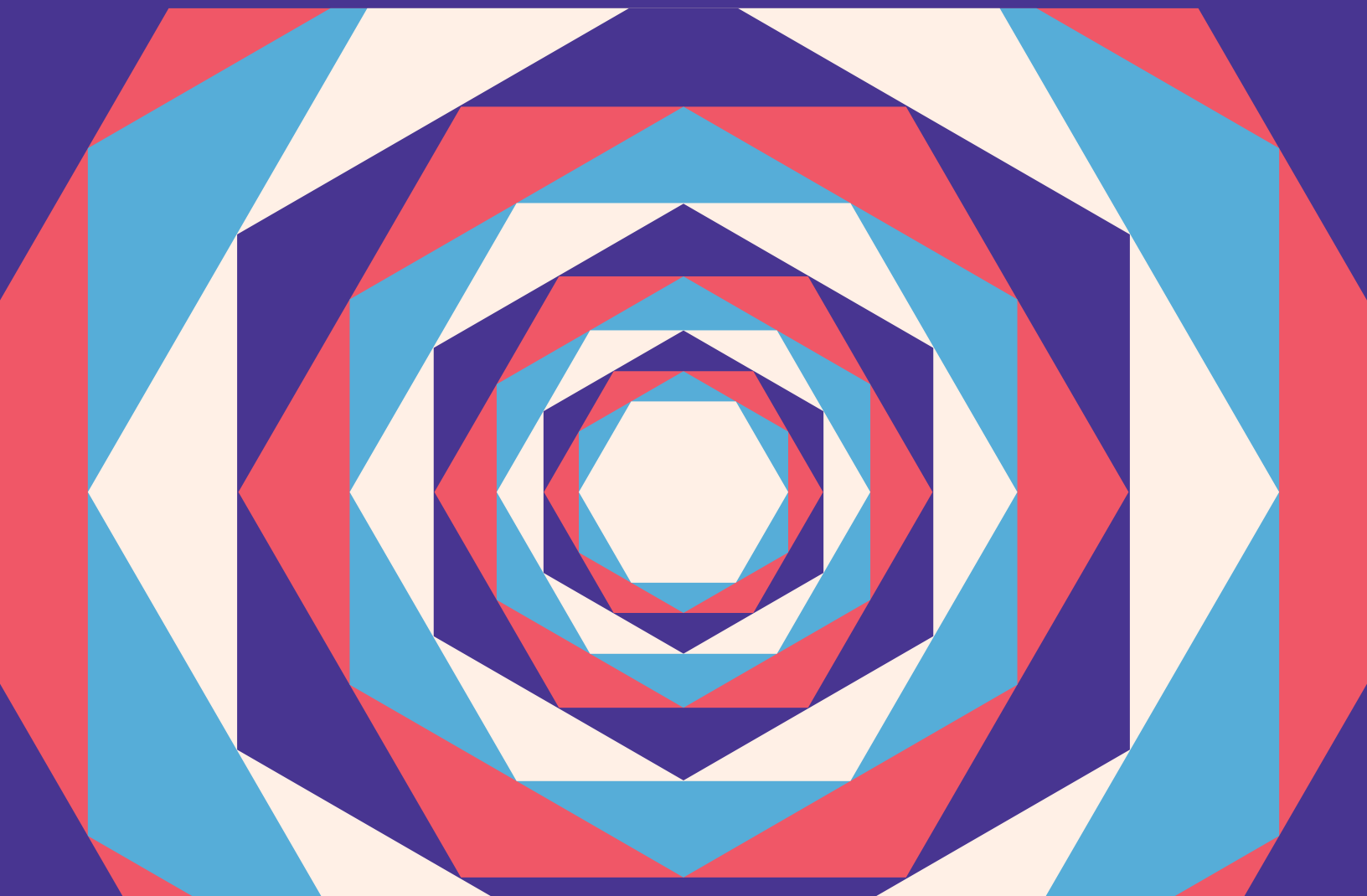


State of Public Trust in Local News



ABOUT THE SERIES

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation's Trust, Media and Democracy initiative aims to address the decline in trust for journalism and other democratic institutions by examining the causes and supporting solutions.

As part of the multidisciplinary initiative launched in 2017, Knight Foundation partnered with Gallup on a research series to better understand Americans' evolving relationship with the media and to inform solutions to the information challenges of our day.

Knight Foundation is also investing in technologists, journalists, academic institutions and others with strong, innovative approaches to improve the flow of accurate information, prevent the spread of misinformation and better inform communities.

Knight Foundation believes that democracy thrives when communities are informed and engaged.

For more, visit kf.org/tmd.

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Introduction

Local news media are a cornerstone of democracy in the United States. They help keep residents informed of the significant issues facing their cities, towns and nearby areas; hold political and civic leaders accountable for their actions; and foster a sense of community among their readers and viewers. Public opinion research has shown that local news sources have typically earned more trust than their national counterparts.

This study — part of Knight Foundation's Trust, Media and Democracy initiative with Gallup — probes Americans' perceptions and assessments of local media in depth.

It finds that Americans mostly believe local news media are doing a good job performing many of their democratic roles and responsibilities. Americans assess local coverage of most important local issues positively, and they generally see local media as in step with, rather than at odds with, the political leanings of their local community.

While Americans give local news organizations stronger ratings than national organizations across most trust dimensions, such as relevancy and transparency, evidence suggests this trust advantage is more a sign of skepticism toward national media than of enthusiasm toward local news organizations.

Partisanship is becoming a powerful lens through which people evaluate not just national news organizations like CNN and Fox News, but also their local newspaper or TV station. Democrats are more likely than Republicans to trust local news to perform their roles, but the gap is especially wide when it comes to getting the facts right. Although 51% of Americans do not perceive that their local news has become more biased in recent years, those who believe it has are more likely to see a shift toward liberal views. Critically, Americans who perceive a shift in the bias of local news coverage are about half as likely to trust local news as those who do not.

The study findings present a dilemma for local news. The data suggest that moving into more aggressive coverage of social and political issues could further polarize views — and possibly lead to an erosion of trust. However, these are not issues that local news organizations can abandon without abdicating some of their mandate to help democracy flourish.

Local news may have built a trust advantage by being associated with reporting largely nonpartisan topics like local business development, crime, cultural events, the weather and sports, but the more it wades into coverage of national issues, the more vulnerable it may be to accusations of bias and a loss of community trust. Even as research suggests that local news sources are increasingly relying on nonlocal news stories,¹ the public hasn't noted such a shift. Instead, to maintain its trust advantage, new findings suggest that local news organizations can increase their focus on local content.

1 An analysis of 16,000 stories, across 100 U.S. communities, finds very little actual local news. (n.d.). Retrieved October 7, 2019, from Nieman Lab website: <https://www.niemanlab.org/2018/08/an-analysis-of-16000-stories-across-100-u-s-communities-finds-very-little-actual-local-news/>

Executive Summary

More Americans trust local news than national news. Forty-five percent of Americans trust reporting by local news organizations “a great deal” or “quite a lot,” compared with 31% for national news organizations.

Local news bests national news in earning more trust of Americans for coverage that Americans can use in their daily life (79% to 19%) and in reporting without bias (66% to 31%), among other roles and responsibilities. And, local journalists have more positive attributes than national journalists, Americans say: Local journalists are more likely than national journalists to be seen as caring (36% vs. 4%, respectively), trustworthy (29% vs. 8%), accurate (25% vs. 8%), and neutral or unbiased (23% vs. 10%). Republicans favor local journalists for the positive attributes by wide margins, while Democrats make few distinctions between the two groups.

Local news is accomplishing most of its key tasks of informing communities: 61% of Americans say their local news organizations do an “excellent” or “good” job of educating people on what is going on in their area.

But local news also ranks behind most other local institutions in public confidence, with only local government ranking lower: 37% of Americans express “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of trust for local news organizations in their area, compared with 73% for local libraries and 56% for local law enforcement.

Partisanship is now coloring how people evaluate local news organizations. Half of Democrats express confidence in local news organizations, while only 27% of Republicans do — a 23-percentage-point gap. These partisan levels of confidence are despite the fact that a majority of Americans think the local news media strike a balanced ideological perspective: 53% describe their local news media as “about right,” while 26% say it is “too liberal” and 15% “too conservative.”

Americans are divided on whether local media have become more biased. Fifty-one percent say coverage from news organizations in their local area has “stayed about the same,” while 37% see it moving “in a more liberal direction” and 11% “in a more conservative direction.” Those who perceive a shift in local news ideology are much less trusting of local news organizations.

Americans are not fully persuaded that local news is holding powerful people and institutions accountable. Sixty percent feel local news organizations only do a “fair” or “poor” job of holding leaders accountable for their actions. And, Americans believe that several topics warrant more attention from their local news sources. Areas needing additional coverage include drug addiction (65%), K-12 education (64%), the environment (64%), and the real estate and housing market (61%).

The key for local news may be to look to those already connected to where they live. People who are strongly attached to their community or who follow the local news closely are more likely to rate local news coverage more highly. For example, 67% of people who follow the news a great deal say local news coverage of local government and politics is “excellent” or “good,” while only 24% of people who don’t follow it closely say the same.

Evaluation of Local News Performance



Most Americans agree that local news is performing well on most of the key tasks involved in serving communities and covering news topics. However, local news fares less well on more contentious tasks, like holding powerful people and institutions accountable or coverage of politicized topics that are part of the national debate.

Americans also do not consider local news to be one of their most trusted local institutions; only one other institution — local government — fares worse. While there are differences in trust in local institutions by partisanship, closer examination reveals local news does not have strong trust levels — even among Democrats, who have the highest levels of support compared with other groups. This finding suggests that Americans' attitudes toward local news are complex and mixed.

Local News Performance Is Rated Positively in Most Respects

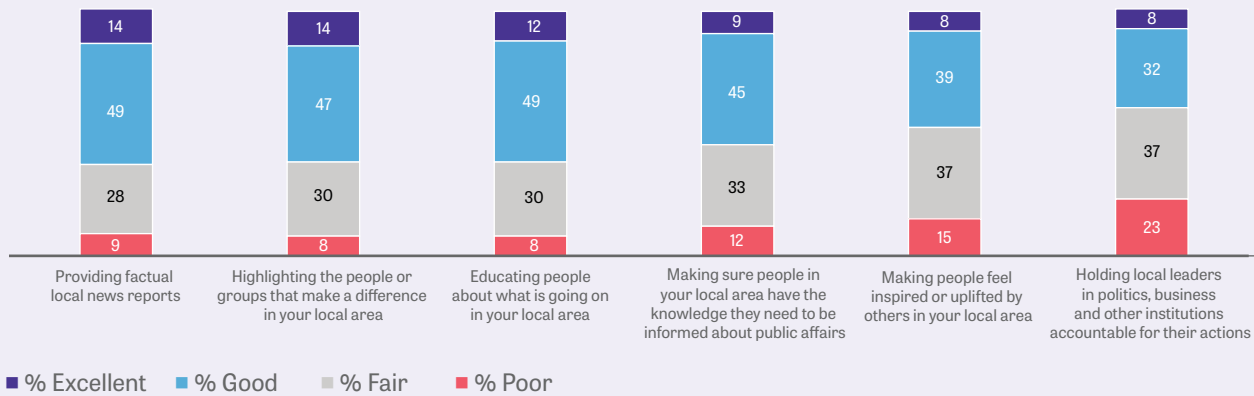
Majorities of Americans say local news is doing an “excellent” or “good” job in fulfilling many of its responsibilities. The most notable exceptions are making people feel inspired and holding local leaders accountable for their actions — 52% and 60%, respectively, feel local news does only a “fair” or “poor” job of these tasks.

Most Americans agree that local news organizations perform their job well. However, these organizations are not one of Americans' most trusted local institutions.

FIGURE 1

Job performance of local news

Do you think news organizations in your local area do an excellent, good, fair or poor job at each of the following?



Note: "No answer" responses not shown.

Knight Foundation/Gallup June 13-July 22, 2019 (combined data from three surveys)

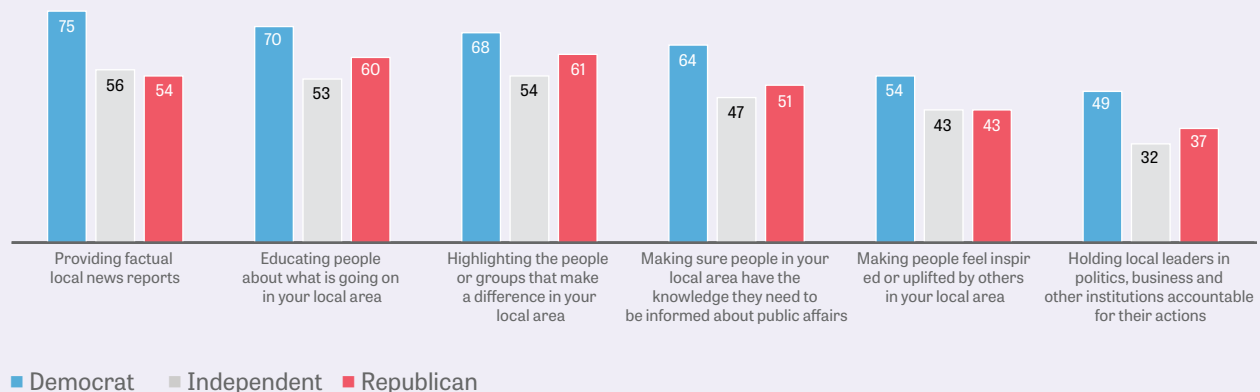
Democrats rate the job performance of local news consistently higher than Republicans and independents do. The largest partisan gap emerges over providing factual local news reports, with 75% of Democrats saying local news organizations are doing an "excellent" or "good" job, compared with 54% of Republicans. Less than half of Democrats, independents or Republicans say local news does a good job holding leaders accountable for their actions.

