press Association” (Massachusetts State House Press Association), accessed May 6, 2019, <https://drive.google.com/open?id=0Bwb4GCLXBJQTTZMVUNyMFFDQmNyVERQa0tWaHtRFhQdnFn>.

⁹⁶ “Massachusetts State House Press Association” (Massachusetts State House Press Association), accessed May 6, 2019, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0Bwb4GCLXBJQU01ZeGdxYmRkdUhtLTV5TUM1c2xpUEdHTy1Z/view?usp=sharing>.

From the 1962 election through the 2018 election, Massachusetts has elected seven Democratic governors and nine Republican governors. Democrats have had control of the Massachusetts legislature since 1959.

Unlike Wisconsin, Massachusetts does not calculate voter turnout based on estimated eligible voters; instead, the state bases its estimates on the number of registered voters. To properly compare Massachusetts with Wisconsin, I have measured the number of votes cast against the number of voting-age citizens as estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau. This is an imperfect calculation, and data for some years is unavailable.

In 2018, 50 percent of Massachusetts' estimated voting-age population voted in the state's midterm election. That level is just one point higher than turnout in the state's 2002, 2006, and 2010 midterm elections, but six points higher than the 2014 election. Midterm turnout in 1986 and 1998 was 40 and 41 percent, respectfully, but soared to 52 percent in 1990.⁹⁷

Oklahoma

The 2014 Pew study found that Oklahoma had 21 reporters assigned to its state capitol; 17 of whom were assigned to cover state government full-time. Two were categorized as part-time and two were assigned to the capitol only during the legislative session. Based on the state's 2012 population of 3.7 million, Oklahoma had 0.56 full-

⁹⁷ "Voter Turnout Statistics." *Elections: Voter Turnout Statistics*, Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, www.sec.state.ma.us/ELE/elevoterturnoutstats/voterturnoutstats.htm; "Voting and Registration." *U.S. Census Bureau*, www.census.gov/topics/public-sector/voting.html.

time state government reporters per 100,000 residents. From 1960 through 2020, Oklahoma voted for a Republican presidential candidate in 93.8 percent of elections.

Unfortunately, Oklahoma does not have a readily available list of the reporters assigned to cover its state capitol, leaving this research to rely on a handful of news clippings—hardly a scientific measure. I was able to enlist the help of several Massachusetts state government reporters to track down information that was not readily available for that state, but efforts to do so in Oklahoma were unsuccessful. A 2009 report published in the *Oklahoma Gazette* is now unavailable, but has been referenced by other media outlets and research organizations. According to an Oklahoma Policy Institute blog post referencing the original article, the Oklahoma state capitol press corps peaked in 1978 at 39 credentialed reporters. At the time the *Oklahoma Gazette* article was published in 2009, the number was reported to be “in the teens.”⁹⁸

From the 1962 election through the 2018 election, Oklahoma has elected six Democratic governors and six Republican governors. Since 1960, Democrats have controlled the Oklahoma legislature for approximately 75 percent of the sessions, with split-party control for just two sessions. Since 2009, Republicans have controlled both chambers of the Oklahoma legislature.

Like Massachusetts, Oklahoma does not calculate voter turnout based on estimated eligible voters; instead, the state bases its estimates on the number of registered voters. Again, I have measured the number of votes cast against the number

⁹⁸ Blatt, David. “The Incredible Shrinking Press Corps.” *Oklahoma Policy Institute*, October 17, 2012, okpolicy.org/the-incredible-shrinking-press-corps/.

of voting-age citizens as estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau. This is an imperfect calculation, and data for some years is unavailable.

Like Wisconsin and Massachusetts, Oklahoma saw an increase in voter turnout in the 2018 midterm election, at 40 percent—the highest it had been since 2002. In the elections in between those dates, turnout varied: 28 percent in 2014, 37 percent in 2010 and 36 percent in 2006. Based on the years of data available, turnout reached a high in 1990, at 48 percent, followed closely by 47 percent in 1986 and 46 percent in 1982. It declined to 42 percent in 1994 and fell again to 35 percent in 1998.⁹⁹

Analysis

It could be expected that voter turnout in statewide elections would decrease over time, in correlation with decreased statehouse reporter staffing. However, the states studied do not present conclusive evidence that this is the case.

During the time period studied, midterm voter turnout in Wisconsin was at its highest when the number of credentialed state capitol reporters was at its lowest, with 20 reporters in 1962 and 34 reporters in 2018. Although the number of press corps members declined from 2014 to 2018, turnout increased. When the number of capitol reporters exceeded 60, turnout was in the high 40- and low 50-percent range. The number of state government reporters was 38 in two of the years studied. In one of those years, turnout was 39 percent; in another, it was 48 percent. Wisconsin does not

⁹⁹ *Election Results*. Oklahoma State Election Board, www.ok.gov/elections/Election_Info/Election_Results/index.html; "Voting and Registration." *U.S. Census Bureau*.

appear to show a strong connection between voter turnout and the number of reporters assigned to cover the state capitol.

In Massachusetts, the data set available is not complete enough to draw any clear conclusions. However, once again based on the data available, there does not appear to be a strong connection between statehouse coverage numbers and voter turnout levels. Turnout levels in Massachusetts have not varied dramatically over the last 30 years, while the size of the state capitol press corps has declined by more than half.

In Oklahoma, the data set available is also not complete enough to draw any clear conclusions. In any case, Oklahoma would be better served by more extensive available data regarding press coverage and voter turnout.

Conclusion

It is clear that the number of reporters dedicated to covering state capitols has generally been on the decline since the 1980s. What is not clear is whether that reduction in journalism resources has had any measurable effect on democratic participation, and, more specifically, on voter turnout. The cases studied in this analysis did not offer conclusive evidence of any connection between the number of state government reporters and voter turnout, and in the state with the most data available, there did not appear to be any strong relationship.

Further research on this topic would benefit from a wider sample that includes states with more extensive data available on both turnout and press corps numbers. It would also be beneficial to explore additional measures of democratic participation. This

could include anecdotal evidence based on interviews conducted with residents of the states being studied, polls measuring satisfaction with government, trends in voter registration, campaign contributions, social media activity, and other metrics.

Chapter Two: Partisan News Media and Political Engagement

Origins of the Partisan Press in the United States

In 1789, John Fenno's semiweekly newspaper, *The Gazette of the United States*, was launched with the support of the federal government.¹⁰⁰ As tensions between Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson grew, Fenno's newspaper increasingly took the side of Hamilton and his supporters. In response, Jefferson lent his support to Philip Freneau and his *National Gazette*, launched in 1791.¹⁰¹ As the Hamilton-Jefferson split was formalized with the formation of two warring parties, the Federalists and the Republicans, newspapers served as partisan tools used to mobilize supporters.¹⁰²

"The extent of the objectivity manifest in the mainstream media of today is not only unusual, it would strike observers from earlier times as morally offensive," political science scholar Si Sheppard noted in 2008.¹⁰³ Indeed, in 1797, William Cobbett wrote, in his pro-Federalist *Porcupine's Gazette*, that to "profess impartiality here, would be as absurd as to profess it in a war between Virtue and Vice, Good and Evil, Happiness and Misery."¹⁰⁴

The "apogee of the party press" arrived with Andrew Jackson's 1824 presidential election loss to John Quincy Adams.¹⁰⁵ For the next four years, Jackson built a "far-reaching network of partisan newspapers" financed with party and government funds.

¹⁰⁰ Cook. *Governing With the News*.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Sheppard, Si. *The Partisan Press*.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 19.

¹⁰⁵ Cook. *Governing With the News*, 29.

The newspaper network's sole purpose was to create and mobilize a national political party, and the partisan press seemed to increase citizen involvement enough for Jackson to be successful. In 1828, he was elected president. Under the Jackson administration, the government subsidization of the press reached new levels.¹⁰⁶ For example, Jackson gave the Senate and House's lucrative printing contracts to Duff Green, owner and editor of the *United States Telegraph*, at an estimated profit margin of 24 percent.¹⁰⁷ During the same time period, dozens of editors were given "plush political appointments."¹⁰⁸ The press and the political system formed a symbiotic relationship, each supporting and relying on the other.

Objective Journalism as a Media Norm

In the decades after Congress first signaled its acknowledgment of journalism as an independent industry by turning over credentialing authority to the press and its Standing Committee of Correspondents, elected officials at every level have learned how to interact with the press.¹⁰⁹ President William McKinley made himself readily available to reporters' inquiries.¹¹⁰ President Theodore Roosevelt set aside a room for the White House press corps and viewed and engaged with them as public servants.¹¹¹ House Speaker Newt Gingrich deployed extreme rhetoric because he knew it would

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid; See p. 14 for a more detailed explanation.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

earn him coverage.¹¹² President Donald Trump has followed Gingrich’s lead, and taken his strategy to new heights.

As modern journalism has come to be dominated by objectivity and autonomy, journalists have placed an increased value on autonomy, or interpreting the story with a more analytic approach.¹¹³ “By any stretch of the imagination, modern journalism does not deliver the ‘marketplace of ideas’ that is so vital to the exercise of informed and engaged citizenship,” argue political science scholars Shanto Iyengar and Jennifer McGrady.¹¹⁴

Since the apex of the objective news media—Walter Cronkite leading the anchor desk at CBS News in the 1960s and 1970s—it has been in an “advanced state of collapse.”¹¹⁵ If, however, media organizations were more transparent about their political preferences, “the supply of substantive, issue-oriented coverage could be increased.”¹¹⁶ Since the 1980s, a new kind of journalist-as-a-political-actor has emerged: the partisan newsperson.

The Emergence of Modern Partisan Media

Enacted in 1949, the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC) Fairness Doctrine required broadcasters to present balanced perspectives on controversial issues.¹¹⁷ Most media and political scholars agree the 1987 repeal of the Fairness

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Iyengar and McGrady. *Media Politics*, 72.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 89.

¹¹⁵ Sheppard. *The Partisan Press*, 20.

¹¹⁶ Iyengar and McGrady. *Media Politics*, 339.

¹¹⁷ Clogston, Juanita “Frankie”. “The Repeal of the Fairness Doctrine and the Irony of Talk Radio: A Story of Political Entrepreneurship, Risk, and Cover.” *Journal of Policy History* 28, no. 2 (2016): 375-396. <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/612934>.

Doctrine under President Ronald Reagan played a significant role in fostering the partisan media that permeates the airwaves and the internet today. The rejection of the mandate led to prioritization of horizontal diversity—a variety of perspectives across television and radio stations—rather than vertical diversity—a variety of perspectives within each station’s programming. Another historical factor that has been posited to have paved the way for more partisan media was the fall of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Americans were no longer united by the common enemy of communism, allowing them to fall back into partisan disagreements.¹¹⁸

The rise of partisan media can also be attributed to technological advances, which make it easier to offer more choices for niche audiences, as much as it can be attributed to economic forces that support the product.¹¹⁹ Partisan news is now more accessible than ever, thanks to the expansion of TV and internet access.¹²⁰ The more choices available on TV and on the internet, the more economically viable it becomes to tailor content to a narrow audience.¹²¹ While cable television and talk radio expanded the availability of narrowly tailored programming, the internet has lowered the cost for people to access politically agreeable content, and to then discuss that content with a likeminded audience.¹²²

The 1990s and 2000s ushered in a trend of media ownership consolidation, sparked in part by the passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, which significantly

¹¹⁸ Sheppard. *The Partisan Press*.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Smith, G., and K. Searles. "Who Let the (Attack) Dogs Out? New Evidence for Partisan Media Effects." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 78, no. 1 (2014): 71–99. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nft082>.

¹²¹ Prior, Markus. *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

¹²² Veenstra, Aaron S., Mohammad Delwar Hossain, and Benjamin A. Lyons. 2014. "Partisan Media and Discussion as Enhancers of the Belief Gap." *Mass Communication & Society* 17, no. 6: 874-897. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 23, 2017).

increased the number of local newspapers and television stations that individual corporations could own.¹²³ As of 2018, Sinclair owned and operated 234 TV stations in 108 markets, reaching 71.5 percent of the U.S. population, and iHeartMedia owned or operated 856 radio stations in 160 markets.¹²⁴ Gannett and GateHouse Media, which merged in 2019, published 613 newspapers in 2020, with a combined circulation of more than 8 million.¹²⁵ All of this data is constantly changing due to mergers, consolidations, closures, and sales. More than one in five U.S. newspapers have closed in the last 15 years, and more than 50 percent have changed ownership in the last decade.¹²⁶ One-third of all U.S. newspapers are owned by just 25 chains.¹²⁷

“The most aggressive response to the loss of local newspapers has come from the several hundred digital news outlets that span the country, most of them started in the past decade by journalists,” journalist and scholar Penelope Muse Abernathy observed in her recent analysis of “news deserts.”¹²⁸ In addition to the objective digital news outlets and other startups that have launched in response to the diminishment of traditional media, partisan media outlets have also begun to fill the void, in some markets more than others.

¹²³ Champlin, Dell, and Janet Knoedler. “Operating in the Public Interest or in Pursuit of Private Profits? News in the Age of Media Consolidation.” *Journal of Economic Issues* 36, no. 2 (June 2002): 459–68. doi:<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/mjei20>; “Telecommunications Act of 1996.” Federal Communications Commission, December 30, 2014. <https://www.fcc.gov/general/telecommunications-act-1996>.

¹²⁴ “Who Owns the Media?” Free Press, 2018. <https://www.freepress.net/issues/media-control/media-consolidation/who-owns-media>.

¹²⁵ Abernathy. “News Deserts and Ghost Newspapers.”

¹²⁶ Abernathy. *News Deserts*.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

Partisan news presents facts within a framework that bolsters one position while suggesting the converse is wrong.¹²⁹ Within that framework, coverage relies more on attacks on the opposition than on content supporting a like-minded candidate.¹³⁰ Political news is presented as a battle between two parties, candidates, or causes, thus priming and activating viewers' own partisan identities.¹³¹

According to a 2016 Pew Research Center study, 57 percent of adults in the United States “often” get their news from TV. Thirty-eight percent often get their news online, while 25 percent hear it on the radio and 20 percent read it in a print newspaper. About one-third of those who favor TV news watch it on cable channels, like CNN, Fox News, or MSNBC.¹³²

Despite the contemporary preference for digital media sources and the proliferation of partisan choices within the digital arena, an overwhelming majority of people still get their political news from centrist media sources.¹³³ However, at the same time, a small segment of partisan individuals consume a large amount of heavily partisan news.¹³⁴ Because those individuals tend to be the most politically engaged, it can be argued they exert an undue influence on politicians and elected officials who act in accordance with their opinions. Additional research suggests this is true: ideological polarization is stronger among the most well educated and politically engaged

¹²⁹ Levendusky, Matthew. “Partisan Media Exposure and Attitudes Toward the Opposition.” *Political Communication* 30, no. 4 (2013): 565–81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2012.737435>.

¹³⁰ Smith and Searles. “Who Let the (Attack) Dogs Out?”

¹³¹ Levendusky. “Partisan Media Exposure.”

¹³² Pew Research Center. *The Modern News Consumer*. July 2016.

¹³³ Guess, Andrew M. *Media Choice and Moderation: Evidence from Online Tracking Data*. Report. Social Media and Political Participation Lab, New York University. October 7, 2016. Accessed August 12, 2017.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

individuals—the population segment with which political elites are most likely to be concerned.¹³⁵

Why do people consume congenial news (content that aligns with and supports their beliefs)? Several theories have been posed. These include:

- the partisan polarization hypothesis: posits that people may prefer to encounter information that is supportive of and consistent with their beliefs;
- the issue public hypothesis: suggests that people may pay attention to this content because they have an interest in particular policy issues; and
- the attentive public hypothesis: suggests people may be exposed to specific political content simply because they have a general interest in politics.¹³⁶

Studies conducted in the early 2000s showed that people were more influenced by issues than party identification in their pursuit of information on the internet.¹³⁷ Those who were guided by partisan affiliation were more likely to be Republicans or conservatives.¹³⁸ People were more likely to seek information based on their personal interest in issues like abortion or national defense.¹³⁹ These studies should be updated to determine whether the same results hold true today.

Studying the Effects of Partisan Media

A thorough assessment of the effects of partisan media should examine its influence on both political activity and political attitudes. It has been argued that “any

¹³⁵ Abramowitz, Alan I. and Kyle L. Saunders. “Is Polarization a Myth?” *The Journal of Politics* 70, no. 2, 2008, 542-55.

¹³⁶ Iyengar and McGrady. *Media Politics*.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

effect partisan media have on our discourse, or our leaders, is likely to be negative.”¹⁴⁰

But that argument addresses just one element of the question this chapter seeks to answer: whether partisan media makes citizens today more or less engaged, and how polarization affects that engagement.

There is not much research studying whether people are more strongly influenced by content that reinforces their beliefs or content that attacks the beliefs of their perceived opponents—but researchers generally agree people are influenced most strongly by content that reinforces their beliefs than by neutral content or content that challenges their beliefs.¹⁴¹ Studies spanning decades in the late 20th century and early 21st century show that negative information is more persuasive than positive information.¹⁴² One-sided negative coverage on cable television influences viewers more than one-sided positive coverage.¹⁴³ Other studies show that people who consume media aligning with their beliefs are more politically active, more likely to participate in campaigns, and more likely to vote early.¹⁴⁴ In contrast, some research indicates the consumption of counter-attitudinal content depresses some forms of political engagement outside of voting.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ Smith and Searles. “Who Let the (Attack) Dogs Out?”

¹⁴¹ A noteworthy exception is documented by Matthew A. Baum and Tim J. Groeling: Counter-attitudinal content presented by a trusted source can be persuasive. (Baum, Matthew A., and Tim J. Groeling. *War Stories: the Causes and Consequences of Public Views of War*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2010.)

¹⁴² Fiske, Susan T. “Attention and Weight in Person Perception: The Impact of Negative and Extreme Behavior.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 38, no. 6 (1980): 889–906. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.38.6.889>; Baumeister, Roy F., Ellen Bratslavsky, Catrin Finkenauer, and Kathleen D. Vohs. “Bad Is Stronger than Good.” *Review of General Psychology* 5, no. 4 (2001): 323–70. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.5.4.323>.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Dilliplane, Susanna. “All the News You Want to Hear: The Impact of Partisan News Exposure on Political Participation,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Volume 75, Issue 2, January 2011, Pages 287–316.

¹⁴⁵ Stroud, Natalie Jomini. *Niche News: The Politics of News Choice*. New York: Oxford University, 2011.

Pro-attitudinal news increases individuals' intentions to participate in the political process as compared with balanced news or counter-attitudinal news.¹⁴⁶ This can be explained by the finding that exposure to congenial news increases individuals' understanding of the issues being covered, which in turn increases their belief that they are qualified to participate in the political process. Indeed, this environment puts heavy consumers of partisan news, no matter how well educated they are, in a position to "take in more misinformation and hold more incorrect beliefs than their less educated or less partisan counterparts."¹⁴⁷

At a less significant level, research also shows that pro-attitudinal news evokes positive emotions, along with anger toward the "other" side. The same anger effect is the only significant emotional result of exposure to counter-attitudinal content.¹⁴⁸

In general, consuming like-minded media "makes viewers feel more negatively toward the other party, have less support for bipartisanship, less trust in the other side to do what's right for the country," as observed by political scientist Matthew Levendusky.¹⁴⁹ The increased political activity that results from participants who are divided—increasingly so due to partisan media—serves to foster gridlock and make politics more dysfunctional.¹⁵⁰

Most research on the subject indicates consumption of partisan or ideological news content leads to increased levels of both polarization and engagement. There is also a "silver lining" in this, observed by a group of researchers led by Magdalena

¹⁴⁶ Veenstra, et al. "Partisan Media and Discussion."

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Wojcieszak, Magdalena, Bruce Bimber, Lauren Feldman, and Natalie Jomini Stroud. "Partisan News and Political Participation: Exploring Mediated Relationships." *Political Communication* 33, no. 2 (2015): 241–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2015.1051608>.

¹⁴⁹ Levendusky. "Partisan Media Exposure."

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

Wojcieszak: “Self-selection into likeminded news is generally viewed as harmful due to polarization. Its consequences for participation are not similarly regrettable.”¹⁵¹

However, the engagement prompted by partisan news content may be driven by partisan rhetoric, which dissuades people from compromise and bipartisanship. In addition, while people may believe they are qualified to participate in the political process based on the reinforcement they have received from pro-attitudinal news sources, that belief may be rooted in an incorrect understanding of the issue.¹⁵² In other words, partisan and ideological content encourages the most extremely partisan voices to participate in the political process, therefore elevating those voices in the public discourse. This elevation of partisan voices may, in turn, cause more moderate voices to withdraw.¹⁵³

Flaws and Gaps in Existing Research

The most significant gap in the body of work available on this issue is in the number of studies conducted within the last decade. So much has changed with regards to the proliferation of ideological and partisan media within the last 10 years, not to mention the last five, that it is difficult to accept the results of any research conducted prior to that timeframe as gospel.

Studies on the effects of partisan cable news and talk radio are useful, but do not account for the ways the internet has changed the media landscape. Research on the subject is only just now starting to examine the effects of more heavily partisan online

¹⁵¹ Wojcieszak, Bimber, Feldman and Stroud. “Partisan News and Political Participation.”

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

media, such as Breitbart on the right or the Daily Kos on the left, and the effects of sharing and receiving that news through social media channels (see fig. 2).

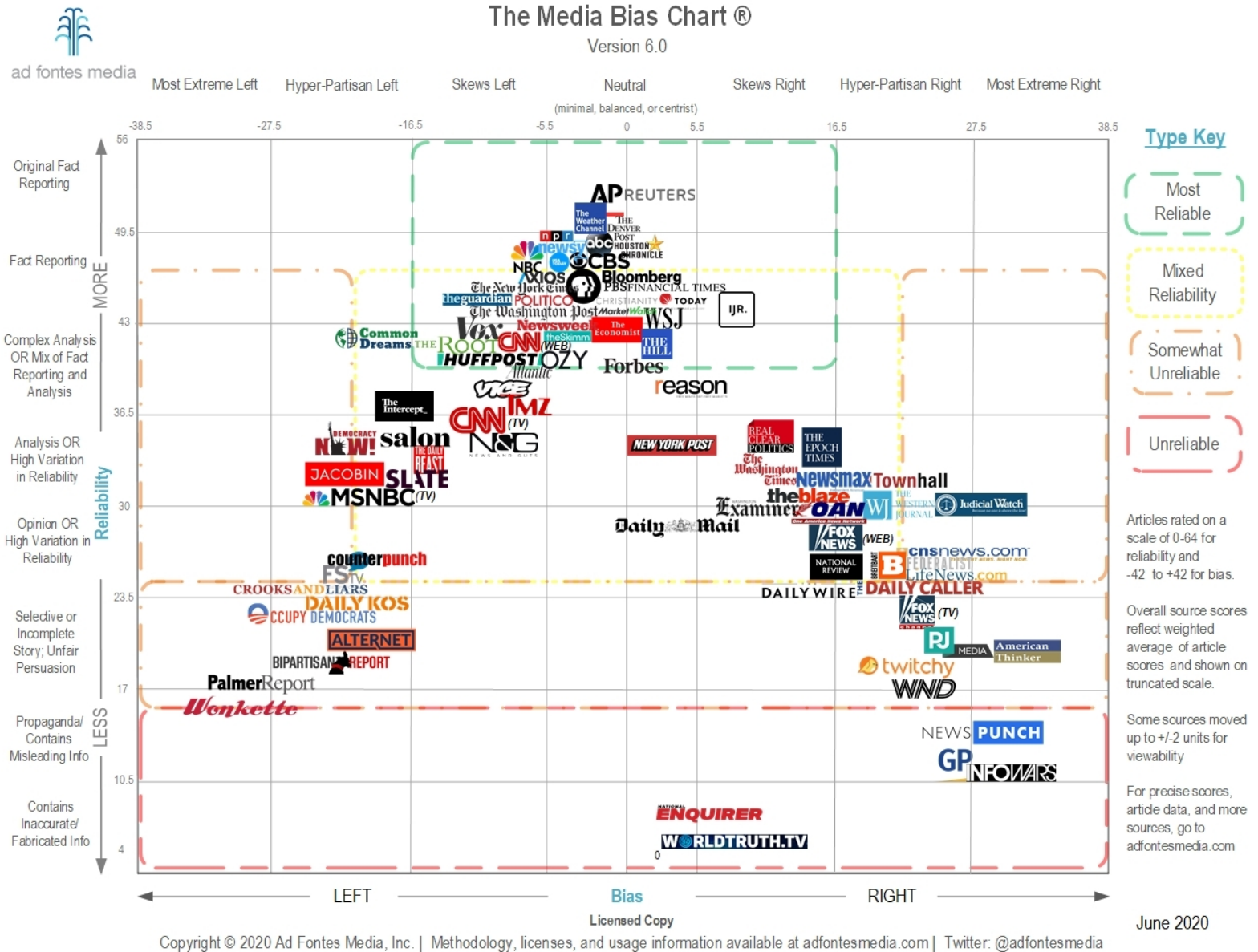


Figure 2: The Media Bias Chart. July 2020. Ad Fontes Media. <https://www.adfontesmedia.com/>.

