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Americans' Views of the News Media During the COVID-19 Outbreak

Even in crisis, Republicans and Democrats remain starkly divided in their attitudes toward journalists

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How we did this

To examine Americans' attitudes of the news media during the COVID-19 outbreak, we used data from a broad survey of 10,139 U.S. adults conducted April 20-26, 2020.

Everyone who took part in the survey is a member of Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel, an online survey panel that is recruited through national, random sampling of residential addresses. Recruiting our panelists by phone or mail ensures that nearly all U.S. adults have a chance of selection. This gives us confidence that any sample can represent the whole population (see our [Methods 101 explainer](#) on random sampling). To further ensure that each survey reflects a balanced cross section of the nation, the data is weighted to match the U.S. adult population by gender, race, ethnicity, partisan affiliation, education and other categories.

Here are the questions asked in this [survey](#), along with responses, and the [methodology](#). Visit our [interactive data tool](#) to access the data on Americans' attitudes of the news media during the coronavirus, as well as other issues related to news and the election.

This report was made possible by The Pew Charitable Trusts, which received support from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

Americans' Views of the News Media During the COVID-19 Outbreak

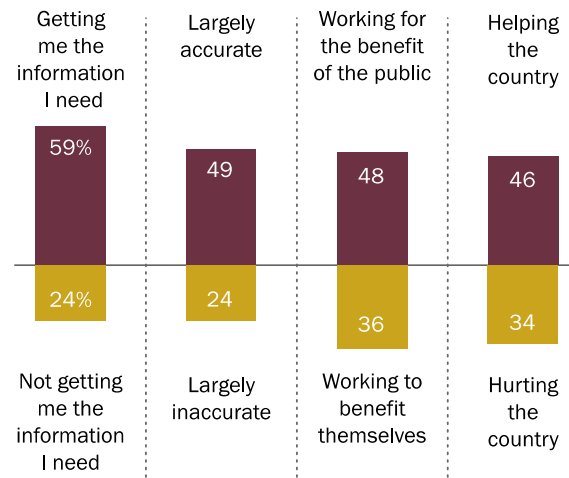
Even in crisis, Republicans and Democrats remain starkly divided in their attitudes toward journalists

Coverage of the current [coronavirus](#) outbreak has consumed much of the news media's attention as Americans look for information in a time of high anxiety and uncertainty. Overall, more Americans hold positive than negative views of the news media's coverage of the COVID-19 crisis, though broader views of the media are more evenly divided or more negative. And Republicans and Democrats continue to stand far apart in their opinions of the media during the pandemic, according to a new Pew Research Center survey conducted April 20-26, 2020, among 10,139 U.S. adults who are part of the Center's [American Trends Panel](#).

When asked to evaluate the news media's coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak, Americans are more likely than not to think that the news media are fulfilling four key roles. For example, most Americans (59%) say the news media are providing them with the information they need about the coronavirus, compared with about a quarter (24%) who say this is not the case. And while nearly half of U.S. adults (49%) say the media's COVID-19 coverage has been largely accurate, roughly a quarter (24%) say it has been mostly inaccurate. (The remainder say that neither of the statements in each case reflect their views.)

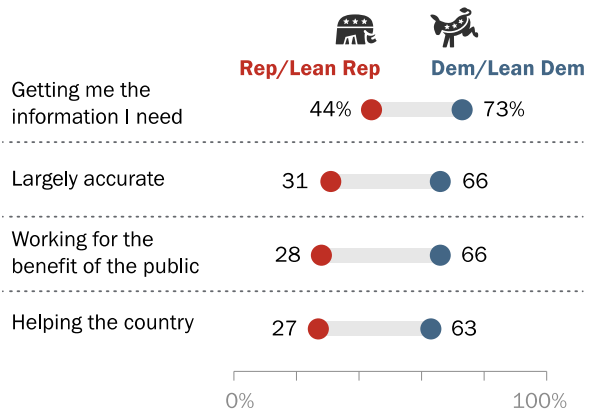
Americans more positive than negative about COVID-19 news coverage ...

% of U.S. adults who think the news media's coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak is ...



... but there are strong partisan divides in whether media fulfill key roles

% of U.S. adults who think the news media's coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak is ...



Note: Those who said neither phrase reflects their views not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 20-26, 2020.
"Americans' Views of the News Media During the COVID-19 Outbreak"

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Americans also are more likely than not to say media coverage of the crisis is benefiting the public (rather than news organizations) and is helping the country (rather than hurting it).

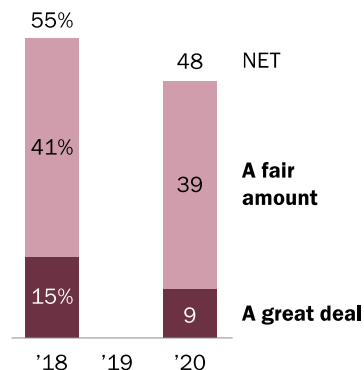
The U.S. public continues to pay rapt attention to news [coverage about the outbreak](#). Americans are following a wide range of coronavirus-related news topics [at both the national and local level](#), and many have seen reporters [change how they cover the news](#) to some degree.

