

# The Paradox of Consumer Demand for Under-informative News

Andrew Trexler  
*Duke University*

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## Abstract

The U.S. news media have long been criticized for reflexive use of conflict narratives and horse-race coverage in political coverage. Media organizations and some scholars argue that these approaches can broaden their audience and entice some relatively disinterested consumers to engage with political news. I argue that approaches instead deepen engagement from a narrow subset of the public, while failing to engage audiences that are less interested in politics. I provide empirical evidence of this dynamic with a preregistered conjoint experiment conducted with a national nonprobability sample ( $n = 2,101$ ), in which I ask respondents to make news consumption decisions between pairs of headlines ( $n = 19,081$ ) that vary in style, policy issue, topic, and source. I find that “public interest” style headlines that convey the public import of news stories in plain language are preferred by less politically engaged consumers, whereas highly politically engaged consumers prefer headlines that use conflict frames, specialized political jargon, forecasting predictions, or clickbait language. While news outlets have financial incentives to cater to the most engaged consumers, this study suggests that doing so may in fact drive away less engaged consumers, while simultaneously threatening democratic accountability mechanisms by producing news that is ultimately less informative.

Word Count: 6,480

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**Contact:** Andrew Trexler, [andrew.trexler@duke.edu](mailto:andrew.trexler@duke.edu).

Audience demand is a key component of the news business (Hamilton 2004; Iyengar, Norpoth and Hahn 2004). In the era of online news, audience demand is carefully tracked with a variety of digital markers: clicks, views, likes, shares, and so on (Petre 2021). Ever hungry for an audience, news outlets learn from these metrics to adapt their news content to better attract consumers to their particular product (Dodds et al. 2023; Mukerjee, Yang and Peng 2023) over the offerings of countless competitors (Hindman 2018). One common tactic is to make the news more entertaining and attention-grabbing. Such efforts are often conceived as attempts to broaden and diversify the audience for news about public affairs. The proliferation of media choice in the internet age has enabled people who are relatively disinterested in politics to select out of consuming news about it (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Prior 2007; Stroud 2008). Because “public affairs-oriented ‘hard news’ is often unappealing to politically inattentive individuals” (Baum and Jamison 2006, 946) that outnumber attentive individuals (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), the “chase for additional consumers means that content will often reflect the preferences of those least interested in hard news” (Hamilton 2004, 2). Therefore, the logic goes, the media must make coverage of public affairs more entertaining to draw “entertainment fans” in addition to “news fans” (to borrow the nomenclature of Prior). Entertaining politics coverage like horse-racing polling news proliferates (Rosenstiel 2005; Hillygus 2011; Westwood, Messing and Lelkes 2020) precisely because it broadens the audience and brings in revenue (Baum and Jamison 2006; Iyengar, Norpoth and Hahn 2004).

In this paper, I propose an alternative explanation for the media’s enduring preference for entertaining and attention-grabbing stories about politics. Rather than appealing to consumers who are less interested in politics, I argue that news outlets instead use this strategy to appeal to the audience that is already most attentive to politics: political hobbyists. Avid consumers of political news are a decidedly unrepresentative slice of the American public: they are typically more partisan, more ideological, wealthier, more highly educated, and less racially diverse than the general population (Hersh 2020; Hopkins 2018; Klar 2014; Krup-

nikov and Ryan 2022; Prior 2007; Usher 2021). Yet these few consumers contribute a large percentage of the clicks, subscriptions, and other demand metrics that news outlets track (Tyler, Grimmer and Iyengar 2022), and aggregated estimates of audience demand are heavily influenced by their preferences. Far from seeking news about public affairs for its pure information value, these most consistent consumers of political news may instead seek news offerings that gratify their personal identities as partisans and ideologues (Hopkins, Lelkes and Wolken 2024), and as in-the-know politics experts (Krupnikov and Ryan 2022). That is, politics junkies may be exactly the consumers most attracted to entertainment-oriented politics coverage, because they primarily follow politics as a sport (Farnsworth and Lichter 2011) rather than for a true civic purpose.

In contrast, for people who are relatively disinterested politics, attempting to draw their attention by making politics coverage more entertainment-focused is akin to committing a category error. Such consumers should not be presumed to seek entertainment in a purely abstract sense, where the label is feature that can garnish any kind of content; rather, these consumers should be expected to seek apolitical content that they find entertaining or interesting. Indeed, recent scholarship on news avoidance has demonstrated a clear relationship between interest in politics and news consumption (Edgerly 2022; Toff, Palmer and Nielsen 2023), despite persistent efforts by media organizations to make their political coverage more entertaining. While jazzing up coverage politics may do little to draw their attention, political coverage about political issues (i.e., hard news) that are of relevance or interest to them may be more successful in drawing their attention.

I provide empirical evidence of these dynamics with a preregistered conjoint experiment conducted with a large national non-probability sample ( $n = 2,101$ ). I ask respondents to make consumption decisions between pairs of headlines ( $n = 38,162$ ) that vary in style, policy issue area, story topic, source outlet, and expected reading time. I find that “public interest” style headlines that convey the public policy import of news stories in plain language are preferred by *less* politically engaged consumers (that is, Prior’s “entertainment

fans”), whereas the most politically engaged consumers (the “news fans”) prefer headlines that present those same news stories in more entertaining styles that emphasize partisan conflict, employ specialized political jargon, engage in political forecasting, or use clickbait techniques to elicit engagement. Further, I show that public interest style headlines are broadly perceived to be more informative, easier to understand, and less biased than the styles that are attractive to the most politically engaged consumers. While news outlets have clear short-term financial incentives to cater their news products to appeal to the most engaged consumers, this study suggests that doing so may in fact drive away less engaged consumers, while simultaneously threatening the media’s expected role in democracy by producing news that feeds political hobbyism but is ultimately less informative about public affairs (Trexler 2024b).

## Appealing to News Junkies

Beyond dedicating reporting resources to specific *content* that attracts the attention of prolific news consumers—e.g., election news (Iyengar, Norpoth and Hahn 2004; Traugott 2005), scandals, gaffes, etc.—outlets can package and present news about nearly any politics story in a *style* that emphasizes specific elements the story to spur increased consumer engagement. Editorial choices over coverage style can include applying specific frames to put forward a chosen narrative interpretation (Entman 1993), but can also (more simply) constitute choices over what elements of the story are given priority in the headline and lede to draw consumers’ attention. News outlets can thus attempt to broaden the audience through entertaining or engagement-oriented styles of news coverage, even when reporting on substantive politics content.

In this paper, I examine four coverage styles that are particularly well-suited to attracting the attention of political news junkies: the *conflict* style, the *insider jargon* style, the *prediction-as-news* style, and the *clickbait* style. The conflict style dramatizes competition between political forces, depicting the news in terms of “winning, losing, strategy, and tac-

tics” (Dunaway and Lawrence 2015, 44), not only for campaign coverage (Patterson 1993; Iyengar, Norpoth and Hahn 2004; Dunaway and Lawrence 2015) but also substantive policy issues like reproductive rights (Han and Federico 2018), campaign finance reform (Gross and Brewer 2007), and anti-poverty policy (Lawrence 2000). By wrapping political news in the language of sports (Farnsworth and Lichter 2011), this style can potentially appeal to the strong partisan identities of highly-engaged news junkies (Krupnikov and Ryan 2022) to draw their attention to how their team is performing. The jargon style—which references specialized political lingo, acronyms, figures, and processes with little context or explanation—is suited to appeal to engaged consumers’ self-perceptions of political expertise and savviness, projecting a product by and for those already “in the know.” Similarly, both the prediction style (which uses current news events to speculate about uncertain future events) and the clickbait style (which strategically withholds key information to elicit a click; Molyneux and Coddington 2020) can appeal to news junkies’ impulsive need to know (Krupnikov and Ryan 2022) (that is, to maintain their expertise) by dangling a potentially juicy news morsel in the headline.<sup>1</sup> Each of these four styles de-emphasizes or otherwise obscures the substantive information content of a given news story, instead prioritizing engagement.

I contrast these four news styles with an alternative fifth style, which intentionally targets the normative expectations of public journalism (Haas 2007; Haas and Steiner 2006; Patterson 1993). This *public interest* style aims to communicate the major substantive facts of a news story and its public import (for public policy, governance, democracy, etc.) in simple terms, making it easy to understand without much cognitive effort—and with or without engaging further than the headline. This style is potentially appealing because the information quotient is high: the headline credibly signals the newsworthy content of the story and directly conveys valuable information that requires little cognitive effort or prior knowledge to understand. In contrast, the other four styles are comparatively “under-informative” in

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<sup>1</sup>Though each of these four styles bears unique markers and qualities, news outlets frequently combine these styles for single stories; for example, news stories about partisan election polling is typically presented with both a conflict and prediction style.

that they make this information less prominent or accessible in some way, as I discuss further below.<sup>2</sup> We might therefore expect that:

**H1:** Consumers prefer to engage with headlines with a public interest style relative to headlines with conflict, jargon, prediction, and clickbait styles.

For the most prolific news consumers, though, the identity-based appeals encapsulated in more entertainment-oriented headline styles may be more effective because these consumers hold stronger, more personally central political identities, and also intrinsically derive more entertainment value from politics. In contrast, for consumers who engage with the news incidentally or infrequently—who vastly outnumber the core political news audience—the political identities that these four styles tap into are typically less salient. Their partisan and ideological attachments are weaker, and following politics as an end unto itself and being “in the know” has less of a draw. Individual-level engagement with politics would thus act as a key moderator for consumption preferences:

**H2:** Individual political engagement moderates preference for headlines with a public interest coverage style, such that higher political engagement reduces preference for public interest style headlines and increases preference for conflict, jargon, prediction, and clickbait styles.