FIGURE 2

Job performance of local news, by political affiliation

Do you think news organizations in your local area do an excellent, good, fair or poor job at each of the following?

% Who answer "excellent" or "good"



Knight Foundation/Gallup June 13-July 22, 2019 (combined data from three surveys)

Americans Approve of Local Coverage of Many Topics but Are Less Positive About Coverage of Politicized Issues

Asked to evaluate local news performance on each of 14 issues, majorities of Americans say local news is doing an “excellent” or “good” job covering five topics: weather (77%), sports (69%), entertainment (63%), crime and public safety (58%), and traffic and transportation (52%).

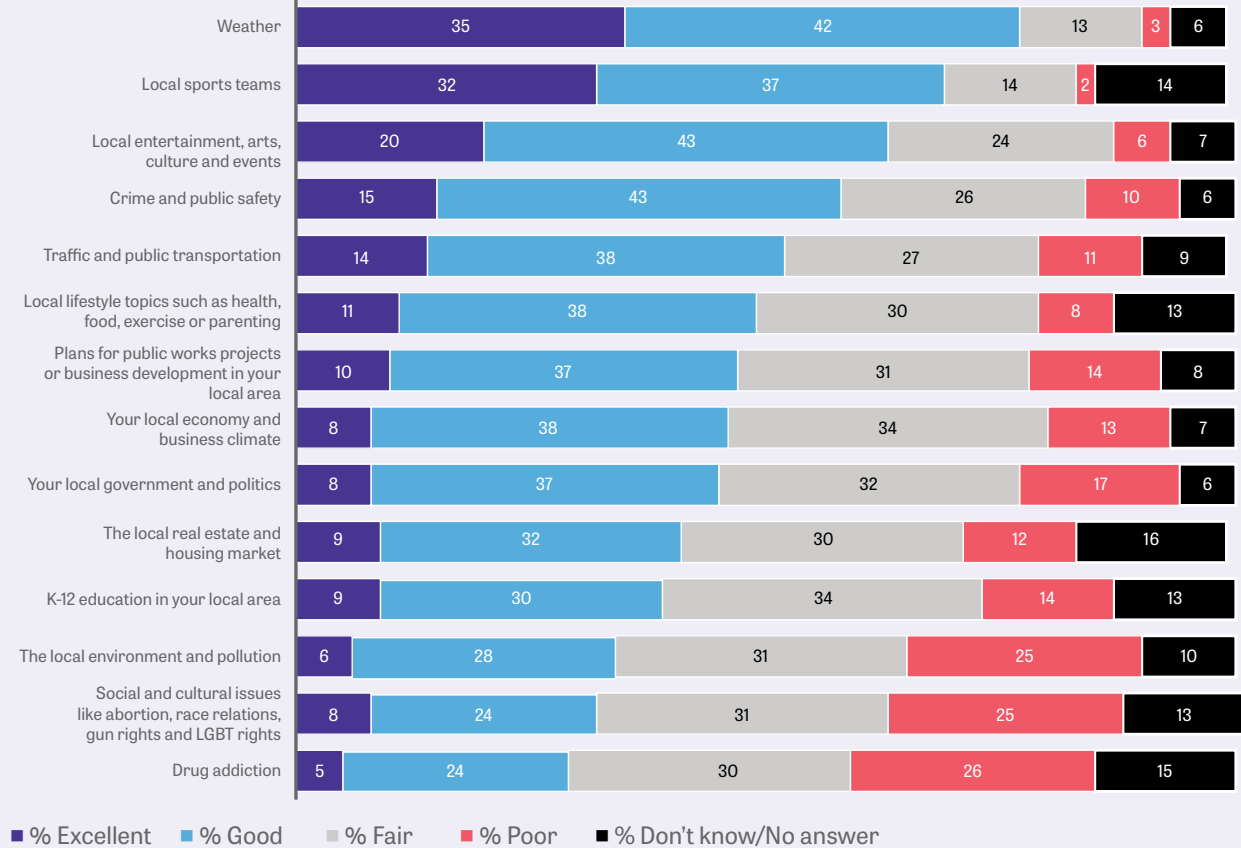
Approval of coverage declines considerably on topics that touch on partisan issues or involve in-depth, nuanced journalism, such as the environment (34%), and social and cultural issues like abortion, race relations, gun rights and LGBT rights (32%).

Majorities say local news is doing a “fair” or “poor” job covering three topics: drug addiction (56%), social and cultural issues (56%), and the local environment and pollution (56%).

FIGURE 3

Job performance of local news on topics

Do you think news organizations in your local area are generally doing an excellent, good, fair or poor job covering the following?



Note: Due to rounding, percentages may total 100% +/- 1%.

Knight Foundation/Gallup June 24-July 11, 2019

To further probe perceived shortcomings in local news coverage, respondents dissatisfied with coverage of a particular topic were asked why they held that view. Respondents who believe coverage of a given topic is “fair”

or “poor” indicated whether they believed local news wasn’t giving the topic enough attention, or it was giving it sufficient attention but covering the issue poorly. These responses varied by issue.

Almost twice as many respondents are dissatisfied with the amount — rather than quality — of coverage of drug addiction, the local environment and K-12 education in their local area. Conversely, majorities of those unhappy with coverage of weather, politics, sports and crime are dissatisfied with the quality of the coverage of these topics, as opposed to the amount of coverage.

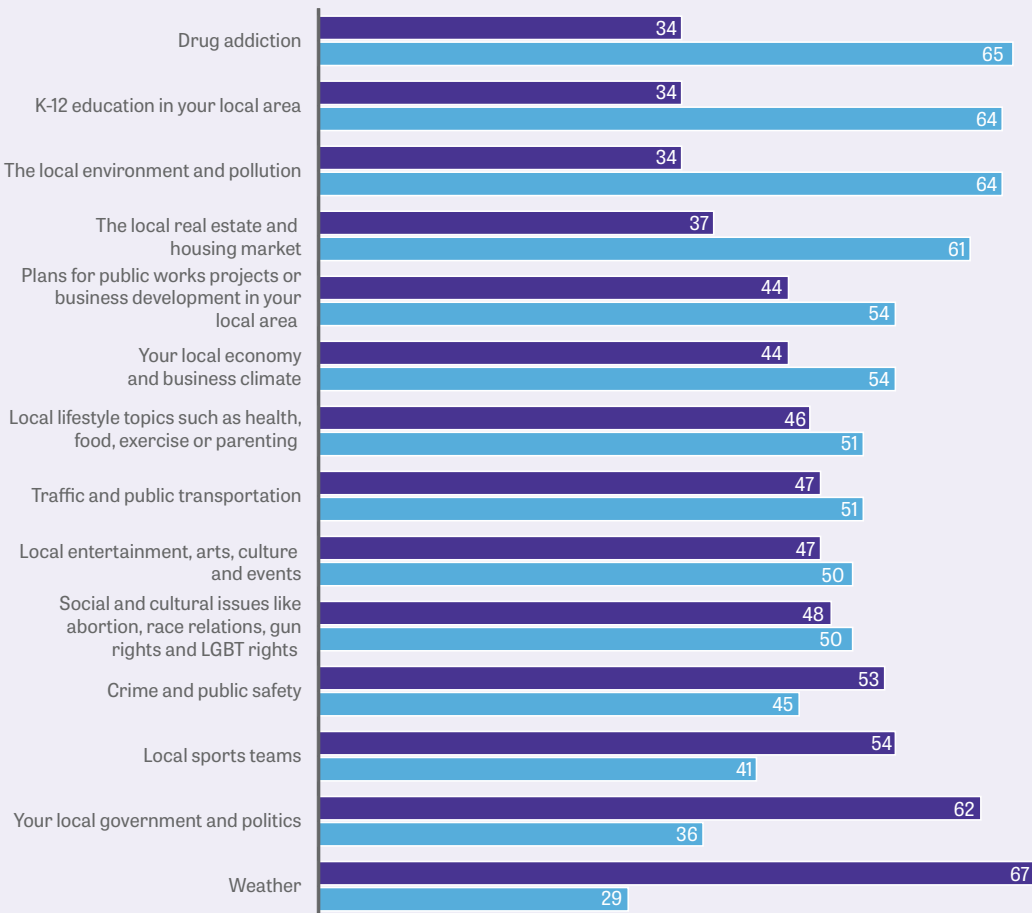
Insufficient attention to drug addiction, the local environment and education may point to a mismatch between the importance Americans attach to these issues and the amount of coverage local media give them. Public dissatisfaction with the quality of local political coverage is consistent with Americans’ frustration with the job that local news is doing at holding local leaders accountable for their actions.

FIGURE 4

Concerns about coverage of local issues

Do you think news organizations in your local area are doing a [fair/poor] job covering [topic] because:

Among those who rate coverage of the issue as “fair” or “poor”



■ % They give the topic enough attention but do not cover it well ■ % They don't give the topic enough attention

Note: “No answer” responses not shown.

Knight Foundation/Gallup June 24–July 11, 2019

STATE OF PUBLIC TRUST IN LOCAL NEWS

Partisanship often drives dissatisfaction with local news coverage of specific issues for different reasons. Roughly two-thirds of Democrats say that local news does a “fair” or “poor” job of covering social and cultural issues because it does not give the issue enough attention. Meanwhile, two-thirds of Republicans say “fair” or “poor” local coverage is due to social issues not being covered well. Independents are more evenly divided, with 52% saying the issue isn’t given enough attention and 48% saying the issue is not covered well.

Local news coverage of the environment shows similar results: Democrats and independents are much more likely to be critical of the amount of attention, while Republicans are more likely to be critical of the coverage.

However, partisanship is not the strongest driver in evaluating local news coverage — the biggest differences in opinions are among those who have stronger versus weaker attachments to their community, and among those who pay more versus less attention to local news. Americans who say they have a strong attachment to their community rate the news more positively than do those who report a weak attachment. Likewise, respondents who follow local news closely are much more positive about the quality of coverage than those who do not.

FIGURE 5A

Ratings of coverage of local issues by news organizations in your area, by community attachment

Figures are the percentages who rate coverage of local news as “excellent” or “good”

Attached to Community

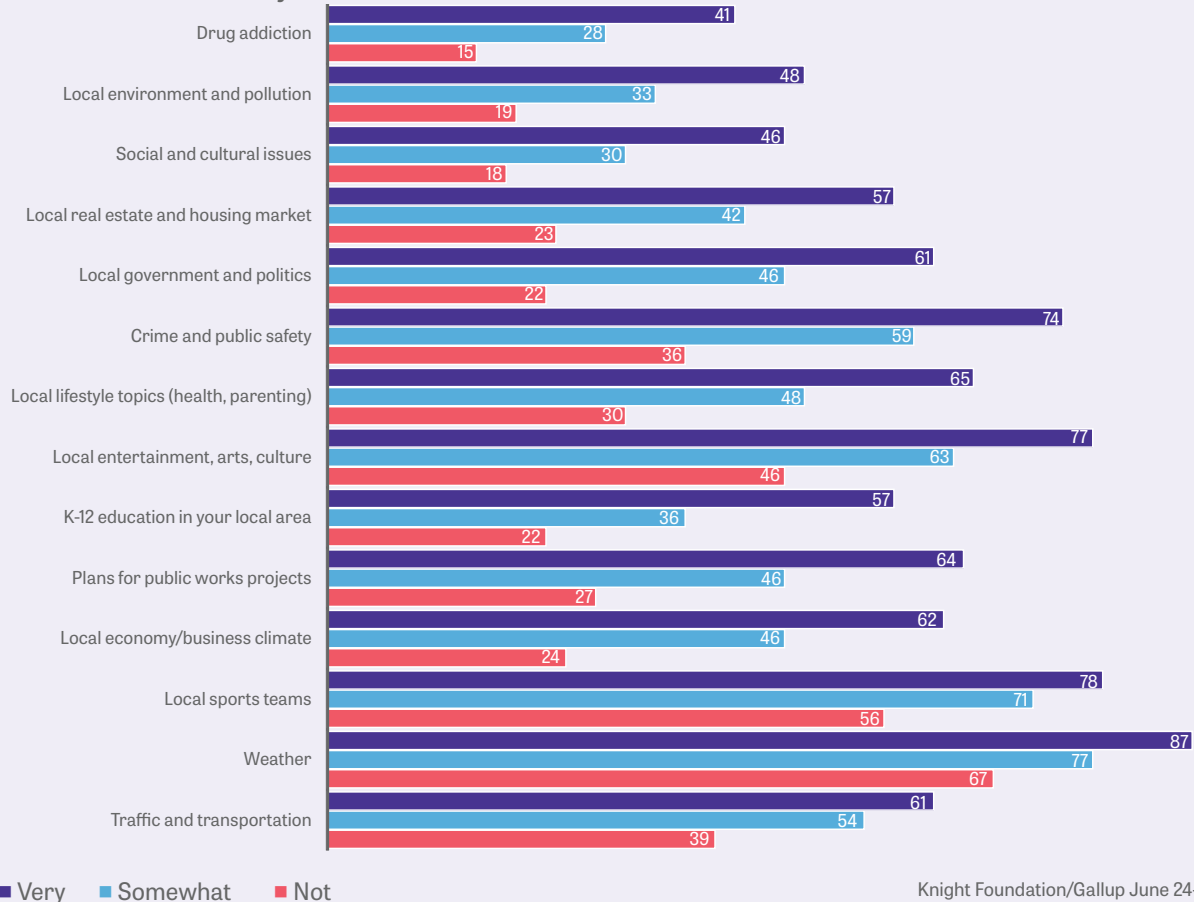
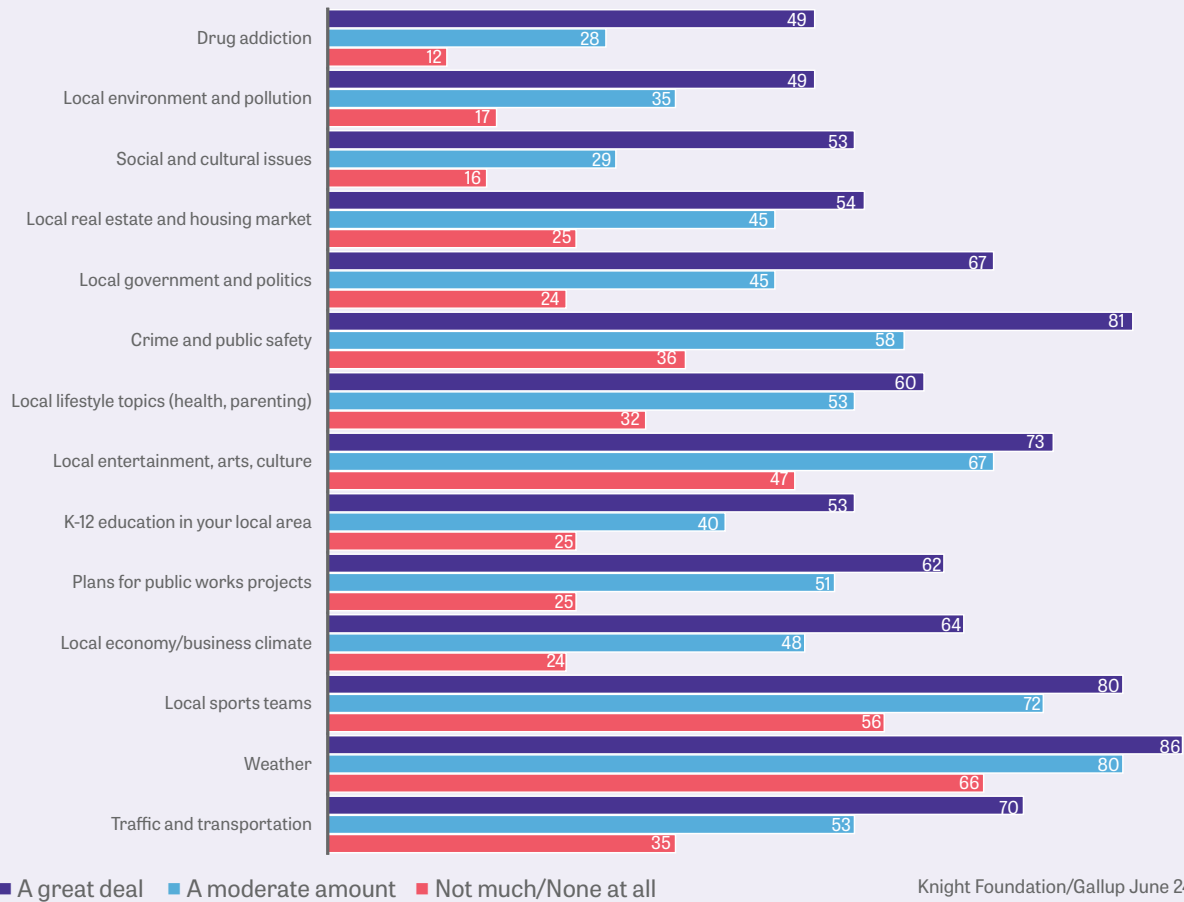


