

# How Americans Navigate the Modern Information Environment

A Study Commemorating the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of  
NORC at the University of Chicago



**75**  
years of insight,  
innovation,  
and impact.

## INTRODUCTION

In this digital era when Americans have easy access to vast amounts of information from widely varying sources, we know little about how people actually use these sources or how they react to the steady streams of information they confront daily. A new study from NORC at the University of Chicago finds that while the vast majority of Americans believe it is easier to find useful information today than it was five years ago, 78 percent report the sheer quantity of information can sometimes be overwhelming.

To commemorate NORC's 75th Anniversary as an independent research institution, NORC conducted a study that provides a detailed understanding of Americans' perspectives on an information environment where most have instant access to virtually unlimited amounts of information via the internet.

Most Americans agree that the internet has made them better informed on a variety of topics, and indeed, those Americans who use at least one digital source of information, like search engines or social media in their daily lives, find it easier to navigate today's information environment than non-digital information consumers.

But the study does find that legacy media continue to fill important roles for Americans. For example, while Americans are most likely to go online for information when making a major product purchase, they are more likely to turn to TV when they need information to decide where they stand on a major national issue. Further, Americans across demographic characteristics report a healthy amount of skepticism over the trustworthiness of online information, especially when found through social media.

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## THE STUDY

The nationally representative survey, funded by NORC, was conducted from January 14 through January 31, 2016. Data were collected using the AmeriSpeak Panel®, which is NORC's probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. Panel members were randomly drawn from the AmeriSpeak Panel, and 1,007 completed the survey. Respondents without

Taking a deeper look at Americans' information habits, the study finds that most Americans do often rely on their instincts to navigate the complexities of the modern information environment. Whether deciding on a major purchase or their stance on a policy issue, many rely on gut feelings to determine when information is suspect. And while Americans often seek out additional sources to sort through conflicting information when they are making decisions, they also frequently rely on their instincts to determine what information "feels right."

Changes in information availability and the proliferation of digital media affect how and where Americans get information, but not everyone has felt this impact in the same way. Older Americans and those with lower levels of education have seen less of an impact from internet-based sources of information than younger people and those with higher levels of education.

For most of these information habits, Americans do not differ much across partisan lines. Republicans and Democrats have very similar overall approaches to information and strategies for evaluating it, even though the specific news outlets they turn to may differ. Political independents, however, do differ in their information-seeking habits compared to Democrats and Republicans.

internet access and those who prefer to complete surveys by phone were interviewed by trained NORC interviewers.

The overall margin of sampling error is +/-3.7 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect. The margin of sampling error is higher for subgroups.

Key findings from the study include:

- Eighty-one percent of Americans believe it is easier to find useful information today than it was five years ago. At the same time, 16 percent report they are often overwhelmed by how much information comes to them, and another 62 percent say the amount of information they get can sometimes be too much.
  - Americans who use at least one digital source of information in their daily lives (search engines, social media, or blogs) are more likely to say it is easier to find useful information today than it was five years ago.
  - Thinking about how the internet connects them to information, many Americans report being better informed than they were five years ago. More than 6 in 10 report being better informed about lifestyle topics such as hobbies, health, or pop culture, and similar proportions say the same about international and national news.
  - The public uses a mix of newer digital sources and more traditional media sources to obtain information for their daily lives. Digital sources are popular, with two-thirds of Americans saying they often use search engines and nearly half using social media.
  - Legacy media outlets remain frequent sources of information for many people. Six in 10 often use television stations' broadcasts, websites, or apps to find information they use in their daily lives. Likewise, 4 in 10 often listen to radio stations or go to their websites or apps, and a similar proportion read newspapers in print or online to find information they use in their daily lives.
  - And, legacy media enjoy higher levels of trust. At least 8 in 10 Americans who use newspapers, radio, search engines, television, and magazines to get information to use in their daily lives say they can mostly or completely trust the information they get from each of these sources.
- Americans are more reluctant to trust information from blogs and social media. Fifty-five percent say they can mostly or completely trust information from blogs, and 53 percent say the same for social media. That trust gap is similar for all age groups.
  - Information habits and attitudes do vary based on a person's age and education, but there are relatively few differences by race, ethnicity, or gender. And when it comes to party identification, partisans differ more from independents than they do from each other.
  - People's information habits differ by decision domain in some respects, but in others they are quite similar. For example, when it comes to information sources, legacy media such as TV and newspapers are more often used when people are deciding where they stand on policy issues compared to product purchase decisions. However, word of mouth plays a large role in people's information seeking for both types of decisions.
  - Americans are more likely to gather new information for purchasing decisions than for deciding where they stand on national issues (85 percent do so often or sometimes for products compared to 72 percent for national issues), but in both domains Americans rely on their instincts to help navigate the information environment. Americans are most likely to seek out new information when they have a gut feeling to be skeptical. Furthermore, when they encounter conflicting information about products or policies, they tend to seek additional information and rely on their instincts to determine which information to trust.

## A LARGE MAJORITY OF AMERICANS SAY IT IS EASIER TODAY THAN IT WAS FIVE YEARS AGO TO FIND USEFUL INFORMATION, BUT MANY SAY THE AMOUNT OF INFORMATION CAN BE OVERWHELMING.

In today's digital age, the challenge for many Americans is not finding useful information, but rather dealing with the large amount of available information.

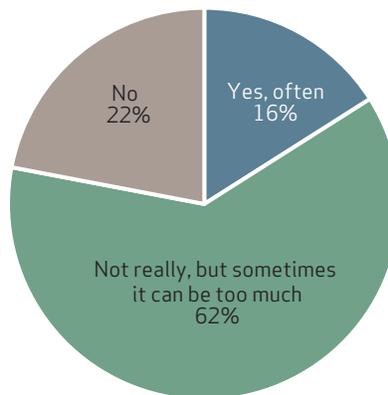
Most Americans believe it is easier today than it was five years ago to find useful information (81 percent). Just 7 percent say it is harder to find useful information today

than five years ago, while 12 percent say there is no real difference.

At the same time, most people say the vast amount of available information can be challenging. Sixteen percent report they are often overwhelmed by how much information comes to them, and another 62 percent say the amount of information they get can sometimes be too much.

**Most Americans are overwhelmed at times by the quantity of information available.**

*Question: Do you ever feel overwhelmed by how much information comes to you? Would you say...?*



## AMERICANS SAY THEY ARE BETTER INFORMED THAN THEY WERE FIVE YEARS AGO ON A NUMBER OF TOPICS DESPITE MIXED BELIEFS ABOUT THE RELIABILITY OF INFORMATION ON THE INTERNET.

Thinking about how the internet connects them to information, many Americans<sup>1</sup> report being better informed than they were five years ago for many, but not all, topics and issues. In particular, the public is more likely to feel better informed now about lifestyle topics and national news than they are about news from their neighborhood.

Majorities of Americans believe they are more informed about issues that generally impact a national or global audience; about 6 in 10 say they are better informed about lifestyle topics such as hobbies, health, or pop culture, and

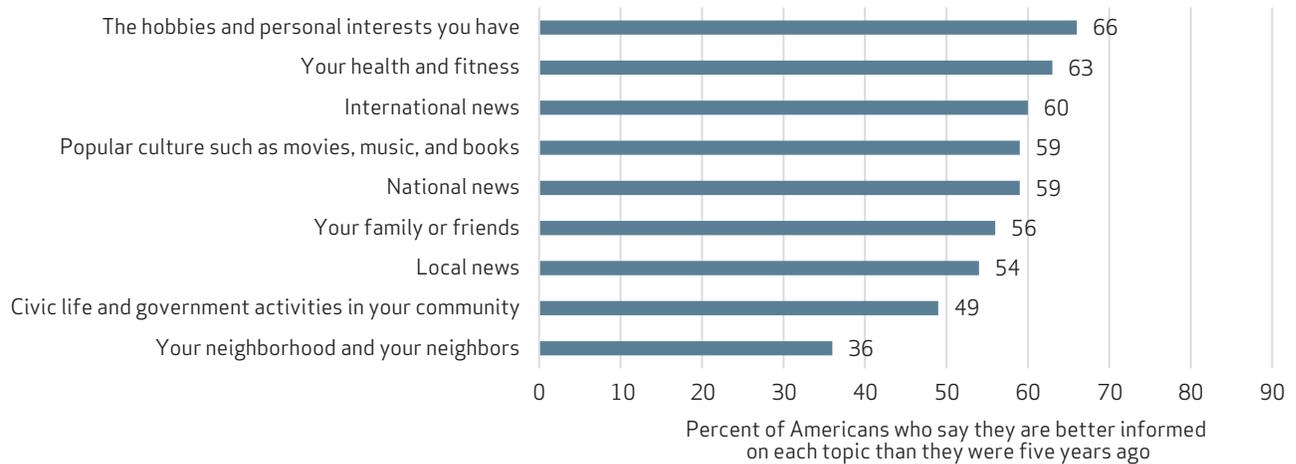
similar proportions say the same about international and national news.

As the type of information becomes more localized and specific, people are less likely to say they are better informed about the topic today than they were five years ago. About half believe they are better informed about local news or civic life in their community, but only about 1 in 3 say they are more informed about their neighborhood and neighbors.

<sup>1</sup> About 3 in 4 Americans say they use the internet or web-enabled applications for more than just email outside of work or school; the remaining 26 percent do not use the internet beyond email in their daily lives. However, questions related to how the internet connects people to information were asked of all respondents.