At the same time, [tensions](#) between the news media and President Donald Trump have continued, and the new survey finds that Republicans and Democrats do not see eye to eye on views of the news media's COVID-19 coverage. Republicans and Republican-leaning independents are far less likely than Democrats and Democratic leaners to think that the news media are fulfilling each of the four functions measured in the survey. For example, while two-thirds of Democrats (66%) say the media's COVID-19 coverage has been largely accurate, just about three-in-ten Republicans (31%) agree. And the divide is even larger between Republicans who describe themselves as conservative and Democrats who describe themselves as liberal.

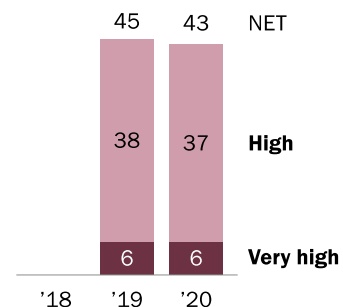
While the American public has a more positive than negative assessment of the news media's COVID-19 coverage, Americans' broader views of the media are more evenly divided or more negative. For instance, Americans are split in their confidence in journalists: About half (48%) have at least a "fair amount" of confidence in journalists to act in the best interests of the public, while a similar share (52%) say they have not much or no confidence. And the public is somewhat more likely to think that journalists have "low" or "very low" ethical standards (56%) than "high" or "very high" standards (43%). Views about the ethical standards of

Americans' confidence in journalists slightly lower since 2018, perceptions of ethical standards on par with last year

*% of U.S. adults who have each level of **confidence** that journalists will act in the best interests of the public*



*% of U.S. adults who say journalists have ___ **ethical standards***



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 20-26, 2020. For dates of other surveys, see the topline.

"Americans' Views of the News Media During the COVID-19 Outbreak"

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journalists are stable from last year, while confidence in journalists has dropped slightly [since 2018](#).

Similar to views of coronavirus coverage, partisan divides also persist over opinions toward journalists more generally – and are wider than for any other group of individuals asked in the survey, including business leaders, elected officials and religious leaders. For example, there is a 47-percentage-point gap between the shares of Republicans and Democrats who have at least a “fair amount” of confidence in journalists, almost exactly on par with the [46-point difference in 2018](#).

Overall, the findings show that Americans are largely evaluating the news media in similar ways during the COVID-19 outbreak as they did prior. Surveys conducted before the pandemic have shown that Americans often see the news media as performing well at [specific roles](#). But Americans tend to have less positive views toward the news media and journalists [more broadly](#). And what seems to be an unbreakable rift – even in a time of crisis – is the continued disconnect between the two parties in attitudes toward journalists and the content they produce.

You can find much of the data from this report in the Pew Research Center’s Election News Pathways [data tool](#) and analyze it alongside other data points.

1. Americans are more likely than not to think the news media are fulfilling key roles during the coronavirus outbreak, but partisans are starkly divided

The American public is more likely than not to say that the news media are serving key functions through their coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak. But dramatic partisan differences emerge, which is consistent with deep-rooted [partisan gulfs](#) in attitudes toward the news media prior to the outbreak.

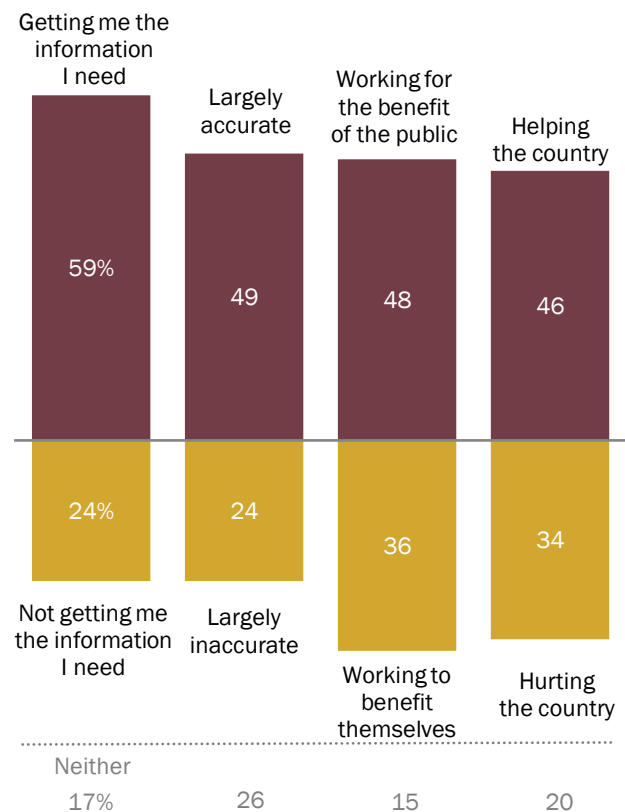
Survey respondents were asked about their views of four elements of the news media's coverage of the coronavirus outbreak: whether the coverage is giving them the information they need, or not; whether it is largely accurate or inaccurate; whether it is benefiting the public or the media themselves; and whether it is helping or hurting the country.