Are entertainment-oriented styles of news coverage informative for consumers? A classic concern is that by highlighting the wrong aspects of politics, the media limit the public’s access to news information that is “more central to issues of governing” (Patterson 1993, 29) and could matter for political participation the democratic process. Indeed, recent empirical evidence suggests that, conditional on exposure to news content, entertainment-focused styles of news coverage do in fact reduce the amount of critical information consumers can recall from news engagement (Trexler 2024b). However, it is possible that, given the choice between different news styles (i.e., across different news outlets covering the same story), those drawn

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<sup>2</sup>Importantly, news stories often contain information elements about public interest concerns, political competition, wonky minutiae, and forecasts of how relevant actors will react. Choosing which of these elements to prioritize in the headline is a key editorial decision that shapes a given story’s coverage style.

to entertainment-oriented styles would be sufficiently hooked to spend more time engaging with that content and therefore learning more from that engagement. Instead, I argue that because public interest style news prioritizes presenting key civic content directly in the headline and early in the story, this style of news coverage may still be more informative, even for people who would have preferred an alternative style. In this paper, I specifically examine how much consumers are able to learn from public interest versus conflict style news, contingent on their relative preference for these two styles:

**H3:** Conditional on preferences for public interest versus conflict style coverage, exposure to public interest style coverage increases information recall relative to exposure to partisan conflict style coverage.

These expectations describe a potential paradox of consumer demand for under-informative news: the most attentive to politics demand news that is the least informative, whereas the least attentive prefer news styles that are more informative. Outlets must therefore choose between appealing to the engaged few, who are likely to each provide a larger monetary value to outlets (through subscriptions and digital engagement), and appealing to broader public, who are many but on average will contribute little monetary value. If the most valuable consumers prefer an under-informative approach to news, the news business will have little incentive to prioritize serving the information needs of the broader public.

## Experimental Design

To test these hypotheses, I conduct a preregistered conjoint experiment that asked respondents to make multiple consumption decisions between pairs of news stories.<sup>3</sup> I recruited a large national non-probability sample of 2,148 U.S. adults via the Prolific survey respondent marketplace. The survey was fielded on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2024. Respondents were paid \$2.55

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<sup>3</sup>Anonymized preregistration materials for this experiment are available [here](#). This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of [REDACTED] under protocol [REDACTED]. I further affirm that this research adheres to the American Political Science Association's Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research.

to complete the survey, which lasted 13 minutes for the median respondent. I removed 47 observations for failing multiple preregistered quality checks; this procedure provided a final sample for analysis of  $n = 2,101$ . Appendix B provides additional details regarding the sample composition and exclusion criteria.

After providing informed consent, respondents answered background questions related to their news consumption habits and political opinions.<sup>4</sup> I use a subset of these responses to estimate baseline engagement with (and interest in) politics. I adapt the approach from Johnston, Lavine and Federico (2017) to create a weighted political engagement index from three components. The first component is a simple average of two questions, each measured on a 5-point scale: how often the respondent pays attention to politics, and their level of interest in political campaigns. The second component is the self-reported number of days per week that the respondent consumes news about politics. The third component is the number of correct answers to seven factual political knowledge questions that vary widely in difficulty (see Appendix A.4). For each component, I rescale the component to vary between 0 and 1; as preregistered, I then weight the first two (subjective) components at 0.25 each, and the (objective) knowledge component at 0.5 to generate the final index score for each individual.<sup>5</sup>

Respondents were then shown a series of pairs of headlines and were asked which of the two stories they would prefer to read. Respondents were told that they would be asked to actually read one of the stories that they selected, to encourage them to express real preferences in each decision task. Respondents answered on balanced a 4-point scale in which they could indicate a “strong” or “slight” preference for story A or story B; as preregistered, I collapse this scale for each profile to indicate whether the profile was preferred (1) or not (0).

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<sup>4</sup>The full survey questionnaire is provided in Appendix B.2.

<sup>5</sup>Following Clifford and Jerit (2016), I ask participants to pledge to complete the knowledge items without any outside assistance. Following Motta, Callaghan and Smith (2017), I also include an additional final knowledge question, which is open-ended and asks respondents to identify the year in which an obscure Supreme Court case was decided. I assume that correct answers to this final question indicate cheating (i.e., looking up the answer). For respondents who either do not make the pledge or do provide a correct answer to the obscure Supreme Court question (total  $n = 48$ ), I drop the knowledge component from the engagement index and take the simple average of the two subjective components instead.



Each decision task presented two story profiles (A or B) that included four independently randomized attributes: the headline style, the issue area and specific story topic, the source outlet, and the expected reading time. In contrast to classic conjoint designs that present two or more profiles with randomized attributes arranged in a grid format (e.g., Bansak, Hainmueller and Hangartner 2016; Graham and Svolik 2020; Jenke et al. 2021; Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014; Hainmueller, Hangartner and Yamamoto 2015; SoRelle and Laws 2023), each profile (A or B) embedded multiple randomized attributes within the headline, with the randomized source outlet and expected reading time positioned below the headline (similar to how such information is presented on news aggregators like Yahoo! News or Google News). An example decision task is shown in Fig. 1.

Please look carefully at each story's headline. Then choose which of the two stories you would most prefer to read.

<b><u>Story A</u></b>	<b><u>Story B</u></b>
<p><b>Senate Republicans block border security bill, adding to Biden's immigration woes</b></p> <p><i>Politico</i> 3 minute read</p>	<p><b>Learn what's behind the latest uptick in the annual inflation rate (hint: you probably buy it)</b></p> <p><i>The New York Times</i> 4 minute read</p>

Which article would you most prefer to read?

Strongly prefer to read **Story A**

Slightly prefer to read **Story A**

Slightly prefer to read **Story B**

Strongly prefer to read **Story B**

Figure 1: Figure displays an example decision task between two story profiles.

The randomized headlines were adapted from recent news coverage. I first identified five broad policy issue areas to include in the study: the economy, the environment, foreign affairs, immigration, and public health. These topics vary on two important dimensions. First, at the time of fielding, the economy and immigration were commonly identified by Republicans as major problems, whereas the environment and public health were commonly identified by Democrats as major problems, while foreign affairs news was less likely to favor one party over the other.<sup>6</sup> Second, the *New York Times* Index assembled by the Comparative Agendas Project (Jones et al. 2023) suggests that foreign affairs typically receives high news coverage, while the economy and public health typically receive a moderate amount of news coverage, and immigration and the environment typically receive comparatively low news coverage. For each of these five issue areas, I selected four current news stories from recent news coverage relating to that issue area (that is, 20 total news stories across the five issue areas). For each story, I then adapted the headline five different ways, generating a story-specific headline for each of the five coverage styles of interest (partisan conflict, insider jargon, prediction-as-news, clickbait, and public interest). The five styled headlines for the foreign affairs–Ukraine story are shown below in Table 1. In addition to the 100 political headlines (5 issue areas x 4 stories x 5 styles), I adapted five apolitical headlines from contemporary news stories. The headline for each profile in each decision task was selected from among all 105 headlines by simple random assignment.<sup>7</sup>

The remaining two attributes were independently selected by simple random assignment. The purported source outlet was selected from among six possible values: CNN, Fox News, *The New York Times*, Politico, *The Wall Street Journal*, or *The Washington Post*. These outlets are all major national news publishers but encompass a range of perceived ideological slants. Finally, the signaled article length, expressed as reading time, was selected from among four possible values: 1 minute read, 2 minute read, 3 minute read, or 4 minute read.

Respondents completed 12 consecutive decisions choosing between two random story

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<sup>6</sup>See, for example, contemporaneous polling data from Gallup and from Pew Research Center.

<sup>7</sup>The text of each possible headline is presented in Appendix B.2.

Table 1: Example Headlines Shown in Decision Tasks

Issue Area	Topic	Style	Headline
Foreign Affairs	Ukraine	Public	Congress approves new military aid package for package for Ukraine in bipartisan votes
Foreign Affairs	Ukraine	Conflict	Congress approves new Ukraine funding, delivering Biden victory over GOP objections
Foreign Affairs	Ukraine	Jargon	Johnson pushes through Ukraine aid bill despite objections from Freedom Caucus
Foreign Affairs	Ukraine	Predict	The House Speaker’s push to approve new Ukraine funding might cost him his job
Foreign Affairs	Ukraine	Clickbait	Here’s how the House Speaker got around far-right opposition to secure Ukraine aid

profiles. The first two decision tasks used distinct sets of possible headlines (reported in Appendix B.2); the first decision task was intended as a warm-up for respondents to get accustomed to the task, while the second determined which of several vignettes the respondent would be asked to read later in the study (see below).<sup>8</sup> As preregistered, I do not analyze the data from these first two decision tasks to test H1 and H2. I consider only respondent preferences over the  $n = 38,162$  profiles in the remaining 10 decision tasks to estimate the average marginal component effect (AMCE; Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014) of each level of each attribute on selection decisions.<sup>9</sup>

The second decision task facilitated the analysis of H3. This decision task randomized only four possible headlines in a more rigid fashion: for all respondents, one profile referenced a Texas election law story and the other a New York gerrymandering story, and one profile used a public interest style headline while the other used a conflict style headline. The reading time was held constant at “2 minute read” for this decision task only. Respondents

<sup>8</sup>Respondents did not know that this specific decision task determined which article they would be asked to read after completing the remaining conjoint decisions.

<sup>9</sup>This total excludes all profiles from any decision task that included one or more apolitical headlines. These headlines served primarily to confirm that individuals with low political engagement prefer apolitical news, while individuals with high political engagement prefer politics coverage. I report analyses affirming these differences in Appendix A.2.

who selected the profile with the Texas story were later piped to a news article vignette on that story, while respondents who selected the profile with the New York story were piped to a news article vignette on that story instead. Crucially, though the vignette *content* matched the respondent’s selection in the decision task, the *style* of the vignette was separately randomized to either a public interest or conflict style, allowing me to directly test H3 by examining respondents’ recall of key factual information contained within the vignette conditional on each respondents’ earlier preference for the public interest style profile versus the conflict style profile.

Following Trexler (2024b), I hold information constant in the vignette but manipulate style by simply altering where a conflict-style paragraph versus a public interest style paragraph appear within the vignette, either higher or lower in the body of the article (i.e., identical text, but different prioritization). Respondents were explicitly informed that they could engage with the vignette for as long as they wished, and the median respondent took 45 seconds to do so. Following the vignette, each respondent was asked four multiple-choice recall questions about key factual information contained within the vignette. To test H3, I combine these four questions into an additive index and regress this measure of recall on a treatment indicator for vignette style, conditional on the respondent’s preference in the initial decision task.<sup>10</sup>

## Results

To test H1 and H2, I estimate the AMCE of each headline style by regressing binary indicators for each style on the binary reading preference outcome, holding the public interest style as the reference group.<sup>11</sup> I use an ordinary least squares (OLS) estimator and cluster

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<sup>10</sup>As preregistered, I also include an indicator variable for the Texas versus New York story, to account for overall differences in the difficulty of the recall questions for these two stories (see Appendix A.4.

