



Center for Communication and  
Civic Renewal at the University of  
Wisconsin-Madison

# Wisconsin's Media Ecology & Civic Health

**A Report on How Info Flows Shape & Reflect Civic Attitudes and Behaviors**

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**FOR MORE INFORMATION  
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## About the Center for Communication & Civic Renewal

The Center for Communication & Civic Renewal (CCCR) is an interdisciplinary research team housed in the School of Journalism & Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. CCCR's research aims to understand Wisconsin public opinion and the state's broad political communication ecology, drawing upon frameworks and methods foundations in communication, political science, sociology, psychology, and computer science. Dr. Michael Wagner leads the Center as Faculty Director, Dr. Dhavan Shah is the Center's Research Director, and Dr. Nathan Kalmoe serves as Executive Director for the Center.

The Center's public opinion polling is one of three analytical components in its broader efforts studying political communication in Wisconsin. We have also conducted in-depth interviews with over 200 citizens throughout the state to understand how they're talking and thinking about politics. And we have conducted large-scale computational analyses of social media and news media content throughout the state.

CCCR's past research is synthesized in the book, [\*Battleground: Asymmetric Communication Ecologies and the Erosion of Civil Society in Wisconsin\*](#), published by Cambridge University Press in 2022, along with several peer-reviewed articles published in academic journals, and public-facing articles in national outlets including the *Washington Post*, *Vox*, and *TechStream* as well as local outlets like the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, the *Capital Times*, and the *Wisconsin State Journal*

Our March 2023 report, "[Civic Fracture & Renewal in Wisconsin](#)," assessed the public's civic attitudes and behaviors and found worrisome signs of social and political conflict – including ending relationships over politics, safety fears in politics, and views supporting for political violence among a minority of citizens – but we also identify vital agreement across divides in ways that may help repair democracy in Wisconsin.



## About the 2022 WI Media Ecology & Civic Health Survey

The 2022 Media Ecology & Civic Health Survey was administered online by the [SSRS](#) survey firm from October 31 to November 14, 2022, with responses before and after the midterm election. SSRS supplied a demographically weighted convenience sample of 3,031 adult Wisconsin residents and a probability-based nationally representative survey of 2,907 U.S. adult residents. We apply demography-based survey sample weights to better align estimates with the state and national populations.

Although non-probability samples do not have traditional margins of error, percentages from the full Wisconsin sample essentially have a margin of error of +/- 1.8 percentage points for point estimates near 50%, with smaller margins for estimates as they move toward 0% or 100%. Due to subsample size differences, the margin of error for estimates with Wisconsin Democrats ( $N=1,423$ ) is +/- 2.6 percentage points, and the margin of error for estimates with Wisconsin Republicans ( $N=1,055$ ) is +/- 3.0 percentage points. Democrats comprise 40% of the weighted sample, and Republicans comprise 42%.

Many of the tests in this report describe average response scored as a scale between 0 and 100, which involves a more complex estimate for evaluating differences between average scores than margins of error for estimates with percentages. For those, we write whether the differences are statistically significant.

Estimates from the full national sample have a margin of error of +/- 1.8 percentage points. The margin of error for estimates with U.S. Democrats ( $N=1,218$ ) is +/- 2.8 percentage points, and the margin of error for estimates with U.S. Republicans ( $N=1,235$ ) is +/- 2.8 percentage points. Democrats comprise 41% of the weighted sample, and Republicans comprise 40%.

The 2022 Media Ecology & Civic Health Survey was supported by the John S. and James L. [Knight Foundation](#), which advances research at the intersections of media and democracy.



## Report Overview

Where do Wisconsinites get information about politics? Are we stuck in partisan bubbles, or are we broadly exposed to views of political opponents? What are the implications for civic health? And how does Wisconsin compare to the nation?

Citizens make better political choices when their political information environment is healthy – accurate, prosocial, and embodying democratic values that include equal influence over government, upholding fundamental human rights, and civic equality for each citizen. Those values are essential for civic health. News about politics, messages from leaders, and conversations with others that embody those values make civil society healthier, even when we disagree. In fact, exposure to that disagreement can help citizens make better choices and act more civically under the right conditions.

However, those same communication channels can undermine democracy and hurt civil society when infected by misinformation, bigotry, and hostility – or even neutrality – toward core democratic values and practices. Healthy information ecologies reorient civic concerns away from partisan polarization generally to a focus on whether each side's views and actions strengthen or weaken democracy – aligned with those values.

In this report, we investigate the Wisconsin public's media diets, which shape and reflect political divides, and how they compare nationally. We find...

### Info-Ecologies in Wisconsin:

- **Watching over Reading:** Local TV news is most popular (34% use regularly), followed by national network news (25%). Cable news has single digits except Fox News among Republicans (32%). Online news aggregators get 19%, and 17% for local papers.
- **Avoiding the news:** 39% in WI don't regularly get any news.
- **Partisan news:** 15% of WI Republicans regularly consume only pro-Republican media, compared to less than one percent of Democrats who predominantly get pro-Democratic news. The numbers for Republicans are much lower – single digits – when counting occasional or rare exposure to mainstream news.
- **Partisan conversations:** 45% of Republicans and 41% of Democrats only talk often with fellow partisans; roughly 12% of each talk with people from both parties while the rest – about half – don't talk about politics often.
- **Partisan bubbles:** 28% of Republicans and 14% of Democrats are not regularly exposed to opposing views at all, in media *or* conversation. However, Republican partisan bubbles drop to 3% when counting *any* mainstream news exposure, and Democratic partisan bubbles drop below 1%.



### Implications of Partisan Bubbles in Wisconsin:

- **Leader Approval:** Republicans in partisan bubbles support Trump more; Biden doesn't gain among Democrats in Democratic bubbles.
- **Policy Views:** Partisans in both parties are usually more aligned with their parties' stances when in partisan bubbles, but not dramatically different.
- **Election Trust:** Republicans in partisan bubbles were more likely to distrust vote counts than other Republicans; there was no difference for Democrats similarly siloed.
- **Religious Nationalism:** Republicans in partisan bubbles were more likely to endorse religious leaders exerting influence in governance than other Republicans; Democrats in bubbles endorsed that *less* than other Democrats.
- **Dangerous Conspiracies:** Siloed Republicans were 14 points likelier to endorse unfounded left-wing "groomer" views linked to political violence.
- **Politics by force:** Republicans in partisan bubbles were more likely to endorse use of force to combat changes in American society in the national survey.

### Prospects for Reducing Partisan Bubbles in Wisconsin

- **Media Trust:** local news is most trusted, more so by Democrats than Republicans. Partisan trust gaps are larger for CNN and the *New York Times* than Democratic outlets like MSNBC and Huffington Post. Republican media are least trusted overall, but Fox News is the most trusted source for Republicans.
- **Media Trust in Partisan Bubbles:** Trust is low for mainstream outlets among Republicans who predominantly consume pro-Republican news, but, among mainstream outlets, they trust local news the most. Democrats who only talk politics with Democrats and don't consume any news also trust local news more than other sources. There are too few Democrats who only consume pro-Democratic news to analyze (5 out of 1,423).

### Which News Sources are Civically Best for Wisconsinites?

- **Local News:** Local news audiences are more civically inclined on trust in vote counts, public influence over politics, and compromise.
- **National newspapers:** national newspaper audiences are civically worse in their beliefs – less trusting of elections, less likely to endorse civic participation in governance, less supportive of compromise – than local news audiences.
- **Republican news:** Republican news audiences had the lowest civic attitude scores.
- **NPR:** National public radio audiences scored best.

### Comparisons with the Nation

- National survey results throughout the report largely mirror Wisconsin's.



## Setting the Scene & Busting Some Media Myths

As our research has demonstrated over time, understanding Wisconsin's media and politics is critical to understanding national media and politics. As the report shows, patterns of media consumption, political talk, and corresponding civic and political views are generally similar between the state and national publics.

Before diving into survey results and analysis, we begin with some context for media ecologies and their relations with civic and democratic aims. Much conventional wisdom about news media is distorted, and so we clarify some of that here for perspective on the broader report.

For starters, partisan media get a bad rap – justifiably so, in some cases – but partisan media are not *inherently* bad for democracy or civic health. Indeed, political parties perform essential informative, mobilizing, and organizing functions in a well-functioning democracy. Partisan media outlets can serve that public good. The trouble arises when one or more parties reduces their support for democracy and for truth.

On the other side, pundits, pontificators, and media professionals often view “mainstream” news uncritically as an unmitigated good for civic life and democracy. However, this news can be just as bad for democracy as partisan demagoguery when it fails to alert audiences to the truth and to threats against democracy. That failure sometimes arises when one party is substantially less truthful and less supportive of democracy than the other, as is the case today. Professional journalists are trained to be “balanced,” even when the two (or more) sides are objectively *unbalanced*, and that unprincipled balance can lend a veneer of legitimacy to the untruthful and illegitimate.

Traditional news can also fail when *both* parties agree to uphold undemocratic practices, as both parties did prior to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century by allowing Jim Crow and other forms of white supremacy to tyrannize largely unchecked. When both sides agree on the status quo and therefore no partisan conflict or change is taking place, journalists often feel there isn't a story to be told, even when other groups are contesting that consensus. Recently, the Black Lives Matter movement helped disrupt media and party inattention to disproportionate and inordinate police violence against Black Americans.

News media content across the spectrum also tends to be lower-quality than ideal with respect to civic goals and democracy – and many journalists agree, often preferring to make more substantive stories of societal importance that bring prestige over entertaining but superficial content that populates much of the news in search of audiences and profit. Some outlets are worse than others – less civic content, more distorted views of society (e.g. crime news), quoting lies without correction, giving platforms to people hostile to democracy (e.g. CNN's recent Trump town hall), and – in the case of Republican media outlets – [intentionally misleading their audiences](#).



The U.S. media landscape has a striking political asymmetry in which pro-Republican sources are much more prevalent and popular than pro-Democratic sources, reflecting a decades-long epistemic closure among conservatives reacting against mainstream news and other sources of knowledge.

Moreover, Democratic media outlets are not mirror images of Republican ones – Democratic outlets generally have much stronger commitments to both democracy and factual reports.<sup>1</sup> That media asymmetry reflects differences in the parties themselves.

At the local level, news is often a misleading mix of crime news and feel-good stories that leave audiences unreasonably fearful and uninformed or even misinformed (beyond traffic and weather). Television news is especially meager in informative content even when covering politics and society. But each of these civic failures can be effective in drawing the audiences that struggling news businesses need to thrive or just survive.

It is also worth noting that people don't always need to pay close attention to news media to be reasonably informed about politics. We can often learn what we need to know from interpersonal conversations and messages from civic groups and leaders, partly because good judgments don't require encyclopedic knowledge of current events.

Each of these media elements helps us contextualize and interpret the media use patterns we find below.

## An Overview of Wisconsinites' Media Use

We begin with a source-by-source view of news and media consumption in Wisconsin. Since we already know that partisanship structures the media ecosystem across what outlets produce and how partisans consume the news, we examine variation by party alongside statewide statistics.

To get at *substantial* media exposure, we focus on “fairly often” or “very often” media consumption responses, setting aside “occasionally,” “rarely,” and “never” responses.

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<sup>1</sup> For a rough comparison, the fact-checking organization PolitiFact monitors statements by Fox News host Sean Hannity, recently fired Fox News host Tucker Carlson (who had Fox's most popular program), and MSNBC's Rachel Maddow on the Democratic side. As of May 1, 2023, PolitiFact considered 29 claims by [Rachel Maddow](#) worth checking. Seven of those were rated false, and 1 was rated “pants-on-fire” – the most blatant category. Eleven of her claims were rated “true” or “mostly true.” PolitiFact weighed 31 claims by [Sean Hannity](#), of which 14 were “false” and 1 was “pants-on-fire.” Seven of his claims were “true” or “mostly true.” PolitiFact check 28 claims by [Tucker Carlson](#), of which 12 were “false,” 9 were “pants-on-fire,” none were “true,” and only 1 was “mostly true.”

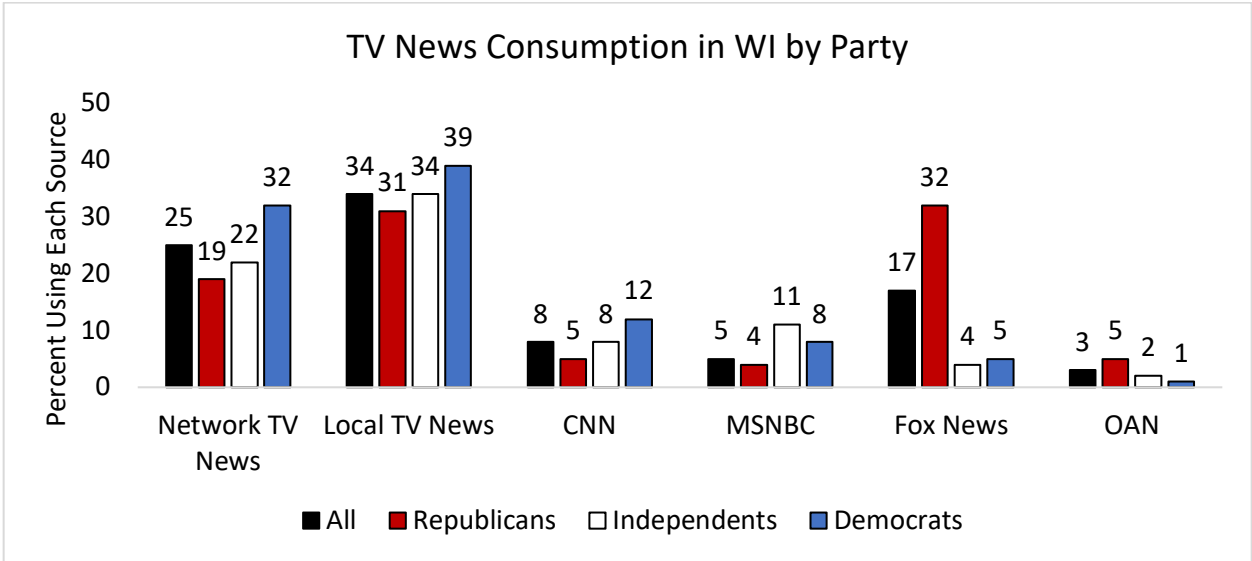




Previewing our findings: Far and away, local TV news is most popular in Wisconsin – even more than several TV entertainment categories – followed by national network news, online news aggregators, and then local newspapers, which are matched by Fox News. News consumption is slightly lower across the board in our national sample (perhaps due to sampling differences), but with similar relative levels across sources.

**Television**

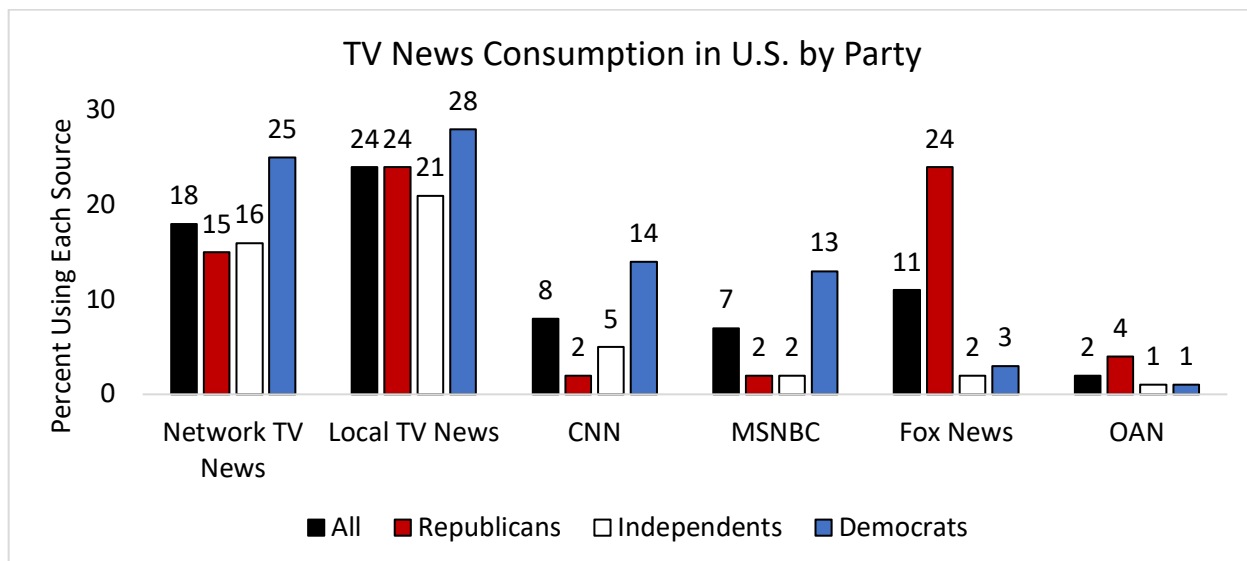
As in prior media use studies, TV news is the most popular news medium in Wisconsin. Local TV news ranks first (34%) over all other TV and other media sources, with relatively small differences between Democrats (39%) and Republicans (31%). National network TV news (i.e. ABC, CBS, NBC) is second most popular (25%) across all sources, with a somewhat larger partisan gap (32% of Democrats, 19% of Republicans).



Cable news is substantially less popular, except for Fox News Channel among Republicans (32%). Among pro-Republican cable channels, Fox News substantially outperforms OAN.

National audiences look somewhat smaller than in Wisconsin for local TV news (24%), national network news (18%), and Fox News (11%), but the same relative levels appear.





