

All Media Trust Is Local?[†]

Findings from the 2018 Poynter Media Trust Survey

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Executive summary

Public trust in news reporting is essential for democratic self-governance. However, the media have come under fire from politicians, including President Trump, for the content of their reporting and the journalistic practices they use. This report examines who trusts the media, measures how media trust has changed during the Trump presidency, and compares trust across different types of media outlets. We present two key findings. First, we show that media trust remains slightly higher than before Trump took office but is dramatically polarized, especially among the most politically knowledgeable Americans. Second, we show that differences in media trust by party are substantially lower for local media sources than national ones — a finding that is driven by independents and Republicans, who report higher levels of trust in news sources within their community.

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Measuring media trust in the Trump era

As President, Donald Trump has engaged in unprecedented attacks on the media in speeches, press conferences, interviews, and on Twitter. These attacks have the potential to undermine public support for a free press, an integral component of democratic self-governance.

Since we conducted [the 2017 Poynter Media Trust Survey](#) last November, President Trump has continued to attack the media as “fake news” and to deride coverage he dislikes as inaccurate and biased against him. While many politicians have criticized coverage they dislike, the ferocity and consistency of Trump’s attacks have the potential to undermine public support for the news media. A very real concern is how attacks on the press threaten not just the news media, but how it might negatively affect American democracy more broadly.

To understand the state of trust in the news media, we conducted an original survey of a national sample of 2,000 Americans who were interviewed in late July 2018. It includes many key questions from our previous survey, allowing us to directly measure aggregate change in attitudes towards the media.

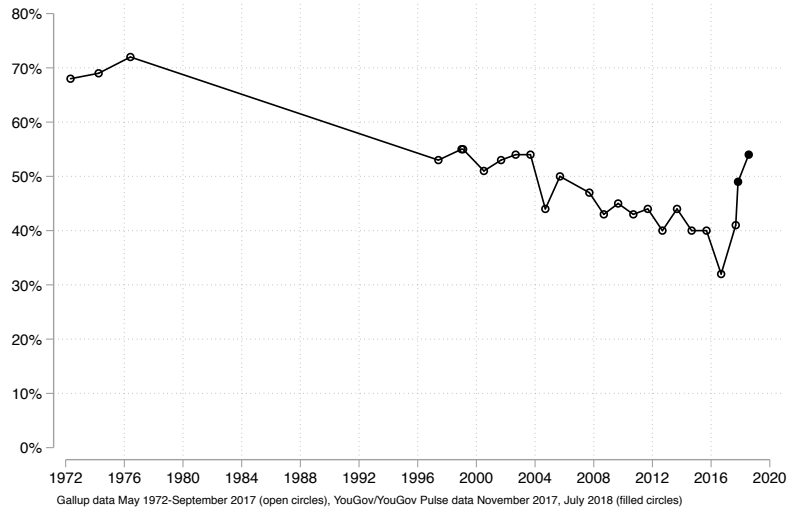
Results

Survey measures of media attitudes

As a whole, the public supports the press, though perhaps only tepidly. For example, when respondents were asked “how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media — such as newspapers, TV and radio — when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly?”, only a narrow majority of respondents (55%) answer either “a great deal” or a “a fair amount.” The lack of intensity in public support is most evident in the divide those two responses — 44% say they have just “a fair amount” of trust and confidence in the mass media versus only 12% who say “a great deal.”

This pattern of tepid support is also reflected in perceptions of media accuracy and bias. For instance, one question asks whether “news posted online by news organizations” is accurate. Only 13% answer “very accurate” compared to 53% who answer “somewhat accurate.” Moreover, a third (34%) answer either “not too accurate” or “not at all accurate.” These concerns about press accuracy are also expressed in the proportion of the public that sees the news media as biased. Only about a third (32%) say that the news media “deal fairly with

Figure 1: Trust and confidence in the press: General public (1972–2018)



all sides,” while 68% say the news media “tend to favor one side” — nearly identical to our previous study, which found that 69% believed that news media favored one side.