FIGURE 5B

Ratings of coverage of local issues by news organizations in your area, by attention to local news

Figures are the percentages who rate coverage of local news as “excellent” or “good”

Attention to Local News



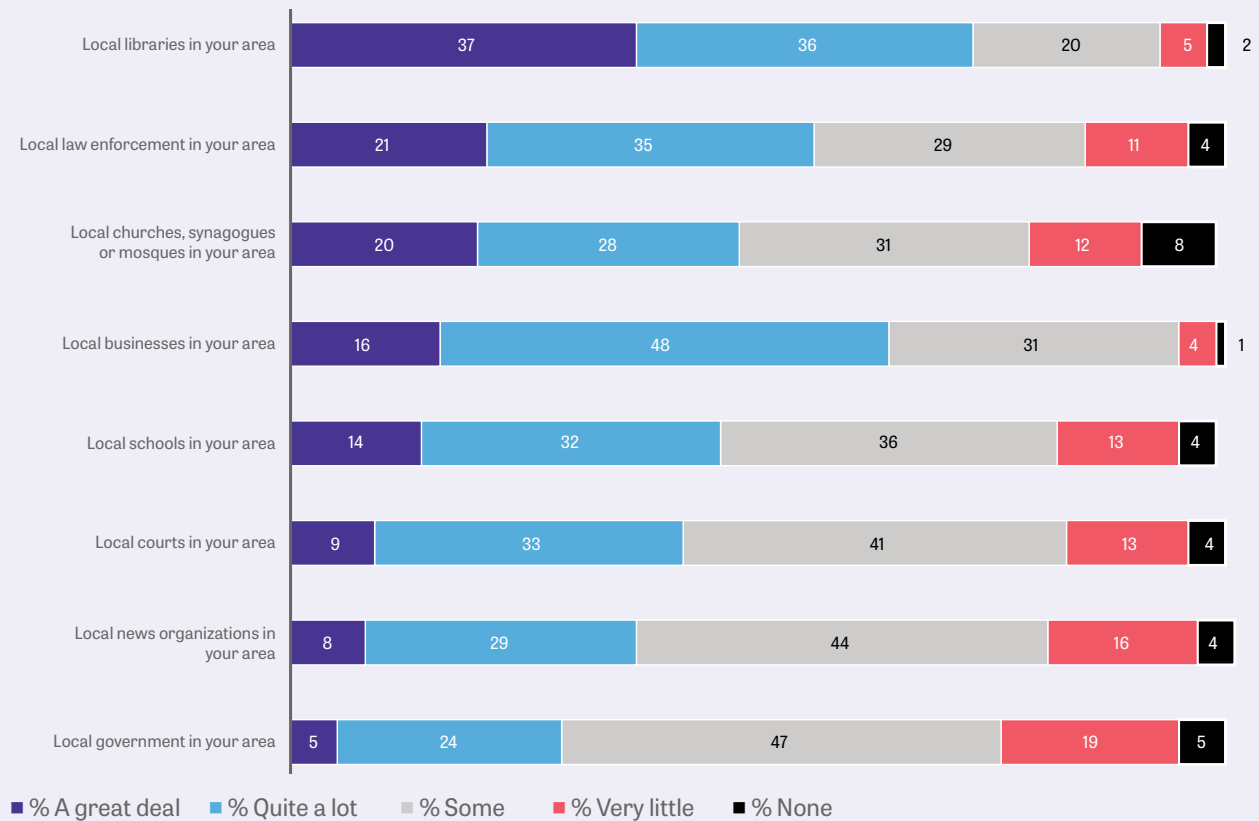
Local News Is Trusted Less Than Other Local Institutions

While Americans generally agree that local news is delivering on its responsibilities to the community and providing decent coverage about various topics in the community, it ranks fairly low in public confidence compared with other local institutions, with only local government ranking lower. Americans express the most confidence in local libraries and businesses.

FIGURE 6

Confidence in local institutions

Thinking about some institutions that exist in cities and towns, how much confidence do you have in each of these institutions?



While stark differences in trust in local institutions arise along political party lines, closer examination reveals that local news does not have strong trust levels within any party affiliation. Even Democrats, who have the highest levels of confidence in local news organizations (50%) compared with other groups, rank it ahead of local law enforcement, local schools and local courts, but behind local libraries and businesses.

In contrast, less than one-third of Republicans and independents have "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in local news in their area; only local government ranks worse for these groups.

The 23-percentage-point Democratic (50%) and Republican (27%) gap in local news media confidence is exceeded only by a 29-percentage-point gap for law enforcement. The partisan confidence gap in local religious institutions is also notable: Republicans have considerably higher confidence in religious institutions than either Democrats or independents.

FIGURE 7

Confidence in local institutions, by political affiliation

Thinking about some institutions that exist in cities and towns, how much confidence do you have in each of these institutions?

% Who answer “a great deal” or “quite a lot”



Knight Foundation/Gallup June 13-July 11, 2019 (combined data from two surveys)

Confidence in most local institutions, including the news, tends to be higher among older than younger Americans. While it is true that young people are less attentive to local news, and inattentive people tend to be less trusting, young people who are attentive to the news are still less trusting than older people who pay attention.

African Americans have lower trust in most local institutions — especially local law enforcement and businesses — but they have slightly more confidence in local news than white and Hispanic respondents do. Still, less than half of African Americans express confidence in local news (44%).

TABLE 1

Confidence in local institutions, by age and race/ethnicity

% “A great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in ...	Age			Race/Ethnicity		
	18-34	35-54	55+	White	Black	Hispanic
Law enforcement	37	58	69	60	34	52
Schools	43	44	50	48	35	46
Courts	32	38	52	44	28	39
Churches, etc.	39	47	57	50	46	44
Businesses	60	61	71	68	44	65
News organizations	28	36	45	36	44	35
Government	20	24	39	30	24	25
Libraries	72	71	76	73	70	74

Knight Foundation/Gallup June 13-July 11, 2019 (combined data from two surveys)

Local-National News Trust Gap Is Driven by High Distrust in National Media



The Knight Foundation-Gallup study confirms previous research that shows trust in local news organizations exceeds that of national news organizations.² This trust advantage cuts across almost every dimension of news coverage, but the depth of this trust appears relatively shallow. For example, while trust in local news compared with national news is similar among Democrats, the overall higher rating of local news is driven by comparatively low trust in national news among independents and Republicans.

Experimental data find respondents rating a news story as more trustworthy when it was identified as taken from a local news organization as opposed to a national one. However, when they evaluated articles with an obvious partisan leaning, that bias overwhelms any local over national trust advantage.

Americans tend to rate local news more positively than national news on a variety of job performance metrics, including reporting the news without bias, as well as in coverage of issue topics. Additionally, Republicans attribute more positive qualities to local journalists than national ones, while Democrats see little difference between the two.

Americans Trust Local News Organizations More Than National News Organizations

Americans trust local news organizations more than national ones. A recent Gallup poll, updating a question asked in 1998, found Americans trust various specific local news sources more than national sources, similar to the pattern from 20 years ago.³

Recent Knight Foundation-Gallup surveys have asked about overall trust in local and national news organizations. The findings show that 45% of Americans trust reporting by local news organizations “a great deal” or “quite a lot,” while 15% have “very little” or no trust at all. Meanwhile, the public’s views of national news organizations are more negative than positive — 31% express “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of trust, and 38% “very little” or no trust in them.

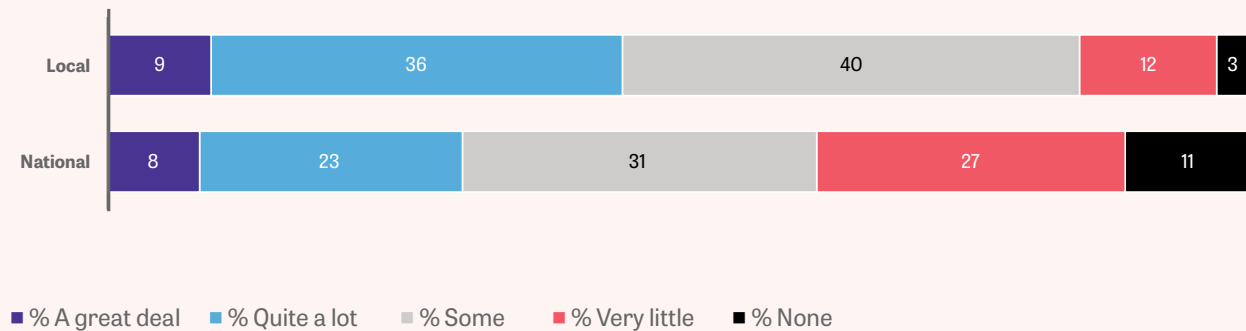
² Finally some good news: Trust in news is up, especially for local media - Poynter. (n.d.). Retrieved October 7, 2019, from <https://www.poynter.org/ethics-trust/2018/finally-some-good-news-trust-in-news-is-up-especially-for-local-media/>

³ Gallup, Inc. (n.d.). In U.S., 40% Trust Internet News Accuracy, Up 15 Points. Retrieved October 7, 2019, from Gallup.com website: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/260492/trust-internet-news-accuracy-points.aspx> Copyright © 2019. All rights reserved.

FIGURE 8

Trust in local vs. national news organizations

In general, how much do you trust [national/local] news organizations when it comes to reporting the news?



Note: "No answer" responses not shown.

Knight Foundation/Gallup June 13-July 22, 2019 (combined data from three surveys)

These findings on overall trust are generally consistent with existing research that has found Americans are more trusting of local than national news sources. But they differ in finding more modest percentages of Americans expressing trust in local news — 45%, compared with percentages near 70% in previous studies.⁴

This difference appears to be a function of the response scale offered to respondents. The Knight Foundation-Gallup studies measure trust on a five-point scale that includes a middle "some" option. A substantial 40% of respondents chose the "some" response — nearly as many as express a high level of trust in local news organizations. This indicates that many who express a positive opinion about local news — when given only choices that indicate trust or distrust — may in fact be more neutral toward it. These response patterns suggest that many Americans' trust in local news is more tepid than other surveys have portrayed.

Trust in local and national news is lower among Republicans and independents than among Democrats, but partisan differences are much more pronounced concerning national news. Democrats trust both types of news organizations about equally, while Republicans and independents are much less trusting of national news organizations compared with local ones. Among Republicans, 34% express high levels of trust in local and 9% in national news organizations. Independents' trust gap is smaller but still substantial — 40% trust local and 23% national news "a great deal" or "quite a lot."

