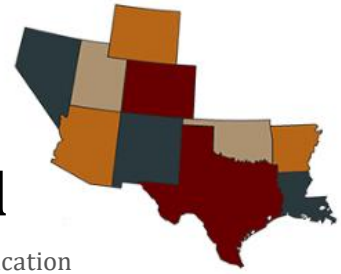


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## Journalists and the Red-State Voter: Perceptions of Journalism Credibility at a Statewide Level in the U.S. and the Trump Effect

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“This study examined the perception of journalism ethics by residents in a red state. A 2016 poll found that only 15% rated the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as high or very high, about 12 percentage points below the all-time low findings of a national Gallup poll. Chi square tests revealed statistically significant associations between those ratings and political party, with Republicans grading journalists much lower than Democrats, especially if they supported Donald Trump.”

*Keywords: journalism ethics, political party affiliation, 2016  
presidential election, framing analysis, Donald Trump*

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The credibility of the mainstream media in the United States has been increasingly questioned. Only 23% of the respondents to a 2016 Gallup poll rated the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as high or very high compared to a 33% approval rating when the same question was asked 40 years before in 1976 (“Honesty/ethics in professions,” n.d.). The Pew Research Center reported that the positive “believability” ratings for media sources, including print, broadcast and cable TV, dropped by 15 percentage points in a decade’s time, from 71% in 2002 to 56% in 2012 (“Further decline in credibility ratings for most news organizations,” 2012). Another Gallup poll taken in 2016 showed that just 32% of the respondents had “a great deal or fair amount of trust in the media,” down from 40% just the year before (Swift, 2016). That rating represented an all-time low since Gallup started asking the question in 1972 and a drop of 40 percentage points from the high in 1976 when 72% of the respondents expressed trust in the media. Gallup reports that since 2007 the public’s trust in the media dropped below “a majority level” and has stayed there ever since.

Gallup has cited a major factor in assessing an individual’s trust in journalists: political party affiliation. In the 2016 Gallup poll, just 14% of Republicans expressed trust in the media compared to 51% of those who identified themselves as Democrats (Swift, 2016). Gallup reported that the “prime reason” for that disparity might have stemmed from the fractious 2016 presidential election, with “many Republican leaders and conservative pundits saying Hillary Clinton has received overly positive media attention, while Donald Trump has been receiving unfair or negative attention” (Swift, 2016). Gallup said that another reason for that decline was Trump himself, or more specifically his “sharp criticisms of the press” (Swift, 2016).

A 2017 study by the Poynter Institute of Media Studies also showed increasing polarization between members of the two parties, with Republicans taking a much more negative view of the press than Democrats (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2017). The authors of the study found that “Republicans and Trump supporters are also far more likely to endorse extreme claims about media fabrication, to describe journalists as an enemy of the people, and to support restrictions on press freedom.” A 2018 poll by the online media outlet *Axios* revealed that 92% of those respondents who identified themselves as Republicans thought the “media intentionally reports fake news” compared to 53% of Democrats (Fisher, 2018).

Leaders of the Democratic and Republican parties have clearly framed the mission of journalists differently. Trump has gone as far as to describe the media as “the enemy of the people” (Oppenheimer, 2017). Democratic Rep. Nancy Pelosi, while serving as the House minority leader, told the media at a 2017 press conference: “You are our guardians of our democracy — First Amendment, freedom of the press,” adding: “So important, but obviously not very important to Donald Trump” (Bobic, 2017). Indeed, Amy Chua (2018) wrote in *The New York Times* that “America is in the grip of political tribalism.” That polarization is evident in the choice of news sources by people in a given political party. A 2014 Pew Center poll showed that Fox News was the main source of news for those who identified themselves as conservative, while liberals sampled a broader range of news sources, in particular outlets like NPR and *The New York Times* (Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, & Matsa, 2014). That trend held true in a 2017 Pew Center poll that revealed that 40% of Trump voters relied on Fox News as their main source of news, while Clinton supporters turned to more varied news sources: 18% listed CNN as their number one choice, 9% listed MSNBC, 8% listed Facebook or local TV, and 7% listed NPR (Gottfried, Barthel,

& Mitchell, 2017). Democrats are also more likely to turn to local newspapers and TV news than Republicans (Gilbert, 2011).

