

# **Partisan Trust in Social Media: Who Trusts the News on Social Media and Who Does Not?**

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## **Abstract**

*Social Media has changed the way Americans and people around the world receive their news. This advancement in media has political scientists questioning who trusts the information they read on social media sites. The PEW Research Center provides excellent data from a public opinion survey they conducted in 2019. My analysis of the data found that found that the older generations (50 years and older) are more worry of the news they receive on social media. More specifically, the older Republicans have less trust than the other demographics. With President Trump's Twitter account being permanently banned from the site in January of 2021, the trust of all Republicans has likely gone down further. My analysis also found that it is the younger Democrats that are trusting the news on social media the most.*

## **Introduction**

The advancements in social media have changed the way the world receives its news. The use of Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media sites has exploded in the past decade, with 2.5 billion monthly users on Facebook alone. One may ask how this is relevant to the world of politics. The use of social media in politics is important because it has expanded the way politicians extend their information and message to voters. In the heat of COVID-19, we saw far less traditional means of campaigning like door knocking, parades, and rallies. Politicians turned to social media to get their word out to voters. People no longer have to buy the daily newspaper or wait for the 6 o'clock news to come on to receive their news. The news is in the palm of their hand anywhere they go, any time of the day—expanding the realm of news consumption.

The old sarcastic statement, “I read it on the internet so it must be true,” has people questioning the validity and truthfulness of the news they receive on social media, along with why they are seeing certain news on their feed. In this review, I will discuss the data information

from the Pew Research Center on a study conducted in 2019, along with other scholarly journals and articles.

## **Literature Review**

The use of social media to receive news is more common than ever. People of all ages use social media but is most prevalent in ages 18 to 49. About half of US adults receive their news via social media—with Facebook leading the pack (Pew Research Center, 2019). As technology and society advances, so will the way the world receives their news—along with the growing concern over the validity and truthfulness behind the news they are reading.

One of the major problems of distrust and bias begins with the news consumers themselves. It is human nature to only listen to what we want to hear, especially when it comes to politics and the news involving it. It becomes rather easy for social media users to lean towards news sources that tend to favor their viewpoint. This can create an echo chamber. This is when a social media user tends to only seek out news that coincides with their viewpoints. This is not always the fault of the user. Social media sites have algorithms that filter the information that a user sees on their feed based on different searches (Dubois and Blank 2018). This is why you might see an advertisement or recommendation on Facebook for something you searched for on Google earlier that day. Therefore, it is important for users to follow and read a variety of different sources, even if they do not align with their political beliefs. Hearing the opposing argument's side is a very important part of the American democratic process. Civil debate should be encouraged to avoid echo chambers.

Social media is an easy way for those who remain quiet in public to let their voice be heard behind a screen. Civil debate can easily take a turn for the worse, more so on political and controversial topics. People feel safe behind the screen. They can even use an account that does not include their name or information in order to hide who is really behind the screen. Thirty-five percent of US adults find uncivil debate to be a very big problem and 34 percent find it to be a moderately big problem (Pew Research Center, 2019). Uncivil debate takes away from the democratic process and tends to further polarize people that disagree with each other.

According to Pew Research Center, a 2019 study found that around 50 percent of US adults find that bias and inaccurate news are the biggest problems on social media. They also found that almost half of Americans described the news they viewed tended to lean to the left or far left on the political spectrum, and only 14 percent described the news to lean right or far right on the political spectrum. The remaining 35 percent described the news to be neutral or moderate. This shows significant bias in the news shown on social media, favoring the liberal viewpoints. In the same study, they found that about 60 percent of US adults think that social media companies have too much control over what news their users see (Pew Research Center, 2019).

While it might seem unfair that big tech companies like Facebook and Twitter can police the internet—they are privately owned companies. They argue that they have the right to control what is posted on their sites. They are also under protection by Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act. Section 230 of the act states that "No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider" ([47 U.S.C. § 230](#)). This means that Facebook, Twitter, and other sites are not liable for anything posted to their site. This raises the question of

whether social media sites should be held liable for treating news organizations or politicians different from others. Eight out of ten Americans feel that news organizations are being treated differently. Seventy-nine percent found the bias was against news that took a certain political stance (Pew Research Center, 2019).

