



The Associated Press-NORC
Center for Public Affairs Research

ASSESSING THE NEWS MEDIA: TRUST, COVERAGE, AND THREATS TO A FREE PRESS

Although trust in the news media remains low, the public is nevertheless worried about a variety of problems threatening a free press in the United States and around the world. Ahead of World Press Freedom Day, findings from this spring 2023 survey from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research and Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights reveal concerns about attacks on journalists, restrictions on press freedoms, and the spread of misinformation.

Overall, 44% of adults polled believe the U.S. government is doing a good job protecting the freedom of the press in this country, and 42% say the same about freedom of speech. About three-quarters of adults view the political preferences of news organization owners as having a major influence on the news media in the United States. Most Americans are also at least somewhat concerned about direct threats to the press, including about one-third who are extremely or very concerned about attacks on journalists.

Nearly all adults (93%) view the spread of misinformation to be a problem. About two-thirds of adults attribute responsibility for the spread of misinformation to U.S. politicians, social media companies, and their users. But nearly as many (58%) are holding the news media responsible as well. And when it comes to fixing the problem, 63% of adults say the news media has a great deal or quite a bit of responsibility to address the spread of misinformation.

In their daily consumption of news, a third of adults report encountering stories containing false claims from politicians (32%) and misleading headlines (31%). Nineteen percent say they encounter conspiracy theories in news stories daily.



© 2022 AP Photo/Suriya Silsaksom.

Many Americans are skeptical about the role the news media is playing in democracy these days. A majority of adults have some degree of confidence in the news media to report the news fully, accurately, and fairly; but just 16% are very confident and 45% have little to no confidence at all. Americans are more likely to see the news media as hurting democracy and increasing political division in the United States than protecting democracy and decreasing division. Many of those polled have the perception that news coverage is also impacted by outside influences, including corporations and government.

Most Americans think the news media is doing at least somewhat well when it comes to covering the issues they care about in their local community, in the United States, and around the world. However, only around a third feel that the news media do a good job on important topic areas such as military and national defense, crime, and election coverage.

The survey also finds that people value in-depth and investigative reporting but are less likely to engage with that content. A majority say news stories that report the facts of the issues or that include in-depth background information and analysis of the issues are extremely or very helpful when it comes to understanding issues important to them. But when they are trying to understand the issues they care about, people more often find themselves scanning the news headlines than engaging with in-depth or investigative reporting.

The AP-NORC Center conducted this study with funding from Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights. The survey includes 1,002 interviews with a nationally representative sample of adults living in America using the AmeriSpeak® Omnibus, a monthly multi-client survey of NORC at the University of Chicago. Interviews were conducted between March 30-April 3, 2023, via web and phone in English. The margin of sampling error is +/- 4.4 percentage points.

FEW ADULTS HAVE CONFIDENCE IN THE ACCURACY AND FAIRNESS OF REPORTING, AND MOST SEE THE NEWS MEDIA AS CONTRIBUTING TO POLITICAL DIVISION IN THE U.S.

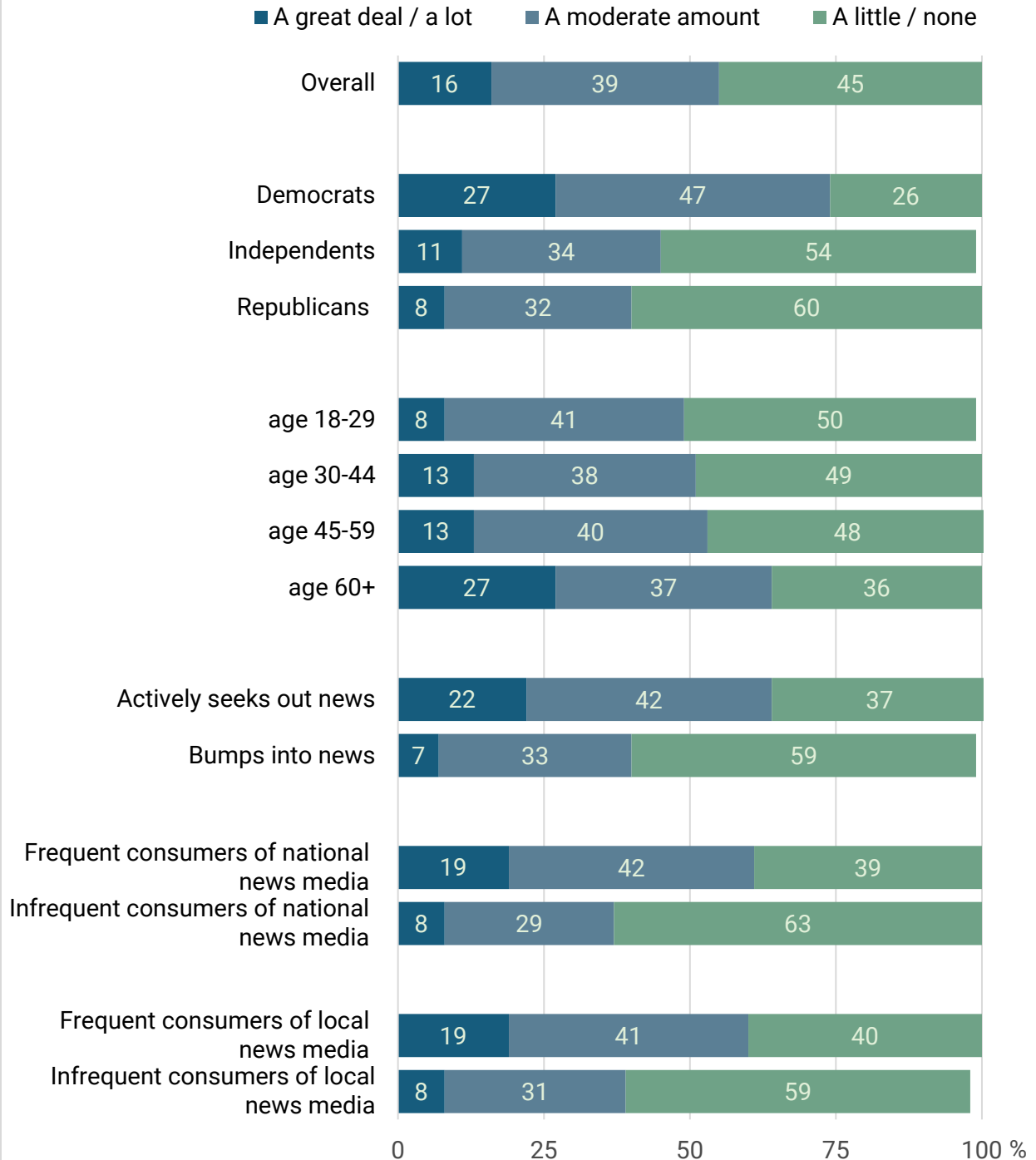
While a majority of U.S. adults are at least moderately trusting of the news media to report the news fully, accurately, and fairly, just 16% are very confident. Forty-five percent have little to no confidence at all.

Democrats are more trusting, with 27% stating that they have a great deal or a lot of trust in the news media, as opposed to 11% of independents and 8% of Republicans. Adults age 60 and up are more likely to trust the news media, whereas younger generations are more likely to express a little to no confidence in the news media to report the news fully, accurately, and fairly.

Adults who actively seek out news are more likely to trust the news media's reporting than those who tend to bump into news or hear about it from others, but still just 22% of active news consumers express a high degree of confidence. Adults who often or sometimes get their news from national or local news media are more likely to have a great deal or quite a bit of trust in the news media than those who hardly ever or never get their news from these sources (19% vs. 8%).

Democrats and active news consumers are the most likely to trust the news.

Percent of adults



Question: In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the news media when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly?

Source: RFK Human Rights/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 30-April 3, 2023, with 1,002 adults age 18 and older nationwide.

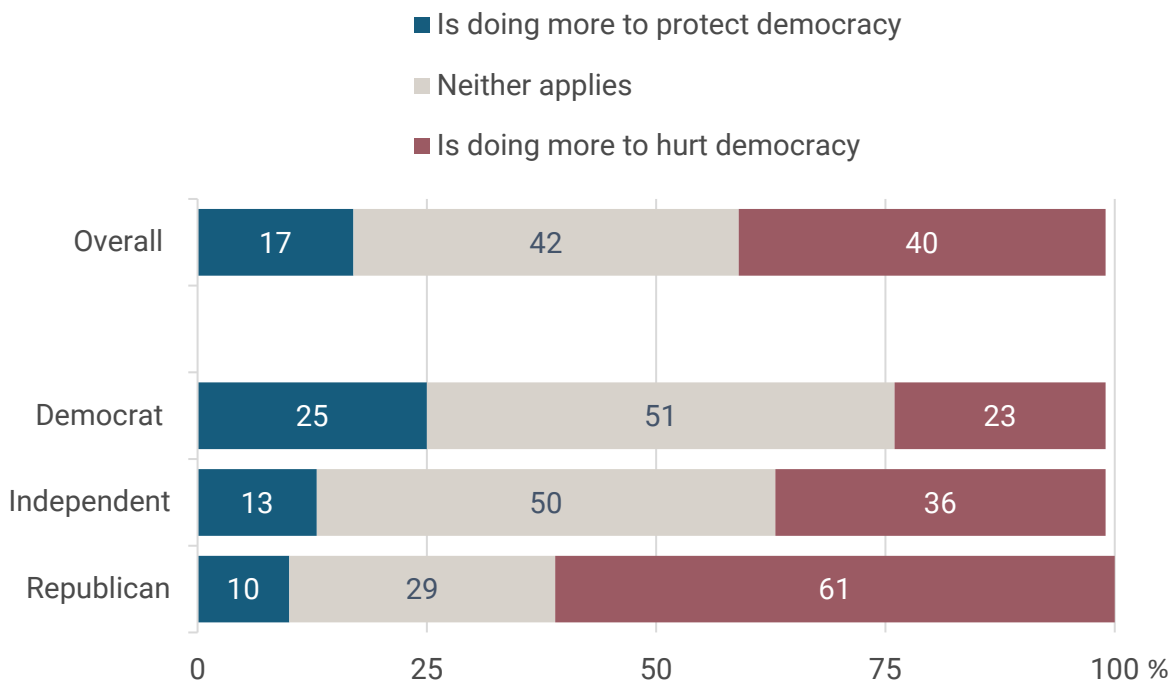


Many people are questioning the role of journalism in this country’s democracy. People are twice as likely to feel the news media are doing more to hurt democracy than help it. Only 17% feel the press does more to protect democracy, and 40% feel it does more harm to democracy.