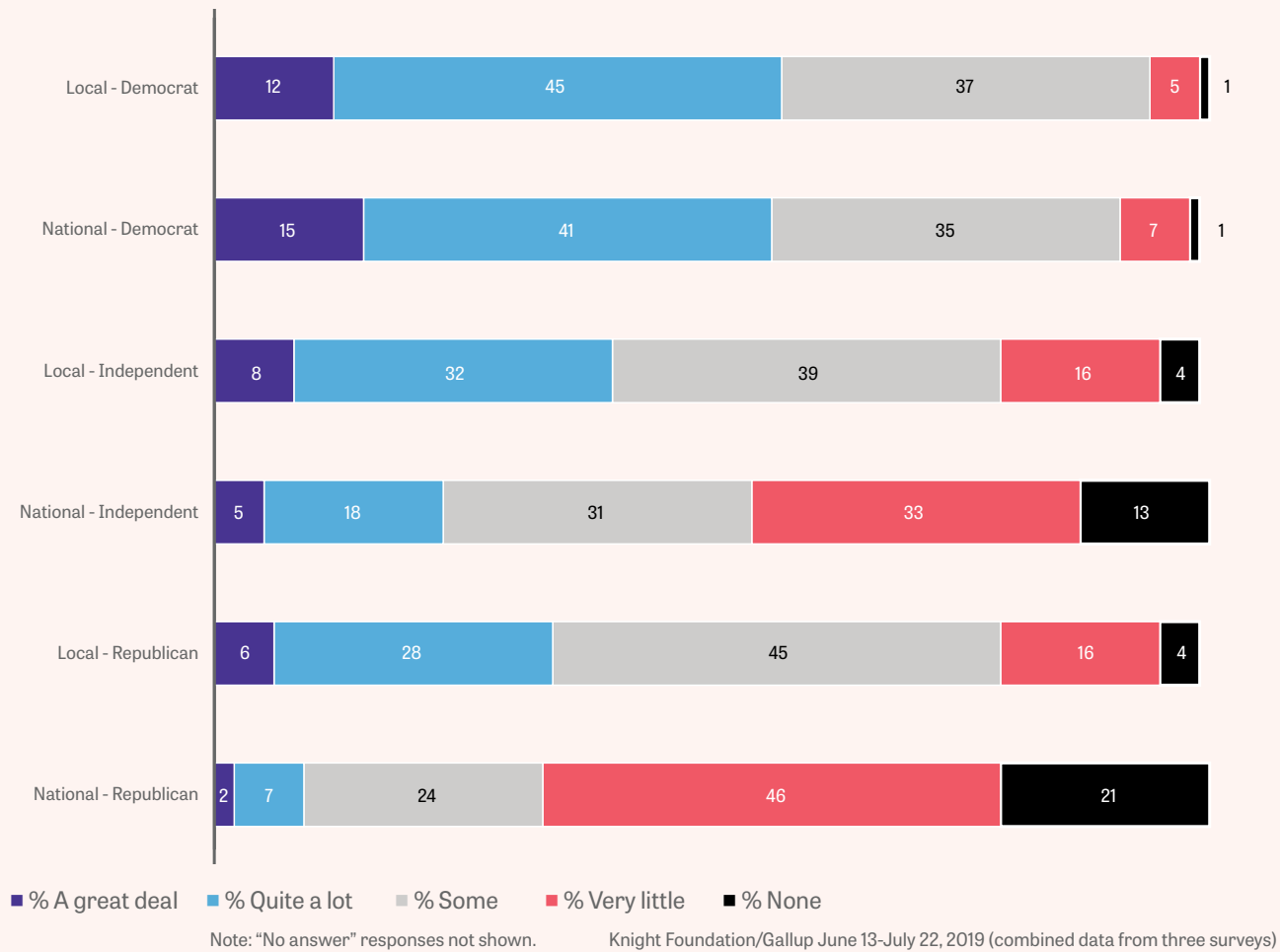
Overall, the local-national trust gap is driven by Republicans and, to a lesser degree, independents, but this gap is more a function of Republican and independent distrust of the national news media than of high levels of trust in local news media.

⁴ Finally some good news: Trust in news is up, especially for local media - Poynter. (n.d.). Retrieved October 7, 2019, from <https://www.poynter.org/ethics-trust/2018/finally-some-good-news-trust-in-news-is-up-especially-for-local-media/>; Mitchell, A., Gottfried, J., Barthel, M., & Shearer, E. (2016, July 7). The Modern News Consumer. Retrieved October 7, 2019, from Pew Research Center's Journalism Project website: <https://www.journalism.org/2016/07/07/the-modern-news-consumer/>

FIGURE 9

Trust in local vs. national news organizations, by political affiliation

In general, how much do you trust [national/local] news organizations when it comes to reporting the news?



Local News Organizations Have Edge on Most Facets of Coverage

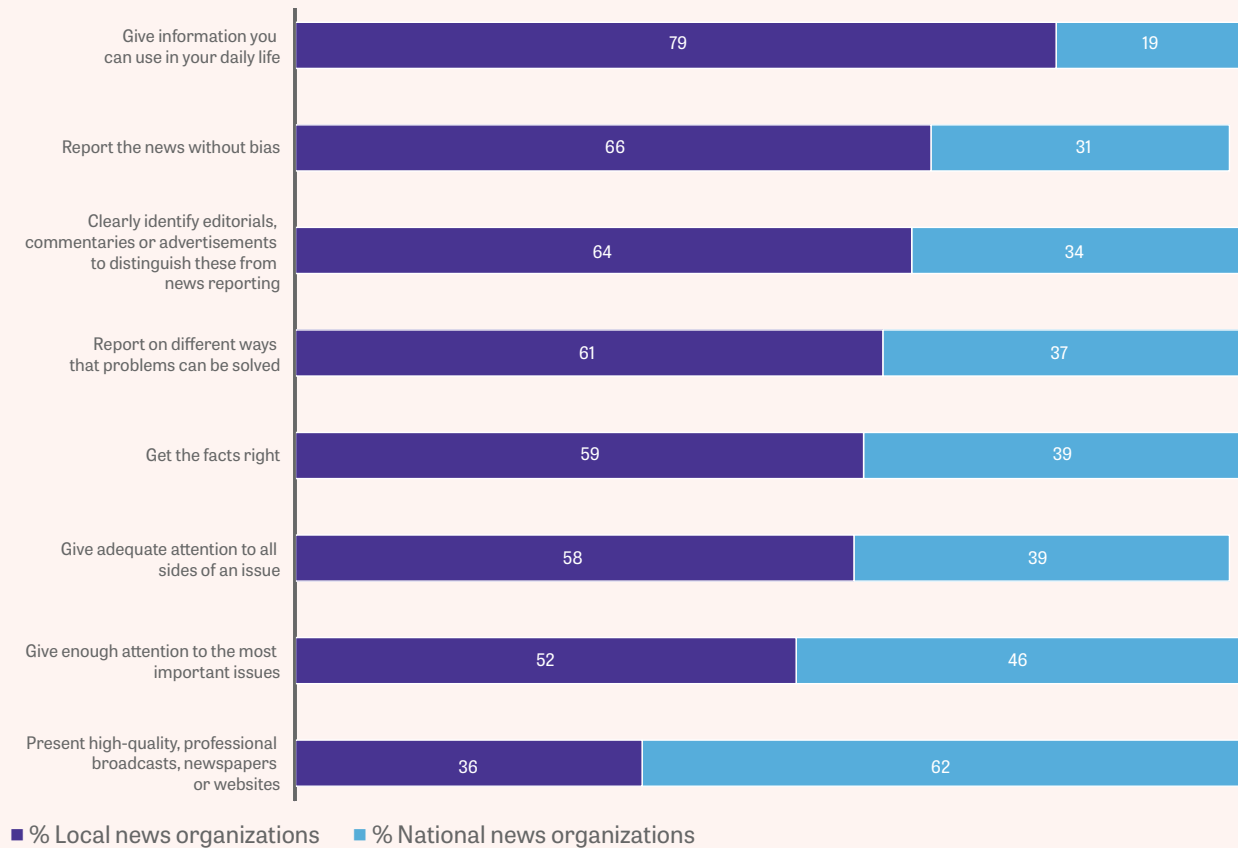
To better understand Americans' views of local and national news organizations, a Knight Foundation-Gallup survey included a series of questions exploring trust in eight facets of coverage that touch on media roles and responsibilities, such as giving adequate attention to all sides of an issue and getting the facts right. Majorities of Americans trust local news more than national news organizations across all facets except having a high-quality, professional presentation. This finding reinforces previous research that has shown that traditional local newspapers are behind in adopting the technology and digital content practices needed to retain and grow audiences.⁵

5 What Newspapers Don't Know about Web Traffic Has Hurt Them Badly – But There is a Better Way. (n.d.) Retrieved October 7, 2019 from Shorenstein Center website: <https://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Sticker-News-Matthew-Hindman.pdf>

FIGURE 10

Local vs. national news performance on media roles and responsibilities

Do you generally have more trust in news organizations in your local area or national news organizations to ... ?



Note: "No answer" responses not shown.

Knight Foundation/Gallup June 13-July 1, 2019

The gap in trust between local and national news is largely driven by Republicans' and independents' penchant for choosing local news over national news on each dimension.

Particularly striking is the fact that over two-thirds of Republicans and independents trust local news organizations to be more accurate, balanced and unbiased. Given the critical role these indicators play in overall news media trust,⁶ these differences in perception are key contributors to the overall gap in trust between local and national news organizations.

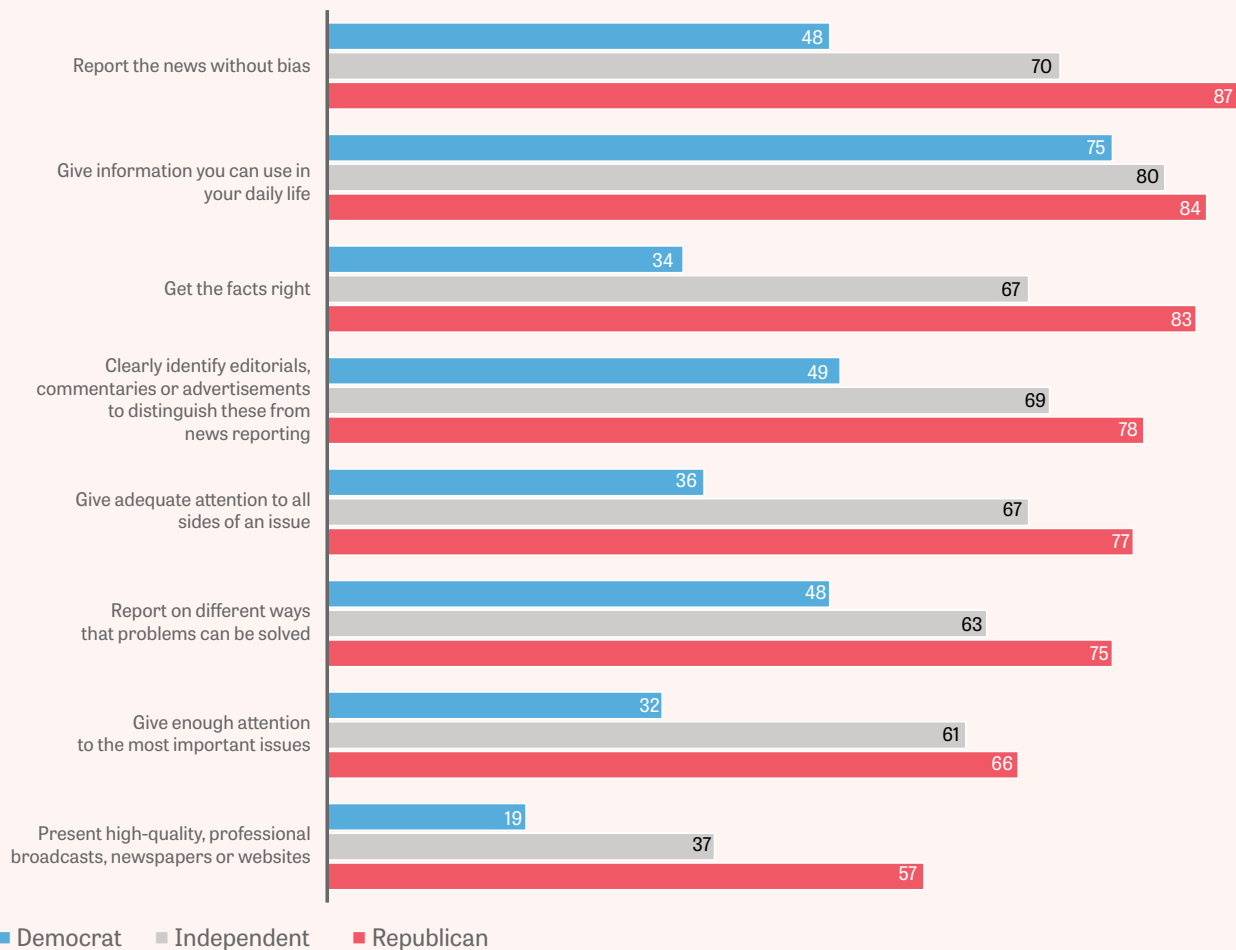
In contrast, majorities of Democrats trust national news organizations more than local ones to get the facts right (accuracy), give enough attention to the most important issues, give adequate attention to both sides (balance) and offer a professional presentation. Democrats are about evenly split between the two on clearly identifying editorials, reporting news without bias and reporting different ways to solve problems. The only dimension of coverage on which Democrats trust local news more than national is providing information that is useful to daily life.