<sup>11</sup>Analyses of AMCEs for other attributes (reading time, source outlet, issue area) are reported in Appendix A.2. Because these attributes were randomized independently (and are therefore equivalent in expectation), as preregistered I do not include these factors in the main models. Nevertheless, they provide a useful confirmation that respondents were expressing considered preferences: respondents indicated preferences for shorter news articles, Democrats preferred stories purportedly from *The New York Times* while Republicans preferred Fox News, and less politically engaged respondents eschewed foreign affairs stories

the standard errors at the respondent level. I first consider whether consumers in general prefer public interest headlines over contemporary alternatives (H1). Figure 2 shows the estimated AMCE of each headline style relative to the public interest style; full results are reported in Appendix Table A.1.1, column 1. While H1 expects that the AMCE for each other style should be negative, Figure 2 shows that this is only true for the insider jargon style (estimate  $-0.028$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), with the conflict, prediction, and clickbait styles selected about as frequently as the public interest style on average across the whole sample.

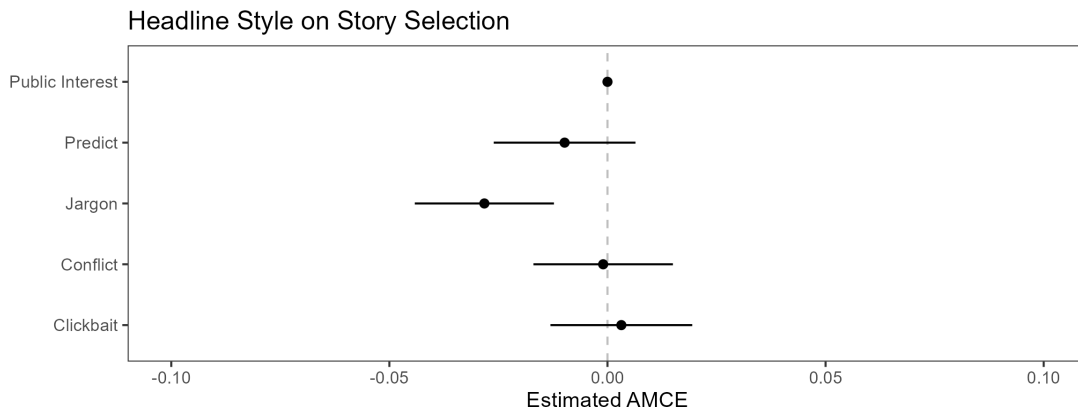


Figure 2: Figure displays the estimated AMCE of headline style on story selection. The error bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals. Analysis excludes decision tasks that included one or more apolitical headlines. For full results, see Appendix Table A.1.1, column 1.

Are story preferences different for individuals who are politically engaged versus those who do not follow politics closely? To assess H2's expectation that individuals highly engaged with politics should prefer under-informative headline styles and less engaged individuals should prefer public interest style headlines, I interact the binary indicator for each style with baseline political engagement. The lower panel of Figure 3 shows the base coefficients for each style (which H2 expects to be negative) in this interacted model, while the upper panel shows the interaction terms (which H2 expects to be positive).<sup>12</sup> The results strongly

<sup>12</sup>while more politically engaged respondents were drawn to them.

<sup>12</sup>Full results are reported in Appendix Table A.1.1, column 2.

support H2: for three of the four under-informative headlines styles, the base coefficient (that is, for less-engaged individuals) is negative, whereas the interaction term (high engagement individuals) is positive. The sole exception is the clickbait style, for which the point estimates are in expected directions and similar to those of other under-informative styles, but narrowly miss the preregistered significance threshold (base coefficient estimate  $-0.0421$ ,  $p = 0.095$ ; interaction term  $0.0743$ ,  $p = 0.053$ ).

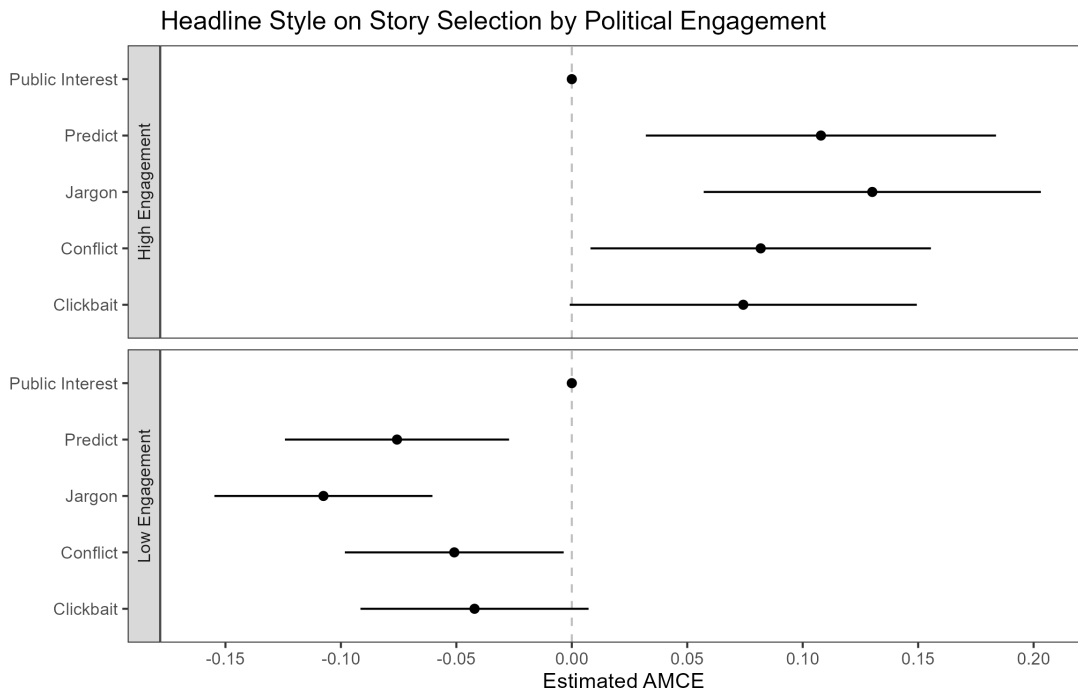


Figure 3: Figure displays the estimated AMCE on story selection of headline style interacted with baseline political engagement. The lower panel displays the estimated base coefficients for each style and the upper panel displays the estimated interaction terms. The error bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals. Analysis excludes decision tasks that included one or more apolitical headlines. For full results, see Appendix Table A.1.1, column 2.

To show how headline selection differs across the spectrum of political engagement, Figure 4 shows the predicted probability of preferring a story with each headline style over the range of political engagement from 0 (least engaged) to 1 (most engaged). The median respondent in this nonprobability sample had a baseline political engagement of 0.625, as

indicated by the grey vertical line in Figure 4. Respondents below this median value on political engagement were much more likely to prefer a news story with a public interest headline, with a predicted relative preference of about five to ten percentage points over the other styles among the least politically engaged respondents. In contrast, respondents above the median political engagement tended to prefer under-informative styles, by about five percentage points for most styles (and about three percentage points for the jargon style) relative to public interest style headlines for the most politically engaged respondents.

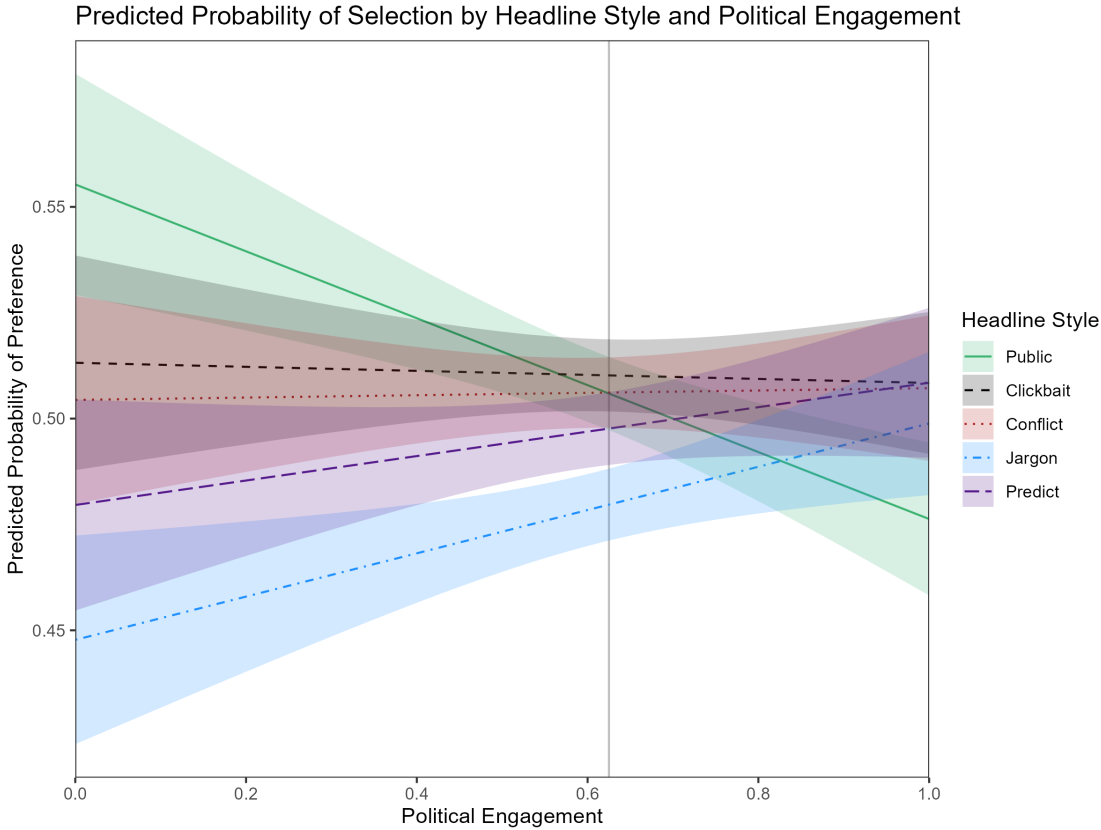


Figure 4: Figure displays the predicted probability of preferring a news story with each headline style by baseline political engagement. The error bars indicate 90 percent confidence intervals. Analysis excludes decision tasks that included one or more apolitical headlines. The vertical line indicates the sample median on baseline political engagement.