Most Republicans (61%) believe the news media is doing more to hurt democracy than to protect it, compared to 23% of Democrats and 36% of independents. Sixty-six percent of adults with a little or no trust in the news media say the news media is doing more to hurt democracy.

A majority of Republicans believe the news media is doing more to hurt democracy.

Percent of adults



Question: Which phrase do you feel better describes the news media these days? Would you say the news media...

Source: RFK Human Rights/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 30-April 3, 2023, with 1,002 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



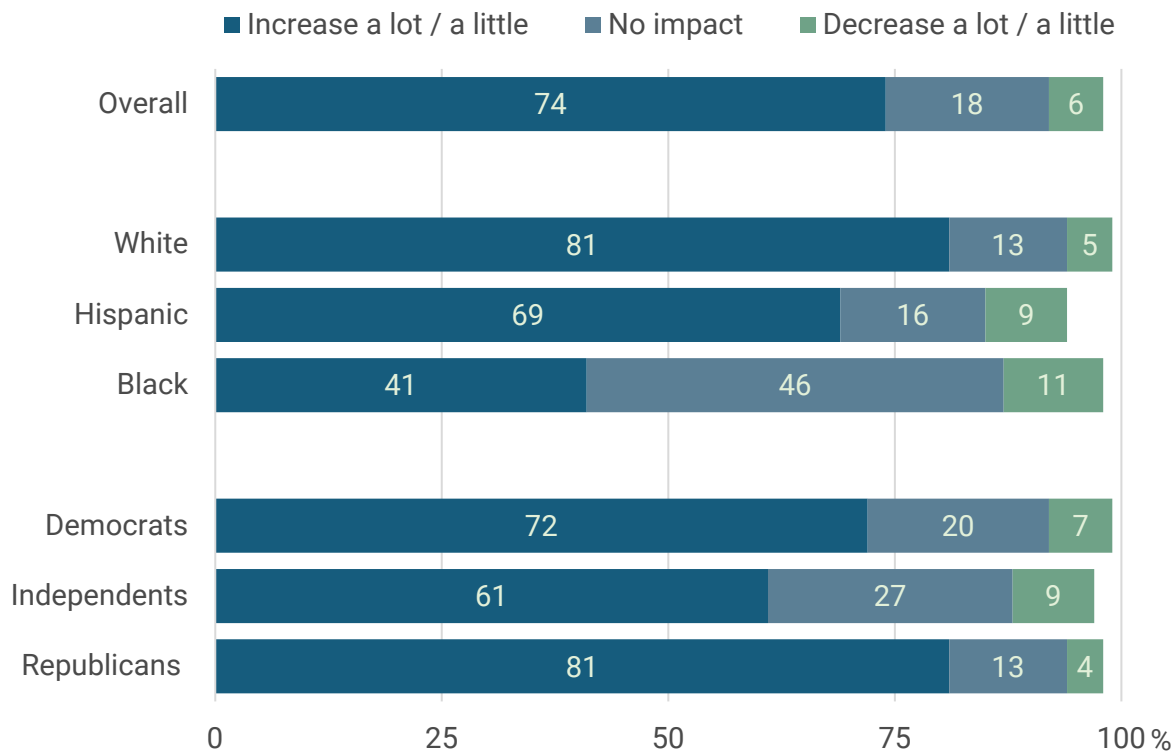
APNORC.org

One driver of that perceived harm may be the widespread perception that the news media is contributing to political divisions in the country. Three-quarters of adults view the news media as increasing political division, just 6% think the news media helps decrease divisions, and 18% don’t think it has an impact one way or the other.

Republicans are more likely to say the news media is doing more to increase political divisions, compared to Democrats and independents (81% vs. 72% vs. 61%). White adults are more likely than Black adults to say the news media has increased political divisions (81% vs. 41%).

Most Americans believe the news media is doing more to increase political divisions in the United States.

Percent of adults



Question: Is the news media doing more to increase political divisions in the United States, decrease political divisions, or does it not have any impact?

Source: RFK Human Rights/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 30-April 3, 2023, with 1,002 adults age 18 and older nationwide.

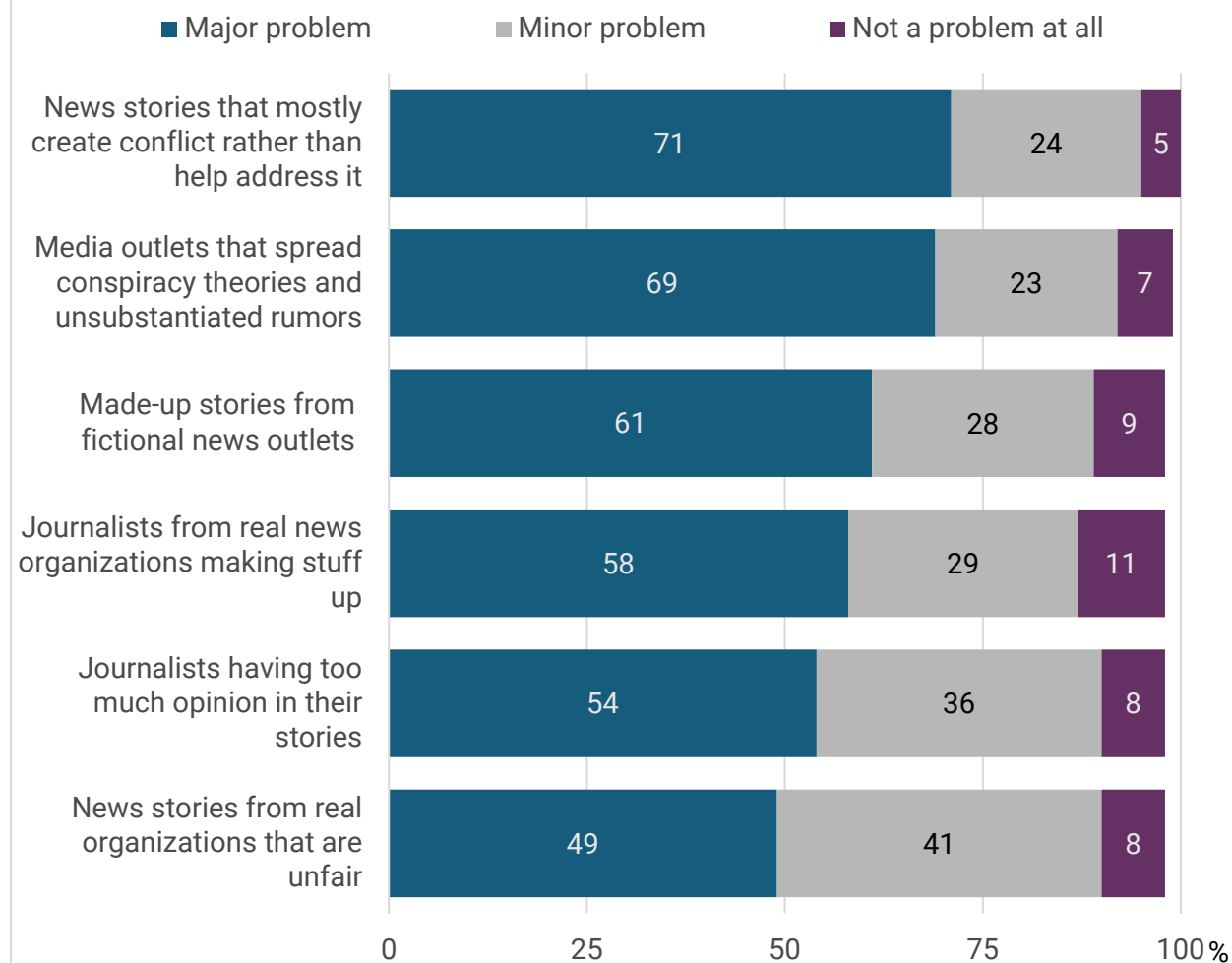


APNORC.org

The public perceives a number of major problems in the country that involve the news media. Nearly three-quarters believe it's a major problem that news stories create conflict rather than address it. The public similarly views the spread of conspiracy theories and unsubstantiated rumors by media outlets as a major problem. Over half say made up stories from fictional news outlets, journalists making up content, and journalists inserting too much personal opinion in their reporting are also significant concerns.

Most adults see major problems with the news media.

Percent of adults



Question: How big of a problem do you think each of the following is in the United States today?