However, there is some positive news to report as well. The public still sees the media playing a valuable and important role in American democracy. Approximately two-thirds of the public (66%) say news organizations “keep political leaders from doing things that shouldn’t be done” (69% in our previous study). Moreover, we find that levels of trust and confidence in the mass media are actually somewhat higher than in recent years. Continuing a trend observed in [our 2017 study](#), public trust and confidence in the media overall is higher than it has been since the post-9/11 period (Figure 1). Currently 54% of Americans say they have a “great deal” or “fair amount” of trust and confidence in the media, which is up dramatically from 32% in 2016.¹

As Figure 2 shows, this upward trend in media trust has been especially prevalent among Democrats, for whom 86% say they have a “great deal” or “fair amount” of trust and confidence in the press compared to 72–74% in 2017 and 51% in 2016. Republican trust and confidence increased too, but to a lesser extent and from a much lower level. Republican trust and confidence increased from 14% in 2016 to 23% today.

Despite this parallel trend, perceptions of the media continue to differ wildly between

Figure 2: Trust and confidence in the press by party (1997–2018)

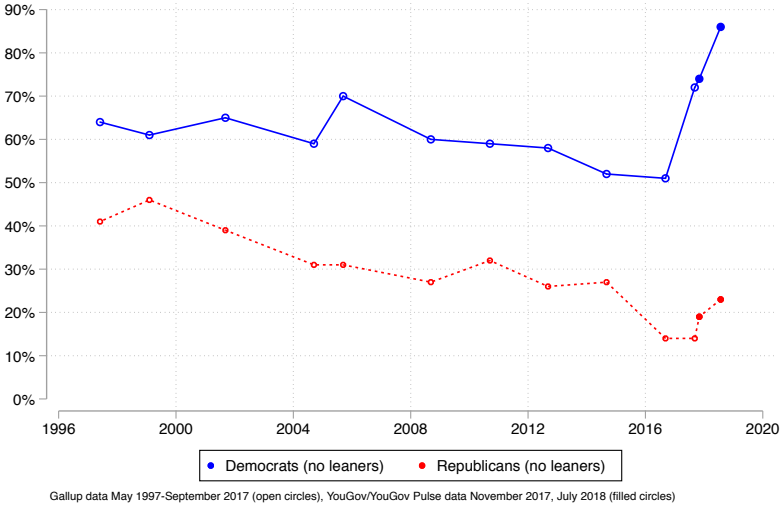
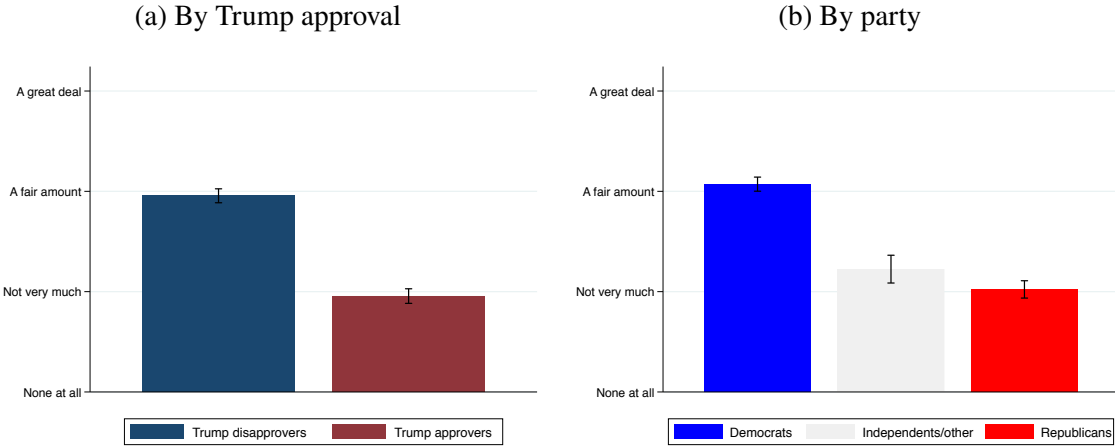


Figure 3: Average trust and confidence in the press by political preference



the parties and between Trump approvers and disapprovers. Figure 3 demonstrates powerful differences in average trust and confidence in the media between these groups.² On average, disapprovers and Democrats have a fair amount of trust while approvers and Republicans say they have not very much.