That increasing partisan divide in the U.S. can be seen in contrasting voting trends in Democratic “blue states” and Republican “red states” throughout the country. *FiveThirtyEight*, a media outlet specializing in data analysis, reports that the states have become increasingly polarized, as “the state-by-state spread of the margins separating the vote for the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates widened from 1992 to 2012 ... blue states grew a bit bluer, red states a bit redder and tossup states a bit fewer in number” (King, 2016). Despite that trend, there is a dearth of research about the scope and implications of the partisan divide on a statewide level, particularly as it relates to the public’s trust of journalists. The purpose of this study was to assess media consumption and perceptions of media credibility in a so-called Republican “red state” that was carried by Trump in 2016. The study specifically sought to assess how that perception of media credibility may have been related to a variety of factors, such as an individual's media consumption, political party affiliation and support of a presidential candidate. Consequently, this study was guided by the following research questions:

*Research Question 1:* How do residents in a red state assess the honesty and ethical standards of journalists?

*Research Question 2:* What are the media consumption habits of residents in a red state as they pertain to reading a daily newspaper and watching local TV news programs in the late evening?

*Research Question 3:* What were the strengths of the relationships between the residents’ assessment of journalists’ ethics, their media consumption, and their political affiliation, including their choice of candidates in the 2016 presidential election?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Sociologist Erving Goffman has been acknowledged as a founder of framing theory (McQuail, 2010; Tuchman, 1978). In his 1974 book, *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*, Goffman wrote:

When the individual in our Western society recognizes a particular event, he tends, whatever else he does, to imply in this response (and in effect employ) one or more frameworks or schemata of interpretation of a kind that can be called primary ... Primary frameworks vary in degree or organization. Some are neatly presentable as a system of entities, postulates, and rules; others - indeed, most others - appear to have no apparent articulated shape, providing only a lore of understanding, an approach, a perspective shape. Whatever the degree of organization, however, each primary framework allows its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms (p. 21).

Framing eventually became a key way of interpreting signs of bias in news stories. Framing, McQuail (2010) wrote, “is a way of giving some overall interpretation to isolated items of fact. It is almost unavoidable for journalists to do this and in so doing to depart from pure 'objectivity' and to introduce some (unintended) bias” (p. 379). Entman (1993) compared media news coverage of two international plane crashes and found that “by de-emphasizing the agency and the victims and by the

choice of graphics and adjectives, the news stories about the U.S. downing of an Iranian plane called it a technical problem while the Soviet downing of a Korean jet was portrayed as a moral outrage" (p. 6). He added:

News frames are constructed from and embodied in the keywords, metaphors, concepts, symbols and visual images emphasized in a news narrative. Since the narrative finally consists of nothing more than words and pictures, frames can be detected by probing for particular words and visual images that consistently appear in a narrative and convey thematically consonant meanings across media and time. By providing, repeating, and thereby reinforcing words and visual images that reference some ideas but not others, frames work to make some ideas more salient in the text, others less so - and others entirely invisible (p. 7).

### **Framing and Politics**

Framing is also a method that political leaders use in persuading the public. In the run-up to the first Gulf War in 1991, President George H.W. Bush repeatedly and consciously demonized Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein by comparing him to Adolph Hitler (Bennett & Manheim, 1993; Manheim, 1994). More often though, political leaders sway voters by framing a particular issue more subtly (Hancock, Weiss, & Duerre, 2010). Supporters of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement – a list that included President Bill Clinton and British Prime Minister Tony Blair – successfully swayed constituents to vote for ratification of a peace settlement between feuding factions in Northern Ireland “as less risky than the alternative” while avoiding paying attention to the consequences of “failures in implementation” of the pact (Hancock, Weiss, & Duerre, 2010, p. 183). At its worst, framing can be used as a form of “fearmongering” (Hancock, Weiss, & Duerre, 2010, p. 183).