### A majority of Americans say they are better informed about lifestyle, international, and national news.

*Question: Now think about all the ways the internet connects you to information. Compared to five years ago, would you say that you are better informed, not as well informed, or about the same as five years ago on the following topics?*



Americans are likely to feel well informed regardless of their reported weekly internet usage. Those who use the internet for 20 or more hours a week are no more likely than those who use it for 11 to 20 hours or those who use it for 10 hours or less a week to say they feel better informed on any of the topics.

The public has mixed beliefs about the accuracy of information on the internet. Respondents were asked on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is little or none and 10 is almost all, how much of the information they find on the internet is accurate. The average rating is 6.2, and the most common choice, selected by 25 percent, was a 7 on the scale. Only 4

percent say almost all information is accurate, and only 1 percent say little or none of the information on the internet is accurate.

Despite the public's widespread use of the internet, a majority of Americans express some reservations about searching for information online. A quarter of adults report they often do not search for information online because they don't want to get a lot of advertisements and follow-up messages trying to sell them something, while 1 in 3 say they have decided not to search online for information at least once or twice for this reason.

## AMERICANS ARE USING A VARIETY OF SOURCES TO OBTAIN INFORMATION FOR THEIR DAILY LIVES.

The public uses a mix of newer digital sources such as search engines and social media, as well as more legacy media sources such as television and radio, to obtain information for their daily lives. In addition, most Americans consult multiple sources of information.

Digital sources are popular, with two-thirds of Americans saying they often use search engines to get information. Nearly half of all Americans often obtain information from social media.

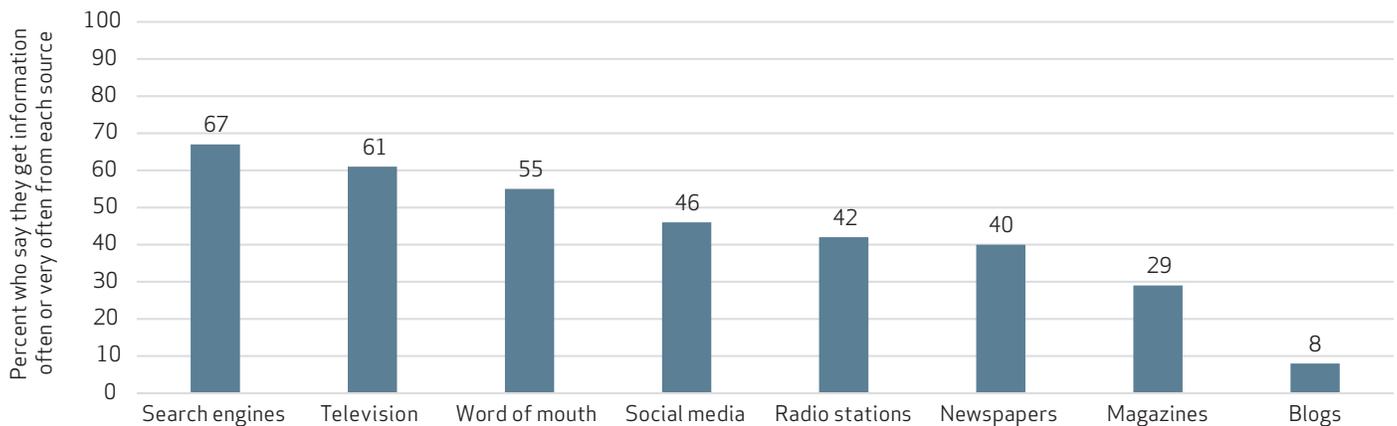
Americans who use at least one digital source of information in their daily lives (search engines, social media, or blogs) are more likely to say it is easier to find useful information today than it was five years ago. Only 38 percent of those who do not use any of these digital information sources say it is much easier to get information today, compared to 57 percent of those who use one of these digital sources and 59 percent of those who use two or three digital sources of information in their daily lives.

At the same time, legacy media outlets remain frequent sources of information for many people. Six in 10 often use television broadcasts, websites, or apps to find information they use in their daily lives. Likewise, 4 in 10 often listen to radio stations or go to their websites or apps, and a similar proportion read newspapers in print or online to find information they use in their daily lives.

About half of Americans get information from talking to friends, family members, neighbors, or coworkers. Magazines (29 percent) and blogs (8 percent) are less popular.

### Both newer digital sources and legacy media outlets remain popular.

*Question: How often do you get information for your daily life from...?*



A majority of the public use multiple information sources to get information. Half of Americans say they use at least four of these eight sources to get information for their daily lives. In contrast, about a quarter of people say they use just one or two sources, and only 5 percent say they don't use any of these sources often.

Many of those who rely on multiple sources of information use a combination of newer digital sources and legacy media outlets. Americans who use newer digital sources such as search engines and social media are connected to more

sources and therefore tend to consult a greater number of sources overall to find information.

People who often seek information on search engines say they frequently use an average of four sources, while those who do not use search engines report an average of about two sources. Likewise, social media seekers say they use, on average, more than four sources, while those who don't use social media report using, on average, fewer than three sources.

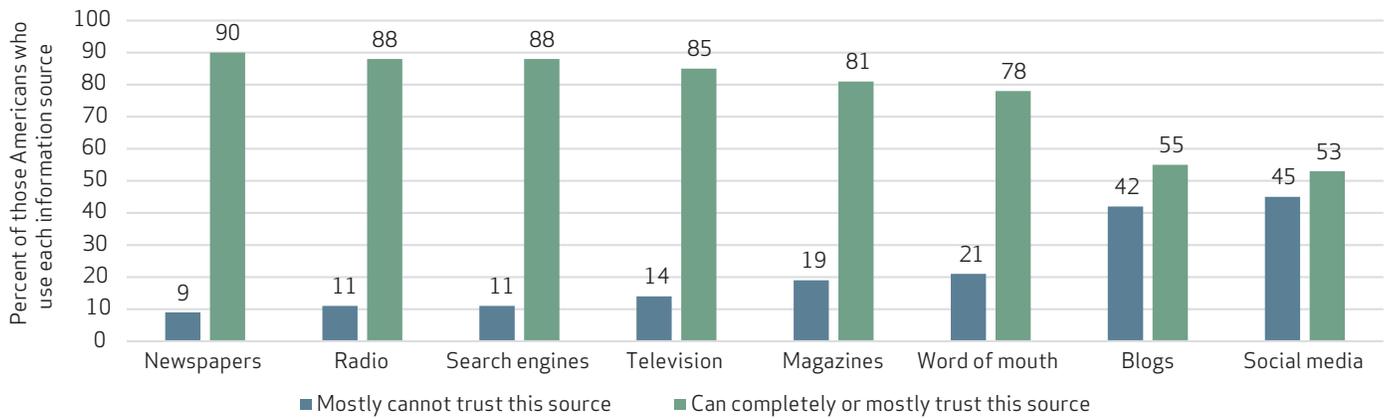
## ALTHOUGH SOCIAL MEDIA IS A RELATIVELY POPULAR WAY TO GET INFORMATION, MANY AMERICANS ARE SKEPTICAL OF INFORMATION GATHERED THERE.

At least 8 in 10 Americans who use newspapers, radio, search engines, television, and magazines to get information to use in their daily lives say they can mostly or completely trust the information they get from each of these sources. Almost as many (78 percent) say they can mostly or completely trust the information they get via word of mouth.

Americans are more reluctant to trust information from blogs and social media. Fifty-five percent say they can mostly or completely trust information from blogs, but 42 percent say they mostly cannot trust the information. When it comes to information from social media, 53 percent say it can be trusted while 45 percent say it cannot be.

### Americans express more skepticism toward the trustworthiness of online content.

Question: In your experience, how much do you trust the information you get from...?



## AMERICANS EMPLOY SOME DIFFERENT INFORMATION STRATEGIES DEPENDING ON THE TYPE OF DECISION THEY NEED TO MAKE, BUT MANY HABITS ARE CONSISTENT ACROSS DECISION DOMAINS.

Moving beyond questions related to Americans general information preferences and habits, the study also looked carefully into understanding the public's information use for different types of decisions. On the survey, people were asked about information use when making a major consumer purchase and when forming an opinion on national policy issues.

People's information habits differ by decision domain in some respects, but in others they are quite similar. Legacy media such as TV and newspapers are more often used for policy issues than product purchase decisions. However, word of mouth plays a large role in people's information seeking for both types of decisions.

The importance of qualities of information sources depends on the decision domain as well. Timeliness of information and use of experts and evidence are highly valued for

### MOST AMERICANS CONSULT SOURCES YIELDED BY SEARCH ENGINES AND THEIR FRIENDS AND FAMILIES WHEN MAKING A MAJOR PURCHASE.

Of those Americans who identified a major purchase they made in the past year, majorities say they used search engines such as Google or Bing (68 percent) or say they relied on word of mouth, including friends, family members, neighbors, or coworkers, to get more information when

policy decisions, while ease of use and the presence of user reviews are important for product decisions. In both cases, Americans rank sources that seem knowledgeable very highly.

While Americans more readily gather new information for purchasing decisions (85 percent do so often or sometimes for products compared to 72 percent for national issues), in both domains Americans rely on their instincts to help navigate the information environment. Americans are most likely to seek out new information when they have a gut feeling to be skeptical. Furthermore, when they encounter conflicting information about products or policies, they tend to seek additional information and rely on their instincts to determine what information to trust.