Source: RFK Human Rights/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 30-April 3, 2023, with 1,002 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



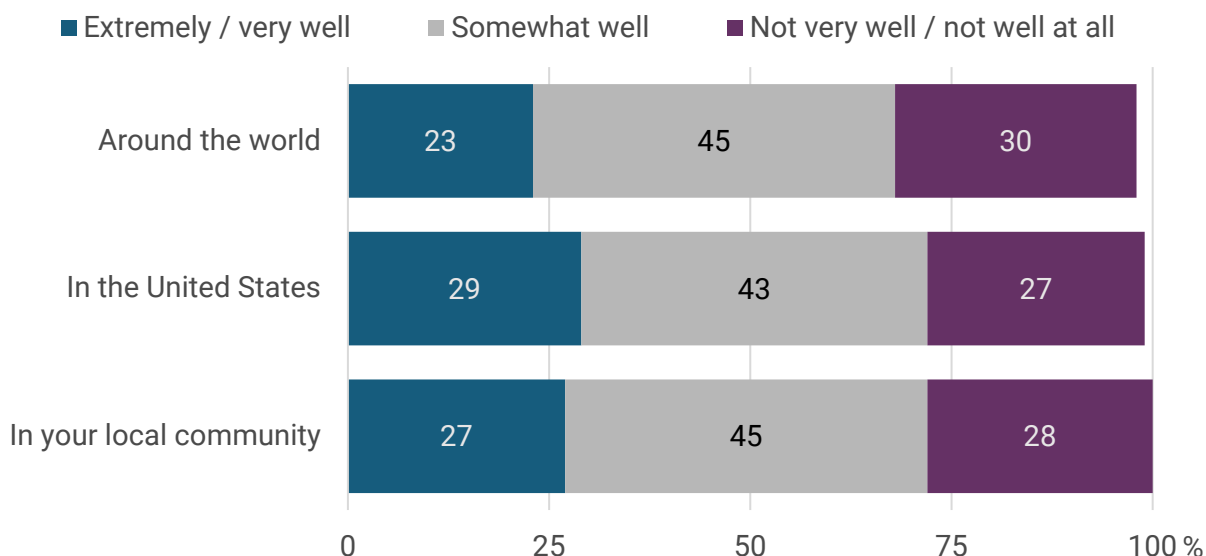
APNORC.org

DESPITE THE LACK OF CONFIDENCE OVERALL, PEOPLE GENERALLY FEEL THE PRESS IS ADEQUATELY COVERING THE ISSUES THEY CARE ABOUT.

Nonetheless, most Americans think the news media is doing at least somewhat well when it comes to covering the issues they care about in their local community, in the United States, and around the world.

Most Americans say the news media does at least somewhat well covering the news in their local community, in the United States, and around the world.

Percent of adults



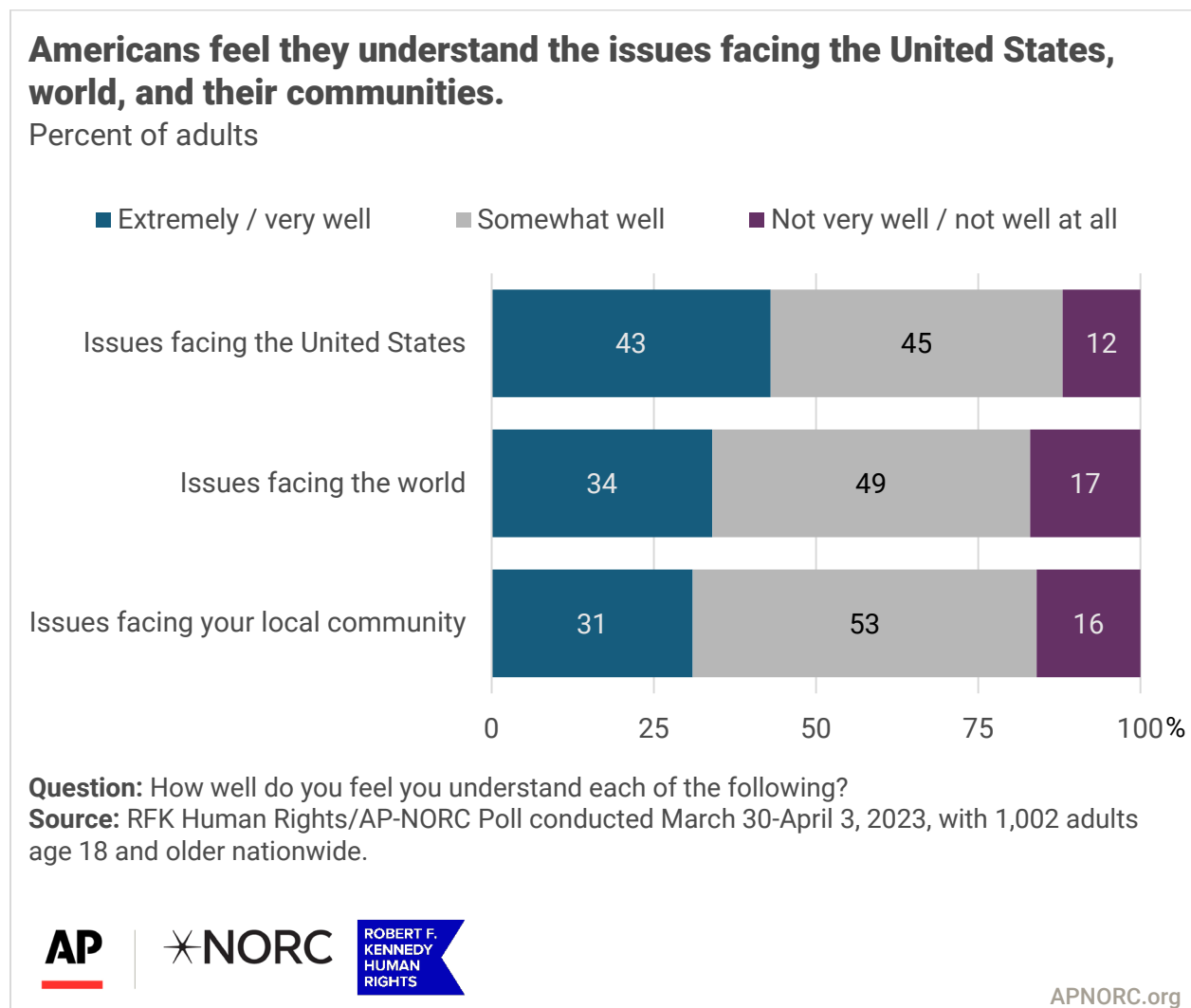
Question: How well do the news media cover the issues you care about in each of the following?
Source: RFK Human Rights/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 30-April 3, 2023, with 1,002 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



APNORC.org

Those adults who generally trust the news media are more likely to say the news media does extremely or very well covering issues in their local community (47%), compared to those who have a little or no trust in the news media (17%). Additionally, 33% of those who actively seek out news believe the news media does well covering issues in their local community, compared to 16% of adults who say they bump into the news. Those who get their news from national or local news media are more likely to say the news media does well covering issues facing their local community (31% and 33%), compared to those who hardly ever or never get their news from national or local news media outlets (13% and 16%).

Overall, most people feel well informed, with large majorities reporting they understand issues facing their local community, the country, and the world somewhat or very well. People are slightly more likely to report having a better understanding of the issues facing the country than facing the world or their local community.

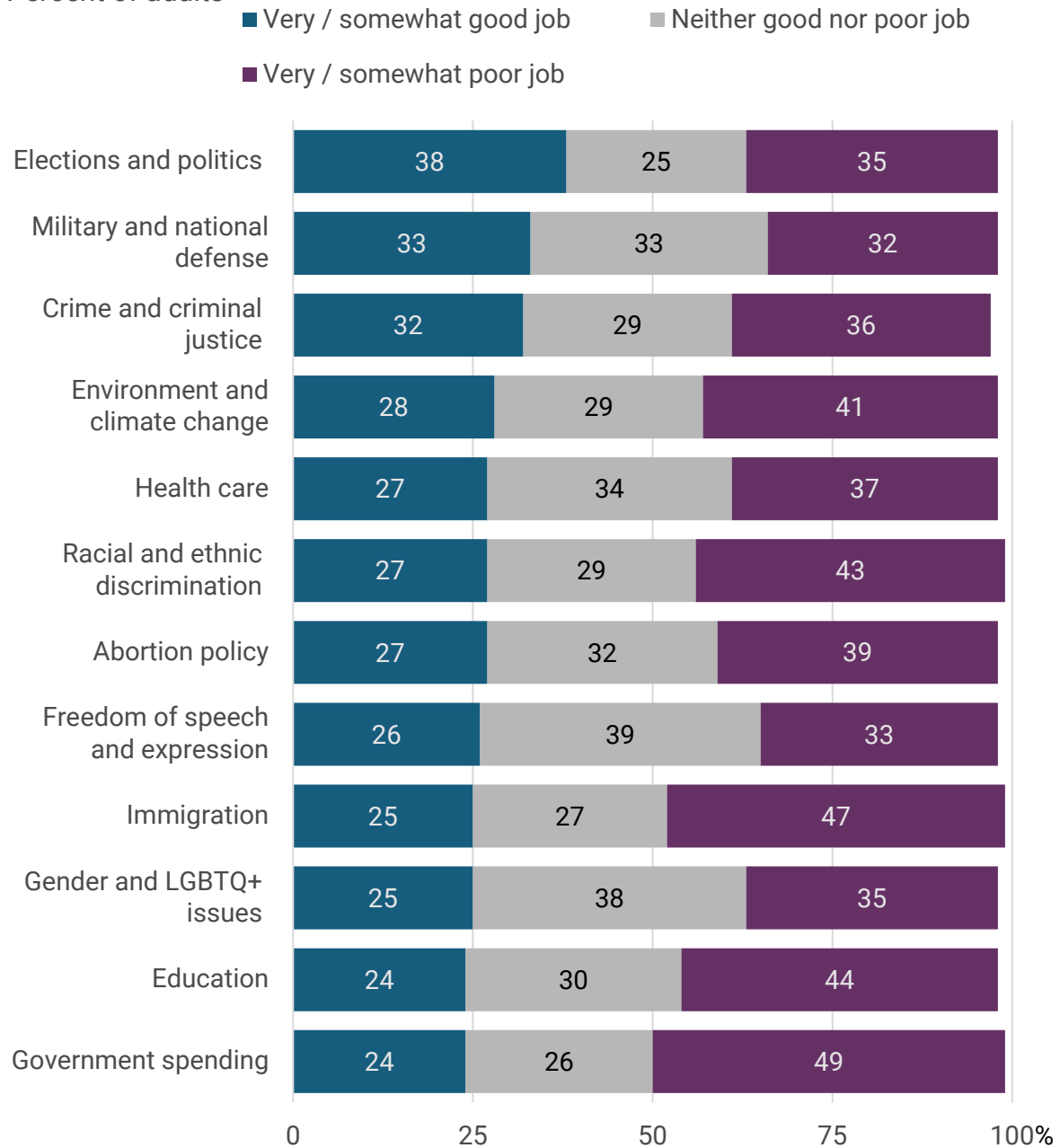


When it comes to how well the news media are covering different topics, the industry gets its best marks for coverage of election and politics, with 38% saying it does a good job on that issue. Roughly a third of adults say the news media does a good job covering the topics of military and national defense and crime and criminal justice. About a quarter say the same for topics such as freedom of speech and expression, gender and LGBTQ+ issues, abortion policy, racial and ethnic discrimination, immigration, government spending, environment and climate change, health care, and education. Nearly half say the news media does a poor job covering the topics of immigration and government spending.