Overall, more Americans see the news media as fulfilling these key roles during this crisis than not, which is in line with other recent findings showing that most Americans think that the news media are doing [fairly well in covering the outbreak](#) more generally.

The news media receive the highest marks for whether they are keeping the public informed. Nearly six-in-ten Americans (59%) say that the news media's coverage is getting them the information they need, compared with far fewer – about a quarter (24%) – who say coverage is *not* serving that role. The remainder (17%) say that neither phrase reflects their view.

Americans more positive than negative in evaluations of the news media's COVID-19 coverage

% of U.S. adults who think the news media's coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak is ...



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 20-26, 2020. "Americans' Views of the News Media During the COVID-19 Outbreak"

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The public also is much more likely to think that coverage of the outbreak is largely accurate (49%) rather than largely inaccurate (24%). And more Americans see the news media's coverage as working for the benefit of the public (48%) and helping the country (46%) rather than benefitting the media themselves (36%) or hurting the country (34%). On each of these questions, between 15%-26% of respondents choose neither option.

This overall sense that news media are performing these key functions in this crisis is similar to the public's general views that the news media do well at a number of specific roles, especially at the [local level](#). For example, Americans say that one of the most positive things that the news media do is simply [report the news and provide important information](#). And Americans overwhelmingly go into national news stories expecting they [will be accurate](#).

Partisans sharply divided over whether the news media are fulfilling key roles during the coronavirus outbreak

Democrats and Republicans are far apart in their views of the news media's COVID-19 coverage. Republicans generally express more [negative sentiments](#) of the news media than Democrats, [particularly since the 2016 presidential election](#). The partisan divide during this crisis is just as stark as before – Republicans are far less likely than Democrats to think that the news media are fulfilling key roles for the public through their coverage of the outbreak.

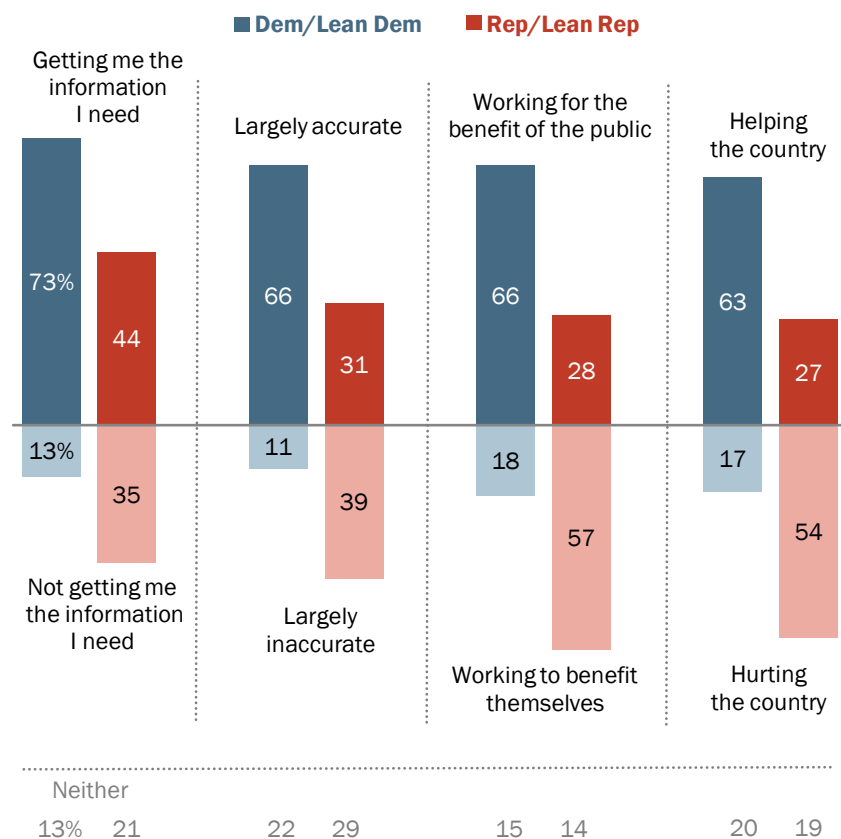
Republicans and Republican-leaning independents are between 29 and 38 percentage points less likely than Democrats and Democratic leaners to hold a positive view of the news media's coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak across the four different roles. For example, while two-thirds of Democrats (66%) think the news media are working for the benefit of the public, roughly three-in-ten Republicans (28%) share this assessment. More than half of Republicans (57%) say the media are working to benefit themselves.

