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# Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable

*Those who rely on social media for news are less likely to get the facts right about the coronavirus and politics and more likely to hear some unproven claims*

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## How we did this

Pew Research Center's [American News Pathways](#) project conducted this study to look at the group of Americans who get most of their political and election news through social media.

For this analysis, we used data from five different surveys conducted from October 2019 to June of 2020. The number of U.S. adults in each survey ranges from 8,914 to 12,043 U.S. adults. Everyone who completed the surveys is a member of Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel (ATP), an online survey panel that is recruited through national, random sampling of residential addresses. This way nearly all U.S. adults have a chance of selection. The surveys are weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population by gender, race, ethnicity, partisan affiliation, education and other categories. Read more about the [ATP's methodology](#).

See here to read more about the report's [methodology](#).

Visit our [interactive data tool](#) to access the questions included in this report, as well as content about the coronavirus outbreak and the 2020 presidential election.

# Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable

*Those who rely on social media for news are less likely to get the facts right about the coronavirus and politics and more likely to hear some unproven claims*

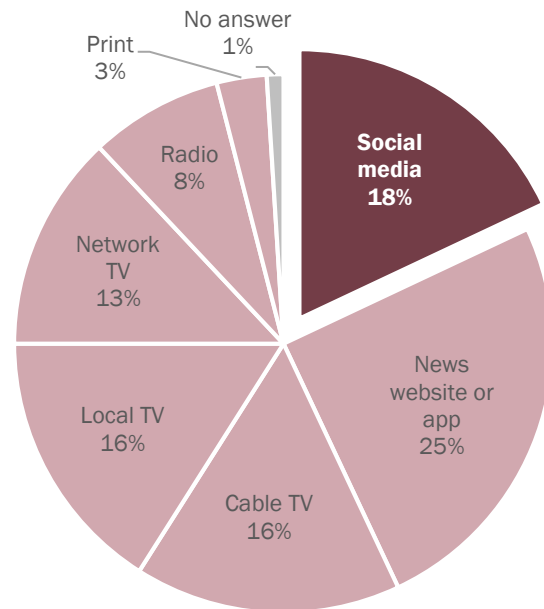
The rise of social media has changed the information landscape in myriad ways, including the manner in which many Americans keep up with current events. In fact, social media is now among the most common pathways where people – particularly young adults – get their political news.

A new Pew Research Center analysis of surveys conducted between October 2019 and June 2020 finds that those who rely most on social media for political news stand apart from other news consumers in a number of ways. These U.S. adults, for instance, tend to be less likely than other news consumers to closely follow major news stories, such as the [coronavirus outbreak](#) and the [2020 presidential election](#). And, perhaps tied to that, this group also tends to be less knowledgeable about these topics.

Through several surveys over the last nine months, the Center’s [American News Pathways](#) project has been exploring the connection between Americans’ news habits and what they hear and perceive about current events. One important aspect of this project is taking a deeper look at the pathways, or platforms, Americans use most often to access news – such as news websites or apps, social media, local, cable and network TV, radio, or print.

## About one-in-five U.S. adults say they get their political news primarily through social media

*% of U.S. adults who say the most common way they get political and election news is ...*



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019. “Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable”

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As of late last year, 18% of U.S. adults say they turn most to social media for political and election news. That's lower than the share who use news websites and apps (25%), but about on par with the percent who say their primary pathway is cable television (16%) or local television (16%), and higher than the shares who turn to three other pathways mentioned in the survey (network TV, radio and print).

To further explore the influence of this relatively new entry into the news ecosystem, this report studies the characteristics of U.S. adults who rely on social media as their main pathway to political and election news, in comparison with the six other groups.

Demographically, U.S. adults who rely most on social media for news tend to be younger, are less likely to be white and have lower levels of education than those who mainly use several other platforms.

### Those who get most political news from social media most likely to be under 30

Among U.S. adults who say each pathway is the most common way they get political and election news, % who are ...

	Social media	News website or app	Cable TV	Local TV	Network TV	Radio	Print
Ages 18-29	48%	21%	7%	10%	5%	12%	7%
30-49	40	44	23	31	23	42	17
50-64	9	23	31	39	34	28	28
65+	3	12	39	20	38	18	47

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019.

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Overall, this group tends to pay less attention to news than those who rely on most other pathways. As of early June this year, just 8% of U.S. adults who get most of their political news from social media say they are following news about the 2020 election "very closely," compared with roughly four times as many among those who turn most to cable TV (37%) and print (33%).

The only group with a level of engagement that is similarly low is U.S. adults who get their political news primarily from local television, 11% of whom are following election news very closely. This is a common thread throughout the analysis: The social media group and the local TV group are often comparable in their lower levels of engagement with and knowledge of the news.

But even compared with those who get their news from local TV, Americans who rely on social media are less likely to be following the biggest storyline of the year thus far – the coronavirus outbreak. Roughly a quarter (23%) of U.S. adults who rely most on social media for political news say they are following news about the COVID-19 pandemic very closely, according to the June survey. Higher shares in every other group say they are tracking the outbreak very closely, including those who get their news from cable TV (50%), national network TV (50%), news websites and apps (44%), or local TV (32%).

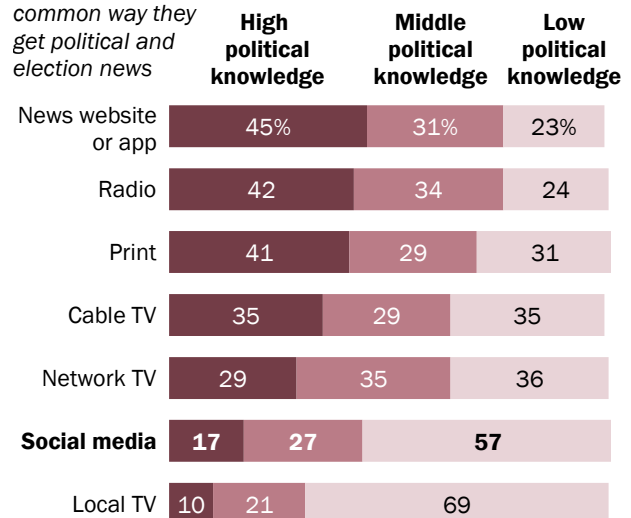
This relative lack of attention to news goes hand in hand with lower levels of knowledge about major current events and politics. Across the nine months of study and five separate surveys, respondents were asked 29 different fact-based questions that touch on a variety of topics related to the news, from economics to Donald Trump’s impeachment to the COVID-19 outbreak and more (see [Appendix](#) for details). Across these 29 questions, the average proportion who got each question right is lower among Americans who rely most on social media for political news than those who rely most on other types of news sources, except for local TV.

One specific set of nine questions focused on foundational political knowledge, such as the federal budget deficit and which party supports certain policy positions. Researchers created an index of high, middle or low political knowledge based on how many of these nine questions respondents got right (high knowledge answered eight to nine questions correctly, middle got six or seven right and low got five or fewer right; see here for more [details of the political knowledge index](#)). While at least four-in-ten individuals who turn mainly to news websites and apps (45%), radio (42%) and print (41%) for news fall into the high political

### Those who depend on social media for political news have lower political knowledge than most other groups

*% of U.S. adults who have \_\_\_\_, according to an index of nine knowledge questions*

*Among those who say \_\_\_\_ is the most common way they get political and election news*



Note: Knowledge index created from nine political knowledge questions. High political knowledge includes those who answered eight or nine questions correctly, middle knowledge includes those who answered six or seven questions correctly, and low knowledge includes those who answered five or fewer questions correctly. Answers correct as of November 2019.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019. “Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable”

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knowledge category, the same is true of just 17% of those who turn most to social media. Only those in the local TV group scored lower, with 10% in the high political knowledge category.