## Online-Only News Media

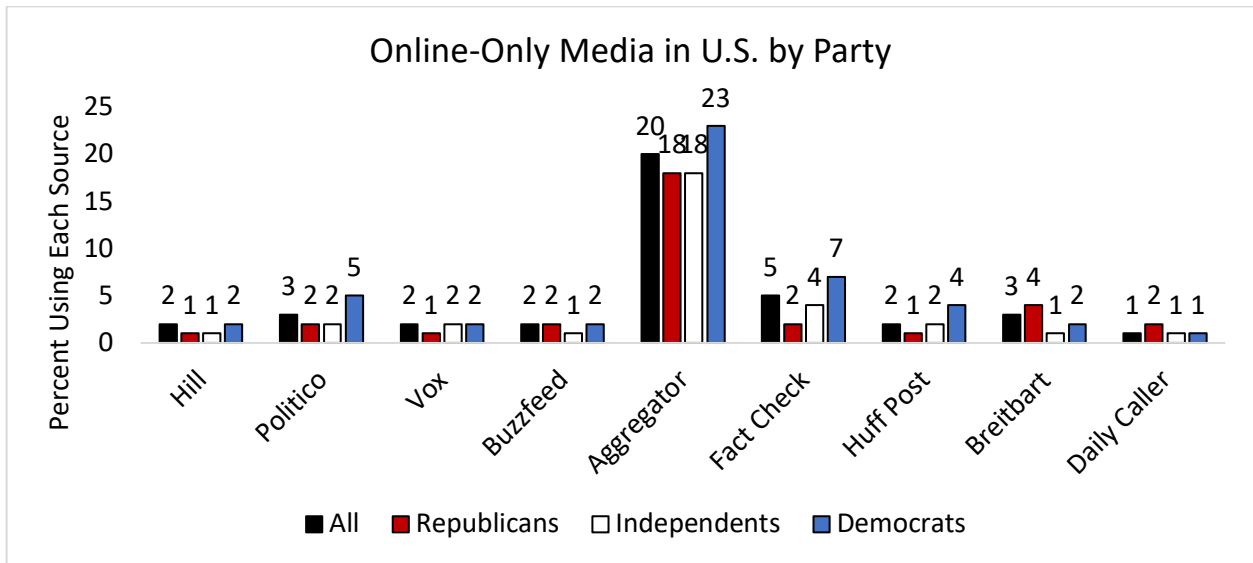
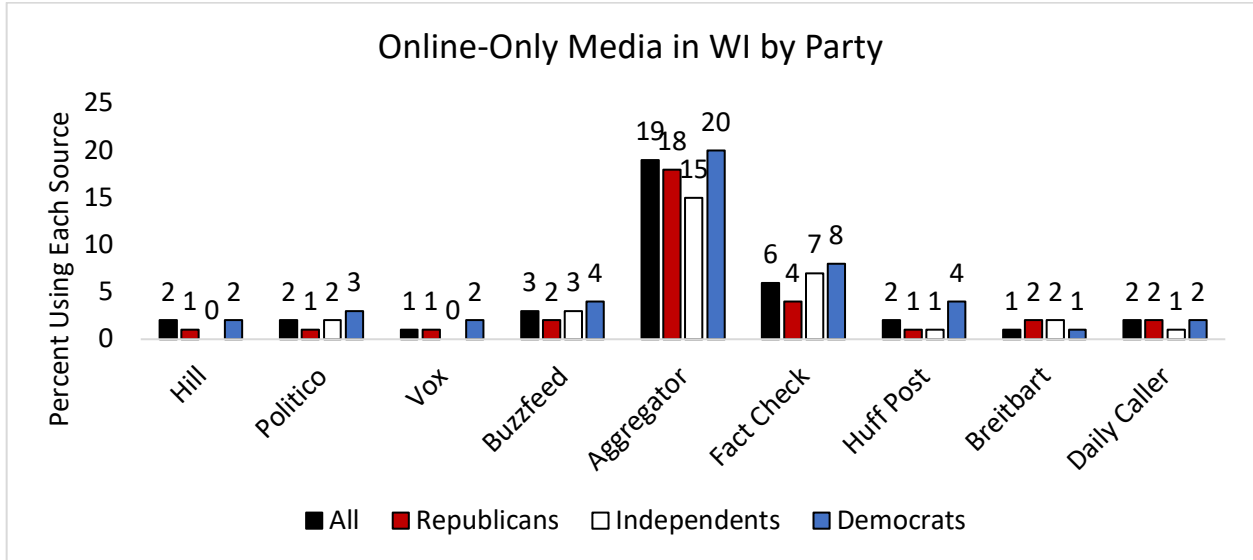
Specific online-only news sources are relatively unpopular in Wisconsin, except for news aggregators like Google News and Apple News (19%). In the national sample, 20% of respondents consume aggregator news – second only to local TV news.

Our survey results are consistent with site traffic data from news aggregators. For example, Yahoo News reports 180 million unique U.S. visitors each month.<sup>2</sup> That certainly justifies more research into aggregator content and consumption patterns – news aggregators are often overlooked by scholars studying the media landscape.

Fact-check websites are next most common among online sources, checked regularly by 6% of Wisconsinites and 5% nationwide – and more among Democrats than Republicans (WI: 8 and 4%; national: 7 and 2%).

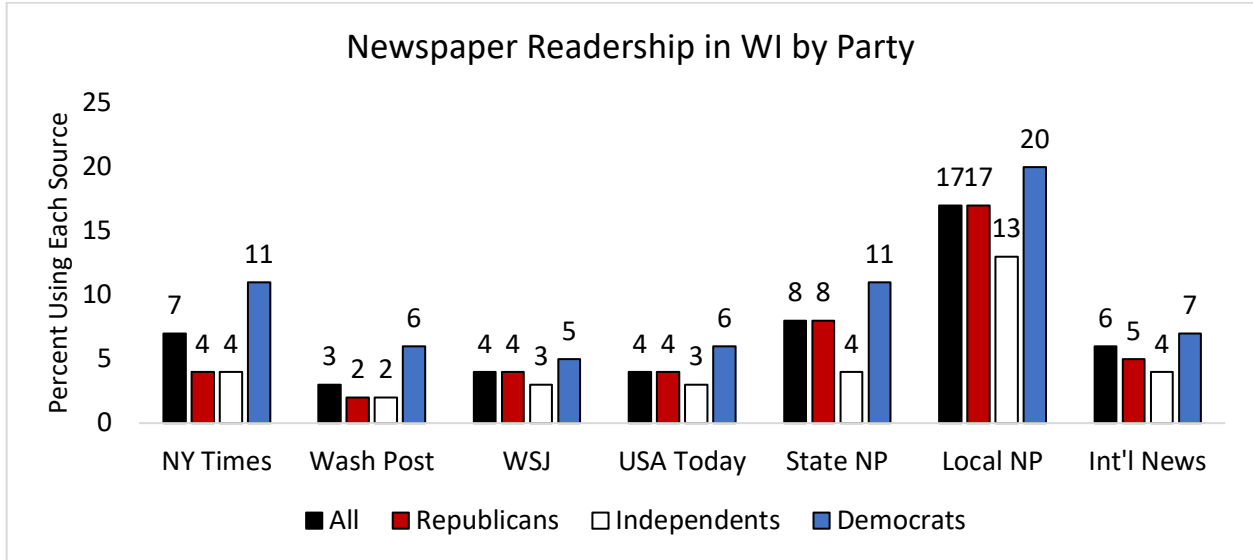
Political wonk websites like Vox and inside-the-Beltway sources like Politico and Hill have few readers in Wisconsin. Similarly sparse are readers for online partisan news sources Huffington Post, Breitbart, and Daily Caller. National survey numbers look nearly identical.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.advertising.yahooinc.com/about/our-brands/yahoo-news>



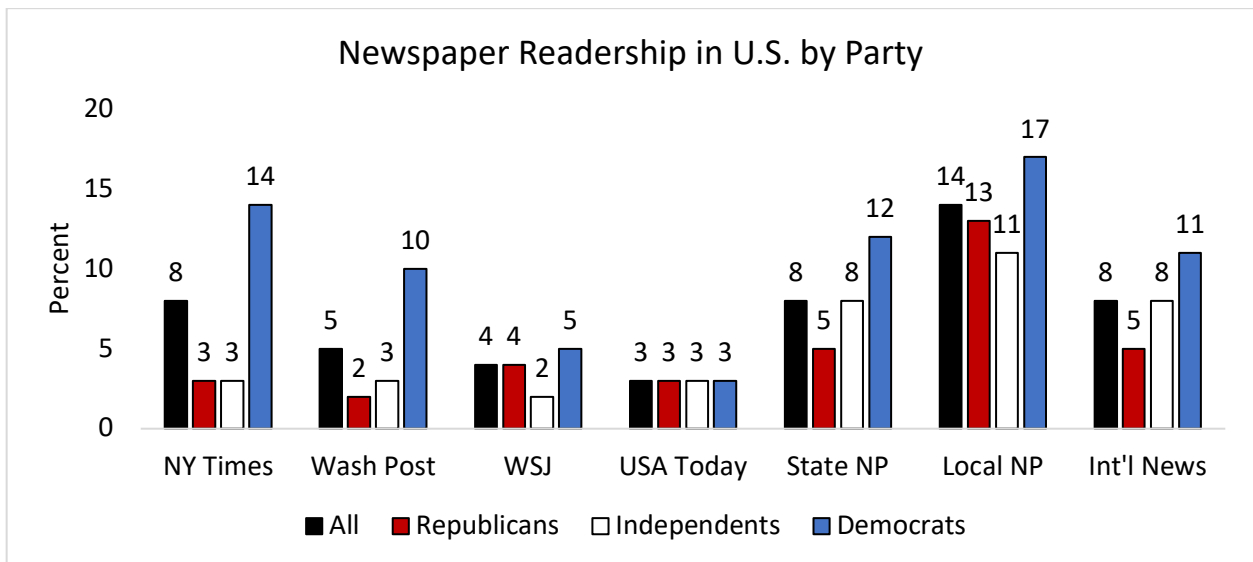
## Newspapers

Politicians, pundits, and scholars often think of newspapers when they think of news – and national newspapers’ coverage of politics plays a major role in shaping the political news produced by other media. But newspapers play a smaller role in the public’s news consumption behind TV, even when counting online versions of print news.



Local newspapers are most popular, with 17% of Wisconsinites subscribing to print editions or reading their local newspaper’s website (14% nationally). Partisan differences are minimal. State-wide newspaper reading for outlets like the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* is lower, at 8%, and international news sources are lower still (e.g. BBC, 6%). National newspapers have a modest audience in Wisconsin with 7% readership for the *New York Times* and roughly half that level for the others.

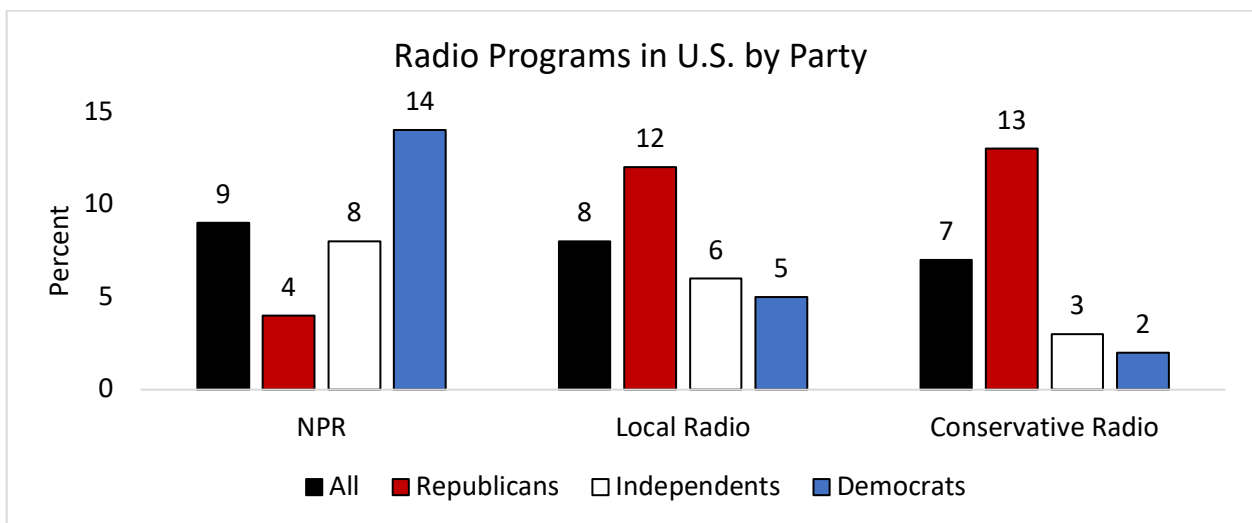
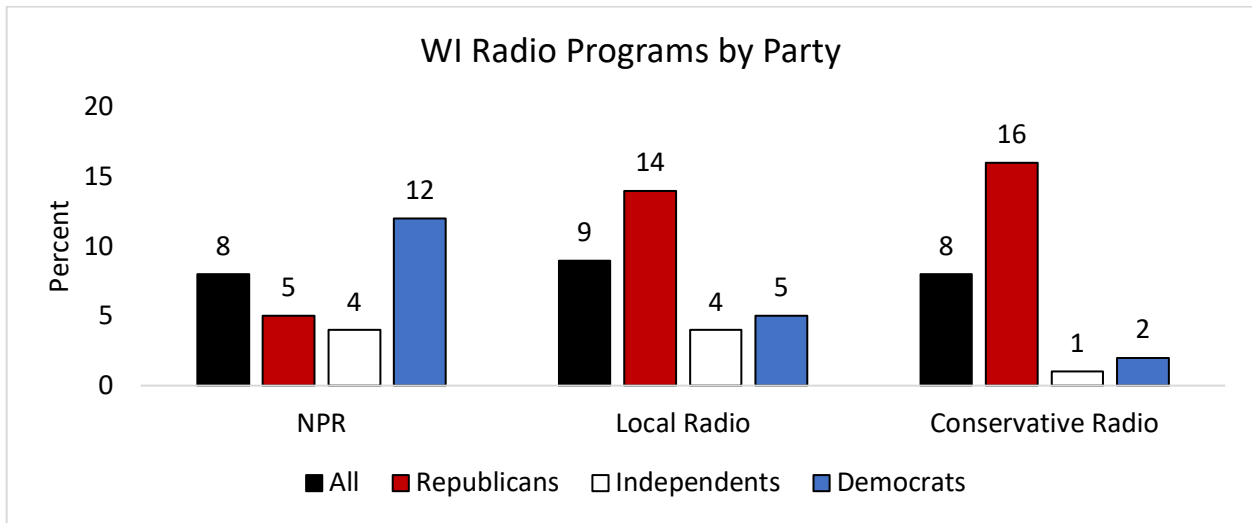
National survey results look quite similar. If anything, partisan differences may be slightly larger among the national sample than among Wisconsinites.



## Radio

Radio plays a smaller role than newspapers in Wisconsin overall, but radio plays an outsized role among the state’s Republicans. Sixteen percent of Wisconsin Republicans listen to national conservative radio programs (e.g. Ben Shapiro; Sean Hannity), and 14% of them tune in to local talk radio – which is predominantly pro-Republican in content – compared to just 5% of Democrats (some of whom may be listening to Wisconsin Public Radio). Democrats are more prominent among National Public Radio (NPR) listeners in Wisconsin (12%) than Republicans (5%).

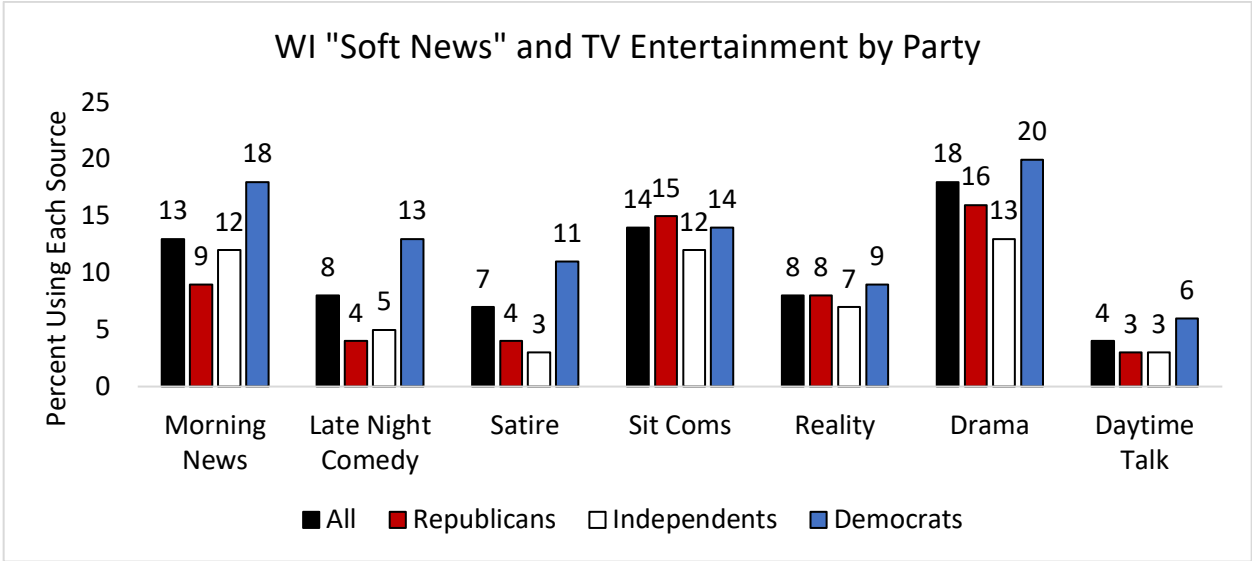
Although Wisconsin has an unusually prominent local conservative radio environment, national Republicans listen to national Republican radio (13%) and local talk radio (12%) at similar rates as Wisconsin Republicans.