Indeed, while Democrats are far more likely to view the news media's coverage of

COVID-19 positively than negatively across all four of these questions, Republicans are more likely to give a negative assessment in three areas. The only exception is whether the news media are

Republicans and Democrats strongly disagree in views of the news media's COVID-19 coverage

% of U.S. adults who think the news media's coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak is ...



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer not shown.
 Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 20-26, 2020.
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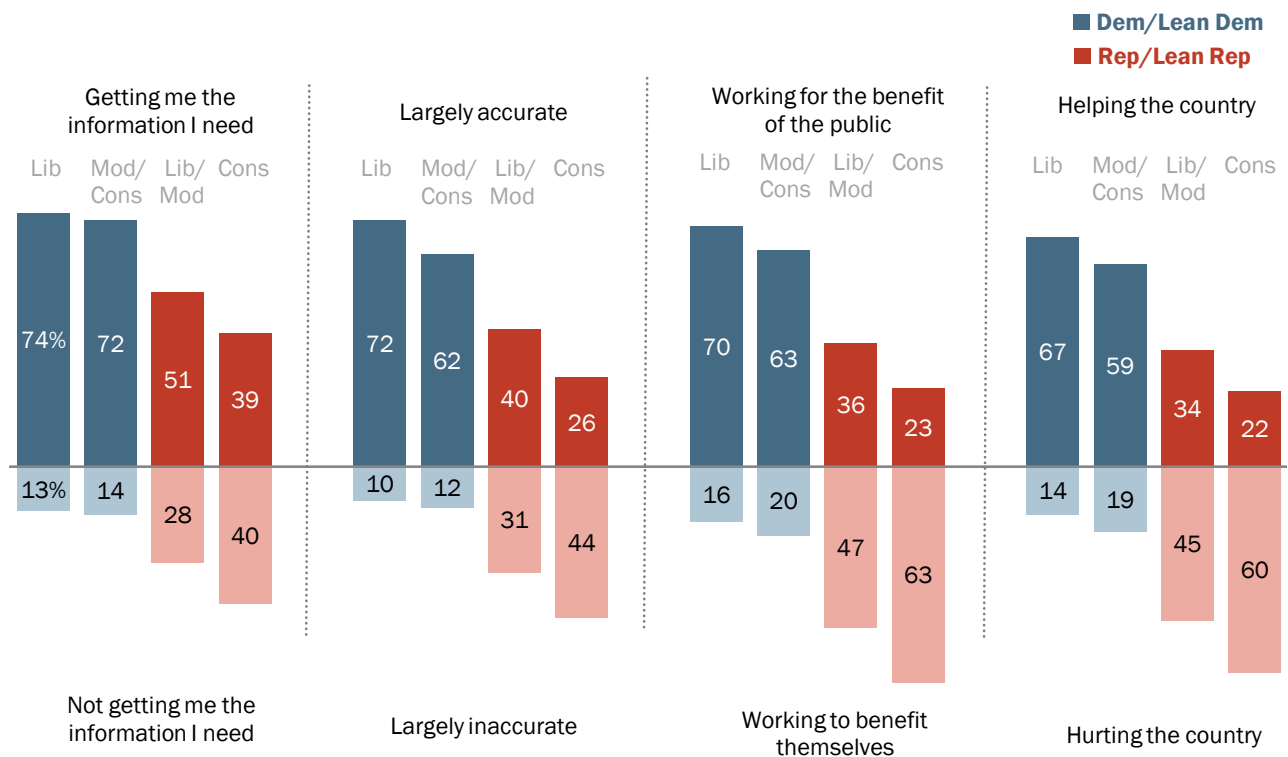
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giving them the information they need during the outbreak: 44% of Republicans say that the news media are providing this information, compared with 35% who say this need is not being met.

These partisan divides are even larger among those at the ideological ends of each party – liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans are even less likely to see eye to eye. For instance, the 35 percentage point divide between the two parties in thinking that news coverage of the coronavirus outbreak is largely accurate grows to 46 points between liberal Democrats (72%) and conservative Republicans (26%).

Liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans stand far apart in their evaluations of the news media’s COVID-19 coverage

% of U.S. adults who think the news media’s coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak is ...



Note: Those who said neither phrase reflects their views not shown. Respondents who did not give an answer not shown.

