

Voters, Media & Social Networks



Eric Hedberg
Thom Reilly
David Daugherty
Joseph Garcia



ASU Morrison Institute
for Public Policy
Arizona State University

Voters, Media & Social Networks

April 2017

Eric Hedberg

Thom Reilly

David Daugherty

Joseph Garcia



ASU Morrison Institute
for Public Policy
Arizona State University

Sociologists have long established that our media consumption and circle of friends can influence our individual political opinions and perspectives.¹ To better understand that relationship, Morrison Institute for Public Policy conducted a pre-election survey and separate post-election focus groups in Arizona regarding how the interaction of news and social networks affect voters in their gathering and discussion of political-related information.

Voters today are not so much shaped by news as the news is shaped for them. In cafeteria-style format, we consume news from a personalized menu that, in addition to informing us, satisfies our appetite for reinforcing our individual beliefs, friendships and politics. As a result, liberal, moderate and conservative voters virtually live in alternative realities depending on their personal point of view and preferred news sources.

But the Morrison Institute study suggests social networks provide a conduit for communication shared between various voters regarding elements of news and issues that otherwise might have been omitted or ignored by their individual media of choice. New research shows that even with political polarization, connectivity through social networks – especially via independent voters, who are at ease interacting with both Republicans and Democrats – can provide an indirect moderation, if not expansion, of media sources.

National research by Pew Research Center² shows that consistent liberals sample an array of main news sources such as CNN, MSNBC, NPR and *The New York Times*. Consistent conservatives, meanwhile, cluster around a single news source: FOX. While Morrison Institute's study confirmed such findings, our research was expanded to include the delineation of independent voters, who made up 39 percent of the U.S. electorate in 2016 and even a greater percentage today.³ In Arizona, independents hold about a third of voter registrations, as do Republicans and Democrats, so it was important to examine what, if any, specific role independents might play in media consumption and social networks.

This statewide study and report were funded by Arizona Citizens Clean Elections Commission, a voter-created state agency that fosters greater citizen participation via the electoral process and voter education.

Morrison Institute Focus Group

"I take with what they (FOX News) say a lot more factual than a news show on MSNBC."

—Registered Republican, male

Morrison Institute Focus Group

"I keep up in the news outlets, totally: Mother Jones, FOX News, MSNBC, CNN. You name it, I watch it. And I pride myself on seeking out the bull--- where it's located. And there was a lot of bull--- out there. Like, a lot. A lot more in this election than other elections."

—Registered Democrat, female

¹ See, e.g., Friedkin, Noah E., and Eugene C. Johnsen. "Social influence and opinions." *Journal of Mathematical Sociology* 15, no. 3-4 (1990): 193-206.

² Political Polarization & Media Habits, Pew Research Center, October 2014.

³ Gallup, December 2016 poll. Forty-four percent of Americans in January 2017 identify themselves as independents.

The Study

In the Morrison Institute survey, 1,315 Arizonans were interviewed in September 2016 via cellphone and landline from a random list of statewide voters. (See methodology for details.) For balanced party/no party representation, respondents were asked to self-identify themselves among the following political categories:

- Strong Democrat
- Democrat
- Independent, leans Democrat
- Independent
- Independent, leans Republican
- Republican
- Strong Republican

By including registered independents in addition to registered Republicans and Democrats, the goal was to gain a better understanding about all Arizona voters' media consumption and their role in social networks.

Arizona independents choose not to belong or establish a formal party. As outlined in the Morrison Institute landmark report, *Who is Arizona's Independent Voter?*, independent voters represent an unpredictable shifting of the loose sands in the American political landscape in terms of engagement, impact and outcomes. One independent voter in the November 2015 report, which was funded by Arizona Citizens Clean Elections Commission, summed it up by saying: "We're not a party. We're a mindset."

There are many ways voters get election and political information, including mailed voter guides by the Arizona Citizens Clean Elections Commission and the Arizona Secretary of State's Office, as well as online links, candidate forums/debates and campaign direct mailers. There also are mobile apps, such as the Commission's.

Indeed, some participants in the Morrison Institute post-election focus groups said they use the voter-guide materials to help inform them about elections, as noted later in this report in greater detail in the section "Voter Voices." But for the survey itself, Morrison Institute concentrated on how individuals of different or no political parties used news media and personal/social networks prior to casting their ballot in the 2016 election.

The overall study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How does political identification of individuals and their social networks influence interactions within social networks?
2. How does political identification influence media use?
3. What is the relationship between the type of media use and the number of sources?
4. How does the political identification of individual's social networks influence media use?

Morrison Institute Focus Group

"I get vast majority of my news through various (sources). Following Facebook. I'll follow different newspapers, news agencies, journalists and even independent radio talk show guys. I like to follow a lot of them and see what articles they post because I am kind of torn in between. I have my values. I have my personal opinions on lots of things. At the same time, I am open to hearing the other viewpoints."

—Registered independent, male



The social influences of independent voters were contrasted with traditionally Democratic and Republican voters. The focus was on two major influences: media consumption and personal networks. Comparing all three groups' answers to political- and media-related questions provided insight into how individuals' global views can be shaped in very different worlds. There was no content analysis regarding news media in this study, with media sources identified as the ones that liberals, moderates and conservatives viewed most often.

Study Findings

To measure media use, political news sources were scored on a continuum of "left" to "right" based on the use differences between strong Republicans and Democrats. The scored sources range between *The New York Times* on the left (or liberal) spectrum to FOX News on the right (or conservative). As the average score of individual media use moved "right," the number of media sources decreases dramatically. For instance, nearly 8 in 10 Arizona Republicans use FOX News as their primary source. No other news source for Republicans ranked above 54 percent.

Arizona Democrats and independents were more similar in using a variety of TV news sources such as CNN, NBC, PBS, ABC and CBS. Independents, however, relied less on TV news due to their internet preference.

Meanwhile, the study found Arizona Republicans talk politics with independent friends at the same frequency as they talk with their Republican friends. However, Republicans largely forgo such dialogue with Democratic friends.

There is evidence that suggests independents may moderate the partisan media consumption through social networks by sharing political news in discussion with members of both major parties. The Morrison Institute study showed that while Republicans with Republican friends score the most conservative on media use, Republicans with independent friends score average on the media-use scale, suggesting a moderating role by independent voters.