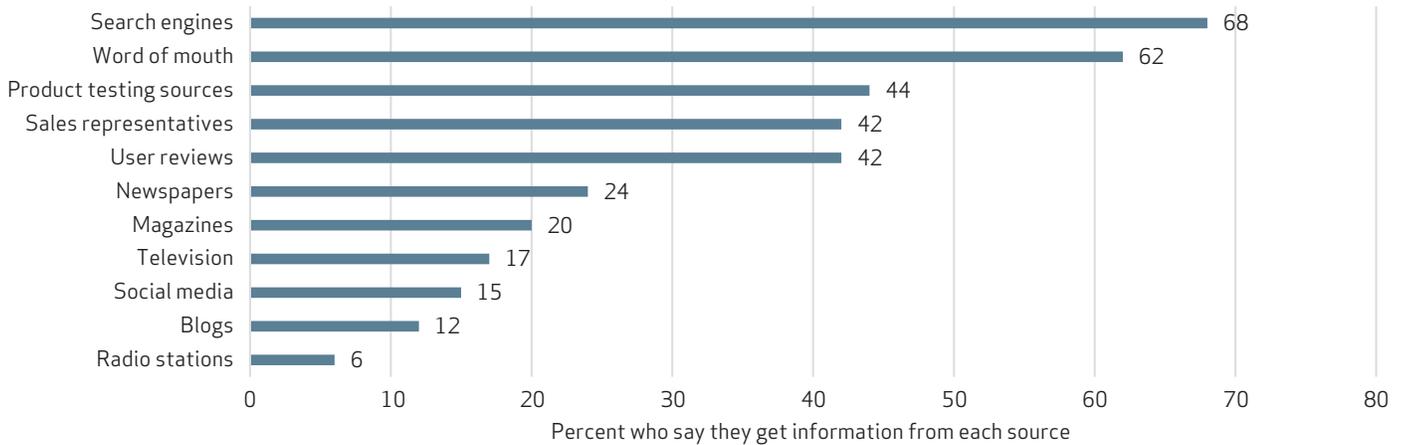
making their purchasing decision (62 percent). Fewer say they consulted either legacy media such as newspapers, magazines, or television stations, or newer forms of media such as blogs and social media. Three-quarters of those who made a major purchase in the past year consulted at

least one product-specific source such as a testing source (44 percent), a product review (42 percent), or a sales representative (42 percent). Eighty-five percent of those

who say they used search engines also used at least one product-specific source compared with 50 percent of those who didn't use search engines.

### When making a major product purchase, Americans most often consult search engines and their friends and family.

*Question: In deciding to buy or not buy this product, did you use any of these sources of information, or not?*



On average, Americans say they used 3.5 sources of the 11 when deciding to make their major purchase. Twenty-eight percent of those who made a major purchase in the past year consulted 5 or more sources when deciding to buy the product, and 6 percent consulted no sources of information before buying.

When making major product purchasing decisions, Americans use different combinations of information sources in interesting ways. For example, those who use search engines tend to use more sources of information overall than those who do not use search engines to make their decisions. Search engine users consult an average of 4.3 sources compared with non-search engine users who consult an average of just 1.8 sources. Those who used search engines were more likely to also use social media, blogs, word of mouth, magazines, user reviews, and product testing sources when deciding to buy the product.

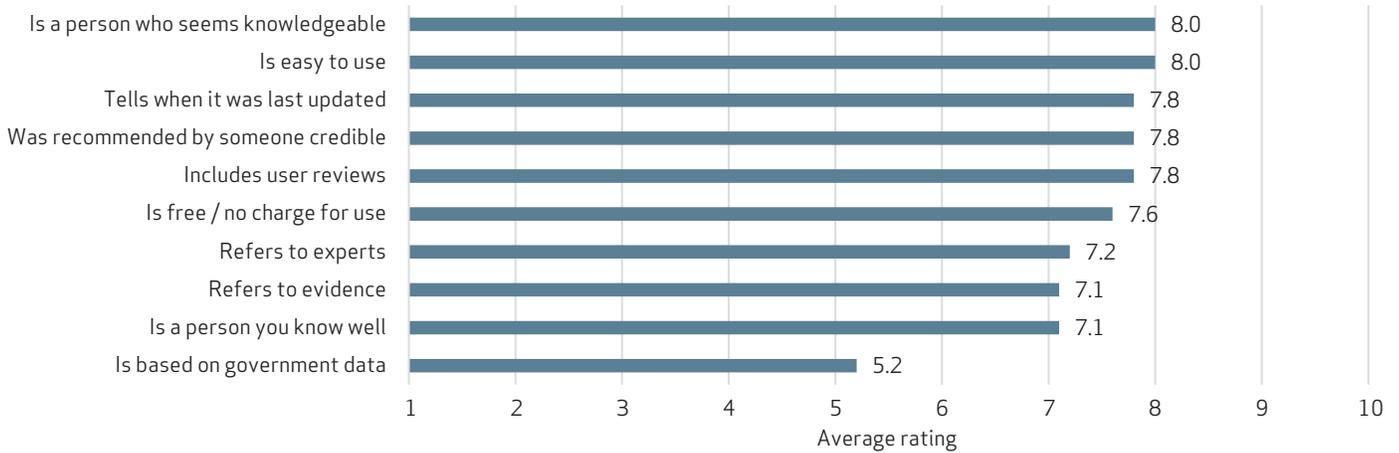
Those who ask their friends and family for advice consult an average of 4.2 sources compared with an average of 2.4 sources for those who do not discuss their purchase with friends and family. Those who discuss their purchase with friends and family are more likely to also use television, radio, search engines, social media, blogs, and product testing sources.

And those who consult at least one product-specific source use an average of 4.2 sources when making their major purchasing decision, more than the 1.5 sources used by those who do not use product-specific sources. Those who consult at least one product-specific source are more likely to also use each of the other sources of information when making their decision.

Many factors go into making an information source valuable to a consumer. Respondents were asked to rank the importance of 10 of these factors when making a major purchase on a 10-point scale where 1 is not important and 10 is very important. Americans value information sources that are knowledgeable and easy to use equally, giving each factor an average rating of 8 on the 10-point scale. Information sources that are deemed credible, that include user reviews, and that include the last day they were updated have an average rating of 7.8, and information sources that are free to use have an importance rating of 7.6. Americans give sources that refer to experts an average rating of 7.2, while they give sources that refer to evidence or that they know well an average rating of 7.1. Less important than any of the other information considerations to Americans is that the source of information be based on government data, with an average rating of 5.2 on the 10-point scale.

**Information based on government data is less important to Americans than other attributes.**

*Question: On a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is not important and 10 is very important, when making a major product purchase, how important is it that the source of your information...?*



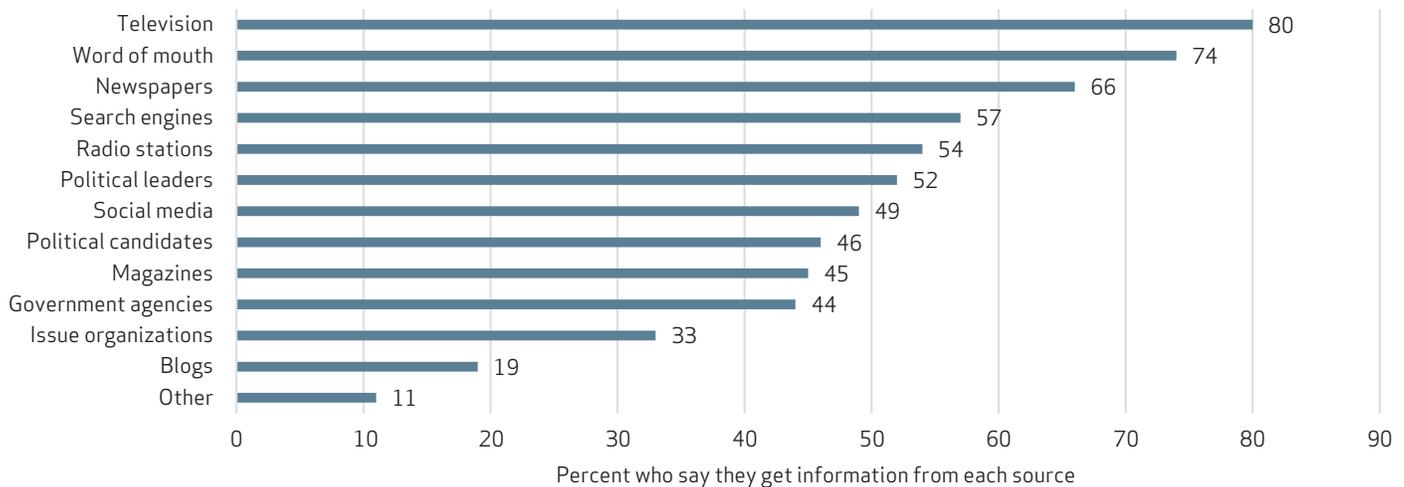
**AMERICANS TAKE A DIFFERENT INFORMATION APPROACH WHEN OBTAINING INFORMATION ABOUT IMPORTANT PROBLEMS FACING THE UNITED STATES, RELYING HEAVILY ON TELEVISION AND PLACING A HIGH VALUE ON THE TIMELINESS OF INFORMATION.**

When the decision domain changes, so do Americans' approaches to obtaining information. Few Americans say they turned to television when making purchasing decisions, however, 8 in 10 say they do so when forming an opinion about an important policy issue. They also rely more heavily on more legacy media sources—such as consulting

newspapers (66 percent vs. 24 percent, respectively) and radio (54 percent vs. 6 percent, respectively)—when forming opinions on news issues as compared to making purchasing decisions.

**Americans most commonly consult TV, friends and family, and newspapers when considering important problems facing the country.**

*Question: In forming your opinion about this issue, did you use any of these sources of information?*



Some modes of information gathering are popular for both

types of decision-making. Word of mouth is cited by many

Americans as a source when forming opinions on issues and when making a major purchase; 74 percent say they talked with their friends and family when forming an opinion about an important national issue, and 62 percent say they talked with friends and family about a major purchase. Fifty-seven percent rely on search engines when forming an opinion on an issue, which is also the most popular source of information among Americans when making a major purchase, as 68 percent use search engines for that purpose.