## TV Entertainment

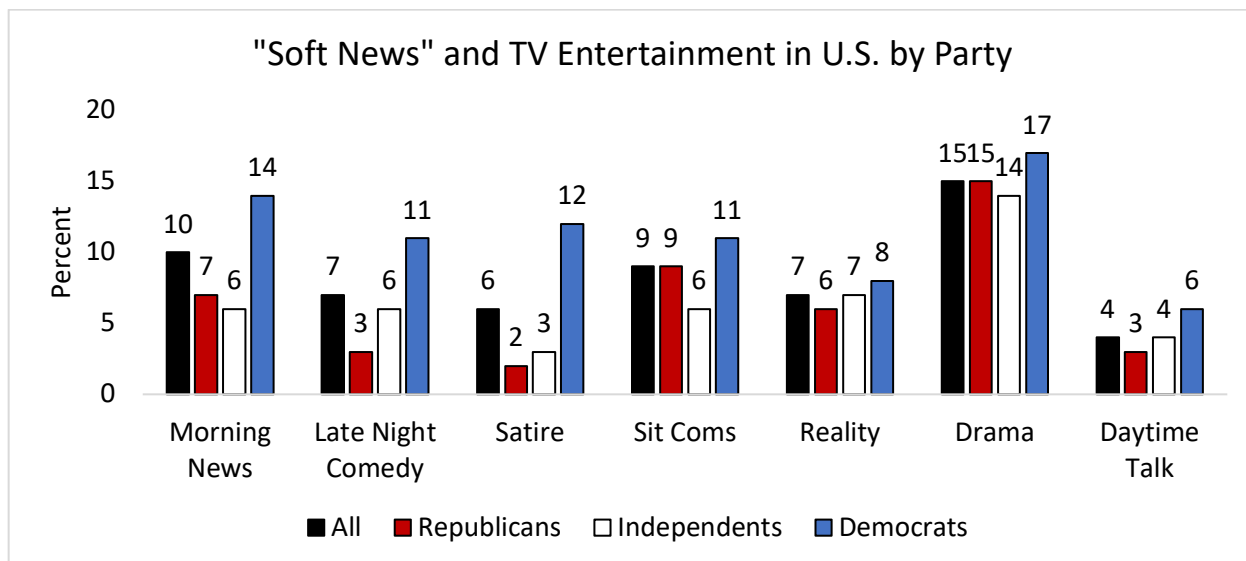
Although the amount of civic information is substantially lower on entertainment television, people do learn about politics and current events from non-news programming – a source researchers call “soft news.” These include morning news shows, late night comedy, political satire, and some daytime talk shows (e.g. The View). More broadly, the survey provides a snapshot of how news consumption compares to entertainment programs, and whether partisans differ on those too.

For entertainment TV, drama is most popular (18%), followed by sitcoms (14%), morning news (13%), and reality shows (8%).



Other sources are less popular overall, but Wisconsin Democrats are especially avid audiences across each of them. Morning news programs are second most popular for Democrats in this category, which they are twice as likely to watch as Republicans. Late night comedy and satire are also different by partisanship. For late night comedy, 13% of WI Democrats and just 4% of WI Republicans tune in, and for satire, it’s 11% of Democrats and 4% of Republicans.





National numbers are similar – drama, sit coms, and morning news lead in overall consumption. We find the largest partisan gaps in national audiences for morning news, late night comedy, and satire.

## News Media Diets and Partisan Bubbles

For a more holistic view of political media use in Wisconsin, we compiled media sources into three categories – mainstream news (including sources like national network television news, national newspapers, local newspapers, CNN, NPR),<sup>3</sup> pro-Republican news (Fox News, Breitbart, Daily Caller, national conservative talk radio), and pro-Democratic news (MSNBC, Huffington Post).

We wanted to learn what combinations of media sources people get their information from. Are Wisconsinites stuck in partisan media bubbles or exposed to a broader range of political information? And how does the nation compare?

Combinations of mainstream news, Republican, and Democratic media types produce 8 news diet categories.

The most prevalent news diet involves not consuming much news at all. Thirty nine percent of Wisconsinites do not consume news often. That inattentiveness is a

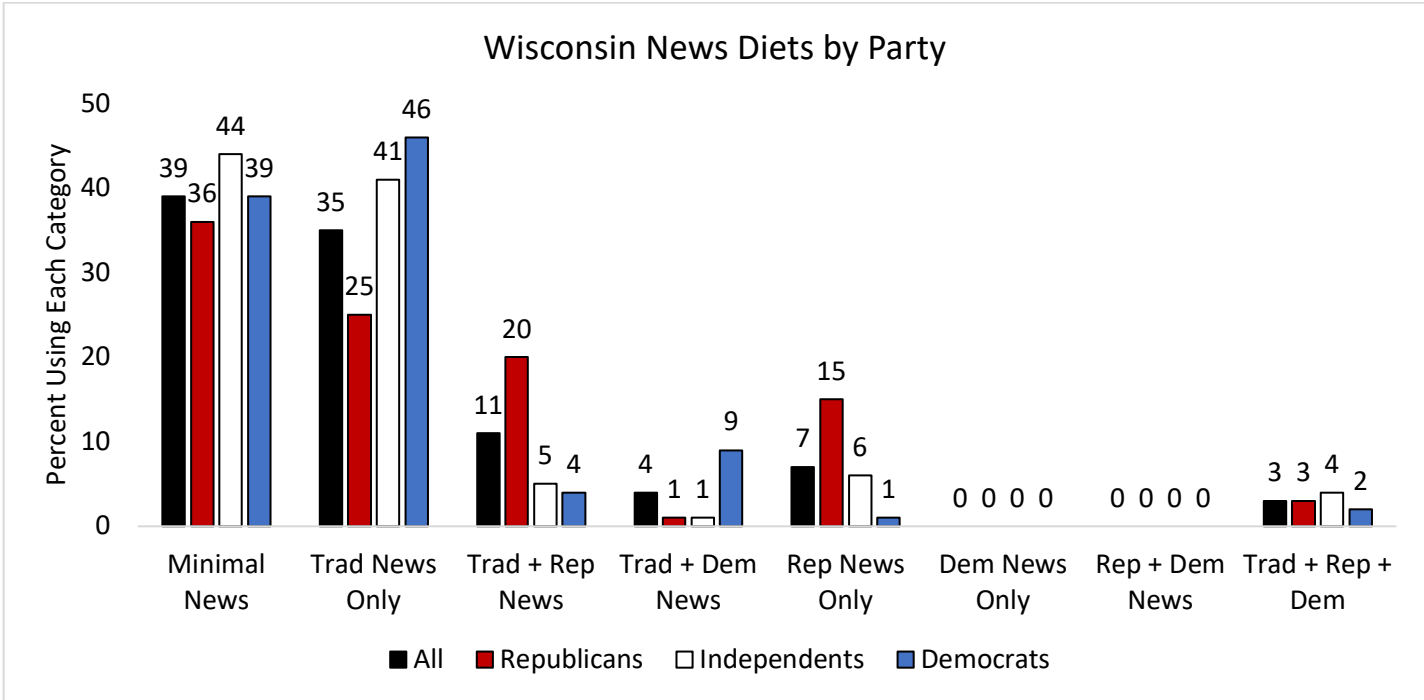
<sup>3</sup> The full list also includes: The Hill, Politico, Vox, BuzzFeed, fact check websites, state newspapers, international news, USA Today, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, NPR, local TV news.)

fundamental feature of public opinion, with profound implications for the political views people hold and the degree to which their views cohere into consistent worldviews.

Independents are more likely to abstain from news (44%) than partisans on either side (36% Republicans, 39% Democrats). That fits a common pattern in public opinion, in which people who don't align with a party tend to be less politically interested and less aware than partisans, on average.

The next most common media diet involves only mainstream traditional news sources (35%). Among Wisconsinites who only get mainstream news, local TV news gathers 61% and national network news gets 34% (not pictured). Democrats in the traditional-only category outnumber Republicans nearly two-to-one (46% vs. 25%).

However, a sizable portion of WI Republicans consume some mainstream news media in combination with Republican sources (20%) – the third most common media diet overall (11%). The mainstream portion of this hybrid diet is dominated by local TV news (63%) and national network TV news (65%; not pictured).



The mirror-image Democratic diet is far less common – only 4% of Wisconsinites combine mainstream news with pro-Democratic sources, with 9% of Democrats exhibiting that combination of news sources.

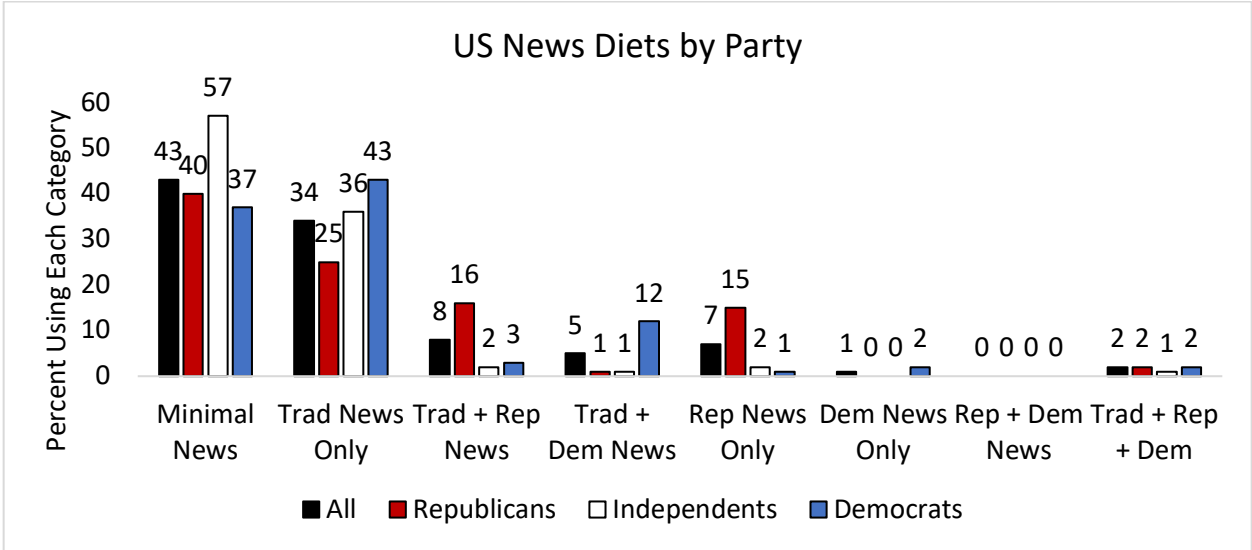




About 15% of Republicans regularly consume only pro-Republican media, comprising 7% of the full sample. Only 5 of 1,423 Democrats in our Wisconsin sample consume only pro-Democratic media, and none combine only Republican and Democratic media.

The final media diet, represented by only 3% of Wisconsinites, involves regularly consuming all three kinds of media sources.

Media diets in the national survey look similar in overall consumption and in partisan differences. Nearly half of Americans don't consume much news at all, and people not affiliated with a party are even more disengaged nationwide than in Wisconsin.



Fifteen percent of national Republicans are in media bubbles compared to just 2% of Democrats, mirroring Wisconsin's partisan news patterns.

Overall, these results reinforce the common finding that Republicans are more likely to close themselves off from mainstream news media than Democrats, and Republicans are more likely to select media environments that regularly advance their party's views, often with a reckless disregard for verifiable evidence.

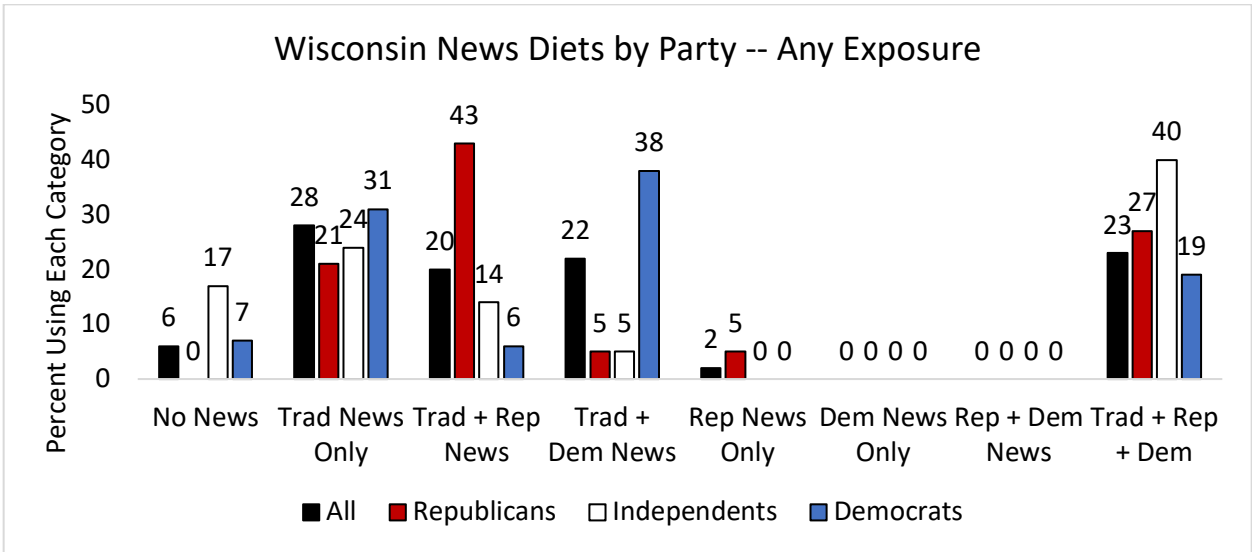
**Adding Nuance: Counting Any Media Exposure in Each Category**

We have argued that meaningful exposure to a media source requires regularly reading or tuning in. But maybe that standard is too high. What changes if we lower the bar to count people who say they occasionally or rarely consume a media source?

First, for Wisconsinites, the number who truly get no news is tiny – six percent – down from the 39% in the “minimal news” category above. That might be a more reassuring



result for people think news consumption is essential for everyone, though the low level of this bar for consumption can't be forgotten.



Second, by construction, the more inclusive measure pulls people out of exclusive categories and into hybrid ones. Consuming only traditional mainstream news falls seven points to 28%, and consuming only pro-Republican news falls ten points among Republicans to 5%.

Among Wisconsinites, the category for consuming traditional news plus pro-Republican news doubles, rising to 43%, and the Democratic equivalent jumps 29 points to 38%. The omnivorous category of traditional news plus both partisan sources jumps from 2% in the narrower accounting to 23% with any exposure.

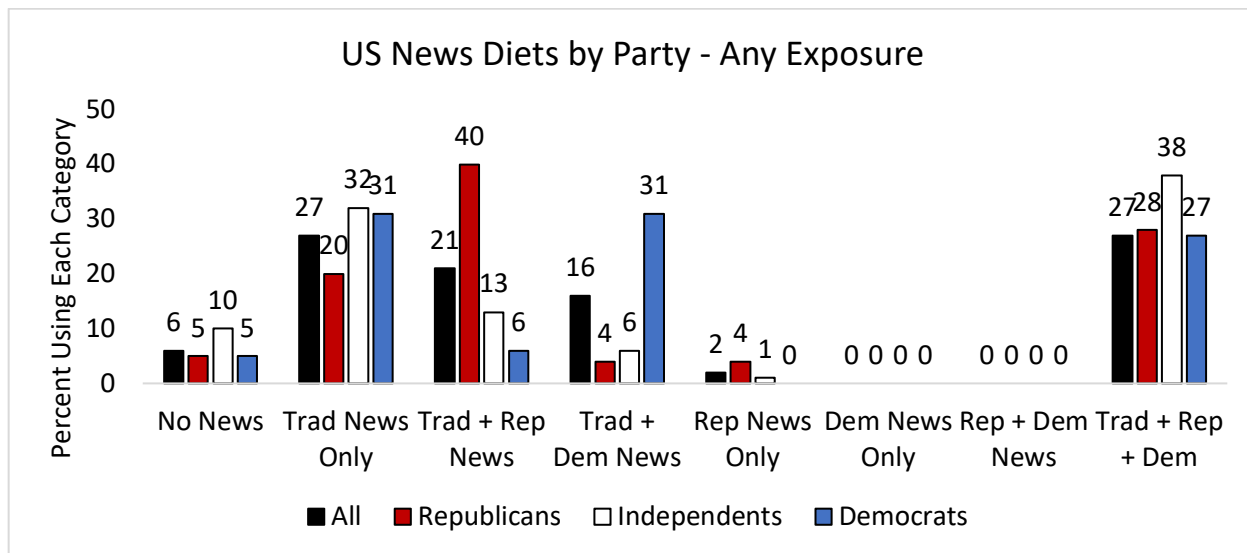
The relaxed coding also reveals that Independents are more likely to have an omnivorous news diet than any of the other news diet categories. Thus, while Independents are generally *less* likely than partisans to consume news, they are much *more* likely than partisans to consume all kinds of news. This speaks to a bifurcation between disengaged Independents and highly engaged Independents.