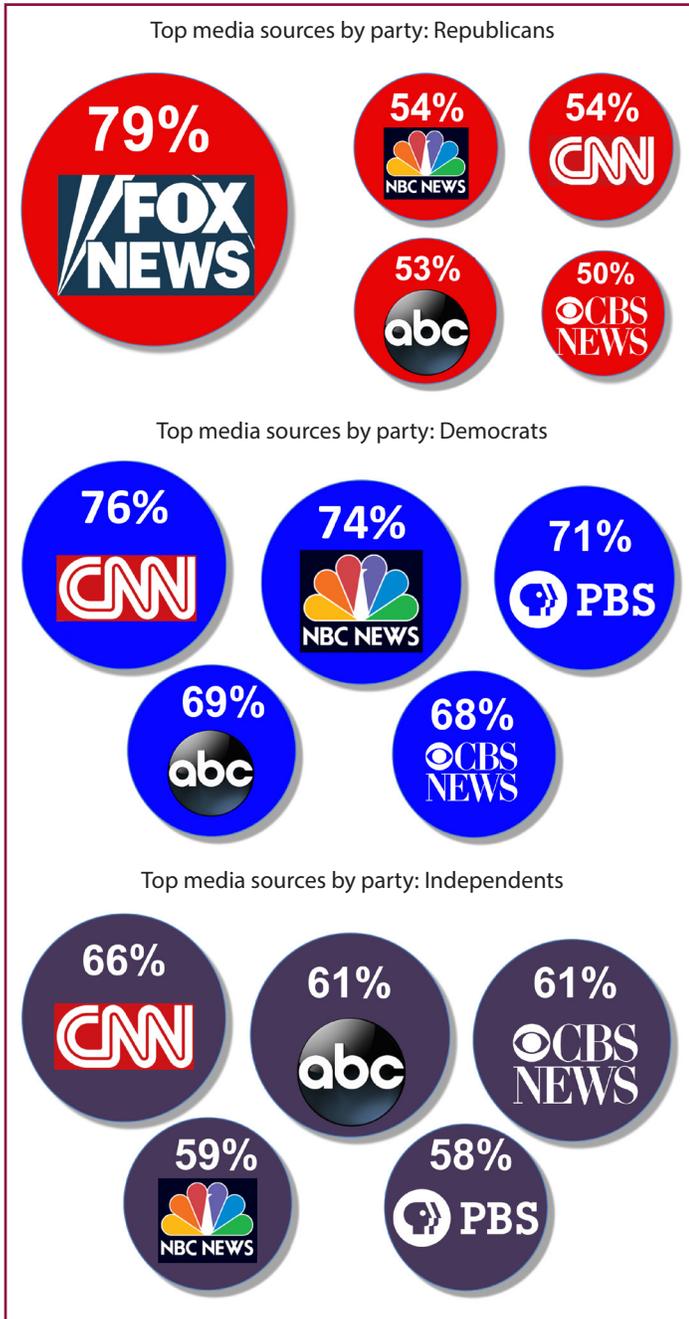
Other findings from the Morrison Institute survey:

- Arizona independents, especially among younger voters, use the internet as their main source for voter information – much more than partisans, who prefer to use TV more, especially if age 51 or over.
- Older members of the Republican Party are more conservative than their younger counterparts in terms of media, while younger independents and Democrats are more liberal than their older counterparts.
- Older independents in Arizona are more center, whereas young independents largely track with Democrats toward more progressive news coverage.
- Regarding social media and social networks, young Democrats in Arizona are the most likely to end a friendship over a political dispute.

Media Use and Political Party Affiliation

Individuals from different political parties and ages use media differently. The Morrison Institute survey showed that independents use the internet as a source of news at a far higher rate than either Republicans or Democrats. About 46 percent of Arizona independents use the internet as the primary source of news, compared to only about a third of Republicans and Democrats, both of whom greatly favor television (48 percent).

Figure 1: Arizona TV Viewership as Main Sources for Political News



TV viewership as main sources for political news showed some differences between Arizona Republicans and others (Democrats and independents), with Republicans greatly relying on FOX News as their primary choice at 79 percent. No other TV news source for Republicans scored in the 70 percent or even 60 percent level, whereas Democrats and independents frequented several news sources at similar levels. *Figure 1* shows Arizona TV viewership among parties/no party as main sources for political news.

The Information Age has changed the information hunting-and-gathering behaviors of Americans across the board. For example, even when radio and printed sources are combined they were considerably less of a main news source for Arizona Democrats/Republicans and independents than either the internet or TV.

Figure 2 illustrates these distributions, with Republicans/Democrats preferring television over the internet. Independents, on the other hand, favor the internet over TV for as their primary source and rank newspapers as their least favorite.

Internet use versus television, print and radio is largely driven by younger voters. A statistical model⁴ shows the likelihood of different party and age combinations choosing the internet as the most important source of news. Figure 3 examines these primary news sources by age.

Figure 2: Primary Source of News by Partisanship

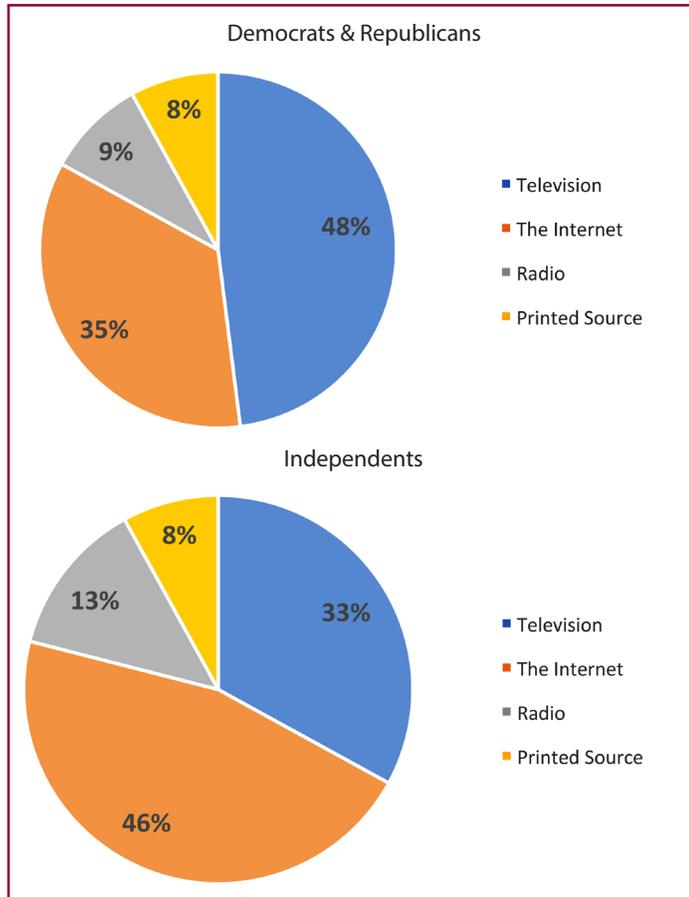
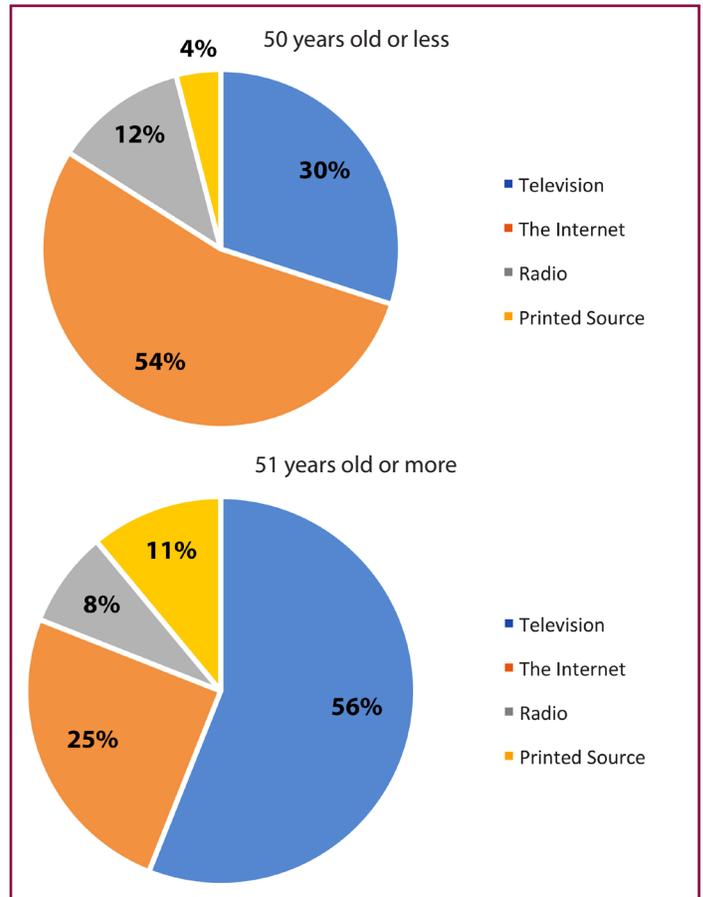