Why might these differences in individual preference for news styles be so stark? After respondents completed all 12 conjoint decision tasks, I showed each respondent a series of three

random headlines (drawn without replacement from all 105 possible headlines, including the five apolitical headlines) and asked them to evaluate to what extent each headline was “informative,” “easy to understand,” “biased,” and “entertaining,” with each dimension measured on a 5-point scale from “not at all” to “a great deal,” which I rescale to vary between 0 and 1.<sup>13</sup> Figure 5 shows the mean evaluation on each dimension for all headlines with each style across the full sample of respondents (also reported in Appendix Table A.1.2. Public interest headlines were perceived to be the most informative, the easiest to understand, and the least biased—but also the least entertaining. Further, while evaluations on these three dimensions did not significantly differ by respondents’ baseline political engagement, public interest headlines were perceived by the most politically engaged as substantially more informative (estimate 0.131,  $p < 0.001$ ) and substantially less entertaining (estimate  $-0.072$ ,  $p = 0.052$ ) relative to the perceptions of the least politically engaged respondents. Because more politically engaged individuals find politics intrinsically interesting and entertaining as a hobby (Hersh 2020; Krupnikov and Ryan 2022; Prior 2007), they would sensibly seek news about politics that provides entertainment value rather than simply information value. News junkies can thus rely on volume of engagement rather than quality to accumulate political information by directing most of their attention to the entertaining aspects of politics coverage, and only incidentally gaining valuable knowledge as a byproduct.

Importantly, public interest style news is more informative, as respondents’ perceptions suggest. Analyzing recall of information from the vignette at the end of the study, I find that viewing identical content in a public interest style vignette instead of a conflict style vignette produces a substantial increase in the amount of critical information correctly recalled after exposure (estimate 0.339,  $p < 0.001$ ). Further, as H3 predicts, this information gain persists for both consumers who preferred the public interest style profile in the selection task (estimate 0.385,  $p < 0.001$ ) and those who preferred the conflict style profile instead (estimate 0.290,  $p < 0.001$ ); these gains are similar in magnitude for both groups (estimated difference

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<sup>13</sup>I also asked respondents to evaluate each headline on four other dimensions reported in Appendix Table A.1.2, which served to confirm that each headline style successfully manipulated the intended concept.



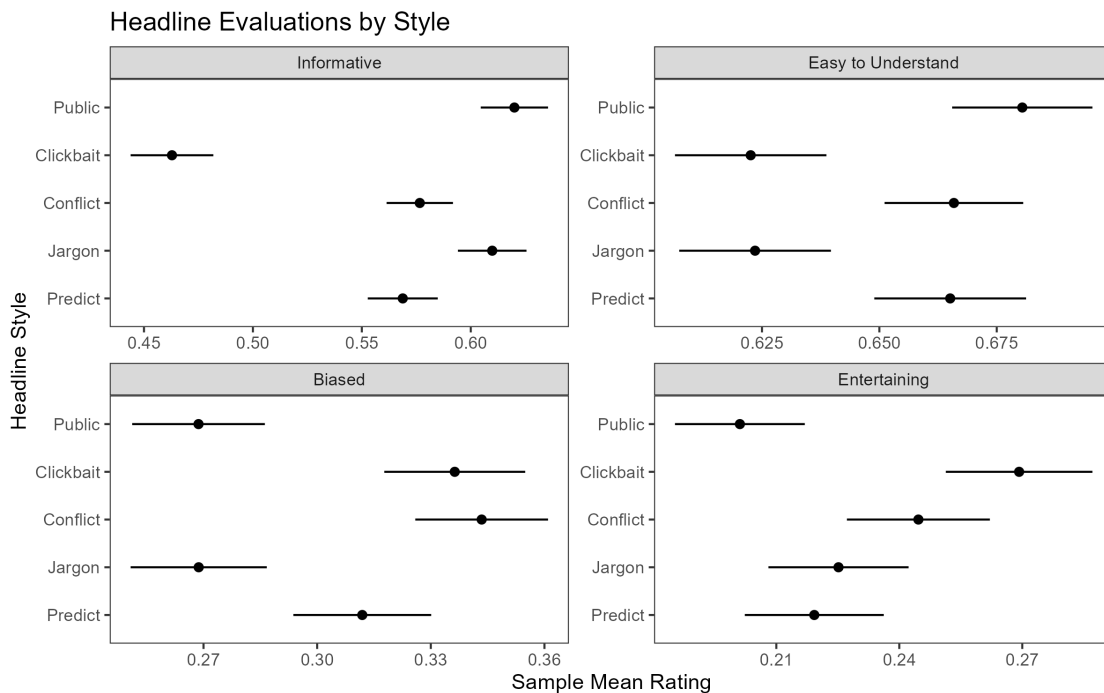


Figure 5: Figure displays the mean rating for all headlines of each style (excluding apolitical headlines) on four qualitative dimensions. The error bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals. For full results, see Appendix Table A.1.2.

0.094,  $p = 0.450$ ).<sup>14</sup> In other words, entertainment-oriented news styles like the conflict style are in fact under-informative, and they are under-informative even for the consumers that find them attractive.

## Discussion

This study shows that demand for political news is qualitatively different for people who are less versus more engaged with politics: the least engaged consumers strongly prefer news headlines that convey the basic public import of a news story in accessible language, whereas the most engaged express a clear preference for headlines with a more exciting hook. From the point of view of each consumer, these preferences appear rational. For the relatively disengaged, who consume little political news day-to-day (Edgerly 2022; Forman-

<sup>14</sup>See Appendix Table A.1.3 for full results. Additionally, Appendix A.3 reports the results of a final pre-registered hypothesis test on political learning moderated by baseline political engagement. I find that differences in learning from the vignette across the two randomized styles does not differ by baseline political engagement, as Trexler (2024b) has previously found when time constraints on exposure are not imposed.

Katz, Naomi 2023; Prior 2019; Tyler, Grimmer and Iyengar 2022), being able to understand the core of a news story immediately from the headline facilitates consumption—as does conveying the substantive import of the story rather than its political intrigue. Far from being fundamentally disinterested in substantive issues relative to the drama of politics (e.g., Achen and Bartels 2016; Zaller 2003), these consumers have a distaste for politics as it is popularly conveyed by the media: as sport (Farnsworth and Lichter 2011). While non-political stories are generally of greater interest to them (see Appendix A.2), to the extent that they wish to follow public affairs these consumers prefer a news style that provides the most relevant information (Lupia 2016) in a “condensed and easy-to-digest” fashion, without feeling the need to clothe every story in garb that screams politics.

In contrast, the most politically interested individuals, who consume a near-continuous stream of political news every day (Krupnikov and Ryan 2022; Tyler, Grimmer and Iyengar 2022), the basic policy issue at the heart of most political news stories is either easily detectable from a headline by reading “between the lines” or already known from prior exposure. That is, heavy news consumers can rely on volume of exposure to accumulate an understanding of the issue at stake, or make an educated guess from a single headline based on their existing knowledge of the mentioned political figures, institutions, and terminology. The rational preference, then, is to seek out news content that seems to provide something entertaining (conflict, clickbait), something new (prediction, clickbait), or something that makes one feel smart (jargon, prediction).

For news producers, these preferences present something of a paradox because the most consistent (and informed) customers demand content that is less informative. To broaden the audience for political news requires producing public interest style news—but because these consumers are less interested in politics, they will still engage only infrequently. In contrast, the most politically interested consumers that engage widely and often ultimately prefer a fundamentally different kind of content—and this kind of content may also drive away other kinds of consumers. In an online world where engagement metrics are made

integral to news production (Dodds et al. 2023; Mukerjee, Yang and Peng 2023; Munger 2020; Petre 2021) and few consumers are actually willing to pay for news (Chyi and Ng 2020; Hopkins and Gorton 2024; Trexler 2024*a*), the extremely unequal distribution of news engagement provides strong economic incentives for news outlets to solve the paradox by prioritizing the prolific few over the periodic many.

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*Online Appendix to*  
The Paradox of Consumer Demand for  
Under-informative News

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# Supplemental Results

## Tabular Results

Table A.1.1: Estimated AMCE of Headline Style on Reading Preference

	Base Model (1)	Engagement Interaction (2)	All Attributes (3)
Style: Conflict	-0.001 (0.008)	-0.051* (0.024)	-0.049* (0.024)
Style: Jargon	-0.028*** (0.008)	-0.108*** (0.024)	-0.104*** (0.024)
Style: Prediction	-0.010 (0.008)	-0.076** (0.025)	-0.073** (0.025)
Style: Clickbait	0.003 (0.008)	-0.042† (0.025)	-0.043† (0.025)
Political Engagement		-0.079** (0.025)	-0.078** (0.025)
Conflict*Engagement		0.082* (0.038)	0.079* (0.038)
Jargon*Engagement		0.130*** (0.037)	0.125*** (0.037)
Prediction*Engagement		0.108** (0.039)	0.103** (0.039)
Clickbait*Engagement		0.074† (0.038)	0.075† (0.038)
Outlet: Fox News			-0.094*** (0.010)
Outlet: NYT			0.021* (0.009)
Outlet: Politico			-0.009 (0.009)
Outlet: WSJ			0.012 (0.009)
Outlet: WaPo			0.003 (0.009)
Issue: Environment			-0.006 (0.009)
Issue: Foreign Affairs			-0.028** (0.009)
Issue: Immigration			-0.005 (0.009)
Issue: Public Health			0.023* (0.009)
Length: 2 minute read			-0.029*** (0.007)
Length: 3 minute read			-0.037*** (0.007)
Length: 4 minute read			-0.049*** (0.008)
Profile Position: B			-0.018* (0.007)
Constant	0.507*** (0.005)	0.555*** (0.118)	0.617*** (0.124)
Observations	38,162	38,162	38,162

†p<0.10; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

*Note:* Data from 38,162 profile observations from 19,081 decision tasks that did not include one or more apolitical headlines. Standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Public interest style held as the reference category.