Voters’ political attitudes often are developed by “cues from the parties they support” (Harteveld, Kokkonen, & Dahlberg, 2017, p 1177). A study involving the Netherlands and Sweden showed that those who changed their allegiance to “the Radical Right become stricter on immigration, whereas voters changing to the Greens” - an opposing party - “become less strict on immigration over time” (Harteveld, Kokkonen, & Dahlberg, 2017, p 1177). The same trend could be seen with the subject of gun control in the United States. A poll taken months after the mass shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012 revealed that “the strongest, most consistent predictors of people’s gun control preferences are their political beliefs and affiliations” (Wozniak, 2017, p. 255). The framing used in the debate between Democrats and Republicans over the credibility of the U.S. press has been far less subtle, pitting the “guardians of our democracy” against “the enemy of the people” (Bobic, 2017; Oppenheimer, 2017). Yet, Democrats have been pressed to offer a catch-phrase as memorable as the one at the heart of Trump’s anti-press campaign: “fake news.” Rather than invent the term, Trump simply seized upon a phrase that had already cropped up in news stories surrounding the 2016 presidential election. However, that news coverage of so-called fake news revolved around fabricated stories that were posted on Facebook and other Internet sites, and the role those stories may have played in influencing the election (Wingfield, Isaac, & Benner, 2016). In an editorial published weeks after the election, *The New York Times* wrote: “Most of the fake news stories are produced by scammers looking to make a quick buck. The vast majority of them take far-right positions. But a big part of the responsibility for this scourge rests with internet companies like Facebook and Google, which have made it possible for fake news to be shared nearly instantly with millions of users and have been slow to

block it from their sites." A month later, *The New York Times* reported that conservatives were now using the phrase as part of an attempt to quash reports that Russia had influenced the election - *Breitbart News* called those stories "left-wing fake news" and radio commentator Rush Limbaugh said that "fake news is the everyday news" reported by the media (Peters, 2016). Then during a news conference shortly after his inauguration, Trump himself appropriated the term that he would use repeatedly in the days and months that followed, saying "you can talk all you want about Russia, which was ... fake news, fabricated deal, to try and make up for the loss of the Democrats and the press plays right into it. It's all fake news. It's all fake news" ("Full transcript and video: Trump news conference," 2017).

### **Political Affiliation and Perceptions of Media Credibility**

There are signs that Trump's "fake news" mantra is having an effect on public opinion. A study by Market Connections Inc. revealed that "(t)wo thirds of decisions makers said recent commentary about 'fake news' has had at least some impact on their perceptions of news organizations' credibility" ("Study shows 'fake news' talk impacts perceptions of media credibility," 2017). A recent Harvard-Harris poll revealed that 65% of voters surveyed believed that "the mainstream press is full of fake news" (Easley, 2017). Overall, 80% of Republicans who responded to that poll believed the press was manufacturing "fake news" compared to 60% of independents and 53% of Democrats (Easley, 2017). At the very least, that finding is reflective of the attitudes about the media expressed by Trump's political base. Edelman, a public relations firm that maintains "a trust barometer" relating to the press, reported that 70% of Trump supporters expressed distrust for the mainstream media (Miller, 2018).

In recent history, Republicans have generally expressed more mistrust of the media than Democrats, but that disparity has only widened since the turn of the century. A Gallup poll in 2000 revealed that 53% of Democrats and 47% of Republicans professed trust in the news media (Swift, 2016). When Gallup asked that same question in 2016, 51% of Democrats expressed trust in the media – a drop of two percentage points in 16 years - while just 14% of the Republicans did, a decrease of 33 percentage points since 2000 (Swift, 2016).

A Pew Center poll showed that the polarization between Democrats and Republicans – as measured in responses to four dozen "political values measures" - has increased dramatically since 1987 ("Partisan polarization surges in Bush, Obama years," 2012). Pew reports that as of 2012 "the average partisan gap has nearly doubled ... from 10 percentage points in 1987 to 18 percentage points in the new study." A 2017 Pew poll revealed that more Americans believe that there are "strong conflicts between Democrats and Republicans in U.S. society today than ... blacks and whites, the rich and the poor, and other social groups" (Gramlich, 2017). Pew reports: "The share of Americans who say there are very strong conflicts between Democrats and Republicans (64%) is more than twice as large as the share who see very strong conflicts between blacks and whites (27%), and between the rich and the poor (29%)."

How would this apparent political polarization reflect itself in a statewide poll that surveyed residents about their media consumption and their rating of the honesty and ethical standards of journalists? This study proceeded with the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1:* The rating of the honesty and ethical standards of journalists would be lower in a Republican red state than that seen in national polls.

*Hypothesis 2:* The approval rating for journalists and media consumption will be associated with the respondents’ political party affiliation and their choice of candidates in the 2016 presidential election.

**METHODS**

This two-part study examined the perception of journalism ethical standards on a statewide level by the public. In both 2014 and 2016, residents in Arkansas, a red state in the southern part of the United States, were asked to rate the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as either: very high, high, average, low, or very low. The question was designed to replicate the query asked regularly about journalism ethics on the national Gallup poll for more than 40 years.