Figure 3: Primary Source of News by Age

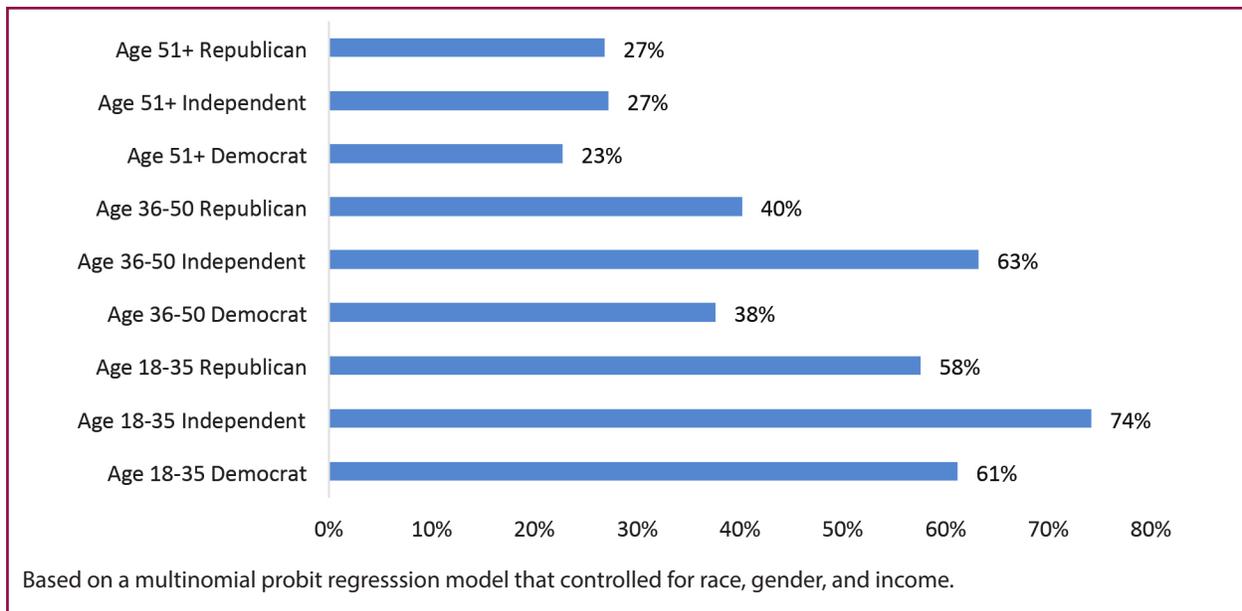


National research notes the many reasons individuals more frequently use one media format over another, with a Digital Divide occurring on many fronts. Among the disparities found between U.S. users of newer computers and new technologies such as smart phones and social media are differences in urban/rural, race/ethnicity, family income and educational attainment.⁵

⁴ Specifically, a multinomial probit regression model that estimates the likelihood of answers to questions based on a set of predictor variables such as political party and age, along with control variables such as race, gender and income.

⁵ *The State of the Urban/Rural Digital Divide*. The National Telecommunication & Information Administration, which is part of the U.S. Department of Commerce. <https://www.ntia.doc.gov/blog/2016/state-urbanrural-digital-divide>.

Figure 4: Predicted Chance of Internet as most Important News Source by Age and Party



For the Morrison Institute study, there appeared to be various preferences according to age – but not exclusively. *Figure 4* shows that among younger voters, independents are far more likely to choose the internet over other sources of news than their Republicans and Democrats counterparts. But 63 percent of independents age 36 to 50 also cite the internet as an important news source, compared with about 40 percent of partisans.

Social Networks

Communication patterns within the social networks of respondents also showed differences between Democrats, Republicans and independents. Key predictors in terms of discussing political or government matters with friends are the party/non-party of the respondent and the party/non-party of each of their named friends.

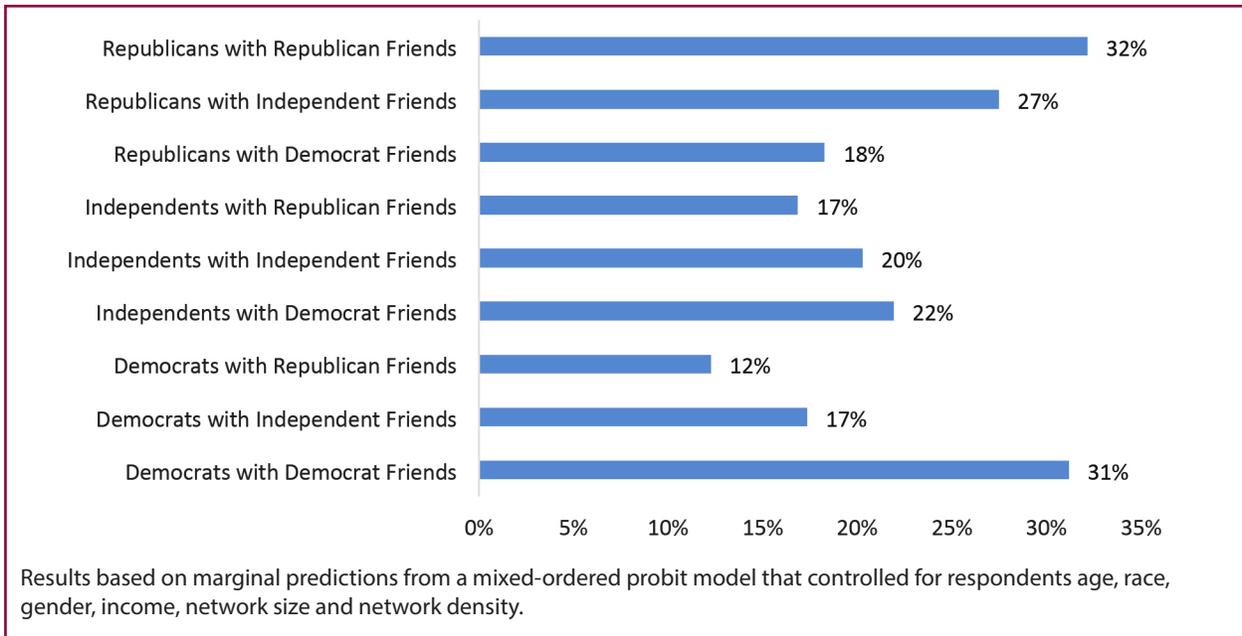
Among those surveyed, as *Figure 5* shows, partisans frequently talk with friends of the same party about 31 percent of the time. However, Republicans are much more likely to talk with independents (at 27 percent) than Democrats do with their independent friends (at 17 percent). Independents seemingly can speak with friends from either or no party – at 17 percent with Republicans, 22 percent with Democrats, and 20 percent with fellow independents.

Morrison Institute Focus Group

“The neighborhood that I live in and the place that I work at is very conservative, and my fellow educator friends are typically a little more liberal, more Democratic. So, it’s fun to watch kind of both sides of issues pop up in Twitter, social media, email recommendations. So, I feel like I pull the best of both.”

