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### 2023 Polarization Index Part IV: Media's Role in Bias and Division

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# The 2023 Polarization Index

A Holistic Analysis of the State of U.S. Political Strife

Katie Langford Sonder  
December 2023



## WRITTEN AND ANALYZED BY

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## SPECIAL THANKS TO

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Bilal Omar Omari

PHOTO CREDIT: Getty Images



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# UNDERSTANDING POLARIZATION

## REPORT METHODOLOGY

Polarization is both a buzzword and a tangible indicator of the state of our nation. We hear how polarized the American public is from our politicians, the media, and our friends and family. We have also experienced the effects of voter suppression, election denial, cancel culture, the January 6th attack on the Capitol, and congressional gridlock.

This Polarization Index was created to help us better understand how polarized the American public is really. Grasping the ways in which we are polarized – to what degree and over what issues – and identifying the areas of bipartisan agreement will give us a stronger foundation from which to make progress.

The following report presents data from a multitude of reputable sources to provide a holistic understanding of partisan polarization in the United States. All analyzed data is weighted to better represent the American public. Links are provided at the bottom of each page and the full source list is at the end of the report.

This report is Part IV of four parts. It covers media and disinformation with data on Americans' approach to news consumption and their perceptions of bias in the media. Parts I and II (September 2023), cover affective and ideological polarization. Part III (October 2023), tackles polarization within the federal government.

The reports will be updated annually to track progress (or the lack thereof) in these areas.



## POLARIZATION INDEX: PART IV

# THE MEDIA'S ROLE IN BIAS AND DIVISION

Over the last 20 years, Americans have become increasingly distrustful of democratic institutions. Trust in Congress, the Supreme Court, and the news media has declined. More Americans view the media as a threat to democracy than they do the federal government (The New York Times, 2022). In 2003, only 11% of Americans had no trust in the news media to report information accurately and fairly. In 2022, 38% did (Brenan, 2022).

While trust has declined overall, it varies by partisan affiliation. Democrats and Republicans trust disparate news sources (beyond The Weather Channel, which is the most trusted source for both parties), and conservatives hold much less trust than liberals. In 2022, Democrats were five times as likely as Republicans to have a great deal or a fair amount of trust in the mass media (Brenan, 2022). Nearly half of Republicans and 81% of Democrats agreed that conservative news media outlets are a major driver of the country's political divisions (Skelley and Fuong, 2022).

Among Democrats, net trust is over 50% for PBS, CNN, MSNBC, and network news channels like NBC, ABC, CNN. Republican trust in CNN and MSNBC is -37%. The most trusted source among Republicans is Fox News, which garnered only 41% support (Sanders, 2023).

Age is another dividing line in news media consumption and trust. Young people are much more likely than older generations to get their news online and to trust the information they glean using a smartphone, computer, or app (Knight Foundation and Gallup, 2023). Older Americans, who still get most of their news from television, are much more skeptical of online news information, especially if it comes from social media (Liedke and Gottfried, 2022).

Concern about the proliferation of fake news has risen alongside online news media consumption. Americans believe the increased access to information makes it more difficult to parse what's real from what's fake, an exercise most report attempting to do daily. Those 65 and older are the most likely to believe they encounter fake news daily, but are among the most confident in their ability to identify false information (Sanders, 2023).

In a YouGov survey based on the Misinformation Susceptibility Test, that confidence proved justified. When asked to identify real and fake news headlines, those 65+ were 4 times more likely than young adults to get the most correct (Sanders, 2023).

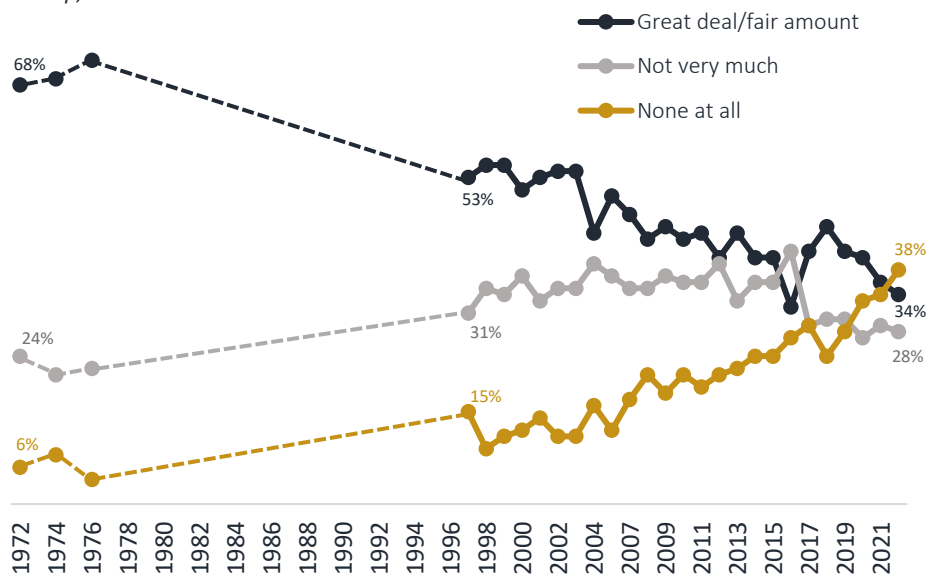
As trust in the media has declined and concerns over fake news have risen, some Americans have started to avoid the news altogether. In 2022, 42% of Americans reported that they sometimes or often actively avoid the news. Democrats are most likely to do so because it brings down their mood, while Republicans avoid the news because they feel it is untrustworthy or biased. A third of American from both parties avoid news about national politics, a sign of fatigue among the electorate (Newman, 2022).

# TRUST IN MAINSTREAM MEDIA

Americans have become increasingly distrustful of the news media over the last two decades, just as they've become more distrustful of the federal government and the political opposition (see Part III page 7; Part I pages 18–20). Since 2000, the percent of Americans who do not trust the mass media at all has increased by 26 percentage points.