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

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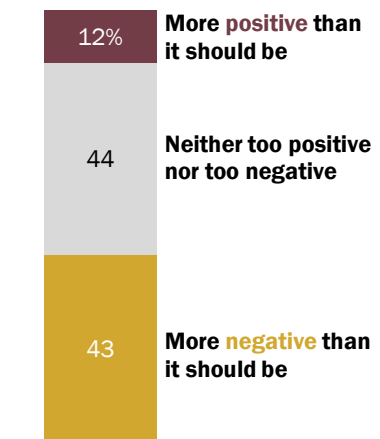
Many Americans – particularly Republicans – think news coverage of the outbreak is too negative

Another survey question asked about the tone of the news media’s COVID-19 coverage. Fully 43% of Americans say the news media’s coverage of the coronavirus outbreak has been more negative than it should be, far more than the share who say the tone of the coverage has been too positive (12%). Many Americans (44%) say that the coverage has been neither too negative nor too positive.

Republicans are particularly likely to think that the news media’s coverage is too negative. Two-thirds (66%) of Republicans and Republican leaners say this, compared with about a quarter of Democrats and Democratic leaners (24%). Instead, Democrats are far more likely to say the coverage struck the right tone (60%, vs. 25% of Republicans).

About four-in-ten Americans say COVID-19 news coverage is too negative

% of U.S. adults who think the news media’s coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak is ...



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer not shown.

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

“Americans’ Views of the News Media During the COVID-19 Outbreak”

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2. Americans are more negative in their broader views of journalists than they are toward COVID-19 coverage

Even as Americans are more likely to give the news media positive than negative marks on key aspects of COVID-19 reporting, views of journalists broadly remain more negative – specifically in Americans’ confidence in journalists and their views of their ethical standards. Furthermore, major partisan divides are just as stark as before the outbreak began, and Republicans and Democrats disagree more strongly in their assessments of the media than they do about several other institutions.

Overall, Americans are about evenly split in their level of confidence in journalists. About half (48%) have at least a “fair amount” of confidence that journalists will act in the public’s best interests, including 9% who say they have a “great deal” of confidence. But the other half (52%) have “not too much” or “no confidence at all” in journalists to serve the public interest.

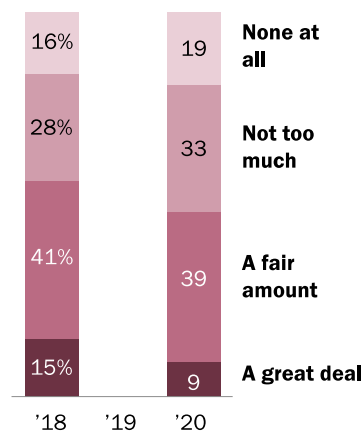
The public’s level of confidence in journalists is slightly lower than the last time this question was asked [in late 2018](#), when 55% had at least a fair amount of confidence that journalists will act in the best interests of the public, including 15% who had the highest level of confidence. Since many issues and events have transpired since late 2018, the reason for the change is unclear.

Views of journalists’ ethics, meanwhile, are somewhat

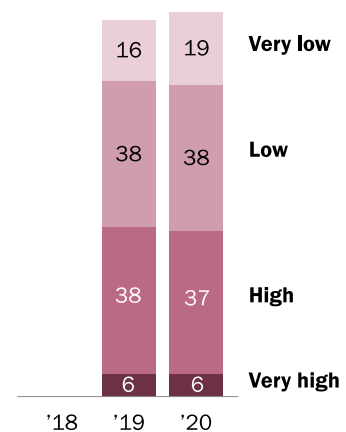
more negative than positive. Roughly four-in-ten Americans (43%) say journalists have “very high” or “high” ethical standards, while a majority (56%) say they have “low” or “very low” standards.

Americans’ confidence in journalists slightly lower than 2018, views of ethics about on par with last year

*% of U.S. adults who have each level of **confidence** that journalists will act in the best interests of the public*



*% of U.S. adults who say journalists have ___ **ethical standards***



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer not shown. For dates of other surveys, see the topline.

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

“Americans’ Views of the News Media During the COVID-19 Outbreak”

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Americans' opinions about the ethical standards of journalists are largely stable compared to 2019, the last time this question was asked.

Partisans remain sharply divided in their opinions about journalists

Like their views of the news media's COVID-19 coverage, Republicans and Democrats sharply diverge in their confidence in journalists and views of journalists' ethical standards – divides that are just as stark as before the outbreak.