“Fake news” has become a very common term in recent years within the media. It can be described as “a news article that intentionally and verifiably false” (Aggarwal and Tong, 2017). Fake news on social media comes in a variety of shapes and sizes. It can be anything from false information from a news outlet, a personal page used to spread an agenda, or even a computer controlled “bot” that uses an algorithm to post false information (Aggarwal and Tong, 2017). All of which produce a stronger distrust on what social media users read online.

Social media sites have taken steps to prevent the spread of fake news by adding algorithms that do fact checking. They check for keywords or posts that involve fake news—including bots and personal accounts (Jiang and Wilson, 2017). Users that view information that has been flagged for possibly containing false information typically see a warning label with the post itself. This can be problematic. Some accounts are used by what are called, political influencers. Social media political influencers are people that use the platform to share their opinion. Their pages do tend to create an echo chamber of like-minded individuals but do spark debate in the topic. Often times, their opinion post does get flagged with a fact check. This is not all bad though, because the reader can click the fact check to read further information on the topic and develop their own opinion on the post. Some see it as a problem because people should have the right to share their opinion online without being flagged by a fact check and labeled as a spreader of fake news.

In today's world, news consumers are able to pick and choose what news they want to see. It is easy to become a news avoider, which leads to echo chambers and bias information. News avoiders represent just under 50% of the population and typically go to one or just a few sources for the news. With social media, that becomes much easier. News seekers, on the other hand, receive their news from multiple sources. An increase in diversified news has an impact on democratic participation. News seekers had a higher registered voter rate at 82%, opposed to news avoiders at 56% (Ksiazek and Webster, 2010). Previous data has found that 77% of journalists identify themselves as Democrats and 5% of journalists identify as Republican (Balan, 2016). This shows the strong possibility of a left-leaning bias in the news received on social media and a stronger trust in social media of those who identify themselves as Democrats.

## **Analysis**

My data is from the Pew Research Center (a nonpartisan fact tank) in a public survey they conducted in October of 2019. The survey asks a variety of questions on public trust in news and information received on social media sites. The dependent variables (level of trust, media control, uncivil discussion) will be tested with political party (Republican, Independent, or Democrat) as the independent variable and layered with age, sex, education, and ideology to test for a statistical relationship.

The first test will show the amount of trust each party has in the news that they receive on social media. Respondents of the survey were asked to answer the question of how much trust they have in the information they receive on social media sites. Response options were: 1) A lot,

2) Some, 3) Not too much, 4) Not at all. The response to the question acts as the dependent variable and political party affiliation acts as the independent variable.

**Hypothesis:** Due to 77% of journalists identifying as Democrat and only 5% identifying as Republican, there will be far less trust in news on social media among Republicans than Democrats.

(Table 1 here)

The table shows that almost twice as many Democrats (6.1%) have a lot of trust in the news that they receive on social media than Republicans (3.1%), with Independents (4.7) landing in the middle. The table also shows that only 33.5% of Republicans have some or a lot of trust in the news received on social media, opposed to Democrats with 40.5% having some or a lot of trust. The Chi-Square, Phi, and Cramer's V tests show statistical significance—proving my hypothesis to correct.

The second test will use the same question as the first test as the dependent variable. Instead of there being four options for the respondents answer, I combined *A lot* with *Some* for option one, and I combined *Not much* with *Not at all* for option two. The independent variable is the age of the respondent, which is divided into four age groups: (18-29), (30-49), (50-64), and (65+). The test is also layered by the party affiliation of the respondent.

**Hypothesis:** Being that the older generations have used more traditional means of social media throughout their life, I believe that the younger Democrat users (18-29) of social media will have more trust in the news they receive than older Republican users (65+).