6 Knight Foundation. (n.d.). Indicators of news media trust. Retrieved October 7, 2019, from Knight Foundation website: <https://www.knightfoundation.org/reports/indicators-of-news-media-trust>

FIGURE 11

Local vs. national news performance on media roles and responsibilities, by political affiliation

% Who trust local news more than national news to do each



Knight Foundation/Gallup June 13-July 1, 2019

In addition to differences across party affiliation, there are also differences in the way Americans assess local versus national media’s performance on specific tasks based on how much attention people pay to local news. U.S. adults who are very attentive to local news are more likely than those who pay little or no attention to trust local news organizations to give enough attention to the most important issues (59% vs. 49%) and report on different ways problems can be solved (68% vs. 56%).

Local News Is Trusted More Than National News to Cover Most Topics

Another indication of the public’s higher confidence in local news coverage is their greater trust in local news organizations to cover specific issues or topics. Of six broad subject areas that have relevance at both the local and national levels, majorities of Americans trust local news organizations “a great deal” or “quite a lot” to cover four

STATE OF PUBLIC TRUST IN LOCAL NEWS

of them: the environment and weather emergencies (75%), public health and safety (58%), schools and education (52%), and business and the economy (51%).

In contrast, the environment and natural disasters is the only issue where almost half of Americans (47%) say they have high levels of trust in national news organizations' coverage. Across the remaining subject areas, between 30% and 41% of Americans express a high level of trust in national news coverage.

The two subject areas in which local and national news organizations both garner low levels of trust are topics that are often politicized. A minority of Americans (45%) trust coverage of local politics and government "a great deal" or "quite a lot," and 36% say the same about national coverage of politics and government. Regarding social and cultural issues like abortion, race relations, gun rights and LGBT rights, only a third express a high level of trust in both local and national news coverage.

FIGURE 12

Trust in local vs. national coverage of key issues

How much do you trust the coverage of each of the following topics by [news organizations in your local area/national news organizations]?

Local

National



Note: "No answer" responses not shown.

Knight Foundation/Gallup June 13-July 1, 2019

STATE OF PUBLIC TRUST IN LOCAL NEWS

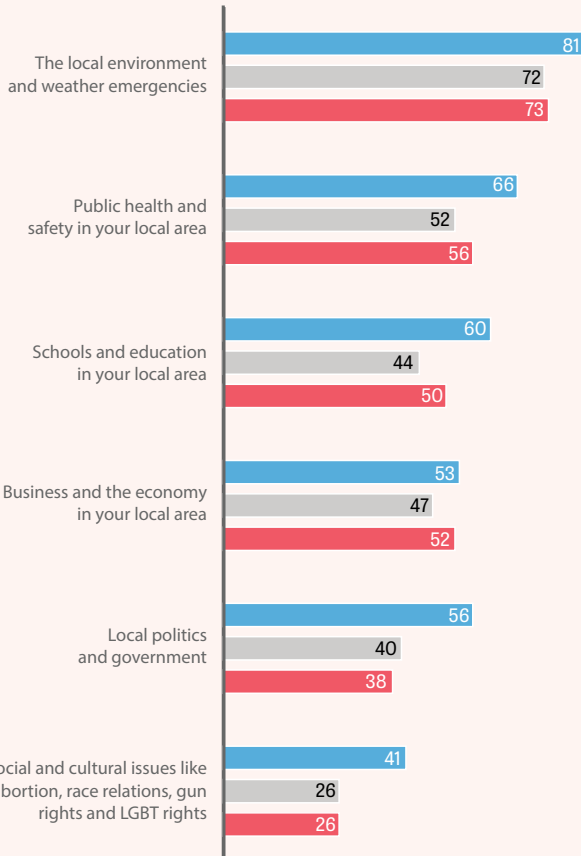
Democrats are more trusting than independents and Republicans of both local and national news organizations' coverage of all topics, except local business and local weather, which are similar across partisan groups.

FIGURE 13

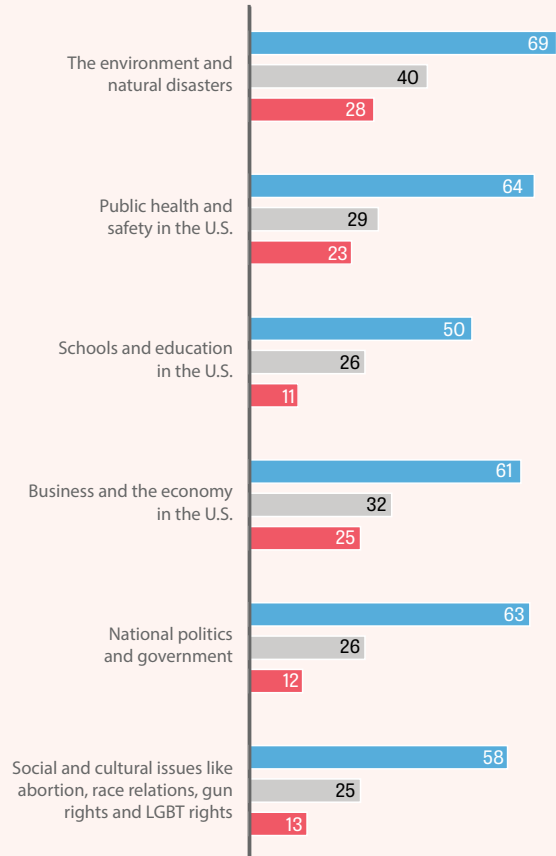
Trust in local vs. national coverage of key issues, by political affiliation

% Who say "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of trust in coverage of the issue

Local



National



■ Democrat ■ Independent ■ Republican

Knight Foundation/Gallup June 13-July 1, 2019

One group that is especially critical of local news coverage on all issues is those who perceive a large gap between their local news media's political leanings and their own political leanings (as measured on a seven-point ideology scale). Those who perceive an especially large ideological gap — essentially, those who are conservative and perceive their local media as liberal (15%) or those who are liberal and perceive their local media as conservative (7%) — express little trust in their media's reporting on local politics and government (24%) and social and cultural issues (8%). These people are also highly critical of national media coverage of these subjects.

Levels of trust in coverage of news topics also differ among other subgroups. Those who express high levels of attachment to their community and who pay more attention to local news have higher levels of trust in its coverage of the topics. Additionally, 42% of 18- to 34-year-olds have very little or no trust in local news coverage of social and cultural issues, compared with 25% of those 55 years and older.

Experimental Study: A News Story Is Trusted More When Identified as Being From a Local Newspaper

Two experimental studies, embedded in two separate waves of the surveys, showed a news story was rated as modestly more trustworthy when identified as being from a local newspaper rather than a national newspaper. The second experiment also found that articles that clearly leaned in a Republican or Democratic direction were rated very differently depending on the readers' partisan leanings, and those partisan messages had a greater impact on readers' opinions of the content than whether the article was from a local versus national source.

The Seven-Point Ideology Scale

Survey respondents were asked to rate their own political leanings and those of their local news media using a seven-point scale, where “0” represented no perceived difference between their personal ideology and that of the local news media, and a “6” indicated that they perceived the local media's political leanings were the opposite of their own.

Those who perceive an especially large ideological gap express little trust in their media's reporting on local politics and government and on social and cultural issues.

Same Story, Different Source, Different Levels of Trust

While survey results can demonstrate a relationship between two variables — e.g., trust in local news is higher than trust in national news — they cannot demonstrate a causal relationship. That is, do Americans trust local news more simply because it is local? To assess the effect that merely identifying news as local might have, the initial 2019 Knight Foundation-Gallup survey included an experiment that found respondents trusting the same news article slightly more when it was identified as taken from a local newspaper versus from a national newspaper.

Respondents were asked to read a newspaper article about the opioid crisis and then answer questions about the content. The content of the article was the same for all respondents, and respondents were asked to rate the article on the same five-point trust scale, on which lower scores indicated greater trust. Those who were told the article came from a local newspaper in Duluth, Minnesota, gave it an average 2.5 rating on the five-point trust scale, compared with a 2.7 rating among those who were told the article came from a national newspaper (also with a Duluth dateline). These differences in ratings of the “local” versus “national” news story are modest but statistically significant and indicate a small gain in trust merely from identifying a story as being from a local news organization rather than a national one.

A second experiment conducted on a separate survey extended the research by varying the content of the local or national articles to include a Republican-leaning or Democratic-leaning bias. The partisan treatment altered the message of the article to attribute a recent decline in U.S. opioid deaths to either the Obama administration (the Democratic-leaning story) or the Trump administration (the Republican-leaning story) efforts. The resulting four conditions are:

CONDITION 1	CONDITION 2	CONDITION 3	CONDITION 4
National news story with a Democratic lean	National news story with a Republican lean	Local news story with a Democratic lean	Local news story with a Republican lean

Respondents who were told the story came from a local news organization rated the article 0.22 points better on a five-point trust scale than those who were told the story came from a national news organization (regardless of partisan leaning), essentially duplicating the results of the first study. This finding is also statistically robust, but the effect is far weaker than the partisan effect. Respondents who read a story that aligned with their partisan beliefs rated the content 0.92 points better on the five-point trustworthiness scale than those who read a story presenting the opposite partisan perspective.

Therefore, partisan alignment with the news content had a much greater effect on trust than whether the story was perceived as local or national. The implication is that a small reservoir of goodwill exists toward local news organizations because they are local, but this could quickly dry up if Americans perceive more political bias in coverage.

Local Journalists Tend to Be Seen as Possessing More Positive Attributes Than National Journalists

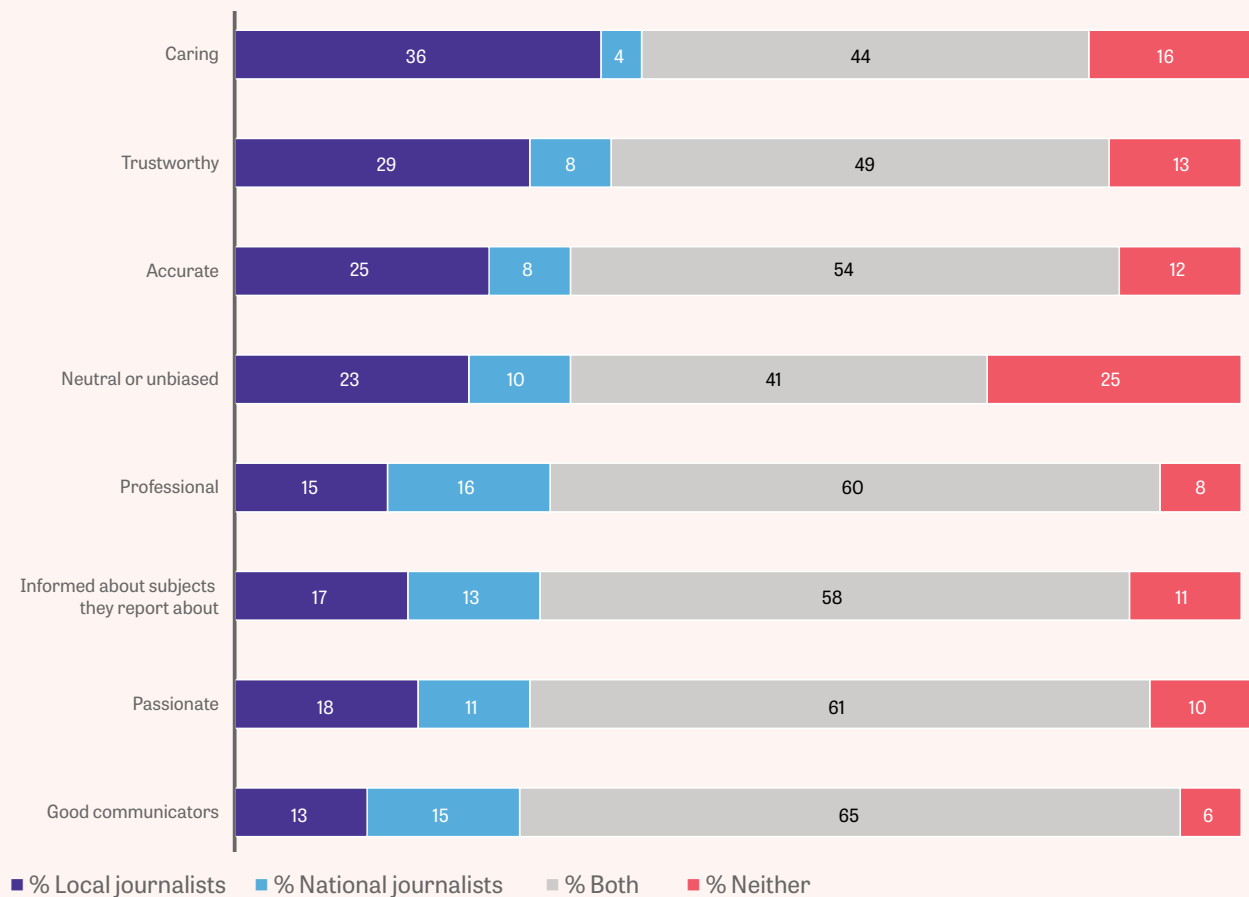
In addition to assessing local and national news organizations' performance across issues and media roles and responsibilities, the survey had Americans compare local and national journalists on eight positive character dimensions. Respondents were given the option of saying the characteristic applied to local or national journalists, both groups equally, or neither. Local journalists tended to be rated better than national journalists on these characteristics, but most respondents did not make a distinction. Specifically — on five of the eight characteristics — majorities of the public think both local and national journalists are good communicators (65%), passionate (61%), professional (60%), informed about the subjects they report on (58%) and accurate (54%). An additional 6% to 12% believe those characteristics apply to neither local nor national journalists.

Local journalists have a comparative advantage on being caring, trustworthy, accurate and unbiased, but pluralities say that each characteristic applies to both local and national journalists. On these characteristics, between 12% and 25% said neither local nor national journalists possess the attribute.

