Manufacturing Concern: The Political Capital of Issues

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Abstract: This study explores the worries of our current college generation and how those concerns may relate to ideology and media consumption habits. Issues have been systematically instrumentalized by political actors and journalists in order to extract political capital from them. In this study, we focus on the contemporary political and social issues that most concern our current student generation. Based on the answers of our participants, students in the Connecticut public university system, we establish a hierarchy of worries, from climate change to systemic racism to immigration. The outcomes produce a clear picture of how the priorities of our target population are distributed. In the second phase of the study, we try to find correlations between the perceived urgency of the issues and the ideological background of the participants. Finally, we explore how our students are using legacy and new media to search for information about economy or politics at the national and international levels. In this regard, the penetration of social media seems to be unstoppable. Our students are turning away from newspapers, radio, and TV. Social networks are becoming their most common source of information. On those platforms, they seem to find instrumental information that feeds worries associated with political and ideological causes.

Keywords: Issue Relevance, Media Consumption, Instrumental Reporting, Social Media, Agenda Setting, Social Concerns

Introduction

Since McCombs and Shaw (1972) explained the agenda setting effect of mass media, a plethora of studies have been documenting how mass media might raise public opinion awareness toward certain issues. The original theory has reached a third level of complexity founded on network dynamics (Guo and McCombs 2011). Issues appear frequently in connection with other issues. Such connections build narrative frameworks that favor a particular interpretation of the events. Agenda setting studies have been proving for decades the connection between media coverage and perceived urgency of the issues.

The power of media to determine the worries of the populations can be traced back to Walter Lippmann, who, in his classic *Public Opinion*, anticipated many of the theories that have been successively dominating the academic inquiry into mass media effects. Lippmann (1922) stated that the main function of the media is to bring us in contact with the unseen world, with those aspects of reality we cannot experience firsthand. At the end of the day, what is not present in media simply does not exist.

Lippmann also crafted the concept of "manufacturing consent," which has been eagerly adopted by many researchers in the field of propaganda. Bernays (1955) changed it slightly to "Engineering of Consent," and Herman and Chomsky (1988) adopted it for their legendary "Manufacturing of Consent." The idea of "manufacturing consent" refers to an information industry that works with the main goal of serving and consolidating any type of power. The industry has, in the course of history, adopted different names, such as propaganda or public relations. The industry of persuasion, one of the most powerful in the US, is especially active in the struggle for political power (Farwell 2013; Taibbi 2021). Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann describes the main struggle of this industry as an articulation function (Noelle-Neumann 2001). Mass media might provide us not only with the issues we have to worry about but also with the right perspective from which to view those issues and the semantic means, the words we must use to define and digest them. The final goal of the persuasion industry is, according to Noelle-Neumann, to channel the legitimacy that flows from public opinion to gain or maintain political or economic power.

The rise of mass communication in the twentieth century always went hand in hand with the concern about the actual effects of mass media on the individual, the society and the political process. After a period of time where the powerful effects were questioned with theories like "selective exposure" or "uses and gratifications," the century ended with theoretical approaches that emphasized the power of mass media to shape how we perceive the world and react upon it.

Digital communication technologies have triggered what is portrayed in mainstream media as an unprecedented information crisis. The terms "fake news," "disinformation," or "misinformation" are frequently used to denounce how masses may be easily deceived by new digital portals that deliver information with no regard for journalistic standards or with hidden political or ideological agendas. All of a sudden, the traditional media present themselves as the solution to save democracy from the dangers of the information crisis that can wipe out our democratic system. Sloterdijk (2023) finds it ironical that precisely those media giants that have had the monopoly of disinformation for decades do portray themselves now as the guardians of truth.

Academic terminals and consolidated media spread the alarm that the chaotic situation in the media landscape is one of the most pressing threats to democracy. Without reliable information, this seems to be the consensus: democracy is not possible. The concern is justified. German scholar Donsbach (1991) convincingly demonstrated that negative news—and most of the fake news has a strong and explicit negative bias—is effective in bypassing the area of protection defined by Festinger (1957) in his theory of cognitive dissonance—and developed by a good number of communication scholars around the selective exposure theory (Bryant and Davies 2008). Media consumers tend to expose themselves to those contents that do not contradict their previous values and beliefs. This reluctance to leave the ideological area of comfort is the reason why media outlets normally work as echo chambers.

Negative news can overpass this cognitive filter. The so-called utility model explains why this happens. Negative news seems to have a higher utility value and is thus, more likely to be consumed and to disrupt selective exposure than positive or neutral news. This trend has also been observed in social networks dynamics of news sharing, where confirmatory biases tend to be stronger than in news consuming (Johnson et al. 2020). The actual impact of "fake news" has not been clearly verified. Recent studies at the Stanford University (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017) were unable to find any significant impact of fake news to bypass the protection of cognitive dissonance.

To establish the debate in terms of fake news versus truth may, in the first place, be the wrong approach. We should go back to Walter Lippmann, who established, maybe for the first time, the epistemological difference between news and truth. According to Lippmann, these two concepts refer to completely different categories. News is just a piece of information that signalizes an event, while the function of truth is "to bring to the light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and make a picture of reality on which men can act" (Lippmann 1922, 358). Lippmann uses the analogy of the spotlight. News casts light—on occasion, a strong light—on events considered newsworthy. Truth cannot be apprehended without a comprehensive analysis of all the circumstances, the nuances and shades of the characters, and the context's intricacy. This is what remains in the darkness around the spotlight.

Furthermore, news happens to be the product media outlets sell, and, thus, it possesses news value, something that is inherently opposed to the nature of truth. There is no "truth value." The obvious disconnection of truth and news became evident when we took into the equation what Boorstin (1961) called pseudo-events, events created exclusively to be staged in and disseminated through mass media outlets.

This brief survey on the field of mass communication theory is necessary to conceptually locate the present project. Mass media effect research has been swinging from the perception to the persuasion paradigm. Our study should be positioned between both research approaches. It starts from the premise that there are more subtle and effective ways to influence audiences than just distributing misinformation. Issues are instrumentally used to extract political capital from them. The German scholar Hans-Matthias Kepplinger introduced the concept of the instrumental publishing of news (Kepplinger 1992). This concept comes close to what Herman and Chomsky (1988) called "selective reporting." The main thesis behind Kepplinger's theory is that issues have an ideological valency. Editorial decisions to make news out of certain events—or to place news in relevant space/time of their print or audiovisual outlets, might yield political benefits.