The lead researchers in this study collaborated with pollsters who agreed to place the question on a longstanding poll of state residents about a number of topics including approval ratings of elected officials, projected voting preferences in upcoming elections, and stances on prevailing issues such as gay marriage, immigration, gun control, abortion, and healthcare. Respondents were also asked about media consumption, specifically the number of days in a given week that they read a newspaper or watched local TV news. (The pollsters chose not to ask the question about the ethical standards of journalists in 2015, an off-election year.)

Overall, 747 adult residents were randomly surveyed by telephone in October of 2014. The rate of cooperation was 20% for those contacted by landline and 19% by cell phone. The margin of error for the total sample was +/- 3.6 percentage points. Overall, 800 adult residents were randomly surveyed by telephone in October of 2016. The rate of cooperation was 29% for those contacted by landline and 25% by cell phone. The margin of error for the total sample was +/- 3.5 percentage points.

In part two of the study, the results from the queries about journalists’ ethical standards as well as the media consumption of the respondents were used to examine the strength of the relationship of those variables to the respondents’ answers to a number of other poll questions that explored political affiliation and attitudes. For example, respondents were asked if they considered themselves a strong Democrat, Republican or Independent; whether they considered themselves closer to the Republican Party or the Democratic Party; and whether they were voting for the Democratic or Republican presidential candidate in 2016. A chi-square test was used to establish whether there was a statistically significant relationship between media use and/or approval rating of journalists and individual questions relating to party affiliation.

Table 1  
*Comparison in Rating of Honesty and Ethical Standards of Journalists*

Rating	2014	2016
Very High	4.4%	5.4%
High	9.5%	9.4%

Average	38.7%	34.1%
Low	20.9%	17.3%
Very Low	14.9%	22.3%
Don't Know or Refused to Answer	11.6%	11.7%

**FINDINGS: PART ONE**

The statewide poll in 2014 found that 13.9% of these red-state residents rated the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as high or very high (see Table 1). The results are about 13 percentage points below the findings of a national Gallup poll in 2016 that asked the same question. Overall, 4.4% of the respondents in Arkansas rated the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as very high, 9.5% as high, 38.7% as average, 20.9% as low, 14.9% as very low, and 11.6% answered don't know or refused to answer.

A poll of Arkansas residents in 2016 found that 5.4% of the respondents rated the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as very high, and 9.4% as high (see Table 1). The combined percentage of residents rating these standards as high or very high – 14.8% was close to the same as in 2014, improving just .9 of a percentage point in 2016. In 2016, 17.3% of the respondents rated the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as low and 22.3% as very low. Those findings meant that the disapproval rating – the collective percentage of voters who rated the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as low or very low - increased, from 35.8% in 2014 to 39.6% in 2016. More importantly, the percentage of the respondents rating the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as very low in 2016 – 22.3% - jumped by 7.4 percentage points from 14.9% in 2014. That increase represents a significant difference at the .95 confidence level, exceeding the cumulative margin of error for both polls of 7.1 percentage points.

In 2014, when asked about how many days in the past week they had read a daily newspaper, 27% of the respondents said 0 days; 23% said one to three days; 8% said four to six days; and 36% said seven days; and 7% answered don't know or refused to answer. Asked how many days in the past week they had watched the local TV news shows in the late evening, 16% said 0 days; 12% said one to three days; 15% said four to six days; 51% said seven days; and 6 % answered don't know or refused to answer. In 2016, 41% of the respondents said they didn't read a newspaper any day in the past week, an increase of about 14 percentage points from 2014. When asked about how many days in the past week they had read a daily newspaper, 6% said four to six days; 30% said seven days; and 4% answered don't know or refused to answer. Asked how many days in the past week they had watched local TV news in the late evening, 20% said 0 days - an increase of 4 percentage points from 2014; 16% said one to three days; 9% said four to six days; 53% said seven days; and 3% answered don't know or refused to answer.

