

Measuring Untapped Demand for Accessible Public Interest News

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Health Dept. Plans Vaccine Poll Run by Trump Ally's Firm

The no-bid contract was published amid Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s effort to move the nation's health infrastructure away from some vaccines.

Qatar plane gift could awaken Trump's sleeping 'corrupt' problem

Americans have long had issues with Trump's potential self-dealing. But while other issues are harder to explain, this one's different.

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Key questions

- ▶ Is there an unmet demand for **public interest news** (accessible substantive content over horserace content)
- ▶ Is this demand concentrated among those who are less politically interested?
- ▶ Is developing a reputation as a public interest news producer a viable strategy?

Motivation

- ▶ How to reconcile the reality of news metrics (partisan conflict coverage dominates) with these predictions?
- ▶ Those metrics are based on a subset of Americans who are very different from the majority (Krupnikov & Ryan 2022)
- ▶ Increasing numbers of Americans are opting out of news altogether and potentially alienated by news focused on partisan conflict

Our past work

- ▶ Trexler (2025): Less attentive audiences prefer more accessible and informative policy news content, high engagement audience prefer political entertainment
- ▶ Thorson (2024): People consistently choose headlines that describe existing policies over those emphasizing partisan conflict

Project Overview

- ▶ **Study 1: Compensation Experiment.** Less politically engaged participants demand less money to read a public interest news article than to read a partisan conflict news article
- ▶ **Study 2 (pilot): News Choice Experiment.** Less politically engaged participants consistently express a preference for public interest news across multiple choice sets, test development of outlet-level heuristics

Hypotheses

Relative to highly engaged individuals, less politically engaged individuals...

- ▶ H1 (Study 1 & Study 2): ...have higher demand for public interest news
- ▶ H2 (Study 2): ...prefer consuming (ex ante) news outlets that prioritize public interest coverage
- ▶ H3 (Study 2): ...have more favorable views of news outlets that prioritize public interest coverage

Public Interest vs Partisan Conflict

Partisan conflict

- ▶ Focus on conflict between political forces
- ▶ Electoral strategy & win/loss framing
- ▶ Effects on political actors or outcomes
- ▶ Public evaluation of candidates/parties/chances

Public interest

- ▶ Policy, governance, effects on the public
- ▶ Information relevant to democratic participation
- ▶ Public demand for policy
- ▶ Actionable information

Study 1 Design

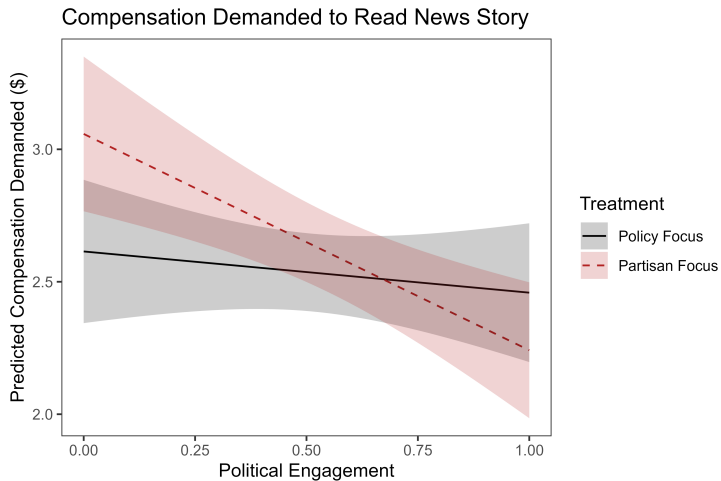
- ▶ “Recruitment” experiment appended to unrelated survey

How much money would you require to participate in the following study?

Study on perceptions of current events

Read and evaluate a current news story about the U.S. Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) that **[provides key information about how the program currently works and how it impacts the American public / describes the ongoing partisan clashes over potential reforms to the program before the 2026 midterm elections]**. This survey will take about 6 minutes.

Study 1 Results: H1 Supported



Study 2 Design

- ▶ Respondents are repeatedly asked to choose between stories attributed to 2 (fictitious) news outlets
- ▶ 1 outlet randomly assigned as a public interest news producer, the other as a partisan conflict news producer
- ▶ Never explicitly indicated, but respondents can develop beliefs about each outlet as they complete the tasks

Outcomes

- ▶ H1: Choices over public interest stories vs partisan conflict stories
- ▶ H2: Choices over stories in abstract (weak content signals: round-ups, general topics)
- ▶ H3: Attitudes about outlets (positive/negative traits, feeling thermometer, willingness to engage/recommend)

Decision Task (Phase 1)

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



GOP Advances Energy Development on Federal Lands Over Democratic Objections

Republican efforts to expand oil and gas leasing on public lands have drawn sharp criticism from Democrats in Congress.



Real Wage Growth Continues for American Workers, Labor Department Data Shows

Inflation-adjusted earnings for workers have shown moderate growth over recent quarters, though gains vary significantly across industries and income levels.



Which outlet's story would you most prefer to read?



Decision Task (Phase 2)

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



Weekly Roundup

Catch up on the biggest and most consequential stories of the week, with in-depth analysis and context from our team of reporters.



The Week Ahead

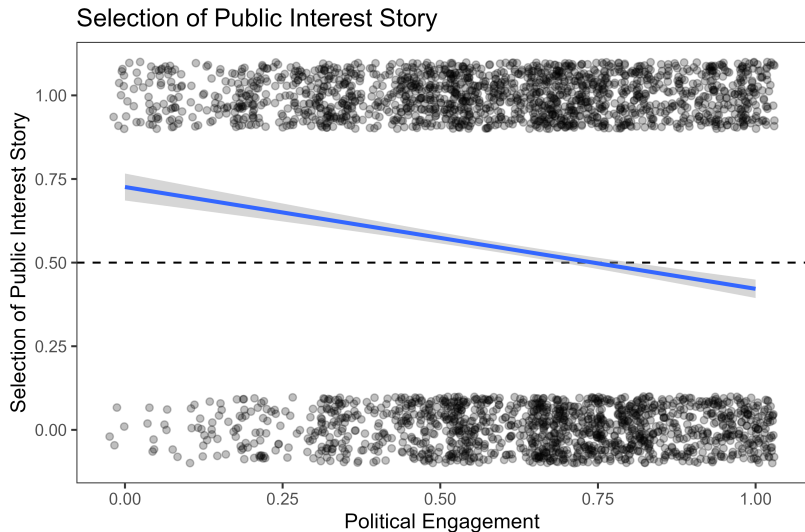
A look at the news stories coming up this week, with coverage of all of the week's most pressing topics and updates.



Procedure

- ▶ 2 warm-up decision tasks with apolitical content
- ▶ Balanced across 5 topical areas (the economy, energy and the environment, immigration, public health, and public safety), 20 total stories per style
- ▶ 12 decision tasks (H1)
- ▶ 2 final decision tasks between “round-up” type articles (H2)
- ▶ Outlet-specific ratings & evaluations

Study 2 Pilot Results: H1 Supported



Discussion

- ▶ Evidence across multiple studies of an untapped demand for public interest news stories
- ▶ Advice on Study 2 design is very welcome!

Thank you

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