Based on this premise, we initiated our exploratory study. We did not establish any hypothesis. We surveyed the issues that our participants found a more urgent need for the government to address and how this priority of concerns may correlate with their ideological background. The media consumption habits of our participants, as well as their self-assessed level of information about the same issues were also brought into the equation. The goal was

to ascertain whether these factors may correlate with the level of concern or the perceived urgency of the issues.

Methodology

Our target population consisted of college students enrolled in the Connecticut public system of higher education. This system includes the University of Connecticut, the four state universities (Central, Western, Eastern, and Southern Connecticut State University), and the twelve community colleges. We focused on students enrolled in public universities for convenience reasons. The Connecticut Labor Department agreed to act as a gatekeeper in this project and helped us recruit students who appear as "active student workers" in its database.

Participants

Our sample consists of 258 students recruited through an email action. We sent an invitation to participate in the survey to all active student workers. The first batch of answers showed an unbalance in terms of ethnicity. Latinos and African Americans were clearly underrepresented in the sample. This is a problem experienced in most research projects with this student population. When participation in the study is voluntary, if we use email actions, as in this case, or the SONA system, minorities seem to be more reluctant to participate. This may be another aspect of the so-called achievement gap. Motivated students and good performers, regardless of their ethnicity, are systematically overrepresented in our samples. The fact that African Americans and Latino minorities score lower in GPA, school attitude, and educational values may explain this behavioral pattern (Moní et al. 2018).

Materials

The survey explored the ideological predisposition of the participants, their media consumption habits, and their perceptions of a host of common issues covered by mainstream media, such as climate change, Islamic or domestic terrorism, vaccine mandates, systemic racism, police brutality, or the war in Ukraine. The choice of topics did not follow a systematic content analysis of the issue relevance in mainstream or new media. We used the topics selected for the projects in our Public Opinion Research Methods course in the three semesters previous to the start of this project.

With regard to ideology, we asked them to identify their political affiliation as democrats, republicans, independents, or none of them. Furthermore, they had to state their ideological standpoint. To this end, the study used a 10-point semantic differential scale to assess whether they saw themselves as more liberal or conservative (1 being hard core liberal/left wing and 10 hard core conservative/right wing).

A Likert-like frequency scale was used to explore the media consumption habits of the participants. They were asked to state how often they used a series of channels and platforms when looking for information about current issues, such as national newspapers, regional

newspapers, national TV news, political blogs, online video platforms (YouTube), podcasts, talk radio, and social media. The penetration of social media in the life of our students' population had been verified in previous studies (del Ama et al. 2021). Following this format, the questionnaire included scales to measure both time and frequency of social media usage as well.

Since it was almost impossible to evaluate the actual knowledge the students had about the different issues (climate change, Islamic terrorism, gender violence, gender income gap, educational gap, systemic racism, domestic terrorism, immigration, firearm regulations, police brutality, vaccines mandates, minimum wage, and the war in Ukraine), the survey included a question asking them to self-assess their level of knowledge on every single issue. The 10-point differential scale went from 1 (not having any information at all) to 10 (being perfectly well informed).

The perceived seriousness of the selected issues was also measured on a 10-point semantic differential scale. The students had to assess how urgently they thought the government should address every one of the given issues (1 being not urgent at all and 10 extremely urgent).

Ideological Landscape

The ideological distribution of our sample cannot be considered surprising or unexpected. The majority of the students who participated in the survey, 38.8 percent, identify themselves as democrat. Only 10.1 percent did it as republican. An important number, 27.5 percent, consider themselves to be independent, and also a noteworthy 23.6 percent do not think any of those categories represents them.
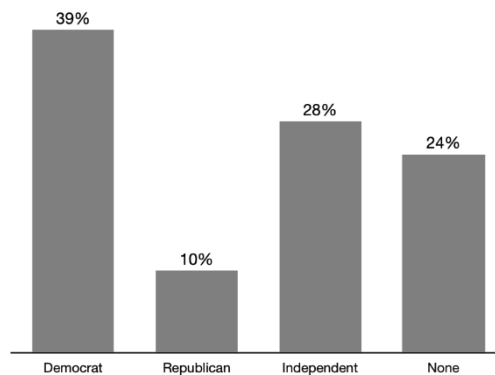

Figure 1: Party Affiliation

When asked about their ideological background using the semantic differential scale (going from 1—hardcore liberal—to 10—hardcore conservative), the outcomes were consistent with the party affiliation. For most of our students, the Democratic Party represents political positions that are considered more liberal, while the concept of conservatism is more commonly associated with the Republican Party. The graph shows how the distribution of answers is clearly skewed toward the liberal side of the scale. Over 40

percent of the students placed themselves in the three first options of the scale, while only 5 percent chose the last three options on the conservative extreme.
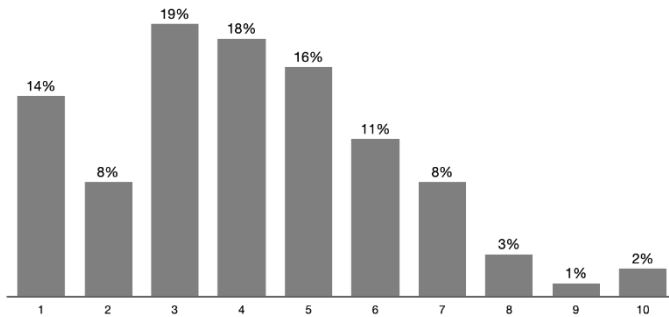

Figure 2: Ideological Background Distribution
(1—Hardcore Liberal/Left Wing—to 10—Hardcore Conservative/Right Wing)