Finally, counting any exposure multiples the number of Wisconsinites getting some partisan news, growing from 28% in the first analysis to 67% here. In other words, while only a quarter of the public regularly gets partisan news, about two thirds gets some, suggesting more reach for partisan media than we might expect.

National results largely resemble Wisconsin's: the no news category is tiny, the exclusive news diets shrink, and the hybrid diets grow. Notably, the omnivorous news category in the national survey equals the mainstream news-only category, tied for largest of the



eight diets. The national survey shows a similar but smaller bifurcation among Independents – between no-news and all-news consumers – and the national survey shows a similar growth in the reach of partisan news, from 22% to 66%.



### Recognizing Partisan Bubbles?

Do people in partisan bubbles recognize their position? We asked people to describe their news diets on a five-point scale, from “mostly favoring liberals” to “mostly favoring conservatives, with “equally favoring...” in the middle. (Here and hereafter, we return to our more rigorous standard of regular exposure.)

Wisconsinites who mostly get Republican media were all over the map in their perceptions of their news diet. Thirty-two percent reasonably described their consumption as somewhat or mostly “conservative.” Twenty percent considered their media use to be balanced (partly reflecting Fox News’ false “fair and balanced” tagline), while 38% in the Republican echo chamber claimed their media use was liberal. That oddity may be partly explained by the many people who are confused about ideological meanings despite the prevalence of ideological terms in news media.

Nationwide, 47% of people in Republican media bubbles recognized their media consumption as “conservative,” 16% said their media was balanced, and 37% called it liberal. For the 2% of U.S. Democrats in Democratic media bubbles, 54% called their media liberal, 39% said balanced, and only 7% said conservative – but the small number of respondents in the category make the estimates less reliable.

It seems, then, that many people who find themselves in that partisan echo chamber have a distorted sense of their position in politics, especially among Republicans.



Related, 55% of Wisconsinites who only consume mainstream news consider it balanced, while more placed it on the somewhat or mostly liberal side (34%) than the conservative side (10%). The comparable national figures among traditional-only consumers are 47% balanced, 41% liberal, and 12% conservative.

We should note that the meaning of “favoring” in the question is somewhat ambiguous and open to subjective skews. If news reports fairly on a coup attempt led by the Republican president, or dispels widespread Republican falsehoods about the 2020 election, does that coverage favor Democrats? Clearly, it *doesn't* favor Republicans, but just as clearly, that coverage would be *equally fair* if Democrats did the same and news reports framed it similarly.

## **Political Conversations: Hearing the Other Side?**

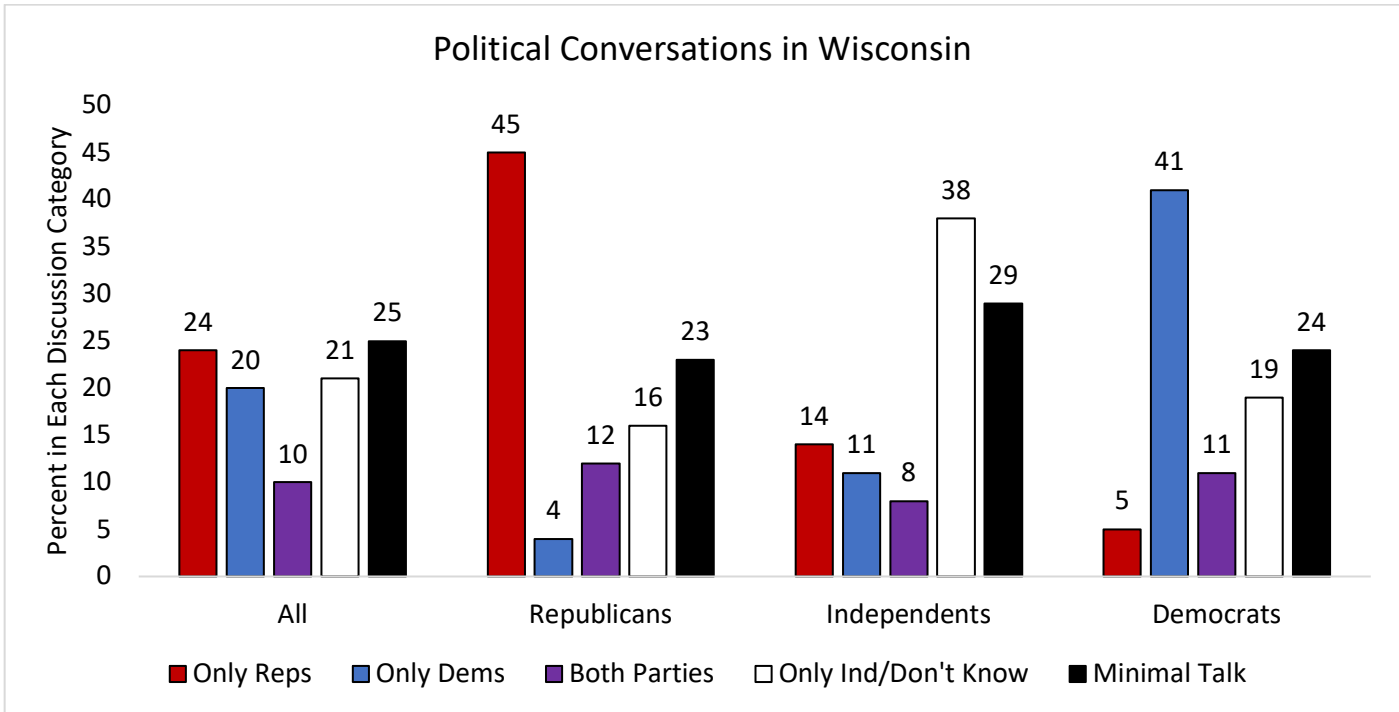
Beyond news, people learn about politics by talking with other people. There are lots of reasons why exposure to opposing partisans might be low – for example, residential segregation and social homophily make it more likely that political discussion partners are more similar than different, even before accounting for motivations to avoid talking to political opponents. We are interested in who talks with opposing partisans, or not.

We asked people to tell us up to three people they talk with most about politics (if at all), how often they do so, and what party those people align with. We group people into five categories: only talk to Republicans, only talk to Democrats, talk to both parties, only talk to Independents (or don't know party), and those who hardly talk politics at all. As with news consumption, we categorize political conversations based on frequent interaction (“fairly often” or more) rather than “occasional” discussion or less.

Much like the news analysis, one quarter of Wisconsinites opt out of regular political talk entirely, with similar numbers among partisans and higher numbers among Independents. That political talk orientation is more common than any other.

People who only talk with Republicans are next most prevalent, at 24%. That number jumps to 45% among Republicans and 4% of Democrats.





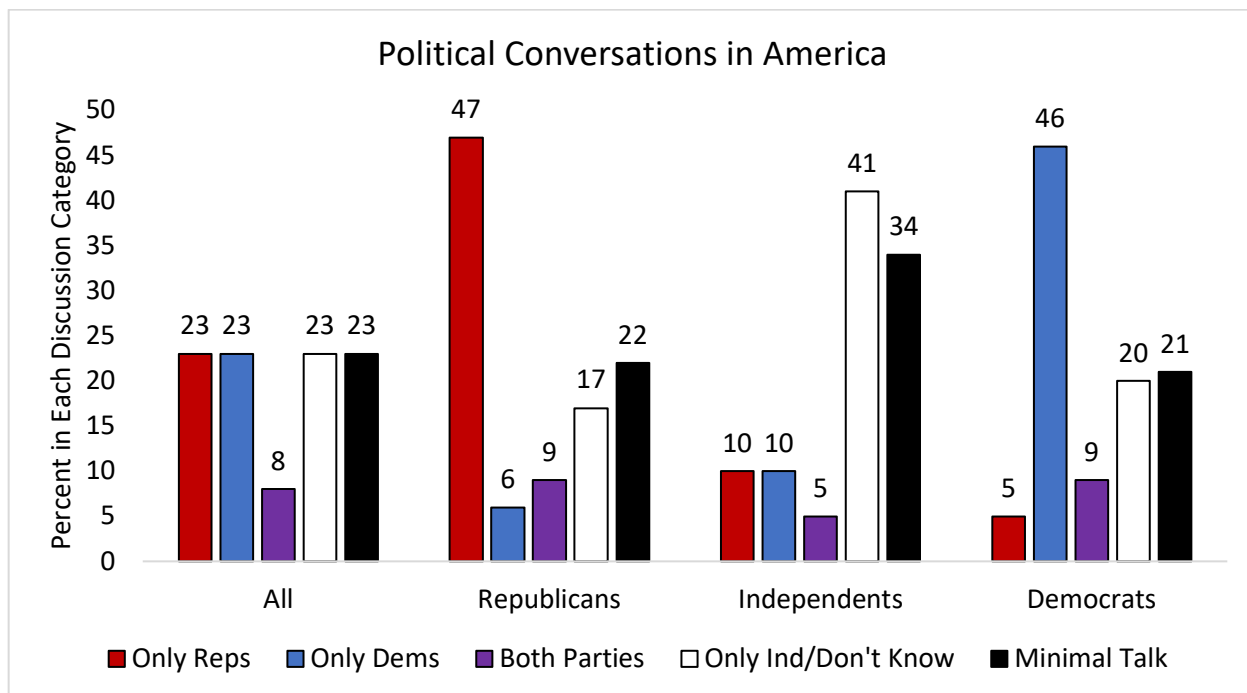
People who only talk with Democrats are a fifth of the public (20%), including 41% of Democrats and 5% of Republicans.

Taken together, Wisconsin’s Republicans are a little more likely than Democrats to only talk to their own partisans, by about four points.

Ten percent of Wisconsinites talk often with people in both parties; 12% for Republicans and 11% for Democrats.

The most common discussant category for Independents is Independent or don’t know (38%), even more than not talking at all (29%), which might reflect homophily or perhaps less ability to detect political allegiances.

Political conversation trends look similar in the national survey. One quarter of Americans do not talk about politics often with anyone, and nearly half of partisans in each party only talk politics with people from their own party.



### **Partisan Bubbles in Media *and* Conversation**

Next, we combine media and conversation patterns to develop a broader measure of seclusion in partisan bubbles.

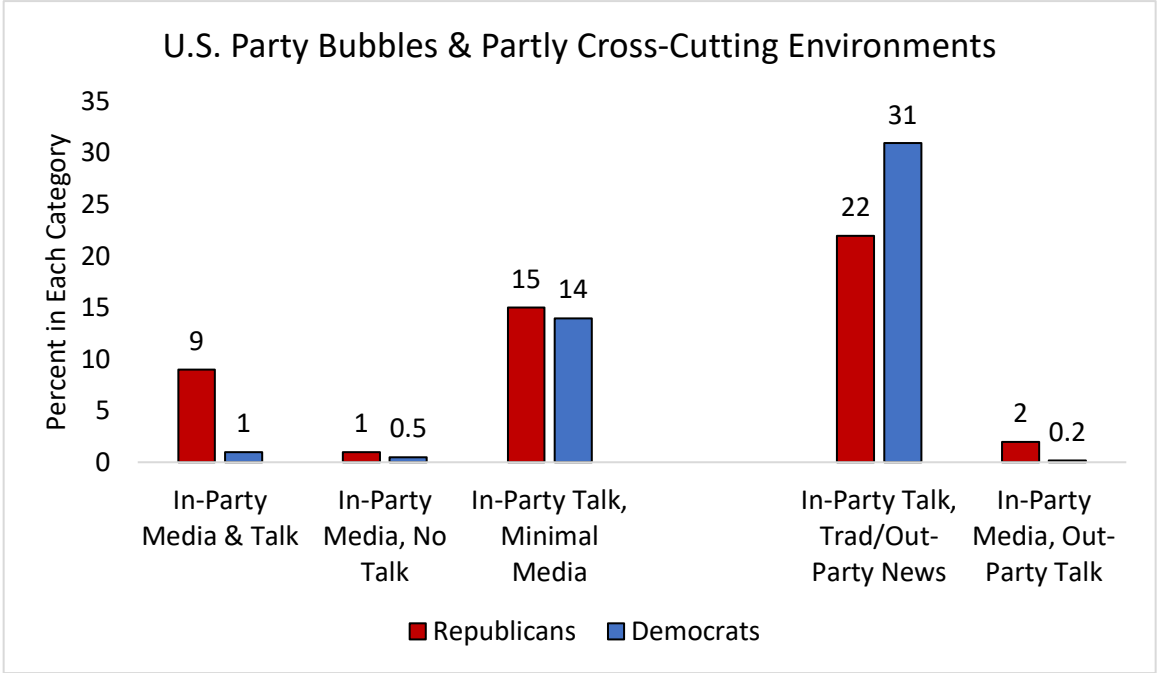
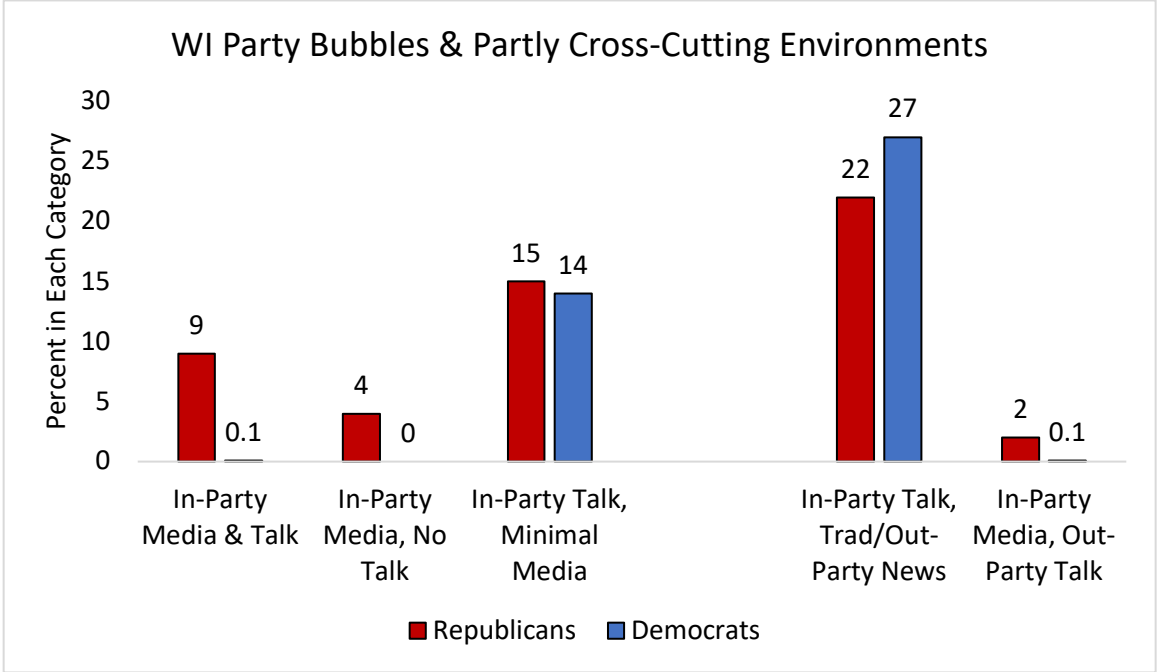
We note that the information environment of in-party only discussions may be much different than for those exclusively consuming in-party media. That’s because the views of partisans in the public are generally more diverse than those of partisan leaders and media figures – even while acknowledging some disagreements among party elites too. Put differently, a Republican who only talks politics with other Republicans might be exposed to a greater range of views than a Republican who only watches Fox News.

Nine percent of Wisconsin Republicans only get Republican perspectives regularly through both mass media and conversations. Another 4% get only Republican media and don’t talk to anyone much about politics. And another 15% only talk to Republicans but don’t consume much political media at all. In sum, 28% of Wisconsin Republicans are in Republican media-social bubbles one way or another.

For Wisconsin Democrats, the picture is different: essentially none are cloistered in pro-Democratic media *and* conversations (3 of 1,423, 0.1%), none in our sample get only Democratic media without talking to anyone about politics, and 14% talk to Democrats exclusively without much news media at all. In sum, 14% of Democrats are in Democratic media-social bubbles of any sort – half the rate for WI Republicans.



Other partisans are sealed off in one realm – media *or* political talk – but not the other. Twenty-two percent of Wisconsin Republicans only talk to Republicans but consume mainstream news “fairly often,” alone or in combination with partisan media (22% nationally). Another 2% only consume pro-Republican media but have some regular Democratic discussion partners (2% nationally).



Similarly, 27% percent of Wisconsin Democrats only talk with Democrats but consume mainstream news or even some pro-Republican media (31% nationally). Vanishingly small numbers of Democrats consume pro-Democratic media while also having regular Republican discussion partners (0.1% in WI, 0.2% nationally).

National numbers are much the same: 27% of Republicans are walled off in media-talk bubbles of one sort or another, as are 16% of Democrats. For Republicans, it's driven by combinations of partisan news and talk (15% talk & no news, 1% news & no talk, 9% both). For national Democrats, bubbles are almost entirely found among people who consume little news but talk politics regularly only with Democrats (14%). Only 1% of national Democrats are in both social and talk bubbles, and only 0.5% consume pro-Democratic media exclusively with no interpersonal talk about politics.

Those sets of partisans get some cross-cutting exposure to political opponents so long as that channel remains open for them.

Notably, when we narrow definitions of bubbles so that even “rare” exposure to mainstream news counts as a diverse news diet, then only 3% of Wisconsin Republicans and less than 1% of Wisconsin Democrats are in total partisan social-news bubbles. Likewise, just 4% for national Republicans and 2% for national Democrats.