Table A.1.2: Estimated Mean Headline Evaluation by Style

Style	<i>Evaluation Dimension:</i>							
	Informative (1)	Easy to Understand (2)	Biased (3)	Entertaining (4)	About Public Policy (5)	About Conflict (6)	About Forecasting (7)	Clickbait (8)
Public Interest	0.620 (0.008)	0.680 (0.008)	0.269 (0.009)	0.201 (0.008)	0.513 (0.010)	0.364 (0.010)	0.298 (0.009)	0.283 (0.009)
Conflict	0.577 (0.008)	0.666 (0.008)	0.343 (0.009)	0.245 (0.009)	0.533 (0.009)	0.458 (0.010)	0.289 (0.009)	0.333 (0.010)
Jargon	0.610 (0.008)	0.624 (0.008)	0.269 (0.009)	0.225 (0.009)	0.508 (0.010)	0.361 (0.010)	0.298 (0.010)	0.284 (0.010)
Prediction	0.569 (0.008)	0.665 (0.008)	0.312 (0.009)	0.219 (0.009)	0.513 (0.010)	0.406 (0.010)	0.462 (0.010)	0.333 (0.010)
Clickbait	0.463 (0.010)	0.623 (0.008)	0.336 (0.009)	0.269 (0.009)	0.459 (0.010)	0.344 (0.010)	0.345 (0.010)	0.488 (0.012)
Apolitical	0.478 (0.017)	0.705 (0.016)	0.193 (0.016)	0.512 (0.018)	0.086 (0.012)	0.114 (0.013)	0.180 (0.015)	0.479 (0.021)
Observations	6,303	6,303	6,303	6,303	6,303	6,303	6,303	6,303

*Note:* Data from 6,303 observations headline evaluations. Standard errors are clustered at the respondent level.

Table A.1.3: Estimated ATE on Information Recall by Style Selection

	All Respondents (1)	Selected Public Interest (2)	Selected Conflict (3)
Public Interest Style	0.339*** (0.063)	0.385*** (0.089)	0.290*** (0.087)
Texas Story	0.711*** (0.062)	0.754*** (0.089)	0.675*** (0.085)
Constant	1.306*** (0.053)	1.331*** (0.078)	1.285*** (0.073)
Observations	2,100	995	1105
*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001			

*Note:* The conflict style vignettes are held as the reference category. Columns 2 and 3 report results for sample subsets according to whether the respondent selected a profile with a public interest style headline (2) or conflict style headline (3).

## Evidence of Credible Stated Preferences

In addition to the 100 political headlines used for the primary analysis, I included 5 apolitical headlines (see Appendix B.2) to confirm that baseline political engagement should be positively associated with preference for political news stories over non-political news stories. Column 1 of Appendix Table A.2.1 below shows the results of regressing headline type (apolitical held as the reference category) and its interaction with baseline political engagement, while column 2 shows the results of regressing headline style (with apolitical headlines included and held as the reference category) and its interaction with engagement. In both analyses, less politically engaged respondents strongly prefer apolitical news stories relative to all five styles of political headlines, while the reverse is true for more politically engaged respondents. These results lend confidence that respondents were making credible stated preferences in the decision tasks.

Analyses of the other randomized attributes (reading time, source outlet, and policy issue area) also suggest credible stated preferences. As shown in Appendix Table A.2.2 respondents indicated preferences for shorter news articles. As shown in Appendix Table A.2.3, Democrats preferred stories purportedly from *The New York Times* while Republicans preferred Fox News. And as shown in Appendix Table A.2.4, less politically engaged respondents eschewed foreign affairs stories while more politically engaged respondents were drawn to them.

Table A.2.1: Estimated AMCE of Non-political vs. Political Headlines on Reading Preference

	By Type (1)	By Style (2)
Political Headline	-0.157*** (0.037)	
Political Engagement	-0.362*** (0.053)	-0.362*** (0.053)
Headline Type*Engagement	0.381*** (0.055)	
Style: Public		-0.104** (0.039)
Style: Conflict		-0.149*** (0.039)
Style: Jargon		-0.209*** (0.039)
Style: Prediction		-0.174*** (0.040)
Style: Clickbait		-0.148*** (0.040)
Public*Engagement		0.303*** (0.059)
Conflict*Engagement		0.381*** (0.060)
Jargon*Engagement		0.431*** (0.060)
Prediction*Engagement		0.406*** (0.060)
Clickbait*Engagement		0.381*** (0.060)
Constant	0.649*** (0.035)	0.649*** (0.035)
Observations	42,020	42,020

\*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

*Note:* Data from full sample of 42,020 profile observations. Standard errors are clustered at the respondent level. Apolitical headlines held as the reference category.

Table A.2.2: Estimated AMCE of Article Length on Reading Preference

	Base Model (1)	Engagement Interaction (2)
2 Minute Read	-0.029*** (0.007)	-0.056* (0.023)
3 Minute Read	-0.037*** (0.007)	-0.062** (0.022)
4 Minute Read	-0.049*** (0.008)	-0.092*** (0.023)
Political Engagement		-0.040 (0.022)
2 Min*Engagement		0.044 (0.035)
3 Min*Engagement		0.041 (0.034)
4 Min*Engagement		0.070* (0.035)
Constant	0.529*** (0.005)	0.553*** (0.014)
Observations	38,162	38,162

\*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

*Note:* Data from 38,162 profile observations from 19,081 decision tasks that did not include one or more apolitical headlines. Standard errors are clustered at the respondent level. “1 minute read” held as the reference category.

Table A.2.3: Estimated AMCE of Source Outlet on Reading Preference

	Base Model (1)	Party ID Interaction (2)
Fox News	-0.095*** (0.010)	-0.190*** (0.014)
New York Times	0.021* (0.009)	0.031* (0.013)
Politico	-0.009 (0.009)	-0.013 (0.014)
Wall Street Journal	0.012 (0.009)	-0.002 (0.014)
Washington Post	0.002 (0.009)	-0.005 (0.013)
Party ID		-0.049** (0.018)
Fox News*PID		0.250*** (0.028)
New York Times*PID		-0.026 (0.026)
Politico*PID		0.011 (0.028)
Wall Street Journal*PID		0.038 (0.028)
Washington Post*PID		0.021 (0.026)
Constant	0.512*** (0.006)	0.530*** (0.009)
Observations	38,162	38,162

\*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

*Note:* Data from 38,162 profile observations from 19,081 decision tasks that did not include one or more apolitical headlines. Standard errors are clustered at the respondent level. CNN held as the reference category.

Table A.2.4: Estimated AMCE of Policy Issue Area on Reading Preference

	Base Model (1)	Engagement Interaction (2)
Environment	-0.006 (0.009)	-0.042 (0.027)
Foreign Affairs	-0.028** (0.009)	-0.157*** (0.027)
Immigration	-0.005 (0.009)	-0.094*** (0.027)
Public Health	0.023* (0.009)	0.047 (0.026)
Political Engagement		-0.075** (0.027)
Environment*Engagement		0.059 (0.042)
Foreign*Engagement		0.212*** (0.041)
Immigration*Engagement		0.146*** (0.042)
Health*Engagement		-0.039 (0.041)
Constant	0.503*** (0.006)	0.549*** (0.017)
Observations	38,162	38,162

\*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

*Note:* Data from 38,162 profile observations from 19,081 decision tasks that did not include one or more apolitical headlines. Standard errors are clustered at the respondent level. Economy news held as the reference category.



## Moderated Learning

In addition to the hypotheses discussed and reported in the main text, the preregistration for this study included the following fourth hypothesis:

**H4:** Conditional on preferences for public interest versus conflict style coverage, individual political engagement moderates the degree to which exposure to public interest style coverage increases information recall relative to partisan conflict style coverage, such that lower political engagement increases the information recall benefit.

I test this hypothesis by interacting the main effect of exposure to a public interest style vignette with baseline political engagement. As reported in Table A.3.1 below, this interaction is not statistically significant for either the full sample or among those who preferred one style over the other in the initial decision task.

Table A.3.1: Estimated ATE on Information Recall by Style Selection

	All Respondents (1)	Selected Public Interest (2)	Selected Conflict (3)
Public Interest Style	0.377* (0.167)	0.432 <sup>†</sup> (0.238)	0.318 (0.236)
Political Engagement	2.229*** (0.184)	2.567*** (0.274)	2.045*** (0.249)
Public*Engagement	-0.076 (0.261)	-0.089 (0.374)	-0.063 (0.365)
Texas Story	0.719*** (0.058)	0.734*** (0.083)	0.702*** (0.082)
Constant	-0.093 (0.122)	-0.213 (0.179)	0.016 (0.167)
Observations	2,100	995	1105
<sup>†</sup> p<0.10; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001			

*Note:* The conflict style vignettes are held as the reference category. Columns 2 and 3 report results for sample subsets according to whether the respondent selected a profile with a public interest style headline (2) or conflict style headline (3).

## Item Response Theory Models

In this appendix, I present the results of item response theory (IRT) models of both pre-treatment and post-treatment factual knowledge questions asked of respondents in the study. Each model uses binary data (1 for a correct answer and 0 otherwise) for a set of variables that make up a single knowledge measure (a single pre-treatment measure, and one recall measure for each of the three vignette news stories) to estimate three parameters for each item in a logistic model (a “3PL” IRT model). The discrimination parameter  $\alpha$  describes how well each individual item relates to the overall scale (formally, the maximum slope of the logistic curve); in this context,  $\alpha$  indicates how well the item contributes to discriminating between those with more or less knowledge. Ideally, this parameter is positive and large for all items. The difficulty parameter  $\beta$  gives an indication how easy or difficult the item is (formally, the point at which likelihood of a correct answer crosses 50 percent, assuming no guessing), and accordingly where on the knowledge scale that item is likely to distinguish between more and less knowledgeable individuals. In this setting, a range of positive and negative  $\beta$  values across items is preferable, to be able to distinguish between low and very low knowledge as well as between high and very high knowledge. Finally, the pseudo-guessing parameter  $\gamma$  describes the estimated probability of a correct answer via guessing (formally, this raises the floor of the logistic function). In this setting, lower  $\gamma$  values are preferred because the scale is better able to capture actual knowledge rather than guesswork. The tables below provide the parameter values for each item used in each scale.

For all three scales, the estimated IRT models indicate that the items all strongly related to what the scale measures, provide a useful range of difficulty parameters to capture differences at many points along the scale, and show acceptably low guessing parameters (with the exception of the final pre-treatment knowledge item).

Table A.4.1: IRT Model for Pre-treatment Political Knowledge Battery

Item	$\alpha$	$\beta$	$\gamma$
House Speaker	2.830	-0.195	0.002
Senate Term	1.753	-0.407	0.227
Chief Justice	3.322	-0.200	0.067
Vice President	0.853	0.901	0.000
State Governor	1.297	-2.095	0.001
State Legislature	0.790	-1.357	0.000
Next Election	1.918	-0.772	0.727

*Note:* Data from 2,053 respondents who pledge to answer honestly and did not show evidence of cheating.