**% that have trust and confidence in the mass media (newspapers, TV, and radio) to report the news fully, accurately, and fairly**

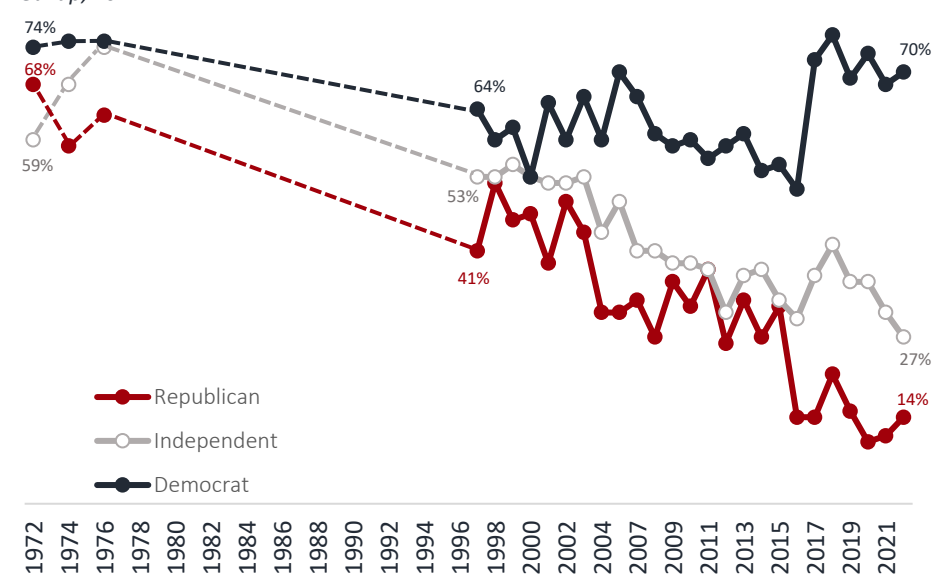
Gallup, 2022



Democrats tend to be more trusting of the news than Republicans. In 2022, they were 5 times more likely than Republicans to possess a *great deal* or a *fair amount* of trust (70% vs. 14%). Among Republicans, the percent of trust has not reached over 50% once in the last 20 years.

**% that have a *great deal/fair amount* of trust and confidence in the mass media by party**

Gallup, 2022



## MEDIA AS A THREAT TO DEMOCRACY

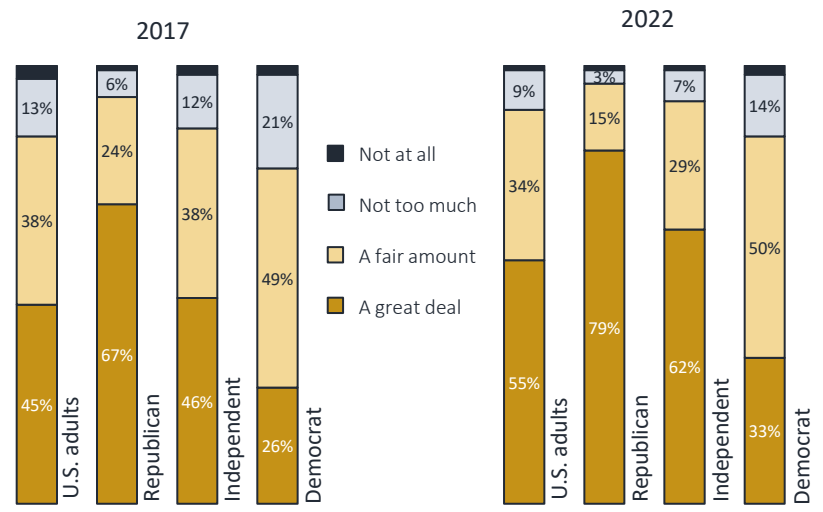
Over half (59%) of registered voters view the media as a threat to democracy; only one-third (33%) see the federal government as such. Republicans overwhelmingly believe the media is a threat (80%), while over half of Independents (53%) and about a third of Democrats (38%) agree (*The New York Times*, 2022).

# PERCEPTIONS OF BIAS AND DIVISION

## THE MEDIA'S ROLE IN RISING POLITICAL STRIFE

### % who see political bias in news coverage

*Knight Foundation and Gallup, 2023*



*Note: no answer responses not shown*

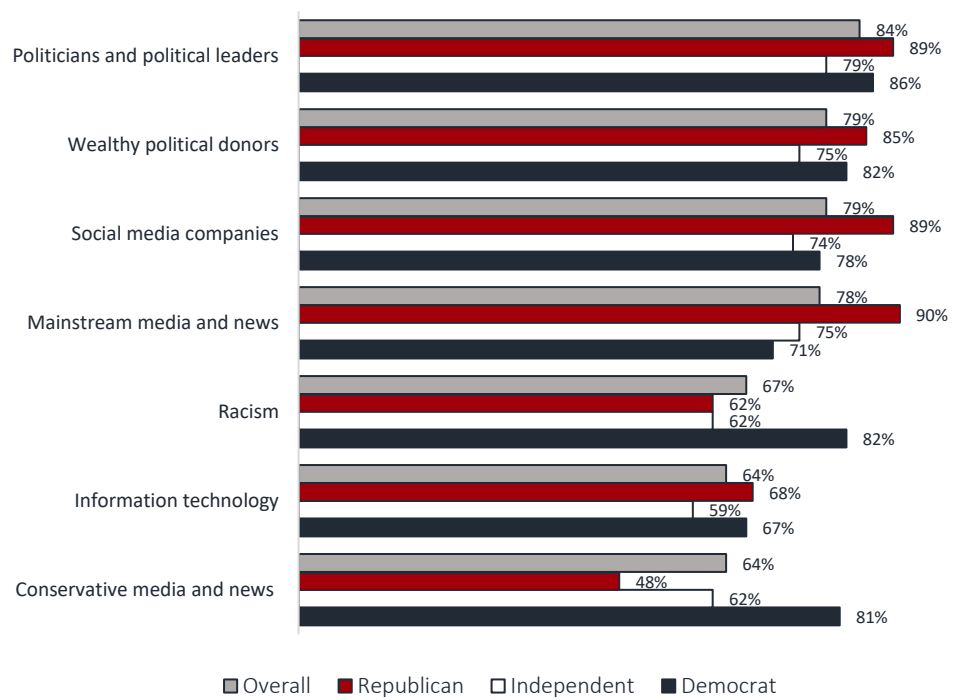
As levels of trust in the news media have decreased, the percent of Americans who see *a great deal* of political bias in news coverage has increased: it rose by 10 percentage points between 2017 and 2022. Republicans are the most likely party to agree – in 2022, nearly 80% perceived *a great deal* of political bias in the news, up from 67% in 2017. Only one-third of Democrats agreed (33%), but the percentage increased from 26% in 2017.