Even as Americans who primarily turn to social media for political news are less aware and knowledgeable about a wide range of events and issues in the news, they are *more* likely than other Americans to have heard about a number of false or unproven claims.

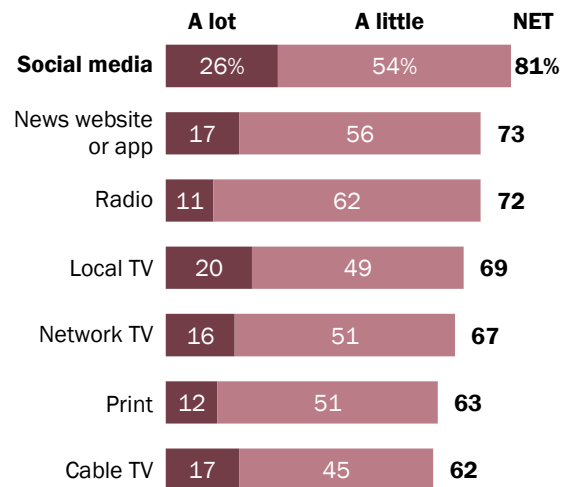
One specific example is exposure to the [conspiracy theory that powerful people intentionally planned the COVID-19 pandemic](#), which gained attention with the [spread of a conspiracy video on social media](#). About a quarter of U.S. adults who get most of their news through social media (26%) say they have heard “a lot” about this conspiracy theory, and about eight-in-ten (81%) have heard at least “a little” – a higher share than among those who turn to any of the other six platforms for their political news.

Despite this, Americans who get their political news mostly through social media express less concern about the impact of made-up news. Roughly four-in-ten of this group (37%) say they are very concerned about the effects on made-up news on the 2020 election, lower than every other group except for those who turn mainly to local television (at 35%). Those who rely on other platforms express higher levels of concern, including 58% of those who mainly turn to cable TV.

### Social media news users most likely to have heard conspiracy theory that pandemic was intentionally planned

*% of U.S. adults who have heard \_\_\_ about the conspiracy theory that powerful people intentionally planned the coronavirus outbreak*

*Among those who say \_\_\_ is the most common way they get political and election news*



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 4-10, 2020. “Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable”

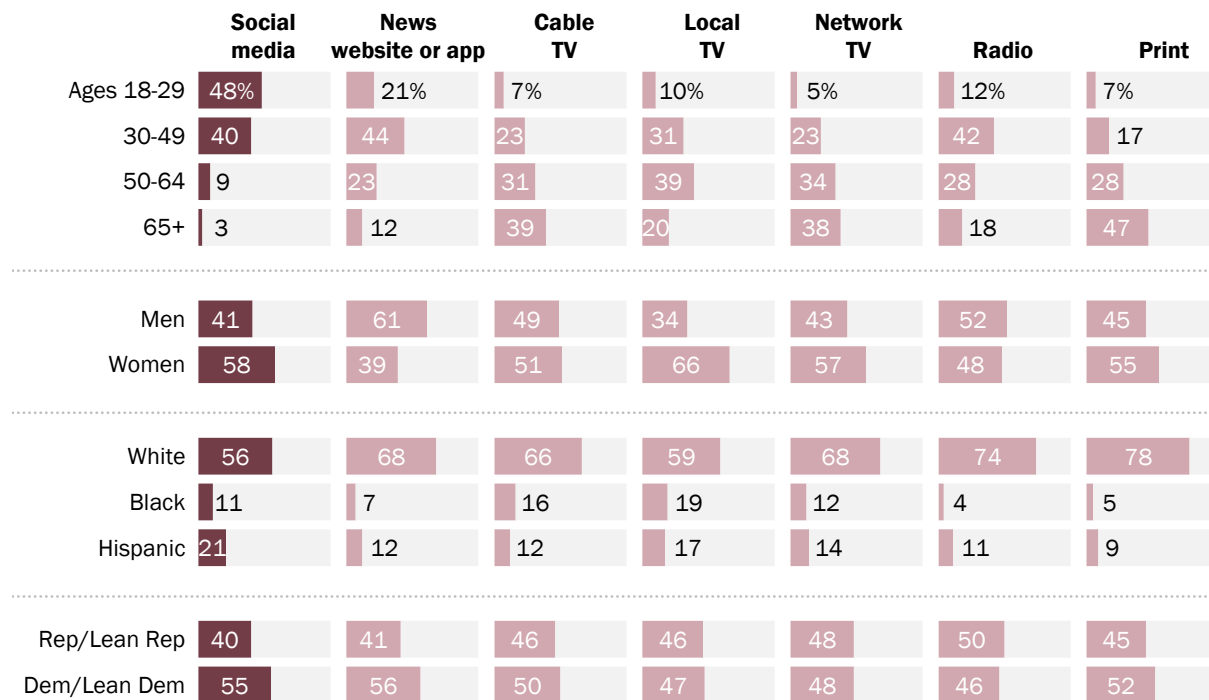
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# 1. Demographics of Americans who get most of their political news from social media

In a number of areas, the 18% of U.S. adults who say social media is their most common way to get political and election news stand out from adults who most often follow politics on other platforms (such as print, radio, television or news websites).

## Those who get most of their political news from social media more likely to be younger adults, less likely to be white

Among U.S. adults who say each pathway is the most common way they get political and election news, % who are ...



Note: White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019.

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Most notably, the social media group is the youngest by a considerable margin. Nearly half of the adults in that group (48%) are under 30, and perhaps even more striking is that only 12% of them are 50 and older, according to a Pew Research Center [survey conducted in October and November of 2019](#).



The group of Americans who rely primarily on news websites and apps for political news also skews relatively young. But compared with those who turn to social media, the share who are 50 and older is roughly three times as large (35%), and a much smaller share (21%) are between the ages of 18 and 29. Americans who most commonly use print, cable TV or network TV tend to be much older and have the smallest percentages of adults under 30 (7%, 7% and 5%, respectively).

Compared with all other news consumers, U.S. adults who most commonly use social media for news also have a lower percentage of white adults, at 56%. Notably, Hispanic adults comprise 21% of the social media news group – higher than the Hispanic share for most other platforms. But Black adults make up bigger shares of those who turn to local TV (19%) or cable TV (16%) than they do in the social media group (11%).

Looking at gender, 58% of those whose most common political news platform is social media are women, which is a larger portion of women than in the groups that turn to cable television (51%), radio (48%) or news websites (39%). The only platform with a higher share of women is local television news; about two-thirds of those who rely primarily on local TV for political news (66%) are women.

### Americans who get most of their news from social media tend to have lower levels of education and household income than those who get news from several other platforms

Among U.S. adults who say each pathway is the most common way they get political and election news, % who are ...