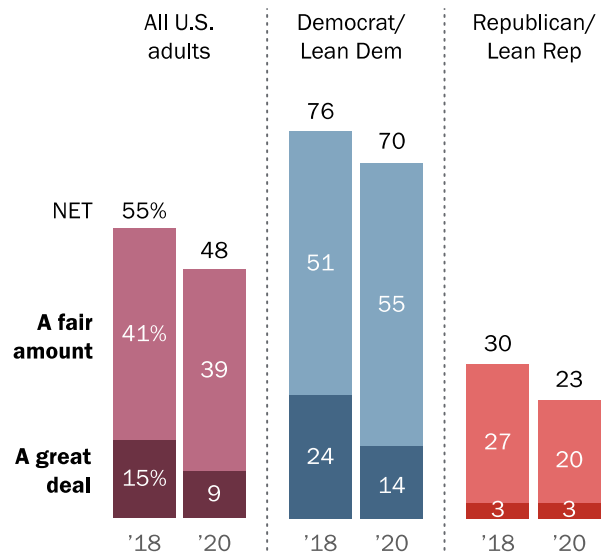
While a majority of Democrats and Democratic leaning independents (70%) say they have at least a fair amount of confidence in journalists to serve the public interest, this share falls 47 percentage points to about a quarter (23%) of Republicans and Republican leaners. The size of this partisan divide is almost exactly the same as it was [in late 2018](#), with slight overall decline in confidence occurring within both parties.

Partisans also disagree in their perceptions of the ethical standards of journalists. Democrats are far more likely than Republicans to say journalists have high or very high ethical standards (64% vs. 19%), a 45-point divide that is about the same [as last year](#).

These gaps are even larger between the ideological ends of the parties. The 47-point gap between the shares of Republicans and Democrats who say they have at least a fair amount of confidence in journalists grows to 61 points between liberal Democrats (76%) and conservative Republicans (15%). And the 45-point partisan divide in views about journalists' ethics swells to 57 points between liberal Democrats (70% of whom say journalists have at least high ethical standards) and conservative Republicans (13%).

Partisan divide in views toward journalists as stark today as in late 2018

% of U.S. adults who have ___ of confidence that journalists will act in the best interests of the public



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 20-26, 2020. For dates of other survey, see the topline. "Americans' Views of the News Media During the COVID-19 Outbreak"

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Partisans are more divided in their assessments of journalists than any other institution

On a list of several different groups of individuals, journalists rank near the bottom when it comes to public confidence. And partisan divides in views toward journalists are larger than they are for these other groups.

Survey respondents were asked about their level of confidence in groups of people from 10 different areas to act in the public interest. Journalists are on par with business leaders (48%), and they rank higher than only one other group – elected officials, who have the confidence of just 37% of U.S. adults. In the new survey, medical scientists (89%), scientists in general (87%), public school principals for grades K-12 (83%) and the military (83%) rise to the top of the list.

Journalists are the only group for which public confidence has declined since the last time each question was asked.

About half of Americans express confidence in journalists to serve public interest, down from 2018

% of U.S. adults who have a great deal/fair amount of confidence that each of the following groups will act in the best interests of the public

	Date					Difference between 2020 and last time asked
	May - June '16	Jan.-Feb. '18	Nov.-Dec. '18	Jan. '19	April '20	
Public school principals for K-12	-	-	80	77	83	+6
Religious leaders	53	49	61	57	63	+6
Medical scientists	84	-	-	87	89	+2
Business leaders	41	44	43	46	48	+2
Elected officials	27	25	37	35	37	+2
Scientists	76	79	83	86	87	+1
The military	79	80	83	82	83	+1
Police officers	-	-	78	-	78	0
College and university professors	-	-	68	-	68	0
Journalists	-	-	55	-	48	-7
The news media*	38	40	48	47	-	-

* The late 2018 survey asked about the level of confidence in both “journalists” and “the news media.” When both were included in the same survey, journalists received a somewhat higher level of confidence than the news media.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 20-26, 2020. For dates of other surveys, see the topline.

“Americans’ Views of the News Media During the COVID-19 Outbreak”

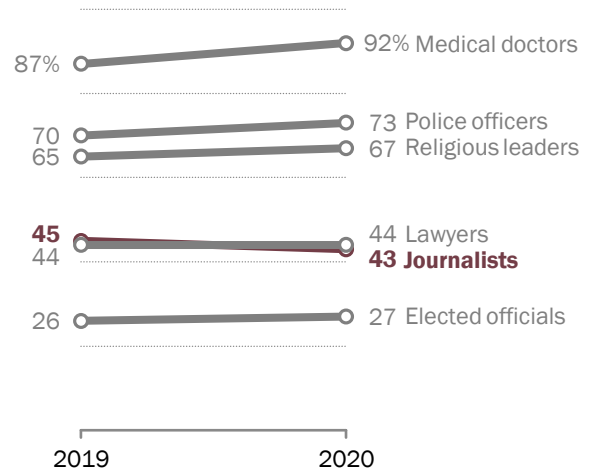
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Americans' views of journalists' ethical standards follow a very similar pattern. Journalists rank toward the bottom compared with five other groups of individuals asked about. And again, the one group that journalists outrank is elected leaders (just 27% of Americans think elected leaders have high or very high ethical standards).

The public is more likely to think medical doctors (92%), police officers (73%) and religious leaders (67%) have very high or high ethical standards, while journalists (43%) are about on par with lawyers (44%).