Perhaps because of high levels of perceived bias, Americans overwhelmingly think the media plays a role in increased political divisions: 74% believe the news media does more to increase rather than decrease political divisions (Associated Press and NORC Center, 2023).

Just as Republicans are the most likely to report *a great deal* of bias in news coverage, they also overwhelmingly believe the mainstream media has had a *major* or *significant* impact on political divisions, followed closely by social media companies (89%) and politicians (89%). While Democrats agree politicians (86%), social media companies (78%), and the mainstream media (71%) drive these divisions, conservative news media is a major concern (81%). Nearly half of Republicans agree it stokes division.

### % who believe \_\_\_ has had a major or significant impact on driving political division

*FiveThirtyEight, 2022*



Legend: Overall (grey), Republican (red), Independent (white), Democrat (black)

# PARTISAN SOURCE DIVIDE

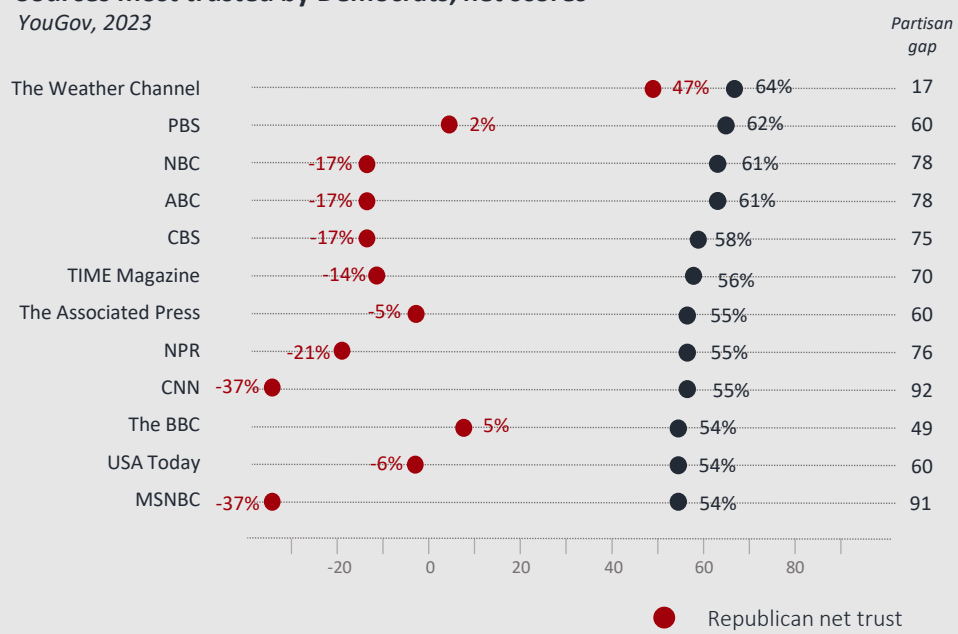
## TRUST IN NEWS OUTLETS DEPENDS ON POLITICAL PARTY

Trust in the news media – or the lack thereof – is divided along partisan lines. The Weather Channel is the only source with over half of America’s trust (Sanders, 2023). PBS, the next closest, has only 30% net trust. Beyond those top two, Democrats generally trust network television channels like NBC and ABC (61%) and Republicans’ most trusted source – Fox News – garnered 41% support.

Because Republicans are more skeptical of the news media, Democrats have higher rates of net trust in their preferred sources. Therefore, the largest partisan gaps in trust occur among sources trusted by Democrats. The gap between Democrats’ and Republicans’ trust in CNN is 92 percentage points, with 55% net trust among Democrats and -37% trust among Republicans. Fox News has a partisan gap of only 57 percentage points in part because of relatively low Republican trust.

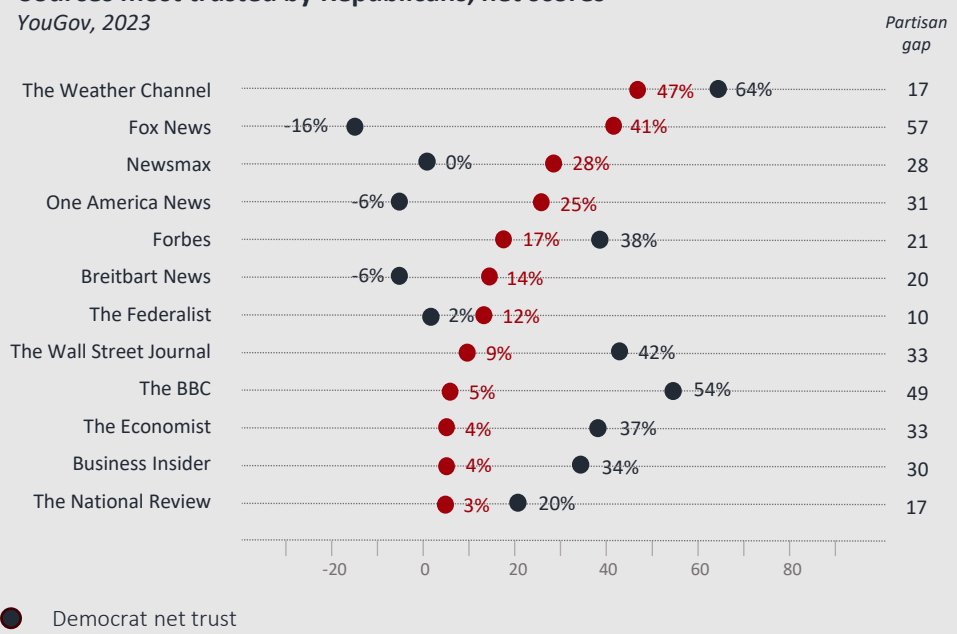
### Sources most trusted by Democrats, net scores