	Social media	News website or app	Cable TV	Local TV	Network TV	Radio	Print
H.S. or less	36%	21%	40%	56%	39%	24%	23%
Some college	37	32	30	30	32	32	28
College+	26	47	29	14	29	44	49
<i>Family income</i>							
Less than \$30K	35	18	24	43	26	18	26
\$30K-\$74,999	37	32	37	33	36	37	26
\$75K or more	25	46	34	20	33	42	42

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019.

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Americans who rely primarily on social media for political news are somewhat more likely to be Democrats or Democratic-leaning independents (55%) than the groups who turn to several other

platforms – radio, local TV and network TV. The groups who turn to print, news websites and cable TV have a similar party makeup.

Finally, those who use social media for news tend to have lower levels of formal education and household income than those who turn to several other news platforms – patterns that are likely tied to the young age of this group. About a quarter of those whose most common platform for political and election news is social media (26%) have a four-year college degree, about on par with those who turn to network and cable TV for news. The only platform with a lower percentage of college graduates is local television, at 14%; far bigger shares among those who look to print (49%), news websites (47%) or radio (44%) have college degrees.

Those in the social media group (along with local TV consumers) also have lower family incomes than the other groups. About one-third (35%) have an income under \$30,000 a year, and only 25% of those in the social media group make \$75,000 a year or more.

## 2. U.S. adults who mostly get news through social media lag behind others in attention to election and pandemic news

Along with their demographic distinctions, those whose most common way of getting political and election news is social media also stand out for their relative lack of engagement with a number of major stories in the news.

While the coronavirus pandemic and the social unrest in the wake of the police killing of George Floyd [have pushed attention to the presidential election coverage to the sidelines](#), those in the social media news group are still paying less attention to news about the candidates than people who get political news through most other platforms, including print, radio, television and digital news sites.

The same holds true for news about the coronavirus pandemic, which has [commanded widespread public attention](#) since it [first disrupted life in the U.S.](#) in March. Once again, the level of attention given to this story by the social media news group lags well behind most other news consumption groups. Similarly, social media news users are somewhat less likely than others to say they are [very closely following demonstrations](#) to protest the killing of Floyd in police custody as of early June.

Given the tendency of older adults to generally follow news more closely than younger ones, some of the relative lack of attention to these stories is connected to the fact that those who use social media to follow political news are disproportionately young. However, even among Americans ages 50 and older, those who turn to social media most for their political news are less likely than others in their age group to be following both COVID-19 news and news about the election very closely.

The one group that tends to follow news at similarly low levels is U.S. adults who rely most on local TV for political news. (See [Chapter 1](#) for similarities and differences between these two groups.)

## Those who rely on social media for political news follow the 2020 presidential candidates less closely, less aware of political storylines

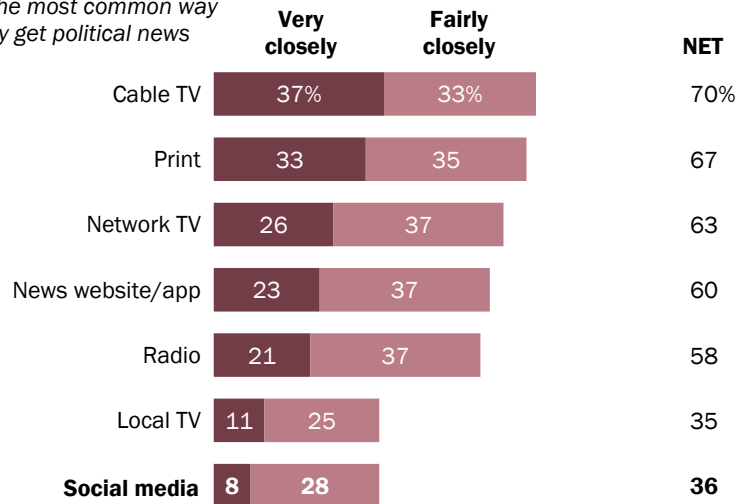
Americans who say social media is their most common way of getting election and political information are among the least likely to be following news about the 2020 presidential candidates “very closely,” at only 8%, according to a [survey conducted June 4-10](#). Only the local television news group, at 11%, has a comparably low share following the election very closely. Among all other groups, about 20% or more say they are following news about the 2020 election very closely, with those in the cable TV group at the high end of 37%.

An additional 28% of those who most commonly get political news from social media say they are following news of the presidential candidates “fairly closely,” again comparable to the local TV group (25%). But in all other groups, larger shares say they are paying fairly close attention, and majorities across these other groups say they are following candidate news either very or fairly closely. In fact, those who get their political news from cable TV are nearly twice as likely as those in the social media group to say they are following candidate news at least fairly closely (70% vs. 36%).

### Fewer Americans who turn to social media for election news follow coverage of candidates closely

% of U.S. adults who say they have been following news about **the 2020 election candidates** ...

Among those who say \_\_\_\_ is the most common way they get political news



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 4-10, 2020.

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The social media group's relative lack of engagement with news about the candidates is in line with [a survey administered in late February and early March](#) that asked how much people had heard about six specific storylines related to politics and the Trump administration.

Those in the social media group were among the least likely to have heard a lot about each of the six stories, and among the most likely to have heard nothing at all.

About three-in-ten (31%) in the social media news group said they had heard a lot about the Trump administration [possibly using political influence on criminal cases at the Department of Justice](#), and 32% said they had heard nothing at all about that. In contrast, half or more of those in five of the other news consumption groups (print, cable TV, radio, digital news sites and network TV) had heard a lot on that subject, while far fewer had heard nothing at all.

### Less awareness of a variety of political storylines among those who get most of their news from social media

Among U.S. adults who say \_\_\_ is the most common way they get political and election news, % who have heard a lot about ...

Trump's treatment of people who testified in the impeachment process	Possible political influence by the Trump admin. on DOJ cases	Govt. money spent at Trump's businesses	Govt. money spent on the impeachment process	Report about FBI surveillance of people connected to Trump's 2016 campaign	Trump admin. adding six more countries to the list of those with restricted travel to the U.S.
Print 65%	Print 60%	Print 32%	Cable TV 31%	Cable TV 35%	Print 32%
Cable TV 61	Cable TV 57	News website/app 29	Network TV 28	Print 28	Cable TV 26
News website/app 58	Radio 56	Cable TV 27	Local TV 28	News website/app 25	News website/app 24
Radio 54	News website/app 55	Network TV 25	Print 27	Network TV 25	Network TV 23
Network TV 52	Network TV 53	<b>Social media 24</b>	Radio 23	Radio 23	Radio 20
Local TV 36	<b>Social media 31</b>	Local TV 21	<b>Social media 22</b>	Local TV 20	<b>Social media 19</b>
<b>Social media 34</b>	Local TV 30	Radio 20	News website/app 20	<b>Social media 18</b>	Local TV 18

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Feb. 18-March 2, 2020.

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On another issue, 18% of those whose most common way of getting political news is social media said they had heard a lot about [a report of FBI surveillance of people connected to the Trump campaign](#). About twice as many (41%) said they had heard nothing at all.

Again, a relatively small percentage of those in the social media group (34%) had heard a lot about [Trump's treatment of those who had testified in the impeachment process](#), while a quarter (25%) said they had heard nothing at all on the topic. In stark contrast, 65% of those in the print group had heard a lot on this topic, and only 8% had heard nothing at all.