## FINDINGS: PART TWO

Arkansas is unquestionably red - residents voted Republican in the last five presidential elections, including in 2016 for Donald Trump. Residents also have elected a GOP governor and two Republican U.S. senators. And yet, on another level, the state is just tilting red. In the 2014 poll, more respondents identified themselves as Democrats than Republicans – 31% versus 28%. Yet those same respondents said they planned to vote Republican in races for governor, U.S. Senate, Congress, and the state legislature; in some cases the margins of preference for GOP candidates over Democrats was as high as 14%. Asked in 2014 whether they would vote for Clinton if she were the Democratic candidate or the then unnamed Republican nominee, the reply was almost evenly split – 41% for Clinton, and 42% for the GOP candidate. In 2016, for the first time in the 17 years that the question had been asked, more respondents identified as Republican than Democrat, 29% to 25%. Asked in 2016 whether they would vote for Clinton or the identified Republican candidate, Donald Trump, 45% said they would be voting for Trump, 31% for Clinton.

In both 2014 and 2016, there were also a number of strong relationships between political affiliation, media consumption and the respondents' assessment of journalists' ethics. Those findings were as follows:

### **Approval rating of journalists and political party affiliation**

In 2014, the rating of the honesty and ethical standards of journalists decreased if the respondent was Republican and increased if the respondent identified as a Democrat. A chi-square test revealed a significant relationship at  $p < .05$  between the approval rating for journalists and political party affiliation,  $X^2(30, N = 747) = 107.900, p = .000$ .

Twice as many Democrats as Republicans rated the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as very high and nearly four times as many Democrats as Republicans rated those standards as high. Nearly three times as many Republicans as Democrats rated the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as very low, and nearly twice as many Republicans as Democrats rated the ethical standards of journalists as low. At the same time, 7% more independents – theoretically those who held the middle ground between the two major parties – than Republicans rated those ethical standards as very low, though 13% more Republicans than independents rated the standards as low, and Republicans topped independents in the aggregate rating of low or very low.

In 2016, the rating of the honesty and ethical standards of journalists also decreased if the respondent was Republican and increased if the respondent identified as a Democrat. A chi-square test revealed a significant relationship at  $p < .05$  between the approval rating for journalists and political party affiliation,  $X^2(30, N = 800) = 129.994, p = .000$ . Seven times as many Democrats as Republicans rated journalists' ethical standards as very high and nearly four times as many Democrats as Republicans rated those standards as high. In contrast, four times as many Republicans as Democrats rated journalists' ethical standards as very low, and three times as many Republicans as Democrats rated the ethical standards of journalists as low. Virtually the same amount of independents as Republicans rated those ethical standards as very low.

**Approval rating of journalists and strength of being a Republican.** In 2014, the rating of the honesty and ethical standards of journalists was more negative if the respondent identified as a strong Republican compared to identifying as not a very strong Republican. A chi-square test revealed a significant relationship at  $p < .05$  between the approval rating for journalists and the strength of being a

Republican,  $X^2(10, N = 206) = 22.007, p = .015$ . Three times as many strong Republicans as not very strong Republicans rated journalists' ethical standards as very low, and twice as many strong Republicans as not very strong Republicans rated those standards as low.

**Approval rating of journalists and strength of being a Democrat.** In 2014, the rating of the honesty and ethical standards of journalists was more positive if the respondent was a strong Democrat compared to those who identified as a not very strong Democrat. A chi-square test revealed a significant relationship at  $p < .05$  between the approval rating for journalists and the strength of being a Democrat,  $X^2(12, N = 231) = 23.945, p = .021$ . Three times as many strong Democrats as not very strong Democrats rated journalists' ethical standards as very high, and nearly twice as many strong Democrats as not very strong Democrats rated those standards as high.

In 2016, the rating of the honesty and ethical standards of journalists also was more positive if the respondent was a strong Democrat compared to those identifying as a not very strong Democrat. A chi-square test revealed a significant relationship at  $p < .05$  between the approval rating for journalists and strength of being a Democrat,  $X^2(18, N = 199) = 29.845, p = .050$ . Nineteen times as many strong Democrats as not very strong Democrats rated the ethical standards of journalists as very high, and nearly three times as many strong Democrats as not very strong Democrats rated those standards as high.

**Approval rating of journalists and being close to either the Republican Party or Democratic Party.** In 2016, the rating of the honesty and ethical standards of journalists decreased if the respondent felt closer to the Republican Party and increased if the respondent identified as closer to the Democratic Party. A chi-square test revealed a significant relationship at  $p < .05$  between the approval rating for journalists and closeness to one of the political parties,  $X^2(24, N = 295) = 44.461, p = .007$ . More than six times as many respondents who felt closer to the Republican Party compared to those closer to the Democratic Party rated journalists' ethical standards as very low and more than four times as many respondents closer to the Democratic Party than those closer to the Republican Party rated those standards as high. In contrast, 63% more of those closer to the Democratic Party compared to those closer to the Republican Party rated the ethical standards of journalists as high or very high. At the same time, about the same percentage of those who identified as just independent as those who felt closer to the Democratic Party rated the ethical standards as high or very high, while nearly four times as many independents as Democrats rated those standards as low or very low.

