

S Syracuse University
Newhouse School of
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News Media and American Politics

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Let's get the elephant out of the room...



**President Joe Biden
Harris**
(Syracuse Law grad, 1968)



**Vice President Kamala
Harris**
first woman & BIPOC VP

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US politics and US media – a complicated relationship

Both our political system and our media system are complex
As one might expect for a large, wealthy, heterogeneous country

328 Million population	242 Million eligible voters
60.1% White	83% live in urban areas
18.5% Hispanic / Latino	62.7% in cities
13.4% African American	
5.9% Asian/ Asian American	13.5% foreign born
1.5% Native American, PI	
2.8% multiracial	77.7% over age 18

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US political system: federal, state, & local systems

Mix of executive, legislative and judicial branches at many levels
As one might expect for a large, wealthy, heterogeneous country

Federal level:	But also each state has...
President	Governor
House of Representatives 435 Reps, 2-yr terms	State House
Senate 100 Senators, 6-yr terms VP breaks a tie	State Senate
Supreme Court (SCOTUS) 9 justices	State Supreme Court

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The US Election System is complex – a civics lesson

There is no national set of election procedures –
Each state sets its own rules, carried out by local officials

So procedures vary widely: *(and COVID affected some of these in 2020)*

- 5 states do all-mail voting (HI, WA, OR, CO, UT)
- 35 states have voter ID laws (17 req photo ID)
- 38 state allow early voting (but times vary)
- States vary in how they handle absentee ballots/voting
- States vary in ballot design, even who is on ballot (CA had six, inc. Kanye West)

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Then there is the Electoral College...

President determined by *electoral college* votes, not popular vote

Each state gets 2 EC votes, plus additional votes based on congressional representation (+3 for DC)

538 total, so need 270 to win

In 48 states, winner of state vote gets all the EC votes
2 states split theirs (ME & NE) based on vote in districts
Largest: CA (55 EC votes)
Smallest: AK, DE, MT, ND, SD, WY (3 EC votes)



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The US Election System & media: political advertising

Federal Election Commission sets some rules governing campaigning

BUT

Political advertising is *lightly* regulated – corp. have free speech rights
 Political Action Committees (PACs) may spend *unlimited sums* on own election-related speech, and do not have to disclose donors
 Consequently, we are flooded with ads... 2020 estimates (from Forbes)

\$3.5 Billion on TV ads \$1.8 Billion digital
 \$1.2 Billion Cable TV \$500 Million radio = \$7 Billion

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US political system: dominated by two political parties

They function like social identities now; very polarized

Democrats	Republicans
“Blue states”	“Red States”
West Coast, Northeast, Upper Midwest	The South, Plains, Mountain
Urban & suburban	Rural & suburban
Diverse, educated	Business elites, Evangelicals,
White	Conservative
Progressive	Pro-business, socially
Pro-unions, -environment, minority rights	conservative

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The US media system is complex, too

Most media in US are for-profit, and many owned by very large corporations

Sources of political news:

Legacy broadcast national TV news: ABC, NBC, CBS (and UNI and TEL 📺)
 Cable TV news: FoxNews, CNN, MSNBC (OAN, BBC, AJ, and others)
 Local TV news: hundreds of stations across 210 TV markets
 Public TV (PBS) and NPR: non-profit, publicly funded
 Legacy (national) newspapers: New York Times, Wall Street Journal, etc
 Smaller newspapers, news magazines: hurting financially
 News websites, and digital-only news sites, news/opinion sites

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The US media system is complex, too – beyond news

Other sources of political news include:

Social media: not just ads, but shares and links amplify messages
 Facebook - foreign actors buy ads and start fake groups
 YouTube – slickly produced “documentaries” distribute disinfo
 Twitter – bots amplify messaging

Talk radio: most leans strongly conservative
 i.e Rush Limbaugh, Alex Jones, and dozens of others

Political comedy television: leans liberal (or reality-based)
 Stephen Colbert, John Oliver, Trevor Noah

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Where Americans get their political news:

- 25% News websites or apps
- 18% Social media
- 16% Cable TV
- 16% Local TV
- 13% Network TV
- 8% Radio
- 3% Print

About one-in-five U.S. adults say they get their political news primarily through social media

% of U.S. adults who say the most common way they get political and election news is ...