## Those who get most of their political news from social media pay less attention than others to coronavirus news

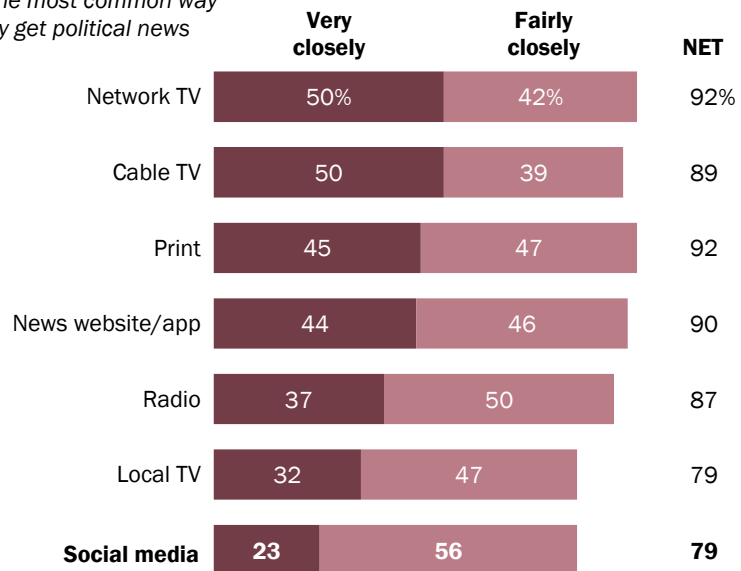
As is the case with news of the presidential candidates, Americans who cite social media as their most common platform for political news have been the least likely to follow coverage of the coronavirus outbreak very closely. [As of June](#), about a quarter of U.S. adults who rely most on social media for political news (23%) say they are following the pandemic very closely – considerably fewer than news consumers on any other platform. Fully half of those who rely mainly on national network television and cable TV say they are tracking coronavirus coverage very closely.

Most of those who rely on social media for news (56%) say they have been following news about the virus “fairly” closely. Still, the combined share in the social media news group who say they are following COVID-19 news “very” or “fairly” closely (79%) is lower than in all other news consumption groups, with the exception of local TV (also 79%).

### Those who turn to social media for news are least likely to be following the coronavirus very closely

*% of U.S. adults who say they have been following news about the coronavirus outbreak ...*

*Among those who say \_\_\_\_ is the most common way they get political news*



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 4-10, 2020.

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In April, about a month after the coronavirus pandemic began spreading rapidly in the U.S., a survey asked U.S. adults how closely they were following a series of 13 different topics [related to both national and local aspects of the outbreak](#). Those who say social media is their most common way of getting political and election news were consistently near the bottom when it came to how closely they were following these topics.

At that time, about three-in-ten in the social media group (31%) said they were following the issue of the national economic impact of the pandemic very closely, 10 points lower than the next lowest group (local television at 41%). In contrast, half or more of those who turn most to cable TV (58%), national network TV (55%) and print newspapers (53%) were following the virus's economic fallout very closely.

### Americans who get most news on social media less likely to be following most national-level news topics about the coronavirus

Among U.S. adults who say \_\_\_\_ is the most common way they get political and election news, % who say they are following news and information about each **national topic** relating to the coronavirus outbreak **very closely**

	The economic impact of the outbreak	Advice from national health orgs. such as the CDC	The health impact on people like me	The number of confirmed cases and deaths in the U.S.	Actions/statements by the federal govt.	The ability of hospitals across the country to treat patients
Cable TV	58%	46%	52%	46%	43%	43%
Network TV	55	48	49	45	45	41
Print	53	46	46	39	31	36
News website/app	46	43	36	37	34	32
Radio	44	35	29	28	29	27
Local TV	41	36	41	37	29	34
Social media	31	33	30	29	25	21

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 20-26, 2020.

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Another national coronavirus topic on which the social media group's attention lags well behind others concerns the ability of hospitals across the country to treat patients. Only about one-in-five



of those who rely on social media for news (21%) were very closely following that subject in April, fewer than for most other platforms.

The differences in levels of attention, based on which platform news consumers use most, were somewhat less substantial for local coronavirus news topics, but the social media group again was paying consistently less attention than most others.

On the subject of the availability of COVID-19 testing at the local level, 21% in the social media group were paying very close attention in April, lower than most other groups. Those in the social media group also were least likely to be closely following the actions and statements of state and local governments regarding the coronavirus. The 36% of those who rely on social media for news who were following that subject very closely trailed most other groups, including Americans who rely most on print (49%), network TV (47%) and cable TV (45%).

### Somewhat less attention to local news topics about the coronavirus among those who get most of their political news from social media

Among U.S. adults who say \_\_\_\_ is the most common way they get political and election news, % who say they are following news and information about each **local topic** relating to the coronavirus outbreak **very closely**

	Actions/ statements by your state & local govt.	Availability of food & essentials in stores	Status of nearby schools	Status of nearby businesses	Availability of testing for COVID-19	Status of nearby hospitals	Availability of unemployment benefits and other aid
Print	49%	36%	30%	31%	33%	27%	24%
Network TV	47	42	31	32	36	34	27
Cable TV	45	44	31	34	38	35	27
Local TV	43	43	36	30	32	34	31
News website/app	42	34	27	27	23	22	20
Radio	40	31	26	27	24	19	19
Social media	36	34	30	24	21	22	25

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 20-26, 2020.

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### 3. U.S. adults who mostly rely on social media for political news are often less knowledgeable about current events

U.S. adults whose most common way of getting political and election news is social media lag behind Americans who turn to most other sources of news in their knowledge and understanding of the COVID-19 outbreak, politics and other current events.

Between October 2019 and June 2020, the [American News Pathways project](#) asked 29 fact-based knowledge questions about a variety of topics. These questions touched on the presidential election, the economy, the major political parties, Donald Trump's impeachment and, more recently, the coronavirus outbreak. (See [Appendix](#) for question details.)

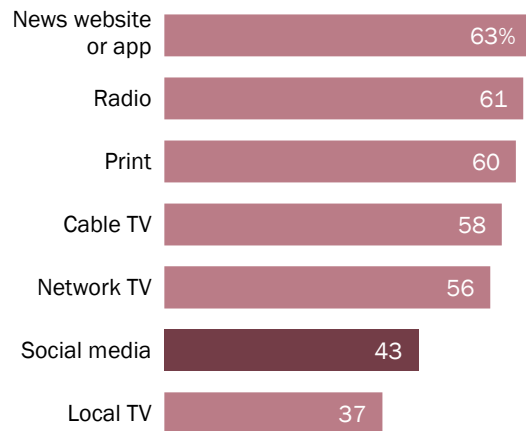
For each of these 29 questions, researchers calculated the percentage who gave the correct answer in each of seven groups of news consumers based on the most common pathway they use to get political news. Researchers then averaged these percentages across all questions to identify the general level of knowledge among these different types of news consumers.

The group of Americans who rely the most on social media for political news were generally less likely than others to give the correct answers across these 29 questions: On average, about four-in-ten of these social media news consumers (43%) gave the right answer. The only comparable group is those adults who watch local television the most for political news, 37% of whom answered each question correctly on average. In every other group, more than half gave correct answers, on average, ranging from 56% among those who turn most to national network TV to 63% among those who rely most on news websites or apps.