**Party affiliation and projected voting in the 2016 presidential election.** Not surprisingly, in 2014, party affiliation was related to projected vote casting in the 2016 presidential election among respondents. A chi-square test revealed a significant relationship at  $p < .05$  between party affiliation and anticipated voting in the presidential election,  $X^2(15, N=747) = 380.586, p=.000$ . The 2014 poll revealed that 16 times more Democrats than Republicans and more than twice as many Democrats than independents indicated that they would vote for Hillary Clinton, the state's former First Lady, if she were the Democratic nominee for president in 2016. In contrast, 12 times as many Republicans as Democrats and 58% as many Republicans as independents said they intended to vote for an unnamed Republican in the next presidential election.

The same trend held when a similar question was asked in 2016, when Trump had been selected as the Republican candidate for the upcoming presidential election. Party affiliation was once again related to anticipated vote casting in the 2016 presidential election among respondents. A chi-square test

revealed a significant relationship at  $p < .05$  between party affiliation and anticipated voting in the presidential election,  $X^2(20, N = 800) = 413.154, p = .000$ . The 2016 poll revealed that 13 times more Democrats than Republicans and more than three times as many Democrats as independents indicated that they would vote for Clinton, the Democratic nominee. In contrast, nine times as many Republicans than Democrats and 50% more Republicans than independents said they intended to vote for Trump. In 2016, 43% of the independents indicated that they intended to vote for Trump. By comparison, in 2014, fewer independents - 35% - answered that they would vote for an unnamed Republican presidential candidate.

**Approval rating of journalists and projected voting in the 2016 presidential election.** In 2014, the approval rating for journalists' ethical standards was related to projected vote casting in the 2016 presidential election. A chi-square test revealed a significant relationship at  $p < .05$  between the approval rating for journalists and anticipated voting,  $X^2(15, N=747) = 360.596, p = .000$ . The 2014 poll revealed 38% more respondents who indicated that they would vote for Clinton compared to an unnamed Republican candidate in the next presidential election rated the ethical standards of journalists as very high. Moreover, five times as many Clinton supporters than backers of the unnamed GOP candidate rated the journalists' ethical standards as high. In contrast, in excess of four times more backers of the Republican candidate than Clinton supporters rated journalists' ethical standards as very low, and more than twice as many GOP supporters than Clinton backers rated those standards as low.

In 2016, in excess of 4½ times more respondents who indicated that they would vote for Clinton as opposed to Trump rated the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as very high. More than three times as many Clinton supporters than Trump backers gave the journalists a high rating. But the biggest difference could be seen in the negative ratings. Nearly eight times more Trump backers than Clinton supporters rated the journalists' ethical standards as very low and nearly four times more Trump supporters than Clinton backers rated journalists' standards as low. Most importantly, the introduction of Trump into the race in 2016 - compared to 2014 when the Republican candidate was unnamed - coincided with the plummeting of the approval ratings of journalists. In 2016, 35% of Trump backers rated the ethical standards of journalist as very low. In 2014, 24% of those backing an unnamed Republican gave journalists the same rating. That jump in the most extreme disapproval rating of journalists over a two-year period represents a significant difference at the .95 confidence level, exceeding the cumulative margin of 7.1 percentage points for the 2014 and 2016 polls.

**Approval rating of journalists and newspaper consumption.** In 2016, the approval rating for journalists' ethical standards was related to the reading of a daily newspaper in a given week. A chi-square test revealed a significant relationship at  $p < .05$  between the approval rating for journalists and newspaper reading,  $X^2(24, N = 800) = 80.462, p = .011$ . The 2016 poll revealed that 64% more respondents who didn't read a newspaper a single day compared to than those who read one every day gave journalists a very low rating for ethical standards. In contrast, 58% more respondents who read a newspaper every day compared to those who didn't read a newspaper a single day rated journalists' standards as very high.