Americans rank journalists' ethical standards below doctors, police officers and clergy, but higher than elected officials

% of U.S. adults who say each of the following groups has very high/high ethical standards



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 20-26, 2020. For dates of other survey, see the topline.

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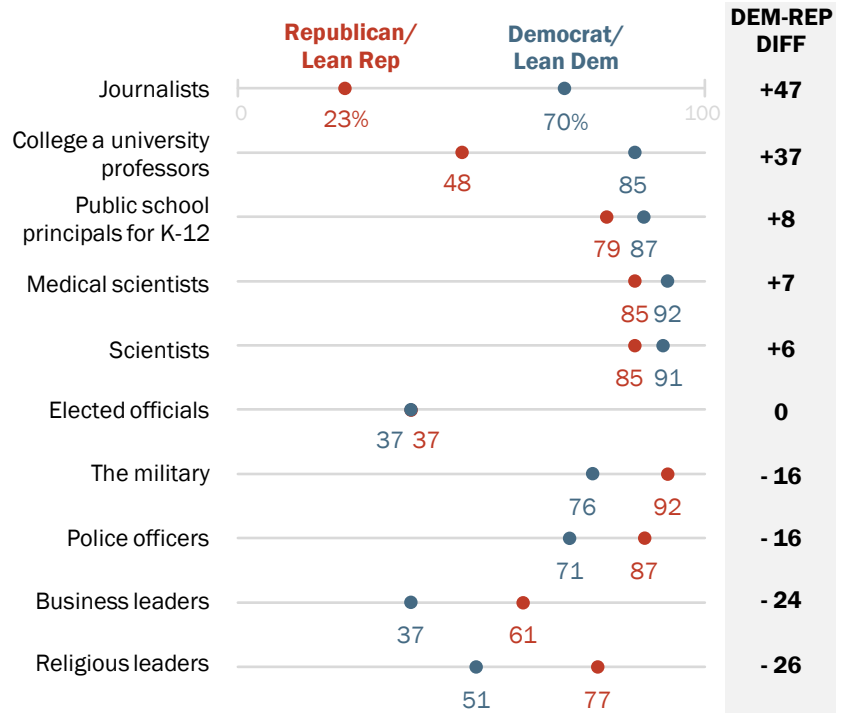
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Partisan divides in these views of journalists stand out for being especially large.

The 47-point gap between Democrats and Republicans (including leaners) in the share who express at least a fair amount of confidence in journalists to act in the public interest is at least 10 points larger than the split for each of the other nine groups of individuals, a pattern that is very similar to views in 2018 to [before the COVID-19 outbreak](#). The next largest gap is 37 points: 85% of Democrats express confidence in college professors, compared with 48% of Republicans.

Republicans and Democrats are more divided over views toward journalists than other groups of individuals

% of U.S. adults who have a great deal/fair amount of confidence that each group will act in the best interests of the public



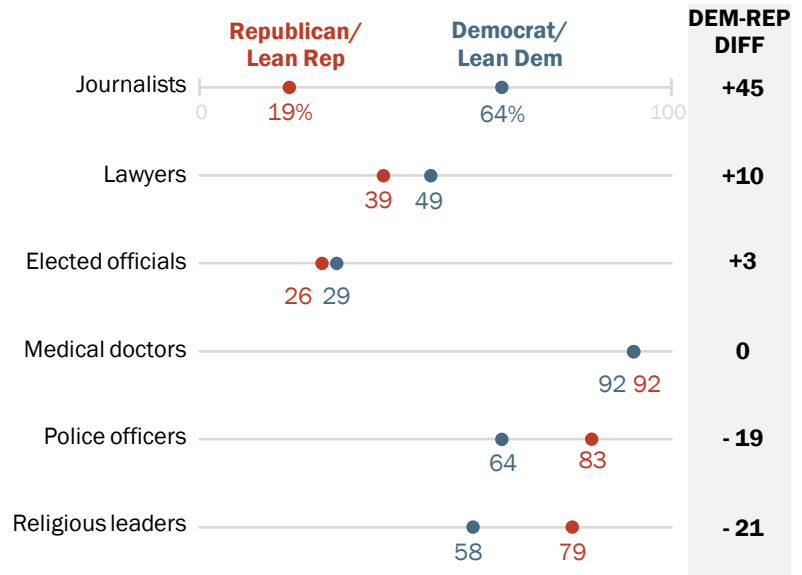
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 20-26, 2020. "Americans' Views of the News Media During the COVID-19 Outbreak"

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And the same pattern emerges in views of ethics. The 45-point gap in whether journalists have high or very ethical standards between Republicans and Democrats shadows the divides for the other five groups asked about.