Democrats tend to be more favorable in their assessments for most issues, as are those people who express high levels of trust in the news media.

The news media receives low marks when it comes to covering important topics in the United States.

Percent of adults



Question: Do you think the news media does a good job, a poor job, or neither a good nor poor job covering each of the following topics in the United States?

Source: RFK Human Rights/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 30-April 3, 2023, with 1,002 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



APNORC.org

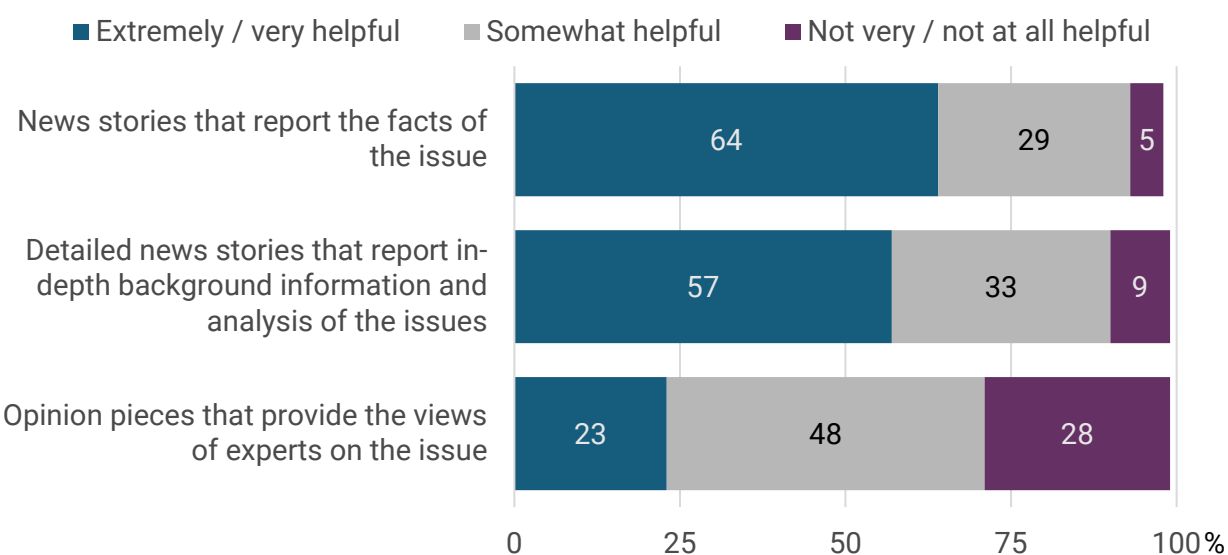
PEOPLE VALUE IN-DEPTH AND INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING, BUT ARE LESS LIKELY TO ENGAGE WITH THAT CONTENT.

People report that in-depth journalism and facts are especially important for understanding issues—more so than opinion pieces. Yet, people are not engaging with that content as often as they do with headlines or standard news coverage.

A majority of Americans find news stories that report the facts of the issues or that share in-depth background information extremely or very helpful when it comes to understanding issues important to them. Just a quarter say the same about opinion pieces that provide the views of experts.

Most Americans find news stories that report facts as well as a detailed analysis helpful when trying to understand current events.

Percent of adults



Question: When it comes to understanding the issues you care about, how helpful is each of the following types of journalism?

Source: RFK Human Rights/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 30-April 3, 2023, with 1,002 adults age 18 and older nationwide.

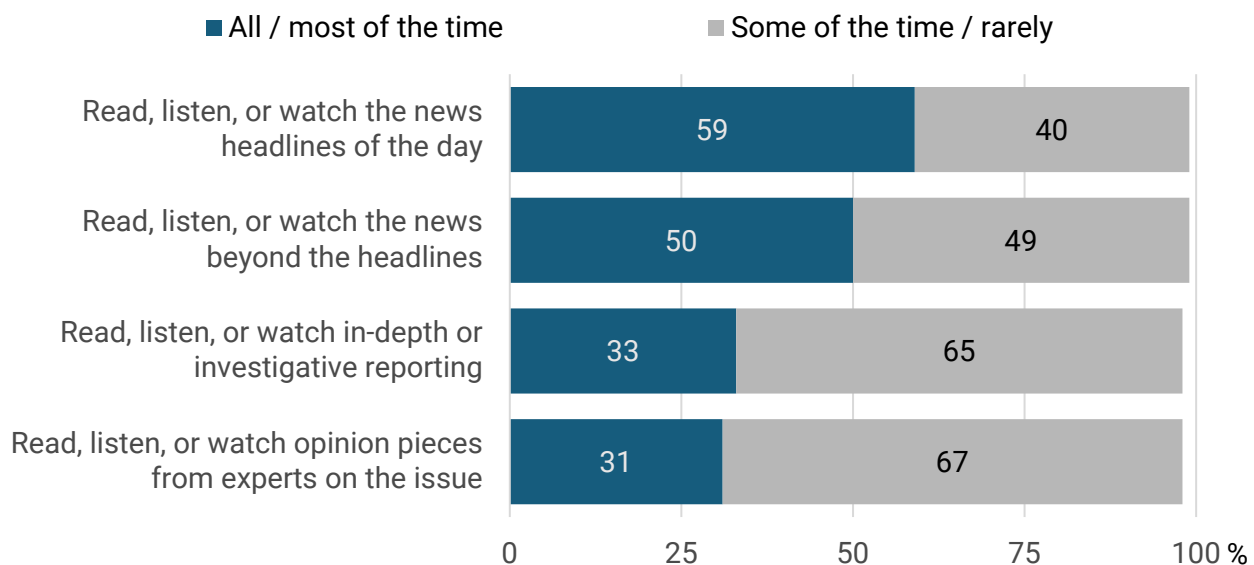


APNORC.org

But when they are trying to understand the issues they care about, people aren't as likely to engage with that in-depth or investigative coverage. People are more likely to read, listen, or watch the news headlines or engage beyond the headlines most or all the time when they are trying to understand an issue than they are to turn to in-depth or investigative reporting.

Most Americans read, listen, or watch the news headlines of the day most of the time.

Percent of adults



Question: When trying to understand the issues you care about, how often do you do each of the following?

Source: RFK Human Rights/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 30-April 3, 2023, with 1,002 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



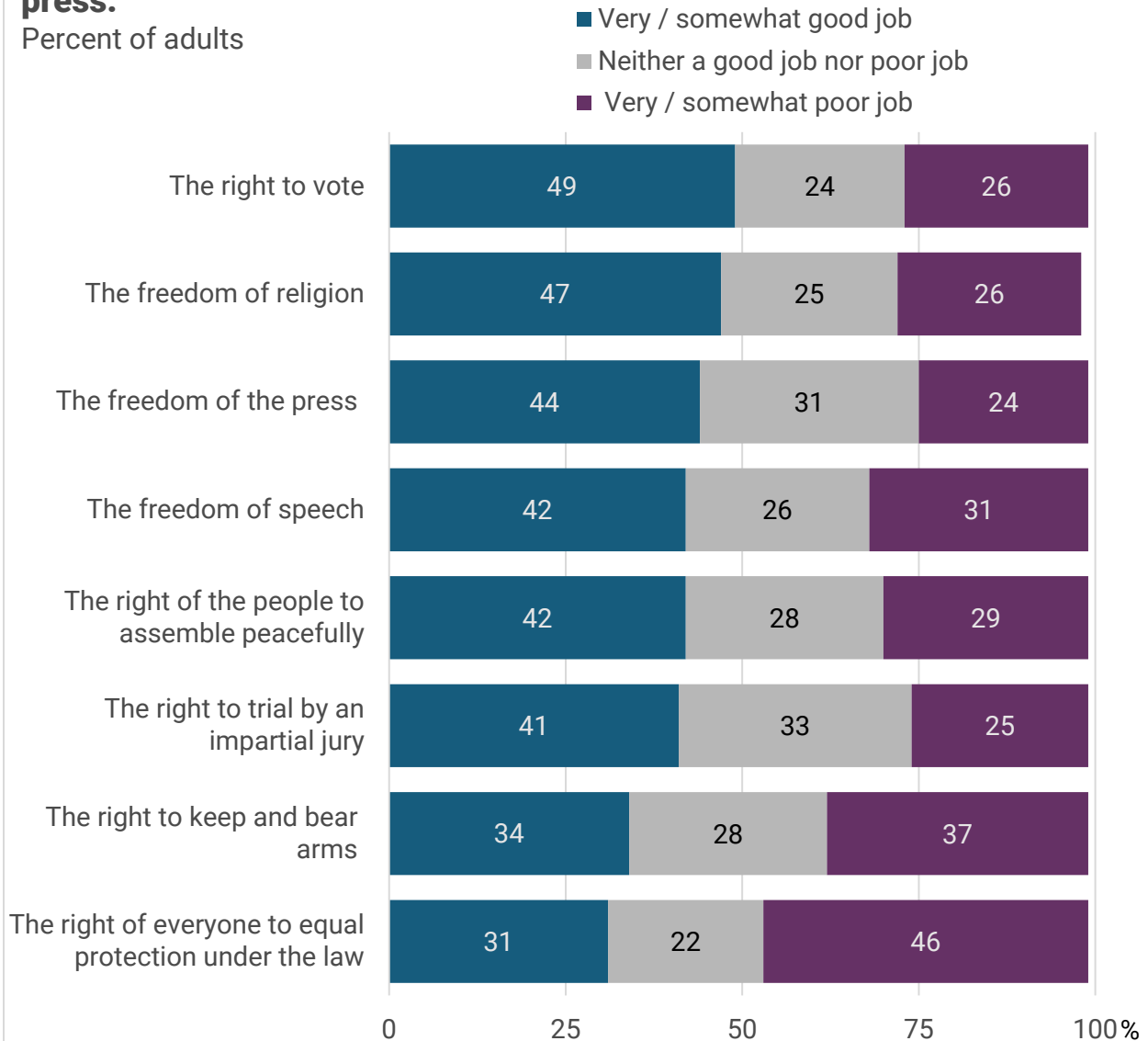
APNORC.org

THE PUBLIC HOLDS A NUMBER OF CONCERNS ABOUT THREATS TO A FREE PRESS.