—Registered independent, female

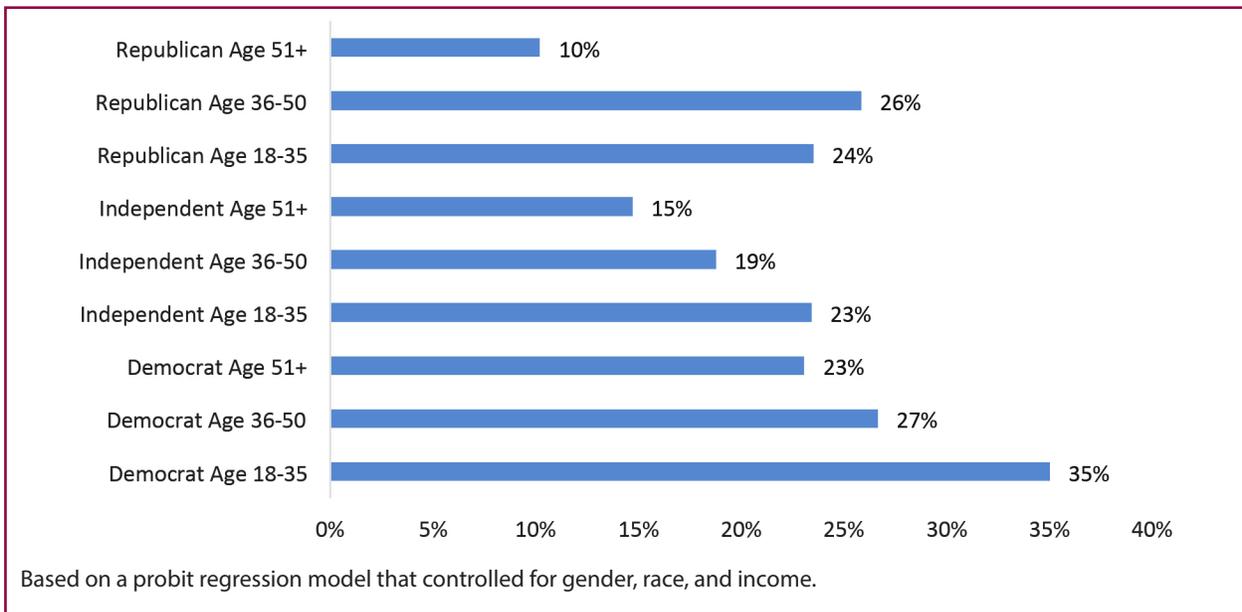
Figure 5: Predicted Chance of Talking about Politics and Government Nearly Every Day



Who’s not talking? At the bottom of the scale of predicted chance of talking politics and government nearly every day, just 12 percent of Democrats would likely chat with Republican friends. Republicans, meanwhile, have an 18 percent chance of dialogue with Democrat friends.

Sometimes, political dialogue can end in argument and harsh feelings. *Figure 6* presents evidence that young Democrats are the most likely to end a friendship over a political dispute. Least likely are Republicans age 51 or over.

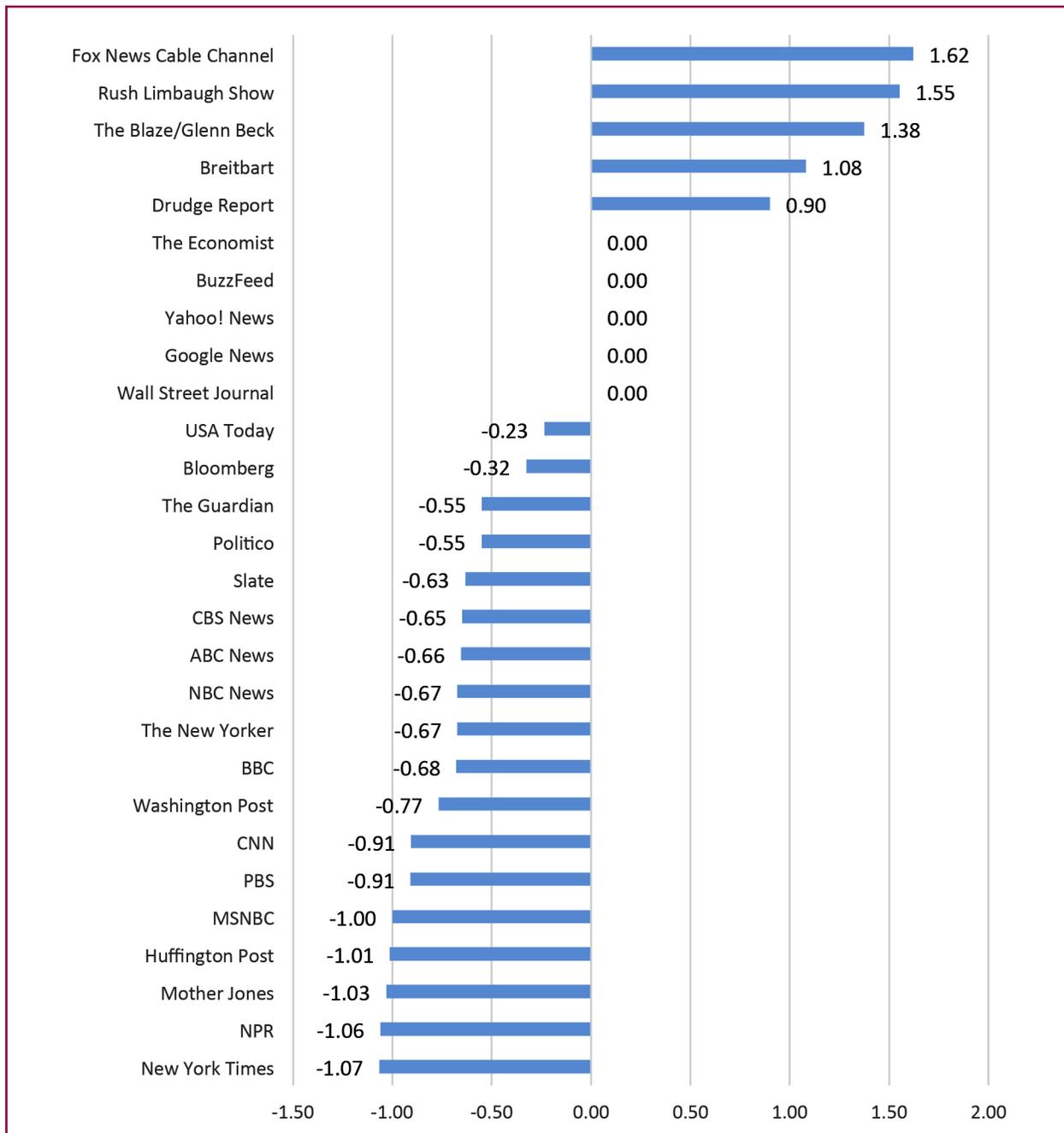
Figure 6: Predicted Chance of Ending a Friendship due to Political Disputes by Age and Party



“Friendships,” of course, come in many forms and definitions these days. In the last election year, nearly two-thirds of Americans used the social network Facebook at least monthly – about a 20 percent increase since 2012, as noted in *The Chronicle* January 2017 column, “How social media determined the election.”

Facebook said it does not keep data on the number of “unfriend” instances related to political disagreement, but polarizing political posts have continued long after the 2016 election, resulting in “unfriend” button pushes. Political debate also occurs in person – over dinner, drinks, family gatherings, the office water cooler. But that doesn’t necessarily mean the possible negative results are any different.