Just over half of Americans turn to political leaders when forming opinions about important policy issues, 46 percent turn to political candidates, 44 percent turn to government agencies, and 33 percent turn to issue organizations.

Many Americans place high importance on both timeliness and expertise when researching information about national

issues. Respondents were asked to evaluate the importance of different factors when researching national issues based on a scale where 1 is not important and 10 is very important.

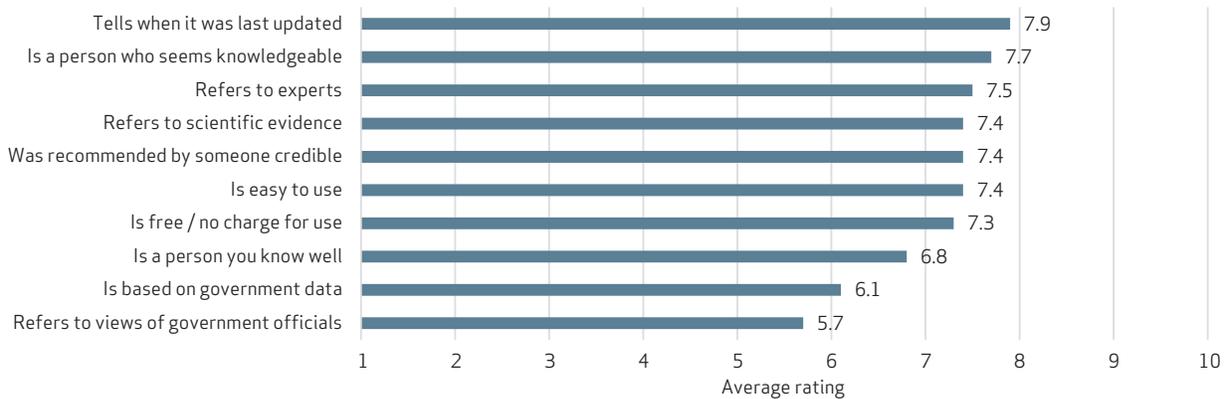
The highest-ranked factor when researching national issues is that a source tells when it was last updated, which had an average rating of 7.9.

Several factors related to expertise also receive high marks from the public when researching national issues. That the information comes from a person who seems knowledgeable has an average rating of 7.7, that it refers to experts has an average rating of 7.5, and that it refers to scientific evidence has an average rating of 7.4.

In contrast, fewer people place high levels of importance on information being based on government data (average of 6.1) or referring to views of government officials (average of 5.7).

**Americans value a variety of factors when researching national issues.**

*Question: On a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is not important and 10 is very important, when thinking about any national issue, how important is it that the source of your information...?*



**PEOPLE MORE OFTEN SEEK OUT NEW INFORMATION WHEN MAKING MAJOR PURCHASES THAN LOOKING INTO NATIONAL ISSUES.**

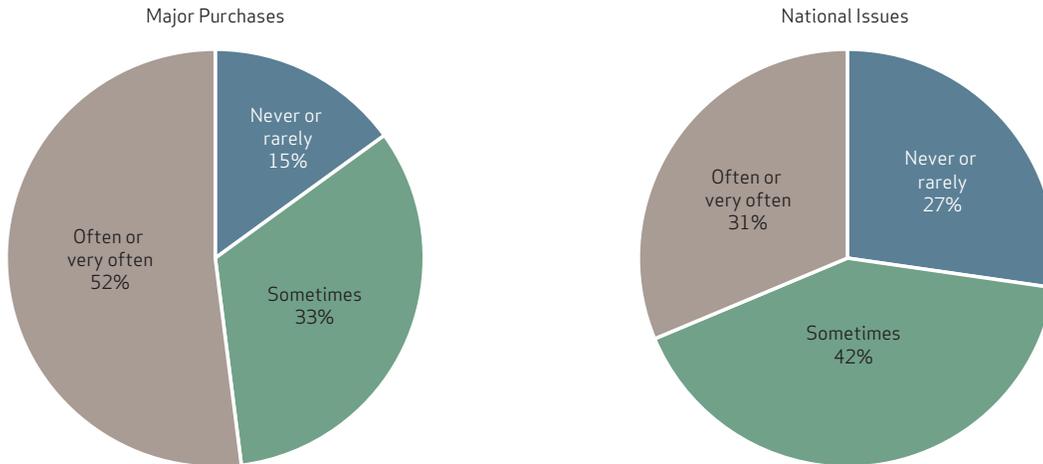
When making a major purchase, 52 percent of Americans say they often or very often seek out new sources of information in addition to the sources they use on a regular basis, 33 percent say they sometimes do this, and 15 percent say they rarely or never use new sources of information.

Fewer Americans seek out new information about national issues. When asked how often they sought new information when forming an opinion on national issues, 27 percent say they never or rarely look for more information, 41 percent report they do sometimes, and 31 percent say they do often or very often.

**Americans tend to consult new sources of information, especially when researching a major purchase and occasionally for national issues.**

*Questions: Now think about all major product purchases you might make. In general, when considering a major product purchase, how often do you seek out new sources of information in addition to those that you use on a regular basis?*

*Now think about any national issue facing the United States today. It can include domestic or foreign policy issues. When considering any national issue, how often do you seek out new sources of information in addition to those that you use on a regular basis?*



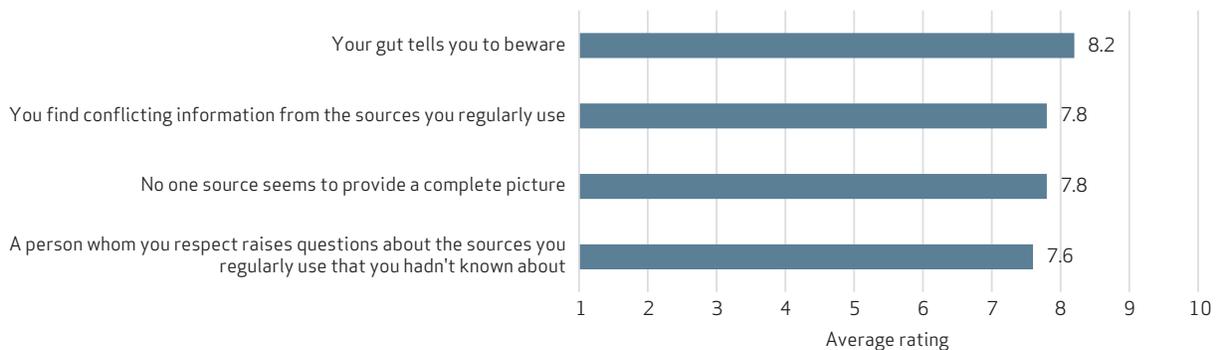
**NO MATTER THE TYPE OF DECISION, AMERICANS ARE MOST LIKELY TO SEEK OUT ADDITIONAL INFORMATION WHEN THEIR GUT TELLS THEM TO BEWARE.**

Respondents were asked how likely they would be to seek out additional information in a variety of scenarios on a 10-point scale where 1 is not very likely and 10 is quite likely. Overall, most Americans rank themselves high on the scale, indicating they would be more likely than not to pursue additional information sources in each of these

scenarios. With an average rating of 8.2, Americans are most likely to trust their gut when deciding whether to seek out additional information for a major purchase. Forty-five percent placed themselves at a 10 on the scale, meaning they are quite likely to seek out additional information when their gut tells them to beware.<sup>2</sup>

**Americans tend to trust their gut instinct when evaluating product information sources.**

*Question: On a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is not very likely and 10 is quite likely, when making a major purchase, how likely are you to seek out additional information when...?*



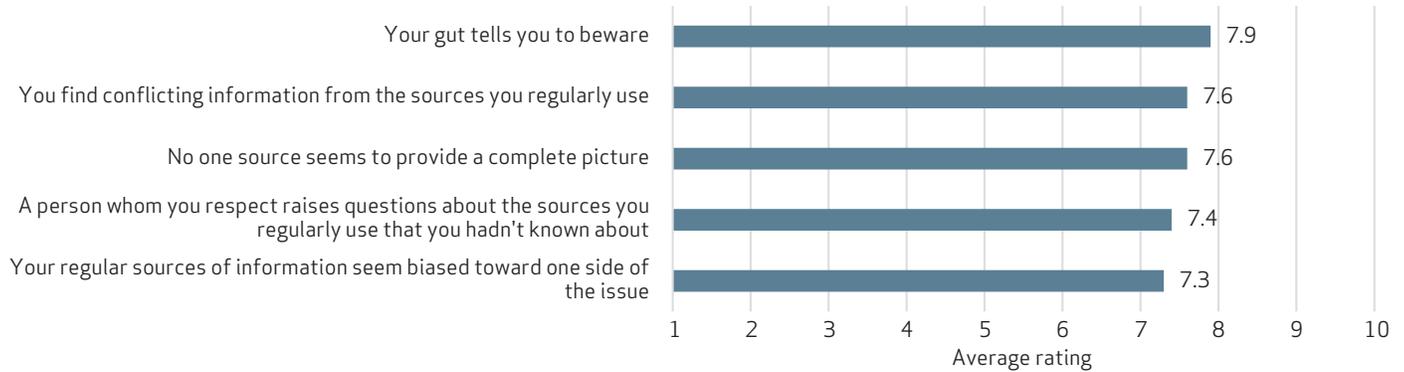
<sup>2</sup> A full distribution of responses for each series is available in the topline. NEED LINK!