Forty-four percent of Americans believe the U.S. government is doing a good job protecting the freedom of the press, and 42% say the same about freedom of speech—similar to views for other rights and freedoms.

Nearly half of adults believe the U.S. government is doing a good job protecting the right to vote, freedom of religion, and freedom of the press.

Percent of adults



Question: The following are some examples of rights and freedoms listed in the Bill of Rights or that are protected under various American laws and court rulings. For each one, please select if you think the U.S. government is doing a good job, poor job, or neither a good nor poor job of protecting that particular right or freedom.

Source: RFK Human Rights/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 30-April 3, 2023, with 1,002 adults age 18 and older nationwide.

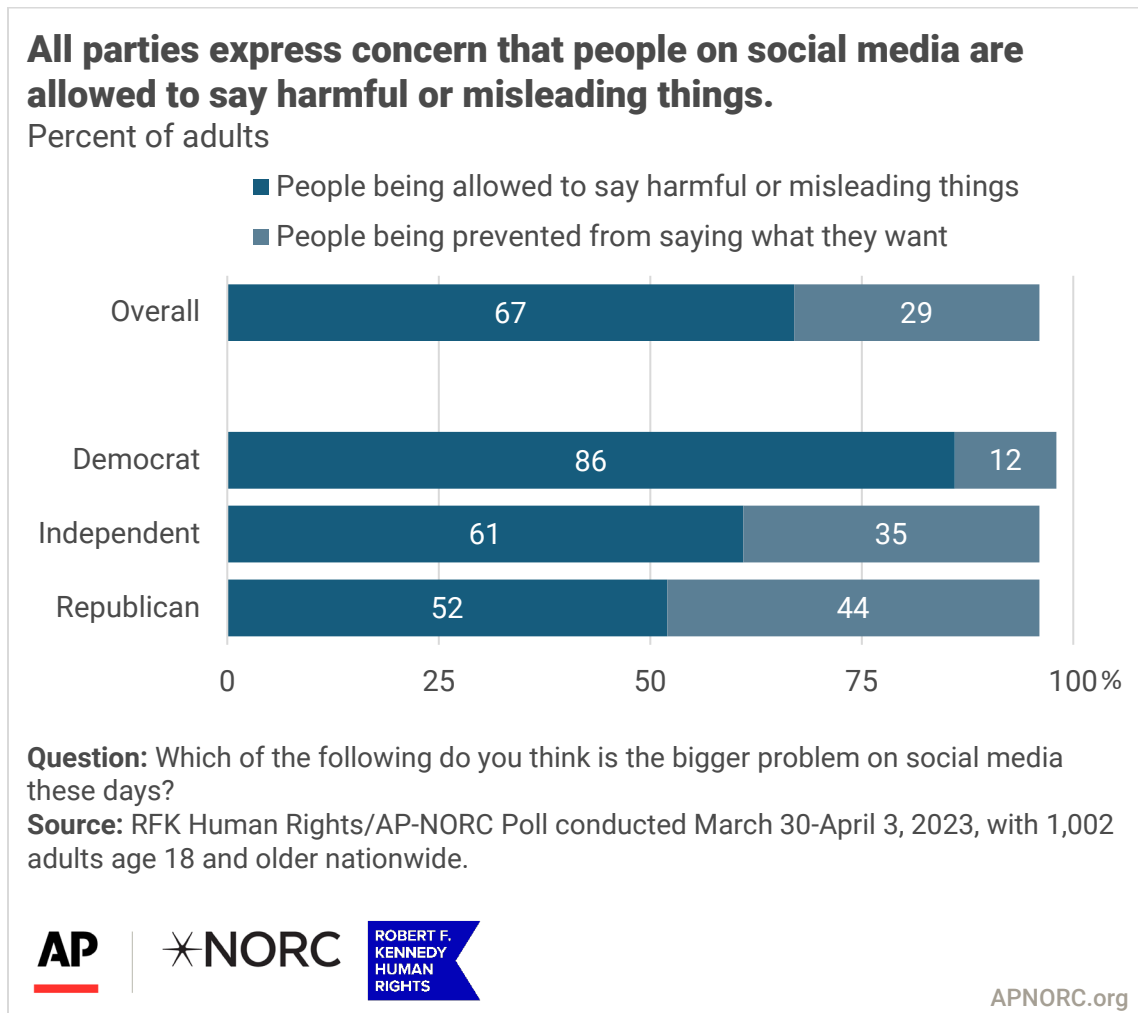


APNORC.org

Fifty-five percent of Democrats say the U.S. government is doing a good job protecting the freedom of the press, while only 41% of Republicans and 29% of independents say the same. Those who have a great deal or a lot of trust in the news media are more likely to say the U.S. government is doing a good job protecting the freedom of the press, compared to those who have a little or no trust in the news media's reporting (71% vs. 31%).

In terms of free speech and the impact of social media, 67% of adults feel that being allowed to say harmful or misleading things on social media is a bigger problem than people being prevented from saying what they want.

Eighty-six percent of Democrats say people being allowed to say harmful or misleading things on social media is a bigger problem than people being prevented from saying what they want, compared to 52% of Republicans.

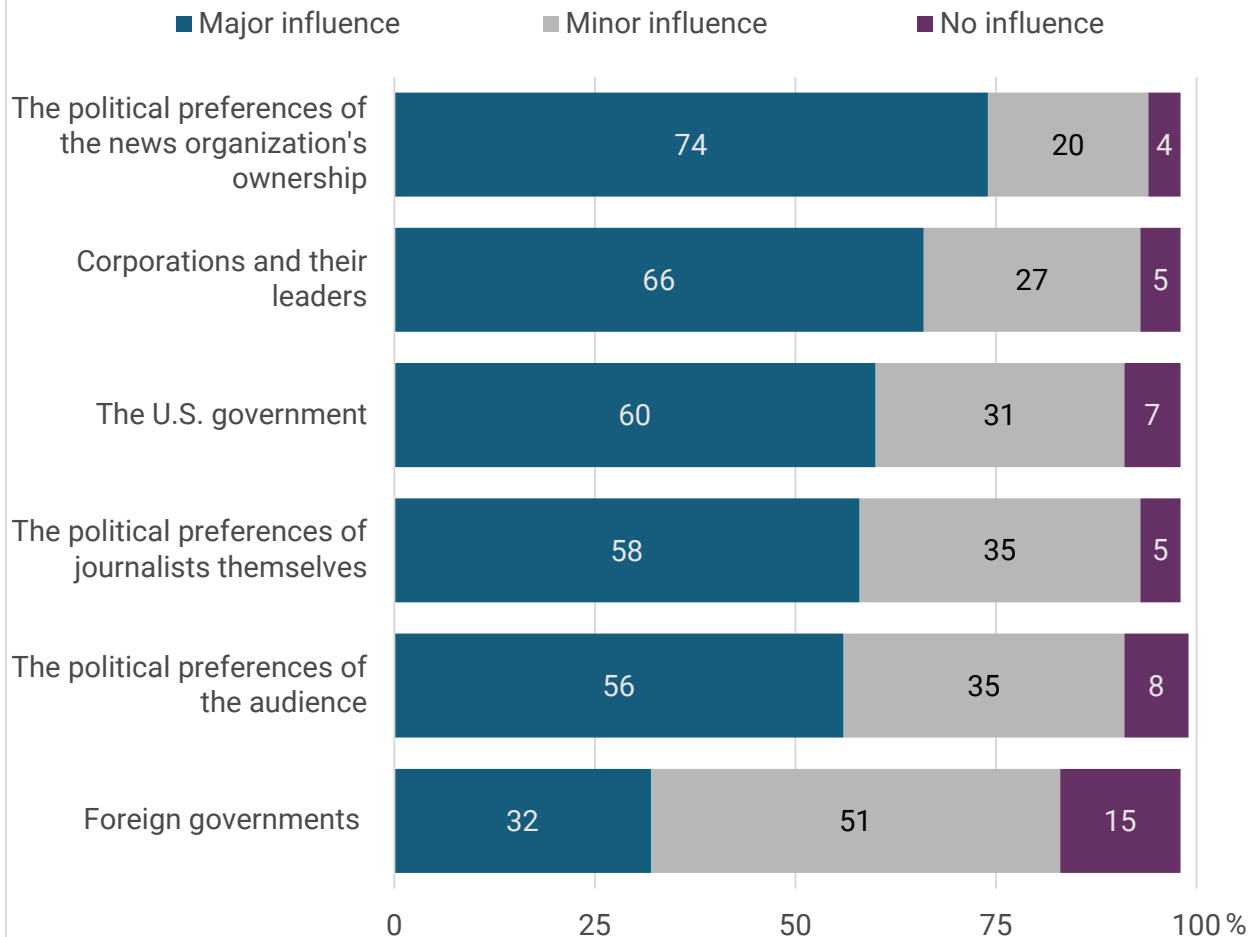


The public is concerned about a number of different threats facing a free press, including the influence of different stakeholders, attacks on journalists, and restrictions on press freedoms.

Three-quarters of respondents feel that the political preferences of news organization owners are a major influence on the news media in the United States. And majorities also believe that the news media is greatly influenced by the U.S. government, corporations and their leaders, and the political preferences of the audience and of the journalists themselves. Fewer perceive a major influence of foreign governments on news media.

Most adults believe the news media is influenced by a multitude of players.

Percent of adults



Question: How much of an influence do each of the following have on the news media in the United States?