## Implications of Partisan Bubbles

Next, we investigate how partisan media diets and political conversation networks correspond with a wide range of political views – supporting the party's national leaders, general agreement with the party on policy, and other extreme views that threaten civic life and democracy.

We are cautious not to assume that different views found between media diets are entirely caused by media content differences, given that people with different political views often select agreeable media, and the people most potentially susceptible to effects from partisan news content are often those who [would rarely seek it out](#). However, media content is a plausible source for some attitude reinforcement and persuasion.

In short, partisan media and conversation partners can align political views better with that part, and already-polarized partisans are more likely to seek out likeminded content, especially among Republicans.





## Distinctive Policy Views

Our state and national surveys asked 11 policy-related questions on restrictive immigration, taxing the rich, Obamacare, abortion, environmental regulations, background checks on guns, US military involvement in Ukraine, Black Lives Matter, the #MeToo Movement on sexual misconduct, and US military involvement in Ukraine. Respondents indicated their views on a 5-point response scale.

For ease of presentation, we display averages in each category on a 0-100 scale, where 100 means everyone in the group chose the most liberal response, and 0 means everyone chose the most conservative response.

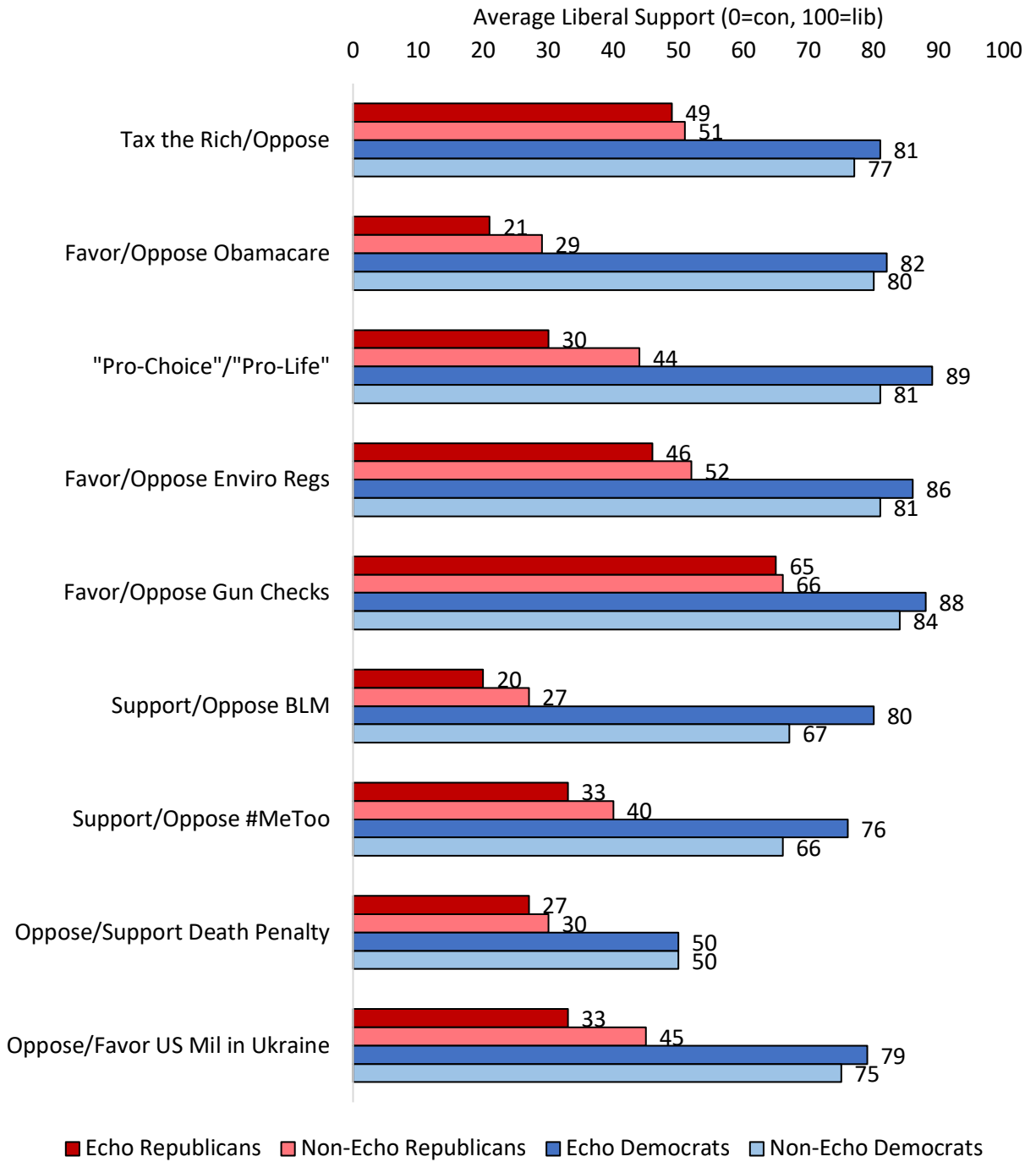
Across nearly every viewpoint in both parties, Wisconsinites in partisan bubbles hold distinctive views from their fellow partisans who have more exposure to opposing perspectives in media and conversation – over 10 points in some cases. Thus, the gaps we find by partisan bubble status are substantial but not enormous.

The biggest bubble-based gaps appear for Democrats on Black Lives Matter (17 points) and immigration (14 points). For Republicans, the bubble differences are largest for abortion (14 points) and Ukraine (12 points).

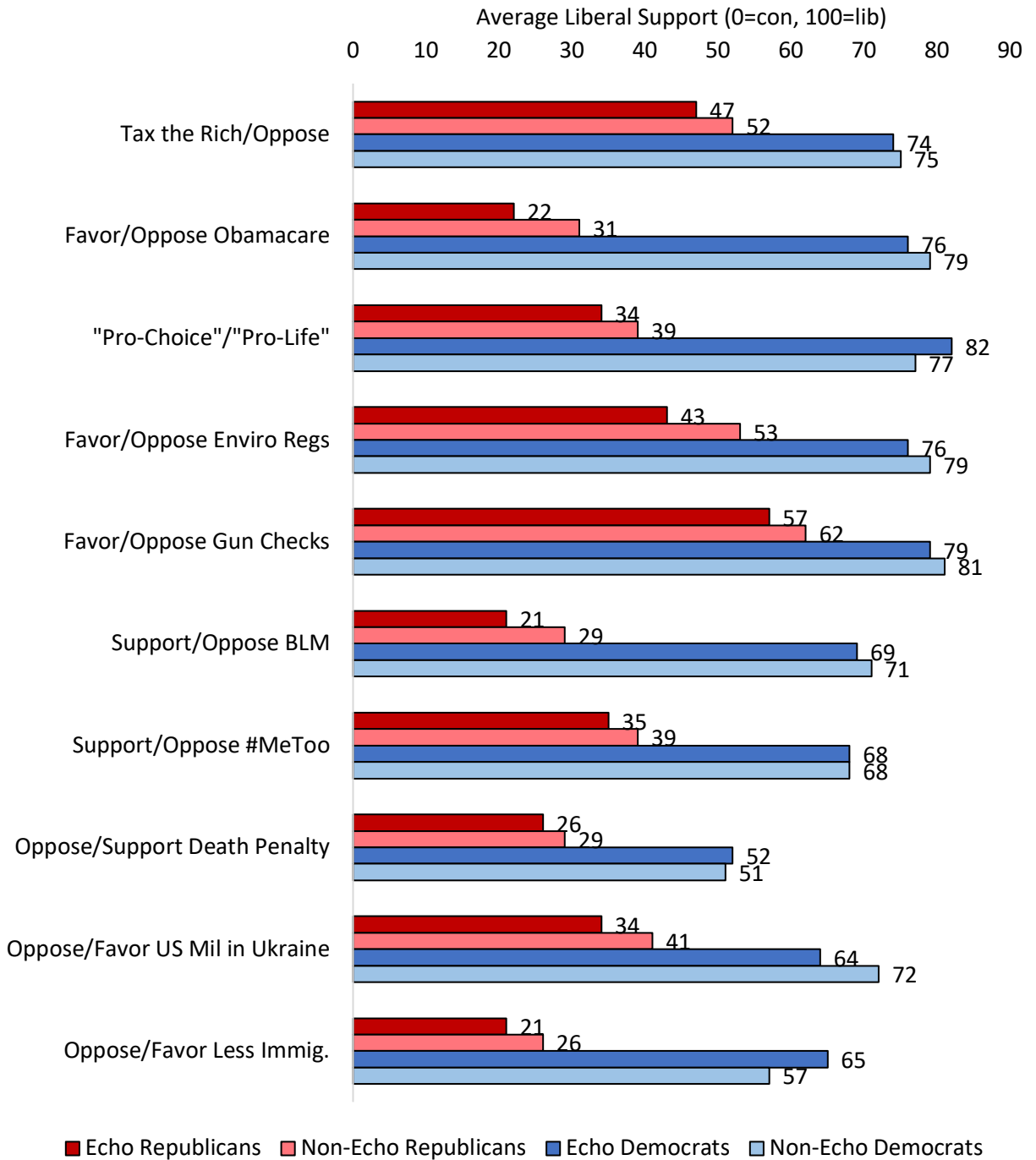
The pattern on support for gun background checks is unusual in that the average Republican is on the “liberal” side of the spectrum, if only slightly. On that issue, Republican voters are much less extreme than their party leaders – and the gap is smallest between bubble Republicans and Republicans getting broader perspectives on this issue.

Wisconsin Democrats are most middling on the death penalty – exactly so, on average – and that is also where we find the smallest gap by echo chamber status for Democrats (none).

### WI Partisan Views by Echo Chamber Status



## U.S. Partisan Views by Echo Chamber Status



The results look similar in our national survey, though Republican bubble status may correspond with more attitude distinction for them than for Democrats.

The biggest bubble-based gap among national Democrats is for Ukraine views, though more cloistered Democrats are *less* supportive (by 6 points) than those with more diverse information environments. Abortion views are next most distinctive among Democrats, though the difference is only about 5 points more liberal, on average, for those in mostly Democratic environments.

Among national Republicans, the biggest gap among them by bubble status is 10 points, against regulations protecting and preserving the natural environment.

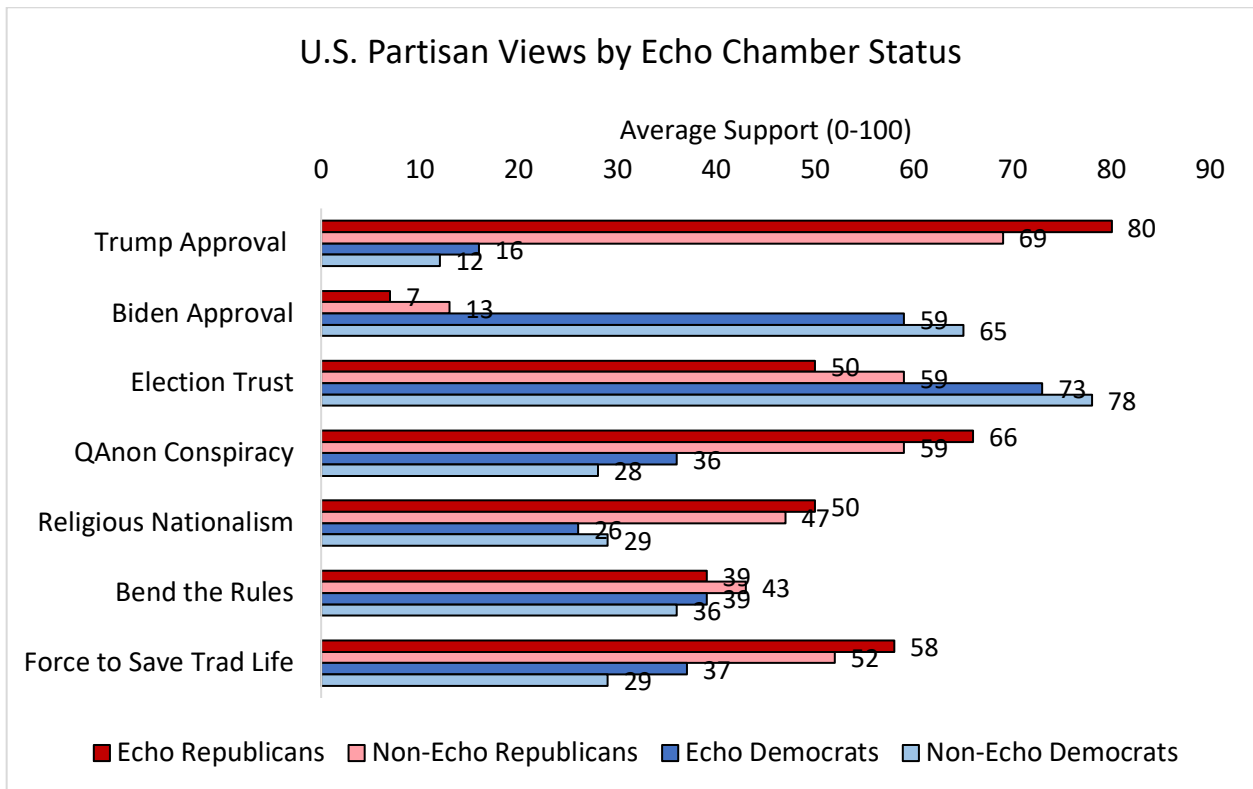
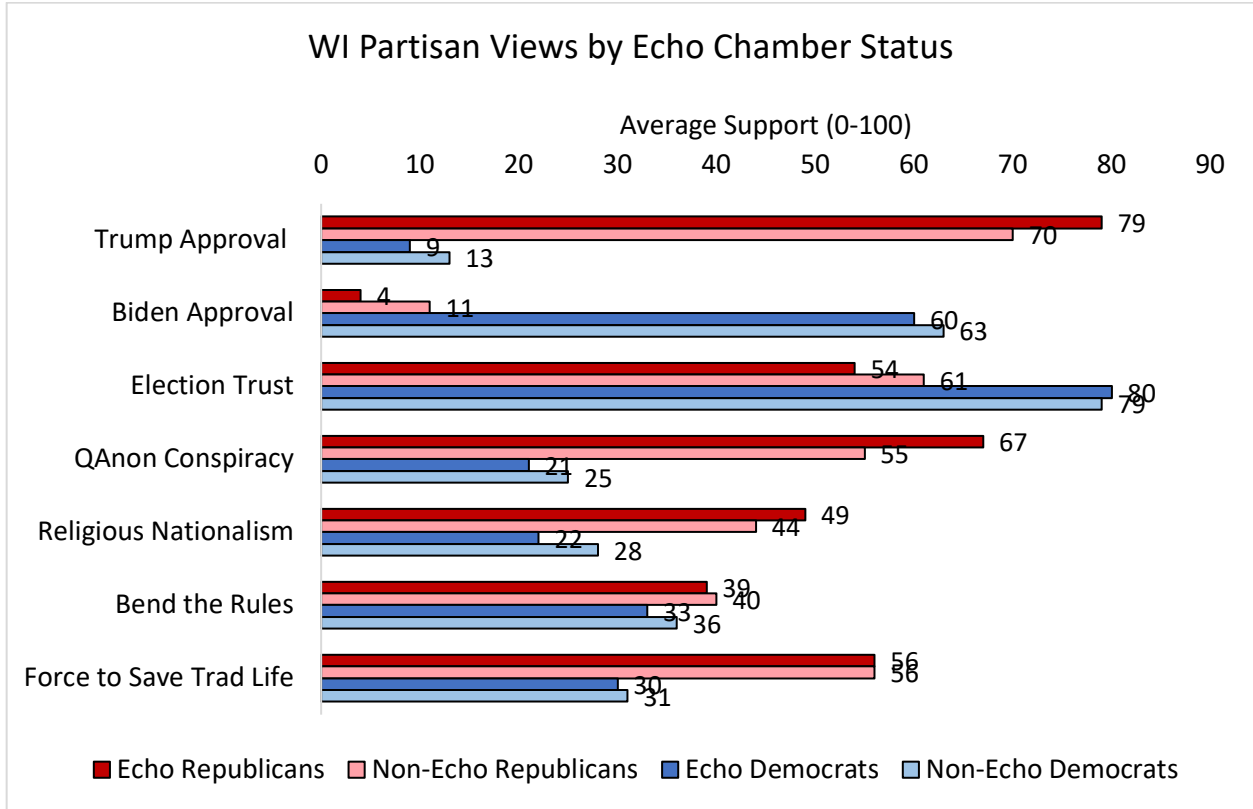
In short, people in partisan bubbles tend to align more with their party leaders on a wide range of stances than those with more diverse political information flows.

### **Support for National Party Leaders**

Moving from policies to leader evaluations, WI Republicans in partisan media-talk bubbles were 9 points more approving of Donald Trump and 7 points less approving of Joe Biden. Wisconsin Democrats were 4 points less approving of Donald Trump and 3 points *less* approving of Joe Biden based when in a partisan bubble.

In the national survey, echo chamber Republicans are 11 points more supportive of Trump and 6 points less approving of Biden than Republicans with more diverse information environments. Bubble Democrats are *more* supportive of Trump and *less* supportive of Biden by a few points than non-echo Democrats.

Why that asymmetry? Recall that almost all echo-chamber Democrats are people who don't regularly consume news, and that political disinterest makes them less likely than Republicans in media bubbles to hear and hold more party-typical views.



## Election Distrust

National and state elections have been under figurative and literal attack as many Republican leaders have spread (or failed to refute) lies about the integrity of our elections. Despite those false claims, Wisconsinites generally trust the elections.