Similarly, with an average rating of 7.9 on the 10-point scale, the highest-ranked factor in determining whether people seek out additional information for policy decisions is also when their gut tells them to beware. Thirty-eight percent

put themselves at a 10 on the scale, noting that it is quite likely they will seek out additional information on national issues based on their gut instinct.

### Many Americans are likely to seek out additional information on national issues when their gut tells them to beware.

*Question: On a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is not very likely and 10 is quite likely, when thinking about any national issue, how likely are you to seek out additional information when...?*



### WHEN AMERICANS ENCOUNTER CONFLICTING INFORMATION, THEY MOST OFTEN LOOK FOR MORE INFORMATION TO RECONCILE THE CONFLICT, BUT ALSO FREQUENTLY RELY ON INSTINCTS.

With all the information available to Americans, there are times when different sources of information conflict with each other. Respondents were asked on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is not very often and 10 is quite often, how often they take certain actions when confronted with conflicting information while making a major purchase or deciding on a policy issue. For many, in both domains, the first instinct is to look for additional information.

When encountering conflicting information while making a product decision, Americans most often search for more information, with an average ranking of 8.3 on the 10-point scale. Fully 4 in 10 Americans ranked themselves as a 10 on the scale, meaning they seek out additional information quite often in reaction to finding conflicting data.

When encountering conflicting information during a product decision, Americans also tend to go with the information that feels right (average of 7.3) rather than going with the majority opinion (average of 6.2) or going with what seems easiest or most convenient. Few leave these decisions up to chance, with an average rating of 2.5 and nearly 60 percent putting themselves at the lowest point of a 1 on the scale,

saying they do not make a random choice very often when making such a decision.

Similarly, Americans are proactive when faced with conflicting information on national issues. Here, too, the highest rated response to conflicting information on national issues is searching for more information, with an average rating of 7.9. Thirty-five percent of people place themselves at the highest point of a 10 on the scale, meaning they quite often search for more information when facing conflicting information.

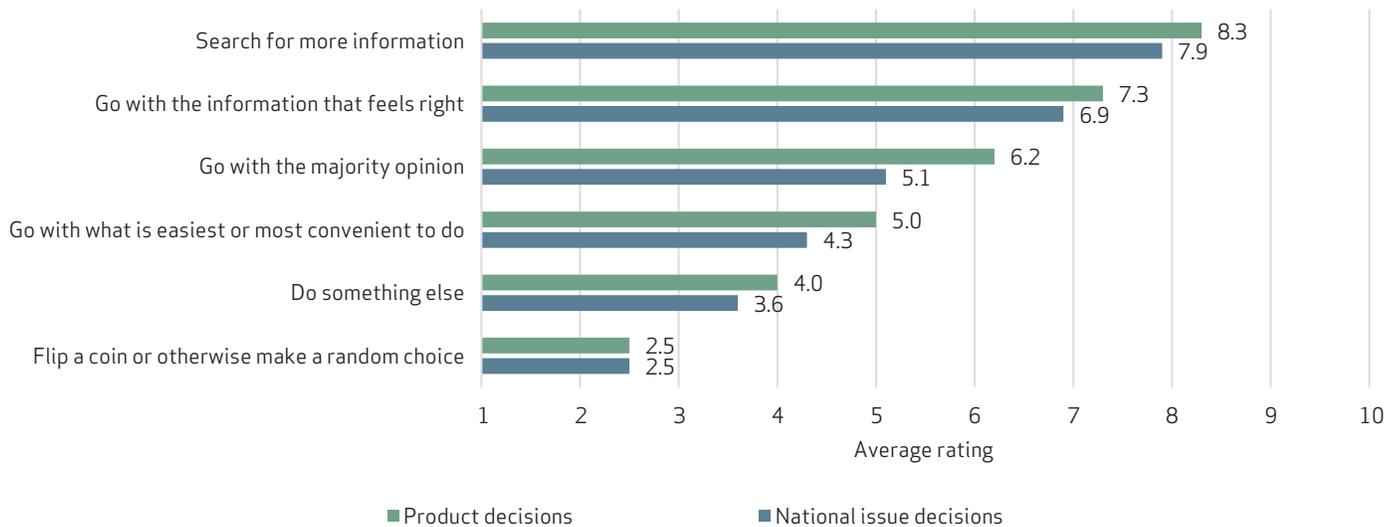
The other most highly rated responses to dealing with conflicting information on national issues are going with the information that feels right (average of 6.9) and going with the majority opinion (average of 5.1).

The lowest-rated approach to handling conflicting information is to flip a coin or make a random choice (average of 2.5). Fifty-nine percent of people place themselves at the lowest point of a 1 on the scale for that option, meaning they would rarely resort to a coin toss when confronted with conflicting information on national issues.

### Americans are most likely to search for more information when facing conflicting information on product information or national issues.

*Questions: Sometimes different sources of information conflict with each other. On a scale of 1 to 10 where 1=not very often and 10=quite often, when making a major purchase, how often do you do each of the following if you find that sources of information do not agree?*

*Sometimes different sources of information conflict with each other. On a scale of 1 to 10 where 1=not very often and 10=quite often, when thinking about national issues in general, how often do you do each of the following if you find that sources of information do not agree?*



## AMERICANS GENERALLY CHARACTERIZE THEMSELVES AS INFORMED DECISION-MAKERS.

The public takes slightly different approaches to making decisions depending on the topic. Respondents were given statements about two decision-making approaches for a series of issues and asked where their view fell based on a scale where 1 is like person A and 10 is like person B.

For decisions about major consumer products and important public policy issues, respondents were asked if they were more likely to rely on gut feelings (person A) or more likely to collect as much information and expert opinion as possible (person B). Most Americans report they are likely to collect additional information for both purchases and policy decisions. However, slightly more people rate themselves like the person who collects additional information for major consumer purchases (66 percent rank themselves as an 8, 9, or 10) than the person who does the same for important policy issues (61 percent rank themselves as an 8, 9, or 10).

When it comes to both new medical treatments and climate change, the public reports similar trust in expert opinion. Americans are as likely to say that we should wait until doctors agree that a new medical treatment is effective before using it as they are to say that we should take the actions scientists recommend when it comes to climate change. In particular, 44 percent of Americans say they are like the person who trusts the experts (ranking themselves as an 8, 9, or 10) for new medical treatments, and 45 percent say they are like the person who trusts the climate change experts.

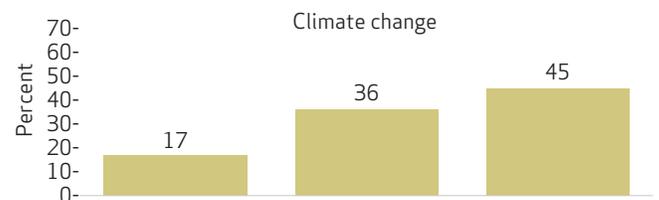
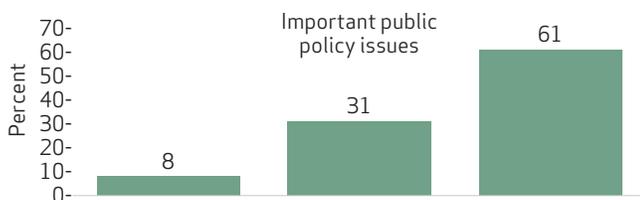
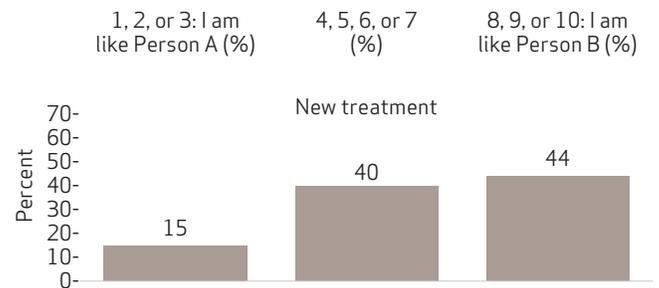
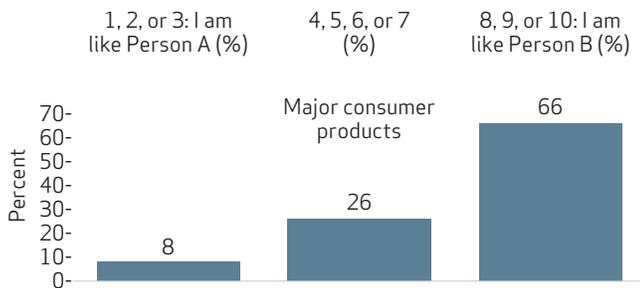
**Many Americans are likely to collect as much information as possible about both major consumer products and important public policy issues.**

*Questions: Two people are discussing how they make decisions about buying major consumer products. Person A relies on gut feelings rather than collecting a lot of information. Person B collects as much information and expert opinion as possible. Which is closer to the way you make decisions about buying a major product?*

*Two patients are discussing a new treatment for a serious illness that many people say has been very effective, but most doctors say its effectiveness has not been proven. Patient A says we should go ahead and use it. Patient B says that we should wait until doctors agree that it is effective. Which view is closer to the way you make these decisions?*

*Two people are discussing how they make decisions about important public policy issues, for example, about the health care reforms that were passed by Congress in 2010 or sending troops to the Middle East. Person A relies on gut feelings rather than collecting a lot of information. Person B collects as much information and expert opinion as possible. Which view is closer to the way you make decisions about important public policy issues?*

*Two people are discussing climate change. Person A says this is a matter for science and we should take the actions that scientists recommend. Person B says that experts always disagree and that we should pay more attention to what seems right from our own experience than to what scientists say. Which view is closer to the way you think about climate change? [REVERSE CODED]*



## AMERICANS WHO PLACE A HIGHER VALUE ON SOURCE CREDIBILITY, DATA, AND EXPERTISE HOLD DIFFERENT POLICY ATTITUDES.

How Americans view source credibility and expertise about national issue information has important implications for their policy attitudes. Even controlling for a person’s political affiliation and other demographic factors, those Americans who place a higher value on sources that refer to experts, scientific evidence, government data, or other credible sources, as well as those who seek out additional information when sources seem to lack credibility, hold more supportive policy preferences on issues such as

legalization of same-sex marriage, belief in global warming, and support for the ACA.