YouGov, 2023



### Sources most trusted by Republicans, net scores

YouGov, 2023



Note: The graphs show net trust scores between Republicans and Democrats. Net score is the percentage-point difference between adults who believe the source is trustworthy/very trustworthy and those who say it is untrustworthy/very untrustworthy.

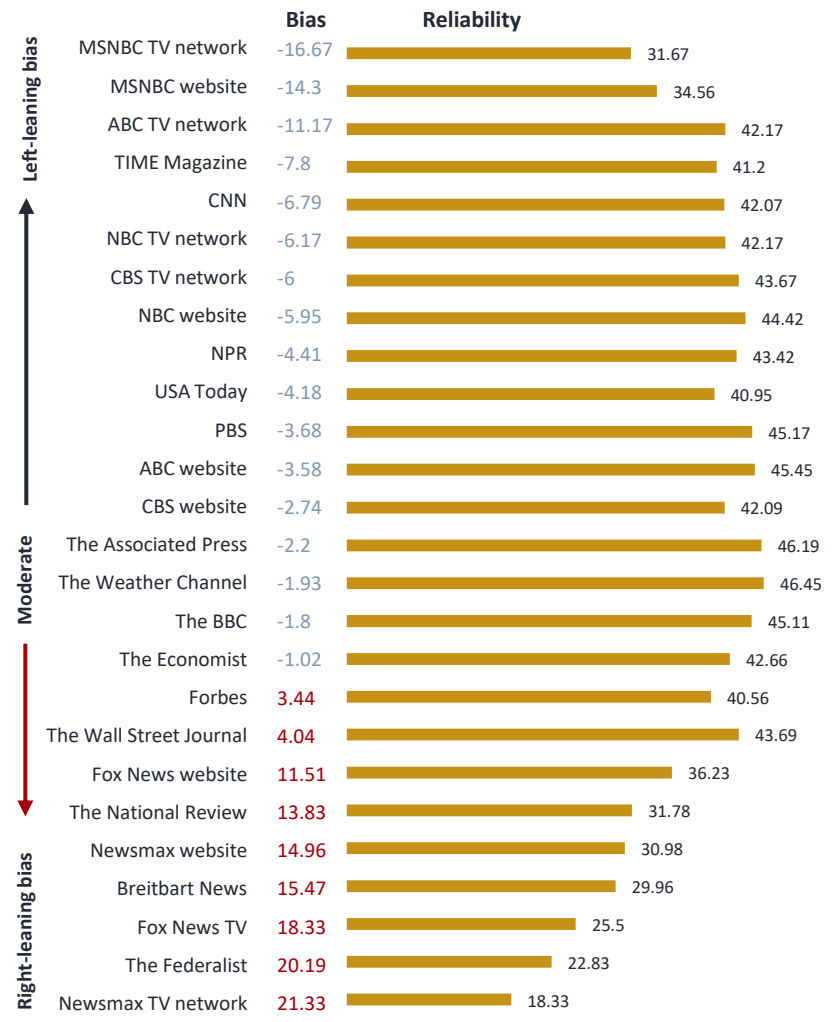


# THE NEXUS OF BIAS AND RELIABILITY

## AD FONTES MEDIA BIAS CHART RANKINGS

### Trusted news sources, bias and reliability

Ad Fontes Media, 2023



The Ad Fontes media bias chart scores specific news sources on political bias and reliability by reviewing a range of individual news articles from that source. Bias scores run from -42 (most left leaning) to +42 (most right leaning). Reliability is tagged from 64 (fact based) to 0 (consisting of false or misleading information). For example, the Weather Channel – the source most trusted by both parties – is one of the least biased (-1.93) and most reliable (46.5) sources.

While the Ad Fontes chart includes a wide range of news sources, the graph on the left depicts the bias and reliability scores for only the news sources most trusted by Republicans and Democrats as listed on the previous page, from most left-leaning to most right-leaning.

Of the 12 sources most trusted by Republicans, two – One America and Business Insider – are not listed in the Ad Fontes Media Bias Chart and three have a slight left-leaning bias – the Weather Channel (-1.93), the BBC (-1.8), and The Economist (-1.02). As a result, the majority of the 27 news sources listed have left-leaning biases. MSNBC’s television network and webpage, which garnered 54% trust among Democrats, are assessed as the most biased left-leaning sources; both the TV network and the website received reliability scores under 35. PBS, Democrats’ most trusted source at 64%, scored much higher than MSNBC on reliability (45.17) and is less biased (-3.68).

Fox News is Republicans’ most trusted news source. The television network, which is the third most unreliable source listed, is more biased and less reliable than the Fox News website. TV networks tend to be more biased and less reliable than their online counterparts. The television networks of MSNBC, ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox News, and Newsmax received higher bias scores and, in five of six instances, the webpages were more reliable than the TV station; CBS is the only exception.