The party affiliation, unsurprisingly, seems to have a clear effect on the ideological positioning. Since the assumption of homogeneity of variance was violated (the Levene Test was significant at $p < .001$), we performed a Welch ANOVA, which showed a significant impact of the party affiliation on the score in the ideological scale ($F(3, 254) = 25.78$, $p < .001$). The Games—Howel model was used for the post hoc analysis. Students who identified themselves as Republicans scored significantly higher on the ideological scale (meaning, they saw themselves as more conservative) than Democrats ($p < .001$, 99% CI = [2.22, 4.86]), independents ($p < .001$, 99% CI = [1.12, 3.86]), or those who do not identify themselves with any of those categories ($p < .001$, 99% CI = [1.89, 4.70]).
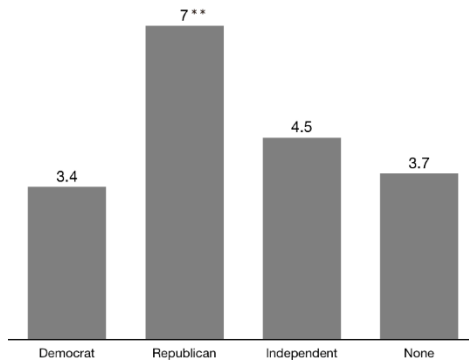

Figure 3: ANOVA Party Affiliation and Ideological Background

Hierarchy of Worries

The instrument used to measure the perceived urgency of issues was also a 10-point differential scale. Students rated rather high the urgency of addressing most of the issues by the government with the exception of Islamic terrorism and the immigration crisis.

It is noteworthy that none of the issues had an average rating below 5. The topmost issues in this map of worries are climate change, police brutality, and systemic racism (the two first items had an average score of close to 8.4; police brutality, slightly over 8). In the second segment (mean of 7–8), we found a group of diverse issues, such as educational gap (7.8), firearms regulation (7.8), minimum wage (7.69), gender violence (7.3), domestic terrorism (7.5), gender violence (7.3), and gender income gap (7.1). In the 6 to 7 range, two issues appear that had enjoyed a significant media relevance, the war in Ukraine (6.8), and the vaccine mandates (6.2). The only two issues that scored lower than 6 were Immigration (5.7) and Islamic Terrorism (5.6).
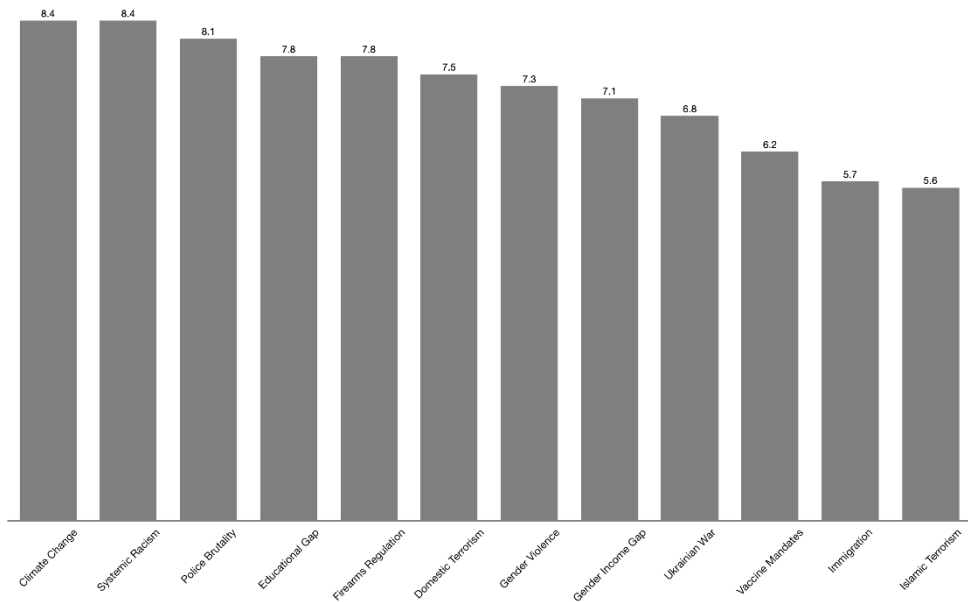

Figure 4: Perceived Urgency of Issues

The Impact of Ideology

One of the priorities of this study was to explore the extent to which the ideological background of our students may explain how they feel about the different issues. Our assumption is that there must be a certain connection since both media and political actors tend to appropriate issues to extract political capital from them. The goal seems to be clear: they must increase the perceived seriousness of an issue to turn it to a cause—and themselves to the champions to fight that battle.

In this study, the ideological background of the participants strongly correlates with the perceived urgency of issues. We attested that, depending on how the participants score on the ideology semantic differential scale, they tend to weigh the importance of addressing a

particular issue differently. The issues included in the questionnaire were the result of a genuine but non-systematic search for relevant issues in the mainstream media.

Ideological Background

It may be surprising that the more liberal participants seem to assess the majority of those issues, ten out of twelve, as more urgently in need of being addressed by the government than the conservative participants. As mentioned in the methodological section of the article, we used a 10-point scale to assess the ideological inclinations of the target audience, 1 being hardcore liberal and 10 hardcore conservative. Thus, a negative correlation between the ideology scale and the perceived urgency of the issue means that the more liberal the participants rate themselves, the more they prioritize the issue.

A more liberal mindset correlates with stronger worries about climate change ($r(256) = -.52$, $p < .001$), gender violence ($r(256) = -.46$, $p < .001$), gender income gap ($r(256) = -.89$, $p < .001$), educational gap ($r(256) = -.42$, $p < .001$), systemic racism ($r(256) = -.48$, $p < .001$), domestic terrorism ($r(256) = -.19$, $p < .001$), firearms regulation ($r(256) = -.42$, $p < .001$), police brutality ($r(256) = -.52$, $p < .001$), vaccines mandates ($r(256) = -.34$, $p < .001$), and the war in Ukraine ($r(256) = -.24$, $p < .001$).

Table 1: Pearson's Correlation Coefficients: Ideology and Priorities I

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Ideology											
2. Climate Change	−.52**										
3. Gender Violence	−.46**	.27**									
4. Gender Income	−.89**	.25**	.73**								
5. Educational Gap	−.42**	.14*	.63**	.67**							
6. Systemic Racism	−.48**	.19**	.75**	.68**	.69**						
7. Domestic Terrorism	−.19**	.36**	.50**	.48**	.44**	.55**					
8. Firearms	−.42**	.40**	.54**	.55**	.46**	.64**	.35**				
9. Police Brutality	−.50**	.48**	.63**	.58**	.61**	.77**	.43**	.67**			
10. Vaccine Mandates	−.34**	.36**	.48**	.50**	.42**	.54**	.34**	.46**	.55**		
11. Ukrainian War	−.24**	.22**	.40**	.41**	.34**	.40**	.36**	.35**	.32**	.40**	

Note: $N = 311$. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$ (two-tailed).