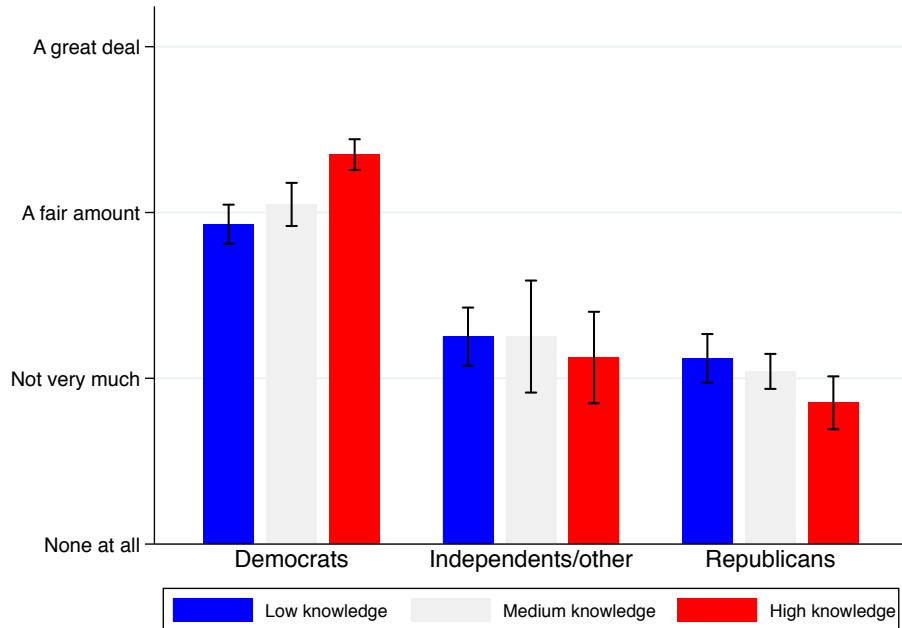
Perceptions of media bias are similarly divergent. Over half of Democrats (55%) say the news media “deal fairly with all sides,” but less than 10% of Republicans say the same. (On this particular question, the attitudes of independents are much closer to Republicans — only 16% see the media as unbiased.)

These differences likely reflect differences in elite messaging about the media. Conservatives have criticized perceived liberal media bias for decades. Since taking office, President Trump has amplified and escalated these attacks. If this explanation is correct and the public is taking cues from allied elites about how they should view the media, then Democrats and Republicans who are more knowledgeable about politics — and therefore more likely to receive and understand from elites — should be the most polarized in their attitudes toward the media. We find exactly this pattern (as [we did](#) in 2017). While there are large differences between Republicans and Democrats at all levels of political knowledge, [Figure 4](#) shows that average differences in attitudes towards the media by party are largest among those with the most political knowledge (i.e., those who score highest on a battery of factual questions). For example, 79% of low-knowledge Democrats say they have a “great deal” or “fair amount” of trust and confidence in the media compared to 31% of low-knowledge Republicans. However, the gap in the proportion of Americans who trust the media by this measure widens dramatically among high-knowledge partisans to 98% among Democrats versus only 11% for Republicans.

The cues that the public now receives from President Trump about the media extend beyond accusations of bias, however. For instance, he frequently claims that the press makes up or fabricates stories. Many Americans appear to believe these claims. Fully 42% of Americans say that the news fabricates stories “about half the time,” “most of the time,” or “all of the time”, including 69% of Republicans.³

These extreme anti-media attitudes extend to viewing the media as a hostile force and to endorsing restrictions on press freedom. One of the most striking findings from [the 2017 survey](#) was the high proportion of the public was willing to join President Trump in calling the press an “enemy of the people” (31% overall, including 63% of Trump supporters). Because this question was written to gauge reactions to a specific claim made in a Trump tweet, we did not ask it again in the current study. However, we did ask a question designed to more directly gauge the public’s support for press freedom. More specifically, we asked respondents “Do you agree or disagree that the federal government should have the power to revoke broadcast licenses of major news organizations it says are fabricating news stories?” More than one