Americans who say it’s important<sup>3</sup> that national issue information sources refer to experts are more likely than those who don’t to believe global warming is happening (73 percent vs. 52 percent) and to strongly or somewhat support the 2010 health care reform (38 percent vs. 24 percent).

<sup>3</sup> Those respondents who rate each information characteristic an 8, 9, or 10 on the 10-point scale are coded as considering the characteristic important. Those who rate the information characteristic a 1, 2, or 3 on the 10-point scale are coded as considering the characteristic less important.

Those who value information sources on national issues referring to scientific evidence are about twice as likely as those who don't to say marriage should be legal for same-sex couples (61 percent vs. 36 percent) and to strongly or somewhat support the 2010 health care reform (42 percent vs. 24 percent).

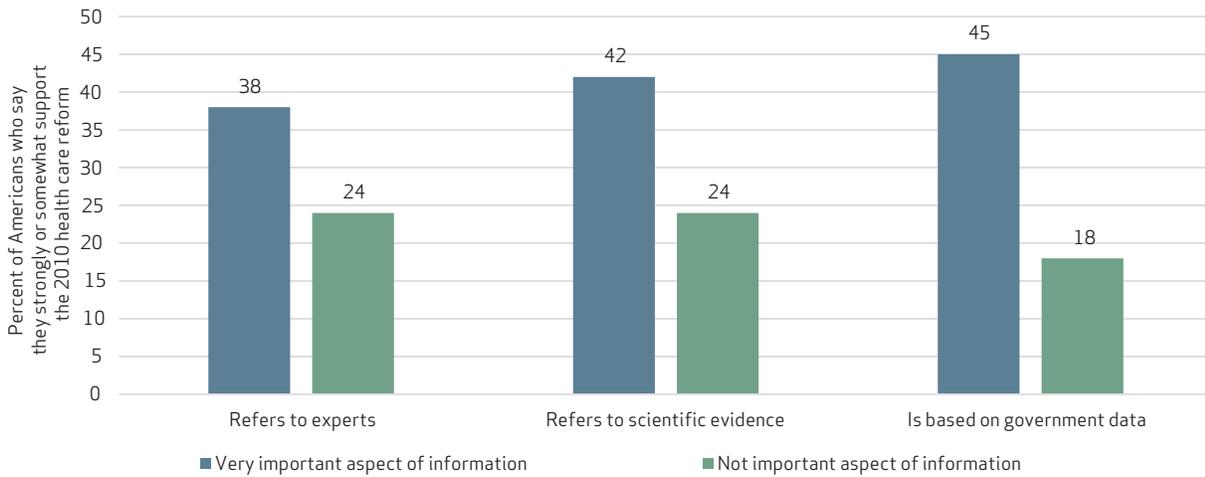
Sixty-four percent of those who value information on national issues that comes from a credible source also say they favor legislation that would provide a path to

citizenship for immigrants living in the United States illegally, compared with 48 percent of those who say credible sources are not important.

Those who value sources of information on national issues based on government data are more likely than those who say this is not important to believe that global warming is happening (72 percent vs. 58 percent) and to strongly or somewhat support the 2010 health care reform (45 percent vs. 18 percent).

**Americans are more supportive of the ACA when they also place a higher value on experts, data, and evidence.**

*Question: In general, do you support, oppose, or neither support nor oppose the health care reforms that were passed by Congress in March of 2010?*



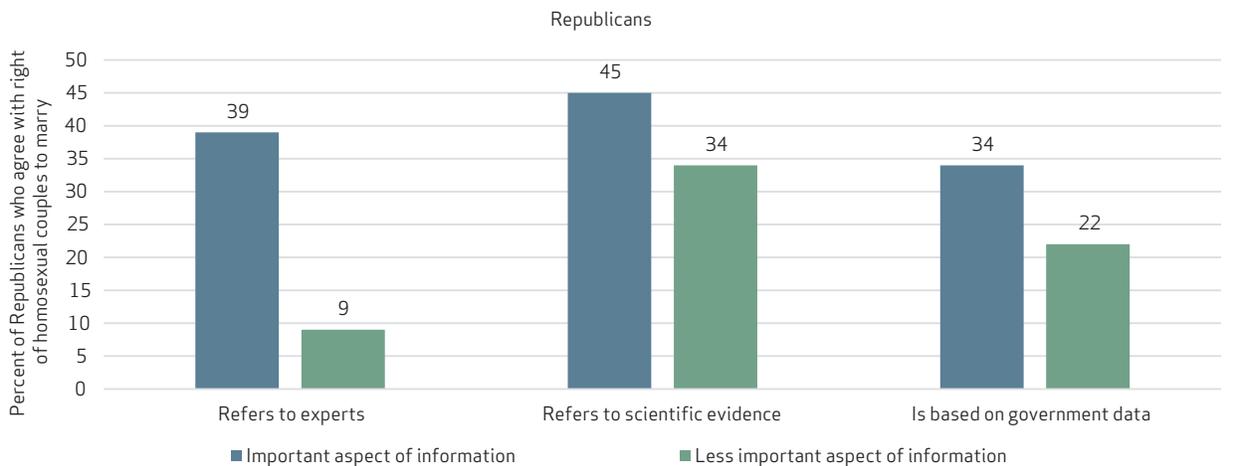
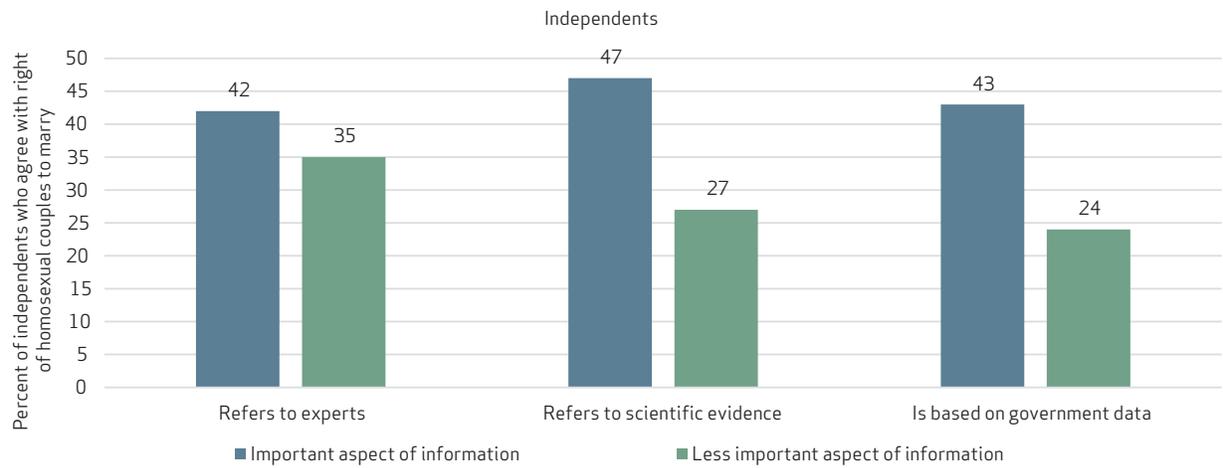
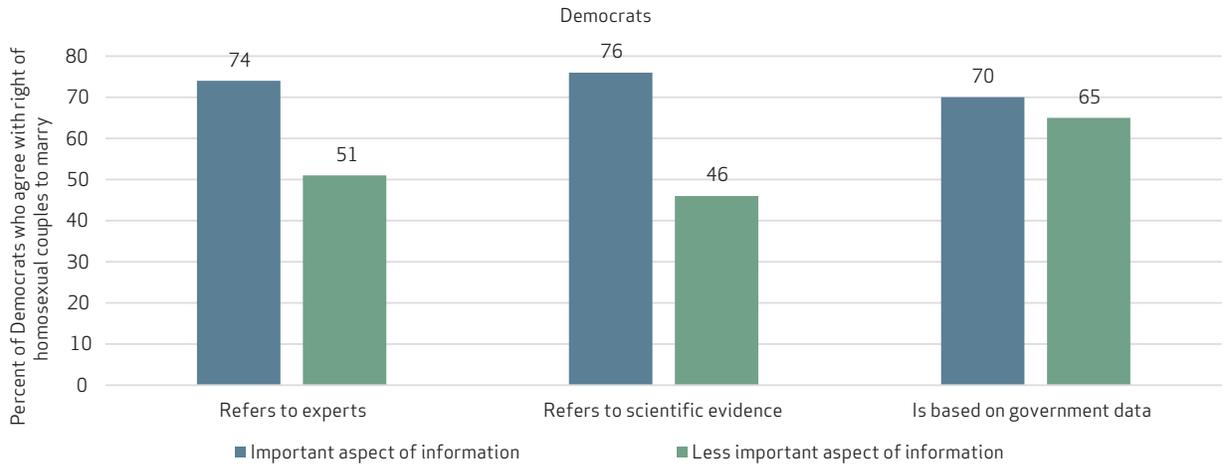
This effect occurs across party lines as well. While Democrats consistently hold more supportive attitudes than Republicans on these issues, those partisans who place a higher value on expertise, scientific evidence, and government data are more supportive of these policy issues than their fellow party members who consider those information characteristics as less important.