Figure 7: Media Source Scores Based on Statistical Model



Media Use

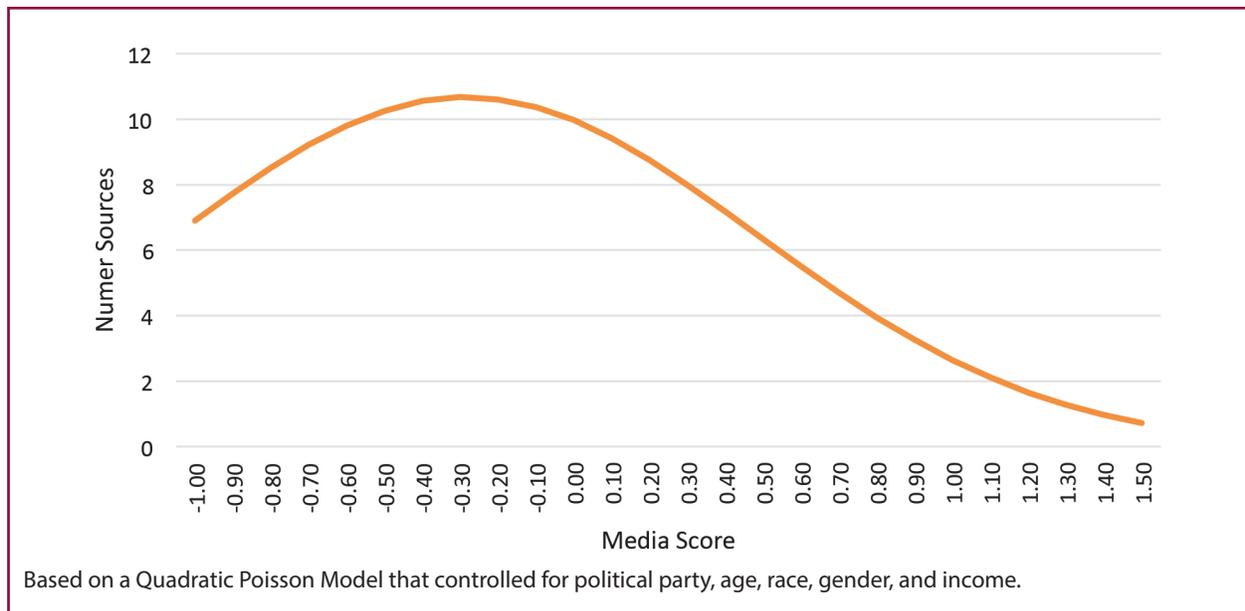
Respondents were asked if they used a variety of media sources for news. Statistical models controlling for age, race, gender and income calculated a score for each media source based on the differing likelihood of a strong Republican using the source compared to a strong Democrat. If strong Republicans were more likely to use a source compared to Democrats, the media source was scored with a positive number (more likely), whereas if strong Republicans were less likely, the media source was scored with a negative number (less likely). The magnitude of the score indicates the strength of the difference.

Figure 7 illustrates media use according to political spectrum. Positive or “right” scores mean that the source was more likely to be used by Republicans/conservatives and less likely to be used by Democrats/liberals. Conversely, negative or “left” scores were indications that the source was less likely to be used by Republicans/conservatives and more likely to be used by Democrats/liberals. If the difference was not statistically significant, the score was set to 0 (neutral). On the scale, FOX News and Rush Limbaugh were on the far right, and *The New York Times* and NPR on the far left. Again, the study did not examine media content analysis.

Media Consumption

Individuals with more typical media consumption patterns used the most media sources. For example, looking at Figure 8, the average number of media sources for respondents with media consumption scores of about -0.3 was about 11. The larger media consumption scores were associated with a fewer number of sources. This was most evident for the far-right media consumption scores, where the number of sources is less than 3.

Figure 8: Predicted Number of Media Sources by Respondent Media Score



Methodology

Survey

Data was collected from a lengthy survey of Arizona registered voters. The survey instrument asked respondents about their political persuasion, sources of news, and interactions with their own personal networks.

Respondents were asked to self-identify on a seven-point political spectrum used in the American National Election Studies (ANES)⁶:

- Strong Democrat
- Democrat
- Independent, leans Democrat
- Independent
- Independent, leans Republican
- Republican
- Strong Republican

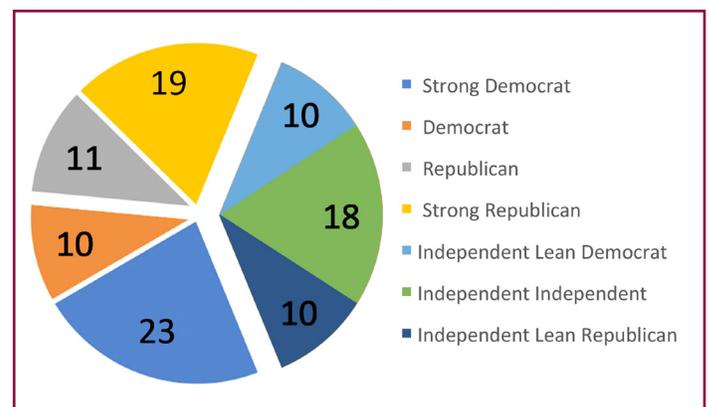
The instrument then named several media sources and asked whether the respondent used the media source, was aware of the media source but didn't use it, or was unaware of the media source. The survey then asked the respondent to name up to five friends, if those individuals know each other, and the political persuasion of their network members.⁷

The survey included established measures of political persuasion of opinions on a variety of issues, and assess where each broadly classified political group (Democrat, Republicans and independents) seeks out information and news in Arizona, replicating Pew Research Center and academic work.⁸

In addition to media consumption, this survey also enumerated details about individual personal networks. The sample was not designed to be representative, but was instead designed to be balanced. As such, roughly equal numbers of registered Republicans, Democrats, and independents were called for the survey equally from Maricopa County, Pima County and the rural counties in Arizona.

The result was a sample of 1,315 registered voters – 38 percent independents (10 percent who lean Republican, 10 percent who lean Democrat, 18 percent simply independent) and a mix of Republicans and Democrats. The percent breakdown of political persuasion is presented in *Figure 9*.

Figure 9: Distribution of Sample Along ANES Political Spectrum



⁶ American National Election Studies (ANES). (2015, November 11). Party Identification 7-Point Scale. Retrieved April 28, 2016, from http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/toptable/tab2a_1.htm

⁷ This methodology is well established, see, e.g., Burt, Ronald S. "Network items and the general social survey." *Social networks* 6, no. 4 (1984): 293-339.

⁸ See, e.g., Rainie, Lee, Aaron Smith, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry Brady, and Sidney Verba. "Social media and political engagement." *Pew Internet & American Life Project* 19 (2012), and Prior, Markus. "News vs. entertainment: How increasing media choice widens gaps in political knowledge and turnout." *American Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 3 (2005): 577-592.

However, the sample was skewed to older individuals. About 64 percent of the sample was over the age of 50. *Figure 10* presents the distribution of age across the sample.