**Political party affiliation and newspaper consumption.** In 2014, political party affiliation was related to the reading of a newspaper. Republicans were less likely to read a newspaper and more likely to give a lower approval rating to journalists than those who identified as Democrats. The 2014 poll

revealed that the habit of reading a daily newspaper decreased if the respondent was Republican and increased if the respondent identified as a Democrat. A chi-square test revealed a significant relationship at  $p < .05$  between political party affiliation and newspaper reading,  $X^2(45, N = 747) = 420.645, p = .000$ . Overall, 5% more Republicans than Democrats reported not reading a newspaper a single day in the past week while 23% more Democrats than Republicans reported reading a newspaper all seven days.

In 2016, political party affiliation also was related to the reading of a newspaper. A chi-square test revealed a significant relationship at  $p < .05$  between political party affiliation and newspaper reading,  $X^2(45, N = 800) = 292.474, p = .000$ . The 2016 poll revealed that 28% more respondents who identified themselves as Democrats as compared to those identifying as Republicans read a newspaper every day of the week. Additionally, 23% more Democrats than independents read a newspaper every single day. In contrast, 36% more Republicans than Democrats didn't read a daily newspaper a single day. Twice as many independents as Democrats didn't read a newspaper in a given week.

**Political party affiliation and TV news consumption.** In 2014, political party affiliation was related to the viewing of local TV news in the late evening. The habit of watching local TV news shows in the late evening decreased if the respondent was Republican and increased if the respondent identified as a Democrat. A chi-square test revealed a significant relationship at  $p < .05$  between political party affiliation and TV news consumption,  $X^2(45, N = 747) = 462.997, p = .000$ . Overall, 21% more Democrats than Republicans reported watching local TV news in the late evening all seven days of the past week.

In 2016, political party affiliation also was related to the viewing of local TV news in the late evening. A chi-square test revealed a significant relationship at  $p < .05$  between party affiliation and TV news consumption,  $X^2(45, N = 800) = 308.730, p = .000$ . The 2016 poll revealed that 17% more respondents who identified themselves as Democrats compared to Republicans watched local TV news every evening of the week. Independents had virtually the same local TV news viewing habits as Democrats. Moreover, twice as many Republicans as Democrats did not watch local TV news a single evening of the week. More independents viewed TV news every evening of the week than either Democrats or Republicans. More independents also failed to watch local TV news a single evening compared to those who identified with the two major parties – almost three times more than those identifying as Democrats and 37% more than those who identified themselves as Republicans.

## DISCUSSION

As predicted, this study clearly showed that both in 2014 and 2016 Arkansas residents rated the honesty and ethical standards of journalists lower than when the question was posed to a national audience by Gallup. The comparison between the ratings in 2014 and 2016 reveal that the approval of journalists' ethical standards is significantly worsening in this state, particularly at the lowest end of the rating scale. This trend comes as traditional forms of news media consumption - reading a daily newspaper or watching the local TV news in the late evening - are also diminishing among residents in this state. In 2016, roughly two in five respondents said they hadn't read a daily newspaper a single day of the week, and roughly one in five said they had not spent a single day watching local TV news in the late evening.

Also as predicted, the approval rating for journalists and media consumption was associated with the respondents' political party and their projected voting in the 2016 presidential election. Across numerous indices, in one or both years of polling data, being a Republican translated to a decidedly lower rating of the honesty and ethical standards of journalists than if the respondent were a Democrat. Republicans read a newspaper less and watched the local late-evening TV news less than Democrats. And, perhaps not surprisingly, the more people read a newspaper or watched the local TV news the better approval rating they gave to journalists.

One of the key findings of this study was that the introduction of Trump into the race in 2016 - compared to 2014 when the Republican candidate was unnamed - coincided with a significant increase in the percentage of respondents rating the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as very low. The poll doesn't answer an important question: Did Trump's popularity have something to do with a growing mistrust of journalism and other U.S. institutions, or did he conger that mistrust with his constant attacks on the media?

It also should be noted that any assessment of voting preferences among Arkansans in the 2016 presidential election must bring into account Clinton's unique ties to the state. Though - unlike her husband - Clinton is not a native Arkansan, she served as the state's First Lady for 16 years. Yet, she and her husband resettled in New York after his presidency came to an end in 2000, and she remained a resident there while she served as a U.S. Senator and, later, U.S. Secretary of State. Another factor to consider is that public opinion of Clinton fluctuated wildly during the eight years she served as First Lady of the United States, with her approval ratings hurt early on for her alleged role in the Whitewater scandal, which involved alleged illegalities surrounding a real estate development corporation. Burden and Mughan (1999) wrote that "few first ladies have been, or are likely to be, as controversial a public figure as Hillary Clinton. Few have been, or are as likely to be, as dogged by scandal and charges of wrongdoing both in and out of office" (p. 248). Despite the fact that Clinton was never charged in connection with Whitewater, and won two terms of office as a U.S. Senator, her public approval ratings have continued to fluctuate since (Burrell, 2007).