Source: RFK Human Rights/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 30-April 3, 2023, with 1,002 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



APNORC.org

Seventy percent of Republicans say the U.S. government has a major influence on the news media, compared to 61% of independents and 49% of Democrats. Those who say they have a little or no trust in the news media are also more likely to say the U.S. government is a major influence on the news media, compared to those who have a great deal or a lot of trust in the news media (71% vs. 39%).

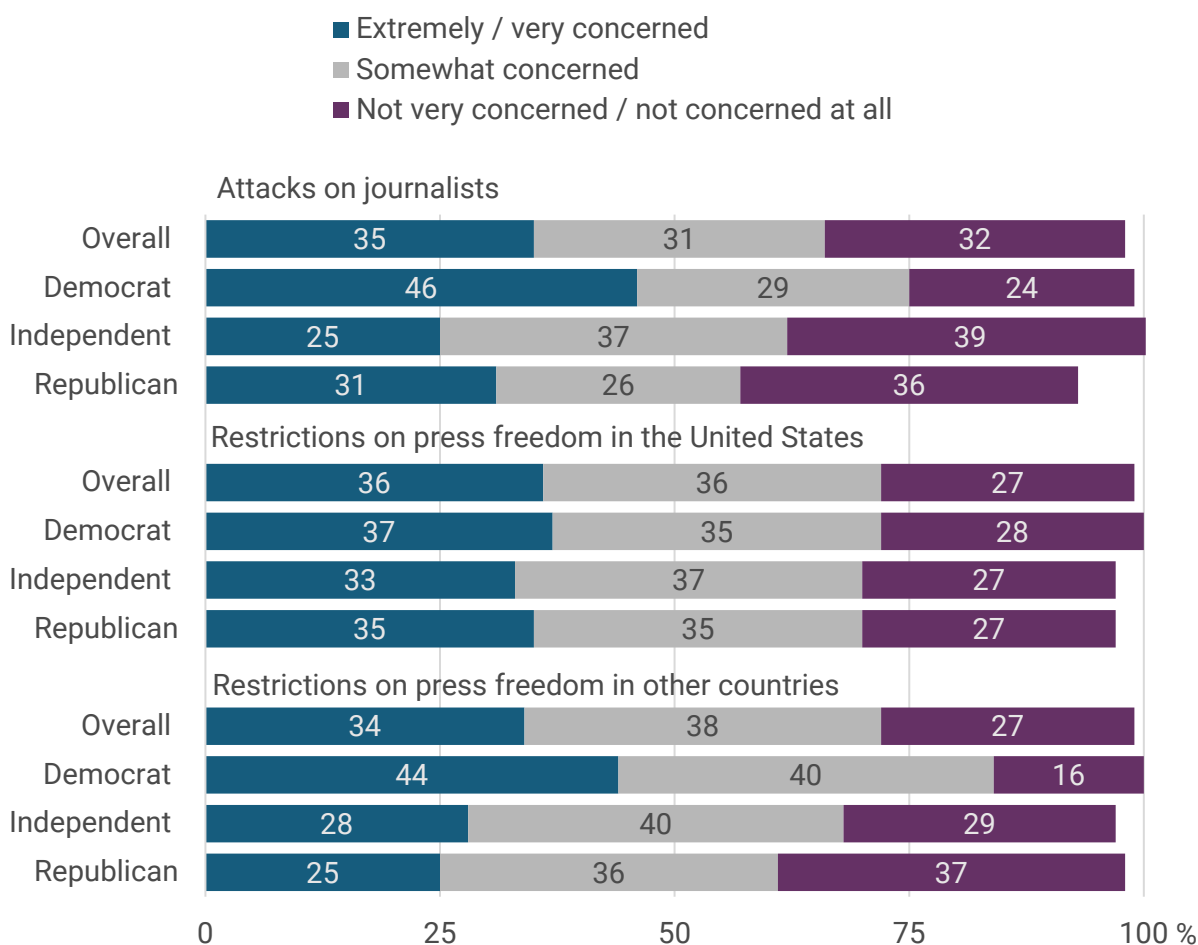
Republicans are more likely to say the political preferences of journalists themselves have a major influence on the news media (67%), compared to 59% of independents and 48% of Democrats.

Most Americans are at least somewhat concerned about a variety of direct threats to the free press, including nearly one-third who are extremely or very concerned about attacks on journalists¹ and restrictions on press freedoms in the United States and abroad.

Compared to those who bump into news, those who actively seek out news are more likely to be extremely or very concerned about attacks on journalists, as well as restrictions on press freedoms in the U.S. and in other countries. Democrats are more likely than Republicans to be concerned about attacks on journalists and restrictions on press freedoms in other countries, but Republicans and Democrats express similar levels of concern about restrictions on press freedoms in the United States.

Democrats, Independents, and Republicans hold similar levels of concern about restrictions on press freedom in the United States.

Percent of adults



Question: How concerned are you about each of the following?

Source: RFK Human Rights/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 30-April 3, 2023, with 1,002 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



APNORC.org

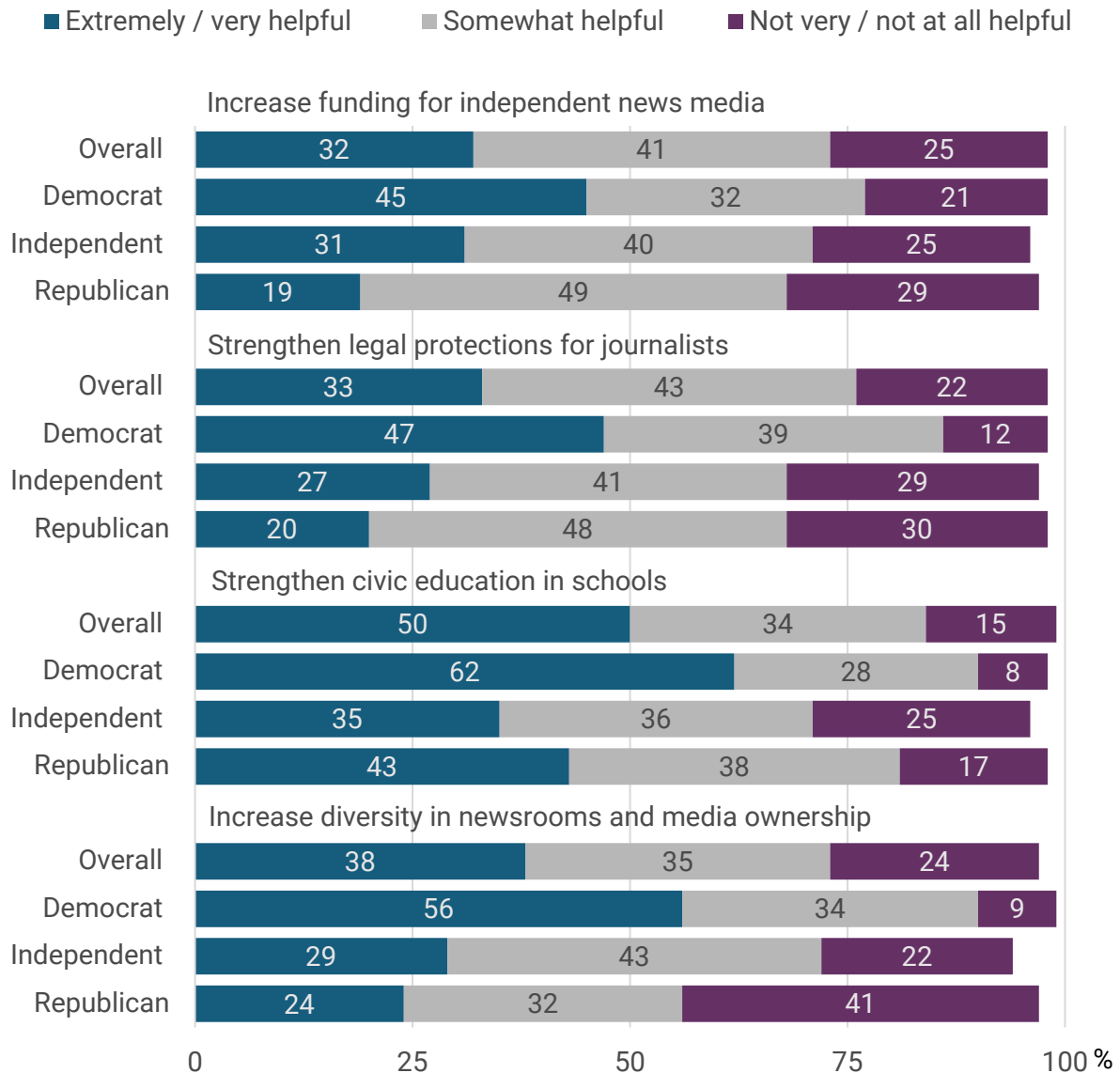
¹ The RFK Human Rights/AP-NORC Poll was conducted just prior to the arrest of the WSJ reporter Evan Gershkovich in Russia.

When it comes to approaches for strengthening the news media in the United States, half of the public believes it would be extremely or very helpful to strengthen civic education in schools. Thirty-eight percent feel it would be extremely or very helpful to increase the diversity in newsrooms and media ownership. Nearly a third say it would be extremely helpful to increase funding for independent news media and strengthen legal protections for journalists.

Democrats are more likely than Republicans and independents to see potential benefits from all of these approaches.

Half of Americans say strengthening civic education in schools would strengthen the news media.

Percent of adults



Question: How helpful would each of the following be for strengthening the news media in the United States?