For example, 74 percent of Democrats who place a high importance on information sources that refer to scientific evidence support legalizing gay marriage, compared to 51 percent of Democrats who do not consider evidence an important characteristic of information sources.

The effect is the same for Republicans. Thirty-nine percent of Republicans who place a high importance on information sources that refer to scientific evidence support legalizing gay marriage, compared to 9 percent of Republicans who do not consider evidence an important characteristic of information sources.

Across party lines, those who consider experts, evidence, and government data important characteristics of information sources are more likely to support several policies.

Question: Do you agree or disagree? Homosexual couples should have the right to marry one another.



## DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GENERATIONS EMERGE IN THEIR INFORMATION GATHERING HABITS.

Legacy media sources are more widely used by older generations to get information. For example, 81 percent of those age 60 and older and 67 percent of those age 45-59 say they often get information to use in their daily lives from television, significantly more than those age 18-29 (43 percent) and age 30-44 (52 percent). In addition, just 30 percent of those age 18-29 and 31 percent of those age 30-44 say they often get information from newspapers, compared with 44 percent of those age 45-59 and 54 percent of those age 60 and older.

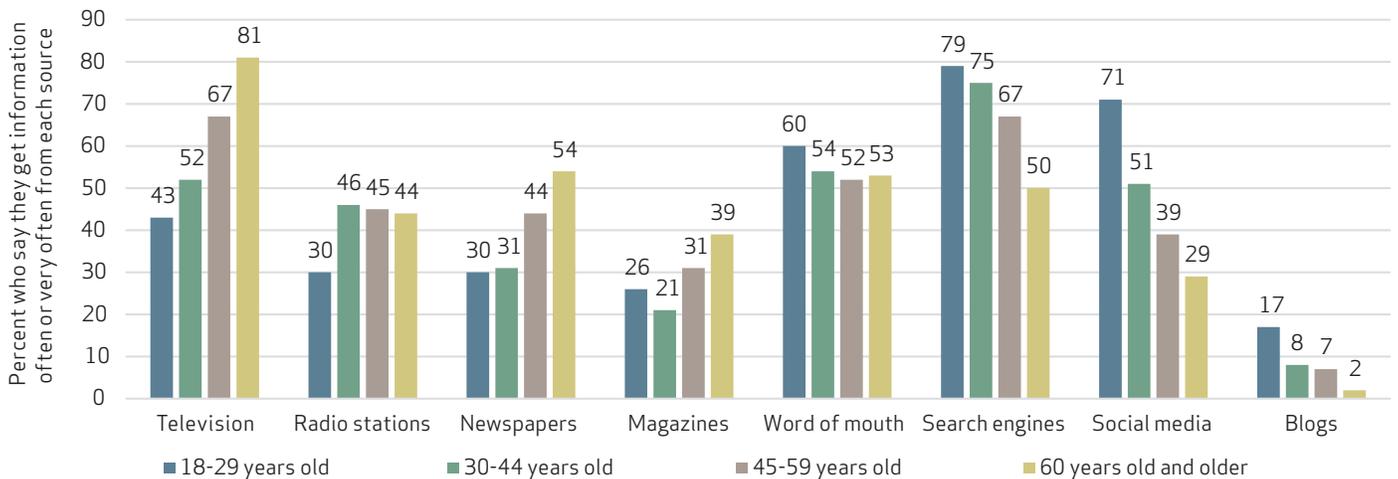
Perhaps expectedly, younger Americans are more likely than their older counterparts to say they get information for their daily lives from newer forms of media, including search

engines, social media, and blogs. The largest difference in information usage by age comes from social media, where 71 percent of adults age 18-29 and 51 percent of adults age 30-44 say they use social media for information very often or often, compared with 39 percent of those age 45-59 and just 29 percent of those age 60 and older.

The only information source without differences across generations is that of word of mouth. Americans of all ages get information for their daily lives from their friends and family at similar rates.

Older and younger Americans use different sources of information in their day-to-day lives.

Question: How often do you get information for your daily life from...?



Younger cohorts also tend to say the internet has made them better informed than they were five years ago on several topics. For example, 69 percent of Americans age 18-29 say they are better informed than they were five years ago on the topic of popular culture, compared with 45 percent of those age 60 years and older.

Americans across age cohorts do not differ significantly when it comes to trusting the information they get from the various information sources they were asked about.

Nuanced differences appear in the information-gathering habits of older and younger Americans when it comes to product purchasing. Nearly half of Americans age 60 and older say it's quite likely that they will seek out additional information when making a major purchase when their regularly used sources produce conflicting information, compared with 33 percent of those age 18-29, 26 percent of those age 30-44, and 35 percent of those age 45-59. Over half of older generations say they are quite likely to seek out additional information when their gut tells them to beware (56 percent of those age 45-59 and 55 percent of those age

60 and older vs. 36 percent of those age 18-29 years old and 33 percent of those age 30-44 years old). When confronted with conflicting information on products, older Americans are less likely than younger Americans to resort to making a random choice. Seventy percent of those age 60 and older and 65 percent of those age 45-59 report being unlikely to do this, compared to 53 percent of those age 30-44 and 46 percent of those age 18-29.

Compared with the major purchasing decisions Americans make, there are fewer differences between generations when it comes to policy opinion formation. When faced

with conflicting information on national issues, Americans age 60 and older are more likely than those age 18-29 and those age 30-44 to say they quite often search for more information (41 percent vs. 26 percent and 23 percent). And again, older Americans are less likely than younger Americans to resort to making a random choice in the face of conflicting information. Seventy-one percent of those age 60 and older and 68 percent of those age 45-59 are unlikely to make a random choice, compared to 52 percent of those age 30-44 and 45 percent of those age 18-29.

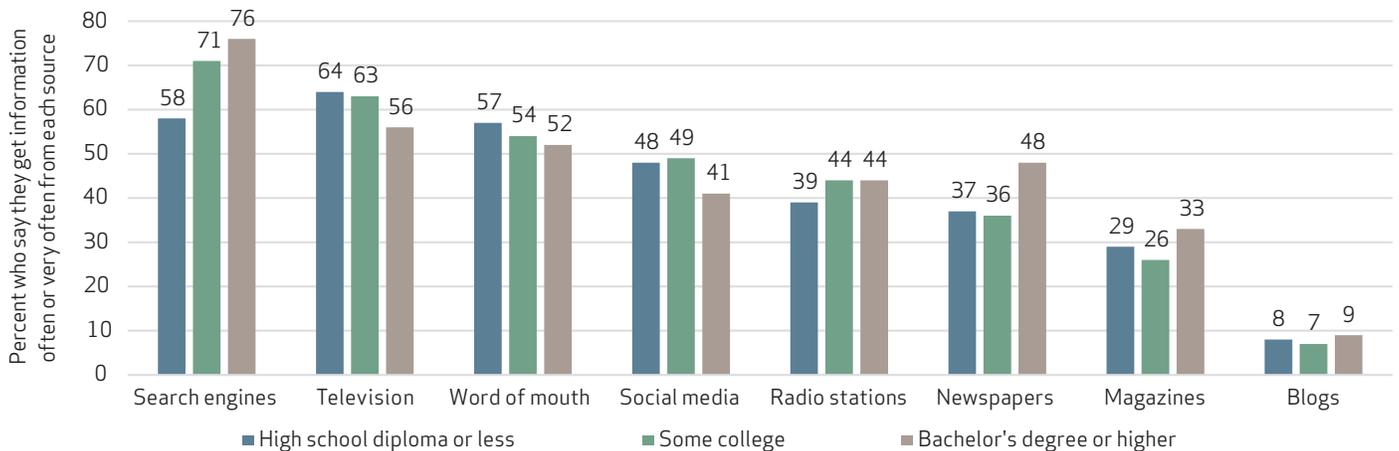
## EDUCATION PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN INFORMATION-GATHERING HABITS.

Overall, educational attainment does not significantly impact the sources Americans consult to obtain the information they use in their daily lives, with two notable exceptions: newspapers and search engines. Nearly half of those with a bachelor's degree or higher say they often get information from newspapers, compared with 37 percent

of those with a high school degree or less and 36 percent of those with some college. Those with a high school degree or less (58 percent) are also less likely to say they use search engines than those who attended some college (71 percent) and those with a bachelor's degree or higher (76 percent).

Americans with bachelor's degrees or higher are more likely to use search engines and newspapers.

Question: How often do you get information for your daily life from...?



Americans who did not graduate from high school are least likely to say it is easier to get information today as compared to five years ago. Only 64 percent of non-high school graduates say it is somewhat or much easier to get information today compared to 84 percent of high school

graduates, 81 percent of those with some college, and 84 percent of those with bachelor's degrees or higher.