Several researchers examining the effects of partisan media have listed the inability of elected officials and politicians to communicate directly with their constituents as a factor in this field of study. Cook argued: “Journalists would serve the public and politics more completely if they stopped seeking the same kind of professional monopoly traditionally employed by lawyers and doctors. . . . They should realize the philosophical benefit if political actors can communicate directly to the public.”¹⁵⁴ Since the late 2000s, this avenue of communication has been readily available through social media, the long-term effects of which are only beginning to be assessed. In addition, the amplification effects of social media have yet to be fully explored in regards to their effect on partisan media consumption.

Methodology

This chapter examines the relationship between partisan and ideological news media and political engagement of its consumers through a set of case studies. My definition of “partisan media” is narrow for the purposes of this analysis, limited to publications that either state an ideological or partisan mission, or that are known to receive funding from ideological or partisan sources. There are, of course, traditional news media that are perceived to “lean” in one direction or another (as seen in fig. 2); however, those are more difficult to quantify than publications with obvious ties to a political goal. This approach allows for a more in-depth examination of trends in a defined set of states, while also including a broader, national view. I have selected three states to study, which will be held up in comparison to the United States as a whole. For

¹⁵⁴ Cook. *Governing With the News*, 174.

the sake of consistency, I assess the same three states I examined in the first chapter of my thesis, which explored the relationship between statehouse coverage and political participation. This study will focus on these three states—Wisconsin, Massachusetts, and Oklahoma—while providing national context.

Case Studies

Claims of media bias date back decades. These claims have most frequently been made by Republicans and conservatives alleging that the “mainstream media” fails to fairly represent conservative views.¹⁵⁵ In the 1988, 1992, and 1996 elections, 92 percent of claims of media bias were made by Republicans alleging media coverage favored the liberal viewpoint.¹⁵⁶ Those claims, along with diminished public trust in the media, have paved the way for the emergence and growth of media outlets with partisan influences.¹⁵⁷ At the national level, this is easily illustrated by warring cable news networks—Fox News catering to the right and MSNBC to the left—but examples of partisan media also exist at the state level.

Wisconsin

Wisconsin, with an estimated population in 2019 of 5.8 million, has been—especially in the last decade—the site of hard-fought political battles and razor-thin

¹⁵⁵ Domke, David, Mark D. Watts, Dhavan V. Shah, and David P. Fan. “The Politics of Conservative Elites and the ‘Liberal Media’ Argument.” *Journal of Communication* 49, no. 4 (1999): 35–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1999.tb02816.x>.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Grossmann, Matt. “Media Bias (Real and Perceived) and the Rise of Partisan Media.” Niskanen Center, December 20, 2019. <https://www.niskanencenter.org/media-bias-real-perceived-rise-partisan-media/>.

election margins. It also has been home to a variety of ideologically-influenced and partisan-backed media outlets, most of which have set up shop within the last 10 years.

The partisan media landscape in Wisconsin has been dominated for the bulk of the last decade by conservative outlets and content, presented digitally and on the radio. In recent years, some of these outlets and programs have shuttered or shifted their approach. In the years following Republican President Trump's 2016 victory and Democratic Gov. Tony Evers' 2018 victory, Wisconsin has seen the launch of a liberal radio station and several digital outlets with liberal influences.

Conservative Wisconsin news outlets soared to prominence in the late 2000s (approximately 20 years after conservative talk radio became popular, particularly in the southeastern corner of the state), after the Tea Party movement caught fire in Wisconsin and throughout the country—and especially once Republican Gov. Scott Walker was elected in 2010, serving with the backing of a Republican-controlled legislature. *MediaTrackers*—billed as a “watchdog dedicated to promoting accountability in the media and government across Wisconsin,” was launched in 2011 and funded by American Majority, a national conservative organization with Tea Party roots.¹⁵⁸ The organization had presences in states including Ohio, Florida, Montana, and Pennsylvania before shutting down in 2019.¹⁵⁹ Around the same time, the Franklin News Foundation—established as the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity in 2009—launched a national network of state-focused news sites under the *Watchdog.org* umbrella, funded with a grant from the Sam Adams Alliance (the Sam

¹⁵⁸ Vogel, Kenneth P. “Right Seeks Edge in 'Oppo' Wars.” *POLITICO*, April 3, 2011. <https://www.politico.com/story/2011/04/right-seeks-edge-in-oppo-wars-052428>.

¹⁵⁹ Opoien, Jessie, and Jerry Bader. Interview with former *MediaTrackers* Wisconsin communications director. Personal, April 24, 2020.

Adams Alliance also helped launch American Majority, which funded the *MediaTrackers* organization).¹⁶⁰ Wisconsin was home to a *Watchdog.org* news site until *Watchdog.org* rebranded nationally as *The Center Square* in 2019.¹⁶¹ As of 2020, *The Center Square* operates state-level news sites in 25 states including Wisconsin. Also founded in 2009, the John K. Maclver Institute for Public Policy operates as both a think tank and news service promoting “free markets, individual freedom, personal responsibility and limited government” and, in 2020, unsuccessfully sued Evers’ administration for excluding the organization from press briefings and email lists.¹⁶²

Founded in 2013, *RightWisconsin* serves as a home for original conservative editorial content and for posts from other conservative sites, like the Maclver Institute.¹⁶³ The website was sold in 2016 by Charlie Sykes, who, for years, was one of Wisconsin’s most influential talk radio voices.¹⁶⁴ In addition to selling the website, Sykes ended his long-running radio show in 2016—at that time one of few anti-Trump voices in the state’s conservative media environment.¹⁶⁵ A similarly formatted website, *Empower*

¹⁶⁰ Hillyer, Quin. “After the Tea Parties.” *The American Spectator*, June 15, 2009. https://spectator.org/41570_after-tea-parties/.

¹⁶¹ Krug, Chris. “Op-Ed: Welcome to TheCenterSquare.com.” *The Center Square*, May 14, 2019. https://www.thecentersquare.com/national/op-ed-welcome-to-thecentersquare-com/article_1a2f08c0-7588-11e9-98e1-774610e5dbb1.html; Bice, Daniel, and Mary Spicuzza. “Is It Lights out for Wisconsin Watchdog?” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, April 14, 2017. <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/local/wisconsin/2017/04/14/lights-out-wisconsin-watchdog/100463852/>.

¹⁶² “About Maclver Institute.” Maclver Institute. Accessed April 24, 2020. <https://www.maclverinstitute.com/about-us/>; Bauer, Scott. “Judge Rules against Conservative Think Tank in Tony Evers Media Access Lawsuit.” *Wisconsin State Journal*. Associated Press, April 2, 2020. https://madison.com/wsj/news/local/govt-and-politics/judge-rules-against-conservative-think-tank-in-tony-evers-media-access-lawsuit/article_a38032c5-2cd6-5d0c-84af-80b04828189f.html.

¹⁶³ “Wisconsin News & Politics.” *RightWisconsin*, April 23, 2020. <https://rightwisconsin.com/>.

¹⁶⁴ Opoien, Jessie. “Excommunicated: Charlie Sykes Is Leaving Radio as He Questions the Direction of the Republican Party.” *The Capital Times*, December 14, 2016. https://madison.com/ct/news/local/govt-and-politics/election-matters/excommunicated-charlie-sykes-is-leaving-radio-as-he-questions-the-direction-of-the-republican-party/article_c1c852da-9705-5fca-8285-9b8c77ceed6a.html; “Charlie Sykes Sells Right Wisconsin Site.” *Insideradio.com*, June 27, 2017. http://www.insideradio.com/free/charlie-sykes-sells-right-wisconsin-site/article_9e36914e-5b7a-11e7-864c-3fe53bf95eae.html.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Wisconsin, was launched in 2019, headed by a Republican former state representative and by conservative political strategist Eric O’Keefe (the former head of several national conservative organizations including the Sam Adams Alliance).¹⁶⁶ Featured columnists on the site include O’Keefe, conservative radio host Vicki McKenna, and Republican former Gov. Scott Walker.¹⁶⁷

In addition, Metric Media, which operates 1,211 sites designed to resemble local or state news in all 50 states, operates 17 sites in Wisconsin.¹⁶⁸ Content published by Metric Media sites has a conservative bent.¹⁶⁹ The network is connected to Locality Lab/LocalLabs, a descendant of the now-defunct publishing company Journatic.¹⁷⁰ The network primarily publishes press releases, gas prices and articles credited to Metric Media News Service. The company has been shown to publish content benefiting conservative candidates and causes, and does so in Wisconsin.¹⁷¹ As reported by the *New York Times*, Metric Media “is built not on traditional journalism but on propaganda

¹⁶⁶ O’Keefe, Eric. “It’s Time to Empower Wisconsin!” *Empower Wisconsin*, September 9, 2019. <https://empowerwisconsin.org/its-time-to-empower-wisconsin/>.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Alba, Davey, and Jack Nicas. “As Local News Dies, a Pay-for-Play Network Rises in Its Place.” *The New York Times*, October 18, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/18/technology/timpone-local-news-metric-media.html>.

¹⁶⁹ Thompson, Carol. “Dozens of New Websites Appear to Be Michigan Local News Outlets, but with Political Bent.” *Lansing State Journal*. Lansing State Journal, October 22, 2019. <https://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/news/local/2019/10/21/lansing-sun-new-sites-michigan-local-news-outlets/3984689002/>.

¹⁷⁰ “LocalLabs, Formerly Journatic.” Hawthorne Strategy Group. Accessed April 26, 2020. https://hawthornestrategy.com/case_study/test-2/.

¹⁷¹ Bengani, Priyanjana. “Hundreds of ‘Pink Slime’ Local News Outlets Are Distributing Algorithmic Stories and Conservative Talking Points.” *Columbia Journalism Review*, December 18, 2019. https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/hundreds-of-pink-slime-local-news-outlets-are-distributing-algorithmic-stories-conservative-talking-points.php; Gabbatt, Adam. “How Local ‘Fake News’ Websites Spread ‘Conservative Propaganda’ in the US.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, November 19, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/nov/19/locality-labs-fake-news-local-sites-newspapers>; Levin, Dan. “Mimicking Local News, a Network of Michigan Websites Pushes Politics.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, October 22, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/21/us/michigan-metric-media-news.html>; Borden, Jeremy. “A ‘Formidable Conservative Force’ Challenges Politics Coverage in Illinois.” *Columbia Journalism Review*, March 30, 2018. https://www.cjr.org/united_states_project/lgis-profit-news-illinois.php.

ordered up by dozens of conservative think tanks, political operatives, corporate executives and public-relations professionals.”¹⁷²

For decades, conservative outlets have outshined liberal outlets both in quantity and in prominence. Former editor of *The Progressive* magazine Matt Rothschild phrased it this way in a 2020 interview with *Wisconsin Public Radio*: “Frankly, it’s taken forever for left-wing donors to recognize the importance of competing in the media arena.”¹⁷³ The liberal Center for Media and Democracy, founded in 1993, publishes advocacy journalism on its *PR Watch* website.¹⁷⁴ It describes itself as a watchdog that investigates the “corruption that undermines our democracy, environment, and economic prosperity.”¹⁷⁵ CMD receives funding from left-leaning sources including the Rockefeller Family Foundation, the Marisla Foundation and the Park Foundation.¹⁷⁶ Although its focus is primarily national, *The Progressive* magazine—founded in 1909—is based in Wisconsin and, like *PR Watch*, covers Wisconsin politics with a progressive slant, billing itself as “a voice for peace, social justice, and the common good.”¹⁷⁷ *The Progressive* and CMD briefly merged in 2014, but separated several months later.¹⁷⁸

In 2016, iHeartMedia ceased airing progressive political programming on a Madison-based radio station that had previously broadcast both local and nationally

¹⁷² Alba and Nicas. “As Local News Dies.”

¹⁷³ Mentzer, Rob. “New Group Seeks To Tell Stories Of Struggle In Wisconsin's Rural Towns.” *Wisconsin Public Radio*, January 31, 2020. <https://www.wpr.org/new-group-seeks-tell-stories-struggle-wisconsins-rural-towns>.

¹⁷⁴ “What We Do.” *PR Watch*, February 22, 2019. <https://www.prwatch.org/cmd>; Note: The author of this paper had a summer internship at CMD in 2011, as an undergraduate student.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ “Mission & History.” *The Progressive*. Accessed April 25, 2020. <https://progressive.org/about-us/mission-and-history>.

¹⁷⁸ Gunn, Erik. “A Marriage Made in Madison.” *Milwaukee Magazine*, April 3, 2014. <https://www.milwaukeeemag.com/amarriagemadeinmadison/>; Conniff, Ruth. “Pulling Together, Saying Goodbye.” *The Progressive*, November 2014.

syndicated shows.¹⁷⁹ The following year, the co-host of a local show that had previously aired on the iHeartMedia station launched his own liberal radio network, broadcasting on AM and FM stations that reached voters in the state's biggest Democratic strongholds (Madison and Milwaukee).¹⁸⁰

The liberal media landscape in Wisconsin expanded further in 2019 and 2020, with the launch of the *Wisconsin Examiner* and *Up North News*. The *Wisconsin Examiner*, launched in 2019, describes itself as “a nonpartisan, nonprofit news site offering a fresh perspective on politics and policy” following “Wisconsin’s great progressive tradition.”¹⁸¹ The *Wisconsin Examiner* is part of the States Newsroom network, which operates about a dozen similar outlets throughout the United States.¹⁸² States Newsroom was launched as a sponsored project of the Hopewell Fund, which primarily funds causes and organizations associated with the left.¹⁸³ Several months after the launch of the *Wisconsin Examiner* came the launch of *Up North News*, a self-described “progressive news site” created to “empower and inspire Wisconsinites to take part in their democracy.” *Up North News* is part of the Courier Newsroom network,

¹⁷⁹ Rath, Jay. “The Mic Replaces Progressive Talk with Christmas Music.” *Isthmus*, November 9, 2016. <https://isthmus.com/news/news/the-mic-replaces-progressive-talk-with-christmas-music/>.

¹⁸⁰ Sommerhauser, Mark. “Liberal Talk Radio Returns to Madison via Longtime Co-Host of 'Devil's Advocates Radio'.” *Wisconsin State Journal*, May 13, 2019. https://madison.com/wsj/news/local/govt-and-politics/liberal-talk-radio-returns-to-madison-via-longtime-co-host/article_cb38015d-9b81-5256-8071-0a1d68e91c68.html; “Lib Talk Format To Launch On Milwaukee AM.” *Insideradio.com*, January 30, 2017. http://www.insideradio.com/free/lib-talk-format-to-launch-on-milwaukee-am/article_b4c36596-e6bc-11e6-b4b7-7f7f01c38ca0.html.

¹⁸¹ “About.” *Wisconsin Examiner*. Accessed April 25, 2020. <https://wisconsinexaminer.com/about/>.

¹⁸² “Relentless Capital Reporting.” States Newsroom. Accessed April 25, 2020. <https://statesnewsroom.com/>.

¹⁸³ Marley, Patrick, and Mary Spicuzza. “Liberal 'News' Websites Launching in Wisconsin, Where Conservative Versions Have Thrived.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 20, 2019. <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/2019/08/20/liberal-groups-take-cue-right-new-websites-wisconsin/2002077001/>; Barrett, Malachi. *Governing*, November 9, 2019. <https://www.governing.com/news/headlines/News-Websites-with-Political-Ties-Spread-Across-Michigan.html>.

which operates seven state-level news sites. The network is owned by the Democratic firm ACRONYM and funded additionally by other private investors.¹⁸⁴ Courier—which Facebook eventually classified as a political organization required to report its ad spending—spent more than \$8 million boosting its stories on Facebook in the 2020 election cycle, \$560,000 of which went to promoting Wisconsin-based content.¹⁸⁵ Wisconsin is also one of 34 states to receive coverage from *American Ledger*, a blog site hosted by the progressive research firm American Bridge.¹⁸⁶

Using the parameters of the first chapter of this thesis, I will review data from midterm elections. This is the time period when the most state-level races are on the ballot: the governor, the entire state Assembly, and half of the state Senate. For the sake of comparison with national politics, I also review presidential election data.

The Wisconsin Elections Commission calculates voter turnout based on the estimated number of eligible voters in the state. As shown in Figure 3, Wisconsin's midterm turnout soared to record levels in 2018, with 61 percent of the voting-age population casting ballots. These record turnout numbers mirrored trends nationally. This followed midterm turnouts of 55, 50, and 51 percent in 2014, 2010, and 2006. From 1986 to 2002, turnout hovered between 39 percent and 46 percent, reaching its high point in 1998. And from 1962 to 1982, turnout ranged from 52 percent in 1962 to 39 percent in 1974.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ "About Us: Courier Newsroom." COURIER. Accessed April 25, 2020.
<https://couriernewsroom.com/about-us/>.

¹⁸⁵ "Facebook Ad Library Report." Facebook. Accessed November 13, 2020.
<https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/report>.

¹⁸⁶ "About Us." *American Ledger*. American Bridge 21st Century. Accessed April 26, 2020.
<https://american-ledger.com/about-us/>.

¹⁸⁷ "Wisconsin Voter Turnout Statistics." Wisconsin Elections Commission, elections.wi.gov/elections-voting/statistics/turnout; "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2018." Voting and

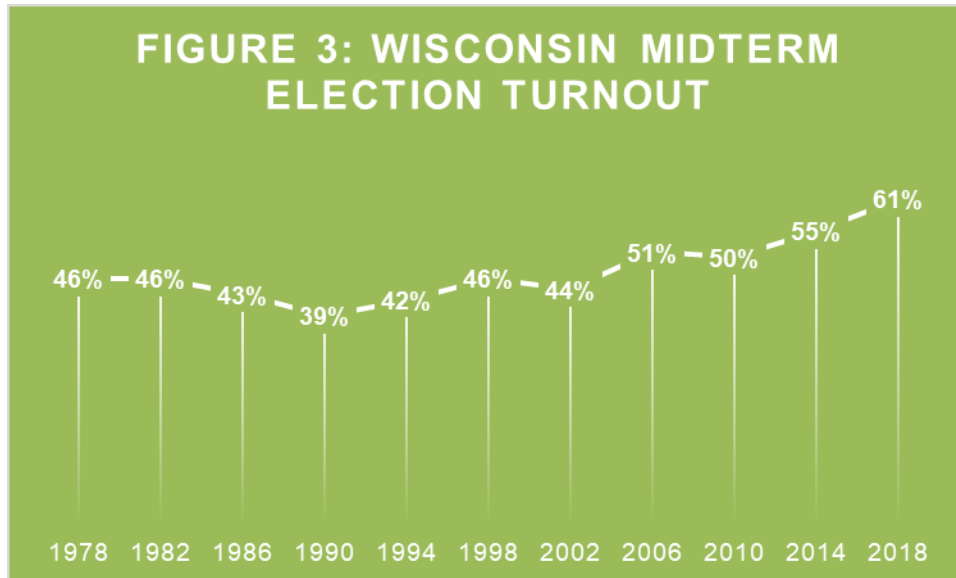


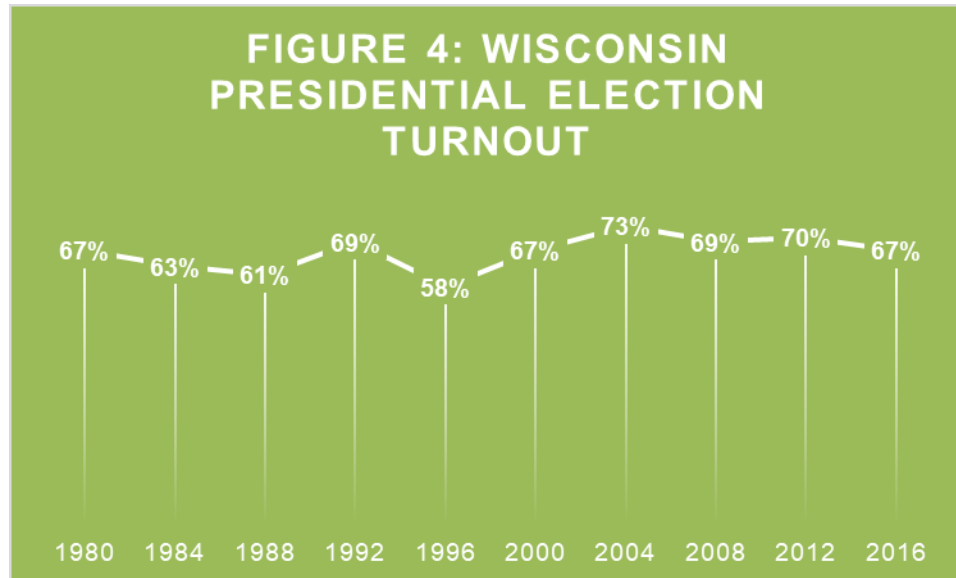
Figure 4 shows that Wisconsin saw its lowest presidential election turnout in two decades—at 67 percent—in the 2016 presidential election.¹⁸⁸ Seventy percent of the voting-age population voted in the 2012 and 2008 presidential elections. From 1984 to 2004, turnout hovered between 58 percent (in 1996) and 73 percent (in 2004).¹⁸⁹ And from 1964 to 1980, turnout ranged from 63 percent (in 1972) to 69 percent (in 1964); turnout was 67 percent in 1980 (see fig. 4).¹⁹⁰

Registration in the Election of November 2018, U.S. Census Bureau, 22 Apr. 2019, www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-583.html.

¹⁸⁸ Opoien. “Why Did Wisconsin See Its Lowest Presidential Election Voter Turnout in 20 Years?” *The Capital Times*, November 11, 2016. https://madison.com/ct/news/local/govt-and-politics/election-matters/why-did-wisconsin-see-its-lowest-presidential-election-voter-turnout-in-20-years/article_6dd2887f-e1fc-5ed8-a454-284d37204669.html.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.



Wisconsin has benefitted from several state-based polling projects over the last few decades, conducted by the University of Wisconsin-Madison, St. Norbert College and the Marquette University Law School.

The Marquette University Law School poll has earned a reputation as the “gold standard” of Wisconsin polling since its launch in 2011.¹⁹¹ It has surveyed Wisconsin voters not only on horse-race questions and policy positions, but also on how politics factor into individuals’ lives and behaviors, including media consumption.¹⁹² In October 2013, 65 percent of voters felt they were qualified to participate in politics (this is the only time the Marquette poll has asked this question).¹⁹³ And despite changes in the way people consume news, the level of attention paid to politics by Wisconsin voters has remained relatively steady. In January 2012, 88 percent of voters said they paid

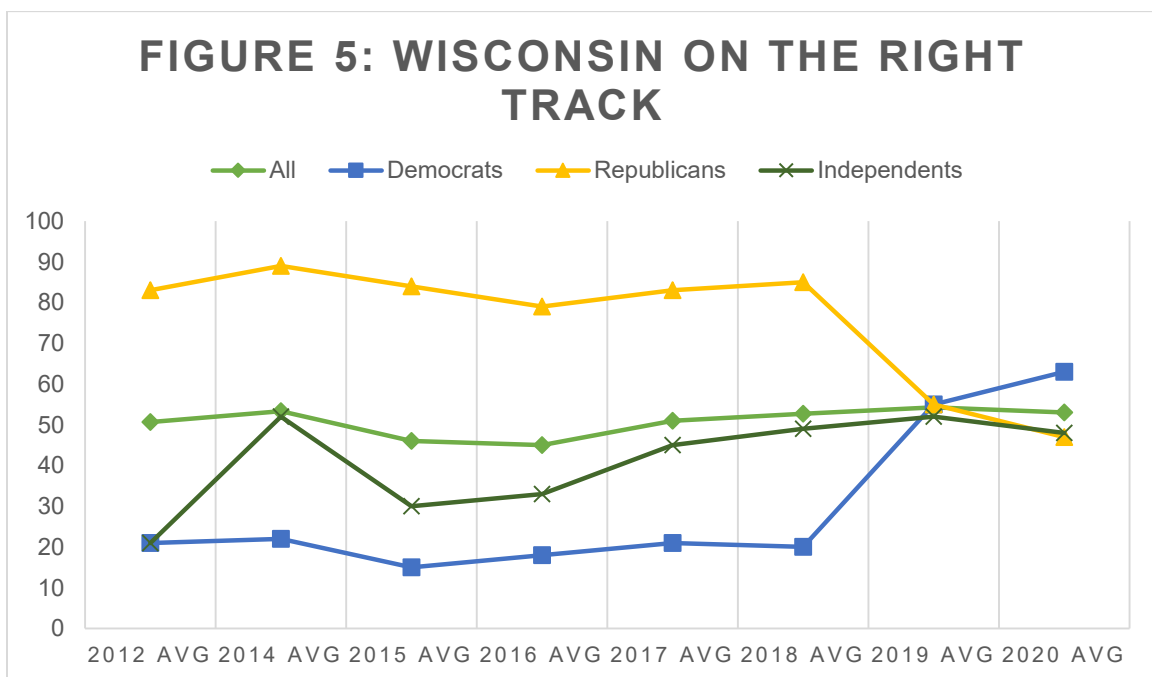
¹⁹¹ Shepard, Steven. “Poll: Clinton Leads in Wisconsin, but Senate Race Tight.” *POLITICO*, November 2, 2016. <https://www.politico.com/blogs/swing-states-2016-election/2016/11/poll-clinton-winning-wisconsin-230638>.