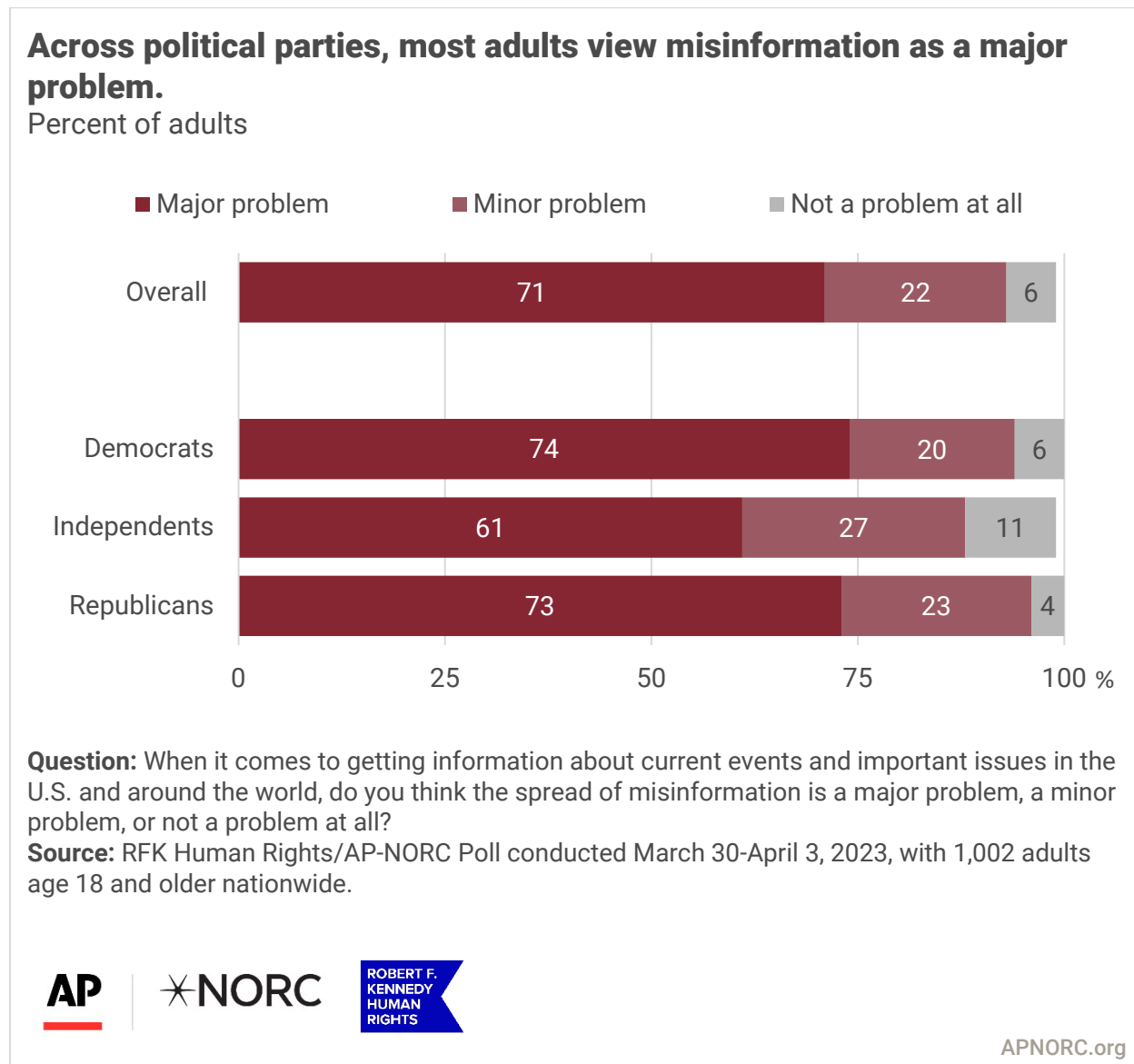
Source: RFK Human Rights/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 30-April 3, 2023, with 1,002 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



APNORC.org

NEARLY ALL AMERICANS CONSIDER THE SPREAD OF MISINFORMATION ANOTHER THREAT, BUT MANY ALSO PLACE SOME OF THE BLAME ON THE NEWS MEDIA.

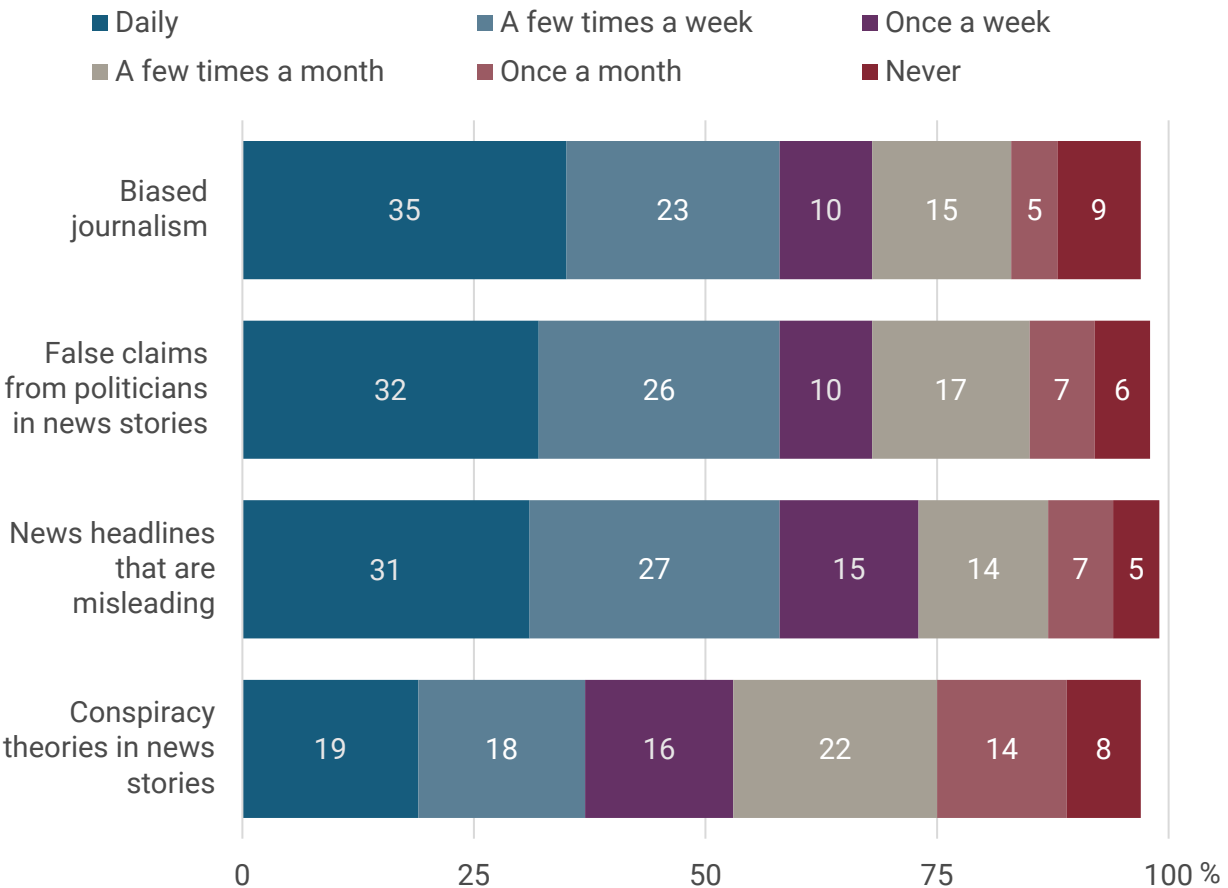
Ninety-three percent of U.S. adults say the spread of misinformation is a major or minor problem. Republicans and Democrats similarly view misinformation as a major problem.



Nearly a third of adults say they encounter false claims from politicians in news stories (32%), misleading news headlines (31%), and biased journalism (35%) daily. Nineteen percent say they encounter conspiracy theories in news stories daily.

Nearly a third of adults encounter biased journalism, misleading news headlines and false claims from politicians in news stories on a daily basis.

Percent of adults



Question: About how often do you encounter the following?

Source: RFK Human Rights/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 30-April 3, 2023, with 1,002 adults age 18 and older nationwide.