For example, 78% of Wisconsin Republicans are somewhat or very confident that their vote will be counted, along with 90% of Democrats, and 80% of Wisconsinites overall.

Even so, WI Republicans in media-social bubbles were 7 points less trusting of election counts across an index of five voting methods (i.e. in-person, mail-in, drop box, absentee, plus “your vote”). Democrats in bubbles were no more or less confident in the vote compared to other Democrats.

The national survey shows a similar election trust gap of 9 points among Republicans, but Democrats are a little *less* trusting when their information environment is less diverse (by 5 points).

## Belief in Dangerous Conspiracy Theories

We asked about belief in the false conspiracy theory that “left-wing politicians and entertainers are grooming children to be at risk of child sexual abuse” on a 5-point agreement scale. This measure taps into views far beyond standard survey measures of partisan animosity and contempt.

The view is also closely associated to the QAnon movement, which purveys a wide range of outrageous, baseless claims. The FBI considers the loosely knit group a serious [threat for political violence](#).

Worryingly, 46% of Wisconsin Republicans endorsed this extremist view, including 29% who *strongly* endorsed it. Republicans siloed in a partisan media and social bubbles were 12 points more likely to endorse the extremist view than those with more diverse information diets. Democrats in partisan bubbles were 4 points *less* likely to agree than other Democrats.

National partisans follow the same patterns, with greater endorsement bubble partisans in both parties.

## Religious Nationalism

Places that base their politics on religious doctrine often struggle to uphold their moral and legal obligations to treat all citizens equally – especially by gender and sexuality.



This is one reason why the U.S. Constitution requires separation of church and state. Even so, debate about the role of religion in politics continues with fervor.

We asked if “democracy works best when politicians ask religious leaders for guidance.” While it’s certainly possible for a religious believer’s values to influence their political actions without running afoul of democracy, this survey question suggests more systematic influence that undermines the principle that the people are ultimately sovereign over the earthly affairs of governance.

Republicans who were in party bubbles of one sort or another were 5 points more likely to agree than Republicans who weren’t. But Republicans in *both* media and talk bubbles were about 14 points more likely to agree than Republicans who were only in one, the other, or neither.

Democrats in partisan bubbles were 6 points *less* likely to endorse religious influence over leaders, indicating a *greater* commitment to this tenet of democracy.

In other words, partisan bubbles are not always associated with worse orientations toward democracy – consistent, too, with the idea that mainstream news norms of balance can sometimes be detrimental to democracy.

In our national survey, bubble status didn’t differentiate the religious nationalism views of people within each party much.

### **“Strong leaders” should “bend the rules”**

Consistently upholding laws and rules for governing is vital for healthy democracies, so long as the laws and rules are consistent with democracy’s principles.

In many countries, leaders undermine democracy by ignoring constraints on their own power. Indeed, the early framers of American government recognized those risks and sought to mitigate the danger through creative institutional designs with various checks, balances, and shared powers.

We asked whether “strong leaders sometimes have to bend the rules in order to get things done.”

Overall, partisans in both parties generally chose not to endorse the statement, which is probably a good sign. Republicans were several points more likely to agree than Democrats, but bubbles made little difference for partisans in either party. The same held true in our national survey.



Here, too, the practical distinction between reasonable disagreement over the scope of ambiguous powers and grossly unlawful action is more complex than a simple reading of responses might suggest.

### **Using force to save the “traditional American way of life”**

Political violence is low but rising, especially [right-wing violence](#). Much of that violence is motivated by changes in demographics and power that are reducing the advantages dominant groups have enjoyed over others for centuries.

We asked whether “the traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it.”

For many Republicans the “traditional” life includes those advantages for historically dominant groups by race, religion, and sex, at the expense of others. Democrats are not blameless on these group issues, especially historically, though their modern levels of endorsement for racism, sexism, and religious dominance are far lower than those views among Republicans, even among Democrats who are white, Christian, and/or male.

43% of Wisconsin Republicans and 40% of U.S. Republicans agreed or strongly agreed that force may be necessary, compared to 15% of Wisconsin Democrats and 15% of U.S. Democrats.

Wisconsin Republicans in media bubbles were no more likely to agree than other Republicans. However, U.S. Republicans in partisan bubbles endorsed use of force by six points more than other Republicans in the national survey.

The national results fit with our [previous report](#), where we found that Trump approval significantly increased support for violence among Republicans – and Republican bubbles correspond with higher Trump support in the analysis above.

## **Prospects for Reducing Partisan Bubbles**

One route to healthier civic life and a more robust democracy may involve persuading pro-Republican media organizations to forgo misinformation campaigns and embrace civic and democratic values. Another route involves shrinking dependence on Republican bubbles among the one quarter of Republicans isolated there. And what might get the 14% of Democrats in talk bubbles without news to branch out?





Given geographic and social limitations, diversifying media exposure by adding mainstream news may be easier to achieve than facilitating talk with political opponents. News trust may be a key indicator regarding who might be open to new media consumption patterns.

## **Media Trust**

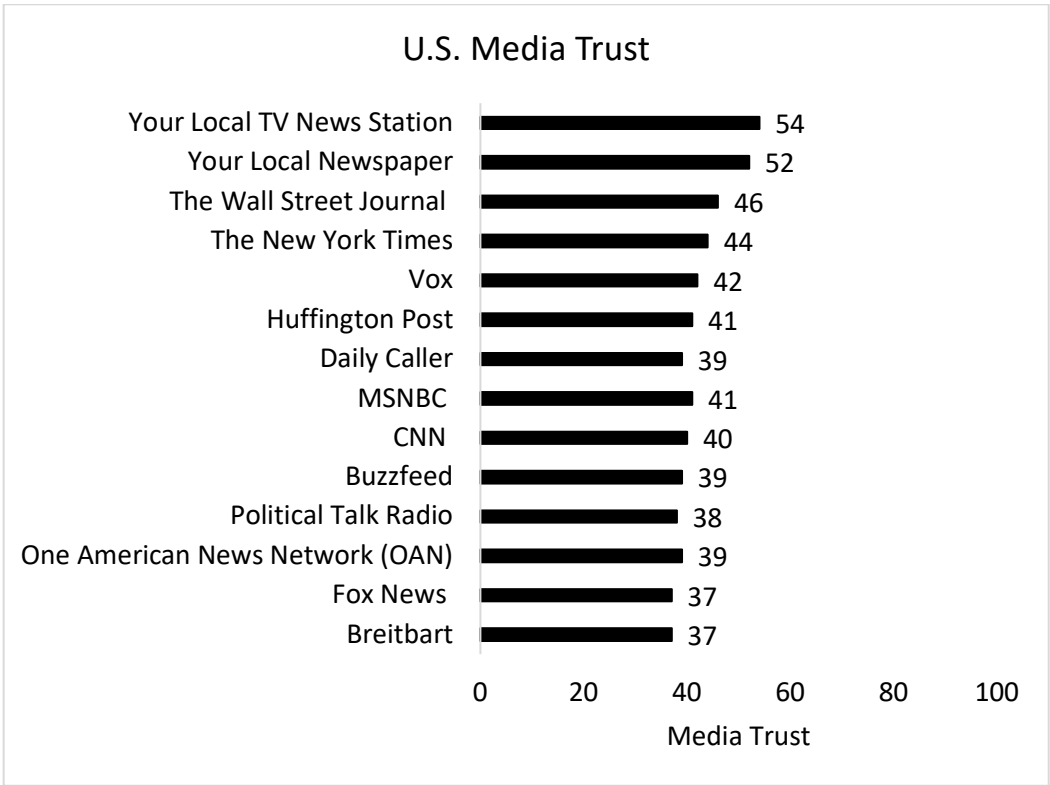
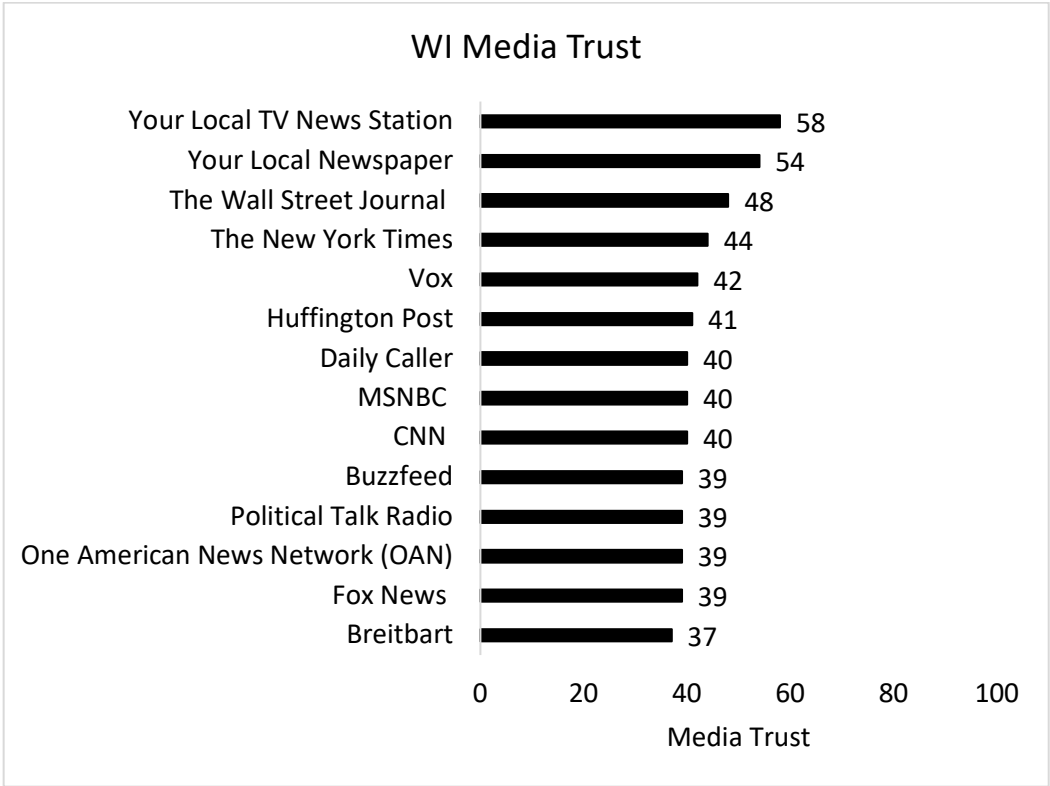
We asked Wisconsinites to rate their trust in several media sources on a five-point scale, from “trust completely” to “distrust completely.” We take the average across respondents for each outlet and scale it between 0 and 100. It’s worth remembering that many people may not know the less popular sources on the list and probably tended to assign those middling trust scores as a result (neither trust nor distrust).

Media trust patterns align with the media consumption patterns reported above. The most popular sources generally rate highest (e.g. local TV news), though local newspapers almost equal local TV news despite having roughly half the audience. One takeaway might be that locally produced news is generally more trusted than more geographically distant sources, though two national newspapers do relatively well, too.

Cable news is less trusted than the sources above, and four pro-Republican sources round out the bottom four of the media trust list. The pro-Democratic outlet MSNBC tied CNN for trust overall, and the conservative Daily Caller website matched them both.

Media source trust follows the same contours in our national survey. Local news is most trusted, followed by national newspapers. Cable news sources are a little less trusted, and pro-Republican outlets are least trusted.





General media source trust levels conceal substantial variation by party – no surprise.

Wisconsin Republicans trust Fox News more than any other source in the survey, on average – even more than their local TV news and local newspaper. One surprising finding is that average trust in Fox News among Republicans sits at 55 points overall, which is only slightly better than the scale’s midpoint on trust or distrust. Whether that reflects a healthy growing skepticism of the channel’s false claims or a desire for Fox News to move in even more radical directions is unclear.

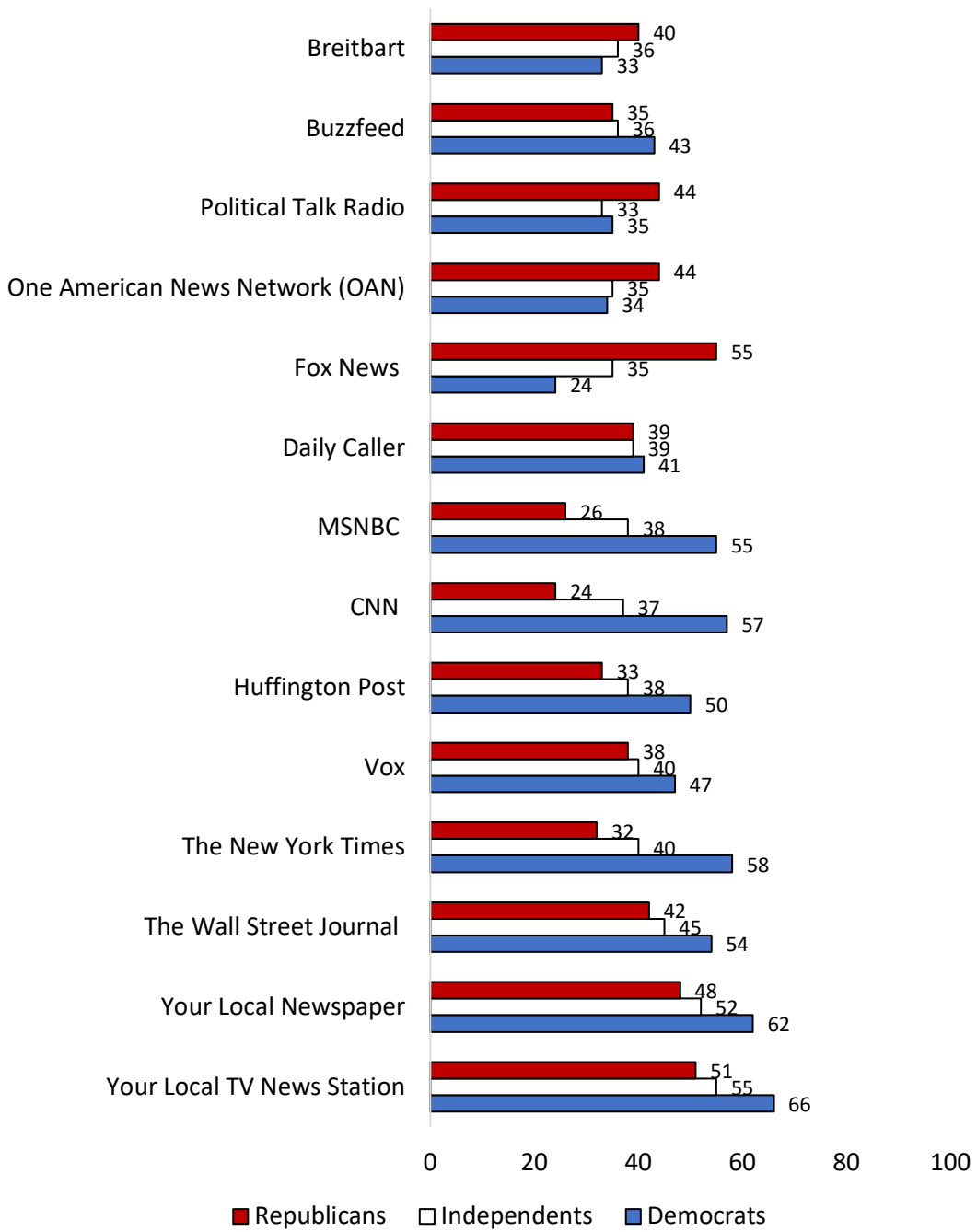
WI Democrats trust five outlets more than Republicans trust Fox news: their local TV news, local newspaper, the New York Times, CNN, and MSNBC. However, Democratic trust only exceeds 60 points for local TV news (66) and the local newspaper (62).