#### Americans who primarily use social media for news are less likely to answer questions about current events correctly

*Average percentage who gave the correct answer across 29 knowledge questions ...*

*Among those who say \_\_\_ is the most common way they get political and election news*



Note: Indicates the average share of each group that gave the correct response to 29 knowledge questions on surveys conducted between November 2019 and June 2020. See Appendix for details. Source: Surveys of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019, Feb. 18-March 2, 2020, March 10-16, 2020, April 20-26, 2020 and June 4-10, 2020.

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It is not that most adults who rely on social media for political news chose *wrong* answers to these 29 questions. Instead, they were much more likely to say they were not sure: An average of 39% of social media news users said they did not know the answer across these questions.

## What do those who get most of their news from social media know about the coronavirus outbreak?

Diving deeper into the 29 knowledge questions the [American News Pathways](#) project has asked over the past few months reveals some specific areas and topics where news users who most commonly turn to social media to get political news know less than other Americans.

A [June 2020 survey](#) asked U.S. adults what they knew about a few facts relevant to the coronavirus outbreak and its impact on the economy. These questions included one asking respondents to identify Anthony Fauci's role as [an infectious disease expert and government adviser](#), another about [the purpose of coronavirus antibody tests](#) and a third about [the employment rate during the pandemic](#).

Americans who rely most on social media for getting political and election news were among the least likely to get these questions right. For example, about half of this group (52%) correctly [identified Fauci](#) as an infectious disease expert and government health adviser, similar to the share among those who rely on local television (49%). The other news consumer groups all performed much better on this question; three-quarters or more knew Fauci's role.

There is a similar pattern on the question about antibody tests. About half of those who get their political news from social media (49%) correctly said that [antibody tests for the coronavirus](#) are intended to detect a previous infection, compared with about six-in-ten or more in most other

## Those who rely on social media for news are among the least knowledgeable about key facts during COVID-19 outbreak

*% of U.S. adults who correctly answered that ...*

*Among those who say \_\_\_ is the most common way they get political and election news*

	<b>Anthony Fauci is an infectious disease expert &amp; govt. adviser</b>	<b>Antibody tests detect previous coronavirus infections</b>	<b>Unemployment rate around 15% in June</b>
News website or app	84%	73%	43%
Print	81	69	36
Radio	80	74	44
Network TV	76	60	36
Cable TV	75	59	41
<b>Social media</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>24</b>
Local TV	49	40	22

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 4-10, 2020

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groups. (The local TV group is again the exception, with only 40% answering this question correctly.)

Measuring the unemployment rate has been difficult and sometimes confusing during the coronavirus outbreak, perhaps leading to nearly as many Americans saying they weren't sure (28%) as giving the correct answer (34%) that the official unemployment rate number at the time the survey was conducted (June 4-10) was around 15%. (This answer was the closest option to both the initial estimate of 13.3% and the later revised estimate of 16.3%.) Again, however, adults who rely most on social media (24%) or local TV (22%) were less likely than others to correctly say unemployment was officially around 15% at the time.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Even accounting for the public uncertainty about the unemployment rate at the time, fewer social media news users got this question right than most other groups of news users. When expanding the correct responses to include "around 10%" and "around 20%" (in addition to "around 15%"), 45% of social media news users gave the correct answers, compared with six-in-ten or more in most of the other groups. Only local TV news users were lower, at 37%.

## Those who get most of their political news from social media have lower levels of political knowledge

Included in the 29 questions examined above were [nine questions asked in October and November 2019](#) about political knowledge, such as trends in unemployment, tariffs and the federal budget deficit over the course of Donald Trump's presidency, and which party supports specific political positions. Researchers created an index of these nine questions and categorized respondents as having high, middle or low political knowledge based on how many they answered correctly. Respondents with high political knowledge are those who answered eight or nine of the questions correctly, those with middle political knowledge answered six or seven right and those with low political knowledge answered zero to five correctly. (See here for [details of the political knowledge index](#).)

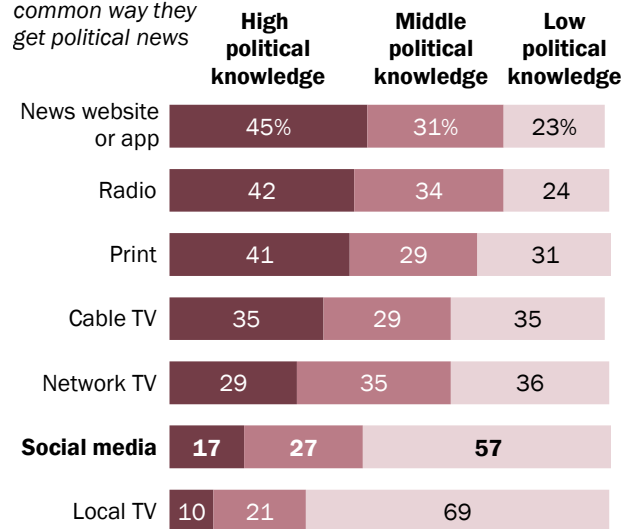
Similar to knowledge related to the coronavirus, U.S. adults who rely most on social media for political and election news generally get fewer political knowledge questions correct than most other groups of news consumers. Fewer than a quarter (17%) in the social media group have high political knowledge. Another 27% have middle political knowledge, and a majority (57%) have low political knowledge.

The only group of news consumers in the study with lower political knowledge, according to this index, are Americans who rely most on local TV for political news; just 10% score among the highly knowledgeable, while about seven-in-ten (69%) have low political knowledge. U.S. adults who rely most on cable or network TV, print, radio, or news apps or websites have much higher levels of political knowledge, with greater shares in each of these groups having high political knowledge.

### Americans who primarily get political news from social media are among least knowledgeable about politics

% of U.S. adults who have ...

Among those who say \_\_\_ is the most common way they get political news



Note: Knowledge index created from nine political knowledge questions. Respondents with high political knowledge are those who answered eight or nine questions correctly, middle knowledge are those who answered six or seven questions correctly and low knowledge are those who answered five or fewer questions correctly. Answers correct as of October 2019.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019. "Americans Who Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable"

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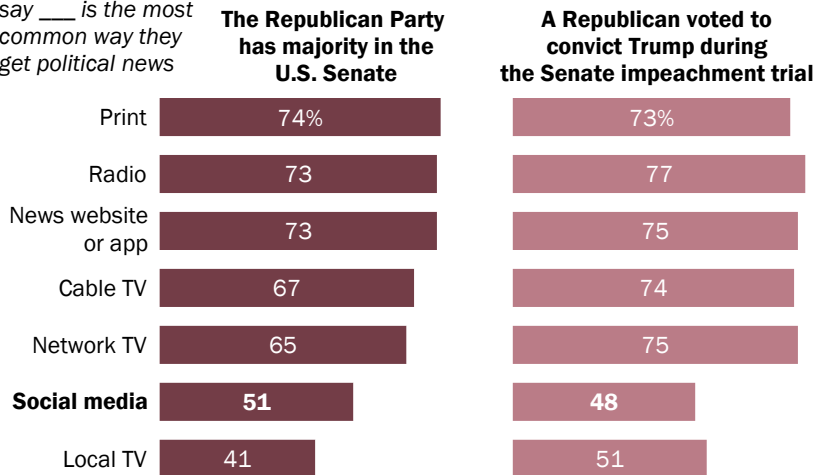
To give one specific example of a question included in the political knowledge index – about the fact that the [Republican Party currently has a majority](#) in the U.S. Senate – people who rely most on social media were much less likely to know this than other groups of news consumers (with the exception of those who rely most on local TV). About half of these social media news consumers (51%) knew this at the time of the survey last fall, compared with about two-thirds or more in most other groups.