Only two issues seem to be more urgently in need of being addressed for conservative participants: Islamic terrorism ($r(256) = .15$, $p = .008$) and immigration ($r(256) = .20$, $p < .001$).

Table 2: Pearson's Correlation Coefficients: Ideology and Priorities II

	1	2	3
1. Ideology			
2. Islamic Terrorism	.15**		
3. Immigration	.20**	.29**	

Note: $N = 311$. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$ (two-tailed)

Party Affiliation

In addition to exploring the ideological background of our participants, we asked them about party preferences. We assumed that the political label they use to define themselves, the party they identify with, must be related to their ideological position. This assumption was confirmed by the ANOVA reported in the section of the article dedicated to a description of the ideological landscape in our sample. We found that a more conservative mindset would correspond to an inclination to vote for Republican candidates—and a tendency to identify themselves with positions normally associated with Republican standpoints. Still, both constructs, ideology and party affiliation, although closely connected, relate to different realities. Participants who identify themselves as independent or who rejected the given political labels may have a different perception of the urgency of the explored issues.

In order to measure the impact of the party affiliation in the degree of concern about the issues, we performed a Welch ANOVA, since the assumption of homogeneity of variance was violated (the Levene Test was significant at p < .001). The Games–Howel model was used for the post hoc analysis.

The impact of the party affiliation was significant in all the tested issues. The three issues that scored the highest, climate change, police brutality, and systemic racism, were significant at the $p < .001$ (Climate change $F(3, 84.55) = 14.65$, $p < .001$; police brutality $F(3, 86.52) = 17.15$, $p < .001$; systemic racism $F(3, 81.41) = 22.18$, $p < .001$). The post hoc analysis showed that the participants who identify as Republicans rated significantly lower the urgency of addressing those issues than the other three groups. In climate change, the difference between Republicans and Democrats ($p < .001$, 99% CI = [−4.77, −1.22]), independents ($p = .006$, 99% CI = [−3.83, −.1]), and none of them ($p = .007$, 99% CI = [−3.93, −.08]). With regard to systemic racism, republicans also scored significantly lower than democrats ($p < .001$, 99% CI = [−5.53, −2.02]), independents ($p = .001$, 99% CI = [−4.33, −.46]), and none of them ($p < .001$, 99% CI = [−4.9, −1.06]). We stated the same pattern in relationship to police brutality Democrats ($p < .001$, 99% CI = [−5.05, −1.62]), independents ($p = .004$, 99% CI = [−3.98, −.18]), and none of them ($p < .001$, 99% CI = [−4.45, −.71]).
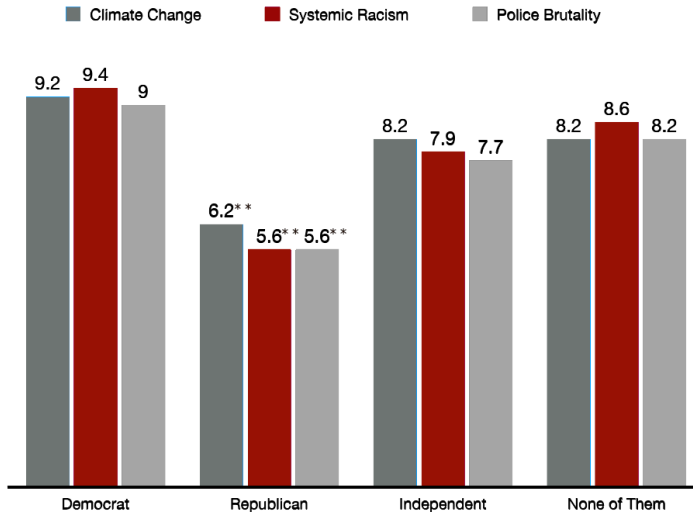
Figure 5: Comparison of Means: Climate Change, Systemic Racism, Police Brutality.
Republicans Scored Significantly Lower than the Other Participants on the Three Issues

On the issues that scored 7 to 8 on the semantic differential scale, the Welch ANOVA also resulted in a significant difference. Educational gap $F(3, 88.52) = 9.85$, p < .001; firearms regulation $F(3, 78.67) = 24.86$, p < .001; domestic terrorism, $F(3, 95.16) = 3.84$, p = .012; gender violence $F(3, 92.17) = 18.20$, p < .001; and gender income gap $F(3, 88.52) = 9.85$, p < .001. The Games–Howell post hoc test for multiple comparisons showed that the mean value among the students who identify as Republicans was significantly lower in the six cases but only in relation to Democrats. Educational gap (p < .001, 99% CI = [−4.09, −.74]). Firearms regulation (p < .001, 99% CI = [−5.86, −1.72]). Domestic terrorism (p = .039, 99% CI = [−2.65, −.23]). Gender violence (p < .001, 99% CI = [−4.72, −1.72]). Gender income gap (p < .001, 99% CI = [−5.11, −.97]).
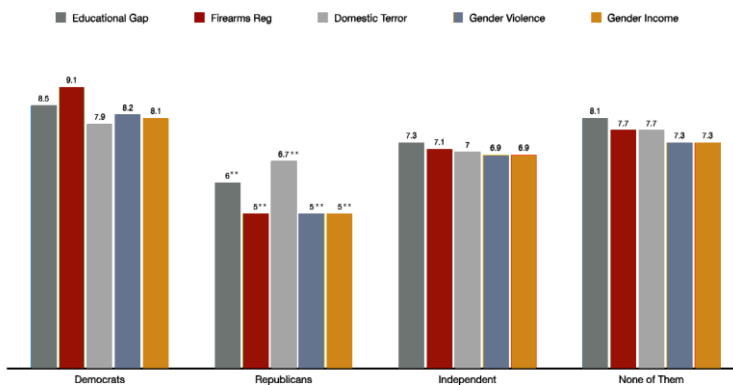