(Table 2 here)

The table shows that almost twice as many young (18-29) Democrats have some or a lot of trust in the news they receive on social media compared to older Republicans. Only 24.1% of the older (65+) Republicans have some or a lot of trust. The results of the test do support my hypothesis that young Democrats have more trust in the news received on social media than older Republicans.

The next test will show what people of different levels of education (college graduate, some college, and high school or less) think about the amount of control that social media companies have over the mix of news on their site. Higher levels of education tend to lead to more political participation and skepticism of news outlets.

**Hypothesis:** Those with a higher level of education (college graduates) will think that social media companies have a lot of control over the news on their sites opposed to those with a lower level of education (high school or less).

(Table 3 here)

The table shows that 52.5% of college graduates and 50.6% of those with high school or less think that social media sites have a lot of control over the news on their site. All three education categories in the test were very consistent with their responses. The test had a statistical significance of .112, disproving my hypothesis. To accept the hypothesis, I need a statistical significance of .05 or less ( $p < .05$ ). The test shows that people of all levels of education are skeptical of the control that social media companies have over the mix of news on their site.

The next test show how political ideology plays a role in if a person expects their news on social media to be largely accurate or largely in accurate. The spectrum of ideology goes; very



conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal, and very liberal. How the person expects the news to be is the dependent variable and the ideology will be the independent variable.

**Hypothesis:** Being that 77% of journalists identify as Democrat and only 5% Republican, I think that those who are very conservative will be more likely to expect the news to be largely inaccurate than those who are very liberal.

(Table 4 here)

The test shows that 66.1% of those that identify as very conservative expect the news on social media to be largely inaccurate, opposed to those that identify as very liberal with 55.2% expecting it to be largely inaccurate, accepting my hypothesis. About 60% of all the ideologies combined expect the news on social media to be largely inaccurate.

The final test will look into how much of a problem males and females of different political parties think uncivil discussion is on social media. Civil discussion and debate are an important part of the democratic process. Echo chambers have created a place for like-minded people to interact, but when they find themselves outside of the echo chamber there is a higher chance of conflict and uncivil discussion. In the United States, 78% of females are active social media users, opposed to 66% of men.

**Hypothesis:** Uncivil discussion on social media will not be a partisan issue but being that there is a higher number of female users, they will find it to be less of a problem than men.

(Table 5 here)

The results show that there is not a significant difference on how males and females react to uncivil discussion on social media. The test found that 73.8% of males and females from both

parties think that uncivil discussion on social media is a moderately big problem/very big problem. This shows that neither sex nor partisanship has an impact on how people feel about uncivil discussion—disproving my hypothesis.

## **Conclusion**

Social media has grown and will continue to grow into the new and maybe not improved way of receiving the news. While it is convenient, it does have some work to do in proving itself as a reliable and unbiased source of the news. The research done by Pew Research Center has shown that Americans, especially older Republicans, are aware of a bias of the news and information that they receive on their feed, opposed to the younger Democrats that are trusting the news on social media the most. The use of social media in politics will continue to expand and false information online is unlikely to go away. It is the reader's job to do their research on a controversial topic rather than segregating themselves into an echo chamber of like-minded individuals.

## Appendix

Table 1.

**Level of Trust in News on Social Media by Political Party**

		Political Party			Total
		Republican	Independent	Democrat	
A lot	Count	41	63	112	216
		3.1%	4.7%	6.1%	4.8%
Some	Count	405	371	627	1403
		30.4%	27.5%	34.4%	31.1%
Not too much	Count	473	488	636	1597
		35.5%	36.2%	34.8%	35.4%
Not at all	Count	415	427	450	1292
		31.1%	31.7%	24.7%	28.7%

Chi-Square = 44.813, p = .001

Phi = .100, p = .000. Cramer's V = .071, p = .000

Table 2.