Table A.4.2: IRT Model for Texas Story Post-treatment Recall Battery

Item	$\alpha$	$\beta$	$\gamma$
Remove Officials	4.818	-0.208	0.001
Principles	3.643	0.001	0.000
Houston	1.856	-0.580	0.014
Appointee	2.406	0.239	0.010

*Note:* Data from 1,308 respondents who selected the Texas story.

Table A.4.3: IRT Model for New York Story Post-treatment Recall Battery

Item	$\alpha$	$\beta$	$\gamma$
Independent Official	2.553	0.971	0.024
Competitiveness	2.950	1.093	0.123
State Constitution	1.679	-0.149	0.017
Largely Unchanged	1.434	0.333	0.000

*Note:* Data from 793 respondents who selected the New York story.

## Study Information

The data for this study come from a non-probability convenience sample of the U.S. general adult population ( $n = 2,148$ ) recruited from the Prolific respondent pool via quota sampling to ensure a gender-balanced sample. The study was conducted by [REDACTED] and funded by [REDACTED]. The study was fielded on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2024, via the Qualtrics online survey platform. The study was approved by [REDACTED UNIVERSITY]'s Institutional Review Board under protocol [REDACTED]. Respondents received \$2.55 to complete the survey; the median respondent completed the survey in 13.5 minutes. Anonymized preregistration materials for this study are available [here](#).

After consenting to participate in the study, participants were screened for eligibility in several ways. First, they were asked to correctly identify a single-digit number shown in an image on the screen. Second, they were asked to verify their age and state of residence. Third, they were asked whether they would answer the survey honestly. In total, 9 respondents failed to correctly identify the number on the screen (all breakoffs), 1 reported being less than 18 years of age, and 7 did not agree to answer the survey honestly. These were terminated from the study, while 14 additional respondents broke off from the survey during screening. A total of 2,286 respondents passed these screening questions and were recruited into the study. Following screening, 3 additional respondents failed a pre-treatment attention check, which asked respondents to correctly select the letters “B” and “E” from among five options, and were terminated from the study. A further 135 respondents failed to reach the last page of the study, and are not included in the analyses. The total number of complete valid responses is thus 2,148.

Finally, 47 respondents were excluded from the analysis for failing an extreme speeding check (completing the survey in less than 1/3 of the media time, or 270 seconds or less) or failing at least two of the following additional quality checks: self-reported age and birth year do not correspond, within a tolerance of +/- 2 years; self-reported state of residence and zip code do not match; non-sequitur or item non-response to an open-ended question about preferred news source; reporting “a lot” or “some” use in the past week of a social media platform that does not exist; speeding, defined by completion in less than 1/3 of the median time (or 405 seconds or less); scoring less than 0.65 on Qualtrics’ internal reCaptcha measure; or partially failing the pretreatment attention check by selecting either “B” or “E” but not both. All of the screening and exclusion criteria were preregistered. The exclusions reduce the final

analysis sample to  $n = 2,101$  respondents. Appendix B.1 provides descriptive statistics for the sample. The observations are not weighted. As with all survey research, the design and collection of data has limitations, and resulting estimates may involve unmeasured error that limits representativeness to the target population.

## Sample Characteristics

Table B.1: Sample Characteristics on Selected Variables

		Percent of Sample
<b>Age</b>	18–29	18.7
	30–39	31.9
	40–49	20.1
	50–59	18.6
	60+	10.7
<b>Gender</b>	Male	48.1
	Female	50.0
	Other Gender	1.9
<b>Race</b>	Asian or Asian-American	11.8
	Black or African-American	15.3
	Hispanic or Latino	7.9
	Middle Eastern	0.6
	Native American or Alaska Native	1.8
	Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0.4
	White	69.9
	Other Race	0.9
<b>Education</b>	Less than High School	0.7
	High School or GED	11.4
	Some College	20.8
	Associate’s Degree	9.7
	Bachelor’s Degree	39.0
	Postgraduate Degree	18.5
<b>Employment</b>	Full-time	58.4
	Part-time	15.6
	Unemployed	8.4
	Retired	5.3
	Homemaker	5.3
	Student	3.6
	Something Else	3.4
<b>Household Income</b>	Less than \$20,000	8.7
	\$20,000 to \$39,000	15.2
	\$40,000 to \$59,000	16.7
	\$60,000 to \$79,000	16.1
	\$80,000 to \$99,000	12.3
	\$100,000 to \$149,000	18.7
	\$150,000+	12.2
<b>Partisanship</b>	Democrat	45.6
	Independent	34.4
	Republican	19.9

*Note: Data from analysis sample of 2,101 respondents.*

## Survey Questionnaire

### *Consent and Screening*

Thank you for your interest in participating in this survey by researchers at [REDACTED]. This research study will ask you to answer a series of questions about you and your opinions about topics in the news. We expect this survey to take about 15 minutes to complete. After completing the survey, you will be paid \$2.55 for your participation. You may withdraw at any time and you may refuse to answer any question, but you must proceed to the final screen of the survey in order to receive payment. In accordance with Prolific policies, we may reject your submission if the survey was not completed correctly, you fail to complete an attention check appropriately, or the instructions were not followed. Your participation is voluntary. We do not ask for your name or any other information that might identify you. Although collected data may be made public or used for future research purposes, your identity will always remain confidential. If you have any questions about the research, please contact the researchers at [REDACTED]. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, contact [REDACTED].

- I consent to participate, begin the study.
- I do NOT consent.

We have just a few questions to confirm your eligibility for the survey. [Image of the number 3 in a box.] Please select the number shown in the box above.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

What is your age in years? Please enter a whole number:

- (Text box.)

In which state do you currently reside?

- I do not reside in the United States
- Alabama
- ...
- Wyoming

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? *“I will answer this survey honestly.”*

- Completely disagree
- Moderately disagree
- Slightly disagree
- Slightly agree
- Moderately agree
- Completely agree

### *News Consumption*

Thanks! You have qualified for the survey. We want to begin by asking you some questions about topics in the news. Politics can be fast-paced, and many people do not follow every new story. How often do you pay attention to what’s going on in politics, if at all?

- Always
- Most of the time
- About half the time
- Sometimes
- Not at all

Generally speaking, how interested are you in political campaigns, if at all?

- Not at all interested
- Slightly interested
- Moderately interested
- Very interested
- Extremely interested

During a typical week, how many days, if any, do you watch, read, or listen to news about politics?

- 0 days
- 1 day
- ...
- 7 days

In the past week, have you... (please check all that apply)

- Used social media (such as Facebook or YouTube)
- Watched news on television
- Read a newspaper (in print or online)
- Listened to a radio news program, talk radio, or news podcast
- None of these

How much, if at all, have you used the following social media platforms in the past week? [*Options: A lot; Some; Not at all*]

- Facebook
- X (Twitter)
- YouTube
- Instagram
- JiveMojo
- TikTok

What source of news do you use most often?

- (Text entry.)

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? *“I can be well-informed even when I don’t actively follow the news.”*

- Strongly agree
- Moderately agree
- Slightly agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Slightly disagree
- Moderately disagree
- Strongly disagree

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? *“I don’t have to actively seek out the*



*news because when important events happen, I will hear about them.”*

- Strongly agree
- Moderately agree
- Slightly agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Slightly disagree
- Moderately disagree
- Strongly disagree

How often do you think you can count on the news media to be accurate, if at all?

- Always
- Most of the time
- About half the time
- Sometimes
- Never

How often do you consider the news media to be trustworthy, if at all?

- Always
- Most of the time
- About half the time
- Sometimes
- Never

How often do you find the news media to be informative, if at all?

- Always
- Most of the time
- About half the time
- Sometimes
- Never

How often, if at all, do you find yourself actively trying to avoid the news these days?

- Always
- Most of the time
- About half the time
- Sometimes
- Never

### *Political Attitudes*

Next, we would like to ask you some questions about yourself and your opinions. Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or something else?

- Democrat
- Republican
- Independent
- Other party (please specify)

[If Democrat] Would you call yourself a strong Democrat, or a not very strong Democrat?

- Strong
- Not very strong

[If Republican] Would you call yourself a strong Republican, or a not very strong Republican?

- Strong
- Not very strong

[If Neither] Do you think of yourself as closer to the Democratic Party or to the Republican Party?

- Closer to the Democratic Party
- Closer to the Republican Party
- Neither

Where would you place yourself on this scale?

- Extremely liberal
- Mostly liberal
- Slightly liberal
- Middle of the road
- Slightly conservative
- Mostly conservative
- Extremely conservative

Which of the following describes your beliefs and attitudes? Please check all that apply.

- Conservative
- Environmentalist
- Green
- Liberal
- Libertarian
- Nationalist
- Progressive
- Socialist
- Traditional
- None of these

### *Political Knowledge*

Next, we're going to ask you some questions about public affairs. Many people have trouble answering questions like these, so if you can't think of the answer, please select "I don't know." It is important to us that you do NOT use outside sources like the Internet to search for the correct answer. Will you answer the following questions without help from outside sources?

- Yes
- No

Who is the current Speaker of the US House of Representatives?

- Mike Johnson
- Nancy Pelosi
- Kevin McCarthy
- Paul Ryan

- I don't know

How long is the term of office for a US Senator?

- 2 years
- 4 years
- 6 years
- 8 years
- I don't know

What job or political office is now held by John Roberts?

- Chief Justice of the Supreme Court
- Senate Majority Leader
- Chair of the Democratic National Committee
- Chair of the Republican National Committee
- I don't know

Who is the current President of the U.S. Senate?

- Kamala Harris
- Elizabeth Warren
- Chuck Schumer
- Mitch McConnell
- I don't know

Is the [governor] of [your state] a member of the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, or neither?

- Democratic Party
- Republican Party
- Neither
- I don't know

Which political party currently controls most seats in the [lower chamber] of [your state]?

- Democratic Party
- Republican Party
- Neither
- I don't know

Which party currently controls the North Carolina State Senate?

- Democratic Party
- Republican Party
- Neither
- I don't know

In what year will the next election for President of the United States take place?

- Year: (Text box.)
- I don't know

In what year did the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) decide the case *Hill v. Wallace*?