Americans who rely most commonly on social media for political news also were much less likely than most other groups to give the correct answer that Republican Sen. [Mitt Romney voted to convict Donald Trump](#) during the impeachment trial. About half of those who rely most on social media (48%) knew that “[any Republicans voted to convict Donald Trump](#) during the impeachment trial in the U.S. Senate.” A similar share of those who get their political news most commonly from local TV (51%) got this question right, but about three-quarters in every other group knew that at least one Republican voted to convict Trump.

## Those who rely on social media for news among the least knowledgeable about Senate, impeachment

*% of U.S. adults who correctly answered that ...*

*Among those who say \_\_\_ is the most common way they get political news*



Source: Surveys of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019 (question about the Republican majority in the Senate) and Feb. 18-March 2, 2020 (impeachment trial). “Americans Who Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable”

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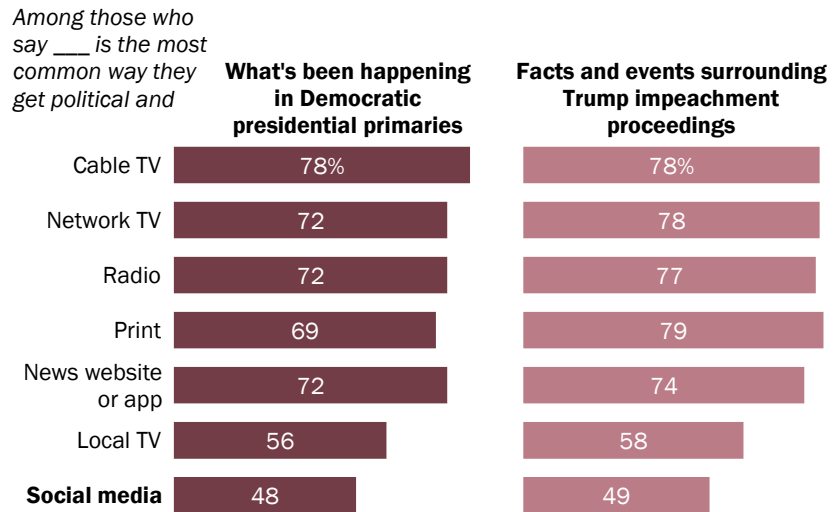
## Social media news users less likely to say they understand key news stories

U.S. adults who rely most on social media for political and election news not only were less likely to answer fact-based questions about politics correctly, but they were also the least likely group to say they understand certain news stories.

In early 2019, with the Democratic presidential primary in full swing, only about half of those who most commonly get their political news on social media said they understood very or somewhat well what was [happening in the Democratic presidential primaries](#) (48%) or [the facts and events surrounding the impeachment proceedings](#) (49%). The group relying most on local TV expressed higher confidence that they understood these events (56% and 58%, respectively). About seven-in-ten or more in the other groups said they understood very or somewhat well.

### People who get political news most on social media are less likely to understand major political events

*% of U.S. adults who said they understood \_\_\_\_ very or somewhat well*



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Feb. 18-March 2, 2020.

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## 4. In addition to lower awareness of current events, social media news users hear more about some unproven claims

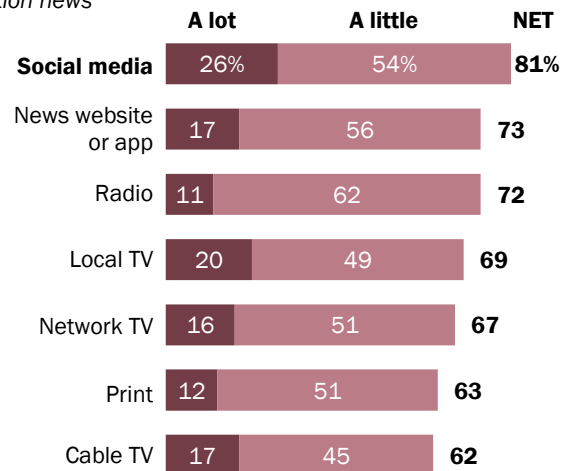
Even as Americans who primarily get their political news on social media are less likely to follow most news topics and be aware of specific events in the news, people in this group are as aware – or sometimes *more* aware – of several unproven claims and fringe theories related to the COVID-19 outbreak.

One clear example is exposure to the conspiracy theory that powerful people intentionally planned the pandemic, a theory that gained attention with the [spread of a conspiracy video on social media](#). About eight-in-ten U.S. adults who get most of their news through social media (81%) have heard at least “a little” about this theory, including about a quarter (26%) who have heard “a lot” about it. That is more than among those who turn to any of the other six platforms for their political news.

### Conspiracy theory that pandemic was intentionally planned more likely to reach social media news consumers

*% of U.S. adults who have heard \_\_\_ about the conspiracy theory that powerful people intentionally planned the coronavirus outbreak*

*Among those who say \_\_\_ is the most common way they get political and election news*



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 4-10, 2020.  
 “Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable”

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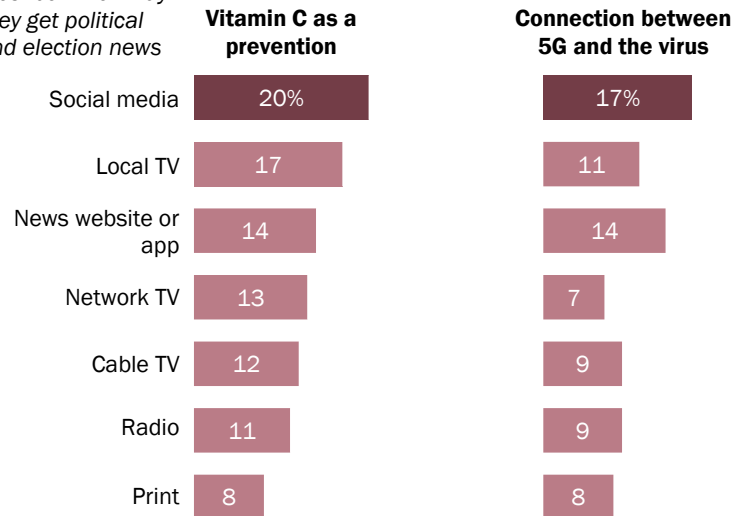
Furthermore, when asked in April about a list of topics connected to the coronavirus, Americans who get their news primarily through social media were more likely than most other groups to have heard about two unproven ideas: that [taking vitamin C would prevent COVID-19](#) and that there is a [connection between the virus and 5G mobile technology](#).

At the time, one-in-five of those who get their news through social media had heard “a lot” about [taking vitamin C as a preventative measure](#), about on par with those who turn to local TV but higher than for those who rely on any other platform for political news. And about the same share (17%) had heard of [a connection between 5G technology and the virus](#), again higher than most other groups.

### Those who get most of their news through social media have heard more about unproven theories that vitamin C, 5G technology are connected to COVID-19

*% of U.S. adults who have heard a lot about each of the following false or unproven claims about the coronavirus outbreak*

*Among those who say \_\_\_ is the most common way they get political and election news*



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 20-26, 2020.