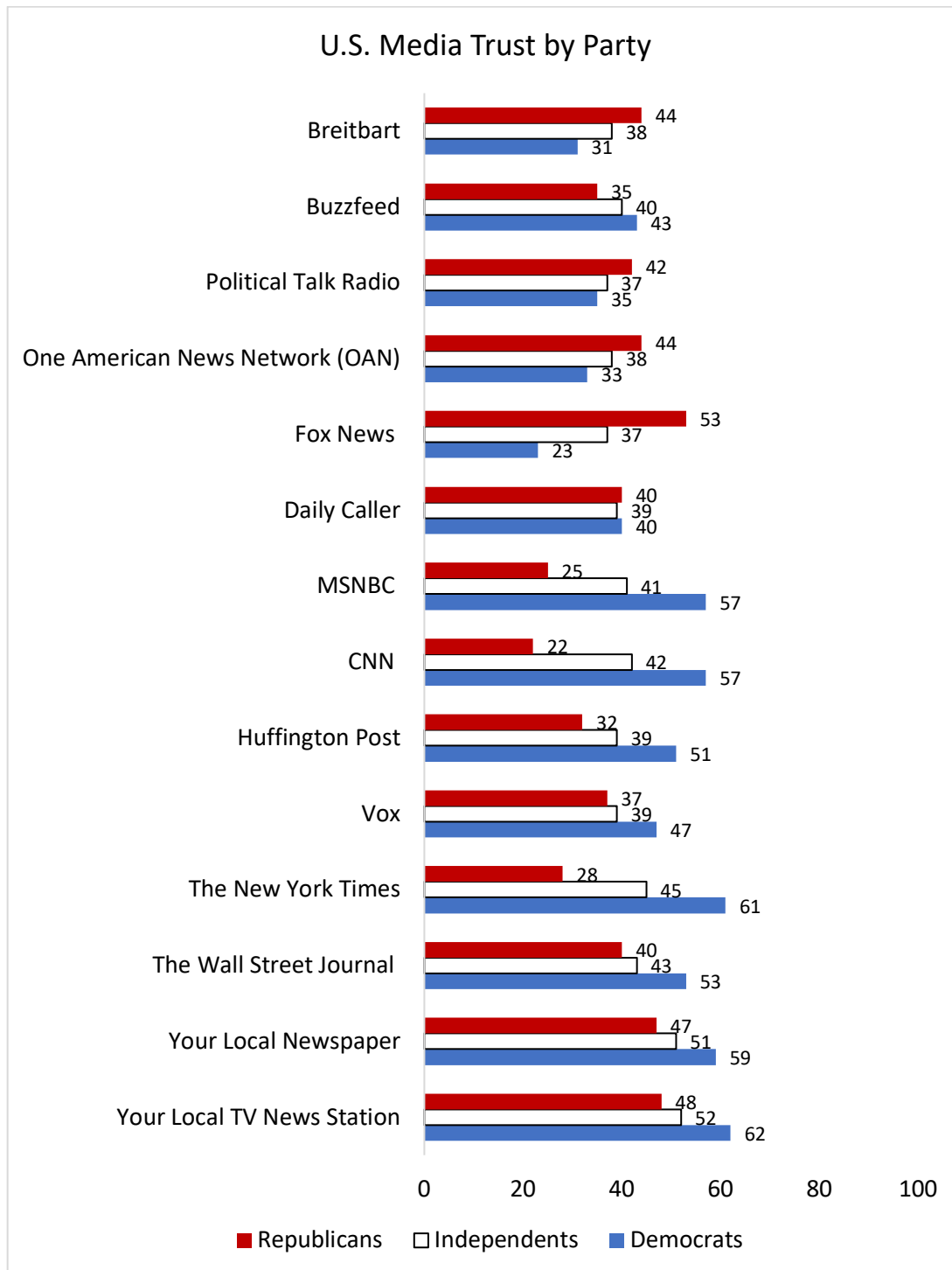
Our national survey shows much the same on media trust by partisanship. Fox News is most trusted by U.S. Republicans (53), followed closely by local television (48) and local newspapers (47). U.S. Republicans trust CNN least (22), with MSNBC nearly as low (25).

U.S. Democrats trust local TV news most (62), then the New York Times (61), the local newspaper (59), and a tie for MSNBC and CNN (57). They trust Fox News least (23).

As with the WI results, Independents are differentiated less in trust across outlets.

### WI Media Trust by Party





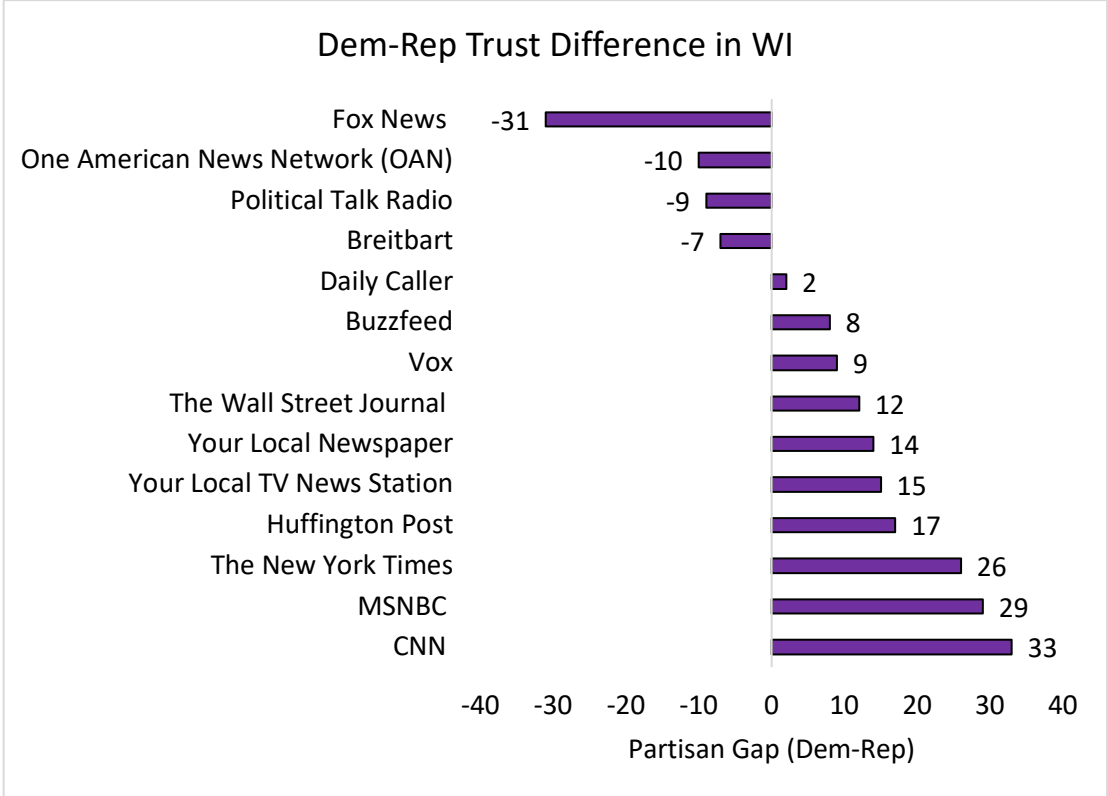
Next, we quantify the trust gap between Wisconsin Republicans and Democrats in the chart below. Sources with large positive numbers are trusted much more by Democrats, while sources with large negative numbers are trusted much more by Republicans. Results appear in the figure below.



CNN has the largest gap among Wisconsinites, with 33 points more trust among Democrats than Republicans. The result is surprising given that CNN is a mainstream outlet, and the trust gap is larger than for MSNBC, which favors Democrats.

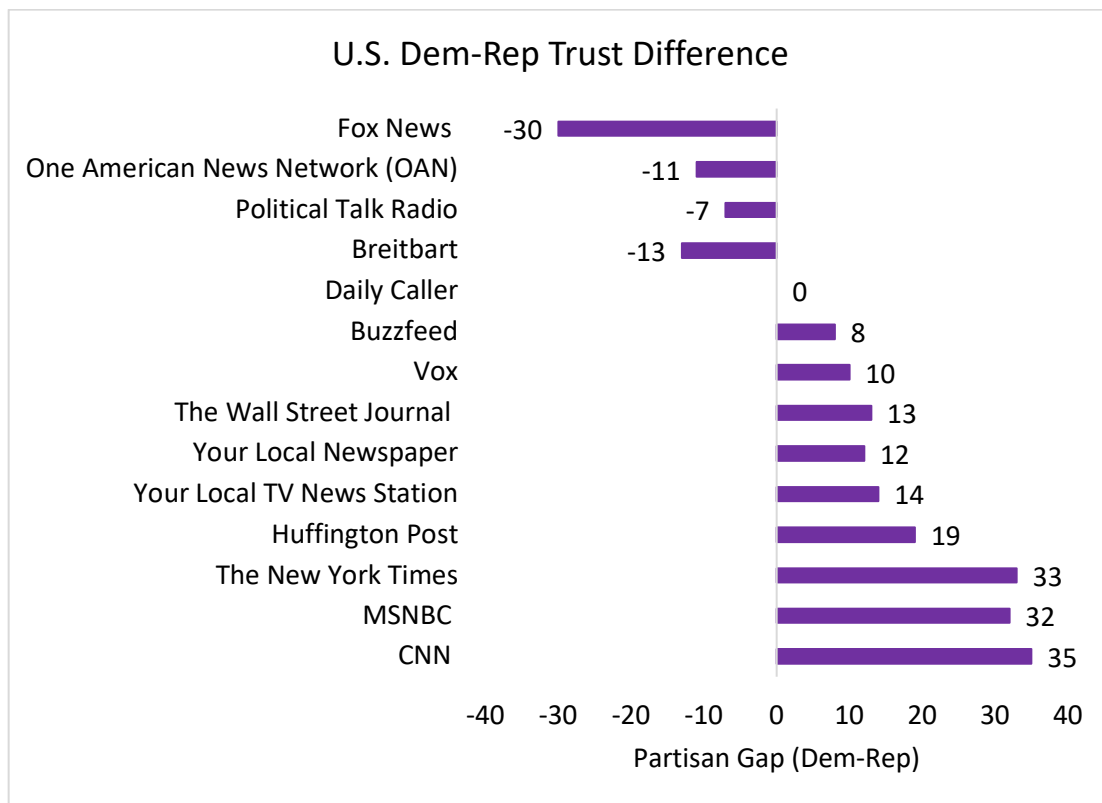
The next largest trust gap is for Fox News, with 31 points more trust among Republicans than Democrats. Other Republican sources show similar but smaller gaps.

Even with local news, which is most trusted overall, we observe a substantial partisan gap in trust among Wisconsinites, with about 15 points more trust among Democrats.



Partisan gaps are equivalently sized and similarly ordered in the national survey. CNN is largest (35), with New York Times (33) and MSNBC (32) close behind. Fox News comes in with a 30-point gap.



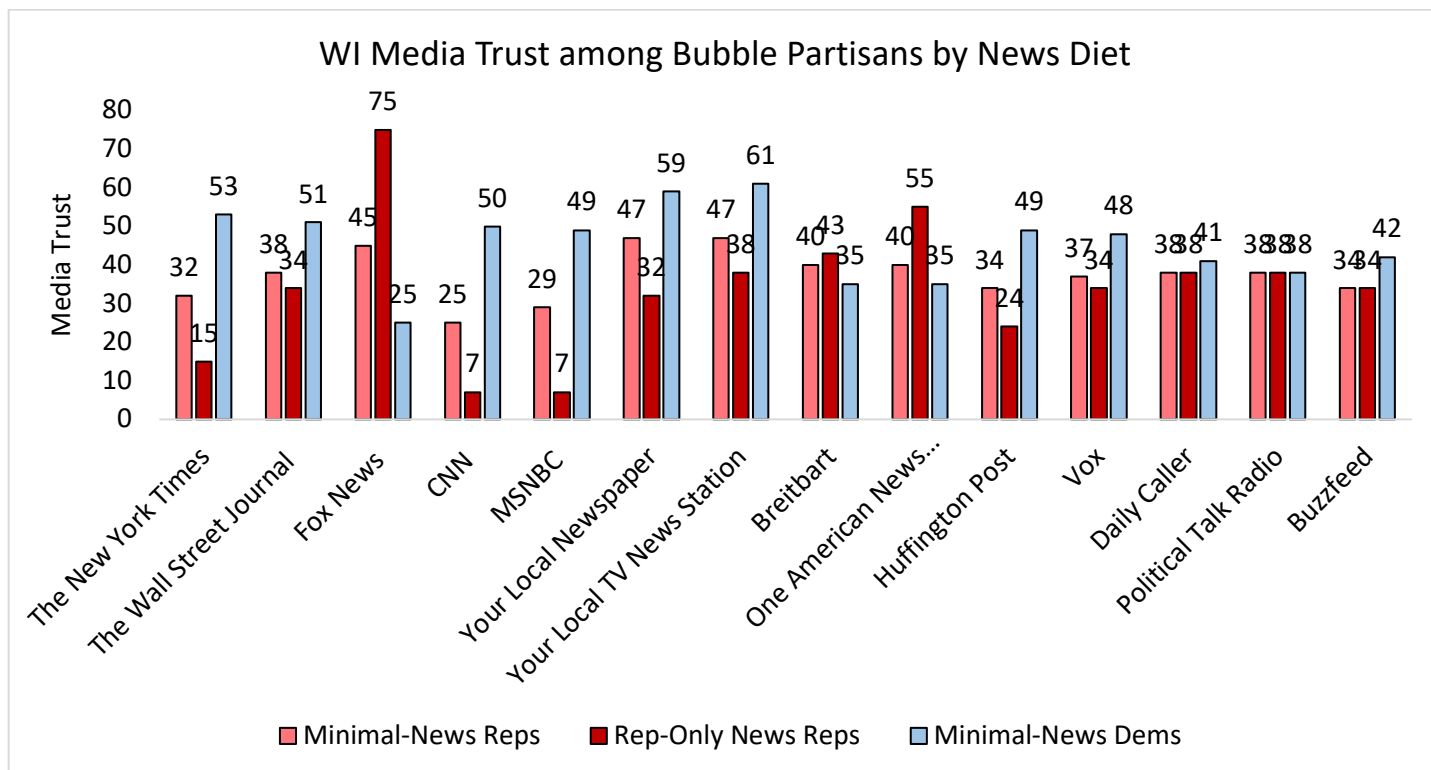


## Who Might Diversify their Media Use?

Republicans who consume minimal news are different from those who only consume pro-Republican news, in that they are probably much less politically interested. In other words, most lack the motivation to seek out much news (though some few may be interested but wholly turned off by all media, left, right, and center).

Among Wisconsin Republicans who don't follow news *and* who don't talk politics with any Democrats, media trust is generally low and not especially differentiated across sources, perhaps because disengagement leads to unfamiliarity. Trust trends follow Republican views generally, from a low with CNN (25) to a high with local news (47), but the differences across outlets are quite muted. Fox News is nearly as high (45).

If WI Republicans in partisan bubbles turn to cable news, they are far more inclined toward Fox News than CNN, but local TV news and newspapers look slightly most favorable for them. And television news is probably a more likely landing spot than print for disengaged citizens.



In contrast, among WI Republicans who only follow pro-Republican news and who don't talk politics with any Democrats, media trust is enormously variable across outlets. CNN and MSNBC tie for lowest trust (7) while Fox News reaches a high far above those (75).

For this group, it is hard to imagine their high trust in Fox News being shaken in a way that leads them to stop consuming content that regularly mischaracterizes verifiable evidence, and they are extremely distrustful of many sources of mainstream news. Among those, however, local TV is the most trusted (38).

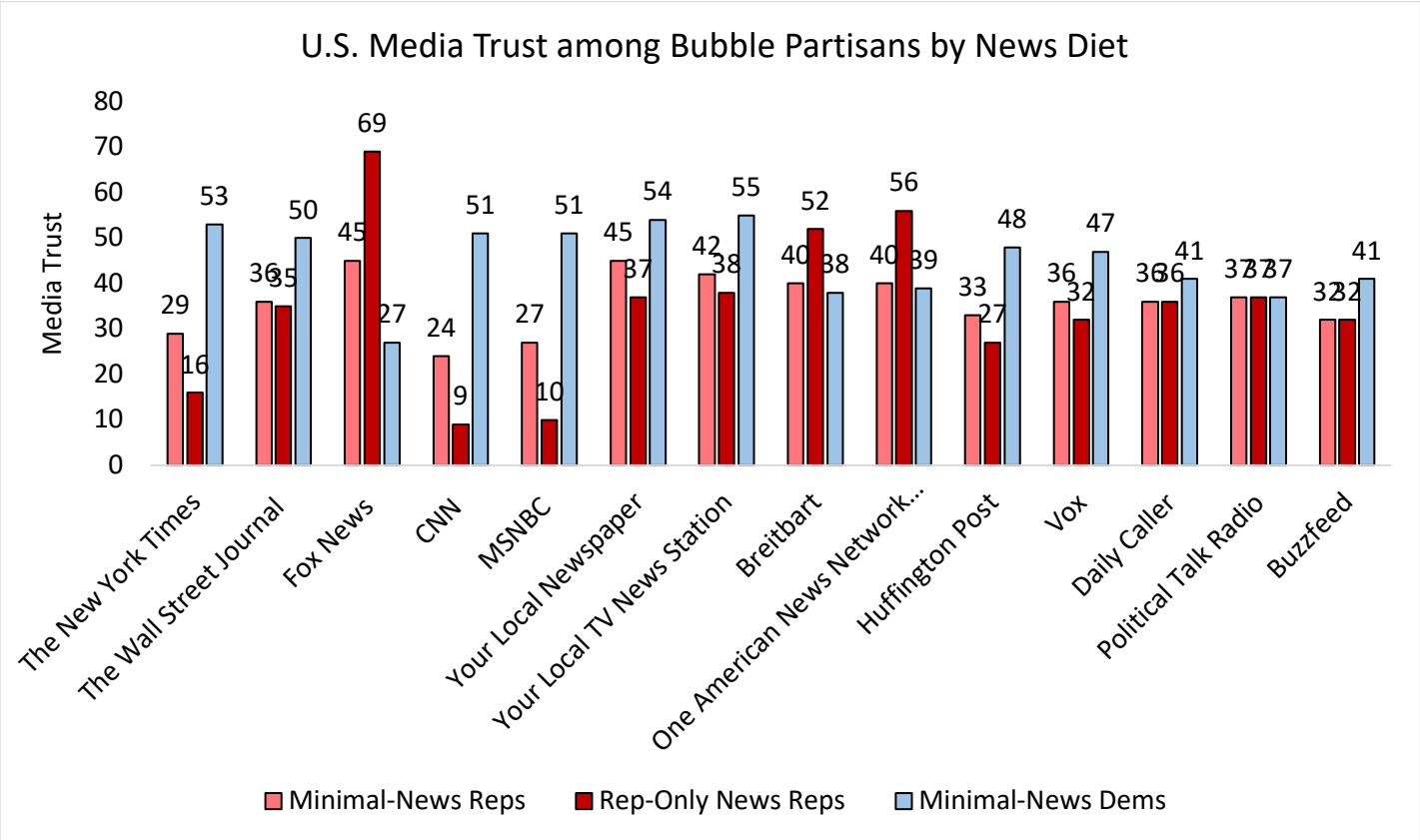
Overall, then, local television news might be the likeliest route to breaking those in the Republican news-only bubbles out of their cloistered information environment for both forms of political seclusion, with important benefits for their overall exposure to political diversity, along with benefits that might accrue more broadly to society in the form of reduced extremism. All the better if local TV news producers can marginally improve their civic content and do it in a way that is consistent with democracy's values.