The most reliable sources – beyond the Weather Channel – include the Associated Press (46.19), ABC’s website (45.45), PBS (45.17), and the BBC (45.11). These sources received bias scores between -2.2 - 1.8, marking them as only slightly biased toward the left. While over half of Democrats trust all four, PBS and the BBC were the only outlets to receive positive trust scores from Republicans, both at very low levels (2% and 5%, respectively).

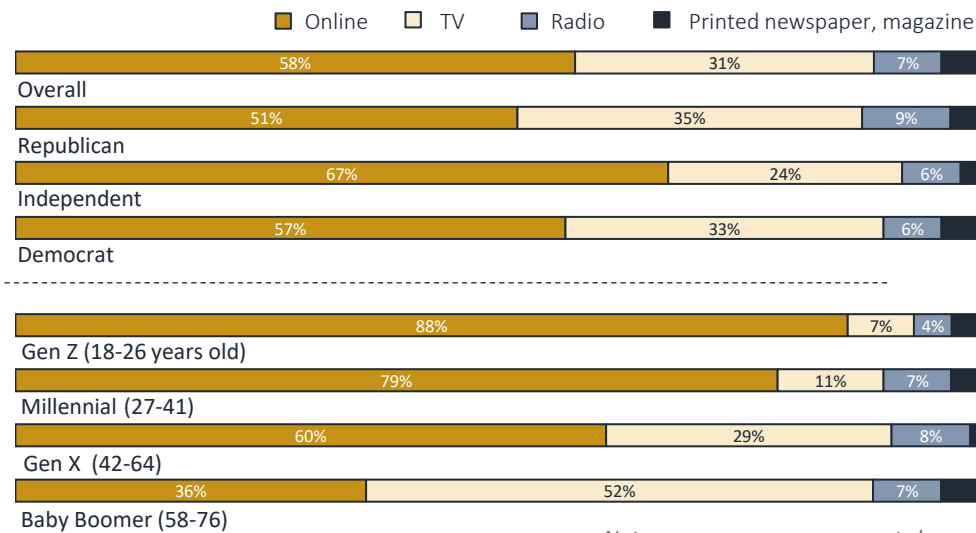
# GENERATIONAL NEWS DIVIDE

## SHIFTS IN NEWS CONSUMPTION HABITS

As trust has declined, Americans have also changed how they access their news. Over half of Americans now get most of their news online, using a smartphone, app, or computer – a 12-percentage-point increase since early 2020 (Knight Foundation and Gallup). The transition is spurred by younger generations, especially Gen Z’ers, who are more likely than older Americans to get news from social media.

### % who get most of their news from ...

*Knight Foundation and Gallup, 2023*



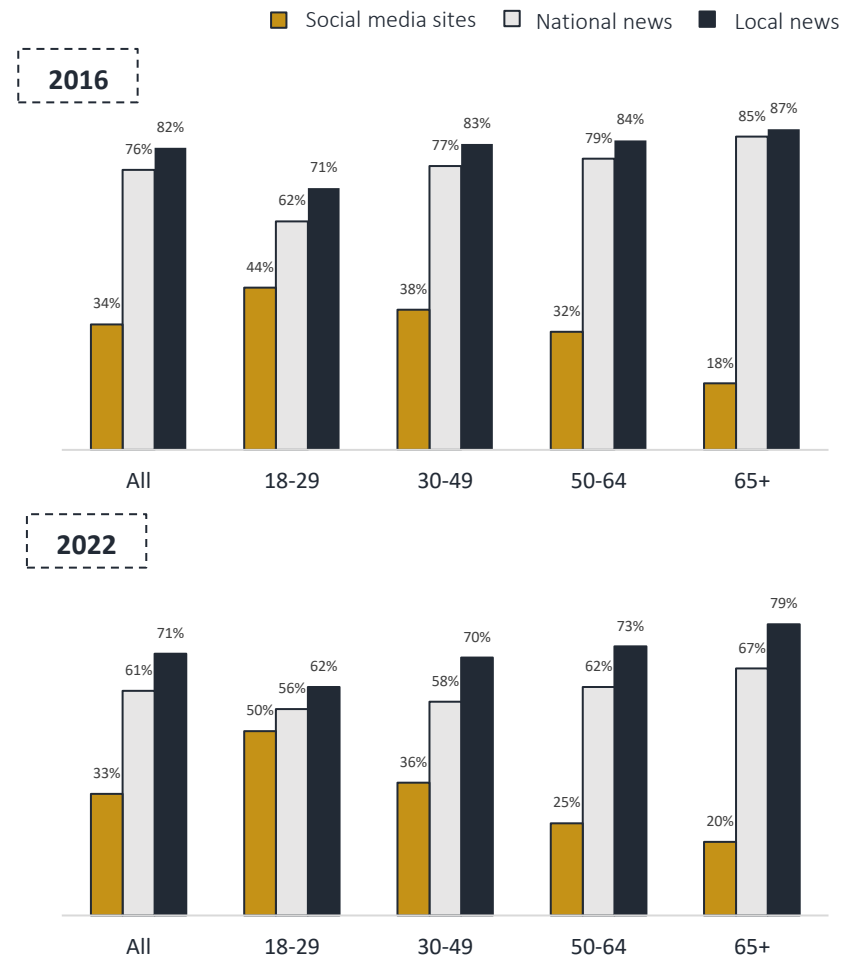
*Note: no answer responses not shown*

Half of all adults under 30 trust information from social media sites, but older Americans are much more skeptical. In 2022, those over 30 were at least twice as likely to trust local news over social media news.

Despite the shift toward online media, nearly half (46%) of Americans still tune into TV news stations daily and over half of those over 58 get most of their news from television (Knight Foundation and Gallup, 2023).