Overall, though, the findings of this study should be disturbing to journalists. From 2016 to 2018, the time period covering the two polls used in this study, there were few journalism ethics scandals that were remotely on par with the types of cases that fill up journalism ethics textbooks - incidents such as those involving Janet Cooke of the *Washington Post* in 1980, Stephen Glass of the *New Republic* in 1998, and Jason Blair of the *New York Times* in 2003, where the culprits were found guilty of fabricating stories (Foreman, 2010). Perhaps the most prominent ethics scandal during this time period involved a retracted *Rolling Stone* magazine story from 2014 about an alleged gang rape of a University of Virginia student by members of a campus fraternity. Nonetheless, when the Columbia Journalism School investigated the scandal after a request by the magazine, its scathing report - titled "Rolling Stone's investigation: A failure that was avoidable" - mentioned that the case did "not involve the kinds of fabrication by reporters that have occurred in some other infamous cases of journalistic meltdown"(Coronel, Coll, & Kravitz, 2015).

Moreover, the coverage of Trump and his administration has been more often been marked by journalistic triumphs, with notable exceptions such as the report that led to resignations of three CNN journalists after the network retracted and apologized for a story that linked a Trump associate to a Russian investment fund (Grynbaum, 2017). Trump predictably tweeted that the story was "fake

news.” But in fact there was no fabrication involved; rather, there was a difference between CNN management and the reporters over whether the reporting supported the story’s central finding.

Ironically, by following journalism ethics codes that advocate accountability and transparency, journalists have been setting themselves up for more criticism by copping to mistakes when many of their fiercest opponents seldom, if ever, do. Equally as troubling for journalists is the fact that disapproval of the media seemingly now is being fused together with political party affiliation. It was beyond the scope of this study to examine whether the approval or disapproval rating of journalists was affected by the framing of the message that Trump regularly uses to attack the credibility of the news media - the constant refrain that stories critical of him or his administration are merely "fake news." Yet, it must be noted that the increase in the disapproval rating of journalists by residents in Arkansas comes at the same time other studies are showing that Trump’s attack on the media is succeeding in discrediting the credibility of journalists in the eyes of the public. Either way, when journalists look at a U.S. map neatly dividing blue states and red states, they may also be viewing regions where they have become the enemy.

## CONCLUSION

This study was able to break new ground by narrowing research regarding public perception of media ethics from a national to a statewide level, in particular in a red state. This study established that public endorsement of journalism ethics in this red state is appreciably lower than the level reflected in national polls. Consumption of traditional media sources is diminishing, too. This study suggests that both of these trends are tied to political party affiliation. One cannot say these trends were caused by Trump’s candidacy, but they certainly coincided with it.

This study is also supportive of research that shows that the country’s partisan divide is only growing insofar as red states are becoming redder and blue states become bluer. Perhaps more troubling to the media is the prospect that what was reflected in Arkansas might extend to other red states, too – namely, that as red states become redder, the residents there become more mistrustful of journalists.

It is impossible to predict if this trend will worsen for the media. But the numbers in this study do not suggest a rosy future. In the 2016 Arkansas Poll, virtually the same amount of respondents who identified as independent - potential swing voters who could hypothetically tilt red or blue in the future - as those who identified as Republican rated the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as very low.

This research will certainly benefit from more annual polling in this state involving these same questions. The addition of more questions concerning media use also would give greater depth to this area of study – of interest, would be how many of the study's respondents get their news and information via other platforms, such as the Internet and social media. Of key interest would be the answers to questions about cable-TV viewing habits, since many of those outlets themselves have been accused of becoming more partisan.

In addition to polling, focus groups might be helpful in conducting a more nuanced exploration of the issues and determine if when residents are rating journalists they are thinking of local reporters, the national press, or the media in general. It would also be meaningful to find out if the respondents were focusing on print, broadcast, internet-only news outlets, or social media. Finally, extensive interviewing of Arkansas residents could be helpful in determining the efficacy of Trump’s anti-media

campaign and whether they support the framing of the media as “guardians of the democracy” or the “enemy of the people.”

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