¹⁹² “Marquette Law Poll Interactive Database (2012-2020).” Milwaukee: Marquette University Law School Poll, n.d.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

attention to politics most or some of the time; 87 percent said the same in March 2020. The lowest this percentage has fallen was 82 percent, at several points throughout 2014.¹⁹⁴

The Marquette Poll frequently asks voters if the state is headed in the right direction or the wrong track. The “right direction” measure hit its lowest point in April 2015, at 43 percent, and its highest in March 2020 at 61 percent. From 2012 through early 2020, the average “right track” rating has been 52 percent (see fig. 5).



Over the same period of time, 80 percent of Republicans have rated the state as being on the right track, compared to 47 percent of Democrats and 26 percent of independents. The state was governed by a Republican for all but two of those years. Favorability ratings for that governor (Walker) ranged from 36 percent in September 2015 to 50 percent at several points in 2012 and 2013. From 2012 through 2018, 85

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

percent of Republicans and 45 percent of independents viewed Walker favorably, compared to just 12 percent of Democrats. Evers, the Democrat elected in November 2018, had a 20 percent favorability rating in March 2018 (before he was elected); that was his lowest point. His highest favorability rating came in March 2020, at 54 percent. From 2018 to 2020, 68 percent of Democrats and 31 percent of independents viewed him favorably, compared to 13 percent of Republicans.¹⁹⁵

Massachusetts

With an estimated population of about 6.9 million, Massachusetts has been a fairly reliable “blue” state over the last half-century, having voted for a Democratic presidential candidate in 87 percent of elections from 1960 through 2016.

Perhaps because the state’s liberal bona fides are hardly in question—in addition to voting “blue” in most presidential races, the state legislature has been under Democratic control since 1959—very few partisan news outlets (following the parameters of this thesis and not accounting for traditional publications with perceived partisan leanings) have set up shop in Massachusetts in recent years. As of April 2020, none of the liberal-backed news networks with presences in Wisconsin had outlets operating in Massachusetts, including *American Ledger*, which had presences in more than half the country.

While there is an absence of liberal-backed media outlets in Massachusetts, Metric Media LLC operates 16 hyperlocal news sites throughout the state.¹⁹⁶ In Maine, the outlets bear names like *Cape Cod Ledger* and *Mid Massachusetts News*. A mid-

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ “Metric Media.” Metric Media News. Accessed April 26, 2020. <https://metricmedianews.com/>.

2019 review of its Massachusetts properties did not indicate much, if any, overtly political activity, but by 2020 the sites appeared to display some content with a conservative slant.

Massachusetts also saw a burst of conservative-backed media activity in 2015, with the launch of two conservative talk radio stations and a conservative news site.¹⁹⁷ *NewBostonPost*, founded in 2015, bills itself as “the hub of conservative thought.”¹⁹⁸ One of the two stations converted to a conservative talk format in 2015, WMEX-AM, has since transitioned to an oldies format; the other, WKOX-AM, is now a gospel station.¹⁹⁹ Since 2018, WXKS-AM has broadcast the conservative programming that had previously run on WKOX.²⁰⁰ In addition, WRKO-AM has been home to conservative host Howie Carr for more than two decades.²⁰¹

Unlike Wisconsin, Massachusetts does not calculate voter turnout based on estimated eligible voters; instead, the state bases its estimates on the number of registered voters. To similarly compare Massachusetts with Wisconsin, I have used data from the United States Election Project, which measures the number of votes for the highest office on the ballot compared to states’ voting-age population.²⁰² Data for elections before 1980 is unavailable from the Election Project.

¹⁹⁷ Borchers, Callum. “Conservative Media Outlets See a Market in Mass.” *The Boston Globe*, June 22, 2015. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2015/06/22/new-conservative-media-outlets-see-opportunity-liberal-massachusetts/4wbCt8iZ7IDkFsb54nqRpl/story.html>.

¹⁹⁸ “About NewBostonPost.” *NewBostonPost*, October 30, 2017. <https://newbostonpost.com/about/>.

¹⁹⁹ “1510 WMEX The Greatest Hits of All Time.” WATD 95.9 FM, August 11, 2020.

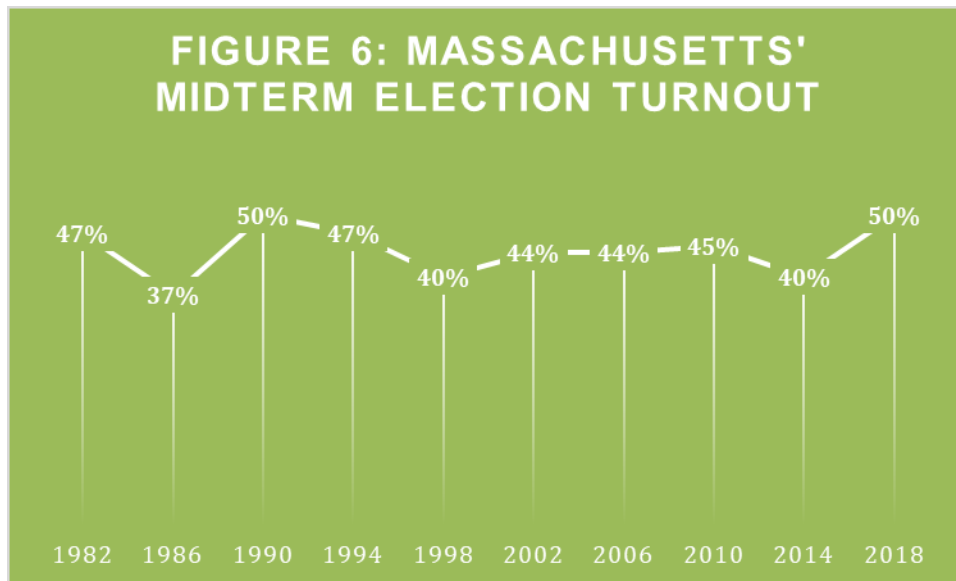
<https://959watd.com/1510-wmex-the-greatest-hits-of-all-time/>; “A Gospel Light Shines Into Boston.” *Radiolnsight*. Accessed December 3, 2020. <https://radiolnsight.com/headlines/195812/a-gospel-light-shines-into-boston/>.

²⁰⁰ “iHeartMedia Relaunches Talk 1200 & Rumba 1430 Boston.” *Radiolnsight*. Accessed December 3, 2020. <https://radiolnsight.com/headlines/150008/iheartmedia-relaunches-talk-1200-rumba-1430-boston/>.

²⁰¹ “The Howie Carr Show.” WRKO-AM 680. Accessed December 4, 2020. <https://wrko.iheart.com/featured/the-howie-carr-show/>.

²⁰² McDonald, Michael P. “FAQ: Denominator.” United States Elections Project. Accessed May 4, 2020. <http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/faq/denominator>.

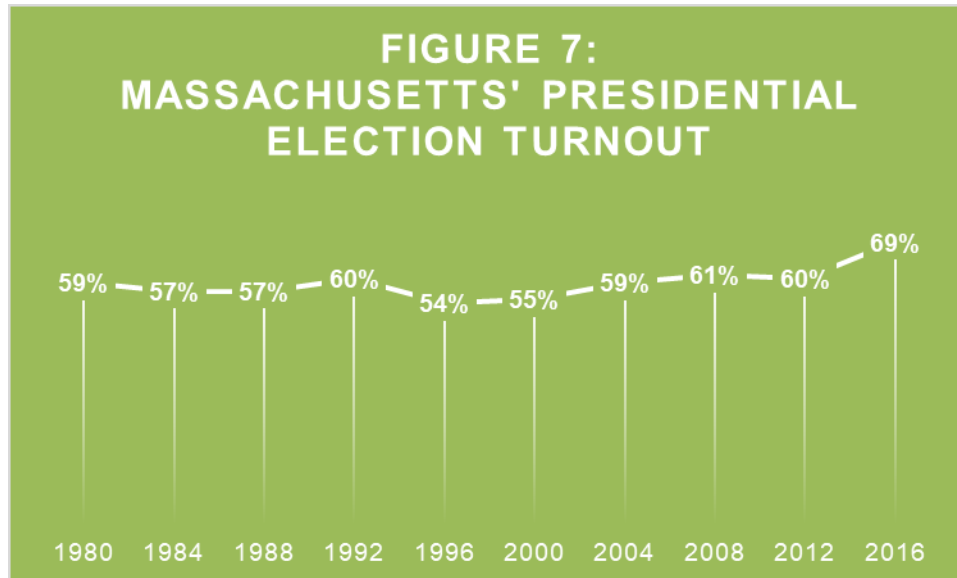
In 2018, 50 percent of Massachusetts' estimated voting-age population voted in the state's midterm election—a high also reached in 1990. The next-highest turnout years were 1982 and 1994, at 47 percent. The lowest-turnout election during this time period was in 1986, at 37 percent (see fig. 6).²⁰³



In the 2008, 2012 and 2016 presidential elections, Massachusetts saw turnouts of 61 percent, 60 percent and 69 percent, respectively. Fifty-nine percent of eligible voters cast ballots in 2004, an uptick from 55 percent in 2000. From 1980 to 1996, turnout ranged from 54 percent (1996) to 60 percent (1992) (see fig. 7).²⁰⁴

²⁰³ McDonald, Michael P. "1980-2014 November General Election." Google Sheets. United States Election Project. Accessed May 5, 2020. <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1or-N33CpOZYQ1UfZo0h8yGPSyz0Db-xjmZOXg3VJi-Q/edit?usp=sharing>.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.



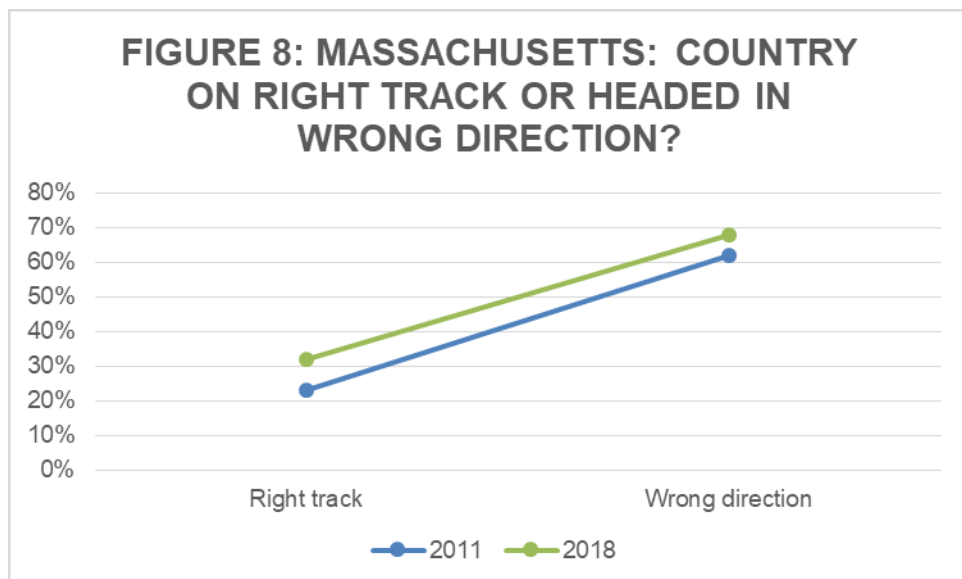
Massachusetts does not have a singular poll that has consistently taken the deep dives that Marquette has in Wisconsin; however, there are several polling efforts that can be analyzed. Like some of the Wisconsin polling projects, not all results for these polls are currently accessible. The UMass Poll, based at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, has provided political polling for Massachusetts, New Hampshire and national races since 2010. The University of Massachusetts Lowell has also conducted political polling since 2011. Suffolk University conducts both national-level polling and state-level polling, and has collected data on Massachusetts voters since 2004. These polls have mostly focused on specific races rather than general temperature checks of the state's electorate.

- **UMass Lowell:**

- **Direction of the country:** In September 2011, 62 percent of Massachusetts voters said the country was on the wrong track.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁵ "Massachusetts U.S. Senate Poll." UMass Lowell, October 3, 2011. https://www.uml.edu/docs/UML%20MA%20RV%20Topline%2020110928%20COMPLETE_tcm18-37756.pdf.

- **Voter qualifications:** Two polls conducted in 2014 found that 43 percent of Massachusetts voters believed other people can be trusted to make intelligent, informed voting decisions. Independents were essentially evenly split on this question; 51 percent of Democrats believed in other voters, compared to 44 percent of Republicans.²⁰⁶
- **UMass Amherst:**
 - **Direction of the country and state:** Seven years after the UMass Lowell poll mentioned above, a November 2018 poll found similar results: 68 percent of voters said the country was on the wrong track. However, the same percentage said the state was headed in the right direction under moderate Republican Gov. Charlie Baker (see fig. 8).²⁰⁷



²⁰⁶ "Voting Attitudes 2015." Center for Public Opinion UMass Lowell. UMass Lowell. Accessed May 5, 2020. <https://www.uml.edu/Research/public-opinion/polls/Voters-Opinions/default.aspx>.

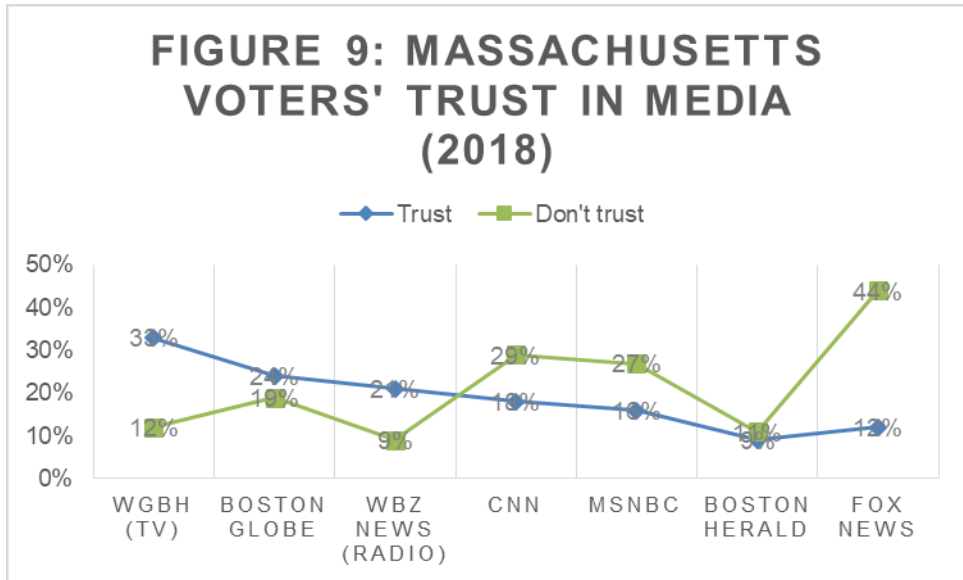
²⁰⁷ "New UMass Amherst Poll Looks at Impact of Trump and Media on National Discourse." UMass Amherst, November 26, 2018. <https://www.umass.edu/newsoffice/article/new-umass-amherst-poll-looks-impact-trump>.

- **Trump, the news media and violent incidents:** Sixty-one percent of those asked in November 2018 if Trump’s rhetoric had contributed to a series of violent incidents replied that they strongly or somewhat agreed. Another set of respondents was asked if they agreed the mass media had contributed to the violent incidents; 49 percent strongly or somewhat agreed. Fewer voters were undecided about Trump’s role than the media’s role, and more voters strongly disagreed that Trump contributed than those who strongly disagreed that the media contributed.²⁰⁸
- **Trust in media:** Fifty-four of voters surveyed in November 2018 said they trusted local radio and TV stations, compared to 21 percent who said they did not trust them. Thirty-three percent said they trust the Boston Globe and the Boston Herald (24 percent for the Globe, 9 percent for the Herald), compared to 30 percent who did not trust the newspapers. It should be noted that the Herald’s editorial section leans conservative while the Globe’s trends liberal.²⁰⁹ Eighteen percent of voters said they trust CNN, followed by 16 percent who said they trust MSNBC and 12 percent who said they trust Fox News. While less than 30 percent of voters said they didn’t trust MSNBC or CNN, 44 percent said they did not trust Fox News (see fig. 9).²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

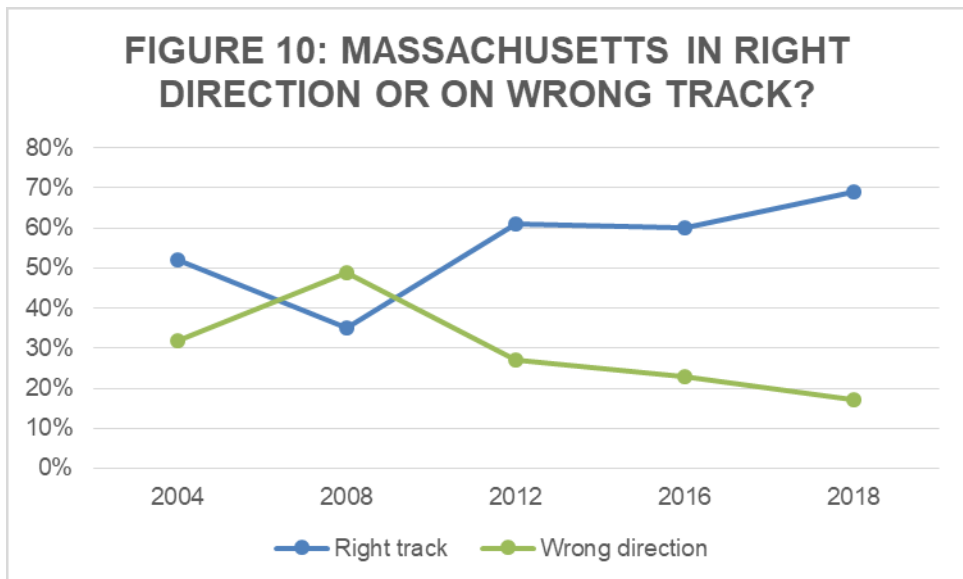
²⁰⁹ “Herald vs. Globe.” *Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project*, December 31, 2019. <https://www.journalism.org/2010/04/20/herald-vs-globe/>.

²¹⁰ “New UMass Amherst Poll Looks at Impact of Trump and Media on National Discourse.”



- **Suffolk University:**

- **Direction of the state:** With the exception of 2008, most Massachusetts voters have tended to think the state is on the right track in the 2000s and 2010s; the highest point for this measure was in 2018 (69 percent) and the lowest in 2008 (35 percent) (see fig. 10).²¹¹



²¹¹ "SUPRC Massachusetts Polling." Suffolk University Boston. Accessed May 5, 2020. <https://www.suffolk.edu/academics/research-at-suffolk/political-research-center/polls/massachusetts>.

- **Trust in media:** Asked which media source they trusted most, 25 percent of voters in an October 2014 poll named Fox News, followed by 15 percent who named NBC, 14 percent who were undecided and 13 percent who named CNN. Just 6 percent named MSNBC.²¹² Asked in April 2015, 24 percent named Fox News, followed by 11 percent each who named NBC and CNN, and 9 percent each who named ABC or were undecided. Seven percent named MSNBC.²¹³

Oklahoma

With an estimated population of about 3.9 million, Oklahoma has been a reliably red state in presidential elections for the last five decades, having voted for the Republican candidate 93 percent of the time from 1960 through 2016.

Like Massachusetts, Oklahoma has not seen the flood of partisan-backed media outlets that battleground states like Wisconsin have in recent years. A review for this analysis found few partisan-backed news sites in Oklahoma. *The American Ledger* published one blog post critical of Kevin Stitt, then the state's Republican candidate for governor, in 2018.²¹⁴ Metric Media operates 15 sites featuring generalized content.²¹⁵

²¹² "October 30, 2014: Massachusetts Governor, General Election, Ballot Questions & Statewide Issues." Suffolk University Political Research Center, October 30, 2014. https://www.suffolk.edu/-/media/suffolk/documents/academics/research-at-suffolk/suprc/polls/massachusetts2/2014/10_30_2014_marginals_pdf.txt.pdf?la=en&hash=03B749258812AE40CFB7C40A23241E0451C1F7CA.

²¹³ "April 22, 2015: Massachusetts Statewide Issues & Governor Baker 100 Days Scorecard." Suffolk University Political Research Center, April 22, 2015. https://www.suffolk.edu/-/media/suffolk/documents/academics/research-at-suffolk/suprc/polls/massachusetts2/2015/4_22_2015_marginals_pdf.txt.pdf?la=en&hash=9C5A64DDADC24CCAC065BF709C5EFEA0D2B8BDD0.

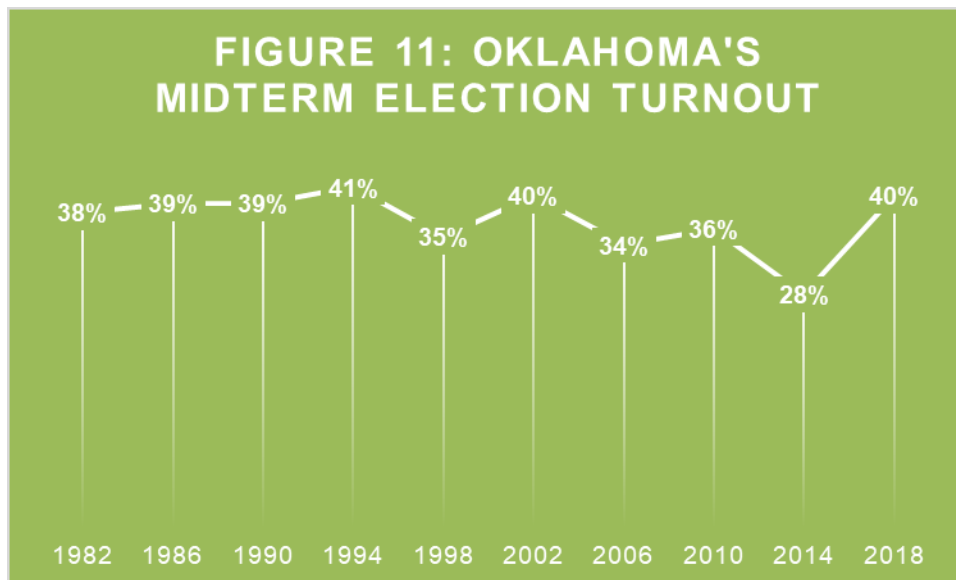
²¹⁴ "Stitt's Company Faced Multiple Sexual Discrimination Suits." *American Ledger*, October 17, 2018. <https://american-ledger.com/accountability/stitts-company-faced-multiple-sexual-discrimination-suits/>

²¹⁵ Metric Media. "Metric Media."

The Oklahoma Conservative, a quarterly print publication with an online news site, bills itself as “Oklahoma’s conservative newspaper since 1979” and, once a year, ranks state legislators on its “conservative index.”²¹⁶ *The Oklahoma Observer*, which describes itself as “the state’s leading source for progressive news and commentary,” started publishing in 1969.²¹⁷

Similar to Massachusetts, Oklahoma does not calculate voter turnout based on estimated eligible voters; instead, the state bases its estimates on the number of registered voters. Again, I have used data from the United States Election Project to assess turnout.