Figure 6: Comparison of Means: Educational Gap, Firearms Regulation, Minimum Wage, Domestic Terrorism,
Gender Violence, Gender Income Gap. Republicans Scored Significantly Only Lower than Democrats on the Six Issues

On the two issues, the war in Ukraine and the vaccine mandates, that scored 6 to 7 on the semantic differential scale, the Welch ANOVA also resulted in a significant difference (war in Ukraine $F(3, 91.45) = 9.55$, $p < .001$, and vaccine mandates $F(3, 89.82) = 6.19$, $p < .001$). The post hoc test revealed the same pattern: Republicans scored only significantly lower than democrats (war in Ukraine $p < 0.001$, 99% CI = $[-5.25, -.98]$). Vaccine Mandates $p = .002$, 99% CI = $[-4.47, -.37]$).
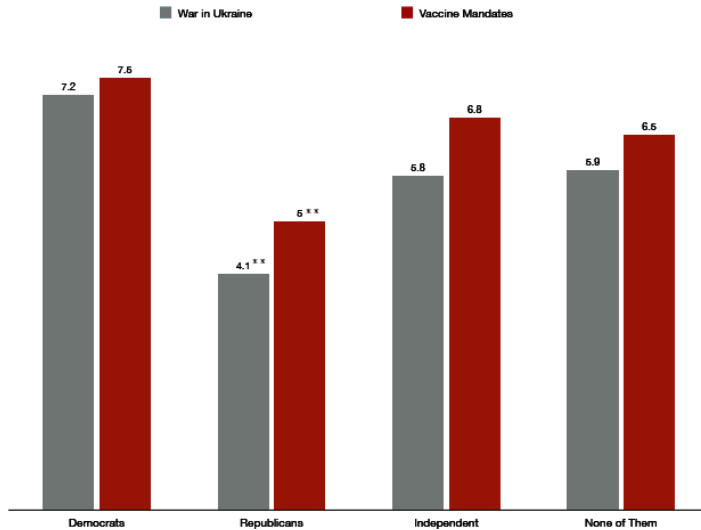

Figure 7: Comparison of Means: War in Ukraine, Vaccine Mandates.
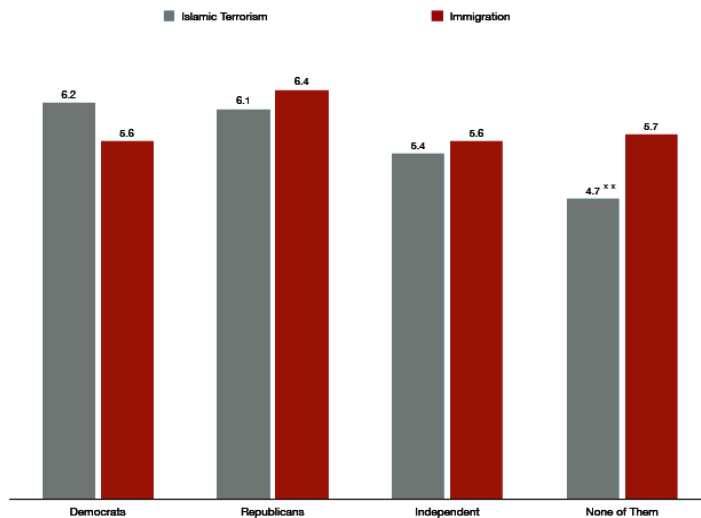Republicans Scored Significantly Lower Only than Democrats on the Six Issues

Figure 8: Comparison of Means: Islamic Terrorism, Immigration.
Republicans Scored Significantly Lower Only than Participants Without Affiliation on These Issues

On the two topics that score the lowest, Islamic Terrorism (5.6) and Immigration (5.7), the Welch ANOVA was significant only in the case of immigration. Participants who did not identify themselves with any of the given categories scored lower on this issue. The post hoc test does not reveal any apparent ideological explanation, since both Democrats and Republicans scored similarly (D 6.14, R 6.08).

In general, the findings of the ANOVA appear to be in consonance with the findings of the correlation analysis between ideology and concern. The three most urgent issues were climate change, systemic racism, and police brutality. On these three issues, Republicans expressed less concern than in regard to the other categories (Democrats, independents and none of them). In addition to the top three priorities, we found a good number of issues that correlated with a liberal mindset. The more liberal the participants, the more urgent they considered the following issues: domestic terrorism, educational and gender income gap, firearms regulation, gender violence, vaccine mandates, and the war in the Ukraine. On this group of issues, the Republicans again registered the lowest level of concern. However, in this case, the difference proved to be statistically significant only between the Democrats and the Republicans. The two issues that appeared to be more relevant for conservative participants were Islamic terrorism and immigration. Even though the Republicans seem to be more concerned than the rest of the groups, we did not find conclusive evidence. Only in the case of Islamic terrorism did the Republicans score significantly higher than the participants who did not identify with any of the given political affiliations. This finding suggests that most of the participants who rejected the other three political categories may have a rather liberal mindset.

Media Consumption Habits

One of the priorities of this study, once we established the concerns of our participants, is to analyze their media consumption habits. There is no doubt now, after decades of agenda setting research, that the media determine the issues we are going to worry about. In our set of questions to identify media consumption habits, we focused the questions on the frequency with which they resort to some generic outlets to specifically get information about national or international economics and politics. We included traditional media, such as newspapers, TV, or radio, as well as new digital communication portals, such as political blogs or podcast, and, of course, social media.

We identified three main groups. First, we can cluster the so-called legacy or traditional media. In this group, we listed national and regional newspapers, radio and TV, or cable news. Common to all these legacy outlets is that they require some degree of cognitive effort and the conscious attitude of actively pulling the information. We called them High-Ego Involvement media following the classic categorization by Cacioppo and Petty (1982) in their Elaboration Likelihood Model. Even though they are accessed mostly through the internet, political blogs

and podcasts also demand a conscious attempt to actively look for the information. Finally, video platforms and social media are more likely to be used passively as a source of information. Users normally get suggestions in their YouTube portal or their social media news feeds based on their declared preferences, browser history, and online activity.