### % who have some or a lot of trust in the information they get from ...

*Pew Research Center, 2022*



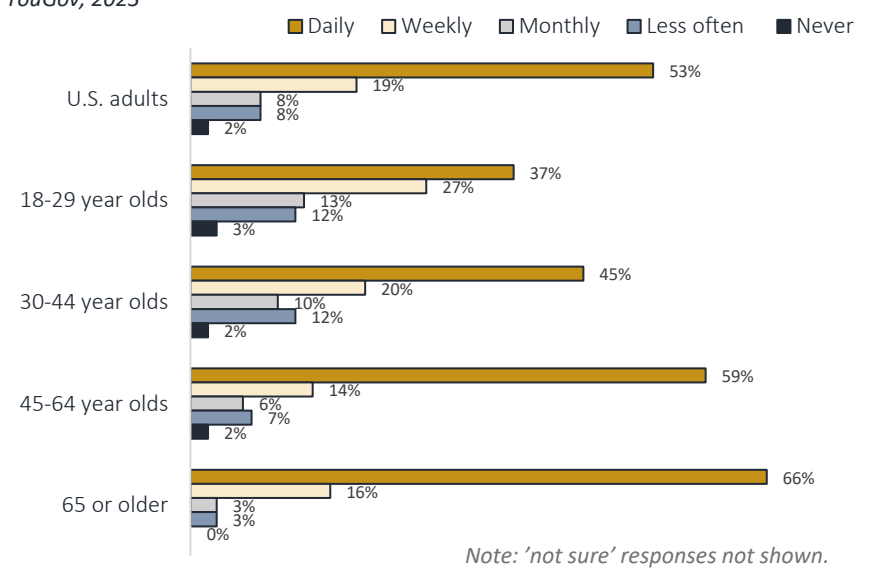
# THE UBIQUITY OF MIS- & DIS-INFORMATION

## THE ONUS TO DETERMINE REAL VS. FAKE NEWS

Most Americans are concerned about the proliferation of mis/disinformation, but as access to news expands, they find it increasingly difficult to tell what's true and real and what is fake. About two-thirds of U.S. adults (61%) think the increase in accessible information makes it more difficult to stay informed, while nearly three-quarters (71%) believe the spread of misinformation is a major problem (Knight Foundation and Gallup, 2023; Associated Press and NORC Center, 2023).

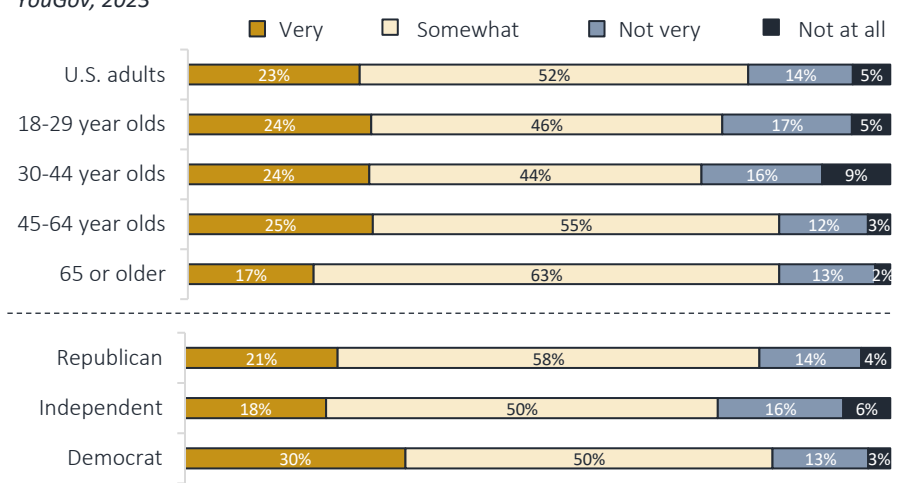
The majority of Americans believe they encounter misleading information online daily. The older generation is the most likely to believe this, while young people are the least: twice as many adults over 65 believe they see false information every day compared to those aged 18-29.

**% who see false or misleading information online \_\_\_\_**  
YouGov, 2023



Despite the inundation of misinformation, those 65+ have the most confidence in their ability to determine fake from real news: 63% are somewhat confident.

**% who are \_\_\_\_ confident in their ability to tell real from fake news**  
YouGov, 2023



### MIS- VS. DIS-INFORMATION

**Misinformation:** information that is incorrect or false, like rumors or pranks.

**Disinformation:** deliberately incorrect information, like propaganda, circulated for the purpose of spreading fear and/or mistrust among a population (UNHCR, 2022).

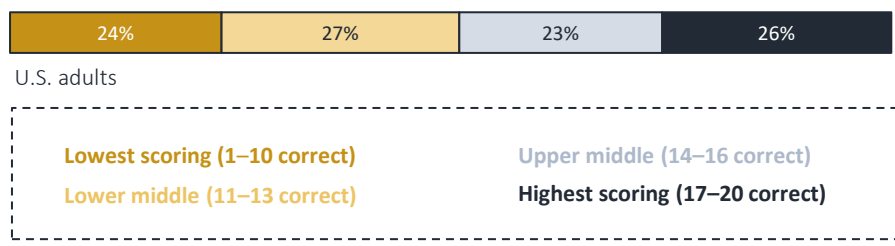
# TRAPS OF FAKE NEWS

## THE MISINFORMATION SUSCEPTIBILITY TEST TESTS MEDIA LITERACY SKILLS

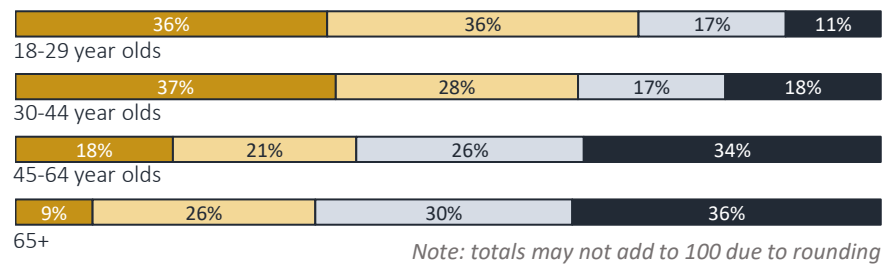
In 2023, YouGov surveyed approximately 1,500 U.S. adults to determine their ability to identify real and fake news headlines. The survey was modeled after the [Misinformation Susceptibility Test](#), a tool developed by University of Cambridge scholars.