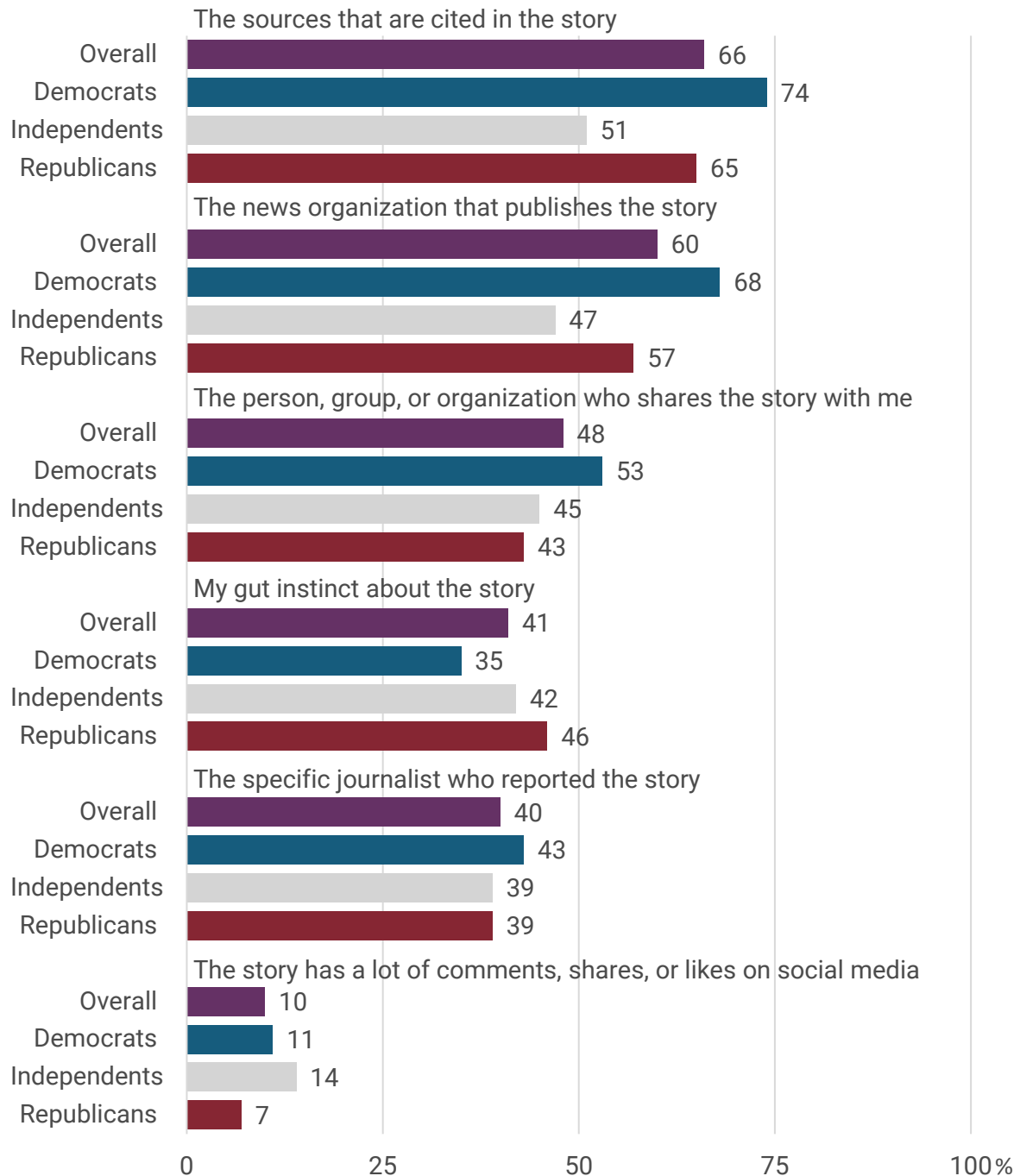


APNORC.org

The news organization publishing the story and the sources they cite in it are the two most important factors people report using to decide whether a news story is trustworthy. Most say it is not very or not at all important if the story has a lot of shares, comments, or likes on social media.

Many Americans find the sources cited in a news story important when deciding if a news story is trustworthy.

Percent of adults who say it is extremely / very important



Question: When you read, watch, or listen to a news story, how important is each of the following in deciding whether it is trustworthy?

Source: RFK Human Rights/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 30-April 3, 2023, with 1,002 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



Both Democrats and Republicans place a comparable amount of importance to the sources cited in the story; the particular journalist responsible for reporting the story; and the number of likes, shares, and comments a story receives on social media. Democrats prioritize the credibility of the news organization and the individuals who share a story with them compared to Republicans, while Republicans rely more heavily on their gut instincts than Democrats do.

Sixty-five percent of Americans expect a news story they see on social media to mostly be inaccurate, and just 31% expect it to be mostly accurate. However, those who often get their news from social media tend to expect stories they see on social media to be mostly accurate (38%), compared to those who hardly ever or never get their news from social media (18%). Those who have low levels of trust in the news media are more likely to say they expect the news on social media to be mostly inaccurate (81%), compared to those who do trust the news (51%).

Nearly two-thirds of adults attribute a great deal or quite a bit of responsibility for the spread of misinformation to U.S. politicians (64%), social media companies (65%), and users (65%). Fifty-eight percent place responsibility on the news media. Forty-eight percent believe the U.S. government bears a great deal or quite a bit of responsibility, while 38% believe foreign governments share the same level of responsibility.

Those with low levels of trust in the news media are more likely to blame the news media for the spread of misinformation, compared to those who express more trust in the news media (73% vs. 44%).

Over half of Republicans (55%) and independents (51%) say the U.S. government has a great deal or quite a bit of responsibility for the spread of misinformation about current events, compared to 40% of Democrats.

When it comes to fixing the problem, 63% of adults say the news media has a great deal or quite a bit of responsibility to address the spread of misinformation. But nearly as many also believe that U.S. politicians (61%) and the U.S. government (52%)—as well as social media companies (59%) and users (57%)—are also responsible for addressing the spread of misinformation. A third say the same about foreign governments.

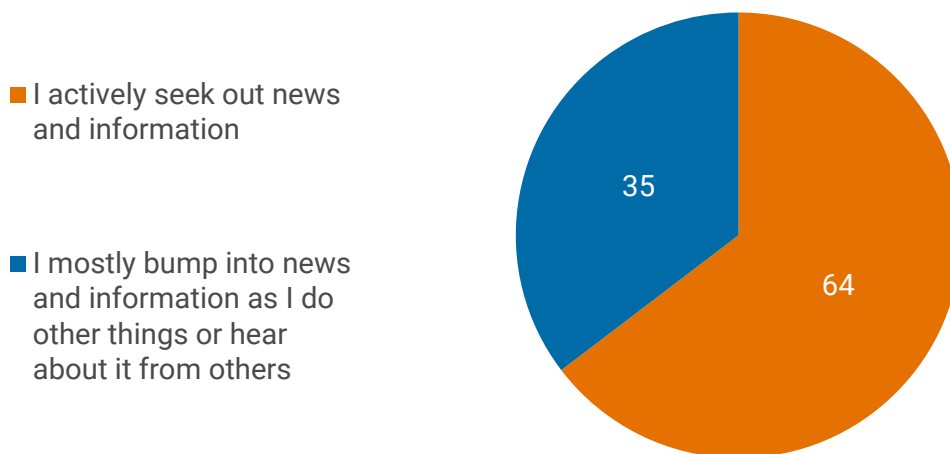
Democrats and Republicans have similar opinions on who is responsible for addressing the spread of misinformation.

MOST AMERICANS ARE SEEKING OUT NEWS FROM LOCAL, NATIONAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA SOURCES

A majority of adults say they actively seek out news and information, as opposed to bumping into news and information or hearing about it from others.

Most adults actively seek out news and information.

Percent of adults



Question: Choose the statement that best describes you, even if it is not exactly right. In general, ...
Source: RFK Human Rights/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 30-April 3, 2023, with 1,002 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



APNORC.org

The public gets their news from a variety of sources. Three quarters of adults say they get their news and information from the national news media or local news media at least sometimes. Sixty-five percent say the same for social media.

About half of adults say they most often rely on a local TV station, its website app, or its news alerts. National TV networks and their apps or news alerts, and social media are also common paths to the news. Nearly a quarter of respondents say they use a search engine, an online aggregator, a local newspaper, or a local radio station. Fewer than a fifth use a national or international newspaper, podcasts, or blogs.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

This study, funded by Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, was conducted by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. Staff from NORC at the University of Chicago, The Associated Press, and Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights collaborated on all aspects of the study.

Data were collected using the AmeriSpeak Omnibus®, a monthly multi-client survey using NORC's probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. The survey was part of a larger study that included questions about other topics not included in this report. During the initial recruitment phase of the panel, randomly selected U.S. households were sampled with a known, non-zero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame and then contacted by U.S. mail, email, telephone, and field interviewers (face-to-face). The panel provides sample coverage of approximately 97% of the U.S. household population. Those excluded from the sample include people with P.O. Box only addresses, some addresses not listed in the USPS Delivery Sequence File, and some newly constructed dwellings.

Interviews for this survey were conducted between March 30 and April 3, 2023, with adults aged 18 and over representing the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Panel members were randomly drawn from AmeriSpeak, and 1,002 completed the survey—944 via the web and 58 by telephone. Panel members were invited by email or phone from a NORC telephone interviewer. Interviews were conducted in English. Respondents were offered a small monetary incentive for completing the survey. The final stage completion rate is 14.5%, the weighted household panel response rate is 20.6%, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 79.9%, for a cumulative response rate of 2.4%. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 4.4 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, including the design effect. The margin of sampling error may be higher for subgroups.

Sampling error is only one of many potential sources of error, and there may be other unmeasured error in this or any other survey.

Quality assurance checks were conducted to ensure data quality. In total, 54 interviews were removed for nonresponse to at least 50% of the questions, for completing the survey in less than one-third the median interview time for the full sample, or for straight-lining all grid questions. These interviews were excluded from the data file prior to weighting.

Once the sample has been selected and fielded, and all the study data have been collected and made final, a poststratification process is used to adjust for any survey nonresponse as well as any noncoverage or under- and oversampling resulting from the study-specific sample design.

Poststratification variables included age, gender, census division, race/ethnicity, and education. Weighting variables were obtained from the 2022 Current Population Survey. The weighted data reflect the U.S. population of adults aged 18 and over.

Complete questions and results are available at: apnorc.org.

Additional information on the AmeriSpeak Panel methodology is available at: <https://amerispeak.norc.org/about-amerispeak/Pages/Panel-Design.aspx>.

For more information, email info@apnorc.org.

CONTRIBUTING RESEARCHERS

From NORC at the University of Chicago

Linda Khoury
Haley Broughton
Dan Malato
Jennifer Benz

From The Associated Press

Emily Swanson
Hannah Fingerhut

ABOUT ROBERT F. KENNEDY HUMAN RIGHTS

Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights advocates for human rights issues and pursues strategic litigation to hold governments accountable at home and around the world. We foster a social good approach to business, celebrate agents of change, and to ensure change that lasts, we educate millions of students about human rights, training the next generation of leaders. <https://rfkhumanrights.org>

ABOUT THE ASSOCIATED PRESS-NORC CENTER FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS RESEARCH

The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research taps into the power of social science research and the highest-quality journalism to bring key information to people across the nation and throughout the world.

- The Associated Press (AP) is an independent global news organization dedicated to factual reporting. Founded in 1846, AP today remains the most trusted source of fast, accurate, unbiased news in all formats and the essential provider of the technology and services vital to the news business. More than half the world's population sees AP journalism every day. www.ap.org
- NORC at the University of Chicago is one of the oldest objective and non-partisan research institutions in the world. www.norc.org

The two organizations have established The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research to conduct, analyze, and distribute social science research in the public interest on newsworthy topics, and to use the power of journalism to tell the stories that research reveals.

The founding principles of The AP-NORC Center include a mandate to carefully preserve and protect the scientific integrity and objectivity of NORC and the journalistic independence of AP. All work conducted by the Center conforms to the highest levels of scientific integrity to prevent any real or perceived bias in the research. All of the work of the Center is subject to review by its advisory committee to help ensure it meets these standards. The Center will publicize the results of all studies and make all datasets and study documentation available to scholars and the public.

Learn more at www.apnorc.org