High-Ego Involvement Media

High-ego involvement, which corresponds to what we could consider "traditional" or "legacy" media, seem to have gone into free fall. Over 80 percent of the participants never or rarely read local or national newspapers. Radio shows a similar decadence. TV appears as the most popular among the traditional media. Still, not even 15 percent of the participants use TV to get information on a daily basis. These findings are consistent with the loss of trust in mainstream that has been documented in the last years. Trust in the legacy media has been consistently dropping. A longitudinal study published by Swift (2016) for the Gallup Poll Social Series shows that this decline began to manifest itself clearly during the financial crisis, around 2007. This trend is stronger in people with a conservative mindset and also among the younger generations.
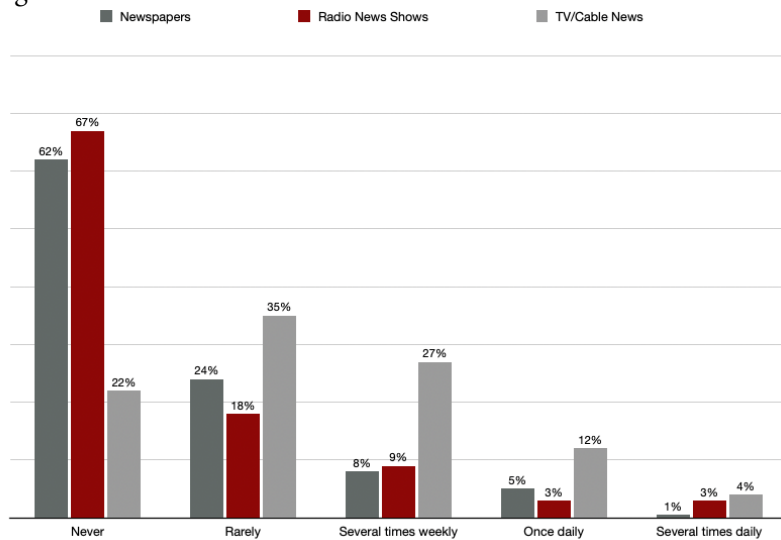

Figure 9: High-Ego Involvement Legacy Media

The frequency of media usage is similar in new online outlets that require a higher degree of ego involvement. Just 6 percent of the participants resort to blogs and 14 percent to podcasts on a daily basis.
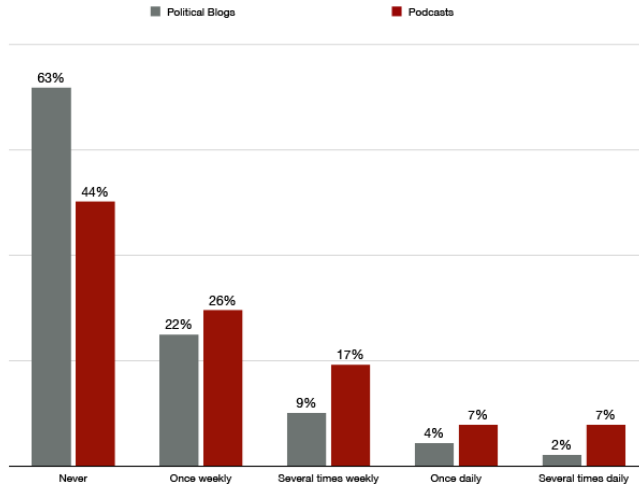
Figure 10: High-Ego Involvement Digital Media

The usage pattern seems to be exactly the opposite when the degree of ego involvement drops. Video platforms and social media seem to be the preferred channels to access information for our students. Almost 70 percent of the participants rely on their social media to get political and economic and national and international information.
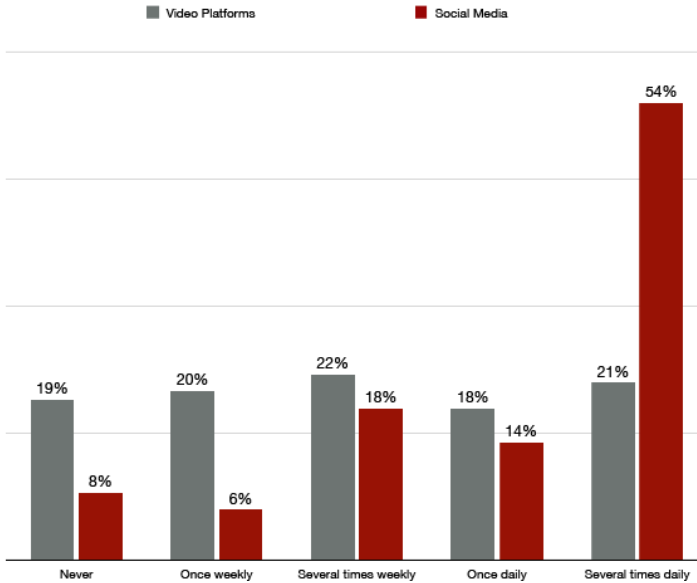

Figure 11: Low-Ego Involvement Media

The relevance of social media to get information is not an isolated incident or a result of a lack of trust in traditional media but rather another aspect of the brutal penetration of social media in the life of this college generation. We measured this penetration in terms of both

amount of time and frequency of usage. Over 90 percent of our students spend at least two to three hours with their social media accounts. Of these, over 35 percent state that they spend more than four hours engaged in their profiles across the various platforms.
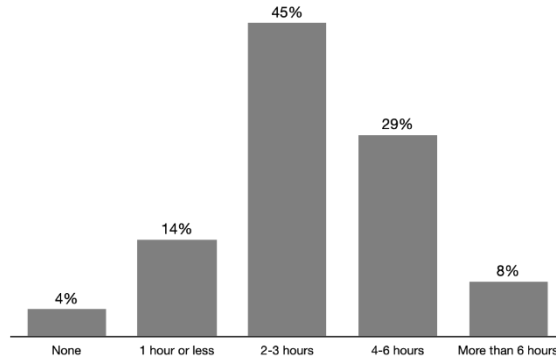
Figure 12: Amount of Time Spent with Social Media