The survey presented participants with 20 headlines (half real, half fake) and asked them to identify which were real and which were fake. Americans generally correctly categorized two-thirds of the 20 headlines. The average score for each category – real and fake – was 7 out of 10. Some groups did better than others, however.

### THE MISINFORMATION SUSCEPTIBILITY TEST *YouGov, 2023*



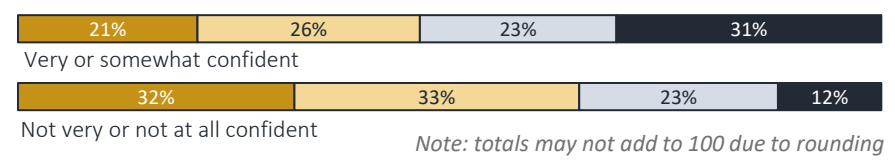
**Older adults outperformed younger adults: respondents 18–29 years old were 4 times more likely than those 65+ to receive the lowest scores.**



Older adults, justified in their confidence to recognize false information, received the largest proportion of high scores on the test: 36% got 17–20 headlines correct. Young people, who are the most likely to get their news online and to trust information from social media sites, had the smallest percentage of high scores.

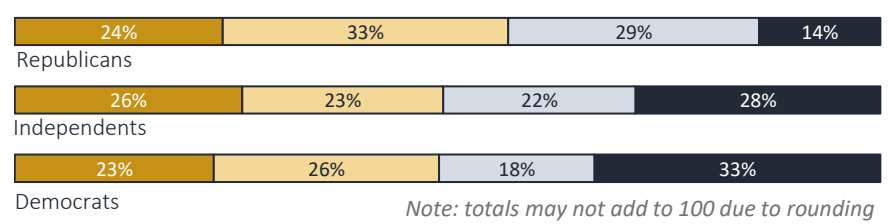
Confidence is an accurate indicator of success: those who were very or somewhat confident in their ability to identify false information were over twice as likely to receive a high score than those who were not confident.

**Adults who are confident in their ability to detect misinformation outperformed less confident participants.**



Democrats were the most likely to be very confident in their abilities and the most likely to receive high scores. Republicans were the most likely to be somewhat confident and had the largest percentage of scores in the upper-middle range.

**One-third of Democrats and only 14% of Republicans received high scores.**



# THE RISE OF NEWS AVOIDERS\*

## DISENGAGEMENT WITH NEWS MEDIA AS TRUST DECLINES

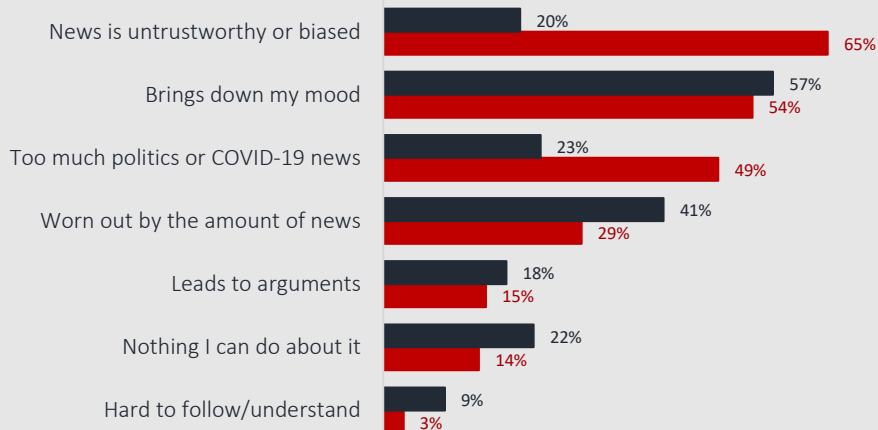
As trust in the news media has declined and perceptions of bias have risen, some Americans have begun avoiding the news. In 2022, 42% of U.S. adults reported that they sometimes or often actively avoid the news, up 4 percentage points from 2017.

Left-leaning adults are most likely to avoid the news because it ruins their mood. While over half of right leaners agree, the majority disengage because they believe the news is untrustworthy and biased.

High levels of right leaners avoid news about social justice (70%) and climate change (64%), compared to under a quarter of left leaners. Beyond sports and celebrity news, left leaners are most likely to avoid news about national politics (35%), followed closely by those on the right (33%). Fatigue regarding news about national-level politics tracks with high levels of perceived polarization in the United States and a general mistrust in the news media.

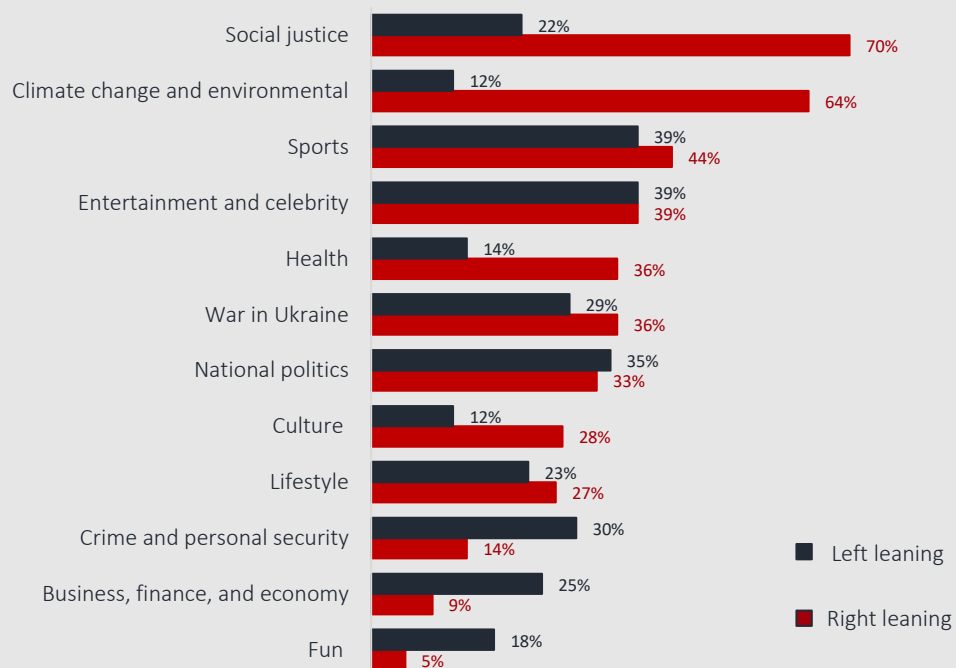
### % of U.S. adults who avoid the news for the following reasons