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There are other claims about possible COVID-19 treatments and preventions, though, that those who get most of their political news through social media had been less likely to hear about. This may be related to where each of these storylines was commonly discussed. For example, the social media group had heard less about the [unproven claim that the drug hydroxychloroquine could be a treatment for the virus](#)<sup>2</sup>, [a claim discussed frequently by the president](#) and [covered by the national media](#), and they also had heard less than other groups about plasma transfusions, a possible treatment [initially explored by scientists in early March](#).

<sup>2</sup> In June, the FDA [revoked the emergency use authorization \(EUA\) to use hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine to treat COVID-19](#), as it had “determined that chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine are unlikely to be effective in treating COVID-19 for the authorized uses in the EUA”

More generally, when asked in March whether they had seen misinformation about the COVID-19 outbreak, those who get their political news from social media were the most likely group to say they had seen at least some misinformation. More than half (57%) said this in March, versus 49% or fewer among the groups turning to other platforms. When this question was asked again in April, [increases occurred across all media news groups](#), but the social media group was still more likely than most to say they had seen coronavirus misinformation (68%), with the exception of those who turn to news websites and apps (73%) and radio (72%).

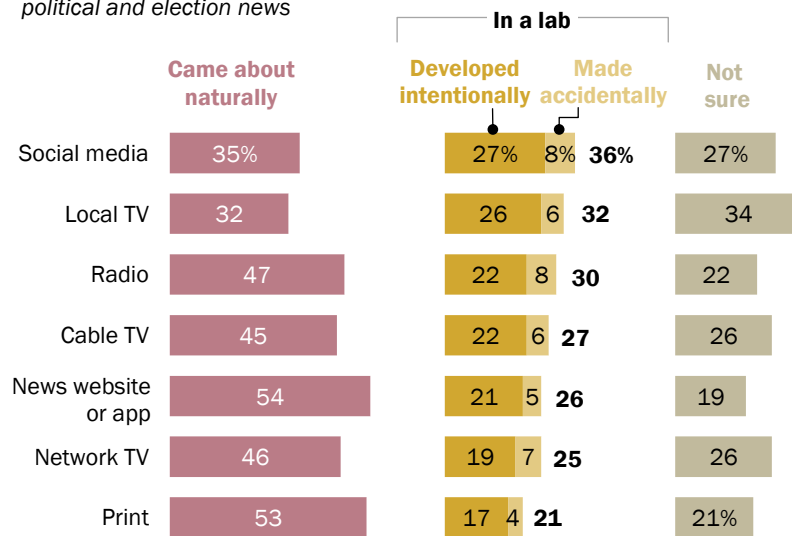
In some cases, those who get news through social media are more likely to *believe* unproven claims.

In March, those who get most of their news through social media were more likely than other U.S. adults to say that the COVID-19 virus was developed intentionally in a laboratory, and less likely than most other groups to say that the virus came about naturally. (The virus is believed [to have originated naturally](#), though the way that it may have jumped from animals to humans is [still being investigated](#).) About a third of this group (36%) said that the virus was made either intentionally or accidentally in a laboratory, higher than the share among those who turn to several other sources for their political news.

### Americans who get news on social media more likely to believe coronavirus was developed in a laboratory

% of U.S. adults who say it is most likely COVID-19 ...

Among those who say \_\_\_ is the most common way they get political and election news



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 10-16, 2020. "Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable"

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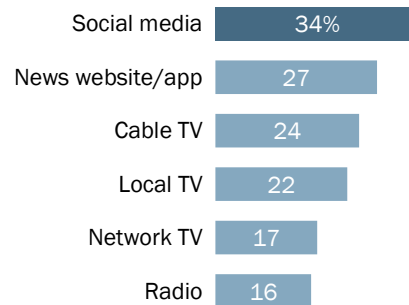
Finally, even as those who get political news mainly through social media were [paying less attention to the 2020 campaign overall](#) compared with other groups, they were more likely to give credence to an unsubstantiated theory during the Democratic primary – particularly among Democrats and independents who lean Democratic.

Among Democrats, those who get the bulk of their news from social media were the most likely to say that there were major efforts to purposefully delay the release of results from the Iowa Democratic caucus (34%), [an unproven theory promoted on social media](#) in early February. The same pattern was not seen among Republicans, who were overall more likely to accept this theory.

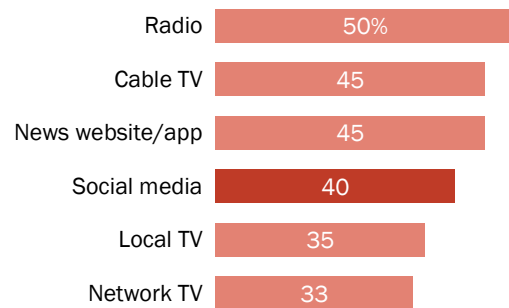
## Democrats who get political news from social media were more likely to suspect foul play in Iowa caucus results

*% of U.S. adults who say that there were major efforts to purposefully delay the release of the Iowa Democratic caucus results*

*Among **Dem/Lean Dem** who say \_\_\_ is the most common way they get political and election news*



*Among **Rep/Lean Rep** who say \_\_\_ is the most common way they get political and election news*



Note: The print group is not shown due to small sample size.  
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Feb. 18-March. 2, 2020.  
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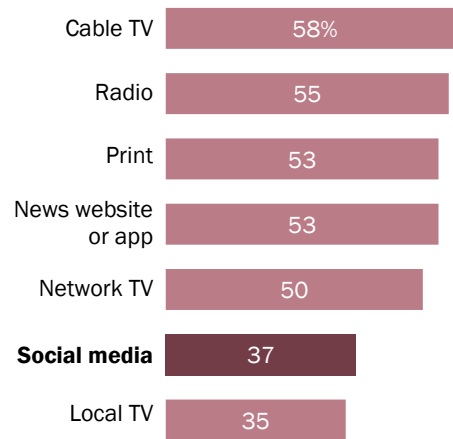
While those who turn to social media are more aware of – and in some cases more likely to believe – certain unproven claims or misinformation, this doesn’t translate to more concern about the effects made-up news can have. [In a November survey](#), this group was actually *less* likely to be concerned about the effects made-up news may have on the 2020 election.

Just over a third (37%) of those who rely on social media for political news said they were “very concerned” about the effects made-up news might have on the 2020 presidential election, lower than for all other groups except those who get political news from local TV. By contrast, half or more of those who get most of their news through other platforms said they were very concerned about misinformation in the news ecosystem and its possible impact on the presidential election.

## Social media group not highly concerned about possible effects of misinformation on the 2020 election

*% of U.S. adults who are **very concerned** about the influence made-up news might have on the 2020 presidential election*

*Among those who say \_\_\_\_ is the most common way they get political and election news*



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019. “Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable”

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## Appendix: Knowledge questions used for average correct responses

The average percentage who gave the correct responses to 29 fact-based questions on American News Pathways surveys between November 2019 and June 2020 is calculated by taking the sum of the percentage of respondents that gave the correct answer to each of the 29 questions and then dividing by the total number of questions (29). The results can be interpreted as the average share of the news consumer groups (e.g., those who rely most on social media, local TV, etc., for political news) who got the question right for these 29 questions.