FIGURE 14

Ratings of local vs. national journalists' positive character dimensions

Do you think each of the following descriptions apply more to journalists working for local news organizations or more to journalists working for national news organizations?



Note: "No answer" responses not shown.

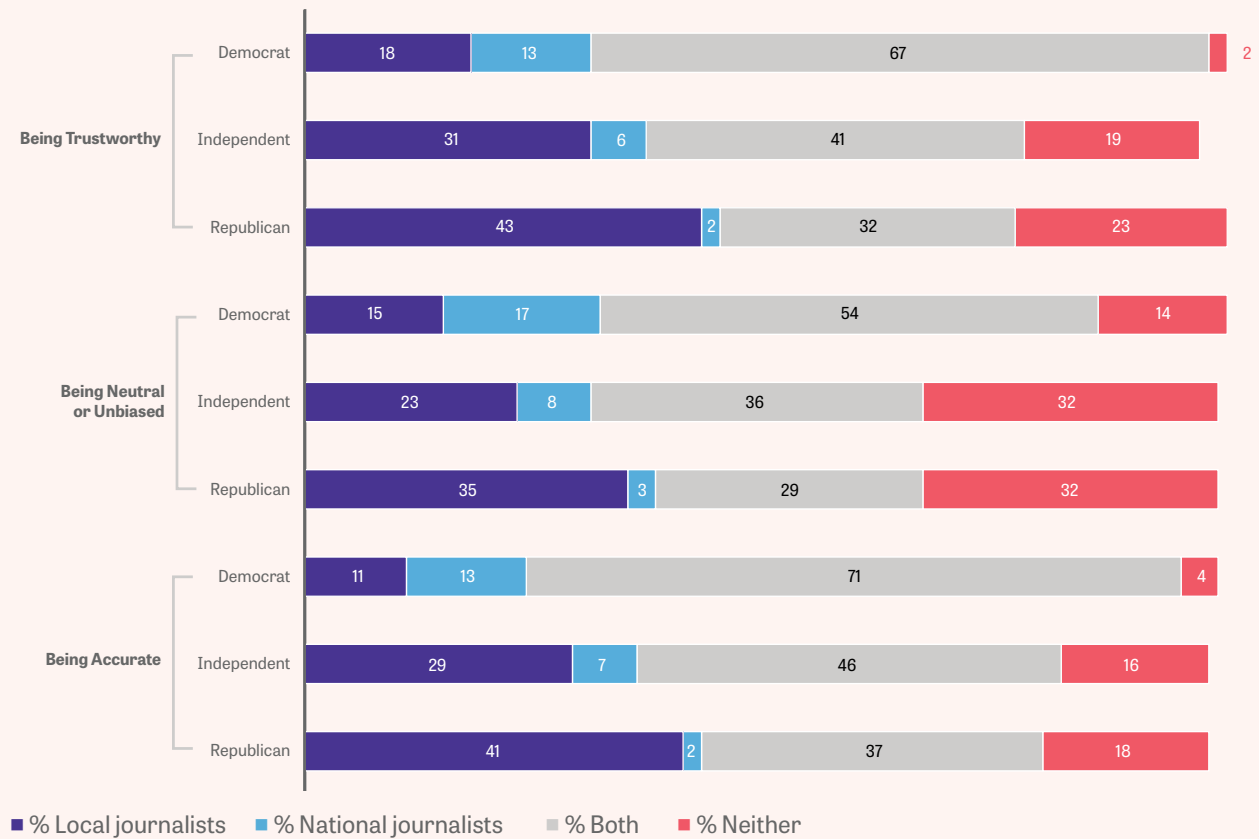
Knight Foundation/Gallup July 11-22, 2019

Once again, Americans with differing political views diverge on these measures. In general, Republicans are more likely than Democrats and independents to make distinctions between local and national journalists' qualities. For every attribute, Republicans who make a distinction favor local over national journalists by wide margins. Conversely, Democrats see little difference between the two. Figure 15 below shows results for three dimensions most closely related to trust — trustworthy, accurate, and neutral or unbiased.

FIGURE 15

Ratings of local vs. national journalists, by political affiliation

Next, please indicate whether you think each of the following descriptions apply more to journalists working for local news organizations or more to journalists working for national news organizations.



Note: "No answer" responses not shown.

Knight Foundation/Gallup July 11-22, 2019

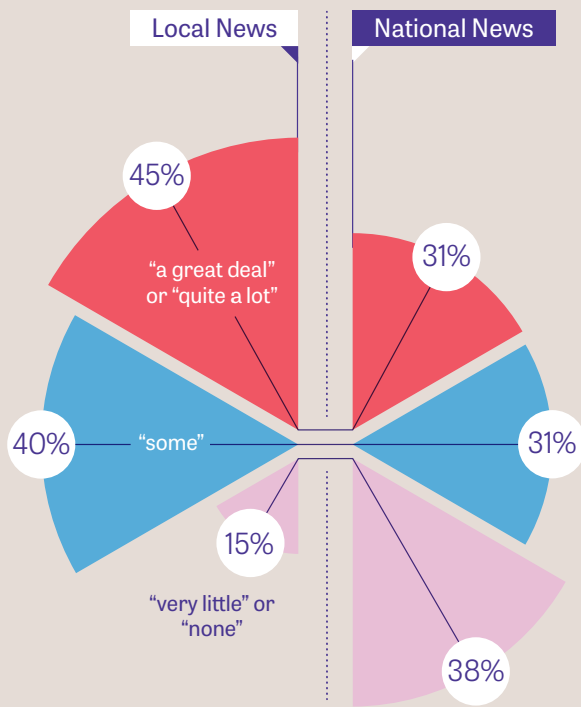
It is noteworthy that when Republicans are not forced to choose between local and national news, over half say each attribute applies to both or neither category of journalist. If Republicans were strong proponents of local media, we might expect much higher percentages to view local journalists as superior to national journalists.

As discussed earlier in this report, survey results that show a strong Republican bias toward local over national media are those that present respondents with only two choices (e.g., local or national, trustworthy or not trustworthy), as opposed to providing a neutral option. The local over national advantage seems smaller when assessing journalist characteristics, likely because of the presence of a neutral response choice — further underscoring that local news may not be viewed as positively as other studies suggest.

Local vs. National News: The Differences That Matter

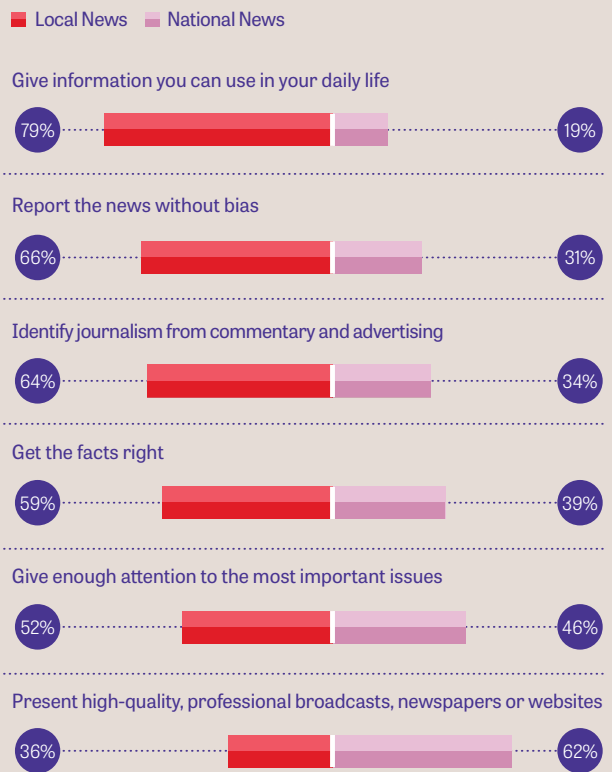
Americans Trust Local News Organizations More Than National News Organizations

In general, how much do you trust [national/local] news organizations when it comes to reporting the news?



Where Local News Excels

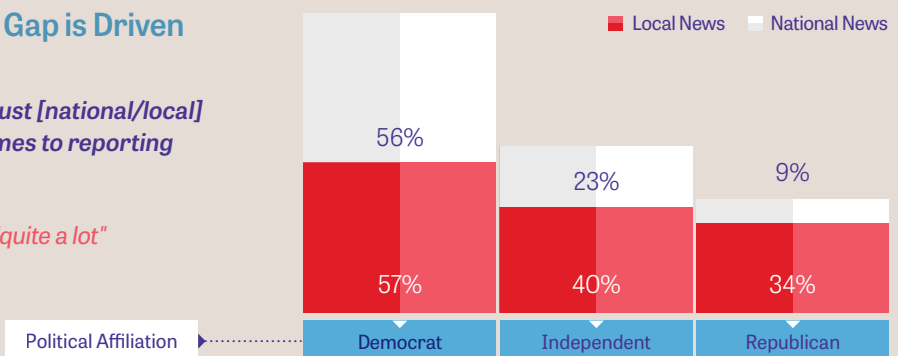
Do you generally have more trust in news organizations in your local area or national news organizations to ... ?



The Local-National Trust Gap is Driven by Political Affiliation

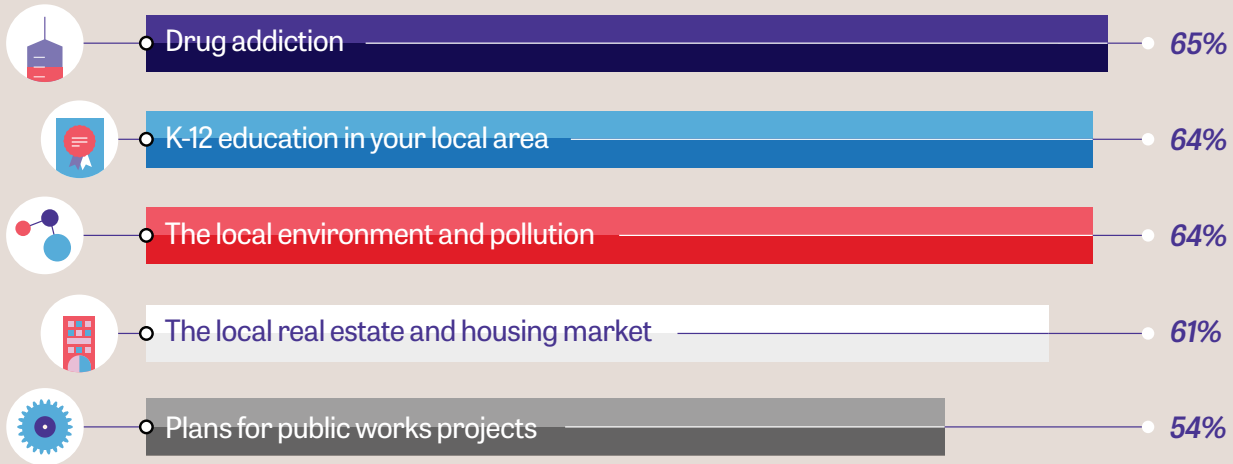
In general, how much do you trust [national/local] news organizations when it comes to reporting the news?

% Who answer "a great deal" or "quite a lot"



Where More Local Coverage Is Needed

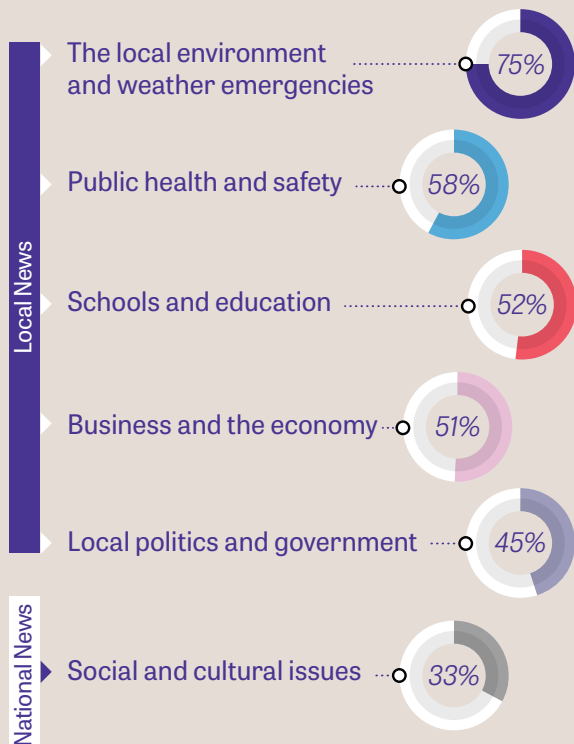
% Who answer "they don't give the topic enough attention"



Who Covers It Best?

How much do you trust the coverage of each of the following topics by [news organizations in your local area/national news organizations]?

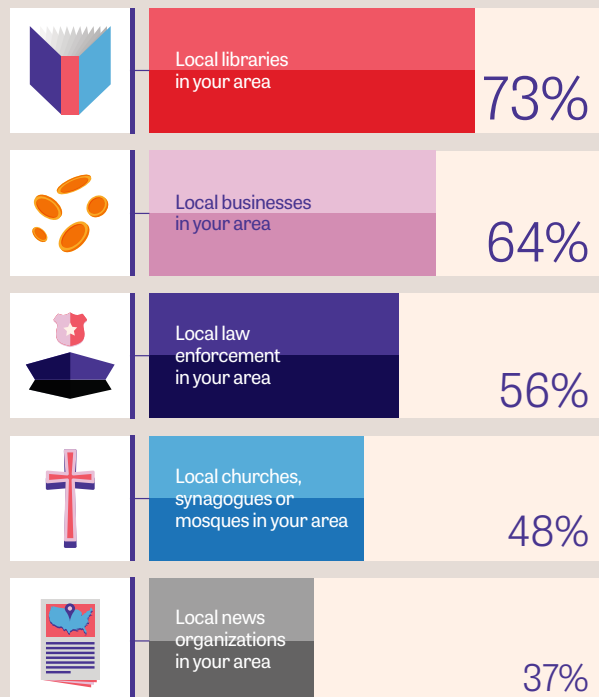
% Who answer "a great deal" or "quite a lot"



Local News Ranks Below Its Community Peers in Public Confidence

Thinking about some institutions that exist in cities and towns, how much confidence do you have in each of these institutions?