- Year: (Text box.)
- I don't know

### *Attention Check*

What are the second and fifth letters of the English alphabet? This is an attention check question and the correct answer is B and E (please select both).

- A
- B
- C
- D
- E

### *Conjoint*

Thanks! Now we will move on to another set of topics. For the next set of pages, we are going to show you some news headlines adapted from recent stories in the news. On each page, you will see two headlines. Your task is to look carefully at each headline and **decide which of the two stories you would prefer to read**. You will make 12 separate decisions between pairs of headlines. Afterwards, you'll have the chance to read one of the stories that you selected.

*Possible conjoint attribute values (randomized):*

*Headline (Task 1):*

- “Don’t believe that survey saying Americans think chocolate milk comes from brown cows”
- “No, Millennials don’t really think that Judge Judy is a Supreme Court justice”
- “What the latest fundraising reports tell us about the November election”
- “What the latest polling results tell us about the November election”

*Headline (Task 2):*

- “Texas legislature imposes unique election laws on Houston, its largest city”
- “Texas Democrats wage fierce court battle against new Republican election laws”
- “New York approves new voting maps, largely keeping party-neutral lines set in 2022”
- “New York approves new voting maps, finally ending a lengthy partisan court battle”

*Headline (Tasks 3-12):*

- “Iowa passes law allowing state officials to arrest and deport some immigrants”
- “Iowa joins other red states claiming direct immigration authority, escalating fight with Biden”
- “Iowa follows Texas, mints new law granting deportation authority to state judges”
- “Iowa passes new immigration law that is likely to face swift challenges in court”
- “You’ll never guess what’s in Iowa’s new immigration law (unless you’re a Texan)”
- “Texas is bussing migrants to cities like New York and Denver, overwhelming local shelters”
- “Texas Republicans are bussing migrants to liberal cities, overwhelming local shelters”
- “Abbott makes good on threat to export migrants to big cities, overwhelming local shelters”
- “Texas policy of bussing migrants to big cities might doom several mayors’ reelection bids”
- “Sending them where? Here’s what Texas is doing with newly arrived migrants”
- “Senate Republicans block border security bill, leaving immigration policy in limbo”
- “Senate Republicans block border security bill, adding to Biden’s immigration woes”
- “GOP leaders kill border security deal, leaving chief architect Lankford fuming”

- “Immigration remains a key election flashpoint as Republicans block border security bill”
- “Here’s what one Republican Senator had to say about the stalled border security bill”
- “Influx of 3.3 million immigrants in 2023 helped to grow U.S. economy and labor force”
- “Influx of 3.3 million immigrants in 2023 fuels tense partisan debate, labor force growth”
- “Influx of 3.3 million immigrants in 2023 helped U.S. growth outpace all G7 economies”
- “Influx of 3.3 million immigrants in 2023 will ensure immigration stays top election issue”
- “You won’t believe how much the U.S. immigrant population grew in 2023—or its economic impact”
- “Federal government sets first limit on hazardous “forever chemicals” in drinking water”
- “In a win for Biden, EPA sets first limits on “forever chemicals” in drinking water”
- “EPA issues rule setting first-ever limits on PFAS in drinking water”
- “As EPA imposes limit on “forever chemicals” in drinking water, critics foretell ballooning costs”
- “What are “PFAS” chemicals and why does the government say they’re bad for you?”
- “Florida lawmakers propose limiting considerations of climate change in energy policy”
- “Pushing the culture war, Florida is going after mentions of “climate change” in state law”
- “Florida Speaker backs proposal to strike references to “climate change” from Florida law”
- “Florida legislature looks likely to double down on oil and gas in proposed bill”
- “Here’s what removing just eight mentions of “climate change” from Florida law would do”
- “Biden administration tightens limits on car emissions to accelerate electric vehicle transition”
- “Biden pushes back on automakers and Republican critics with new limits on gas-powered cars”
- “EPA finalizes new rule on hybrids and EVs in bid to curb automobile emissions”
- “Biden administration’s new regulation on electric vehicles will help convince young voters”
- “Biden administration set new rules on “tailpipe emissions.” Here’s why that might be a problem.”
- “Federal government blocks mining company’s proposal to build industrial road through fragile Alaskan wilderness”
- “Courting environmentalists, Biden administration blocks mining company’s planned road through fragile Alaskan wilderness”
- “Interior Department blocks road-building plan for Ambler Access Project through fragile Alaskan wilderness”
- “Industry groups likely to take Biden administration to court for decision blocking road-building plan in Alaskan wilderness”
- “Why did Biden block a road-building plan in Alaska? It might not be for the reason you expect.”
- “China subsidizes opioid production and fuels U.S. overdose deaths, Congressional report says”
- “House committee finds that China is fueling U.S. opioid crisis, urges Biden to get tough”
- “House committee finds that China’s CCP is subsidizing fentanyl production, export to U.S.”
- “House report on China’s role in opioid crisis could contribute to a breakdown of U.S.-China relations”
- “How responsible is China for opioid deaths in the U.S.? Here’s what a new House report says.”
- “Congress approves new Ukraine funding, delivering Biden victory over Republican objections”
- “Johnson pushes through Ukraine aid bill despite objections from Freedom Caucus”
- “The House Speaker’s push to approve new Ukraine funding might cost him his job”
- “Here’s how the House Speaker maneuvered past far-right opposition to secure Ukraine aid”
- “Congress approves aid package for Israel alongside humanitarian funding for Gaza”
- “Congress approves aid package for Israel and Gaza, despite partisan qualms on both sides”
- “Congress approves aid package for Israel and Gaza, a victory for Johnson as much as Biden”
- “Aid package for Israel approved by Congress will deepen Biden’s struggles with Muslim-Americans”
- “See what’s in the new aid package for Israel and Gaza (and what isn’t)”
- “As Venezuela’s leader imprisons opposition candidates, U.S. considers stricter oil embargo”
- “On Venezuela, Biden wants to impose oil embargo, but is wary of increasing gas prices or refugees”

- “U.S. considers reimposing strict oil sanctions on Venezuela after brokered deal falls apart”
- “Biden’s decision on Venezuela oil embargo may cost him crucial votes in November”
- “How a new oil embargo on Venezuela might work—and why it might matter in November”
- “Measles outbreaks among unvaccinated pose increasing threat to U.S. infants, CDC warns”
- “Recent measles outbreaks renew public debate on polarized issue of infant vaccination”
- “CDC warns that spike in measles cases pose threat to ‘elimination status’ in U.S.”
- “U.S. measles cases have already doubled since last year—and will probably keep rising”
- “Here’s what’s happening with measles cases in the U.S.—and why the CDC is worried”
- “Arizona set to enforce 1864 law banning nearly all abortions after state court ruling”
- “Trump and Biden trade blows regarding Arizona law that bans nearly all abortions”
- “Arizona’s Court of Appeals rules territory-era abortion prohibition enforceable”
- “Arizona’s 1864 abortion law puts issue at center stage in a key battleground state”
- “Arizona left its abortion law on the books for 160 years—since before AZ was even a state”
- “Congress investigates health sector security after cyber-attack disrupts care at most U.S. hospitals”
- “GOP House and Dem-controlled Senate launch dueling inquiries after cyber-attack disrupts U.S. hospitals”
- “Congress to investigate Change Healthcare cyber-attack that derailed insurance payments across U.S.”
- “Congress begins inquiries after major health sector cyber-attack, but systems remain ‘a prime target’”
- “‘A prime target’: here’s how many U.S. hospitals say they were disrupted in recent cyber-attack”
- “U.S. issues new regulations to protect miners from dust that causes black lung disease”
- “Long stalled by politics, U.S. issues new rule to protect miners from dust that causes lung disease”
- “Federal government issues new regulation limiting ground silica dust, linked to lung ailments”
- “New regulations on mining dust linked to black lung disease will be costly for the industry”
- “What the government’s new regulation on mining dust means for workers and the economy”
- “Annual inflation rate increases slightly to 3.5% in March, driven by food and energy prices”
- “Bad news for Biden: U.S. annual inflation rate increases slightly in March, to 3.5%”
- “Consumer inflation rate climbs to 3.5% in March, core CPI inflation dips slightly to 3.8%”
- “Annual inflation rises to 3.5% in March, dashing hopes that Fed will cut interest rates soon”
- “Learn what’s behind the latest uptick in the annual inflation rate (hint: you probably buy it)”
- “U.S. annual economic growth rate rose to 3.4% in last months of 2023, new government estimate says”
- “Good news for Biden: new estimate says annual economic growth was 3.4% in last months of 2023”
- “U.S. Commerce Department revises estimated annual GDP growth rate to 3.4% for Q4 of 2023”
- “U.S. annual growth estimate at 3.4% for last months of 2023, a sign of continuing economic strength”
- “What the latest GDP numbers tells us about the state of the U.S. economy—and Biden’s chances”
- “U.S. economy added 303,000 jobs in March as unemployment rate falls slightly to 3.8%”
- “Democrats cheer March jobs report: economy added 303,000 jobs, unemployment at 3.8%”
- “March jobs report: BLS says employers added 303,000 jobs, unemployment dips to 3.8%”
- “Signs of continuing job growth in March: economy added 303,000 jobs, unemployment at 3.8%”
- “What the latest jobs report means for workers, the presidential election, and more”
- “Average gas prices climb to \$3.61 per gallon in March, contributing to stubborn inflation”
- “Gas prices climb to \$3.61 per gallon in March, fueling consumer resentment over economy”
- “Price at the pump climbs to \$3.61 in March, contributing to uptick in CPI inflation rate”
- “Gas prices climb to \$3.61 per gallon in March, and are likely to keep rising heading into summer”

- “See where average gas prices changed the most in March, in your state and across the country”
- “10 Easter eggs hidden in Taylor Swift’s new album ‘Tortured Poets Department’”
- “Dodgers star Shohei Ohtani shows no sign he’s distracted by translator’s gambling scandal”
- “Massive Disneyland expansion will add new rides and amenities to California theme park”
- “Astronomers discover a massive black hole less than 2,000 light years from Earth”
- “Our most satisfying, inexpensive weeknight dinner recipes from 2023”

*Source Outlet:*

- CNN
- Fox News
- The New York Times
- Politico
- The Wall Street Journal
- The Washington Post

*Reading Time:*

- 1 minute read
- 2 minute read
- 3 minute read
- 4 minute read

Please look carefully at each story's headline. Then choose which of the two stories you would most prefer to read.