Reuters Institute, 2022



### % of U.S. adults who avoid news about the following topics

Reuters Institute, 2023



\*the term 'news avoiders' is borrowed from the Reuters Institute.

Sources: Newman, [Reuters Institute](#), 2023; Newman, [Reuters Institute](#), June 2022.



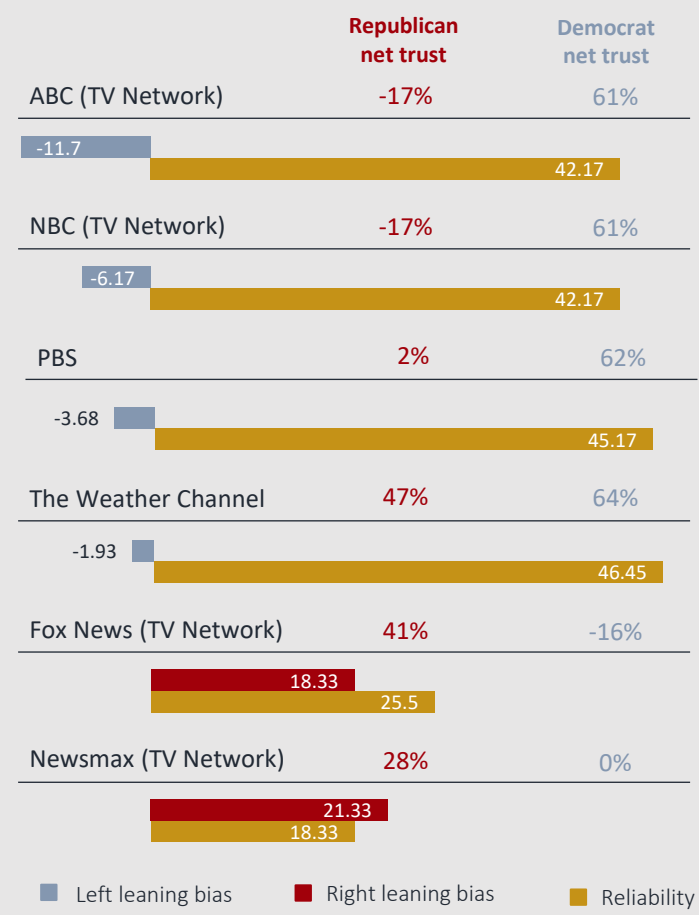
# PART IV: THE MEDIA'S ROLE IN BIAS AND DIVISION

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Only one-third of Americans have a *great deal/fair amount* of trust in the news media. Democrats (70%) are much more trusting than Republicans (14%) (Brenan, 2022).
- Republicans are more likely to see political bias in news coverage: in 2022, 79% perceived a *great deal* of political bias in the news compared to 33% of Democrats (Knight Foundation and Gallup, 2023).
- The majority of Americans believe mainstream media and news and social media companies have had a major impact on driving political division. Nearly two-thirds (64%) believe conservative media is a contributor to division, and about half of Republicans agree (48%) (Skelley and Fuong, 2022).
- Beyond The Weather Channel, which over half Americans trust, trust for news media sites is divided along partisan lines. Democrats have over 50% confidence in PBS and network news channels like ABC and NBC. Republicans trust no source over 50% but, Fox News, the most trusted behind The Weather Channel, garnered 41% support (Sanders, 2023).
- Over half of Americans now get most of their news online, using a smartphone, app, or computer, but only a third trust the information they receive from social media sites. Younger generations are the most likely to get their news online and the most likely to trust it (Knight Foundation and Gallup, 2023; Liedke and Gottfried, 2022).
- Over half of Americans believe they see false information online daily. Those above the age of 45 are the most likely to believe this but they are also the most confident in their ability to tell real from fake news (Sanders, 2023).
- A growing distrust of news media has led some to avoid it: 42% of U.S. adults reported that they *sometimes* or *often* actively avoid the news. Democrats tend to refrain from the news because it brings down their mood while Republicans do so because it is biased or untrustworthy (Newman, 2022).. Of the news avoiders, over a third of avoid news about national politics, no matter political party affiliation (Newman, 2023).

### Reliability and bias of most trusted news sources by party

*Ad Fontes Media, 2023; YouGov, 2023*



*Note: for information on how net trust, bias, and reliability metrics are calculated, see pages 7 and 8.*

Sources: [Ad Fontes Media](#), 2023; Brenan, [Gallup](#), 2022; [Knight Foundation and Gallup](#), Jan. 2023; Liedke and Gottfried, [Pew Research Center](#), Oct. 2022; Newman, [Reuters Institute](#), 2023; Newman, [Reuters Institute](#), June 2022; ; Sanders, [YouGov](#), May 2023; Sanders, [YouGov](#), June 2023; Skelley and Fuong, [FiveThirtyEight](#), June 2022.

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