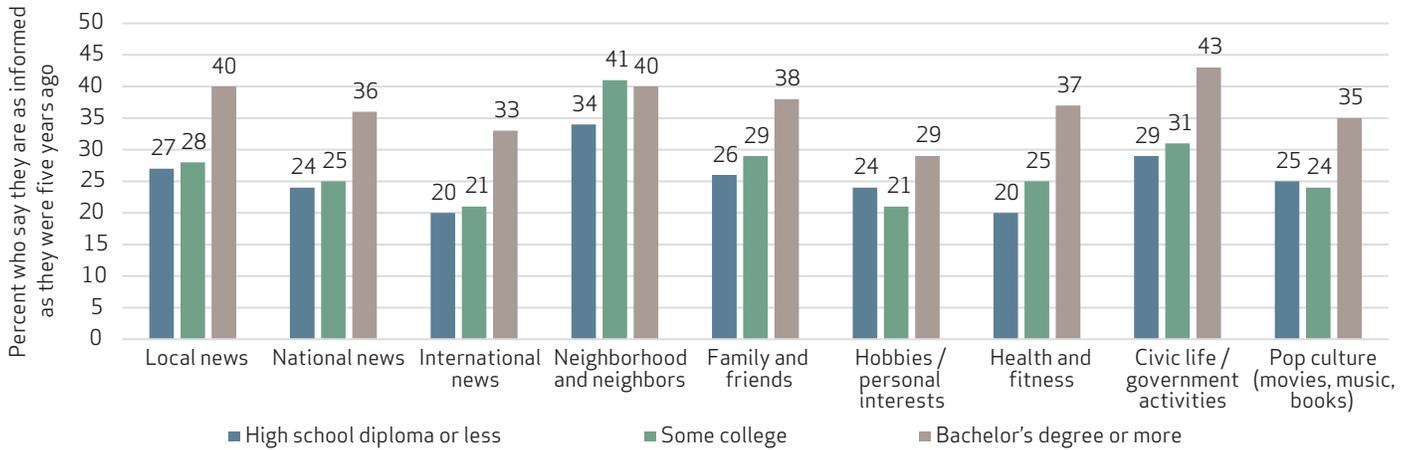
When asked how the internet has impacted their level of information on a variety of topics compared to five years ago, two trends emerge along educational backgrounds.

First, those with bachelor's degrees or higher are more likely to say they are just as informed as they were five years ago on most topics. This indicates that college-educated

Americans have likely been using the internet to obtain a variety of information for more than five years, but those with lower educational levels have not.

**Americans with bachelor's degrees or more are generally more likely to feel as informed as they were five years ago than those with lower levels of education.**

*Question: Now think about all the ways the internet connects you to information. Compared to five years ago, would you say that you are better informed, not as well informed, or about the same as five years ago on the following topics?*

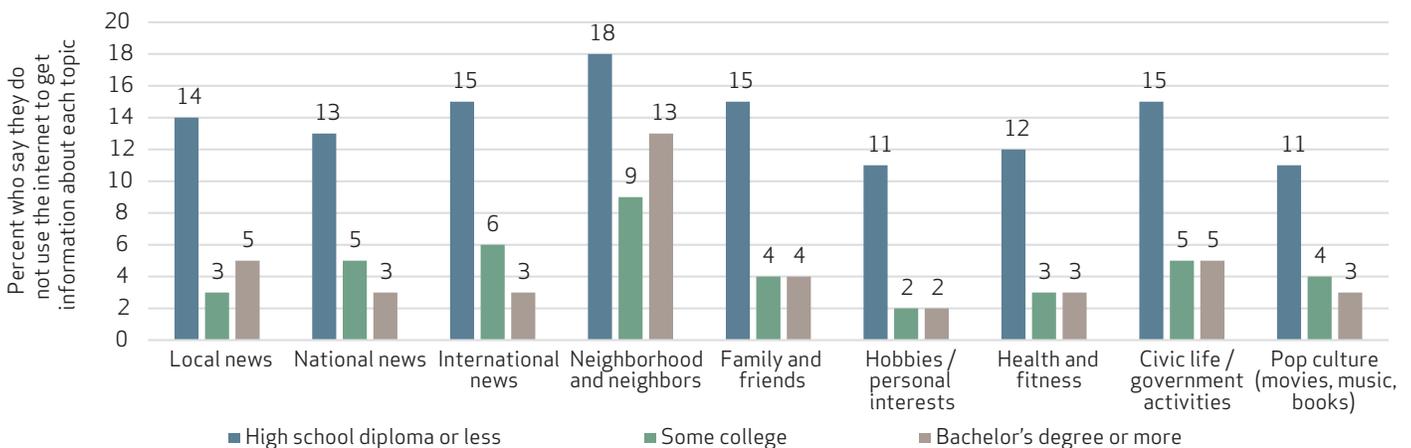


However, this does not translate into those with lower levels of education now feeling more informed than they previously were. Instead, a second trend is found among those with a high school diploma or less. This group is most likely to say they do not use the internet at all to obtain

information on these topics, indicating that while there is no difference in how much time lower- and higher-educated Americans spend on the internet, there are stark differences in how they spend their time online.

**Americans with a high school diploma or less are more likely to say they do not use the internet for all types of information gathering they were asked about.**

*Question: Now think about all the ways the internet connects you to information. Compared to five years ago, would you say that you are better informed, not as well informed, or about the same as five years ago on the following topics?*



Americans with higher levels of education are more likely to seek out new sources of information when making a major purchase than those with lower education levels. About 6 in 10 respondents with some college education or more say they search for additional information from new sources often or very often when making a major purchase, compared to just 46 percent of those with a high school diploma and 35 percent of those who did not graduate high school.

## THERE ARE FEWER DIFFERENCES BY PARTY IDENTIFICATION, RACE AND ETHNICITY, AND GENDER.

Independents differ a bit in their information-seeking habits on policy issues compared to Democrats and Republicans. Partisans have very similar habits in terms of overall behavior no matter the party; however, this study did not ask about specific news outlets.<sup>4</sup> On policy issues, Republicans (54 percent) and Democrats (47 percent) are more likely than independents (28 percent) to say they use information from political candidates to form their opinions. Republicans are more likely than independents to say they use information from government agencies (48 percent vs. 31 percent) and political leaders (58 percent vs. 37 percent). Democrats do not differ significantly from either Republicans or independents in their use of information from government agencies (47 percent) or political leaders (53 percent).

Americans don't differ across parties when it comes to the factors they value when evaluating policy sources, nor do they have different behaviors when sources conflict.

Blacks and Hispanics feel better informed than they did five years ago on several issues thanks to all the ways the internet connects us to information. Blacks and Hispanics are more likely than whites to say they are better informed about their neighborhood and their neighbors than they were five years ago (48 percent and 47 percent vs. 31 percent, respectively). Blacks are also more likely than whites to say they are better informed about civic life and government activities in their community (62 percent vs.

One possible consequence of those with higher education levels seeking out more sources of information is that they also are more likely to say they often feel overwhelmed by the amount of information that comes to them. Compared to high school graduates, nearly twice as many people with some college or a bachelor's degree or more feel overwhelmed (19 percent vs. 10 percent, respectively).

45 percent) and popular culture (67 percent vs. 55 percent). And Hispanics are more likely than whites to say they are better informed about their family or friends than they were five years ago (69 percent vs. 51 percent).

Men and women place slightly different levels of importance on sources that were recommended by someone credible and sources that seem knowledgeable when making a major purchase. Roughly 1 in 4 women say it's very important that information sources seem knowledgeable (41 percent) and that the source was recommended by someone credible (37 percent), compared with 27 percent of men who agree on each. Women are also more likely than men to say it would be quite likely that they would seek out additional information when their gut tells them to beware (50 percent vs. 40 percent). And when information conflicts, women are more likely than men to say they quite often go with the information that feels right (26 percent vs. 19 percent).

When it comes to thinking about national issues, women are more likely than men to say it's very important that information sources are recommended by someone credible (28 percent vs. 20 percent), are easy to use (30 percent vs. 19 percent), and tell when they were last updated (41 percent vs. 31 percent). And 42 percent of women say they would be quite likely to seek out additional sources when their gut tells them to beware, compared with 33 percent of men. When information on national issues conflicts, women are more likely than men to say they quite often go with the

<sup>4</sup> In a 2014 study, Pew Research Center found that ideological liberals and ideological conservatives turn to different outlets for political news. Conservatives tend to seek out and trust a single source, Fox News, while liberals tend to seek out and trust a variety of sources, including CNN, MSNBC, NPR, and *The New York Times*. (Pew Research Center, October 2014, "Political Polarization and Media Habits.")

information that feels right (21 percent vs. 14 percent), but they are less likely to resort to a random choice (64 percent of women unlikely to do so vs. 54 percent of men).

Men and women do not differ in trusting the information they get from the various information sources they were asked about.

## ABOUT THE STUDY

### Survey Methodology

This survey was conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago as part of NORC's 75th Anniversary commemoration. Data were collected using AmeriSpeak®, which is a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. During the initial recruitment phase of the panel, randomly selected U.S. households were sampled with a known, non-zero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame and then contacted by U.S. mail, email, telephone, and field interviewers (face-to-face).

Interviews for this survey were conducted between January 14 and January 31, 2016, with adults age 18 and over representing the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Panel members were randomly drawn from AmeriSpeak®, and 1,007 completed the survey—793 via the web and 214 via telephone. The final stage completion rate is 37.3 percent, the weighted household panel response rate is 36.9 percent, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 97.7 percent, for a cumulative response rate of 13.5 percent. The overall margin of sampling error is +/-3.7

percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect. The margin of sampling error may be higher for subgroups.

Once the sample has been selected and fielded, and all the study data have been collected and made final, a poststratification process is used to adjust for any survey nonresponse as well as any non-coverage or under- and oversampling resulting from the study-specific sample design. Poststratification variables included age, gender, census division, race/ethnicity, and household phone status. The weighted data, which reflect the U.S. population of adults age 18 and over, were used for all analyses. All differences reported between subgroups of the U.S. population are at the 95 percent level of statistical significance, meaning that there is only a 5 percent (or lower) probability that the observed differences could be attributed to chance variation in sampling.

A comprehensive listing of the questions, complete with tabulations of top-level results for each question, is available on The NORC website: [www.norc.org](http://www.norc.org).

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