<u><a href="#">Story A</a></u>	<u><a href="#">Story B</a></u>
<p><b>Senate Republicans block border security bill, adding to Biden’s immigration woes</b></p> <p><i>Politico</i> 3 minute read</p>	<p><b>Learn what’s behind the latest uptick in the annual inflation rate (hint: you probably buy it)</b></p> <p><i>The New York Times</i> 4 minute read</p>

Which article would you most prefer to read?

Strongly prefer to read <b>Story A</b> <input type="radio"/>	Slightly prefer to read <b>Story A</b> <input type="radio"/>	Slightly prefer to read <b>Story B</b> <input type="radio"/>	Strongly prefer to read <b>Story B</b> <input type="radio"/>
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Figure B.2: Example decision task. Participants repeated this task 12 times. This image is an example decision task, for which the values shown in each field are randomized.

*Programming note: The first decision task, intended as a warm-up, randomized only 4 possible headlines such that 1 profile always included a headline about polling on public ignorance and 1 profile always*

*included a clickbait headline about the election. The second decision task, which determined which story would later be shown to the respondent in the vignette, randomized only 4 possible headlines such that 1 profile always included a conflict headline, 1 profile always included a public interest headline, 1 profile always included a Texas headline, and 1 story always included a New York headline. For this decision task, the reading time signal was fixed at “2 minute read” for both profile (this being an accurate estimate of the reading time for all possible vignette articles at typical reading speeds; see Brysbaert 2019).*

### *Vignette*

Thanks! On the next page, we will show you one of the stories that you selected earlier, adapted from recent coverage in the news. You can spend as much or as little time reading it as you like.

*Programming note: One of two possible stories was presented in the vignette (Texas election law or New York redistricting), which corresponded with the respondent’s story preference in the second decision task. However, the style of the article (including headline, framing snippets in the lede, and the ordering of the body paragraphs) was randomized to reflect either a conflict style or a public interest style. If assigned to the conflict (public interest) style, the conflict (public interest) snippets were used in the lede and the conflict (public interest) paragraph appeared first, with the other three body paragraphs randomly ordered. Both stories are presented here with the body paragraphs arbitrarily ordered public interest, conflict, jargon, prediction (framing snippets are provided in the same order, excluding the jargon and prediction snippets).*

#### **Texas Public Interest Headline or Texas Conflict Headline**

A new election law in Texas [now allows extraordinary interference in local Houston elections by state officials / now allows extraordinary interference in local Houston elections by state officials], with key implications for [democratic rights / partisan matchups] in the 2024 elections.

The unusual election policies adopted by the Republican-controlled state legislature apply only to the 4.8 million residents of Houston’s home county—but not other Texas voters. The change gives an unelected official, appointed by the Republican governor, extraordinary powers to remove two locally-elected officials from office and to directly administer local elections. Voting rights advocates say the law undercuts principles of self-government, denying local voters their choice of representatives.

After adopting the new rules for the Democratic stronghold, Texas Republicans defended the measures by accusing Houston Democrats of bungling prior elections. GOP lawmakers observed that some polling sites opened late on Election Day in 2022, making some voters wait or miss voting. But local Democrats say they’ve already fixed those problems, calling them rare, and lambasted Republicans for a naked power grab that they are already fighting in court.

Jane Nelson, a former Republican state senator and current Secretary of State appointed of Governor Greg Abbott, now enjoys new authority in Texas’s Harris County. Under the new law, Nelson can remove the County Clerk and County Assessor of Harris County, and directly oversee election administration and voter registration in the county, upending the traditional roles these two local offices have held in Texas elections.



The new election rules in Houston are expected benefit Republicans seeking to retain their slim three-seat majority in the House of Representatives in Washington, as well as their majorities in both chambers of the state legislature. With Republican state officials taking over elections in the liberal stronghold, Democrats fear that the shift will create enough voter confusion to tip several races to Republicans this year.

*or*

### **New York Public Interest Headline or New York Conflict Headline**

New York’s legislature has approved new Congressional district maps, [largely keeping party-neutral lines that a state court imposed in 2022 / ending a legal war Democrats and Republicans had waged for years]. The surprising result reflects a new emphasis on [election fairness / campaign strategy] as the November election nears.

In 2022, New York’s Court of Appeals ruled that the Democrat-controlled legislature unfairly favored Democrats when drawing new Congressional district lines, a practice known as “gerrymandering” that is prohibited by the state constitution. The 2022 districts were drawn by a neutral, court-appointed official to make elections more competitive. The new voting maps approved by the state legislature are barely changed from the neutral court-ordered maps drawn in 2022.

After the 2020 Census, both parties accused each other of hijacking the normal redistricting process for partisan gain, leading to a cascade of lawsuits in courtrooms across the country. While Democrats pushed to revise New York’s maps, which enabled Republicans to flip four House seats in 2022, North Carolina’s Republican-led legislature successfully overturned that state’s court-ordered maps. Ultimately, New York’s legislature opted for only modest changes.

The litigation over New York’s district maps was extensive. First, Republicans successfully sued to overturn the Democrat-led legislature’s original maps, resulting in a special master drawing court-ordered maps for the 2022 election. Then Democrats sued to overturn those maps; an appellate court ruled in Democrats’ favor in July, which New York’s top court upheld in December. But since few changes were made, Republicans say they will not litigate further.

The new district lines are a potential disaster for Democrats, who hope to retake the House of Representatives this year. While some slight revisions will help Democrats in a few races, after spending millions of dollars suing for a chance to revise, the updated maps do much less than expected—leaving several Republican-held swing districts largely untouched. Election polling in the coming months will show just how steep those costs are.

Next, we’d like to ask you a few questions about the story you just viewed.

[If Texas story:]

According to the article, the new election law in Texas...

- ...allows the Texas Secretary of State to remove elected officials from office
- ...increases the number of times the Texas Governor can run for re-election
- ...imposes new term limits on Texas state Senators
- ...prohibits early voting in off-cycle special elections
- ...requires each Texas county to provide an annual report on election fraud

According to the article, voting rights advocates have criticized the new Texas law because it...

- ...undermines principles of self-government
- ...increases election administration costs
- ...will reduce transparency in campaign spending
- ...will lead to more election fraud
- ...makes filing to run for office more difficult

According to the article, the new Texas law will directly affect...

- ...the city of Houston
- ...the city of El Paso
- ...rural counties
- ...areas along the state's border with Mexico
- ...the entire state

According to the article, the new Texas law gives election powers to...

- ...an official appointed by the Texas Governor
- ...the Texas Governor
- ...the state legislature
- ...local county officials
- ...a non-governmental election watchdog organization

[If New York story:]

According to the article, New York's Congressional district lines used in the 2022 elections were drawn by...

- ...an independent court-appointed official
- ...a bipartisan court-appointed panel
- ...Democratic state lawmakers
- ...the state's Independent Redistricting Commission
- ...a bipartisan committee of state lawmakers

According to the article, New York's Congressional district lines used in the 2022 elections were drawn with specific intent to...

- ...increase election competitiveness
- ...favor Democrats
- ...favor Republicans
- ...increase the number of majority-minority districts
- ...always conform to county lines

According to the article, the New York state constitution...

- ...prohibits partisan gerrymandering
- ...prohibits public funding of political campaigns
- ...provides public campaign funding for an incumbent governor
- ...requires a new election if less than half of eligible voters cast a ballot
- ...requires amendments to obtain two-thirds approval of the voters

According to the article, the latest Congressional district maps approved by the New York legislature...

- ...are very similar to the maps used in 2022
- ...are likely to help Democrats flip as many as 6 House seats

- ...are likely to help Republicans flip as many as 6 House seats
- ...are likely to be struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court
- ...force three popular incumbent Representatives to compete in the same district

### *Headline Evaluations*

Thanks! Next, we'd like to get your thoughts on a few headlines you may have seen earlier.

*Programming note: Three random headlines were drawn without replacement from the 109 possible headlines for decision tasks 2-12, and presented to respondents one at a time to evaluate on all eight dimensions in a grid format question.*

Please consider the following headline: [Randomized Headline]

To what extent, if any, would you say that this headline is...

#### Entertaining

- Not at all
- Very little
- A moderate amount
- Quite a bit
- A great deal

#### Informative

- Not at all
- Very little
- A moderate amount
- Quite a bit
- A great deal

#### Easy to understand

- Not at all
- Very little
- A moderate amount
- Quite a bit
- A great deal

#### About forecasting

- Not at all
- Very little
- A moderate amount
- Quite a bit
- A great deal

#### About conflict

- Not at all
- Very little

- A moderate amount
- Quite a bit
- A great deal

About public policy

- Not at all
- Very little
- A moderate amount
- Quite a bit
- A great deal

Clickbait

- Not at all
- Very little
- A moderate amount
- Quite a bit
- A great deal

Biased

- Not at all
- Very little
- A moderate amount
- Quite a bit
- A great deal

### *Demographics*

Finally, we have some background questions for statistical purposes. Which of the following best describes your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Something else

What race or ethnic group best describes you? Please check all that apply.

- Asian or Asian-American
- Black or African-American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Middle Eastern
- Native American or Alaska Native
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- White
- Something else

What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

- Less than a high school degree or equivalent
- High school degree or equivalent (for example: GED)
- Some college, but no degree

- 2-year college degree (Associate’s degree)
- 4-year college degree (Bachelor’s degree)
- Postgraduate degree (MA, MBA, MD, JD, PhD, etc.)

What is your current employment status?

- Employed full-time
- Employed part-time
- Unemployed
- Retired
- Full-time homemaker
- Student
- Something else

In what year were you born? Please enter a 4-digit number.

- (Text box.)

Which of the following describes your total annual household income from 2022—that is the total income everyone living in your household made together, before taxes, in 2022?

- Less than \$20,000
- \$10,000 to \$39,999
- \$40,000 to \$59,999
- \$60,000 to \$79,999
- \$80,000 to \$99,999
- \$100,000 to \$119,999
- \$120,000 to \$149,999
- \$150,000 to \$199,999
- \$200,000 or more

In which zip code do you currently reside? Please enter a 5-digit number.

- (Text box.)

Thank you for completing this survey. Your participation is greatly appreciated. Please share any comments you have about the survey. We welcome your feedback. When you are finished, the next screen will return you to Prolific.

- (Text box.)