Oklahoma, like Wisconsin and Massachusetts, saw an increase in voter turnout in the 2018 midterm election, at 40 percent—the highest it had been since 1994. In the elections in between, turnout varied: 28 percent in 2014, 36 percent in 2010 and 34 percent in 2006 (see fig. 11).²¹⁸

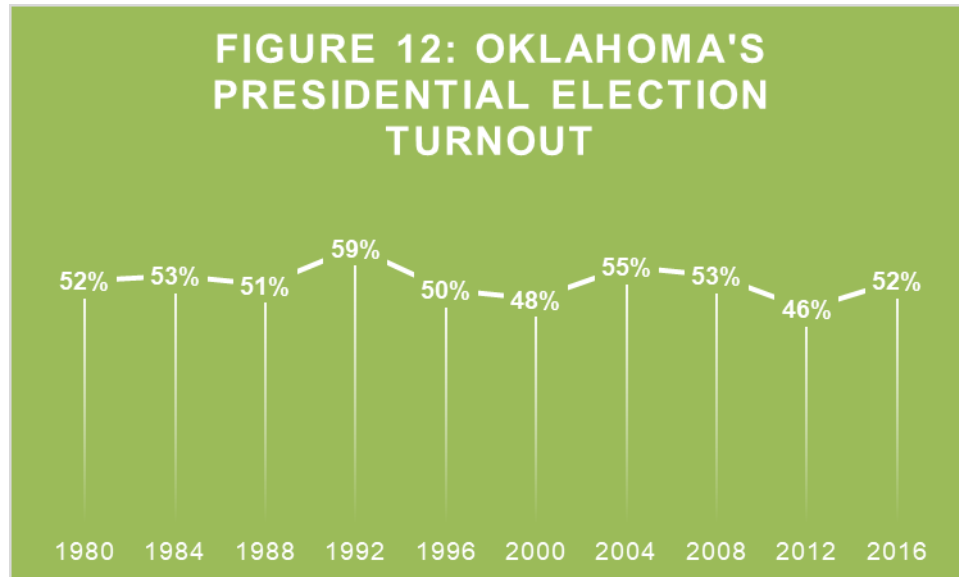


²¹⁶ “Subscribe To The Oklahoma Constitution.” *The Oklahoma Constitution*. Accessed December 4, 2020. <http://oklahomaconstitution.com/ns.php?subscribe=1>.

²¹⁷ “The Oklahoma Observer.” Facebook. Accessed December 5, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/OkObserver/>; “The Oklahoma Observer (Oklahoma City) 1969-Current.” The Library of Congress. Accessed December 5, 2020. <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn78005184/>.

²¹⁸ McDonald. “1980-2014 November General Election.”

In the 2008 presidential election, 53 percent of Oklahoma’s voting-age population turned out, followed by 46 percent in 2012 and 52 percent in 2016. From 1984 to 2004, turnout hit a high point in 1992 at 59 percent, and a low point in 2012 at 46 percent (see fig. 12).²¹⁹



Founded in 2004, SoonerPoll — an independent, nonpartisan poll run by ShapardResearch — has conducted public opinion research in Oklahoma.²²⁰ The poll is regarded as “the most respected in the state” and conducts both on its own and in partnership with news outlets.²²¹ SoonerPoll has measured voters’ perceptions of state government, news media and political parties:

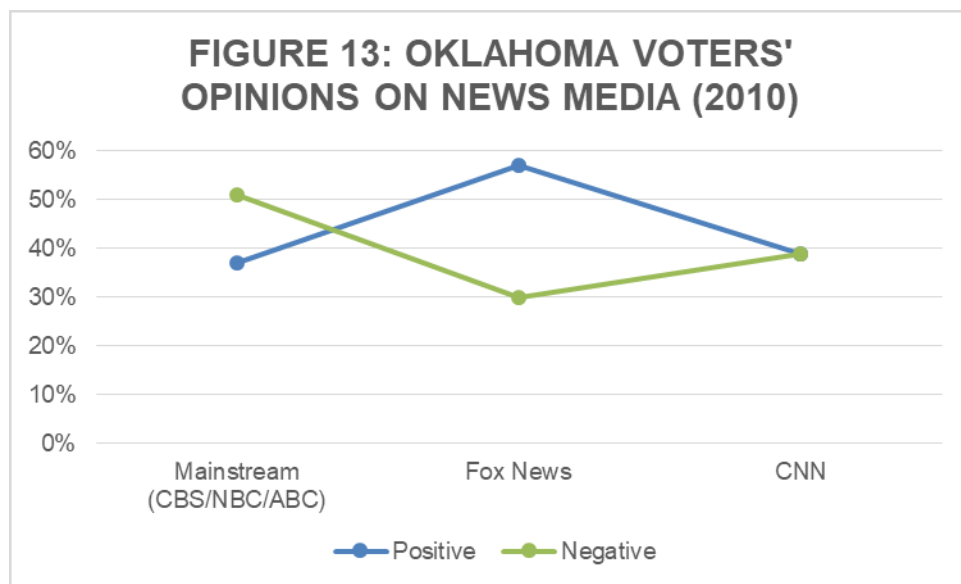
- **Perceptions of news sources:** A poll conducted in May and June 2010 found that 51 percent of voters had a negative opinion about “mainstream media” (examples given were ABC, NBC and CBS), while 37 percent had a

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ “History of SoonerPoll.” SoonerPoll. Accessed May 3, 2020. <https://soonerpoll.com/history/>.

²²¹ Ibid; Weigel, David. “Why Oklahoma Could Be a Super Tuesday Surprise for Sanders.” *The Washington Post*. WP Company, February 17, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/02/17/why-oklahoma-could-be-a-super-tuesday-surprise-for-sanders/>.

positive opinion. Voters were evenly split on their opinions of CNN's coverage, but positive opinions of Fox News outweighed negative opinions by 27 points. Fifty-two percent of Democrats had a positive opinion of mainstream outlets, compared to 21 percent of Republicans. Seventy-three percent of Republicans had a positive impression of Fox News, compared to 43.8 percent of Democrats.²²² Following the November 2004 election, all voters thought news media had covered the two candidates in the U.S. Senate fairly, although they felt coverage had slightly favored the Democratic candidate (see fig. 13).²²³



- **Opinions of political parties:** In March 2011, 55 percent of voters favored the Oklahoma Republican Party, compared to 39 percent of voters who

²²² Burt, Wesley. "In Oklahoma Political Ideology and Perceptions of Mainstream Media Go Hand in Hand." SoonerPoll, September 8, 2010. <https://soonerpoll.com/in-oklahoma-political-ideology-and-perception-of-media-go-hand-in-hand/>.

²²³ Shapard, Bill. "Oklahomans Satisfied Overall with Outcome of Elections." SoonerPoll, November 26, 2004. <https://soonerpoll.com/oklahomans-satisfied-overall-with-outcome-of-elections/>.

avored the state Democratic Party.²²⁴ But in May 2018, Democratic voting enthusiasm (52 percent) was approaching Republican enthusiasm levels (54 percent).²²⁵ Between August 2017 and January 2018, the percentage of voters who wanted Republicans running state government dropped by about 10 points, to 46 percent; however, Republicans still topped Democrats, who had the faith of 33 percent of voters.²²⁶

- **Direction of the state:** Fifty-one percent of voters in October 2016 said the state was moving in the wrong direction, compared to 38 percent who said it was on the right track.²²⁷ A poll conducted in July 2016 found that Oklahomans were overall dissatisfied with government; just 39 percent viewed Republican Gov. Mary Fallin favorably down 16 points from November 2015 and down 32 points from her all-time high in May-June 2013), while 36 percent viewed Democratic President Barack Obama favorably. The state legislature scored poorly too, viewed favorably by 34 percent of voters.²²⁸ Amber Integrated, a public affairs firm founded in 2019, also conducts statewide polling in Oklahoma, and has measured voters' perceptions of news media and elected officials:

²²⁴ Burt, Wesley. "Revisiting Voters' Changing Opinions of Political Parties." SoonerPoll, March 16, 2011. <https://soonerpoll.com/revisiting-voters%e2%80%99-changing-opinions-of-political-parties/>.

²²⁵ Shapard, Bill. "Democrats Surge in Enthusiasm Compared to Prior Years, Catch up with Republicans." SoonerPoll, June 26, 2018. <https://soonerpoll.com/democrats-surge-in-enthusiasm-compared-to-prior-years-catch-up-with-republicans/>.

²²⁶ Shapard, Bill. "Voters Losing Faith in Republicans Although Still Favored in Running State Government." SoonerPoll, February 17, 2018. <https://soonerpoll.com/voters-losing-faith-in-republicans-although-still-favored-in-running-state-government/>.

²²⁷ Dougherty, Justin. SoonerPoll, October 13, 2016. <https://soonerpoll.com/news9newson6-are-state-leaders-taking-oklahoma-in-the-right-direction/>.

²²⁸ Krehbiel, Randy. "TulsaWorld: Poll Shows Growing Dissatisfaction with State Lawmakers." SoonerPoll, August 14, 2016. <https://soonerpoll.com/tulsaworld-poll-shows-growing-dissatisfaction-with-state-lawmakers/>.

- Preferred news sources:** In April 2020, 58 percent of Oklahoma voters said they prefer watching news on TV, followed by 16 percent who go online, 9 percent who listen to the radio and 7 percent who read a newspaper. Republicans and Democrats had relatively similar news consumption habits with the exception of TV and radio; 11 percent of Republicans prefer radio compared to 6 percent of Democrats, and 64 percent of Democrats prefer TV compared to 56 percent of Republicans.²²⁹
- Handling of the coronavirus pandemic:** Trump, federal agencies, Republican Gov. Kevin Stitt and the state legislature all received high marks for their handling of the coronavirus pandemic, with approval ratings all topping 60 percent in April 2020. However, only 44 percent approved of the way Congress handled the pandemic, and 49 percent approved of the national news media's approach. Oklahoma news media fared better, with a 71 percent approval rating. Republicans and Democrats were sharply divided over the national news media's approach (72 percent of Democrats approved, compared to 33 percent of Republicans), but the gap was smaller for local media (8 points, with more Democrats in approval). Democrats and Republicans were even on their approval of Congress, but sharply divided on Trump (a 61-point gap, with more Republicans in approval). More Republicans approved of state officials' handling than Democrats, but all by margins of less than 10 points.²³⁰

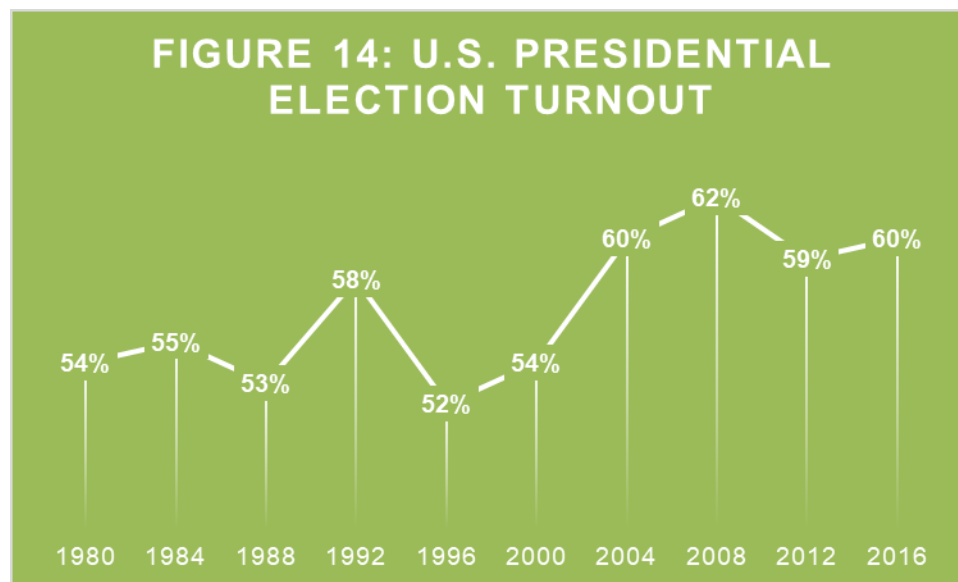
²²⁹ Weintz, Alex. "Oklahoma Voters Weigh-in on Coronavirus Pandemic and Response." AMBER INTEGRATED, April 7, 2020. <https://amberintegrated.com/blog/covid19poll>.

²³⁰ Ibid.

United States

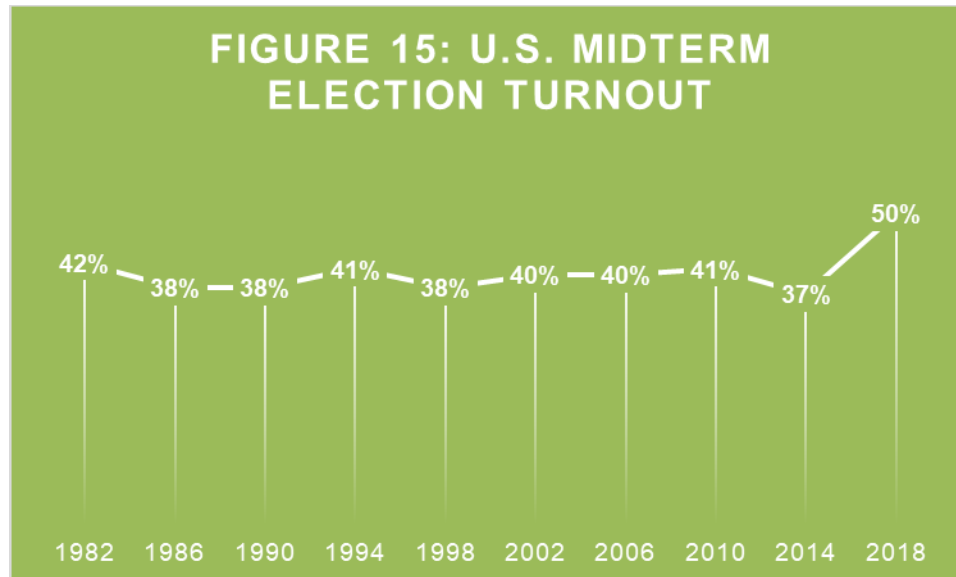
The United States has an estimated population of 328 million people. Since 1969, the population has grown by 125 million. In that time period, the country has elected six Republican presidents and three Democratic presidents. Congress has been controlled entirely by Democrats 47 percent of that time, by Republicans 31 percent of the time and under split control 22 percent of the time. Congress was under divided control for much of the 1980s, and again in the late 2000s and the 2010s.

National turnout in presidential elections since 1972 was at its lowest in 1996, at 52 percent, followed by 1988 at 53 percent, 1980 and 2000 at 54 percent, and 1996 at 55 percent. Turnout peaked at 62 percent in 2008, followed by 60 percent in 2004 and 2016, 59 percent in 2012, and 58 percent in 1992 (see fig. 14).²³¹



²³¹ McDonald, Michael P. "National General Election VEP Turnout Rates, 1789-Present." United States Elections Project. Accessed May 3, 2020. <http://www.electproject.org/national-1789-present>.

National turnout in midterm elections since 1970 cratered in 2014, at 37 percent, followed by 1986, 1990 and 1998 at 38 percent, 1972 and 1976 at 39 percent, and 2002 and 2006 at 40 percent. Midterm turnout reached its peak in 2018 at 50 percent, followed by 47 percent in 1970, 42 percent in 1982 and 41 percent in 1994 (see fig. 15).²³²



The rise, fall and subsequent rise of partisan and ideological news outlets at the national level was largely laid out earlier in this chapter. With that knowledge in hand, it is worth examining recent studies of news consumption and attitudes toward the news media.

Pew Research Center

A Pew Research Center study released in January 2020 found that “Republicans and Democrats place their trust in two nearly inverse news media environments.”²³³ In a

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Jurkowitz, Mark, Amy Mitchell, Elisa Shearer, and Mason Walker. “U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election: A Nation Divided.” *Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project*, January 24, 2020. <https://www.journalism.org/2020/01/24/u-s-media-polarization-and-the-2020-election-a-nation-divided/>.

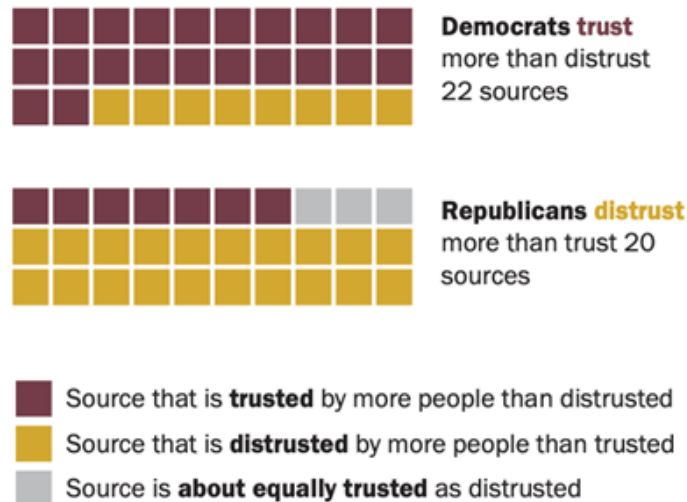
survey listing 30 news media sources, Democrats trusted, more than distrusted, 22 of them — while Republicans distrusted, more than trusted, 20 of them (see fig. 2).²³⁴

“Another way to look at the diverging partisan views of media credibility: Almost half of the sources included in this report (13) are trusted by at least 33% of Democrats, but only two are trusted by at least 33% of Republicans.” (see fig. 16)²³⁵

Democrats express more trust of most news sources asked about; Republicans express more distrust

Number of sources more trusted and more distrusted for political and election news, among 30 asked about

30 SOURCES:



Note: Partisans include leaners.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019.

“U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election: A Nation Divided”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 16: U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election. Pew Research Center.

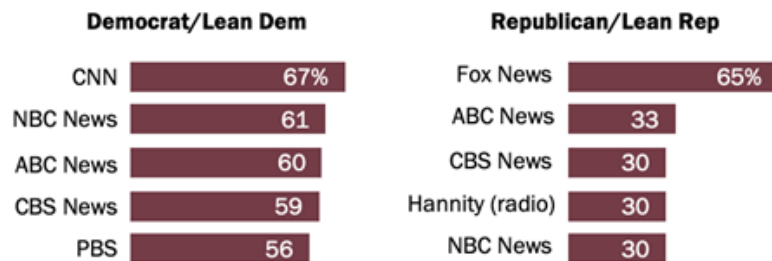
²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Ibid.

The study also found that more than 50 percent of Democrats trusted five mainstream news sources, but Fox News was the only news source to top 50 percent (at 65 percent) for Republicans (see fig. 17). Compared to a similar Pew study conducted in 2014, Republicans' distrust grew for 15 of the 20 sources asked about in both surveys, while Democrats' trust changed "considerably less."²³⁶

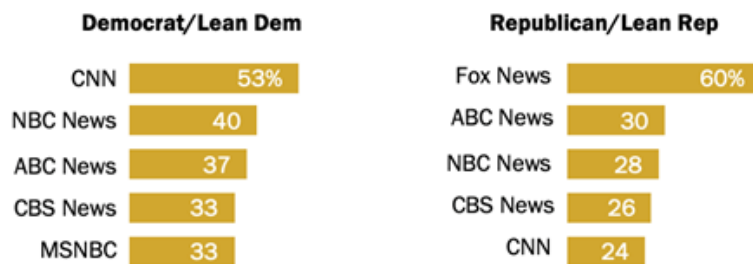
Republicans place trust in one source, Fox News, far more than any other ...

% who trust each source for political and election news (first 5 shown)



... and rely on Fox News far more for political news

% who got political and election news from each source in the past week (first 5 shown)



Note: Order of outlets does not necessarily indicate statistically significant differences.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019.

"U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election: A Nation Divided"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 17: U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election. Pew Research Center.

²³⁶ Jurkowitz, et al. "Political Polarization & Media Habits." *Pew Research Center's Journalism Project*, October 21, 2014. <https://www.journalism.org/2014/10/21/political-polarization-media-habits/>.

The 2020 Pew study found that Fox News and CNN were the country's top sources for political news—39 percent of Americans received political news from them. They were followed closely by NBC News, ABC News and CBS News, at 34, 33, and 30 percent respectively, then by MSNBC at 24 percent and National Public Radio at 20 percent. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* were named by 20 percent and 17 percent of those surveyed. The study found that about 20 percent of voters in each party are in a “tight” political news bubble (primarily consuming news from a source with a similarly-minded political audience).²³⁷

A 2014 Pew report identified 33 ideological outlets providing state government coverage in 25 states, all but one associated with Republican or conservative leanings. At the time, these reporters accounted for approximately 2 percent of all full-time statehouse press.²³⁸

In 2018, more than two-thirds of Americans told Pew they had participated in politics within the last five years (“by volunteering for or donating to campaigns, attending protests or meetings, contacting officials or expressing their views on social media”). The likelihood of participating in a political activity was about equal between the two parties, but the parties differed in the types of activities in which they were most likely to engage.²³⁹ A 2009 Pew study, which presented different measures of time,

²³⁷ Jurkowitz, et al. “U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election: A Nation Divided.”

²³⁸ Enda, Jodi. “At the Statehouse, Ideological Press Tries to Fill a Void in News Coverage.” Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center, July 15, 2014. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/15/at-the-statehouse-ideological-press-tries-to-fill-void-in-news-coverage/>.

²³⁹ “The Public, the Political System and American Democracy.” Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy, April 26, 2018. <https://www.people-press.org/2018/04/26/10-political-engagement-knowledge-and-the-midterms/>.

found that nearly two-thirds of Americans had participated in politics within the last year.²⁴⁰ The 2009 survey did not provide party-specific data on participation.

Gallup

Gallup has tracked the American public's trust in news media since 1973, when it was measured at 68 percent. It hit its apex in 1977, at 72 percent, and declined gradually until 1997, when it fell to 53 percent. Since 1997, the highest point for trust in media was in 1999, at 55 percent. Trust in media reached its lowest point in 2017, at 33 percent, then rebounded to 41 percent in 2019.²⁴¹ In 1972, 75 percent of Americans surveyed by Gallup indicated a great deal or fair amount of trust in government; this measure was at 50 percent toward the end of 2019.²⁴²

Other polls

There are, of course, far more national polling resources available than there are state-specific studies. The following polls were compiled by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research:

- **Presidential approval:** Since 1970, the lowest approval ratings any presidents received were Republican President George W. Bush, at 19 percent in February 2008, and Republican President Richard Nixon, at 23 percent in January 2004. Other presidents' lowest ratings were in the high 20s to high 30s. Bush also claims the highest approval rating of this set, at 92 percent in October 2001. His father, Republican President George. H.W.

²⁴⁰ Smith, Aaron, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry Brady. "The Internet and Civic Engagement." Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech. Pew Research Center, September 1, 2009. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2009/09/01/the-internet-and-civic-engagement/>.

²⁴¹ "Media Use and Evaluation." Gallup.com. Gallup, March 31, 2020. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1663/media-use-evaluation.aspx>.

²⁴² "Trust in Government." Gallup.com. Gallup, March 30, 2020. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/5392/trust-government.aspx>.

Bush, came close behind at 89 percent in February 1991. All other presidents' highest approval ratings fell in the high 60s to high 70s, with the exception of Donald Trump, whose highest documented approval rating was 49 percent in March 2019.²⁴³

- **Media in the 1980s and 1990s:**

- In 1979, 80 percent of Americans said the news media provide information that is essential to democracy.²⁴⁴ In 1976, 86 percent said they trusted the news media “some” or “a lot,” and in 1981, 85 percent said the major news media did a good or excellent job reporting on major issues.²⁴⁵
- In 1989, 62 percent of Americans rated the ethics and honesty of members of the news media as “good” or “excellent,” and the previous year, 46 percent said they believed media coverage was fair (20 percent perceived a liberal bias and 10 percent perceived a conservative bias).²⁴⁶ Also in 1987, Americans were relatively split

²⁴³ “Presidential Approval Highs & Lows.” Roper Center Presidential Highs & Lows. Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. Accessed May 3, 2020. <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/presidential-approval/highslows>.

²⁴⁴ Public Agenda Foundation, Public Agenda Foundation Poll: December 1979, Question 17, USPAF.80SP.R017, Public Agenda Foundation, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1979), Dataset, DOI: {doi}.

²⁴⁵ Newsweek, Gallup/Newsweek Poll # 1976-946K: Political Attitudes Survey (Newsweek Version), Question 24, USGALNEW.946NW.Q025G, Gallup Organization, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1976), Dataset, DOI: {doi}; ABC News/Washington Post, ABC News/Washington Post Poll: July 1981, Question 48, USABCWP.81JUL.R32, ABC News/Washington Post, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1981), Dataset, DOI: {doi}.

²⁴⁶ ABC News/Washington Post, National Poll, May, 1989, Question 24, USABCWP.352.R19B, Chilton Research Services, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1989), Dataset, DOI: {doi}; Time Magazine, Yankelovich/Time Magazine Poll: Bush/Israeli-Palestinian Conflict/AIDS, Question 9, USYANKCS.884705.R07, Yankelovich Clancy Shulman, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1988), Dataset, DOI: {doi}.

between TV (35 percent) and newspapers (33 percent) as the most reliable sources for news; radio was named by just 7 percent.²⁴⁷

- A decade later, 66 percent of those polled said they tended to believe the news media when government officials denied reports.²⁴⁸ In 1999, 45 percent of Americans rated the news media's performance as good or excellent, and another 35 percent rated it as fair, and 56 percent said they trusted the news media somewhat or a great deal.²⁴⁹ The previous year, 42 percent of Americans saw TV news as the most biased (42 percent), followed by newspapers (23 percent); 8 percent said all media was biased—but, while 46 percent described local news media as “general good” or “informative,” only 17 percent said the same of national news media. At the same time, 6 percent described local news media as “over the top” or “biased,” while 23 percent said the same of national news media.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁷ Opinion Research Corporation, Opinion Research Corporation Poll: July 1987, Question 2, USORC.87AUG.R2A, Opinion Research Corporation, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1987), Dataset, DOI: {doi}.