**Level of Trust in Social Media by Age Within Political Party**

Party				Age Category				Total
				18-29	30-49	50-64	65+	
Republican	Level of Trust	Some/A Lot of Trust	Count	51	153	152	89	445
				47.7%	40.8%	31.7%	24.1%	33.4%
	Not Much/No Trust	Count	56	222	328	281	887	
			52.3%	59.2%	68.3%	75.9%	66.6%	
	Total	Count	107	375	480	370	1332	
			100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
Independent	Level of Trust	Some/A Lot of Trust	Count	107	170	101	54	432
				47.3%	37.7%	27.8%	17.7%	32.1%
	Not Much/No Trust	Count	119	281	262	251	913	
			52.7%	62.3%	72.2%	82.3%	67.9%	
	Total	Count	226	451	363	305	1345	
			100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
Democrat	Level of Trust	Some/A Lot of Trust	Count	165	279	201	94	739
				55.2%	47.8%	36.7%	23.8%	40.5%
	Not Much/No Trust	Count	134	305	346	301	1086	
			44.8%	52.2%	63.3%	76.2%	59.5%	
	Total	Count	299	584	547	395	1825	
			100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Rep. Chi-Square = 85.81, p = .000. Phi = .254, p = .000. Cramer's V = .147, p = .000

Ind. Chi-Square = 141.868, p = .000. Phi = .325, p = .000. Cramer's V = .188, p = .000

Dem. Chi-Square = 169.666, p = .000. Phi = .305, p = .000. Cramer's V = .176, p = .000

Total Chi-Square = 385.312, p = .000. Phi = .293, p = .000. Cramer's V = .169, p = .000

Table 3.

**Feeling of How Much Control Social Media Companies Have Over News on Their Site by Level of Education**

			Education			
			College graduate+	Some College	H.S. graduate or less	Total
How much control do social media companies have over the news on their site?	A lot	Count	1113	800	740	2653
			52.5%	54.2%	50.6%	52.4%
	Some	Count	781	528	540	1849
			36.8%	35.8%	36.9%	36.5%
	Not much	Count	198	118	156	472
			9.3%	8.0%	10.7%	9.3%
	Not at all	Count	29	30	27	86
			1.4%	2.0%	1.8%	1.7%

Chi-Square = 10.309, p = .112

Phi = .045, p = .112, Cramer's V = .032, p = .112

Table 4.

**How Different Political Ideologies Expect to See News**

			Political Ideology					
			Very conservative	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal	Very liberal	Total
Describe the accuracy of the news on social media.	Largely accurate	Count	86	261	578	327	154	1406
			33.9%	32.7%	41.7%	43.0%	44.8%	39.7%
	Largely inaccurate	Count	168	537	807	434	190	2136
			66.1%	67.3%	58.3%	57.0%	55.2%	60.3%

Chi-Square = 29.404, p = .000

Phi = .091, p = .000. Cramer's V = .091, p = .000

Table 5.

**Feeling of How Much of a Problem Uncivil Discussion is on Social Media by Sex Within Political Party**

Sex				Political Party			Total
				Republican	Independent	Democrat	
Male	How much of a problem is uncivil discussion	A very big problem	Count	224	258	268	750
				35.3%	38.3%	38.6%	37.4%
		A moderately big problem	Count	220	244	258	722
				34.6%	36.2%	37.2%	36.0%
		A small problem	Count	153	132	137	422
				24.1%	19.6%	19.7%	21.1%
		Not a problem at all	Count	38	40	31	109
				6.0%	5.9%	4.5%	5.4%
		Total	Count	635	674	694	2003
				100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Female	How much of a problem is uncivil discussion	A very big problem	Count	274	268	406	948
				39.3%	40.1%	36.4%	38.2%
		A moderately big problem	Count	255	231	402	888
				36.5%	34.6%	36.1%	35.8%
		A small problem	Count	132	133	245	510
				18.9%	19.9%	22.0%	20.6%
		Not a problem at all	Count	37	36	62	135
				5.3%	5.4%	5.6%	5.4%

Male Chi-Square = 7.675, p = .263. Phi = .062, p = .263. Cramer's V = .044, p = .263

Female Chi-Square = 4.383, p = .625. Phi = .042, p = .625. Cramer's V = .030, p = .625

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