Figure 4: Average trust and confidence in the press by political knowledge



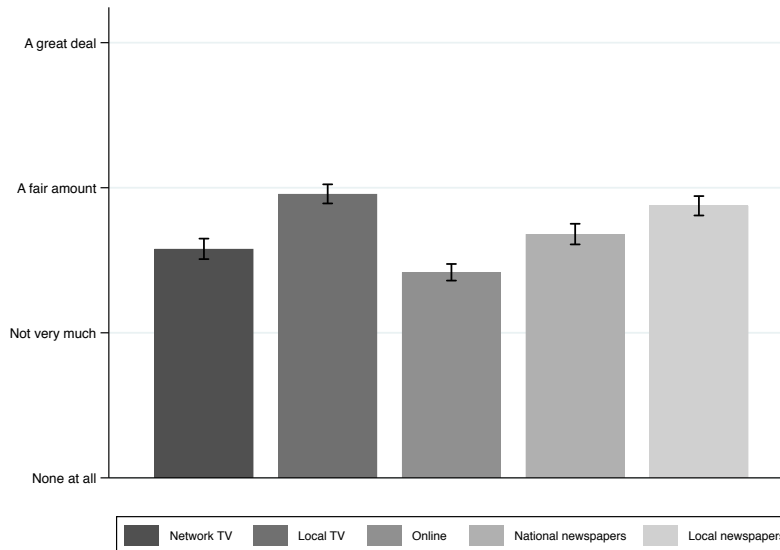
of four Americans endorses the government having the right to take away broadcast licenses from news organizations, including 36% of Trump supporters.

Less polarization in media trust at the local level

Research on media trust tends to focus on the media as a whole or on prominent national news organizations, but people get news from many different types of sources, including outlets that serve their community. To understand whether the polarization in media trust we observe extends across different types of outlets, we asked our respondents about the trust and confidence they have in news organizations “when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly,” for “local newspapers” and “local television news in your community” in addition to outlets that serve the national market (national newspapers, network television news, and online-only news outlets).

As Figure 5 shows, overall trust is higher for local TV news and newspapers, which Americans on average say they trust a fair amount, compared to their national counterparts. Specif-

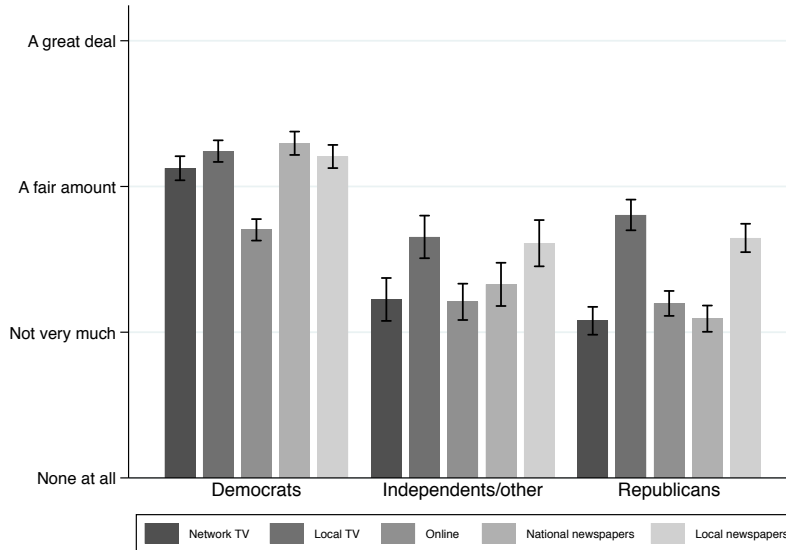
Figure 5: Average media trust by outlet type



ically, 76% of Americans have a “great deal” or a “fair amount” of trust in local television news in their community and 73% do so for local newspapers. By comparison, only 59% of Americans have a “great deal” or a “fair amount” of trust in national newspapers, 55% for network news, and 47% for online news.