²⁴⁸ ABC News, ABC News Poll: News Media, Question 12, USABC.021297.R04, ABC News, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1997), Dataset, DOI: {doi}.

²⁴⁹ Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, Freedom Forum First Amendment Center Poll: September 1999, Question 1, USCSRA.99ART.R01, Center for Survey Research & Analysis (CSRA) at the University of Connecticut, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1999), Dataset, DOI: {doi}; US Census Monitoring Board's Presidential Members, US Census Monitoring Board's Presidential Members Poll: September 1999, Question 8, USBELDEN.99CENS.R05D, Belden, Russonello & Stewart, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1999), Dataset, DOI: {doi}.

²⁵⁰ American Society of Newspaper Editors, American Society of Newspaper Editors Poll: April 1998, Question 13, USURBAN.98NEWS.R06, Urban & Associates, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1998), Dataset, DOI: {doi}; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Pew Research Center Poll: Media Consumption, 1998, Question 56, USPSRA.98JUN8.R19, Princeton Survey Research Associates, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1998), Dataset, DOI: {doi}.

- Media in the 2010s:** In 2012, most Americans (57 percent) said they received their political news on television and from cable news networks. This was followed by 22 percent who frequented newspapers and magazines (online or in print) and 9 percent who named radio.²⁵¹ These In 2017, more Americans thought the news media were immoral (30 percent) than moral (24 percent), but 44 percent believed neither label applied.²⁵² A September 2018 poll found that 54 percent of Americans trusted news media to tell them the truth, as opposed to 30 percent who trusted Donald Trump more.²⁵³ In August 2018, 65 percent of Americans saw the news media as an important part of democracy, while 26 percent felt the phrase “enemy of the people” came closer to their view.²⁵⁴ The same year, 70 percent of Americans said they had no confidence, or very little confidence, in the news media.²⁵⁵

Analysis

²⁵¹ Suffolk University Political Research Center, Suffolk University Political Research Center Poll: March 2012, Question 49, USSUFF.032612.R56, Suffolk University Political Research Center, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2012), Dataset, DOI: {doi}.

²⁵² American Press Institute (API), American Press Institute (API)/Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research Poll: “My” Media Versus “The” Media: Trust in News Depends on Which News Media You Mean, Question 21, USAP.052417N.R09CA, The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research/American Press Institute (API), (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2017), Dataset, DOI: {doi}.

²⁵³ Quinnipiac University Polling Institute, Quinnipiac University Poll, Question 9, 31115464.00007, Quinnipiac University Polling Institute, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2018), Dataset, DOI: {doi}.

²⁵⁴ Quinnipiac University Polling Institute, Quinnipiac University Poll, Question 11, 31115417.00010, Quinnipiac University Polling Institute, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2018), Dataset, DOI: {doi}.

²⁵⁵ PBS NewsHour/NPR, NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist Poll, Question 3, 31115385.00037, Marist College Institute for Public Opinion, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2018), Dataset, DOI: {doi}.

Much of the existing literature can be boiled down to this premise: the prevalence of partisan media can be associated with increased political engagement; however, it can at the same time be associated with increased political polarization. The cases analyzed in this review neither confirm nor negate this premise; however, they do contribute details and data points that could be useful in further reviews.

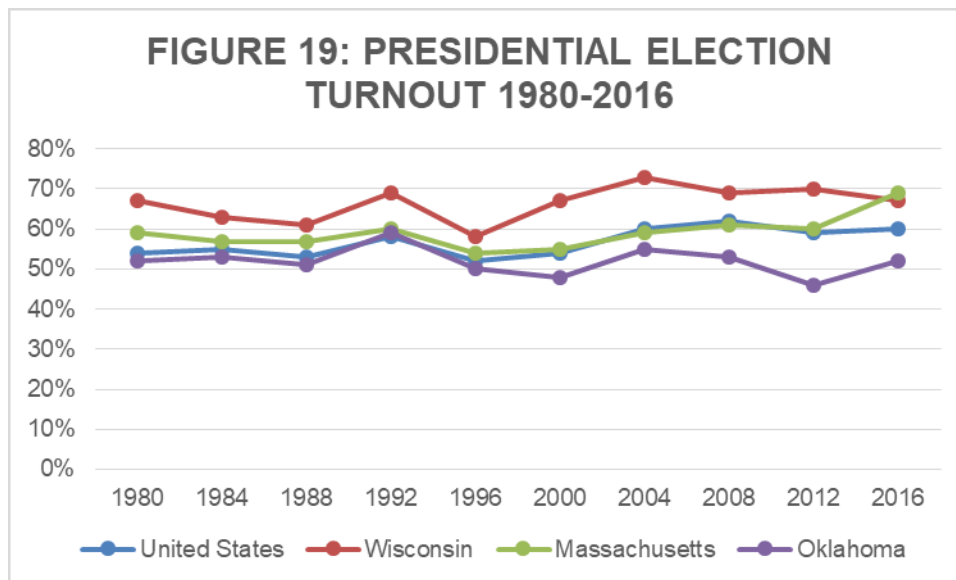
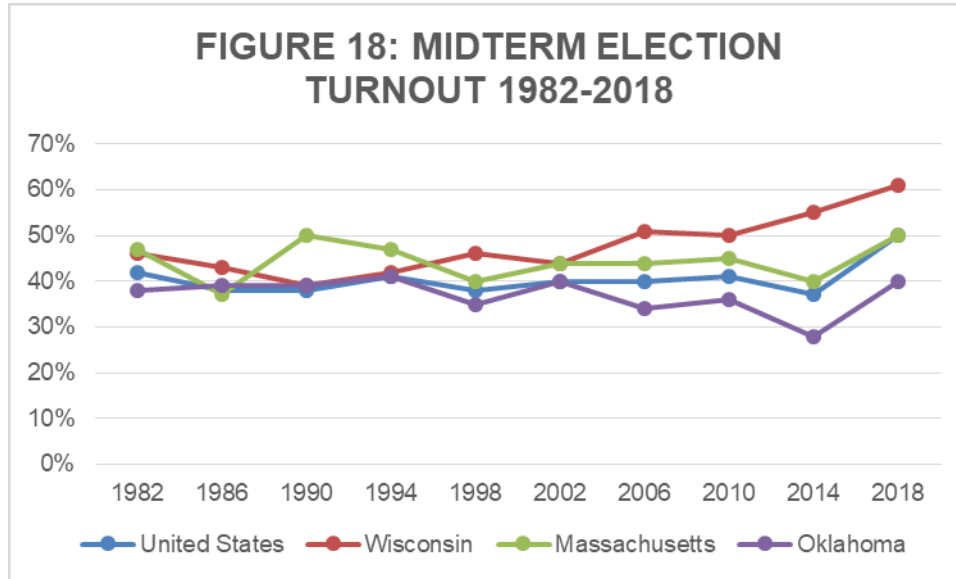
The scope of this review is, of course, limited by the case studies, as only one of the three states has had an abundance of partisan media coverage in the last decade. Wisconsin also has more consistently available, in-depth, statewide polling data than Massachusetts and Oklahoma.

It is impossible to know whether participation or polarization would have been affected in Massachusetts or Oklahoma had either state seen more partisan news coverage during the same time period. With the data assessed in this study, it is also impossible to isolate the presence of partisan media as the sole factor contributing to any given change in political behavior at a state or national level.

However, the lack of concrete conclusions does not preclude the finding of observations worth further exploration:

- **Election turnout:** Both Massachusetts and Wisconsin have tended to outpace the United States in both midterm election turnout and presidential election turnout, while Oklahoma has largely kept pace with the nation—until the 2000s, when it started to fall behind. All three states, and the U.S. as a whole, saw an uptick in midterm turnout from 2014 to 2018. Among the case studies, Wisconsin had the only instance of a decrease in turnout in the 2016 presidential election. While Wisconsin has more partisan news outlets than the other states in this

study and its turnout generally outpaces the others, there is not sufficient evidence to assert a strong connection between partisan media and voter turnout (see figs. 18 and 19).



- **Attitudes toward media:** Wisconsin voters would appear to have more trust in the news media than voters at the national level, although it is difficult to compare polls not conducted in the exact same time frame and with differences in the

wording of questions. It is clear from polls that Massachusetts and Oklahoma voters trust their local news media far more than they do national outlets. Overall, trust in the traditional or “mainstream” media has declined at every level over the last several decades, and the trend does not appear to be on a course to reverse. Over a period of four decades, the percentage of Americans who saw the news media as essential or important to democracy fell 15 points. Data from Oklahoma, the “red” state in this study, indicates that Fox News—a conservative media source—is trusted more than other sources that are considered to be neutral. Data from Massachusetts, the “blue” state in the study, indicates that voters tend to trust local news media over national cable TV networks, and neutral or liberal outlets over conservative sources. It would be useful for this study, to have similar information available about the attitudes of Wisconsin voters.

- **Perception of the direction of the state and country:** For most of the last decade, Wisconsin voters have perceived the state as being headed in the right direction; the perception that the state was on the wrong track led from 2015 to 2017, and voters were relatively evenly split at two points in 2018 and 2019. In the last decade, the percentage of Wisconsin voters who believe their state is on the right track has not caught up to the percentage of Massachusetts voters who believed that of their state in 2018. While Wisconsin’s right direction/wrong track numbers have been nearly evenly split, Massachusetts has been trending upward with a relatively large gap favoring those who believe the state is moving in the right direction since 2008. Oklahoma does not have adequate data

available for an effective comparison. While this is not enough to conclusively link partisan media consumption to polarization in attitudes toward state government, it is worth noting that Wisconsin—a swing state with a significant number of partisan news publications—is far more divided on this measure than Massachusetts, a generally reliably blue state with fewer partisan news sources, comparatively.

- **Partisan divisions:** Both state and national data reviewed in this study point to stark and growing differences in the way Democrats and Republicans view the world. This is especially true of the way the two parties perceive news media. It is clear that the overall level of trust and value in traditional news media is on a downward slope, and that the strongest negative perceptions are held by Republicans. While Democrats tend to trust a larger variety of news sources a moderate amount, Republicans have trust in very few—and instead place the most trust in a cable network that hews conservative. Both parties, however, still tend to favor local news sources over national outlets—but in spite of that, local newsrooms are shrinking and disappearing.

Conclusion

Despite a centuries-old commitment to objectivity as a journalistic standard, the growth of partisan and ideologically influenced news in the last several decades is not a first for the United States. It is, however, a relatively new phenomenon for voters to have a choice between “objective” or “traditional” news media and news media that promote or discourage a particular point of view. This choice has been increasingly

available at a national level since the 1980s, primarily via TV and radio. State-based coverage with a partisan or ideological influence has become more prevalent in the 2000s and 2010s, and continues to evolve into the 2020s—but some states have experienced this more than others.

Existing literature supports the theory that an increased availability of partisan news is connected to heightened political engagement, along with heightened polarization. The case studies in this thesis do not contradict this theory, but they also do not add significant evidence to strengthen it.

Several questions remain: Has partisan media driven polarization, or has it emerged in response to political cleavages? What effect might state-level partisan media have in reliably “red” or “blue” states like Oklahoma and Massachusetts, as opposed to a swing state like Wisconsin? Although many conservative/Republican outlets were formed because of a perceived bias against conservative viewpoints in the mainstream news media, liberal/Democratic outlets have not emerged in response until relatively recently—how will that change the news media landscape and its effects on voters? Do voters value objectivity over reinforcement? Do voters value being exposed to perspectives different from their own?

Further research on this topic would benefit from a broader sample including additional states that could be held up in comparison to the benchmarks in this study—in particular, states with extensive data documenting voters’ electoral participation, attitudes toward media, attitudes about political discussions, and perceptions of government. It would be helpful to study a mix of “red,” “blue,” and “purple” states, as well as a mix of states with varying degrees of partisan media saturation.

The relationship between modern partisan media and political engagement is not likely to be a static or easily defined data point in the near future. It will warrant continued observation as both the political and media environments evolve.

Chapter Three: The Press and Polarization in Wisconsin

'Wisconsin, not Washington, D.C.'

As governor of Wisconsin, Scott Walker reminded voters and lawmakers on multiple occasions that “this is Wisconsin, not Washington, D.C.” in an effort to inspire confidence that, even at its most challenging moments, the Badger State was above the perceived dysfunction of politics in the nation’s capital.²⁵⁶ “We actually get things done here in this state by working together,” Walker, a Republican, said following a 2018 meeting during which he sought support from state Senate Republicans for a number of initiatives he had proposed ahead of a reelection bid.²⁵⁷

The truth is more complicated than the catchphrase. While dysfunction in Madison has earned national headlines since Democrat Tony Evers defeated Walker in November 2018, polarization plagued Wisconsin government even before it faced the challenges of having a Democrat heading the executive branch while Republicans held control of the legislature. A National Conference of State Legislatures review of 10 state legislatures during their 2015-16 sessions found that Wisconsin was one of five states that were “substantially more polarized” than Congress, based on the Shor-McCarty state legislative ideology measure.²⁵⁸ A July 2019 review, also based on the Shor-

²⁵⁶ “Governor Walker Releases Statement After Meeting with Senate Republican Caucus.” The Wheeler Report, March 7, 2018. Office of the Wisconsin Governor.

http://www.thewheelerreport.com/wheeler_docs/files/0307walker_01.pdf; Loyola, Mario, and Jake Curtis. “Scott Walker’s Call to Arms.” *National Review*, December 22, 2016. <https://www.nationalreview.com/2016/12/federal-state-balance-walker-letter/>.

²⁵⁷ Bauer, Scott. “Walker Confident Juvenile Justice, Other Bills Will Pass.” AP NEWS. Associated Press, March 7, 2018. <https://apnews.com/article/c788c71745004495b1055807f784fe9b>; Opoien, Jessie. “Scott Walker Proposes Sweeping Agenda for Wisconsin in Pre-Election State of the State Address.” *The Capital Times*, January 25, 2018. https://madison.com/ct/news/local/govt-and-politics/election-matters/scott-walker-proposes-sweeping-agenda-for-wisconsin-in-pre-election-state-of-the-state-address/article_71aad9f5-851e-5dd3-bb50-e333ffcf37a7.html.

²⁵⁸ Shor, Boris, and Nolan McCarty. “The Ideological Mapping of American Legislatures.” *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 3 (2011): 530–51. doi:10.1017/S0003055411000153; Kurtz, Karl, Brian

McCarty measure, ranked Wisconsin as the 11th most polarized state in the country, and an October 2020 analysis found that Wisconsin had the least active full-time state legislature in the nation since state governments started taking steps to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁵⁹ Wisconsin has been presented as a cautionary tale of what happens when Republican-led legislatures fight to limit the powers of Democratic governors as they seek to limit the spread of the coronavirus: “You don’t even need to look any further than the explosion of cases in Wisconsin to see how damaging (a court ruling limiting a governor’s emergency powers) is,” former Centers for Disease Control director Dr. Tom Frieden said in an NBC News report highlighting these battles in Wisconsin and Michigan.²⁶⁰

Much research has already been conducted to identify factors that contribute to polarization and gridlock. In this final chapter, I will focus on Wisconsin and, while acknowledging other significant events and factors, will assess the role that changes to the state’s media landscape may have played in Wisconsin’s ascent to becoming one of the country’s most polarized, least active state governments.

From La Follette to McCarthy

Weberg, Gary Moncrief, Lynda Powell, and Peverill Squire. Rep. State Legislative Policymaking in an Age of Political Polarization. National Conference of State Legislators, February 2018.

https://www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/Documents/About_State_Legislatures/Partisanship_030818.pdf.

²⁵⁹ Weinschenk, Aaron. “How Polarized Are Wisconsin’s Lawmakers?” *WisContext*. PBS Wisconsin and Wisconsin Public Radio, July 17, 2019. <https://www.wiscontext.org/how-polarized-are-wisconsins-lawmakers>; “Review Finds Wisconsin Has Least Active Full-Time Legislature in Nation since Pandemic.” *WisPolitics.com*, October 6, 2020. <https://www.wispolitics.com/2020/review-finds-wisconsin-has-least-active-full-time-legislature-in-nation-since-pandemic/>.

²⁶⁰ Kaplan, Adiel. “As Covid Cases Soar, GOP State Lawmakers Keep Fighting to Limit Governors’ Power to Respond.” NBC News, November 14, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/covid-cases-soar-gop-state-lawmakers-keep-fighting-limit-governors-n1247801>.

Wisconsin's politics have long encompassed ideologies at opposite ends of the spectrum. Robert "Fighting Bob" La Follette, a national leader in the Progressive movement, served as a congressman, governor, and U.S. senator, and has been called "the most celebrated figure in Wisconsin history."²⁶¹ Twenty-two years after La Follette's death, Wisconsin elected Joseph McCarthy—one of the most reviled figures in the state's and nation's history—to the Senate, ousting La Follette's son, who had carried on his father's progressive legacy.²⁶² In 2010 and 2012, voters sent Tea Party favorite Ron Johnson and liberal stalwart Tammy Baldwin to the Senate, where two years later they would hold the record for the two senators from the same state who had voted in opposition most frequently.²⁶³ Within a span of months in 2012, voters rejected an effort to recall Republican Gov. Scott Walker and then voted to send Democratic President Barack Obama back to the White House.²⁶⁴ A state doesn't become purple without a strong mix of red and blue.²⁶⁵

²⁶¹ Buenker, John D. "Robert M. La Follette's Progressive Odyssey." *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 82, no. 1 (1998): 2-31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4636775>.

²⁶² Herman, Arthur. "Introduction." Introduction. In *Joseph McCarthy: Reexamining the Life and Legacy of America's Most Hated Senator*, 1. New York, New York: The Free Press, 2000; Tye, Larry. "Joe McCarthy's First Victim: How the Senator Brought Down a La Follette." *The Capital Times*, July 8, 2020. https://madison.com/ct/news/local/history/joe-mccarthy-s-first-victim-how-the-senator-brought-down-a-la-follette/article_15c85974-7bb7-5498-a4e2-ef7f9bcf41c7.html.

²⁶³ Chavar, A. J. "Wisconsin's 'Odd Couple' in the Senate." *The New York Times*, January 17, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/politics/10000002619683/wisconsins-odd-couple-in-the-senate.html>.

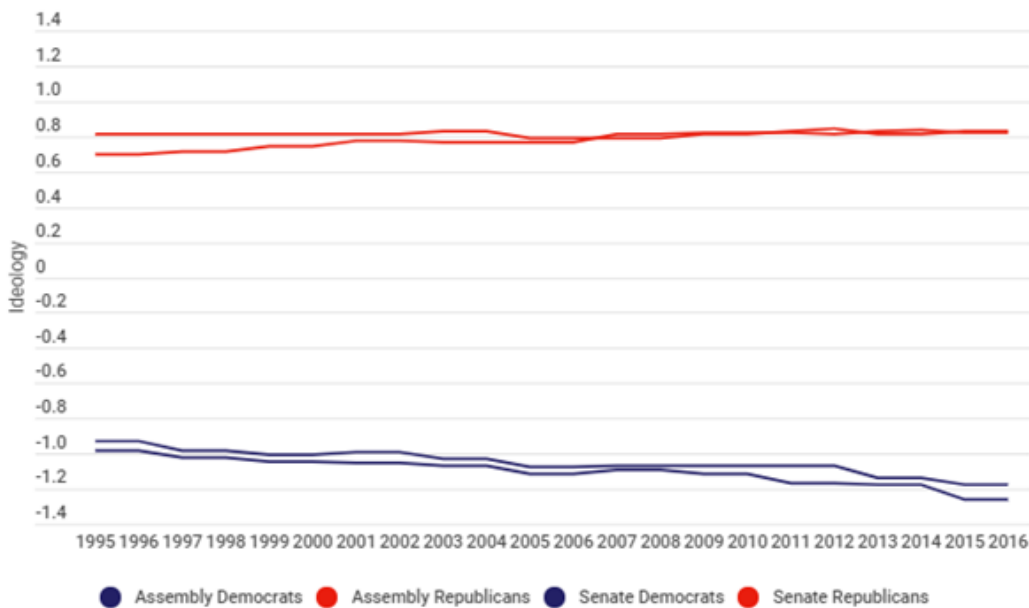
²⁶⁴ Marley, Patrick, and Jason Stein. "Walker Wins Recall Race over Barrett." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, June 6, 2012. <http://archive.jsonline.com/news/statepolitics/guvrace06-ku5ld5b-157364555.html>; Verburg, Steven. "Obama Wins Wisconsin, Second Term." *Wisconsin State Journal*, November 7, 2012. https://madison.com/wsj/news/local/govt-and-politics/elections/obama-wins-wisconsin-second-term/article_44394bde-2883-11e2-a8da-001a4bcf887a.html.

²⁶⁵ Heller, Karen. "All Eyes Are on Wisconsin, the State That's Gearing up to Define the Presidential Election." *The Washington Post*, November 7, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/all-eyes-are-on-wisconsin-the-state-thats-gearing-up-to-define-the-presidential-election/2019/11/04/abf643dc-f40d-11e9-a285-882a8e386a96_story.html.

While Wisconsin has always had room for a wide variety of political persuasions, data from 1995-2016 show that its state legislature has become more polarized and ideologically separated over time (see fig. 20).²⁶⁶

Polarization in the Wisconsin Legislature, 1995-2016

A measure of political polarization based on roll call votes by state legislators highlights the ideological difference between Democratic and Republican lawmakers in both chambers of the Wisconsin Legislature.



Source: Graph by Aaron Weinschenk using data from the American Legislatures project.

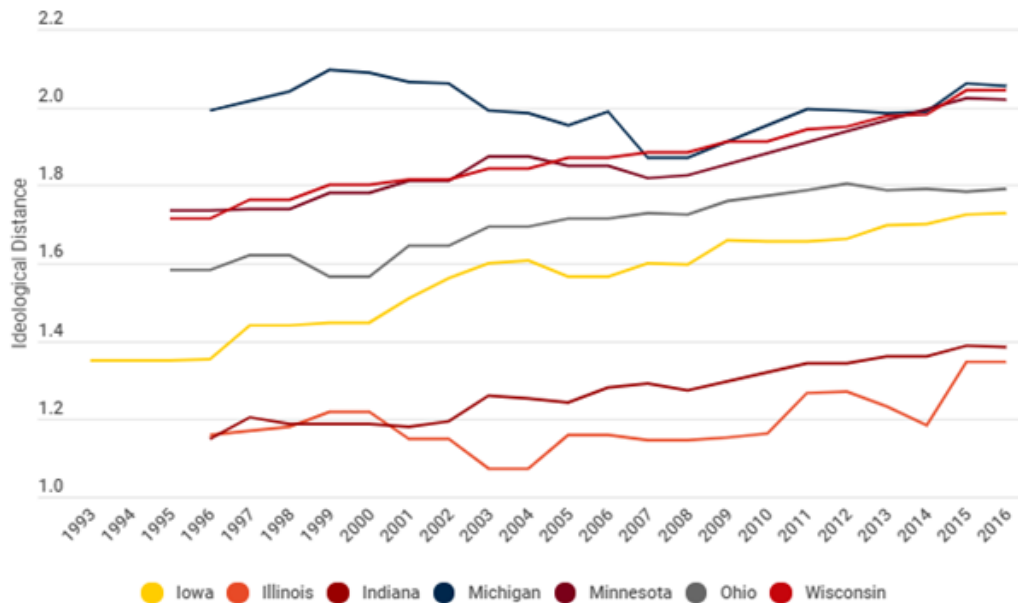
Fig. 20: Weinschenk, “Polarization in the Wisconsin Legislature, 1995-2016.” *WisContext*, July 17, 2019.

Among Midwestern states, Wisconsin is second only to Michigan in its degree of polarization—which has steadily increased since the mid-1990s—and among all 50 states, it is the 11th most polarized (see fig. 21).

²⁶⁶ Weinschenk. “How Polarized Are Wisconsin’s Lawmakers?”

Ideological Distance between Parties in Midwest Legislatures, 1993-2016

A measure of political polarization based on roll call votes by state legislators highlights the ideological distance between the Democratic and Republican parties in seven states in the Midwest: Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin.



Source: Graph by Aaron Weinschenk using data from the American Legislatures project.