Among Wisconsin Democrats, the only notable partisan bubbles are for people who talk politics with Democrats and don't consume much news. Media trust among that group is greatest for local news, too – television (61) and newspapers (59). Next most are the *New York Times* (53) and the *Wall Street Journal* (51).



Nationwide, our survey shows comparable patterns. Among both kinds of party bubble Republicans, local news does relatively well compared to other mainstream sources. However, Republican-only news Republicans don't trust local news much compared to their Republican sources. No-news Republicans are generally more trusting across mainstream sources, and less trusting of pro-Republican sources.

No-news Democrats nationally have much greater trust across a range of mainstream sources in contrast with both kinds of echo-chamber Republicans.



Would a shift from bubble partisan content into local mainstream news help? The next section examines which news sources correspond with civically desirable views.

### Which News Sources are Civically Best?

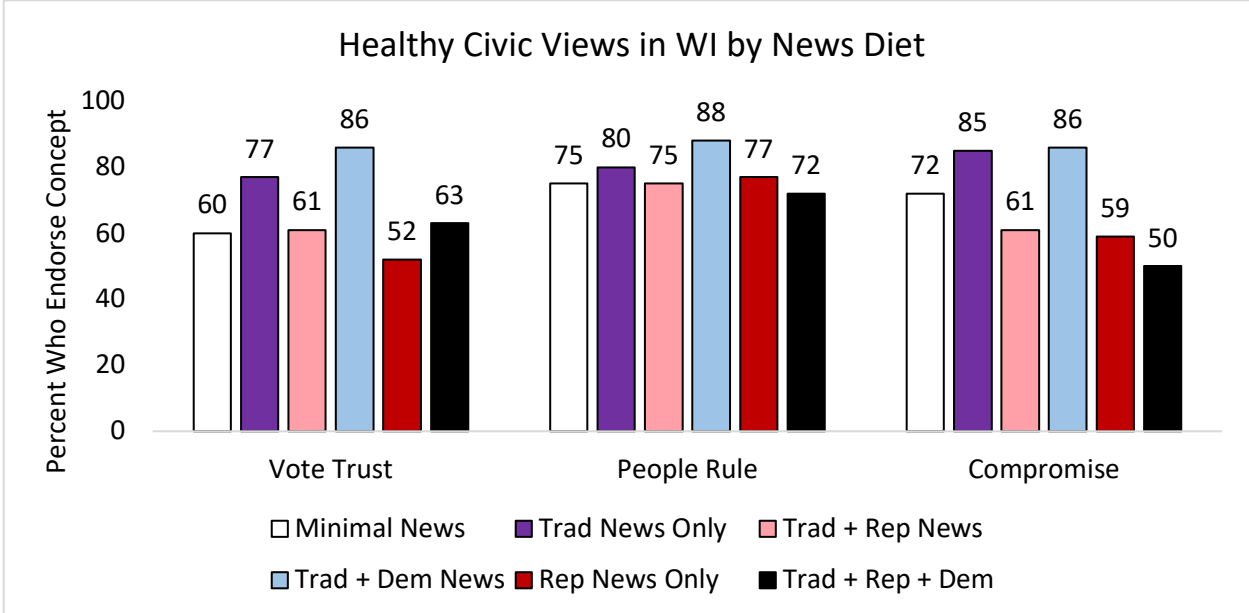
The sections above traced implications of partisan bubbles – some of them quite destructive to civic health and democracy. Which media diets correspond with the healthiest civic attitudes? We examine trust in election vote counts, basic democratic



beliefs that people should influence government, and support for the compromises necessary to make good governance possible.

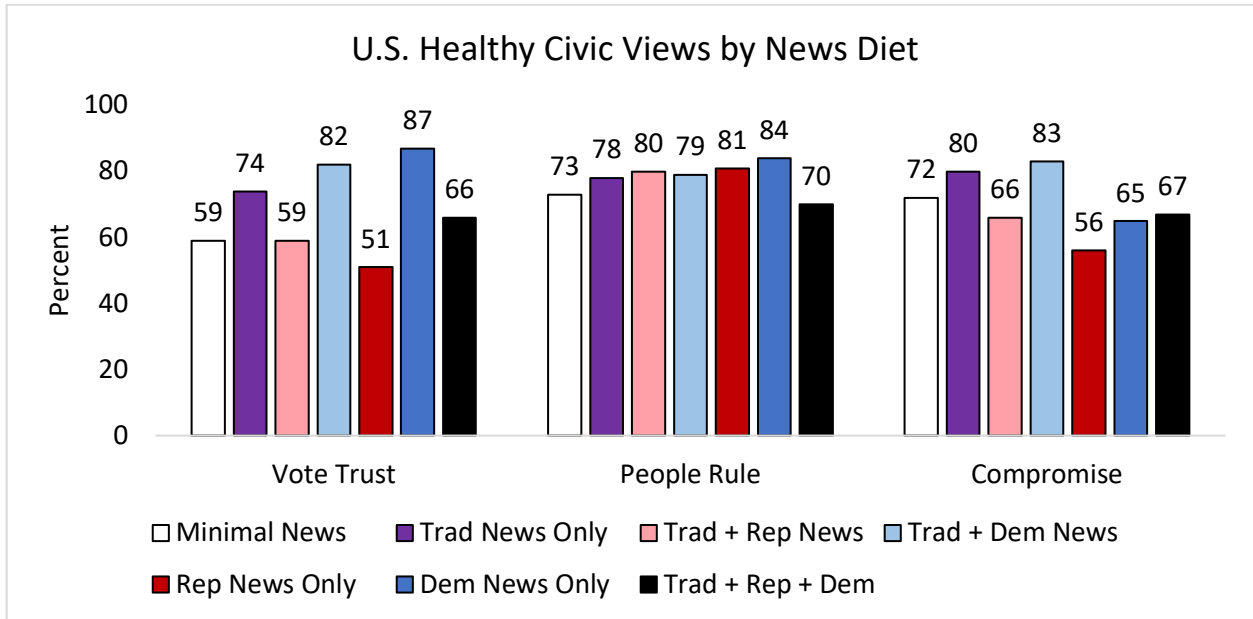
Once again, we note that these views are probably a product of both media content effects and pre-existing views of people who select these kinds of media.

We dive into the details on each of our three civic indicators below, but the takeaway is that Wisconsinites who combined frequent consumption of mainstream news with pro-Democratic news consistently held the healthiest civic attitudes. Next came people who only consumed mainstream news media. Perhaps surprisingly, people who consumed mainstream news plus partisan sources on *both* sides had the lowest scores on two of the three indicators – even worse than those who only consumed Republican media, except on vote trust. A different way to read the results is that any consumption of Republican media is associated with less healthy civic views. People who don't really follow the news tended to score in the middle or the bottom.



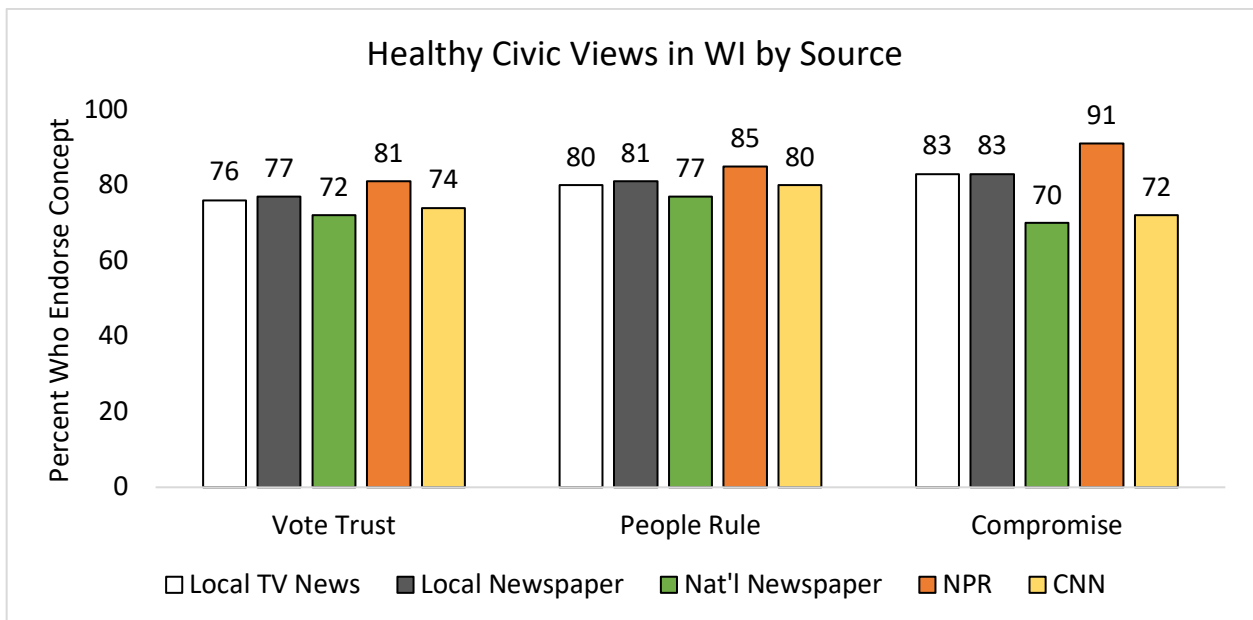
The same mostly holds true in the national survey. Information source patterns look quite similar on vote trust and compromise. Meanwhile, endorsing the view that the people should participate in the governing process is less differentiated by media diet compared to the Wisconsin survey.



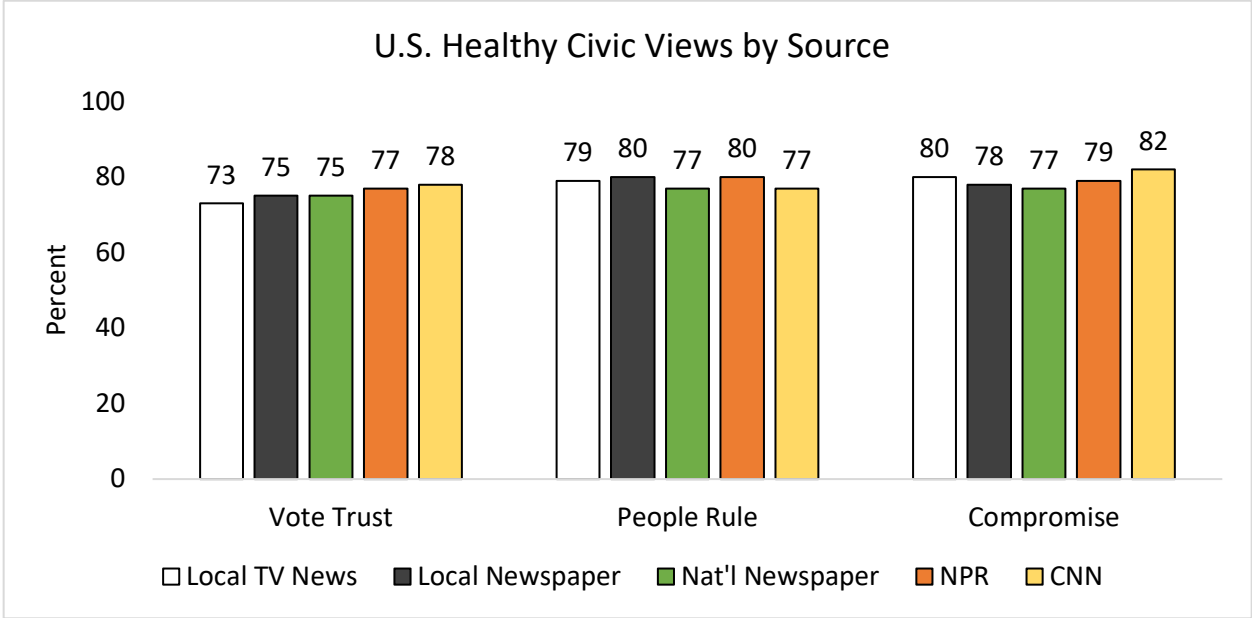


We can also break down mainstream news sources to learn which ones have audiences with the best civic scores. Is it local or national news? Print, television, or radio?

In Wisconsin, NPR's audiences generally did a little better than the rest, on average, across all three dimensions. Next best were local TV and local newspaper audiences. CNN's relatively low scores may not be surprising given the generally low quality of cable news content, but some people might be shocked to see that national newspaper readers (New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, USA Today) did worst of all, among these mainstream news sources.



In the national survey, the sources are less differentiated on our three civic metrics.



**Vote Trust (where warranted)**

Wisconsinites suffer from partisan gerrymandering that make state and federal legislative elections unrepresentative, along with recent Republican election rule changes that make it [harder for eligible voters to participate](#) and efforts to strip governing powers from Democrats when Democrats win. However, the vote counting process itself is sound in Wisconsin’s recent elections, despite unfounded claims otherwise by some Republicans.

Using the same vote trust index described above, we find substantial differences in trust across media diets. Mainstream news consumers were generally trusting, especially if they also consumed Democratic media, but less so if they consumed Republican media. People who consumed only Republican media were least trusting, as we might expect given unfounded claims about elections in those media.

Which forms of mainstream news are best for voting trust? NPR does best in Wisconsin, followed by local newspapers and local TV news. In the national survey, CNN and NPR audiences trust elections most.

**People Make Democracy Great**

Democracy is defined by rule of the people, along with equal rights for all – including equal say over government for each citizen.



Overall, eighty-one percent of Wisconsinites agree or strongly agree that “democracy works best when people are able to participate in decision making,” with similar support in both parties. But, on a 0 to 100 scale, the figure above shows sharp differences by media diets.

As before, mainstream news viewers score better on the people’s influence in politics, especially when they also consume Democratic sources. Republican sources in any combination correspond with less belief that people should influence government, though those numbers are still high on the scale. Once again, NPR and local news sources have the most civically supportive audiences in Wisconsin.

Nationwide, local newspaper readers and NPR listeners endorse the civic participatory ideal slightly more than the others.

### **Political Compromise**

Progress in politics usually requires some level of compromise, even as we recognize that some compromises sacrifice civic and democratic values too much to be worthwhile.

Overall, Wisconsinites are not ideological purists: 74% support lawmakers compromising to make progress on solving problems versus holding out on principle no matter what. For a final time, we see differences by media diets.

Mainstream news consumption is a strong indicator of support for compromise, with higher levels when coupled with Democratic media, and lower levels with any Republican media exposure. On this measure, people who consume all three types of media scored especially low. Nearly all NPR listeners supported compromise, along with 83% of local news audiences on TV and in print. National newspaper and CNN audiences come in much lower in the Wisconsin survey. However, CNN is slightly higher than the rest in the national survey.

## **Conclusions**

Citizens and civic society thrive in a healthy democratic political environment that is factual, prosocial, and grounded in values that include equal influence over government and civic equality for each citizen, even when we disagree on other things.

Parts of the media environment used by Wisconsinites and beyond fail to live up to those ideals, with consequences primarily found in users of pro-Republican media.



While no media sources are flawless regarding civic health and democracy, the responses of our survey participants indicate that mainstream news appears to provide the best basis for exposure to a diverse set of political views, relatively unbiased information about politics, the holding of healthy civic views that can serve as a foundation for a civic renewal that encourages evidenced-based reporting and conversation, civic engagement, and prosocial behavior more generally.

Local news may be the most promising route for reintegrating partisan bubble Republicans into a healthier media ecosystem, given higher levels of Republican trust at that proximity. That assigns a heavy load for local news to carry, and their content is often light on civic and political information as newsrooms continue to face significant financial constraints.

Even so, there may be few alternatives for reestablishing a common civic reality that is needed to protect and advance democracy in Wisconsin and beyond. And current local news audiences are especially oriented toward positive civic and democratic values, which may help instill those values as they aim to build new audiences.



## Additional Tables

### Media Diets & Political Talk among Wisconsin Republicans

News Diets	Political Talk				
	Only Talk to Dems	Only Talk to Ind/Don't Know	Only Talk to Reps	Talk to Dems & Reps	Minimal Talk
Minimal News	1	8	15	2	10
Trad. News Only	2	5	10	3	4
Trad. News + Rep	<1	3	10	4	3
Trad. News + Dem	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
Rep Media Only	<1	1	9	1	4
Dem Media Only	<1	0	0	0	0
Rep + Dem Only	0	0	0	0	0
Trad. News + Rep + Dem	<1	<1	2	<1	1

Cell entries indicate the percentage of Wisconsin Republicans with each combination.

### Media Diets & Political Talk among Wisconsin Democrats

News Diets	Political Talk				
	Only Talk to Dems	Only Talk to Ind/Don't Know	Only Talk to Reps	Talk to Dems & Reps	Minimal Talk
Minimal News	14	9	2	3	11
Trad. News Only	20	8	2	6	9
Trad. News + Rep	1	<1	<1	1	1
Trad. News + Dem	4	1	1	1	2
Rep Media Only	1	0	0	0	<1
Dem Media Only	<1	0	0	<1	0
Rep + Dem Only	0	0	0	0	0
Trad. News + Rep + Dem	<1	<1	<1	<1	1

Cell entries indicate the percentage of Wisconsin Republicans with each combination.