The social network of the respondent was classified as predominantly Democrat, Republican or independent. *Figure 11* presents the distribution of the social network sample, showing that 65 percent of the sample’s social network was predominantly the same party as the respondent. However, there were non-trivial percents of respondents with

Figure 10: Age Distribution of Sample

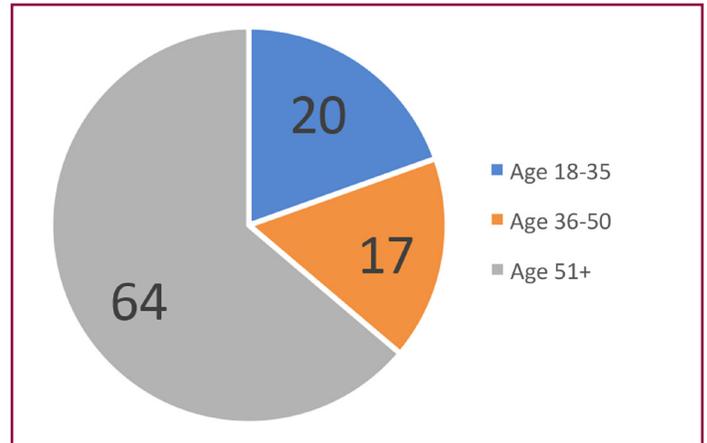
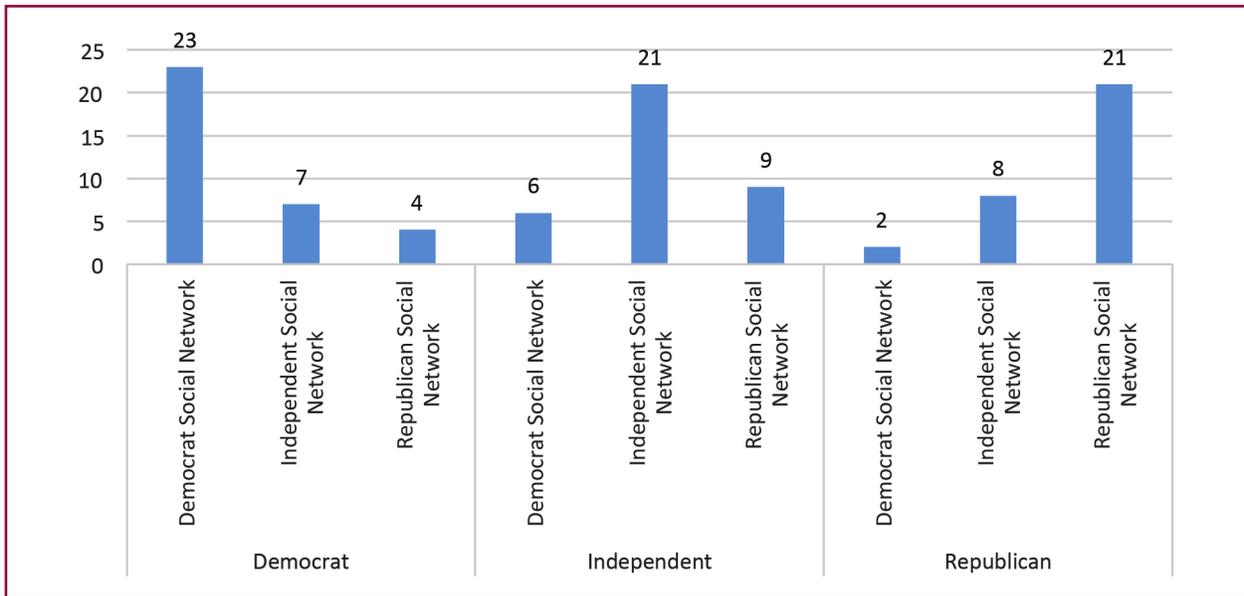


Figure 11: Respondent Distribution by Party and Social Network Type



independent networks. About 7 percent of the sample was a Democrat with an independent network, and about 8 percent of the sample was a Republican with an independent network. *Figure 11* shows predicted media score quantiles by party and social network type.

To examine the influence that friends have on media consumption, statistical models were used to look at the distribution (25th, 50th, and 75th percentiles) of media consumption scores by respondent party and social network party representation.

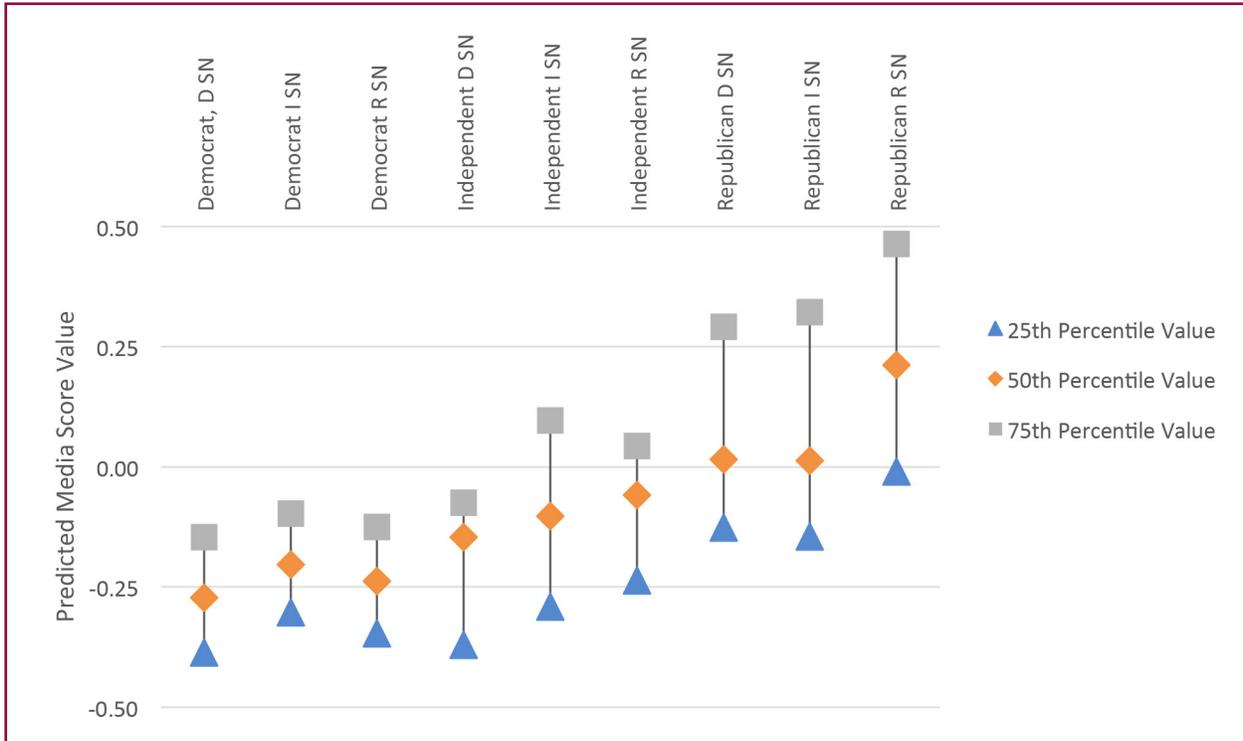
Morrison Institute Focus Group

“Family, we don’t talk politics, it’s too fiery. It would make Thanksgiving far too awkward, so we just – We don’t.”

—Registered Democrat, male

Figure 12 presents the distribution of media scores by respondent party and primary social network party. For example, the column “Democrat, D SN” denotes a Democrat respondent with a mainly Democrat social network. For respondents that fall into this category, the 25th percentile of the media consumption score was about -0.39, meaning that 25 percent of the Democrat respondents with Democrat networks were more liberal in their media score than -0.39. The median (50th percentile) was about -0.27, and the 75th percentile was about -0.15. The relatively small size of the line indicates that there was little variation for these respondents. Indeed, all Democrat respondents, regardless of their social network, had similar media use profiles.