Fig. 21: Weinschenk, “Ideological Distance Between Parties in Midwest Legislatures, 1993-2016.” *WisContext*, July 17, 2019.

Why does polarization matter? Because “the frequency of legislative deadlock increases as the parties polarize,” and “polarization and the partisanship that ensues more often encourage parties to fight messaging wars than to negotiate.”²⁶⁷ In their study of polarization in Congress, Michael Barber and Nolan McCarty found that:

²⁶⁷ Binder, Sarah. “How Political Polarization Creates Stalemate and Undermines Lawmaking.” *The Washington Post*, May 3, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/01/13/how-political-polarization-creates-stalemate-and-undermines-lawmaking/>.

. . . polarization has fundamentally altered legislators' incentives to negotiate. Expanding ideological differences and declining dimensionality have increasingly replaced win-wins with zero sum outcomes. Increased teamanship has reduced the number of honest brokers who can effectively work "across the aisles" to create agreements. Moreover, polarization has exacerbated the incentives for strategic disagreement. It is difficult to negotiate when one or both sides think they are better off when bargaining fails.²⁶⁸

Most research on the legislative effects of polarization approaches the issue at the congressional level. In the absence of a substantial body of work examining the question at the state level, I will operate under the conclusion that "most state legislatures operate under substantially the same conditions as the Congress."²⁶⁹

'Divide and Conquer'

Polarization in Wisconsin has reared its head in battles superficial and substantive. Tensions erupted between the two parties in November 2019 over whether the evergreen displayed in the state capitol rotunda during the holiday months should be called a "Christmas tree" or a "holiday tree."²⁷⁰ In response to Evers referring to the tree as a "holiday tree," 60 Assembly Republicans and four Assembly Democrats voted to officially recognize it as a "Christmas tree," while most Assembly Democrats argued

²⁶⁸ Barber, Michael, and Nolan McCarty. "Causes and Consequences of Polarization." In *Negotiating Agreement in Politics*, edited by Jane Mansbridge and Cathie Jo Martin, 19–53. Washington, D.C.: American Political Science Association, 2013.

²⁶⁹ Kurtz, et al. State Legislative Policymaking in an Age of Political Polarization.

²⁷⁰ Beck, Molly. "Wisconsin Lawmakers Are Divided Once Again — This Time over a Tree." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, November 13, 2019. <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/2019/11/12/wisconsin-lawmakers-divided-once-again-time-over-tree/2580094001/?fbclid=IwAR0xYmU9vBBaKiLVpzwQqHzGIh2easld0SwK3-1bV5J6lqyp6NAFvvWXlc>.

the resolution was being used to stoke existing political divisions.²⁷¹ The following year, Evers announced that there would be no tree in the rotunda for the holiday season, because the capitol building was closed to the public due to the coronavirus pandemic.²⁷² Weeks later, two Republican state representatives put up their own tree in the rotunda, despite having been denied a permit for the tree by the state Department of Administration.²⁷³ The legislators said it was “petty” of the governor to skip the tree tradition, while the governor’s administration argued it should not spend tax dollars on a display that would be inaccessible to the general public.²⁷⁴

Earlier in 2020, lawmakers were divided along party—and racial—lines for the third consecutive year over who should be honored in a state Assembly resolution commemorating Black History Month.²⁷⁵ “If we can’t come together on the Black History Month resolution how are we going to tackle the big issues?” asked Republican state Rep. Scott Allen in January 2020, foreshadowing the legislature’s inability to do exactly that just a few months later, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit.²⁷⁶

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² “Evers: No Holiday Tree in State Capitol This Year.” AP NEWS. Associated Press, November 13, 2020. <https://apnews.com/article/veterans-coronavirus-pandemic-holidays-3c4d3614121efb7b65748b41c3b5db1f>.

²⁷³ *Rep. Sortwell & Rep. Tittl Place Christmas Tree in Wisconsin State Capitol 2020*. YouTube. Wisconsin Assembly Republicans, 2020. <https://youtu.be/z4i7SFZwmS8>.

²⁷⁴ “THU PM Update: Trump Camp Plans Quick Circuit Court Filings after Supreme Court Refuses Case.” *WisPolitics.com*, December 3, 2020. <https://www.wispolitics.com/2020/thu-pm-update-trump-camp-plans-quick-circuit-court-filings-after-supreme-court-refuses-case/>.

²⁷⁵ Beck. “Lawmakers Clash over How to Honor Black History Month.” *Wisconsin State Journal*, February 3, 2018. https://madison.com/wsj/news/local/govt-and-politics/lawmakers-clash-over-how-to-honor-black-history-month/article_800b5f97-fdb3-5982-8153-5030a60286de.html; Opoien. “Wisconsin Lawmakers Clash over Inclusion of Colin Kaepernick in Black History Month Resolution.” *The Capital Times*, February 12, 2019. https://madison.com/ct/news/local/govt-and-politics/election-matters/wisconsin-lawmakers-clash-over-inclusion-of-colin-kaepernick-in-black-history-month-resolution/article_9f05e300-cb88-52be-a0ce-95b82b06b014.html; Beck. “Black History Month Resolution Again Stirs Clash in Wisconsin Legislature.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, January 13, 2020. <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/2020/01/13/black-history-month-resolution-again-stirs-clash-wisconsin/2843901001/?fbclid=IwAR03NloWE1QhT8jtBjEgOKyuilxYHkkXV6ozFPBP54C9iwFnx2Q34Gq08X0>.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

Signs of the division and dysfunction to come emerged before Evers' inauguration as governor. In December 2018, Republican legislators worked through the night to pass a lame-duck bill diminishing the powers of the incoming Democratic governor and the incoming Democratic attorney general, Josh Kaul.²⁷⁷ Evers, at the time, said he would continue to try to find common ground with Republicans in the legislature, but "this is going to make it much more difficult."²⁷⁸

After Evers took office, Republican legislative leaders declined on three separate occasions to convene the legislature after Evers called special sessions to address specific issues. In response to calls to consider proposals to curb gun violence, adjust the administration of an election in response to the coronavirus pandemic, and implement policing reforms, Republican leaders gaveled in and gaveled out—symbolically acknowledging the governor's request while conveying the message that his proposals would not be entertained.²⁷⁹ The legislature passed the state's first COVID-19 relief bill in on April 14, 2020.²⁸⁰ As the coronavirus continued to spread throughout Wisconsin, Evers and Republican legislative leaders did not speak with each

²⁷⁷ Opoien. "Wisconsin Republicans Pass Lame-Duck Bill to Curb Powers of Incoming Governor, Attorney General." *The Capital Times*, December 5, 2018. https://madison.com/ct/news/local/govt-and-politics/election-matters/wisconsin-republicans-pass-lame-duck-bill-to-curb-powers-of-incoming-governor-attorney-general/article_e19caecf-624e-57b0-9a31-7d8e7a96f0a4.html.

²⁷⁸ Krieg, Gregory. "Wisconsin and Michigan Republicans Try to Undermine Democratic Election Wins." CNN, December 5, 2018. https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/04/politics/wisconsin-michigan-republican-post-election-power-grabs/index.html?utm_term=image.

²⁷⁹ Smith, Mitch. "Gavel to Gavel in 15 Seconds: Why Lawmaking Is Frozen in Key States." *The New York Times*, November 11, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/11/us/wisconsin-divided-government.html>; Freyberg, Frederica. "Update: Coronavirus Election Session Gavels In and Out." PBS Wisconsin, April 5, 2020. <https://pbswisconsin.org/news-item/coronavirus-election-session-gavels-in-and-out/>; Johnson, Shawn. "Wisconsin Senate Will 'Gavel In' But Won't Vote On Evers' Special Session Monday." *Wisconsin Public Radio*, August 29, 2020. <https://www.wpr.org/wisconsin-senate-will-gavel-wont-vote-evers-special-session-monday>.

²⁸⁰ Ferral, Katelyn. "Wisconsin Assembly Overwhelmingly Approves COVID-19 Relief Bill in State's First Virtual Session." *The Capital Times*, April 14, 2020. https://madison.com/ct/news/local/govt-and-politics/wisconsin-assembly-overwhelmingly-approves-covid-19-relief-bill-in-states-first-virtual-session/article_e884f53e-07f5-5d76-8001-bacfd4fd8bb3.html.

other for a period of six months.²⁸¹ At the same time, Republican lawmakers fought against measures put forward by the Democratic governor to fight the pandemic, but offered no alternative plans or bills until nearly eight months later, on December 1.²⁸²

"State government has just simply failed to respond to an enormous crisis," former Democratic Gov. Jim Doyle told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.²⁸³ Even through political disagreements, Doyle said, he was never not on speaking terms with a legislative leader during his two terms from 2003 to 2011. The former governor said the capitol's dynamic during the COVID-19 pandemic was less productive than it was during the 2008 recession.²⁸⁴

"Doing the right thing is really the best politics and that's why you're elected—to do what you think is right and (to) have a plan," former Republican Gov. Scott McCallum told the *Journal Sentinel*. "I see that falling apart."²⁸⁵

The period between Doyle's and Evers' terms was also marked by partisan polarization and intense disagreements, led in large part by Scott Walker's governing style. Walker's leadership was polarizing both because he pushed for such aggressively conservative policies, and because of his "shock and awe" approach.²⁸⁶ That was

²⁸¹ Beck. "Evers and GOP Leaders Talk for First Time in Six Months, Call Meeting 'Productive'." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, November 20, 2020. <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/2020/11/20/evers-and-gop-leaders-talk-first-time-six-months-call-meeting-productive/6355338002/>.

²⁸² Reilly, Briana. "Wisconsin Republicans Float Provisions to Address COVID-19." *The Capital Times*, December 1, 2020. https://madison.com/ct/news/local/govt-and-politics/wisconsin-republicans-float-provisions-to-address-covid-19/article_03b1dbf5-2d3f-5e77-bfaa-9704b8f63058.html.

²⁸³ Beck. "A Pandemic. Marching in the Streets. Economic Hardship. Former Governors Ask Where Our Government Leaders Are." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, July 28, 2020. <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/07/28/past-wisconsin-governors-see-government-leaders-absent-pandemic/5460034002/>.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Gilbert, Craig. "In a Divided Wisconsin, Scott Walker's Lightning-Rod Approach to Politics Worked for Him -- until It Didn't." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, January 24, 2019.

exemplified by his signature policy, known as Act 10. Walker did not campaign on eliminating collective bargaining for public employees, but he did just that shortly after he took office in 2011, telling a campaign donor he would use a “divide and conquer” strategy to advance the policy.²⁸⁷ The move was met with massive protests and a bitter recall effort, and resulted in 14 Democratic state senators fleeing the state in a desperate effort to block a vote on the bill.²⁸⁸ One national news story previewing the June 2012 recall election (in which Walker prevailed) referred to Wisconsin as “the most polarized state in the country.”²⁸⁹ Walker’s polling numbers throughout his governorship reflect that description. As governor, his average approval rating was 47 percent, and his average disapproval rating was 49 percent—an empirical representation of the fact that, as he once put it, “there’s like two people in this state that don’t have a strong opinion of me.”²⁹⁰ Opinions were also largely dictated by partisan affiliation. Among Republicans, Walker’s average approval rating was 88 percent; among Democrats it was 11 percent.²⁹¹

Polling conducted by both Gallup and Public Policy Polling during the 2012 election cycle placed Wisconsin among the top three states in terms of size of the

<https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/blogs/wisconsin-voter/2019/01/07/scott-walkers-shock-and-awe-politics-worked-until-didnt/2484838002/>.

²⁸⁷ Ibid; Blake, Aaron. “Scott Walker Said Budget Strategy in Wisconsin Was ‘Divide and Conquer’.” *The Washington Post*, May 11, 2012. https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/post/scott-walker-said-budget-strategy-in-wisconsin-was-divide-and-conquer/2012/05/11/glQARhmTIU_blog.html.

²⁸⁸ Glauber, Bill, Jason Stein, and Patrick Marley. “Democrats Flee State to Avoid Vote on Budget Bill.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, February 17, 2011.

<http://archive.jsonline.com/news/statepolitics/116381289.html>.

²⁸⁹ Cillizza. “Scott Walker and the Most Polarized State in the Country.”

²⁹⁰ Gilbert. “As Split-Ticket Voting Dies, Elections Ride on Party Turnout.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, May 6, 2014. <https://archive.jsonline.com/news/statepolitics/as-split-ticket-voting-dies-elections-ride-on-party-turnout-b99263094z1-258158921.html/>.

²⁹¹ Gilbert. “In a Divided Wisconsin.”

partisan gap in Barack Obama’s approval ratings, and Walker’s partisan approval gap (80 points between Republicans and Democrats) was even larger than Obama’s.²⁹²

Data collected in the “gold standard” Marquette Poll since 2011 show that polarization has seeped into the interactions of everyday citizens, although its effects have fluctuated over time.

The frequency with which voters say they talk to friends and family about politics hit a high point in October 2016, when 52 percent said they discussed politics with friends and family more than once a week, and just 6 percent said they never had these discussions.²⁹³ Its lowest point was in June 2012, when 33 percent said they had these discussions more than once a week and 9 percent said they never did. It is worth noting that Walker’s recall victory was in June 2012, a little more than a year after Act 10 and its fallout.²⁹⁴ Generally, the percentages of voters who either frequently or never discussed politics with family and friends remained relatively steady from 2012 to 2018.

The poll has asked only once whether voters feel comfortable talking about politics with friends and acquaintances, or whether they feel like they need to be careful with what they say. In August 2020, voters were nearly evenly split: 50 percent said they were comfortable and 47 percent felt they needed to watch what they said.²⁹⁵ Slightly less than half of voters surveyed said in September 2018 that they hear an equal mix of liberal and conservative perspectives from friends and family.²⁹⁶

²⁹² Gilbert. “Wisconsin Democrats, Republicans Worlds Apart in Divided Wisconsin.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, May 3, 2014. <https://archive.jsonline.com/news/statepolitics/democratic-republican-voters-worlds-apart-in-divided-wisconsin-b99249564z1-255883361.html/>.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

While discussion of politics with friends and family has not changed dramatically from 2012 to 2018, more people have decided to stop discussing politics with their coworkers. In April 2012, 25 percent of voters said they discussed politics with coworkers more than once a week; that declined to 14 percent in August 2018. At the same time, the percentage of people who said they never discuss politics with coworkers rose from 35 percent in April 2012 to 46 percent in August 2018.²⁹⁷ The most noticeable increase in this category occurred from December 2016 to August 2018.²⁹⁸

In April 2012, 28 percent of voters said they had stopped discussing politics with someone due to disagreements over the state's recall elections or disagreements about Walker; in October 2018, 33 percent of voters said they had made this decision. In October 2016, the only time the question was asked about the 2016 presidential election, 34 percent said they had ceased political discussions with someone because of a disagreement over the upcoming election. The poll has asked once if voters had stopped talking to someone entirely because of political disagreements; in August 2018, 18 percent said they had done so.²⁹⁹ It has asked twice if voters had stopped talking to someone because of disagreements over the 2016 presidential election; on average, 35 percent of voters said they had and 64 percent said they had not.³⁰⁰

The Makings of a Swing State

Wisconsin's political divisions weren't always so immovable. In 1994, Republican Gov. Tommy Thompson and Democratic U.S. Sen. Herb Kohl both won landslide

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

victories, with 40 percent of voters splitting their tickets on the two races.³⁰¹ Thompson won the now reliably blue Dane and Milwaukee counties, and Kohl prevailed in now reliably red Waukesha County. In 2012, Walker would lose Dane and Milwaukee counties by 27 and 39 points, respectively, and Obama would fall 34 points short in Waukesha County.³⁰²

While it could be argued that Thompson and Kohl were the type of once-in-a-blue-moon politicians with a rare ability to appeal to almost anyone, they also existed in a far less polarized political landscape. In the state's 2018 election, which included a gubernatorial race and a Senate race, 12 percent of voters split their tickets—and that was high, compared to just 5-6 percent in elections preceding it.³⁰³ The trajectory of Democratic former Sen. Russ Feingold's races backs up this trend: He earned 19 percent of the Republican vote in his 1992 U.S. Senate race, and just 6 percent when he was ousted by Republican Ron Johnson in 2010. Thompson told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*:

“When I was running for governor, I intentionally went out in the Black churches. I intentionally went into the union halls. I went to the Democratic festivities. I did that because I wanted to bridge the gap. That kind of politics isn't in vogue anymore. (For me) it was, 'How do I expand from 69 or 70 percent to 75 percent?' People now say, 'How do I get to 50 percent plus one?’”³⁰⁴

³⁰¹ Gilbert. “As Split-Ticket Voting Dies.”

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Wagner, Michael W., Jiyoun Suk, Dhavan V, Shah, Lewis A. Friedland, Jordan Foley, Ceri Hughes, Josephine Lukito, Katherine J. Cramer, and Chris Wells. “What Makes Wisconsin Swing?” *Mischiefs of Faction*. Vox, March 29, 2019. <https://www.vox.com/mischiefs-of-faction/2019/3/29/18286836/wisconsin-swing-vote-democratic-primary>; Gilbert. “As Split-Ticket Voting Dies.”

³⁰⁴ Gilbert. “As Split-Ticket Voting Dies.”

Politicians are now better served by catering to partisan media, donors, and interest groups than by trying to build broad coalitions, Thompson observed.³⁰⁵ The Republican former governor, who lost to Baldwin in the 2012 Senate race, has predicted (thus far, accurately) that no Republican candidate will ever again carry the liberal strongholds of Dane and Milwaukee counties as he did several times throughout the 1990s.³⁰⁶

Recent election results indicate Thompson was right. Tony Evers and Lt. Gov. Mandela Barnes won Dane County by 52 points, and Milwaukee County by 37 points, in 2018.³⁰⁷ In the 2020 presidential election, Democrat Joe Biden bested Donald Trump by 53 points in Dane County, and by 40 points in Milwaukee County.³⁰⁸ Thompson, likely the last Republican to do so, won Dane County by 6 points in 1994.³⁰⁹

In addition to the Marquette Poll, several polls have surveyed Wisconsin voters over the last several decades. There is very little data available from the St. Norbert College poll, which was founded in 1984, but a review of available data finds that Wisconsin voters were most united in their support of a governor in April 1995, when there was a 63-point gap between those who approved of Thompson's performance as governor and those who disapproved.³¹⁰ The largest gap in opinions under Democratic

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ "2018 Fall General Election Results." Wisconsin Elections Commission. Accessed November 12, 2020. <https://elections.wi.gov/elections-voting/results/2018/fall-general>.

³⁰⁸ "Milwaukee County Election Results." 11-3-20 General and Presidential Election - Unofficial Results. Milwaukee County, November 4, 2020. <https://county.milwaukee.gov/EN/County-Clerk/Off-Nav/Election-Results/Election-Results-Fall-2020>; "2020 General Election (Unofficial Results)." Dane County Clerk, November 4, 2020. <https://elections.countyofdane.com/Election-Result/124>.

³⁰⁹ Gilbert. "A Few Decades Ago, Tommy Thompson Broke through Wisconsin's Fault Lines. Will Anyone Try It Again?" *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, May 22, 2017. <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/blogs/wisconsin-voter/2017/05/22/few-decades-ago-tommy-thompson-broke-through-wisconsins-fault-lines-anyone-try-again/335148001/>.

³¹⁰ Franklin, Charles. "St. Norbert Approval Ratings 1987-2015." De Pere: St. Norbert College, n.d.

Gov. Jim Doyle came in April 2003, when there was a 44-point difference between those who approved of his performance and those who disapproved (by the end of his second term, his approval rating was underwater).³¹¹ For much of Walker's tenure, the St. Norbert poll measured the gap to be less than 10 percentage points; the largest gap came in April 2014, at 20 points (with those who approved of his performance leading).³¹²

The Badger Poll, conducted by UW-Madison and sponsored by the *Capital Times* and the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, surveyed Wisconsin residents from 2002 to 2011.³¹³ In the first Badger Poll, 63 percent of voters rated Republican Gov. Scott McCallum's job performance as "fair" or "poor," compared to just 31 percent who gave those ratings to Thompson, his predecessor.³¹⁴ The poll also found that while McCallum's approval ratings were influenced strongly by partisan identification, majorities of both parties gave Thompson high marks.³¹⁵ A 2005 Badger Poll indicated deepening partisan divisions in Wisconsin; 49 percent rated Republican President George W. Bush's job performance as excellent or good while 51 percent rated it fair or poor. Democratic Gov. Jim Doyle received similar marks.³¹⁶ At the time, poll director G. Donald Ferree, Jr., highlighted the fact that 16 percent of voters rated Bush's performance as excellent while 26 percent rated it as poor, reflecting "deep partisan

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ "The UW Badger Poll." University of Wisconsin Survey Center. Accessed May 1, 2020. <https://uwsc.wisc.edu/the-uw-badger-poll/>.

³¹⁴ Callender, David. "McCallum Ratings Dismal, Poll Shows." *The Capital Times*. March 20, 2002; Sorgi, Jay. "Tommy Thompson 'Upset,' Wants Wisconsin Dems & GOP to Work Together on Coronavirus." WTMJ, April 24, 2020. <https://wtmj.com/news/coronavirus/2020/04/23/tommy-thompson-upset-wants-wisconsins-dems-gop-to-work-together-on-coronavirus/>.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ Callender. "Partisan Divisions Deep Here, Poll Shows." *The Capital Times*. January 20, 2005.

divisions.”³¹⁷ In the poll’s final year, partisan tensions erupted dramatically as the battle waged over Walker’s efforts to curtail labor rights for public employees.³¹⁸

“It’s a swing state not because we are all independent. It’s a swing state because there are people with strong leanings on both sides,” said University of Wisconsin-Madison political science professor Katherine J. Cramer.³¹⁹

Factors That Contribute to Polarization

So what happened to Wisconsin? Before assessing the role of media, it is important to discuss some of the other factors that may have contributed to modern polarization in the Badger State.

Redistricting

Existing research shows that, despite it being an “attractive narrative,” there is little evidence that partisan gerrymandering on its own has a significant causal relationship to political polarization.³²⁰ Wisconsin’s districts, last drawn in 2011 by Republicans, have been ranked among the most gerrymandered in the country.³²¹ Despite claims from redistricting reform advocates, gerrymandering’s effect on polarization ranges from “marginal to undetectable.”³²² Nonpartisan redistricting reform

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Burns, Jane. “A State Divided: Union Debate Pushing Friends, Family Apart.” *Wisconsin State Journal*. April 22, 2011.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ McCarty, Nolan, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal. “Does Gerrymandering Cause Polarization?” *American Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 3 (2009): 666-80. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25548144>.

³²¹ Kertscher, Tom. “On Whether Wisconsin Is the Most Gerrymandered State.” Politifact, June 8, 2018. <https://www.politifact.com/article/2018/jun/18/whether-wisconsin-most-gerrymandered-state/>.

³²² Schwarzenegger, Arnold. “Idea: Ban Partisan Gerrymandering and Enact Open Primaries Nationwide.” *POLITICO*, September 20, 2019. <https://www.politico.com/interactives/2019/how-to-fix-politics-in-america/polarization/ban-partisan-gerrymandering-enact-open-primaries-nationwide/>; Beyer, Don. “Don’t

is a popular proposal in Wisconsin—70 percent of voters polled in February 2020 supported moving the state to a nonpartisan process—but it does not appear to be the solution to Wisconsin’s polarization problem.³²³

Act 10 and the Breakdown of Political Talk

Scott Walker, in his own words, “dropped the bomb” one month into his first term by introducing legislation that effectively eliminated collective bargaining for most public employees.³²⁴ The bill provoked a legislative standoff between parties, a variety of legal challenges, massive protests and smaller counter-protests, heated outbursts from lawmakers and state Supreme Court justices, and multiple recall efforts (directed at the governor and state senators of both parties).³²⁵ The political disagreements that followed extended “beyond the formal political domain, deep into many citizens’ occupational, media, and interpersonal talk networks.”³²⁶

like SCOTUS Decision on Gerrymandering? This Bill Would Fix It, and Make Elections Better.” *The Hill*, August 2, 2019. <https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/politics/455813-dont-like-scotus-decision-on-gerrymandering-this-bill-would-fix?rnd=1564688355>; Masket, Seth E., Jonathan Winburn, and Gerald C. Wright. “The Gerrymanderers Are Coming! Legislative Redistricting Won’t Affect Competition or Polarization Much, No Matter Who Does It.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 45, no. 01 (2012): 39–43. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1049096511001703>.

³²³ Marquette Law Poll Interactive Database.

³²⁴ Edwards, Haley Sweetland. “Scott Walker: Playing to Win.” *Time*, March 19, 2015. <https://time.com/3750539/scott-walker-playing-to-win/>.

