

Summary Report: Summer 2024 Media & Opinion Study

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May 2025

Study Overview

This report summarizes the main results of a study on media consumption and public opinion in the United States conducted in the summer and fall of 2024. The study was conducted by Andrew Trexler, a Ph.D. Candidate at Duke University, in collaboration with Ground News, a non-partisan news platform. The study recruited 1,717 U.S. adults to participate by enrolling for 8 weeks in a special email newsletter built by Ground News, which focused on U.S. political news stories. To evaluate how different news consumers engaged with and learned from different approaches to news coverage, the text of the headlines in each newsletter were randomized for each participant. Specifically, each headline was randomized among four options: (1) a format that prioritized conciseness and accessibility, using digestible language focused on policy and governance issues relevant to the story; (2) a format that prioritized strategy and competition, using conflict-oriented language focused on political parties or actors relevant to the story; (3) a format that prioritized communicating expertise, using more specialized political terminology to communicate a nuanced understanding of the story; or (4) a format that prioritized analysis, focusing on what the story might mean for future political outcomes or events. Engagement with news stories was measured with click-tracking, while a series of participant surveys fielded during the study measured participant attitudes and information recall.

Study results show that participants who were less politically engaged at baseline preferred headlines that presented concise and digestible information about key public policy and governance issues. In contrast, participants who were more politically engaged at baseline preferred headlines that used specialized political terminology or offered analysis on potential future political consequences of current events. Participants at all levels of baseline engagement showed higher levels of information recall when exposed to more headlines that presented news in a concise and digestible format focused on policy and governance. Relative to the other treatments, this accessible format also reduced self-reported news avoidance behaviors among study participants, increased feelings of internal political self-efficacy (the self-perception that one understands political issues and can navigate political decision-making), and increased support for several core norms of democracy.

Methodological Details

The study recruited 1,717 U.S. adults through two distinct recruitment efforts. In one effort, a probability-based random sample of 36,000 registered voters was drawn from public U.S. voter records in June 2024. In July 2024, these randomly sampled registered voters were each mailed an invitation to enroll in the study by completing an online survey at a URL provided in the mailed invitation. A total of 706 sampled individuals completed the onboarding survey (minimum response rate 2.0 percent). In a second effort, brief ads for the study were placed in Ground News’ weekly “Blindspot Report” newsletter for three weeks in July 2024; these ads invited U.S.-based readers to enroll in the study by completing the online onboarding survey. A total of 1,041 individuals recruited via the ads completed the onboarding survey. The onboarding survey was fielded by Duke in July and August 2024.

Participants recruited through both processes were screened for eligibility, data quality, and willingness to complete the entire 2-month study; these exclusions reduced the analysis samples to 688 participants recruited by mail and 1,029 recruited by newsletter ads (total of 1,717 participants). All participants who completed the study were paid \$5 for their

participation, plus up to \$5 in additional bonus payments earned by completing surveys during the study. As an additional participation incentive, ten participants who completed the study were selected by random lottery to win an additional bonus payment of \$100.

Enrolled participants received special email newsletters from Ground News three times per week for eight weeks from July to September 2024. Each newsletter included five news stories, selected by Ground News staff, each with a headline randomized by Duke University. Ground News tracked which participants clicked on each headline at least once. Duke University fielded short surveys to active study participants every two weeks during the study, which asked multiple-choice questions about information included in the newsletters. Participants were incentivized to complete these surveys, in which they could earn up to \$1.25 in bonus payments. Each participant was invited to complete four of these short surveys and the average (mean) participant completed 2.6 short surveys. After eight weeks of newsletters, Duke also invited study participants to complete an endline survey that measured general attitude and behavior change over the entire study period; 1,184 participants completed this survey, providing a re-interview rate of 67.7 percent. The endline survey was fielded in September and October 2024.

About the Study

Ethics review and approval for this study was provided by the Campus Institutional Review Board of Duke University. The study was made possible in part by grants from the Rapoport Family Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Bass Connections at Duke University, the DeWitt Wallace Center for Media & Democracy at Duke University, and the Department of Political Science at Duke University, as well as support from the Polarization Lab at Duke University. The statements made and views expressed in this report are solely the responsibility of the author.

A more detailed report of the study's findings and methods is currently being prepared for publication in a peer-reviewed journal.