% Who answer "a great deal" or "quite a lot"



Bias in Local News Coverage: Past, Present and Future



A key element of distrust in news organizations is the perception of bias in news coverage.⁷ One reason Americans may trust local news over national news is because of local news' ability to avoid the stigma of ideological bias. Another potential reason is that local news organizations cover local issues that matter to the community. If perceived bias creeps into local news coverage, or local news organizations reduce the breadth and depth of local news coverage, the present trust advantage local news enjoys over national news may dissipate.

Americans consider local news to be more politically moderate than national news, and they are generally satisfied with the current mix of coverage between local and national news. Over half of Americans do not perceive a shift in news coverage in any specific ideological direction or the mix of local and national news stories compared with five years ago. However, Americans who do perceive a change in news organizations' political leanings tend to be less trusting of local news media.

Such continuity provides a basis for cautious optimism. However, 63% of Republicans and 51% of independents perceive greater ideological bias in local news coverage. This growing perception of bias suggests that the current state of trust in local news is fragile.

Americans See Local News as Politically Moderate

Compared with national news media, more Americans say the local news media strike a balanced ideological perspective. A recent Gallup Poll finds a majority of Americans, 53%, describing their local news media as "about right," while 26% say it is "too liberal" and 15% "too conservative."⁸ Meanwhile, just 39% describe the national news media as about right, while 42% say it is too liberal and 13% too conservative.⁹

In the recent Knight Foundation-Gallup surveys, Gallup asked respondents to place their local news media on a seven-point ideology scale ranging from very liberal to very conservative. The majority of respondents (57%) believe the political leanings of news

7 Knight Foundation. (n.d.). Indicators of news media trust. Retrieved October 7, 2019, from Knight Foundation website: <https://www.knightfoundation.org/reports/indicators-of-news-media-trust>

8 <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1663/Media-Use-Evaluation.aspx> Copyright © 2019. All rights reserved.

9 Subsequent surveys through 2014 found essentially no change in Americans' perceptions of the "news media's" ideology.

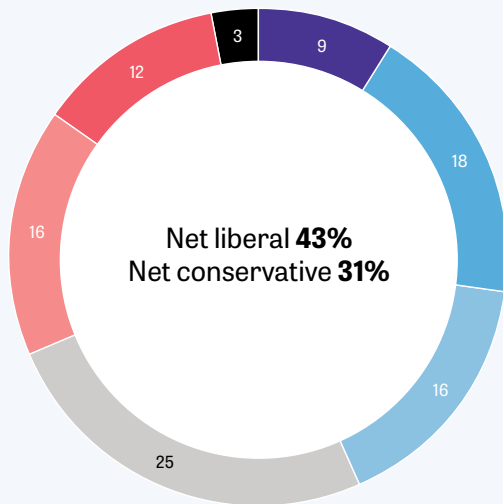
organizations in their local area are moderate or lean slightly liberal or conservative. Twenty-seven percent believe local news organizations are liberal or extremely liberal, and 15% say extremely conservative or conservative.

More Americans perceive local media to be somewhat more in the center of the ideological spectrum than the residents in their community; 47% of U.S. adults believe residents in their community are slightly liberal, moderate or slightly conservative. People are more inclined to see these residents as being conservative (34%) than liberal (18%).

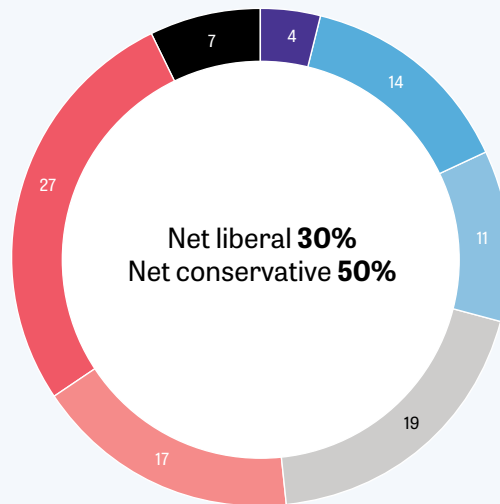
FIGURE 16

Americans' perceptions of ideology of their local news organizations and local residents

Local news organizations*



People in your area**



■ % Extremely liberal ■ % Liberal ■ % Slightly liberal ■ % Moderate
 ■ % Slightly conservative ■ % Conservative ■ % Extremely conservative

* Generally speaking, if you were to characterize the political leanings of news organizations in your local area, would you say they tend to be ... extremely liberal, liberal, slightly liberal, moderate, slightly conservative, conservative, extremely conservative?

** Generally speaking, if you were to characterize the political leanings of the people who live in your local area, would you say they tend to be ... extremely liberal, liberal, slightly liberal, moderate, slightly conservative, conservative, extremely conservative?

Note: "No answer" responses not shown. Knight Foundation/Gallup June 13-July 11, 2019 (combined data from two surveys)

Analysis of the responses to local news ideology and local community ideology reveals that, for the most part, people believe local news organizations reflect the ideological leanings of residents in the local area. Specifically, 64% of Americans believe there is little to no gap (one point or less on the seven-point rating scale) between the perceived political leanings of news organizations in the local area and the perceived political leanings of the people who live in the local area. Only 8% see a significant disconnect (4+ point difference) between the ideology of local news organizations and residents. Importantly, almost no U.S. adults observe a complete disconnect (a six-point difference) between the political leanings of news organizations in the local area and the people who live there. The perceptions of local news and local area ideological alignment hold true across the entire political spectrum.

This ability to reflect the overall perceived political values of the community may contribute to the perception of most Americans (53%) that the local media's coverage is "about right" rather than being too liberal or too conservative.

More Americans See Disconnect Between Their Own Views and Local Media Ideology

Respondents see more ideological differences between themselves and local news media than between others in their community and local news. These differences may arise because survey respondents may tend to rate the ideological leanings of groups — local residents or local media — more toward the middle of a scale than they would rate an individual, including themselves. Therefore, the gap between personal ideology and local news offers a slightly less positive outlook of ideological alignment between local news organizations and their audience.

Forty-four percent of Americans perceive little to no ideological gap between their personal political views and the perceived political leanings of news organizations in their local area (compared with 64% seeing a similar correspondence between local news ideology and the ideology of local residents). Also, the 22% of U.S. adults who see a large gap between their ideology and that of their local news media is more than double the percentage of those who see a similar divide between local news media ideology and local resident ideology.

Nearly four in 10 Republicans, 38%, perceive a wide gap between their own ideology and the political leanings of the local news media, more than double the percentage of Democrats (14%) and independents (17%) who say the same. Meanwhile, 52% of Democrats, 46% of independents and only 33% of Republicans see a high correspondence between their ideology and that of the news media in their area.

Analysis of the responses to local news ideology and local community ideology reveals that, for the most part, people believe local news organizations reflect the ideological leanings of residents in the local area.

FIGURE 17

Differences in the ideologies of local news organizations and respondents, by political affiliation

Numbers 0 through 6 are the differences between the respondent's rating of local news ideology* and their own ideology** on a seven-point ideology scale



* Generally speaking, if you were to characterize the political leanings of news organizations in your local area, would you say they tend to be ... (1) extremely liberal, (2) liberal, (3) slightly liberal, (4) moderate, (5) slightly conservative, (6) conservative, (7) extremely conservative?

** How would you describe your political views ... (1) extremely liberal, (2) liberal, (3) slightly liberal, (4) moderate, (5) slightly conservative, (6) conservative, (7) extremely conservative?

Note: "No answer" responses not shown. Knight Foundation/Gallup June 13-July 11, 2019 (combined data from two surveys)

A closer examination of the gap between personal political views and the perceived political leanings of news organizations in the local area indicates that, on average, these do not predominantly favor any specific ideological position. About as many respondents say their local media are at least moderately more conservative than they are (24%) as say their local media are at least moderately more liberal (31%); however, this difference is almost entirely due to a higher percentage of respondents seeing the media as much more liberal than they are (15%) than much more conservative (7%).

TABLE 2

Americans’ perceptions of differences in the ideology of their local news organizations and themselves

News vs. Personal Ideological Gap [^]	%
Local media much more liberal than respondent (4 through 6)	15
Local media moderately more liberal than respondent (2 through 3)	16
Local media and respondent have similar ideology (1 through -1)	44
Local media moderately more conservative than respondent (-2 through -3)	17
Local media much more conservative than respondent (-4 through -6)	7

[^] Difference between respondent rating of local news ideology* and their own ideology** on a seven-point ideology scale.

* Generally speaking, if you were to characterize the political leanings of news organizations in your local area, would you say they tend to be ... (1) extremely liberal, (2) liberal, (3) slightly liberal, (4) moderate, (5) slightly conservative, (6) conservative, (7) extremely conservative?

** How would you describe your political views ... (1) extremely liberal, (2) liberal, (3) slightly liberal, (4) moderate, (5) slightly conservative, (6) conservative, (7) extremely conservative?

Note: “No answer” responses not shown. Knight Foundation/Gallup June 13-July 11, 2019 (combined data from two surveys)

As described in section one, Americans who perceive a large gap between their local news media’s political leanings and their own political leanings trust local news coverage less. Thus, the lower level of Republican trust in local news organizations compared with Democrats’ trust is partly driven by the fact that more Republicans perceive a disconnect between their personal ideology and that of the local news media.

Americans Are Divided on Whether Local Media in Their Area Have Become More Ideologically Biased

Perceptions of whether local news is more politically biased today than in the past offer a window into how Americans’ attitudes toward the local news media may shift in the future. An increase in perceived bias may forewarn of a deterioration in trust of local news organizations.

About as many Americans perceive shifts in the ideological leanings of local news organizations compared to five years ago as indicate there has been no change. A slim majority, 51%, say local news coverage has stayed about the same, while 37% see movement in a more liberal direction and 11% in a more conservative direction.

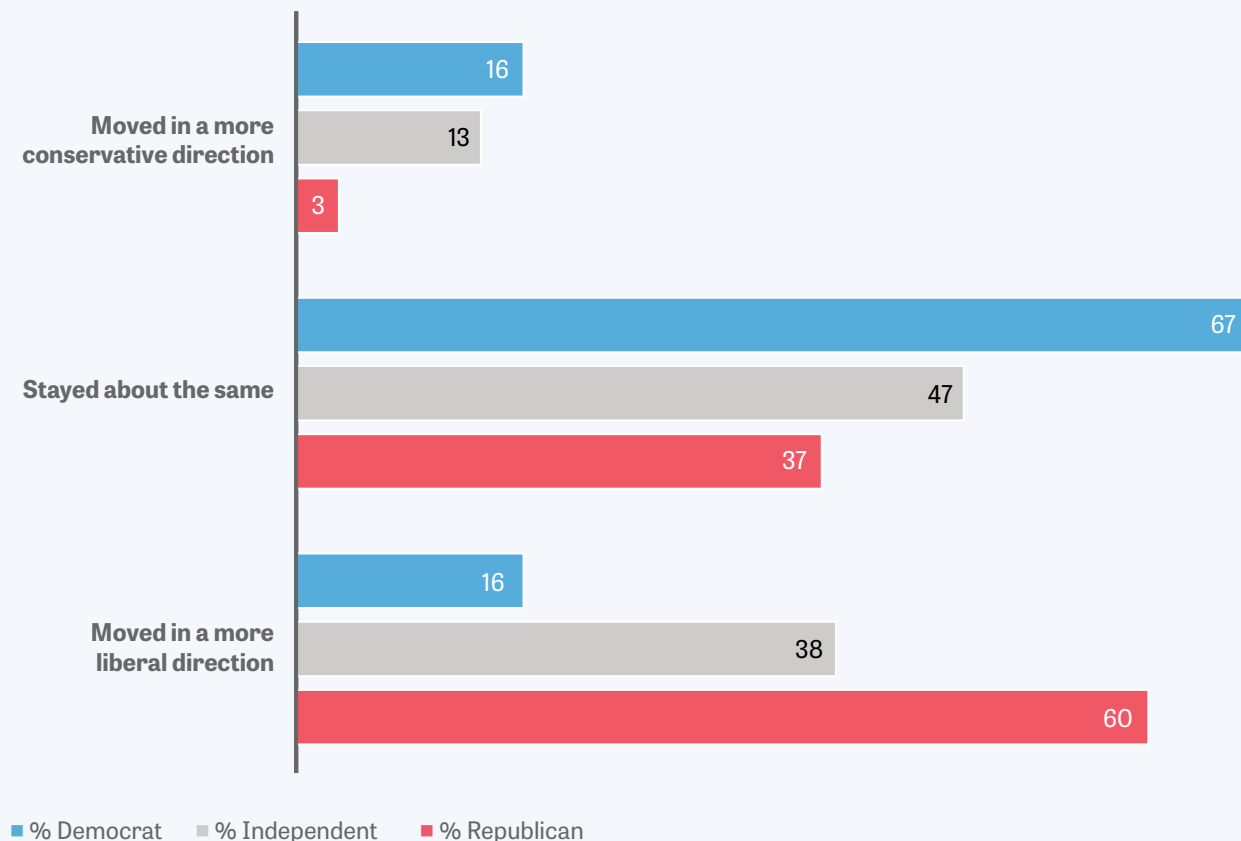
The partisan differences of perceived shifts in the ideological leanings of local news are substantial. Six in 10 Republicans say news organizations in their local area have moved in a more liberal direction, compared with 16% of Democrats who say local news organizations have moved in a more conservative direction. Two-thirds

of Democrats perceive no change in local news ideology. Among independents, nearly half (47%) say news organizations in their local area have stayed the same, 38% say they have moved in a more liberal direction and 13% say a more conservative direction.