³²⁵ Stein and Marley. *More than They Bargained for: Scott Walker, Unions, and the Fight for Wisconsin*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013.

³²⁶ Wells, Chris, Katherine J. Cramer, Michael W. Wagner, German Alvarez, Lewis A. Friedland, Dhavan V. Shah, Leticia Bode, Stephanie Edgerly, Itay Gabay, and Charles Franklin. “When We Stop Talking Politics: The Maintenance and Closing of Conversation in Contentious Times.” *Journal of Communication* 67, no. 1 (2017): 131–57. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12280>.

Five years later, Republican former state Senate President Mike Ellis told the *Wisconsin State Journal* that the law's most significant impact would be "the long-lasting political division it created."³²⁷

"Lines were drawn deeper in the sand. Instead of maybe a half an inch in the sand they went down two feet. As a result of that time frame, that's going to be there for a generation," Ellis said.³²⁸

That division resulted in a "widespread breaking down of political talk . . . reminiscent of significant political polarization, but in fact extending beyond it," a group of researchers primarily from the University of Wisconsin found years later.³²⁹ Personal and occupational identities became politicized, rendering family and friends unwilling or unable to discuss politics without fear of damaging their personal relationships.³³⁰ In some cases, political disagreements were too much to overcome, ending relationships entirely.³³¹

Urban/Rural Divide

Since the late 1980s, "Wisconsin's political geography has evolved toward a spatial realignment that shows the Democrats increasingly dominant of the state's larger cities and a growing conservative counteraction in which the Republican Party dominates voting in suburban, exurban, small town, and rural Wisconsin," as noted by geography scholar Kazimierz J. Zaniewski and political science scholar James R.

³²⁷ DeFour, Matthew. "5 Years after Act 10: Political Division Still Pervasive." *Wisconsin State Journal*, February 11, 2016. https://madison.com/wsj/news/local/govt-and-politics/5-years-after-act-10-political-division-still-pervasive/article_e510bd05-9b43-564f-969a-c2ee45c8a795.html.

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Wells, et al. "When We Stop Talking Politics."

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Ibid.

Simmons.³³² As a result of that realignment, the state’s largest and medium-sized cities, where Democrats are most successful, “are pitted in increasingly partisan elections” against expanding Republican strongholds in small towns, rural areas, suburbs, and exurbs.³³³ The correlation between population density and voting tendencies was recorded in 2014 as being about four times stronger than it was four decades earlier.³³⁴

No researcher has captured the underpinnings of Wisconsin’s widening urban-rural divide than Katherine J. Cramer, whose 2016 book examined “the politics of resentment” after nearly a decade of visiting 27 (mostly rural) communities throughout the state and sitting down with residents in coffee klatches and other informal gatherings.³³⁵ Cramer argues convincingly that place matters not only because of its correlation with votes, but because it shapes the way people interpret politics.³³⁶ The sense that rural residents “don’t get their fair share” permeates less-populated communities, driving a wedge between Wisconsinites and the government that represents them.³³⁷

In her conversations, Cramer quickly learned that many rural residents feel ignored by both government and news media, viewing both as institutions out of touch with their lives and communities.³³⁸ Cramer observed:

³³² Zaniewski, Kazimierz J., and James R. Simmons. “Divided Wisconsin: Partisan Spatial Electoral Realignment.” *The Geography Teacher* 13, no. 3 (2016): 128–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19338341.2016.1195764>.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Gilbert. “Wisconsin Democrats, Republicans Worlds Apart.”

³³⁵ Cramer, Katherine J. *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

³³⁶ Ibid, 11.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Ibid, 108.

If local newspapers are not covering issues relevant to rural residents, the effect of that content on rural residents may not be to cause their views to become more similar to that of urban residents over time. Instead, it could reinforce rural folks' perception that rural communities like their own are ignored.³³⁹

The Role of Media in Polarization

In the last 15 years, the United States lost more than 25 percent of its newspapers.³⁴⁰ Wisconsin was no exception to this trend, losing 28 percent of its newspapers and seeing a 39 percent decrease in newspaper circulation during that period.³⁴¹ In the United States, 225 counties do not have a local newspaper, and 1,528 (half of all counties) have only one.³⁴² Wisconsin fares slightly better than the nation as a whole; just one of Wisconsin's 72 counties lacks a local newspaper, while 22 have just one.³⁴³ At the same time that newsrooms and statehouse coverage have declined, so has public trust in the press.³⁴⁴ This is only one example—but a significant one—of how the media landscape has changed at both the national and state levels over the last decade.

³³⁹ Ibid, 109.

³⁴⁰ Abernathy. News Deserts.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Gottfried, Jeffrey, Galen Stocking, and Elizabeth Grieco. "Partisans Remain Sharply Divided in Their Attitudes About the News Media." *Pew Research Center's Journalism Project*. October 31, 2018. <http://www.journalism.org/2018/09/25/partisans-remain-sharply-divided-in-their-attitudes-about-the-news-media/>; Saad, Lydia. "Military, Small Business, Police Still Stir Most Confidence." *Gallup*. June 28, 2018. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/236243/military-small-business-police-stir-confidence.aspx>; Lee, Tien-Tsung. "Why They Don't Trust the Media: An Examination of Factors Predicting Trust." *American Behavioral Scientist* 54, no. 1 (September 2010): 8–21. doi:10.1177/0002764210376308.

Media Ownership

As of 2018, the country's largest 25 newspaper companies owned 67 (or about one-third) of Wisconsin's nearly 200 newspapers.³⁴⁵ The top five owners in Wisconsin are Adams Publishing Group (18 newspapers), Gannett (11 newspapers), Lee Enterprises (20 newspapers), Morris Multimedia (10 newspapers), and News Publishing Company Inc. (13 newspapers). Of those, only News Publishing Company is based in Wisconsin.³⁴⁶

Gannett acquired the majority of its Wisconsin properties in 2000, although its purchase of the state's largest newspaper, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, did not come until 2016.³⁴⁷ Its Wisconsin presence began in 1980 with its purchase of the *Green Bay Press-Gazette* and *Wausau Daily Herald*. Gannett owns newspapers in five out of Wisconsin's 10 largest cities.³⁴⁸ In 2010, Gannett announced plans to open five regional design studios that would produce most of its newspapers' pages—a move that was significant in part because, in tandem with layoffs and consolidations in local newsrooms, it has at times resulted in multiple newspapers displaying the same front pages (see fig. 22).³⁴⁹

³⁴⁵ Abernathy. "News Deserts."

³⁴⁶ "About Us." News Publishing Company Inc. , n.d. <https://www.newspubinc.com/about.php>.

³⁴⁷ Gores, Paul. "Gannett Closes on \$280 Million Purchase of Journal Media Group." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, April 8, 2016. <https://archive.jsonline.com/business/gannett-closes-on-280-million-purchase-of-journal-media-group-b99703027z1-375073871.html/>.

³⁴⁸ "Wisconsin Cities by Population." Wisconsin Demographics. Cubit, n.d. https://www.wisconsin-demographics.com/cities_by_population.

³⁴⁹ Berlin, Jonathon. "A Q&A With Gannett's Kate Marymont." Society for News Design, July 26, 2010. <https://www.snd.org/2010/07/a-qa-with-gannetts-kate-marymont/>.



Fig. 22: Photos of newspaper front pages from 10 Gannett-owned Wisconsin newspapers on March 5, 2019.

There is an extensive body of research indicating that media ownership does matter.³⁵⁰ The influence of a large chain is generally not directed specifically at individual newspapers; rather, a company’s policies, budgeting decisions, profit quotas, and hiring or firing of management trickle down to affect a local newspaper’s

³⁵⁰ Wagner, Michael W., and Timothy P. Collins. “Does Ownership Matter?” *Journalism Practice* 8, no. 6 (2014): 758–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2014.882063>; Dunaway, Johanna. “Media Ownership and Story Tone in Campaign News.” *American Politics Research* 41, no. 1 (2012): 24–53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673x12454564>; Martin, Gregory J., and Joshua McCrain. “Local News and National Politics.” *American Political Science Review* 113, no. 2 (2019): 372–84. doi:10.1017/S0003055418000965.

operations.³⁵¹ Consolidation shifts the incentives of news organizations in favor of coverage that can be published in multiple markets, rather than content specific to a local community.³⁵² It also incentivizes the publication of content that suits the financial and political interests of the outlet's owners.³⁵³

The legendary (and often controversial) journalist and media critic Ben Bagdikian put it this way:

“No national paper or broadcast station can report adequately the issues and candidates in every one of the 65,000 local voting districts. Only locally based journalism can do it, and if it does not, voters become captives of the only alternative information, paid political propaganda, or no information at all.”³⁵⁴

Local media can play a significant role in forming a person's sense of community, shaping their perception of it beyond their immediate interactions with friends, family, and colleagues.³⁵⁵ Additionally, readership of local print news sources increases the likelihood of an individual's community participation.³⁵⁶

Consolidation of local news organizations does appear to have an effect on readers' trust in the news. A 2019 Gallup survey found that 92 percent of people are “very” or “somewhat” worried about the political views of owners influencing the fairness

³⁵¹ Bagdikian, Ben H. *The New Media Monopoly*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2007, 199.

³⁵² Martin and McCrain. “Local News and National Politics.”

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Bagdikian. *The Media Monopoly*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1997.

³⁵⁵ Suk, Jiyoun, Dhavan V Shah, Chris Wells, Michael W Wagner, Lewis A Friedland, Katherine J Cramer, Ceri Hughes, and Charles Franklin. “Do Improving Conditions Harden Partisan Preferences? Lived Experiences, Imagined Communities, and Polarized Evaluations.” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edz051>.

³⁵⁶ Paek, Hye-Jin, So-Hyang Yoon, and Dhavan V. Shah. “Local News, Social Integration, and Community Participation: Hierarchical Linear Modeling of Contextual and Cross-Level Effects.” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 82, no. 3 (2005): 587–606. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900508200307>.

of news coverage. Seventy-seven percent are worried about losing news that is unique to their area, and 73 percent are worried about a reduction in resources for news-gathering and reporting.³⁵⁷

In March 2017, 57 percent of Wisconsin voters said they would be more likely to believe facts presented by newspaper and television media, while 22 percent said they would be more inclined to believe politicians; 18 percent said neither.³⁵⁸ Wisconsin's trust in news media faltered the following year. In June 2018, 45 percent of voters said they trusted news media to tell the truth about important issues, while 38 percent said they trusted Trump instead; 14 percent said neither.³⁵⁹

Conservative Talk Radio

In 2016, conservative talk radio in Wisconsin was influential enough that analysts cited it as a significant factor contributing to Trump's loss to Texas Sen. Ted Cruz in the state's Republican presidential primary (six prominent hosts throughout the state were sharply critical of Trump, most of whom would eventually come to support him).³⁶⁰ That influence accumulated over a period of approximately 25 years, with former Milwaukee radio host Charlie Sykes leading the pack for most of that time.³⁶¹ When the Federal Communications Commission revoked its Fairness Doctrine in 1987, stations pursued

³⁵⁷ Brenan, Megan, and Zacc Ritter. "When It Comes to Local News Mergers, Bias Top Concern." Gallup, October 29, 2020. <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/264923/comes-local-news-mergers-bias-top-concern.aspx>.

³⁵⁸ "Marquette Law Poll Interactive Database."

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ Martens, Bill. "Cruz Owes Right-Wing Talk Radio A Big Thank You, Analysts Say." *Wisconsin Public Radio*, April 7, 2016. <https://www.wpr.org/cruz-owes-right-wing-talk-radio-big-thank-you-analysts-say>;

Bohn, Kevin. "Radio Hosts' Influence Seen in Trump's Wisconsin Loss." CNN, April 6, 2016. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/04/05/politics/wisconsin-radio-host-donald-trump-primary/index.html>.

³⁶¹ Opoien. "Excommunicated."

the profitable conservative talk model pioneered by Rush Limbaugh and packed the airwaves with hosts like Sykes.³⁶² According to Nielsen, in 2014, the news/talk/information format accounted for approximately 11 percent of the radio audience nationally, but for 17 percent of the audience in the Milwaukee market.³⁶³ By 2016, Wisconsin had 81 radio stations broadcasting 235 hours of conservative talk radio per day.³⁶⁴ University of Wisconsin journalism professor Lewis Friedland noted in a 2018 interview with *The Capital Times*:

“You can say there is something in the range of six-plus hours a day of right-wing talk radio in every major market in the state, usually on the most powerful AM stations in those markets.”³⁶⁵

Sykes’ show—broadcast from the state’s largest radio signal, reaching much of eastern Wisconsin and even part of Illinois—served as both a launching pad and megaphone for conservative causes and politicians including Gov. Scott Walker, Sen. Ron Johnson and Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke, a man whose ego and national presence led Sykes to consider him his “Frankenstein monster.”³⁶⁶ In 2013, in partnership with WTMJ AM, Sykes launched *RightWisconsin*, a site featuring news and commentary with a conservative bent—often, like his radio show, portraying mainstream news sources such as the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* as untrustworthy or biased against conservatives. At the time, WTMJ, its corresponding television station, and the

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Gilbert. “As Split-Ticket Voting Dies.”

³⁶⁴ Fanlund, Paul. “Diving Deep into Wisconsin’s ‘Media Ecology’.” *The Capital Times*, June 15, 2018. https://madison.com/ct/opinion/column/paul_fanlund/paul-fanlund-diving-deep-into-wisconsin-s-media-ecology/article_38afa155-8a3a-5ff3-b08b-fdff2a59536a.html.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel were all owned by Journal Broadcast Group. In a 2016 *New York Times* op-ed, Sykes wrote:

One staple of every radio talk show was, of course, the bias of the mainstream media. This was, indeed, a target-rich environment. But as we learned this year, we had succeeded in persuading our audiences to ignore and discount *any* information from the mainstream media. Over time, we'd succeeded in delegitimizing the media altogether—all the normal guideposts were down, the referees discredited. . . . We destroyed our own immunity to fake news, while empowering the worst and most reckless voices on the right.³⁶⁷

While Republicans saw him as a “conscience” for the party, Democrats argued he stoked the flames of racism and division that he has since made a career of decrying with the start of Trump’s political reign. In an interview, Sykes cited Act 10 as a turning point, noting that he stopped making room for diverse voices after its fallout—contributing to an “amazing divide.”³⁶⁸ When Sykes ended his show in 2016, he was viewed by some Republicans—as they embraced the newly victorious Trump—as a traitor to the party for continuing to hold the “Never Trump” line. As he left, Sykes predicted that Wisconsin’s political divide would only get worse:

“The people who bet on hyperpolarization, they’ve been empowered. So there might have been a reckoning afterwards saying, ‘Hey guys, you cannot go out

³⁶⁷ Sykes, Charles J. “Charlie Sykes on Where the Right Went Wrong.” *The New York Times*, December 15, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/15/opinion/sunday/charlie-sykes-on-where-the-right-went-wrong.html>.

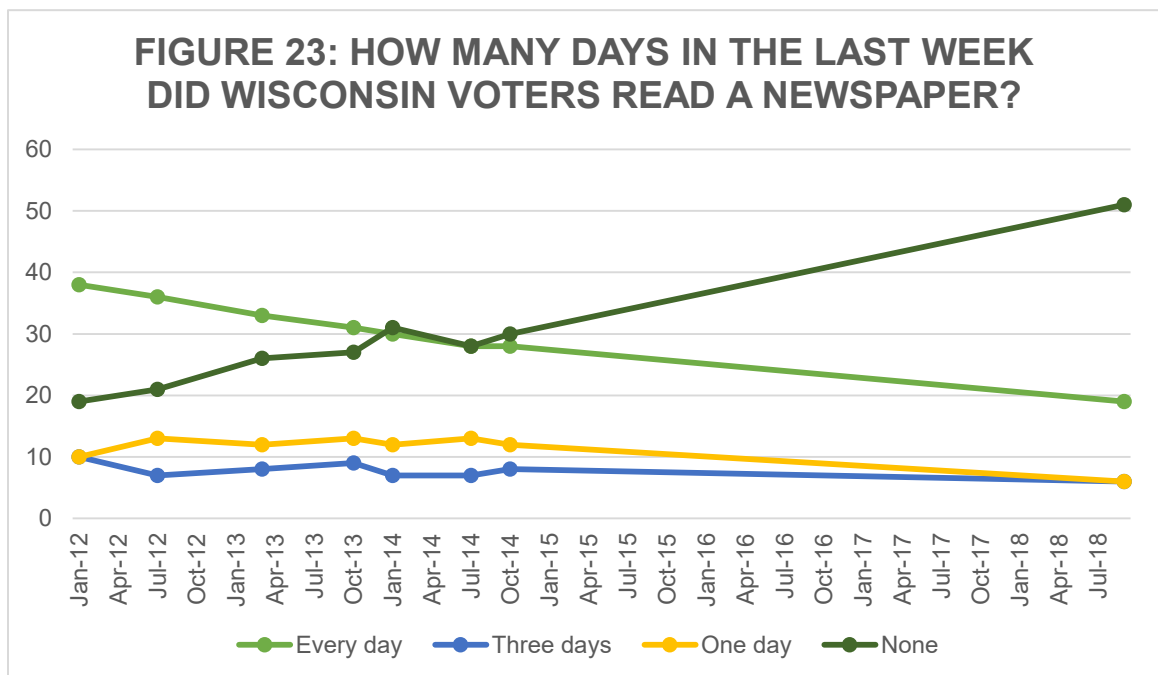
³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

there into the fever swamps.’ But the ones who went the furthest out, they are the ones who are the big winners right now.”³⁶⁹

Information Diets

The Marquette Poll asked frequently about voters’ news consumption habits from 2012 to 2014, then asked again in 2018. Some dramatic shifts emerged:

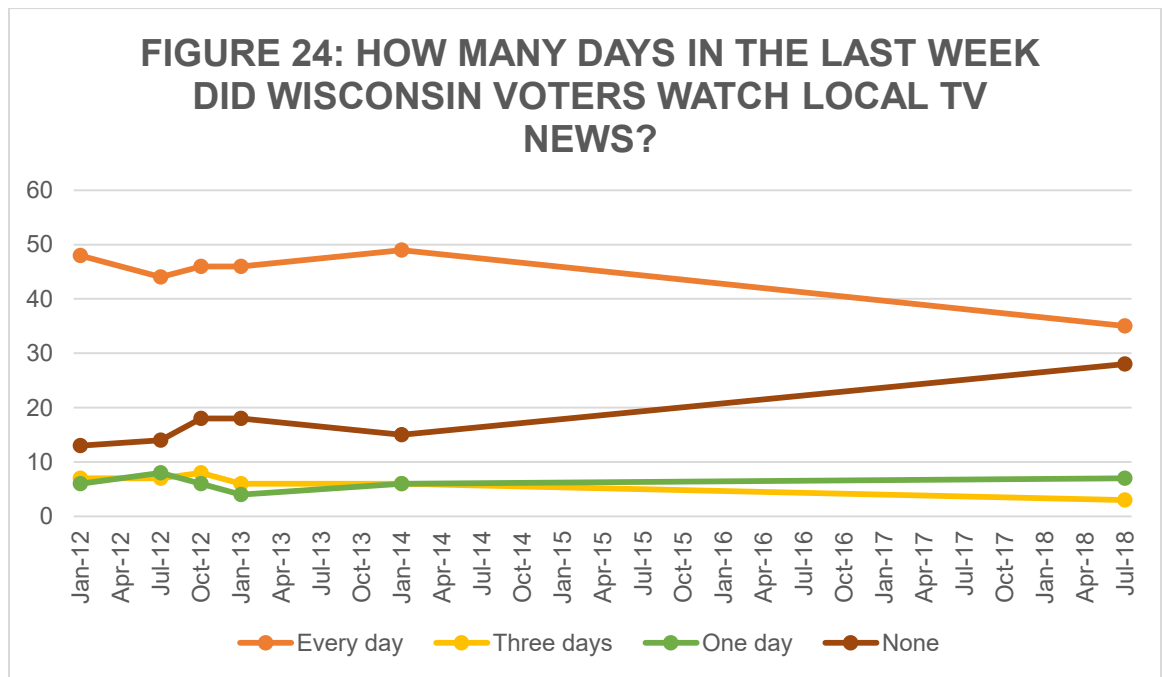
- Daily newspapers:** In January 2012, 19 percent of voters said they didn’t read a daily newspaper at all during the week. That percentage stayed in the teens, 20s and 30s up to January 2014. In September 2016, 51 percent of voters said they didn’t read a daily newspaper at all during the week. The peak of voters who said they read a daily newspaper every day occurred in May 2012, at 43 percent. That percentage was down to 19 percent in September 2018 (see fig. 23).³⁷⁰



³⁶⁹ Opoien. Interview with Charlie Sykes. December 5, 2016.

³⁷⁰ “Marquette Law Poll Interactive Database.”

- Local TV news:** In January 2012, 13 percent of voters said they did not watch local TV news at all during the week; that percentage stayed below 20 percent up to January 2014. It was up to 28 percent in September 2018. The percentage of voters who watched local TV news every day dropped from 48 percent in January 2012 to 35 percent in September 2018. The percentage of voters who watched local TV news every day dropped from 48 percent in January 2012 to 35 percent in September 2018; its lowest point in the poll's measurement (see fig. 24).³⁷¹ Thirty-eight percent of voters asked in September 2018 said they saw an equal mix of liberal and conservative content in local TV and newspapers. Twenty-nine percent said local TV and newspaper content was mostly or all liberal, while 15 percent said the content was mostly or all conservative.³⁷²



- Online news:** In April 2012, 44 percent of voters said they did not visit online news sources at all during the week (to consume local, state or national

³⁷¹ Ibid.

³⁷² Ibid.

news). That figure dropped to 38 percent in September 2018. Unlike daily newspaper and local TV news, the percentage of people who said they consume online news every day grew from 2012 to 2018—from 22 percent in April 2012 to 34 percent in September 2018.³⁷³

- **Social media:** Similar to online news consumption, frequent social media news consumption also increased from 2012 to 2018. In April 2012, 62 percent of voters said they did not receive news from social media (examples listed were Facebook, Twitter and email); that was down to 50 percent in September 2018. At the same time, while 17 percent said they received news from social media every day in April 2012, 24 percent said they did in September 2018. Twenty-eight percent of voters asked in September 2018 said they encountered an equal mix of liberal and conservative views on social media. Twenty-three percent said they encountered mostly or entirely liberal content, while 8 percent said they encountered mostly or entirely conservative content.³⁷⁴
- **Talk radio:** The poll only asked once about talk radio consumption, in September 2016. It is unfortunate that there is no data on talk radio listening habits from the early 2010s, when it was arguably at its most influential in Wisconsin.³⁷⁵ In September 2016, 47 percent of voters said they never listened to talk radio shows about politics, while 15 percent said they listened every day, 23 percent said they listened one to three days a week, and 12

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

³⁷⁵ Opoien." Excommunicated."

percent said they listened four to six days a week.³⁷⁶ Of those who said they listened to political talk radio, 13 percent said they listened to an equal mix of liberal and conservative programming, while 11 percent said they listened to almost all liberal or mostly liberal with some conservative programming. Eighteen percent said they listened to almost all conservative or mostly conservative with some liberal programming.³⁷⁷

- **Friends and family:** Forty-seven percent of voters asked in September 2018 said they heard an equal mix of liberal and conservative perspectives from friends and family. The percentages of voters who said conversations leaned liberal (22 percent) or conservative (24 percent) were effectively evenly split.³⁷⁸

Ahead of the 2020 presidential election, political preference was a relatively reliable indicator of voters' trust in news media. Among voters surveyed in the fall of 2020, Biden supporters exhibited a higher level of trust in news sources than Trump supporters in every category except political talk radio and Fox News. Biden supporters were significantly more likely than Trump supporters to trust the *New York Times*, CNN, MSNBC, Wisconsin journalists, and their local TV news station (see fig. 25).