The penetration shows a similar pattern in terms of frequency. Over 90 percent of the students check their social media accounts at least two to three times a day, while close to 50 percent do so every hour; a notable 8 percent admits checking them every fifteen minutes.
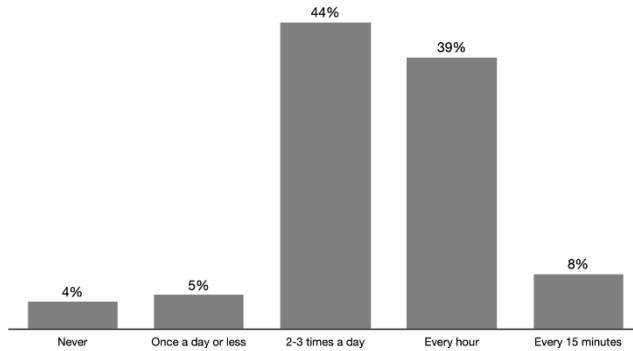
Figure 13: Frequency of Social Media Usage

Media Consumption and Ideology

There seems to be no clear correlation between the ideological inclination of our participants and the media they use to look for information. The participants who identify themselves as conservative show a minor proclivity to use newspapers ($r(256) = .17$, $p = .006$), online video channels ($r(256) = .14$, $p = .023$), podcasts ($r(256) = .14$, $p = .023$), and political blogs ($r(256) = -.15$, $p = .008$). Other media sources do not seem to make any significant difference, not even a marginal difference. All these media outlets demand a higher degree of active participation from the user. Only those who are knowledgeable about the nature and characteristics of the newspapers, podcasts, or political blogs resort to them when searching for information about specific issues.

Table 3: Pearson's Correlation Coefficients: Ideology and Media Usage I

	1	2	3	4
1. Ideology				
2. Newspapers	.17**			
3. Political Blogs	.15**	.22**		
4. Video Platforms	.14*	.24**	.24**	
5. Podcasts	.14*	.15**	.31**	.49**

Note: $N = 311$. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$ (two-tailed).

The ideological background correlates with the activity in social media in terms of both frequency of use and quantity of time. This correlation is negative, i.e., the participants who identified themselves as liberal tend to check their social media accounts more frequently ($r(256) = -.14$, $p = .023$) and to spend more time engaged with them ($r(256) = -.15$, $p = .008$).

Table 4: Pearson's Correlation Coefficients: Ideology and Media Usage II

	1	2	3
1. Ideology			
2. Frequency of Use	−.14*		
3. Amount of Time	−.15**	.67**	

Note: $N = 311$. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$ (two-tailed).

Level of Information

As indicated in the methodology section, the survey did not measure the actual knowledge the participants had on the various issues. They were merely asked to self-assess the level of information they had on them. This self-assessment must not necessarily reflect the precise knowledge or the actual level of information.

From the set of twelve suggested topics, those that scored higher on the 10-point scale were systemic racism (7.6), police brutality (7.6), vaccine mandates (7.3), and climate change (7). Under seven, firearms regulation appears first (6.7), followed by gender income gap (6.5), gender violence (6.3), gender income gap (6.3), the war in Ukraine, and domestic terrorism (5.8). Only two items scored under 5: Islamic terrorism (4.8) and immigration (4.8).

We expected to find a correlation between self-assessed information and media usage. A more intense use of high-ego involvement media may correlate with a higher assessment of their own knowledge. However, it is noteworthy that this correlation appears consistently with the exception of the three top items in the hierarchy of worries: climate change ($r(258) = .103$, $p = .1$), police brutality ($r(258) = .108$, $p = .08$), and systemic racism ($r(258) = .091$, $p = .15$). In the other items, the correlation is significant at the .001 level (Islamic terrorism, domestic terrorism, immigration, firearms regulation, Ukrainian war, vaccine mandates). In the items

that seem to be perceived as more urgent for conservative participants, Islamic terrorism and immigration, the bivariate correlation analysis did not provide significant differences.
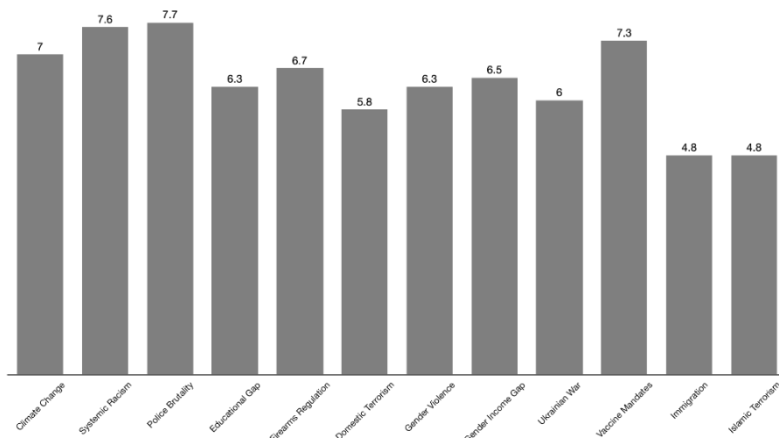

Figure 14: Self-Assessed Level of Information

Level of Information and Perceived Urgency

After having gained an idea of the perceived urgency of the issues and the media habits of our participants, we explored how this perceived urgency may correlate with the self-assessed level of knowledge on the issue.

The perceived seriousness of the issues seems to correlate with the self-assessed knowledge of each one. At least this is what happens in most of the items used in our questionnaire. In nine out of the twelve issues, the correlation was significant at the 99 percent level. Common to those nine issues is that they tend to be perceived as more urgent by liberal/left wing participants: climate change ($r(258) = .485$, $p < .001$), systemic racism ($r(258) = .280$, $p < .001$), police brutality ($r(258) = .252$, $p < .001$), educational gap ($r(258) = .526$, $p < .001$), domestic terrorism ($r(258) = .319$, $p < .001$), gender violence ($r(258) = .333$, $p < .001$), gender income gap ($r(258) = .288$, $p < .001$), Ukrainian war ($r(258) = .238$, $p < .001$), and vaccine mandates ($r(258) = .293$, $p < .001$). On the two issues that conservative participants tended to consider more urgent, immigration and Islamic terrorism, the correlation coefficient was not significant: immigration ($r(258) = .101$, $p = .104$), Islamic terrorism ($r(258) = .009$, $p = .884$). The issue of firearms regulation was an exception, since the correlation between level of information and perceived urgency appears to reflect the correlation between perceived urgency and ideological background. No significant correlation was found between the perceived urgency of regulating firearms and the level of information about the issue ($r(258) = .052$, $p = .409$).