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019. “Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable”

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And why that is a problem: (% with high pol knowledge)

- 45% News website or app
- 42% Radio
- 41% Print
- 35% Cable TV
- 29% Network TV
- 17% Social Media
- 10% Local TV

Those who depend on social media for political news have lower political knowledge than most other groups

% of U.S. adults who have ... according to an index of nine knowledge questions

Among those who say ... is the most common way they get political and election news	High political knowledge	Middle political knowledge	Low political knowledge
News website or app	45%	31%	23%
Radio	42%	34%	24%
Print	41%	29%	31%
Cable TV	35%	33%	35%
Network TV	27%	35%	38%
Social media	17%	27%	57%
Local TV	20%	21%	69%

NOTE: Knowledge index created from nine political knowledge questions. High political knowledge includes those who answered eight or nine questions correctly, middle knowledge includes those who answered six or seven questions correctly, and low knowledge includes those who answered five or fewer questions correctly. Answers correct as of November 2019.


Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019. “Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable”

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And all these sources vary in their reliability and partisanship

Vary in facts vs opinion, left vs right
 Many sources are of questionable reliability
 One in particular – FoxNews – stands out

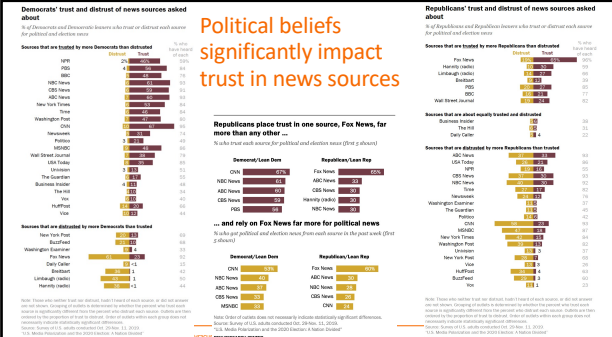


- Hyper-partisan opinion shows are very popular
- Commentators often push baseless claims or conspiracies
- Had very cozy relationship with Trump (he called & tweeted)
- **Research from PRRI** shows “Fox News Republicans” hold more extreme views than other Republicans & believe **nonsense**

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Political beliefs significantly impact trust in news sources



Democrats' trust and distrust of news sources asked about

Republicans' trust and distrust of news sources asked about

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

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

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So liberals and conservatives live in very different information environments in the US

- Liberals prefer mainstream news organizations
- Conservatives prefer FoxNews and talk radio personalities
- FoxNews is very profitable, so it has spawned imitators
- MSNBC is liberal alternative and has gained viewers



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And, of course, there are social media

Facebook argues it should not be “arbiter of truth” and so is reluctant to remove political content, especially by politicians.

Twitter and YouTube a little better, but still show deference to politicians

Their business models rely on engagement – content that keeps us on the site means more eyeballs for advertisements

But emotional and extreme political content generates more engagement, and so it has proliferated on these sites

Twitter refuses political ads, but Facebook & YouTube accept them

All three are awash in misinformation & disinformation

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Since the insurrection on January 6th...

Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Insta all removed Trump and QAnon

One study showed 73% drop in disinformation about election on Twitter

Yet... the Big Lie continues

In one **poll**, about 33% of Americans, and 65% of Republicans, think... Biden's election was illegitimate

And **similarly**, about 30% of Americans, but 44% of Republicans, plan... not to get a COVID vaccine

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Issue for discussion...

1. Does the practice of journalism have to be altered for someone like Trump?
2. Why is TV news so bad at educating the public?
3. Should social media curb disinfo and be “arbiters of truth”?
4. Will media literacy efforts help when 40% of the public disbelieves mainstream press?

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Thank you!
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