Republicans and Democrats are far more divided over the ethical standards of journalists than other groups of individuals

% of U.S. adults who say each of the following has very high/high ethical standards



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 20-26, 2020. "Americans' Views of the News Media During the COVID-19 Outbreak"

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Methodology

American Trends Panel survey methodology

The American Trends Panel (ATP), created by Pew Research Center, is a nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults. Panelists participate via self-administered web surveys. Panelists who do not have internet access at home are provided with a tablet and wireless internet connection. The panel is being managed by Ipsos. This report was made possible by The Pew Charitable Trusts, which received support from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

Data in this report is drawn from the panel wave conducted April 20 to April 26, 2020. A total of 10,139 panelists responded out of 11,022 who were sampled, for a response rate of 92%.

This does not include three panelists who were removed from the data due to extremely high rates of refusal or straightlining. The cumulative response rate accounting for nonresponse to the recruitment surveys and attrition is 5%. The break-off rate among panelists who logged on to the survey and completed at least one item is 0.01%. The margin of sampling error for the full sample of 10,139 respondents is plus or minus 1.5 percentage points.

American Trends Panel recruitment surveys

Recruitment dates	Mode	Invited	Joined	Active panelists remaining
Jan. 23 to March 16, 2014	Landline/ cell RDD	9,809	5,338	2,310
Aug. 27 to Oct. 4, 2015	Landline/ cell RDD	6,004	2,976	1,335
April 25 to June 4, 2017	Landline/ cell RDD	3,905	1,628	685
Aug. 8 to Oct. 31, 2018	ABS/web	9,396	8,778	6,411
Aug. 19 to Nov. 30, 2019	ABS/web	5,900	4,720	4,686
	Total	35,014	23,440	15,427

Note: Approximately once per year, panelists who have not participated in multiple consecutive waves or who did not complete an annual profiling survey are removed from the panel. Panelists also become inactive if they ask to be removed from the panel.

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The subsample from the ATP consisted of 11,022 ATP members that responded to the Wave 57 survey and were still active.

The ATP was created in 2014, with the first cohort of panelists invited to join the panel at the end of a large, national, landline and cellphone random-digit-dial survey that was conducted in both English and Spanish. Two additional recruitments were conducted using the same method in 2015 and 2017, respectively. Across these three surveys, a total of 19,718 adults were invited to join the ATP, of which 9,942 agreed to participate.

In August 2018, the ATP switched from telephone to address-based recruitment. Invitations were sent to a random, address-based sample (ABS) of households selected from the U.S. Postal Service's Delivery Sequence File. In each household, the adult with the next birthday was asked to go online to complete a survey, at the end of which they were invited to join the panel. For a random half-sample of invitations, households without internet access were instructed to return a postcard. These households were contacted by telephone and sent a tablet if they agreed to participate. A total of 9,396 were invited to join the panel, and 8,778 agreed to join the panel and completed an initial profile survey. The same recruitment procedure was carried out on August 19, 2019, from which a total of 5,900 were invited to join the panel and 4,720 agreed to join the panel and completed an initial profile survey. Of the 23,440 individuals who have ever joined the ATP, 15,427 remained active panelists and continued to receive survey invitations at the time this survey was conducted.

The U.S. Postal Service's Delivery Sequence File has been estimated to cover as much as 98% of the population, although some studies suggest that the coverage could be in the low 90% range.¹ The American Trends Panel never uses breakout routers or chains that direct respondents to additional surveys.

¹ AAPOR Task Force on Address-based Sampling. 2016. "[AAPOR Report: Address-based Sampling](#)."

Weighting

The ATP data was weighted in a multistep process that begins with a base weight incorporating the respondents' original selection probability. The next step in the weighting uses an iterative technique that aligns the sample to population benchmarks on the dimensions listed in the accompanying table.

Sampling errors and test of statistical significance take into account the effect of weighting. Interviews are conducted in both English and Spanish.

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

Weighting dimensions

Variable	Benchmark source
Gender	2018 American Community Survey
Age	
Education	
Race/Hispanic origin	
Country of birth among Hispanics	
Years lived in the United States among Hispanics	2019 CPS March Metropolitan status Supplement
Home internet access	
Region x	2017 CPS Volunteering & Civic Life Supplement
Metropolitan status	
Volunteerism	2018 CPS Voting and Registration Supplement
Voter registration	
Party affiliation	Average of the three most recent Pew Research Center telephone surveys.

Note: Estimates from the ACS are based on non-institutionalized adults. Voter registration is calculated using procedures from Hur, Achen (2013) and rescaled to include the total US adult population.

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The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the survey:

Group	Unweighted sample size	Plus or minus ...
Total sample	10,139	1.5 percentage points
Republican/Lean Republican	4,171	2.3 percentage points
Conservative	2,695	2.7 percentage points
Moderate/Liberal	1,430	3.9 percentage points
Democrat/Lean Democrat	5,693	2.1 percentage points
Liberal	2,945	2.9 percentage points
Moderate/Conservative	2,683	3.1 percentage points

Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request.

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