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

Trust by Biden/Trump support in WISCONSIN
1 = distrust completely, 5 = trust completely

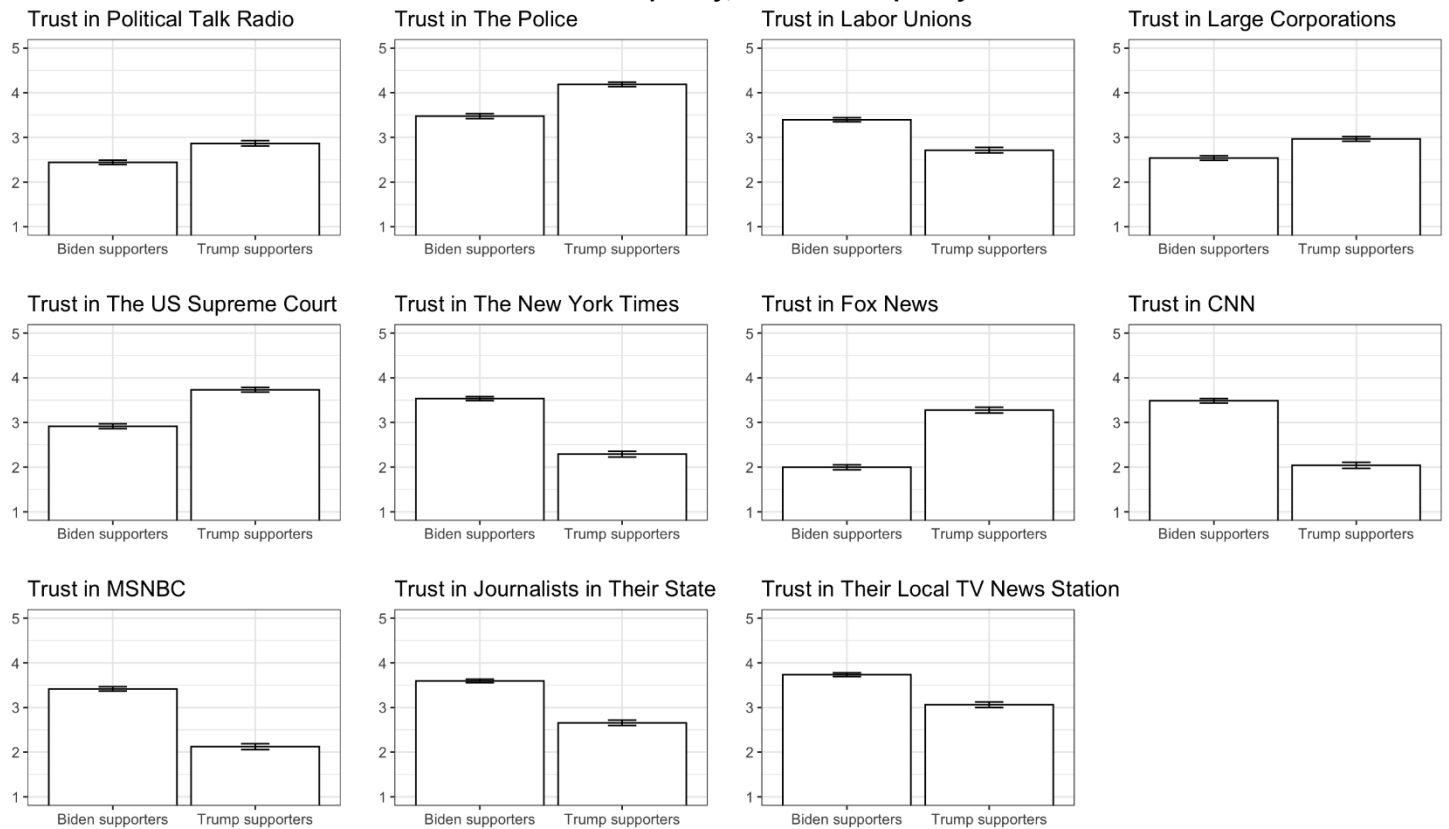


Fig. 25: Michael W. Wagner, Trust by Biden/Trump support in Wisconsin, fall 2020.

In Wisconsin, information diets matter. Consumption of traditional news sources has not been shown to significantly influence attitudes toward candidates, but a study of Wisconsin voters found that use of digital media did strengthen polarized attitudes toward Barack Obama.³⁷⁹ This is likely a result of voters’ ability to seek out the political information of their choosing online, rather than receive it passively through a print newspaper or television broadcast—in turn rewarding existing partisan attitudes.³⁸⁰ Wisconsinites who talk more with family and friends (likely to be mostly politically

³⁷⁹ Suk, et al. “Do Improving Conditions Harden Partisan Preferences?”

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

homogenous exposure) have more polarized attitudes about Barack Obama, Scott Walker, the Tea Party, and public labor unions.³⁸¹ However, those who talk about politics with their coworkers (likely to be a more heterogeneous set of views) display less polarization in their attitudes toward Obama and Walker.³⁸² These effects have implications at the ballot box: the more ideologically diverse Wisconsin voters' media diets are—in terms of both news media consumption and personal conversations—the more likely they are to split their tickets.³⁸³

Conclusion

Although analysis of the 2020 presidential election will continue well beyond the completion of this thesis, Wisconsin's role in electoral politics is worth highlighting as an illustration of the state's polarization.³⁸⁴

When Donald Trump defeated Hillary Clinton in 2016, he was the first Republican to win Wisconsin's 10 electoral votes since 1984. He did so by a margin of 22,748 votes. Evers' margin over Walker in the 2018 gubernatorial election was similarly close, at 29,227. In both cases, the margin amounts to about four votes per ward across the state.

In 2020, Joe Biden flipped Wisconsin back to blue, by a margin of 20,682—continuing the state's tradition of razor-thin election margins.³⁸⁵ In 2020, 2016, 2004,

³⁸¹ Wagner, et al. "What Makes Wisconsin Swing?"

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ At the time of this writing, election results were certified, but Trump's campaign and supporters had several legal challenges to the results pending.

³⁸⁵ Marley. "Gov. Tony Evers Authorizes Biden Electors as Wisconsin Certifies Election Results."

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, December 1, 2020.

<https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/11/30/showdown-over-finalizing-wisconsin-presidential-results/6465419002/>.

and 2000, presidential elections in Wisconsin were decided by less than one percentage point.³⁸⁶ Trump continued to perform well in 2020 in rural counties, as he did in 2016—while suburban voters shifted slightly Democratic, and Biden performed predictably well in Dane and Milwaukee counties.

Despite Biden having won approximately the same number of Wisconsin's votes in 2020 as Trump did in 2016, more than a week after Biden was determined by unofficial vote counts to be the president-elect, only one elected Republican in Wisconsin would say he believed that Biden won the election.³⁸⁷ Of the state's 81 Republican state lawmakers, 76 did not respond to reporters' questions, and four who did respond declined to acknowledge Biden's victory.³⁸⁸ Forty-four of 47 Democratic state lawmakers responded, all of whom acknowledged Biden as president-elect.³⁸⁹ The same was true at the congressional level; every Republican member of the state's congressional delegation ignored an inquiry from the *Washington Post* asking if they would accept Biden as the legitimately elected president of the United States.³⁹⁰ If the two parties cannot agree on an objective fact such as which candidate received more votes (in both the popular vote and the Electoral College) for the presidency, it appears there is little room for them to agree on anything else. This appears to be a signal that

³⁸⁶ "Wisconsin Presidential Election Voting History." *270toWin.com*. Accessed November 14, 2020. <https://www.270towin.com/states/Wisconsin>.

³⁸⁷ Vetterkind, Riley, and Mitchell Schmidt. "Only One Elected Republican in Wisconsin Has Acknowledged Joe Biden Is President-Elect." *Wisconsin State Journal*, November 15, 2020. https://madison.com/wsj/news/local/govt-and-politics/only-one-elected-republican-in-wisconsin-has-acknowledged-joe-biden-is-president-elect/article_b7278198-c417-5408-ac4c-4e0b0e64edfa.html.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁰ Washington Post Staff. "Where Republicans in Congress Stand on Trump's False Claim of Winning the Election." *The Washington Post*, December 5, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/politics/congress-republicans-trump-election-claims/?itid=lk_interstitial_manual_8.

the partisan divide in Wisconsin is more pronounced than ever, and perhaps still growing.

Wisconsin has a rich history of political diversity, but the last decade in particular has been marked by deep division that extends beyond the walls of the state capitol. There is no smoking gun that explains polarization at the state level, nor is there a silver bullet to alleviate it. The available evidence, however, supports the theory that media consumption plays a role in polarization. This connection is worth further exploration.

From this analysis, several themes have emerged:

- Consumption of traditional news media has declined, and with it, so has the public's trust in the news media.
- The “divide and conquer” politics of Act 10 have created lasting fissures in Wisconsin's politics.
- A robust conservative talk radio presence appears to have hardened some of the state's political divisions.
- Media consolidation has reduced the amount of local news coverage available in cities throughout the state—adding to an existing perception in rural communities that they are ignored by government and news media.
- Sense of place and community identification influence civic participation, and local news influences community identity.

It is worth noting that this analysis was conducted within the first eight months of the coronavirus pandemic. Future research should present a more detailed account of how elected officials, journalists, and voters responded to the virus and its associated

fallout. Interviews with current and former elected officials also would likely provide valuable insight, as so much of politics and polarization is personal.

It is fair to conclude that journalism does have a relationship with polarization, but it is difficult to fully isolate its role, as it is intertwined with so many other significant factors. But as Wisconsin—and the nation—continues to grapple with its effects, any efforts to better understand how we reached this point will not be wasted.

Conclusion

Whether serving as watchdogs, lapdogs, or attack dogs, journalists play an integral role in our democracy—from city hall, to the statehouse, to the U.S. Capitol. As former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter said, “Freedom of the press is not an end in itself but a means to the end of achieving a free society.”³⁹¹ This “fourth pillar of democracy” is at risk of crumbling, though, as resources directed toward government coverage—particularly at the state level—dwindle and trust in the news media plummets.

A comprehensive report released in November 2020 by Gallup and the Knight Foundation reinforces many of the findings of this thesis, observing “continued pessimism and further partisan entrenchment about how the news media delivers on its democratic mandate for factual, trustworthy information.”³⁹² As observed throughout this thesis, the survey found that party affiliation was the primary predictor of attitudes toward news media.³⁹³

The survey found that 83 percent of Americans perceive a “fair amount” or “great deal” of political bias in journalism, but two-thirds of Americans are more concerned about the bias in other people’s news sources than in their own.³⁹⁴ Sixty-seven percent of Republicans view the news media “very” or “somewhat” unfavorably, compared to 20 percent of Democrats—and one in seven Republicans believes the news media is trying

³⁹¹ “World Press Freedom Day 2012.” VOA. Editorials on Voice of America, August 22, 2012. <https://editorials.voa.gov/a/world-press-freedom-day-2012-149912745/1493181.html>.

³⁹² Rep. American Views 2020: Trust, Media and Democracy. Gallup/Knight Foundation, November 9, 2020. <https://knightfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/American-Views-2020-Trust-Media-and-Democracy.pdf>.

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

to ruin the country.³⁹⁵ Most Americans agree that the news media is under political attack, but while most Democrats believe it is unwarranted, most Republicans believe it is deserved.³⁹⁶

There is some good news in the Gallup/Knight report. An overwhelming majority of Americans—81 percent—still believe journalism is “critical” or “very important” to democracy.³⁹⁷ Between 2018 and 2020, the percentage of Americans who said they follow news about their local community “very closely” went up from 25 percent to 33 percent—and, in keeping with the literature reviewed and arguments made in this thesis, people who followed local news closely were more likely to feel attached to their communities, vote in local elections, and feel that people like them could have a say in what government does.³⁹⁸ And, while 83 percent of Americans believe the news media should be blamed “a great deal” or “a moderate amount” for the country’s political divisions, the same percentage of people sees “a great deal” or “a moderate amount” of potential for news media to heal those divisions.³⁹⁹

The findings of this thesis confirm some existing theories on the relationship between government and journalism, neither confirm nor negate some other theories, and raise questions that should be explored in future research. This work provides compelling information and arguments in favor of devoting additional resources to the study of the intersection of media and politics.

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

It is encouraging to learn from the first chapter that shrinking statehouse coverage does not appear to depress voter turnout. However, there is not sufficient data available in two of the three case study states to thoroughly and definitively declare whether there is any significant relationship between the size of a statehouse press corps and political participation among citizens.

Further research in this avenue would benefit from an expanded case study. In this analysis, these three states best fit the controlling factors of population, length of legislative session, and political diversity in presidential elections—but a more in-depth analysis should draw data from a larger number of states to allow for more comparisons among states with similar populations, similar legislative operations, similar presidential election outcomes, and similar voting regulations.

This chapter is also limited by its use of voter turnout as the only measure of political participation to be assessed. Future research should consider additional measures, including but not limited to: perception of one's qualifications to participate in politics, voter registration trends, attitudes toward government, campaign contributions, volunteerism, social media activity, and frequency and quality of political conversations with friends, family, and coworkers. As the second and third chapters focus heavily on political polarization, it would also be useful to conduct analysis of polarization as it relates (or does not) to the size of a state's press corps.

Studying again the states of Wisconsin, Massachusetts, and Oklahoma, the second chapter neither confirms nor negates the theory that an expanding partisan news landscape leads to increased political participation and increased political polarization. People who consume media that reinforces their beliefs are more likely to

feel negatively toward the opposite party and more likely to oppose compromise—fostering gridlock and, arguably, making politics more dysfunctional.

Similar to the first chapter, the second chapter is limited by the inconsistency in data available from each of the states being studied. My analysis does not find sufficient evidence to assert a strong connection between partisan media and voter turnout, at least in some part due to the limitations of data. Findings do indicate a slight preference for local news over national news, but there is not enough data available to strongly confirm this. It is clear, though, that trust in media is on a downward slope, and that negative attitudes toward news media are far more prevalent among Republicans than Democrats.

The questions raised in the second chapter would again suggest that further research would benefit from a broader sample of states, with varying presidential election trends and varying degrees of partisan media saturation. Questions that warrant further exploration include: whether partisan media has driven polarization or emerged in response to growing divisions, how partisan media might exhibit different effects in swing states as opposed to reliably “red” or “blue” states, whether voters value objectivity over reinforcement of their existing perceptions, and whether voters value exposure to different perspectives.

Timing is also an issue in this analysis. So many of the partisan outlets noted in this chapter are relatively new, particularly those with liberal/Democratic influences. It is likely too early to fully assess their impact on the political landscape in any of these states, but continued observation will surely be beneficial.

In the final chapter, Wisconsin emerges as a microcosm of the polarization seen throughout the United States, demonstrating how rich political differences can be hardened into a seemingly incurable chasm between parties.

Both consumption of traditional news media and the public's trust in journalism have declined. At the same time, journalistic resources devoted to traditional state government have dwindled, and many local newspapers have either been purchased by larger corporations or ceased printing altogether. All the while, partisan-influenced media outlets continue to set up shop.

News media is far from the only factor that has contributed to polarization in Wisconsin. Legislative battles have deepened divisions, in many cases changing the way people communicate with one another, and in some situations ending relationships entirely. Additionally, a spatial realignment has occurred as Democrats flock to urban areas and Republicans expand their presence in smaller towns and rural areas.

It is difficult to isolate the role of the news media in Wisconsin's severely polarized political environment, but its presence is clear. Even in measures of geographic divisions, media emerges as a factor as rural residents increasingly feel as if institutions such as government and the news media are out of touch with their lives. While local news coverage can lead to increased civic participation, consolidation of media ownership appears to affect perceptions of one's local news sources. Chipping away at the "local" element of local news erodes readers' shared sense of community. Additionally, consolidation raises issues of trust among most people, and as people lose trust in news media, they become increasingly guided by partisan influence when making political decisions like voting.

The influence of conservative talk radio is mostly documented with anecdotes, which suggest that, at its strongest point, it served to foment mistrust of mainstream media and to reinforce perspectives favored by conservatives and Republicans. Additional research should seek to quantify these observations with polling, interviews, and more extensive listenership data.

The final chapter also identifies a trend in media consumption: in recent years, the percentage of Wisconsin voters who read a newspaper or watch local TV news every day has decreased, while the percentage who say they never do these things has increased. Further research should aim to learn more about why these habits have changed, and whether these news sources are being replaced with others.

Although polarization in Wisconsin is more dramatic than most other states, its recent history can provide a useful window into the factors that deepen political divisions, both inside and outside of government. Initial research indicates that the changing media landscape and changing media consumption habits—along with a variety of other factors—contribute to political polarization. The scholars at the University of Wisconsin’s Center for Communication and Civic Renewal offer a multi-method, cross-disciplined approach to the study of the relationship between news, communication and polarization, and will continue to produce valuable research in this field that will be useful for future analysis.⁴⁰⁰

Future research in Wisconsin should delve deeper into the partisan divisions surrounding major events like the COVID-19 pandemic and the presidential election. Additional studies should continue to make use of the wealth of data available from the

⁴⁰⁰ “UW Scholars Receive Major Funding.”

Marquette Poll, but should also take a cue from Cramer’s “politics of resentment” research, which has relied heavily on individual conversations and personal experiences to present these lofty concepts in relatable, real-life context.

There is still much to learn about what happens to political participation, engagement and polarization as the news media landscape changes. The evidence amassed in this work makes a compelling case that a diminished traditional news media is undesirable in our democracy, especially as partisan outlets fill the gaps. These trends are likely to elevate extreme voices, reinforce negative perceptions between political camps, and drive political actors away from compromise. As gridlock becomes more frequent and more impenetrable, voters’ negative attitudes toward government and institutions in general are likely to deepen. The cycle of dysfunction and polarization, if left unchecked, will become an ouroboros.

Just as public lack of trust in news media existed before Donald Trump’s presidency, it will continue to be an issue after he leaves the White House. So, too, will political polarization—and, as a result of the economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic, so, too, will the financial threats to traditional news media. Additionally, absent significant changes to the allocation of political power in the United States, state governments will continue to hold considerable weight in our democracy and, as a result, so will statehouse coverage. If journalism is to fulfill its role as a steward of democracy, solutions must be offered and implemented to restore resources and build trust—likely with some trial and error. A key factor in building trust will be ensuring that these solutions are designed with the aim of decreasing polarization and thus, moving toward a news media that is trusted regardless of partisan affiliation.

The search for solutions is complicated in part by journalism's complex relationship with government, serving both as a check on political actors and as a fundamental pillar of democracy. Ultimately, to preserve the profession's "watchdog" role, solutions must primarily come from within the industry, and not from the government. However, that does not mean government does not have a role to play.

A number of promising proposals aimed at preserving local journalism have already been introduced or floated by members of Congress:

- As suggested by Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, the Federal Communications Commission should implement a moratorium on mergers of major media corporations until their effects on democracy can be better determined.⁴⁰¹ Any assessment of these effects should include recommendations for the enforcement and/or development of antitrust laws. Media companies should also be required to disclose whether proposed mergers would result in significant layoffs, similar to the requirements of the Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act.⁴⁰²
- As Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren has proposed, the private equity firms that have purchased, gutted, and sold so many local newsrooms should face stricter regulations and transparency requirements. Warren's "Stop Wall Street Looting Act" would require these companies to share information about

⁴⁰¹ Sanders, Bernie. "Op-Ed: Bernie Sanders on His Plan for Journalism." *Columbia Journalism Review*, August 26, 2019. <https://www.cjr.org/opinion/bernie-sanders-media-silicon-valley.php>.

⁴⁰² "Plant Closings and Layoffs." U.S. Department of Labor . Accessed December 5, 2020. <https://www.dol.gov/general/topic/termination/plantclosings>.

ownership and debt, and would implement worker protections to deter firms from “stripping (newspapers) down for parts.”⁴⁰³

Solutions from within the journalism industry should be guided by the principles of transparency and engagement, with the primary goal of earning trust. A 2019 study conducted by University of Texas at Austin Center for Media Engagement researchers found that increasing transparency on a news website can increase both its perceived credibility and the level of engagement among readers.⁴⁰⁴ As documented throughout this thesis, increased trust in news media can positively affect political participation and may decrease the polarizing influence of partisanship.

Several organizations—composed of academic researchers and practicing journalists—have offered some useful recommendations as newsrooms seek to build trust in their communities:

- Readers surveyed by the Center for Media Engagement in 2019 said they want newspapers to do a better job of 1) digging deeper into stories, 2) explaining jargon and procedures, 3) explaining why some voices were included in stories and others were left out, and 4) detailing efforts to prevent bias from influencing reporting.⁴⁰⁵ To fulfill these requests, newsrooms should link to previous

⁴⁰³ Nilsen, Ella, and Tara Golshan. “Can Democrats Running for President Save a Journalism Industry in Crisis?” *Vox*, August 29, 2019. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/8/29/20834983/bernie-sanders-2020-warren-plan-save-media-local-news>; Davidow, Sally. “A Hedge Fund Stripped My Paper for Parts. Now, Elizabeth Warren Has a Plan to Fight Back.” *The NewsGuild*. Communication Workers of America, July 18, 2019. <https://newsguild.org/a-hedge-fund-stripped-my-newspaper-for-parts-now-elizabeth-warren-has-a-plan-to-fight-back-opinion/>.

⁴⁰⁴ Curry, Alexander L, and Natalie Jomini Stroud. “The Effects of Journalistic Transparency on Credibility Assessments and Engagement Intentions.” *Journalism*, May 25, 2019, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919850387>.

⁴⁰⁵ Wilner, Tamar, Dominique A. Montiel Valle, and Gina Masullo Chen. Rep. *What People Want to Know About the News*. Center for Media Engagement, October 2019. <https://mediaengagement.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/CME-Report-What-People-Want-to-Know-About-the-News.pdf>.

coverage whenever possible; offer explanations of terminology, specialized processes, and sourcing decisions; and direct readers to explanations of newsroom policies.⁴⁰⁶

- Newsrooms should follow the lead of news organizations like *Colorado Public Radio*, *StoryCorps*, *The Tennessean* and many others that have launched projects designed to facilitate civil, productive interactions among people who disagree. These efforts, as detailed by the Center for Media Engagement, should include a diverse group of participants, experiment with different methods of interaction, create an environment that promotes positive interactions, and lead to further analysis and follow-ups.⁴⁰⁷
- Newsrooms should follow the guidelines and recommendations put forth by efforts like Trusting News and The Trust Project. Examples include: emphasize local connections to differentiate local news from “the media;” invite feedback and be responsive; explain efforts to provide balance; clearly label content (“news,” “analysis,” “opinion,” etc.); explain the reporting process; share information about ethics and funding; present journalists as human beings; and share the publication’s mission and guiding principles.⁴⁰⁸

As a journalist, I can attest to the power of a personal connection. On several occasions while interviewing supporters at Trump rallies, I listened to indictments of “the media” as an entity, followed up with a comment along the lines of, “You don’t seem that

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ Murray, Caroline, and Natalie Jomini Stroud. Rep. *Making Strangers Less Strange*. Center for Media Engagement, November 14, 2018. <https://mediaengagement.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Making-Strangers-Less-Strange.pdf>.

⁴⁰⁸ Trusting News. Reynolds Journalism Institute and American Press Institute. Accessed December 5, 2020. <https://trustingnews.org/>; The Trust Project. Accessed December 5, 2020. <https://thetrustproject.org/>.

bad, though.” As long as local journalism continues to dwindle, so, too, will the number of opportunities for people to interact with journalists and gain some measure of trust in news—as will voters’ shared sense of community. And as long as partisan news media continues to take the place of traditional publications, moderate political voices will be diminished while extreme perspectives are elevated. Continuation of these trends will further deepen political divisions and dissatisfaction with government, drive gridlock, discourage political deliberation and participation, and weaken the “watchdog” function of the free press.

Further efforts to understand how the news media can gain the trust of the public, how less polarized states differ from states like Wisconsin, and what can be done to bridge the country’s deep ideological gaps will benefit democracy at every level. Without a robust free press that is trusted by the people, democracy as we know it is in peril.

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[wisconsin/2843901001/?fbclid=IwAR03NloWE1QhT8jtBjEgOKyuilxYHkkXV6ozFPBP54C9iwFnx2Q34Gq08X0](https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/2020/01/13/black-history-month-resolution-again-stirs-clash-wisconsin/2843901001/?fbclid=IwAR03NloWE1QhT8jtBjEgOKyuilxYHkkXV6ozFPBP54C9iwFnx2Q34Gq08X0)

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Based in Madison, Wisconsin, Jessica Opoien is the opinion editor of the *Capital Times*—a digital-first news publication with a weekly print edition. In addition to editing the century-old newspaper's opinion section, Opoien writes a weekly column and hosts a podcast about Wisconsin politics called *Wedge Issues*. Prior to her move to opinion journalism, she was the *Capital Times*' state government reporter, based in the state capitol, for several years. She has appeared on local, national, and international media as an expert on Wisconsin politics, discussing the Badger State on television stations including BBC World News, CNN, MSNBC, Bloomberg, Fox News, Fox Business News, and Sky News; and on radio stations including BBC Radio, Wisconsin Public Radio, WMTJ, and WHBY. In 2020, she was named one of *New York Magazine*'s 17 “swing state experts to follow on election night.” Opoien's work has been honored by the Wisconsin Newspaper Association and the Milwaukee Press Club.

Opoien earned her bachelor's degree in journalism at Iowa State University, where she was honored to serve as editor in chief of the student newspaper, the *Iowa State Daily*. Before moving to Madison to write for the *Capital Times*, Opoien reported on local government and education for the *Oshkosh Northwestern*. She grew up in Marinette, Wisconsin.