The average was drawn from the following 29 survey questions:

- The Republican Party then had a majority in the U.S. Senate ([October/November 2019](#))
- The U.S. federal budget deficit had increased since Donald Trump took office ([October/November 2019](#))
- The unemployment rate in the U.S. had decreased since Donald Trump took office ([October/November 2019](#))
- Tariffs in the U.S. have generally increased since Donald Trump took office ([October/November 2019](#))
- A state's number of seats in the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives determines the number of votes it has in the Electoral College ([October/November 2019](#))
- The Republican Party is more supportive of reducing the size and power of the federal government ([October/November 2019](#))
- The Democratic Party is more supportive of increasing taxes on higher income people ([October/November 2019](#))
- The Republican Party is more supportive of restricting access to abortion ([October/November 2019](#))
- Democratic Party is more supportive of creating a way for immigrants who are in the U.S. illegally to eventually become citizens ([October/November 2019](#))
- Joe Biden had not voiced support for "Medicare for all" ([February/March 2020](#))
- Bernie Sanders had voiced support for "Medicare for all" ([February/March 2020](#))
- Elizabeth Warren had voiced support for "Medicare for all" ([February/March 2020](#))
- Pete Buttigieg had not voiced support for "Medicare for all" ([February/March 2020](#))
- Amy Klobuchar had not voiced support for "Medicare for all" ([February/March 2020](#))
- Pete Buttigieg was the Democratic presidential candidate who is openly gay or lesbian ([February/March 2020](#))
- Bernie Sanders was the Democratic presidential candidate who called themselves a "democratic socialist" ([February/March 2020](#))

- Elizabeth Warren was the Democratic presidential candidate who was a leader in the creation of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau in 2010 ([February/March 2020](#))
- At least one Republican (Mitt Romney) voted to convict Donald Trump during the impeachment trial in the U.S. Senate ([February/March 2020](#))
- The economic aid law passed by Congress in March and signed by Donald Trump included \$1,200 in stimulus money for many American adults ([April 2020](#))
- The economic aid law passed by Congress in March and signed by Donald Trump did not include pay raises for members of Congress ([April 2020](#))
- The economic aid law passed by Congress in March and signed by Donald Trump included restrictions on businesses connected to Trump and other administration officials from receiving assistance ([April 2020](#))
- The economic aid law passed by Congress in March and signed by Donald Trump included increased unemployment benefits for the next four months ([April 2020](#))
- The economic aid law passed by Congress in March and signed by Donald Trump did not include federal aid and benefits for undocumented immigrants ([April 2020](#))
- The amount of economic aid in the bill passed by Congress and Donald Trump in March was about \$2 trillion ([April 2020](#))
- States were still holding primaries for the Democratic presidential nomination ([April 2020](#))
- Some states in the U.S. did not have a statewide stay-at-home order ([June 2020](#))
- The national unemployment rate as reported by the government was then about 15% ([June 2020](#))
- Antibody tests for the coronavirus are intended to detect previous infections ([June 2020](#))
- Anthony Fauci is an infectious disease expert and government health advisor ([June 2020](#))



## Knowledge questions from October/November 2019 and February/March 2019

*% giving correct answer to each question*

	News website or app	Radio	Print	Cable TV	Network TV	Social media	Local TV
<i>October/November 2019</i>							
The Republican Party had a majority in the U.S. Senate	73%	73%	74%	67%	65%	51%	41%
Federal budget deficit had increased since Donald Trump took office	69	64	70	62	59	40	36
Unemployment rate had decreased since Trump took office	73	75	67	69	70	52	53
Tariffs had generally increased since Trump took office	84	82	79	78	77	60	52
Seats in Senate & House determines votes in the Electoral College	47	46	41	40	39	36	28
Republican Party more supportive of reducing the size and power of the federal govt.	66	72	62	60	53	43	32
Democratic Party more supportive of increasing taxes on higher income people	86	84	79	77	73	65	48
Republican Party more supportive of restricting access to abortion	86	82	78	76	75	71	54
Democratic Party more supportive of way for immigrants who are in the U.S. illegally to eventually become citizens	82	75	74	72	72	69	59
<i>February/March 2020</i>							
Joe Biden had not supported "Medicare for all"	42	38	42	41	38	21	17
Bernie Sanders supported "Medicare for all"	82	83	75	76	76	62	49
Elizabeth Warren supported "Medicare for all"	65	67	63	62	55	35	29
Pete Buttigieg had not supported "Medicare for all"	34	31	32	33	32	21	13
Amy Klobuchar had not supported "Medicare for all"	30	29	32	36	29	17	13
Pete Buttigieg was openly gay Democratic presidential candidate	73	74	73	71	67	41	37
Bernie Sanders called himself a "democratic socialist"	74	78	71	67	67	52	35
Elizabeth Warren was a leader in the creation of the consumer financial protection bureau in 2010	31	27	25	23	14	11	5
A Republican voted to convict Trump during impeachment trial	75	77	73	74	75	48	51

Source: Surveys of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019 and Feb. 18-March 2, 2020.  
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## Knowledge questions April 2020 and June 2020

*% giving correct answer to each question*

	News website or app	Radio	Print	Cable TV	Network TV	Social media	Local TV
<i>April 2020</i>							
Economic aid law included \$1,200 in stimulus money for many American adults	95%	94%	95%	90%	93%	87%	86%
Economic aid law did not include pay raises for members of Congress	39	37	51	45	47	23	30
Economic aid law included restrictions on businesses connected to Trump and other administration officials from receiving assistance	28	21	26	26	23	17	15
Economic aid law included increased unemployment benefits for the next four months	69	68	67	67	69	56	58
Economic aid law did not include federal aid and benefits for undocumented immigrants	59	57	56	60	55	42	41
Economic aid law was about \$2 trillion	42	35	33	29	25	29	20
States were still holding primaries for the Democratic presidential nomination	54	52	58	45	42	36	29
<i>June 2020</i>							
Some states in the U.S. did not have a statewide stay-at-home order	62	61	62	53	55	50	40
The national unemployment rate as reported by the government currently was about 15%	43	44	36	41	36	24	22
Antibody tests for the coronavirus are intended to detect previous infections	73	74	69	59	60	49	40
Anthony Fauci is an infectious disease expert and government health advisor	84	80	81	75	76	52	49

Source: Surveys of U.S. adults conducted April 20-26, 2020 and June 4-10, 2020.

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## Methodology

The analysis in this report uses data from five waves of the American Trends Panel (ATP), which were fielded during November 2019, and February, March, April, and June 2020. Respondents' most-used platform for political and election news was asked in the November 2019 survey, and all demographic characteristics of each group are taken from that survey. See the full methodologies for each of the five surveys conducted below:

- [American Trends Panel June 2020 survey methodology](#)
- [American Trends Panel April 2020 survey methodology](#)
- [American Trends Panel March 2020 survey methodology](#)
- [American Trends Panel February 2020 survey methodology](#)
- [American Trends Panel November 2019 survey methodology](#)

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<b>Group</b>	<b>Unweighted sample size</b>	<b>Plus or minus ...</b>
Those who get most of their political and election news on social media		
June 2020 ATP	1,200	4.2 percentage points
April 2020 ATP	1,257	4.1 percentage points
March 2020 ATP	1,060	4.4 percentage points
February 2020 ATP	1,307	4.0 percentage points
November 2019 ATP	1,604	3.8 percentage points

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