Why is local news more highly trusted than national news? Figure 6 shows clear differences between Democrats and Republicans in media trust by outlet type. Democrats generally show relatively high average levels of trust across media types (“a fair amount” or higher) except for online news, which is less highly trusted. In contrast, Republicans trust national and online sources approximately “not very much” on average except for local newspapers and local TV news, which they trust somewhat more highly. To illustrate, 73% of Republicans say they trust local TV news “a great deal” or “a fair amount” and 62% say the same about local newspapers – far more than express equivalent levels of trust and confidence in national and online news sources (27–31%). Finally, independents are similar to Republicans in placing higher trust in local sources. On average, they equally distrust online news and national network news.

Figure 6: Average media trust by party and outlet type



Discussion

Low levels of media trust raise concerns about the ability of democratic citizens to make informed decisions. However, the politics of media trust are more complex than many assume. First, trust in the news media has actually *increased* since President Trump took office among both Democrats and Republicans. In addition, when we attempt to disentangle attitudes toward different types of media, we find that the public is more trusting of local news sources (both newspapers and TV) than national ones. This pattern is largely driven by Republicans, for whom local outlets are a notable exception to a pattern of generalized distrust.

Notes

¹Our question wording comes from the Gallup poll, allowing us to better compare changes in media attitudes over a longer time period. In our 2017 survey, we showed an increase in public trust and confidence in the media compared to previous Gallup polling (see Figure 1 above). One concern would be that these differences are primarily caused by “house effects” that reflect differences in how different polling organizations conduct their studies. However, Gallup [reported](#) a noticeable uptick in media confidence from 2016 to 2017 as did [a recent finding](#) in *The Economist* when comparing polls between 2016 and 2018.

²In Figures 3–6, we treat our media trust outcome measures as four-point scales from “none at all” (1) to “a great deal” (4) and present graphs of their mean values for the public as a whole and for various subgroups.

³The difference between the reported total (69%) and the sum of the quantities (70%) is due to rounding.

Appendix

Study methodology

This study was conducted among a representative sample of the U.S. population by the survey company YouGov, which recruits a large panel of opt-in respondents and then uses a weighting and matching algorithm to construct a final sample that mirrors the demographic composition of the U.S. population. Our participants closely resemble the U.S. population in both demographics (51% female, 65% white, median age 47, 29% hold a four-year college degree or higher) and political attitudes and affiliations (38% identify as Democrats, 26% identify as Republicans; 39% approve of Donald Trump’s job performance).

Question wording

(The wording of all questions described in this report are provided below. The full survey instrument and results of this survey will be reported in a subsequent academic paper.)

Please indicate which news sources below that you have heard of, regardless of whether you use them or not. If you are unsure, please DO NOT click it.

-Fox News

-The New York Times

-CNN

-The Guardian

-The Economist

Of the news sources you have heard of, please indicate how much trust and confidence you have in each one when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly?

- Great deal of trust
- Fair amount of trust
- Not very much trust
- No trust at all

In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media — such as newspapers, TV and radio — when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly?

- A great deal
- A fair amount
- Not very much
- None at all

How accurate, do you think, is the news posted online by news organizations?

- Very accurate
- Somewhat accurate
- Not too accurate
- Not at all accurate

In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the following types of news organizations when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly?

- Network television news
- Local television news in your community
- Online-only news outlets
- National newspapers
- Local newspapers in your community

In presenting the news dealing with political and social issues, do you think that news organizations deal fairly with all sides, or do they tend to favor one side?

- Deal fairly with all sides
- Tend to favor one side

Based on what you know, how often do you believe the nation's major news organizations fabricate news stories?

- Never
- Once in a while
- About half the time
- Most of the time
- All the time

The federal government should have the power to revoke broadcast licenses of major news organizations

- Agree strongly
- Agree somewhat
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree somewhat
- Disagree strongly