Figure 12: Predicted Media Score Quantiles by Party and Social Network Type



The pattern for Democrat respondents contrasts with the pattern for Republican respondents. Here, the median media consumption score for Republicans with Republican social networks was about 0.21, meaning that the middle-of-the-road Republican respondent with a Republican social network consumed more conservative media. However, if Republican respondents had social networks that were predominately independent or Democrat, their median media consumption was close to 0 (neutral).

Voter Voices

In addition to the quantitative survey to determine political information gathering among voters prior to the 2016 election, the Morrison Institute study on voter media consumption sought the “voice of voters” by conducting two focus groups Feb. 1 and 2, 2017.

The ballots already had been counted, election outcomes determined and enough time had passed to allow for some reflection by Arizona voters. Morrison Institute conducted the two focus group discussions with 17 Arizona voters – six registered Republicans, five registered Democrats and six independent voters (those not registered with any of Arizona’s officially designated political parties).

Focus group participants were split evenly by gender and represented a wide range of ages (the oldest first voted for President Dwight Eisenhower in 1956 and the second oldest for John F. Kennedy in 1960, while the youngest just began voting recently).

Regardless of age, gender, political preferences or education, all expressed a commitment to casting their votes wisely and thoughtfully, following deliberation and interaction with others. While their viewpoints, media habits and social networks were not included in the quantitative survey, they do seem to match the earlier results and illustrate the human interaction between Republicans, Democrats and independents.

Media sources

Based on participant comments, most voters acknowledged they seek out information from sources that concur with their own beliefs. For example, most Republicans cite FOX News as one of their most important sources for political information and as a source to help them clarify their political thinking. Democrats, on the other hand, cite MSNBC and CNN as their primary sources for political reporting and news. Further, members of each political party were quick to disparage the television news sources cited by the opposing political party members as consistently untruthful and misrepresenting the truth on all political issues – Republicans denigrated CNN and MSNBC while Democrats did the same with FOX News.

Said one registered Republican male:

“(I watch) CNN and MSNBC, especially MSNBC. I think I’d listen to them and it’s like, ‘Really? People believe that?’ And it’s just totally off the wall. But I listen to FOX News a lot and I take for what they say, but there’s certain commentators on there that are opinion commentators. They’re not news commentators, so I take what they say with a grain of salt. But there’s also news shows and they report the news and I take with what they (FOX News) say a lot more factual than a news show on MSNBC.”

A second Republican characterized his use of media to find political information in the following manner:

“(I use) different media, the newspapers, some internet. I’d say it was one site that I went to. I’d go to three or four, I’d see something come up and then I’d research that issue and see who was supporting it or how they felt about it-- the different ones. I listened to different television media quite a bit. I listened to FOX News a lot. And get input from them.”

A registered Democrat described his search for information in this exchange with the group moderator:

“I keep up in the news outlets, totally: Mother Jones, FOX News, MSNBC, CNN – you name it, I watch it. ... I pride myself on seeking out the bull-- where it’s located. And there was a lot of bull--- out there. Like, a lot. A lot more in this election than other elections. ... I have a disability so I have a lot of time on my hands. And I question whether people who have jobs and families and other commitments, (if) they follow as closely the issues.”

Independents who participated in the focus groups tend to cast a much wider net when seeking out political news and information. Further, they appear to be more conscientious in determining who they should vote for and how they should vote on ballot propositions. Keeping in mind the focus groups were comprised of only 17 voters, the Arizona independents interviewed said they had reviewed election information from such diverse sources as FOX News, MSNBC, CNN, talk radio, numerous websites, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times* and *The Arizona Republic*, REDDIT, and fact-checkers.

The following comment from a male independent voter captures the thoroughness applied by the independent voters represented in the groups:

“I get vast majority of my news through various – following Facebook. I’ll follow different newspapers, news agencies, journalists, and even independent radio talk show guys. I like to follow a lot of them and see what articles they post because I am kind of torn in between. I have my values. I have my personal opinions on lots of things. At the same time, I am open to hearing the other viewpoints. So, I usually start with what basically is my personal intuition. And then I start researching both sides of the coin. So, an issue will come up and I’ll see.

“I’ve got friends that are strongly on the left and friends that are strongly on the right and they’ll throw all sorts of posts out and that gives me the opportunity to see what arguments both people have. Then usually from there, I’ll start to gravitate towards one side of the issue or the other.

“Fact-checker sites are some of my favorite ones. I did follow a few of those. And I also thoroughly investigated the (presidential campaigns), both Donald Trump’s and Hillary Clinton’s candidate page, online, to look to see where they stood on issues, how they described their plans, and their stances, even looked at the pages for third-party candidates, as well. It was really hard for me to organize everything, but I tried to get at least an overall sense of what was going on and what people were promising.”

A female independent voter characterized her political searches as follows:

“Well, I’m an educator. So, I will say that I look at things kind of through that lens of being an educator. And I have a lot of friends who obviously are educators as well. ... I’m pretty (much a) techie, so I do have Facebook, and Twitter, and Instagram. And I kind of read different – I follow different news outlets. NBC usually, *The New York Times*. I read *The New York Times*, I have a subscription. *The Arizona Republic*. Those are the ones I generally read. And that’s kind of how I get most of my information about the topics and the candidates.”



The female independent voter also said that in her social circle of friends she discussed the campaigns, election and voter information she gathered. “And (with) family. And I’m from a family that is very divided – lots of Republicans, lots of Democrats.”

It is important to note that, not surprisingly, younger voters (those 45 or younger) are much more likely to cite internet sites for their information than are older voters.

Among the participants, talk radio was a relatively popular source of information, particularly among the more conservative participants. Talk show hosts cited include Dennis Prager, Rush Limbaugh, Mike Gallagher and Larry Elder.

The voter information booklets provided by the Arizona Secretary of State’s Office and the Arizona Citizens Clean Elections Commission also were mentioned as popular sources for election-related information. Group participants did not/could not distinguish between the two booklets but considered them an important component in their information search.

Comments concerning the booklets include:

“What I’ll do for propositions and local stuff, they send out that (voter guide) booklet, I’ll take an evening, I’ll sit the booklet down on my computer, and just Google all of it.”

“Yeah. I use that booklet a lot myself. You go into a bit more depth. Same thing. If I can’t find very much information, usually I’ll just rely on intuition like (a fellow participant) said, and how I personally feel about it. But I will try to at least go through that booklet they send me, figure out more what they’re saying. I like it because it seems to be fairly neutral compared to all the other stuff that’s sent out.”

“Well, I’m the official election representative for my family. I get the paper booklets on the candidates and the issues, and I read through those ... things that people throw away (*laughter*). And I laugh at them sometimes because they’re just full of opinions and it’s interesting to me. And I make a cheat sheet for my husband and myself, kind of summarizing what I’ve taken in on some of those topics.”

Voter types

The groups represented a wide range of individuals and “voter types.” For example, the groups included at least one voter who represented what has been described in media coverage as a disenchanting, white, working-class male. His comments are notable because he so clearly articulates what the media have reported, including a distrust of news and politicians in general, and a heavy reliance on “I guess my life experience.”

News, social media and social network played little in his decision to vote for Trump:

“And seeing how my feelings towards the nation is in decline, and I thought maybe this independent guy who don’t owe anybody anything could maybe bring this back around some. Because he’s not beholden to anyone. That’s why I picked him.”