We must stress that we focused on the self-assessed level of knowledge. To possess actual and accurate information about a topic does not necessarily imply a major concern. As a matter of fact, deeper knowledge on an issue may imply a deeper understanding of its complexity, a more educated assessment of the actual scope of the issue—and a more neutral approach to it.

Conclusions and Further Discussion

This study shows a clear trend. There is a consistent correlation between the ideological background of the participants in the study and the perceived urgency of the issues. Both ideological standpoint and party affiliation seem to correlate with the degree of urgency with which the participants thought the government must address those issues. Hans-Matthias Kepplinger's thesis of the instrumental use of news is grounded on the political valency of issues. This study seems to confirm the premise. Conservative and liberal, republican, and democrat participants weight differently the seriousness of the most common issues. Their concerns seem to be, in part, dictated by their ideological convictions. Kepplingler's work detailed how media outlets favor stories that support their ideological agendas. Audiences gravitate toward those channels that support their own worldview. Those issues are overrepresented according to the ideological inclination of the media outlet. Thus, it is no surprise that political actors and organizations push topics into the media agenda that they know would help in their struggle for political power.

The study also shows interesting trends in media consumption habits of our participants. We confirmed the penetration of social media and the decline of the legacy media in the current generation of college students. The trend has some worrying aspects because the usage of media that require a cognitive effort—or the active seeking and pulling of specific information—wanes in comparison with automatic news feeds provided by the social media platforms. Even digital channels that involve a certain degree of cognitive efforts, such as blogs or podcasts, are not very popular among our college students. The study shows some correlation between the ideology and the willingness to engage with high-ego involvement media portals. The conservative participants seem to be more likely to use newspapers, in local or national formats, magazines, podcasts, or blogs on economy or politics. It is very unlikely that we can extrapolate these outcomes to the entire US population. We doubt that conservative people, or even republicans, are more willing to engage with high-ego involvement media than people with a more liberal mindset, or democrats. The number of conservative and republican participants in our sample was reduced. It is not unlikely that participants in this age that identify as republicans, have a stronger level of conscientiousness and a stronger motivation, a personality profile that we can identify as "opinion leaders." We know since Lazarsfeld and Katz's (1955) studies in this field back in the 1950s that opinion leaders tend to be more avid media consumers. A plethora of studies keep confirming that

individuals with this personality trait are more active "opinion seekers," being the most likely ones to engage with media outside their area of ideological comfort (Jung and Kim 2016).

Students tend to assess their level of issue knowledge in accordance with their media usage. The more they claim to know, the more inclined they seem to be to engage with media that require a higher degree of cognitive effort. Notably, this correlation does not appear in the three issues considered most urgent in this study: climate change, police brutality, and systemic racism. The ubiquity of the three issues across media platforms might create the illusion of being more informed than one is in actuality. The need for social approval could also be a reason why participants feel inclined to state that they are well informed of issues of apparent colossal relevance.

Furthermore, the salience of a particular issue in the media may contribute to the overrating not only of its urgency but also of the actual knowledge one may have on that issue. Strong worries and fears do not necessarily respond to an accurate knowledge of the issue at hand. Frequently, it is the ignorance that exacerbates the fear, and, as a consequence, the subjective perception of the seriousness of the issue. The interrelation of the two factors appears clear in our study: self-assessed level of information and perceived urgency of the issue. The more they claim to know about the issue, the more concern they showed—and the more urgently they thought the government should address it.

The trend in media consumption habits gives us some solid basis to question the actual knowledge our participants have on the issues at hand. Again, we did not measure the level of knowledge but just asked them to assess the knowledge they thought they had. The fact that social media and online video platforms are the most frequently used channels to access information could be considered a warning signal to question the reliability of the self-assessed knowledge. The media consumption habits show a pattern that suggests a systematic avoidance of cognitive effort—at least, when it comes to searching for information on national and international issues. News feeds in social media and online video platforms work on the basis of the declared preferences of the users, as well as their browsing history and online activity. It is thus likely that they have the effect of echo chambers. The algorithms filter information about topics the users are definitely interested in and select the angles they may prefer the issue to be addressed from with extraordinary accuracy. No need, then, to leave the area of comfort.

The connection between ideology or party affiliation and the perceived urgency of issues deserves attention. Hans-Matthias Kepplinger's theory of the Instrumentalle Aktualisierug (instrumental use of news) builds upon the fact that individual journalists and media outlets decide to direct the news spotlight toward issues that they know will support their ideological agendas. In the contemporary media landscape, news feeds in social networks seem to reinforce the echo-chamber effect of mass media. This might create a vicious spiral. In those echo chambers, news consumers will find information about issues they already worry about. The apparent relevance of those issues will increase the more exposed the consumers are to

information about them. The growing concern about a particular salient issue might reinforce the ideological standpoint and contribute to the illusion of being well informed about it.

The fact that issues have a political or ideological valency, furthermore, has an impact on the political game. Political actors and organization are eager to appropriate issues in order to extract political capital from them. Once this goal has been achieved, the strategy is to push the issue into the media agenda. Studies in frame building and setting have shown that the angle used to present a topic may favor a particular interpretation of it (Scheufele 2000). The mere issue might already come with an ideological interpretation. This study seems to suggest that to worry about a given issue can also reflect a frame of mind inclined toward specific ideological and political positions. This fact opens lines of investigation on political communication dynamics. It also raises questions about the real motivation of political actors to effectively address and solve issues they are extracting political capital from.

The ideological weight of the perceived urgency of issues may vary depending on the geographic and demographic contexts. This study focused on a well-defined age group, college undergraduate students, in a reduced area of the US, the state of Connecticut. We are aware that, before we reach any definite conclusion, the study should be replicated with an audience that goes beyond this age frame and the geographic limitation. In addition, for reasons of convenience, we worked only with students registered in the Connecticut State University System. Obviously, the findings of the study cannot be generalized to the entire US student population. Finally, the range of issues would also need a more systematic approach. The study relied only on the topics selected by the students over several semesters for their project in a course on Public Opinion Research Methods. A rigorous content analysis of issue salience in media would provide a more exhaustive list of issues.

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Informed Consent

Conflict of Interest

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