FIGURE 18

Perceptions of change in local news organizations' ideology, by political affiliation

Compared to five years ago, has coverage from news organizations in your local area ... ?



Note: "No answer" responses not shown. Knight Foundation/Gallup June 24-July 11, 2019

Americans who perceive a change in news organizations' political leanings (31%) are far less trusting of local news organizations than those who see no change in local news ideology (55%). Among Republicans, just 22% who perceive local news organizations moving in a liberal direction say they trust those organizations "a great deal" or "quite a lot," while nearly half (46%) who perceive no ideological change say the same. Similarly, 51% of independents who notice no ideological shift say they trust local news organizations, while 29% of those who notice an ideological shift in either direction agree. Even among Democrats, those who perceive a change in either ideological direction (45%) are less trusting of local news organizations than those who do not see a shift (61%).

Overall, a mixed picture emerges concerning the perceived creep of ideological bias into local news organizations. Many local news organizations appear to occupy a generally moderate political position, but trust may erode if coverage is increasingly perceived as politically biased.

Americans View the Mix of Local, Nonlocal Stories in Local News Coverage as About Right

Another recent trend is the nationalization of news coverage, where news consumers are consuming much less local news than in the past. A recent Gallup poll demonstrated that, since 1998, fewer Americans are consuming local TV news (73% to 51%), local radio news (51% to 36%) and local newspapers (64% to 27%) daily or several times a week.¹⁰

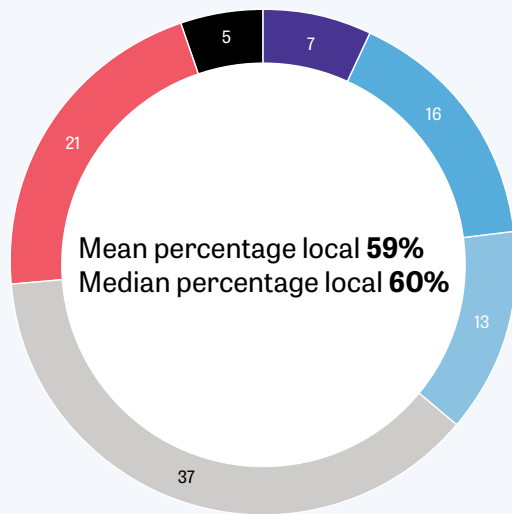
The reduction in consumption is exacerbated by the fact that many local news organizations appear to cover more national politics at the expense of local politics.¹¹ This trend may be driven by several factors, including reductions in local news organizations' resources, with fewer reporters resulting in less original reporting and more reliance on national wire service stories to provide content. Do Americans recognize or support such a shift in local news coverage?

On average, Americans say about 60% of the coverage by news organizations in their area is about local events. This figure is very close to Americans' preferred mix of local and nonlocal news coverage. Americans only want a slightly greater focus on local news content from local news organizations, about 63% on average, than they perceive is the case now.

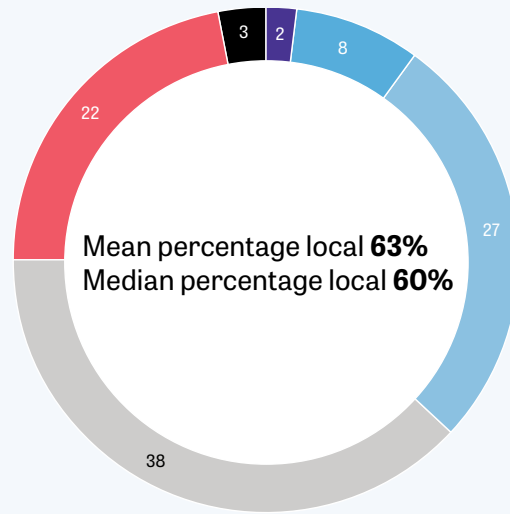
FIGURE 19

Americans' assessments of, and preferences for, the mix of local and nonlocal stories covered in local news media

Current situation*



Preference**



■ 0%-24% local, 76%-100% nonlocal
 ■ 25%-49% local, 51%-75% nonlocal
 ■ 50% local/50% nonlocal
■ 51%-75% local/25%-49% nonlocal
 ■ 76%-100% local/0%-24% nonlocal
 ■ No answer

* We'd like you to think about the news coverage you see from news organizations in your local area. Roughly what percentage of this news is about things happening in your local area, and what percentage is about things happening outside your local area, such as in the rest of the country or the world?

** What percentage of the news from news organizations in your local area would you prefer to be about things happening in your local area, and what percentage would you prefer to be about things happening outside your local area?

Note: Due to rounding, percentages may total 100% +/- 1%.

Knight Foundation/Gallup June 24-July 11, 2019

10 Gallup, Inc. (n.d.). In U.S., 40% Trust Internet News Accuracy, Up 15 Points. Retrieved October 7, 2019, from Gallup.com website: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/260492/trust-internet-news-accuracy-points.aspx> Copyright © 2019 Gallup, Inc. All rights reserved.

11 Hopkins, D. J. (2018). The increasingly United States: How and why American political behavior nationalized. University of Chicago Press.

When asked to state their preferred mix of local versus nonlocal news coverage, six in 10 prefer that local news organizations cover more local stories than national stories, 10% want more national than local news stories, and 27% want an equal mix. Thus, the base expectation among most Americans (87%) is that at least half of the stories focus on local matters. This consumer preference suggests a limit to how much local news organizations can increase their coverage of national stories at the expense of local stories.

To the extent local news organizations have devoted more time and space to national stories, the majority of the public is not aware of such a change. Fifty-six percent of Americans say there has been no change in the mix between local and national coverage by news organizations in their local area compared to five years ago. Among those who notice a shift, slightly more say local news organizations cover more stories about things happening outside their local area and fewer stories about things happening in their local area (24%) than say the opposite (19%). The perceived trend in changes in local versus nonlocal coverage is similar across all relevant demographic subgroups, including by party affiliation and by different levels of attention paid to local news.

TABLE 3

Perceptions of change in coverage of local news stories by local news media

Compared to five years ago, do news organizations in your local area cover ... ?	%
More stories about things happening in your local area and fewer stories about things happening outside your local area	19
More stories about things happening outside your local area and fewer stories about things happening in your local area	24
There has been no change	56

Note: "No answer" responses not shown. Knight Foundation/Gallup June 24-July 11, 2019

Less local coverage creates another potential disconnect between local news organizations and consumers that could affect trust due to increased coverage of more politicized national issues and a less firm connection to the community. Nearly half, 46%, of Americans who have noticed no change or more coverage of local issues in the past five years trust local news organizations "a great deal" or "quite a lot," while 34% who have noticed more coverage of national topics express the same high level of trust.

Despite the multiple negative consequences associated with declines in local coverage, Americans appear most worried about ideological bias. When asked what concerns them most about a hypothetical acquisition of their favorite local news source by a large company outside their area, three times as many say the political views of owners influence the fairness of news coverage (75%) than were concerned that the owners would spend less money on news gathering and reporting (9%) or include more news that is not unique to their area (14%).¹²

¹² Gallup, Inc. (n.d.). When It Comes to Local News Mergers, Bias Top Concern. Retrieved October 7, 2019, from Gallup.com website: <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/264923/comes-local-news-mergers-bias-top-concern.aspx>

Conclusion

Americans' weakened trust in the news media arguably reflects their increasingly poor views of national news sources. What is often obscured in reports of declining media trust is the fact that the public continues to rate local media positively in general. And while Americans' more positive evaluations of local media are to a large degree driven by the low esteem in which they hold national media, they tend to give high ratings to local news' performance and coverage.

But the stronger positioning of local media is fragile. Relative to other local institutions, including libraries and businesses, confidence in local news is low. Maintaining the existing level of trust local news has will likely become more of a challenge with declining revenues, smaller newsrooms and diminished subscriber bases. Many local news organizations have responded to these changes by devoting more of their newsprint, airtime and web space to nonlocal stories, blurring the lines between what is local and what is national news.

One of local news' more important advantages over national media is the perception that it does a better job reporting the news without bias. Whether that reflects national media moving in a more partisan direction, or just allegations that it has, is unclear. But if local media were to be perceived as being more politically biased, it may see its trust levels sink closer to those of the national media.

Local news distinguishes itself from national news and maintains its trust advantage by increasing its focus on local stories, many of which are nonpartisan by nature. It can also fulfill its democratic responsibilities by making greater efforts toward accountability reporting — reinforcing universally shared values condemning corruption, waste and abuse in local institutions.

The next report in this series will explore the extent to which Americans view local news media as a community asset that should be preserved if facing an uncertain financial future. It also will examine the level of concern Americans have about the uncertain future of local news, their awareness of it, and what institutional or personal approaches to preserving local news people are willing to support.

Methodology

Results for the survey items are based on three separate, self-administered web surveys with random samples of U.S. adults, aged 18 and older, who are members of the Gallup Panel™. Gallup uses probability-based, random sampling methods to recruit its Panel members.

Interviewing for the first survey took place between June 13 and July 1, 2019, and included 1,311 Gallup Panel members.

Interviewing for the second survey took place between June 24 and July 11, 2019, and included 1,384 Gallup Panel members.

Interviewing for the third survey took place between July 11 and 22, 2019, and included 1,468 Gallup Panel members.

Gallup weighted the obtained samples to correct for nonresponse. Nonresponse adjustments were made by adjusting the sample to match the national demographics of gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education and region. Demographic weighting targets were based on the 2015 Current Population Survey figures for the aged-18-and-older U.S. population. For results based on any individual sample, the margin of sampling error is ± 3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Margins of error for subgroups are higher.

In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

The full questionnaire, topline results, detailed cross tabulations and raw data may be obtained upon request. For questions about how the survey was conducted, please contact galluphelp@gallup.com.

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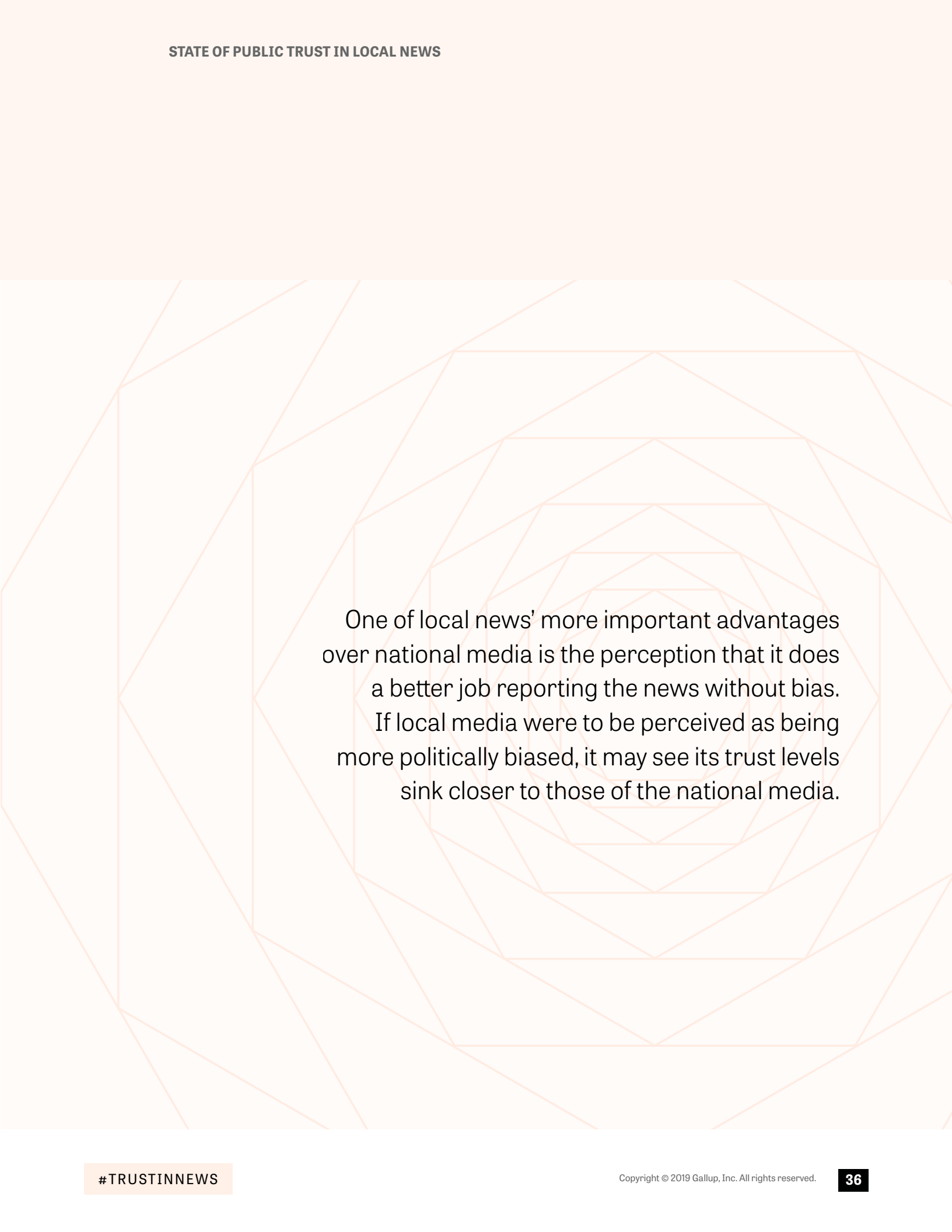
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