Another individual in the focus group – a single-issue, right-wing conservative voter with religious convictions – also limits election-related information to match political and moral viewpoints:

“I tend to be very conservative. Most of my friends and family are conservative – probably all of us are. We get our conservatism from church, from the Bible, from what we believe that the Bible says. So, that’s my biggest influence. That is not to downgrade anyone else. It’s just where we are or where I am. As far as what I read, I read a lot from the Center for Arizona Policy (an ultra-conservative lobbying organization) because abortion is a huge issue for me. That is the line for me. Period.”

Social networks

Participants noted they discuss political candidates and political issues with family and friends – their social circles. Further, most indicated they have friends and family who both agree and disagree with their political leanings. Predictably the influence of family and friends within social networks tends to be very informal and differs markedly from individual to individual.

With a sample of only 17 participants it is not possible to characterize subtle difference among Republicans, Democrats and independents. That is better done through the quantitative survey accompanying this report. That said, members of all three groups noted the influence of members of their social networks.

One female independent participant characterized the influence of her social circle in the following way:

“I’m friends with kind of a mix. It’s interesting. The neighborhood that I live in and the place that I work at is very conservative and my fellow educator friends are typically a little more liberal, more Democratic. So, it’s fun to watch kind of both sides of issues pop up in Twitter, social media, email recommendations. So I feel like I pull the best of both.”

Another participant, a registered Republican, noted the influence of one particular individual:

“Well, my boyfriend is a lawyer and he’s also very conservative. He’s one of the few people in my life who’s a conservative. And he’s well-educated, but he’s also a little too passionate about his conservative views. So, he’s probably most influential on me, but I also take what he says with a grain of salt, because I know that he’s so right-winged.”

Another registered Republican noted:

“I have a circle of friends that I’m very close with and the vast majority of them are – we all agreed on one thing. I didn’t know for sure who I was going to cast my vote for, but I knew for sure it wasn’t going to be for Hillary Clinton. And all of my friends agreed with me. For a variety of reasons. But for the first time, all of us went right up to the wire. Right up to the wire.”



An independent voter noted his spouse's influence:

“My wife definitely has an influence over me. And we discuss it a lot. We talk. Our daughter, she's 11 now, and we have a lot of political discussions in the house. And she asked us a lot of pointed questions about why ... we believe on certain issues the way we believe. And so, that really gets to the core of things, when your kid says, 'Why do you believe that?' So I think that had a big influence on both of us this year.”

A Democratic participant characterized the influence of friends and family in the following manner:

“I have a friend that I discuss politics quite a bit with, and he's in mortgage banking, Chase, so when there's a lot of economic stuff or banking stuff in particular, when it comes to policy I'll talk it over with him because he has a lot better grasp on it than I do. And I discuss a lot of it with my girlfriend, as well. She has a background in criminal justices and such, so we have a lot of discussions with that. Family, we don't talk politics, it's too fiery. It would make Thanksgiving far too awkward, so we just – we don't.”

There was little if any discussion of “electronic” political discussions. If participants discuss politics with friends and family, it appears to be mostly face-to-face. This particular group of 17 voters was, for the most part, quite independent of outside influences. They did their research, pursued the media, chatted with friends and then made what they considered to be a well-informed decision about how to vote.

Finding truth

Participants were asked how they determined the “truth” of an issue or candidate in circumstances of conflicting information. While most seek out information from all sides of the issue in question and then, after their research, rely on common sense and reasoning to sort out the issue.

Some noted that, in circumstances where they could not locate the truth, they would rely on the positions/recommendations of individuals they respect, whether that person is a family member, friend or politician. A few rely on their “go-to” media source to determine the truth – depending upon their political preferences that could be MSNBC, CNN, FOX News or any of a handful of websites. Most felt they could reason through the issue and make a common-sense conclusion that was close to the truth.

Voter Voices Conclusions

While the small sample size provided by the Morrison Institute focus groups negates drawing any firm conclusions about voters in general or by political party, it is noteworthy to mention the following themes that emerged:

- This political year was unlike any other. The long, arduous, Republican presidential primary campaign, followed by the contentious race between the two major parties' nominees, required more research and background information than in the past.
- Both parties' candidates were largely considered to be poor choices for president.
- The majority of these voters takes the election seriously and did detailed research to make voting decisions.
- Most voters go to information sources that reinforce their own beliefs and positions on issues and candidates.
- Young voters tend to visit numerous internet sites in their search for accurate political information. Older voters rely on traditional sources, newspapers and network television.
- Republicans and Democrats are highly suspicious of the sources of information used by those registered in the opposing party.
- Independents use a wider variety of sources for their information gathering than either Democrats or Republicans.
- Voters are much more likely to rely on friends and family in determining who they should support in more "obscure" races – e.g., judges, state offices, and corporation commissioners.
- News media sources tend to be viewed as biased, particularly if those sources conflict with the voters' beliefs and political positions.
- They use a wide range of information sources – numerous news/information websites, candidate websites, blogs, a variety of TV channels, print media, voter booklets and easy electronic access to friends and acquaintances provide voters with more sources than they can use. What they lack is a way to sort out who is telling them the truth, other than relying on their own political leanings.

Appendix A: Media Scores for Sources, Percent Use, and Use Rank by Party

Source	Media Score	Republican		Democrat		Independent	
		Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank
New York Times	-1.07	26	19	52	9	38	15
NPR	-1.06	38	11	65	7	56	6
Mother Jones	-1.03	6	28	28	22	17	26
Huffington Post	-1.01	23	22	50	10	41	12
MSNBC	-1.00	40	10	67	6	49	9
PBS	-0.91	48	6	71	3	58	5
CNN	-0.91	54	3	76	1	66	1
Washington Post	-0.77	24	21	41	13	40	13
BBC	-0.68	42	7	59	8	53	7
The New Yorker	-0.67	18	25	35	17	26	22
NBC News	-0.67	54	2	74	2	59	4
ABC News	-0.66	53	4	69	4	61	2
CBS News	-0.65	50	5	68	5	61	3
Slate	-0.63	15	27	27	23	24	24
Politico	-0.55	28	18	40	14	35	16
The Guardian	-0.55	17	26	29	21	29	20
Bloomberg	-0.32	25	20	33	18	31	19
USA Today	-0.23	41	8	48	11	42	11
Wall Street Journal	0.00*	38	12	39	15	38	14
Google News	0.00*	37	13	43	12	44	10
Yahoo! News	0.00*	32	16	31	20	34	17
BuzzFeed	0.00*	23	23	33	19	32	18
The Economist	0.00*	22	24	27	24	28	21
Drudge Report	0.90	34	15	12	25	24	25
Breitbart	1.08	35	14	7	26	26	23
The Blaze/Glenn Beck	1.38	32	17	6	28	16	27
Rush Limbaugh Show	1.55	40	9	7	27	15	28
Fox News Cable Channel	1.62	79	1	38	16	51	8

* Score set to 0 due to non-significant difference between Strong Republicans and Strong Democrats

April 2017 | Morrison Institute for Public Policy, Arizona's premier think tank, was established in 1982. An Arizona State University resource, Morrison Institute utilizes nonpartisan research, analysis, polling and public dialogue to examine critical state and regional issues. Morrison Institute provides data- and evidence-based review to help improve the state and region's quality of life. Morrison Institute is part of the ASU College of Public Service and Community Solutions.

MorrisonInstitute.asu.edu