

Conspiracy Theory Endorsement by Media Viewership

Research Report: PCIS-006 | April 30, 2022

Research Question

Cable news media in the United States has been playing to partisan audiences since at least the 1990s (Hollander, 2008). If conspiratorial thinking is sometimes partisan—as it seems to be given our prior reports on this topic—it is worth investigating whether cable news media viewership is itself associated with conspiracy belief. To do so, we divided our sample into those who reported watching CNN only (a politically left-skewed cable news channel) and those who reported watching Fox News only (a politically right-skewed cable news channel) and then asked the question: “Does cable news viewership impact conspiracy belief?”

Methodology

Data Source

- Paranormal and Conspiratorial Ideation Study (“PCIS,” collected in July-August 2021)

Data Quality Control

- All participants in this dataset passed attention, response time, fraud, duplication, and bot checks.

Participants

- 1,467 adults in the United States (51.7% Female)
- Average Age = 48.94 years (*SD* = 19.54 years)
- 60.7% White; 20.3% Hispanic; 13.5% Black; 5.5% Asian

Measures

- Media Viewership:** Respondents checked all sources they would watch if interested in learning more about a current event. Respondents included here only chose CNN or Fox News.
- Endorsement:** Respondents were asked whether they agree with the statements provided. Answer options ranged from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” using a 7-point scale.
- Key of conspiracy statements is on the next page (Table 1).

Summary of Findings

- Fox News viewers, on average, believed that Covid-19 was developed in, and intentionally covered up by, China and that the 2020 presidential election of Joe Biden was fraudulent (Fig. 1).
- Notably, however, these were the only two conspiracies believed, on average, by Fox News viewers. CNN viewers, on average, endorsed none of our measured conspiracies (Fig. 1)
- Though average conspiracy belief was low for both Fox News and CNN viewers, rates of belief did vary by conspiracy (Fig. 2)
 - Around 40% of CNN viewers agreed that only white people and men can be truly successful in society.
 - Close to 50% of CNN viewers agreed that the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump was fraudulent.
 - Fox News viewers were more likely to endorse different conspiracies: over 20% of Fox News viewers agreed with the QAnon conspiracy and nearly 40% endorsed a Deep State conspiracy.

Take-Home Message

- CNN and Fox News viewers are not, in general, very conspiratorial.
- Fox News viewers were, however, the only group to report agreement, on average, with two of our conspiracies (a COVID-19 conspiracy and a 2020 election conspiracy).
- CNN viewers were more likely to believe conspiracies about race and gender groups; Fox News viewers were more likely to believe in COVID and Deep State conspiracies.

Share your interpretation with us (research@skeptic.com) and it may be included in Skeptic Magazine.

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Researchers

Kevin McCaffree, PhD
Anondah Saide, PhD

research@skeptic.com

Suggested Citation

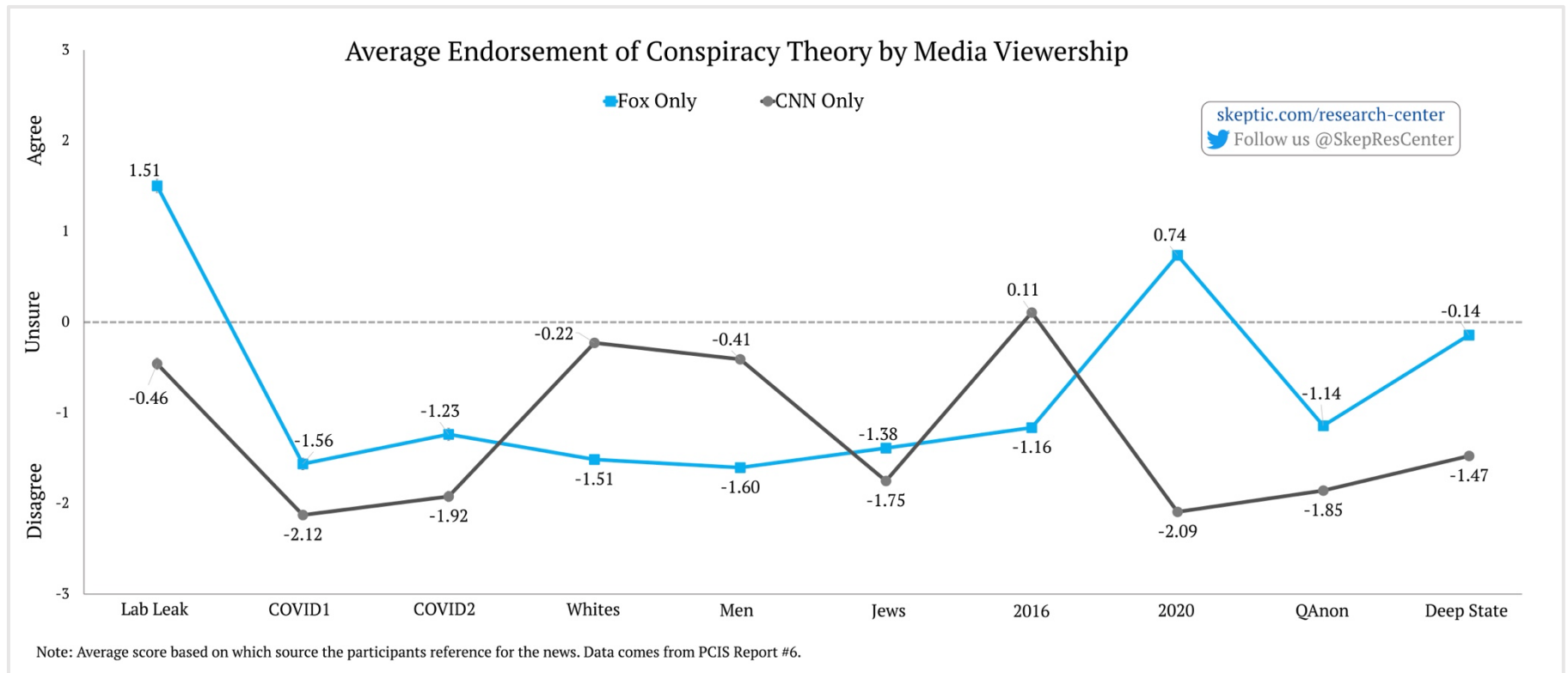
McCaffree, K., & Saide, A. (2022). Conspiracy Theory Endorsement by Media Viewership. Skeptic Research Center, PCIS-006.

Table 1: Conspiracy Statement Key

Label	Full Statement
White	The way the founders of the United States set things up ensures that, even today, only whites can be truly free and successful.
Men	The way the founders of the United States set things up ensures that, even today, only men can be truly free and successful.
Jews	Israel/Jews secretly control most of the decision-making processes across key US institutions, including government and media.
2016	The 2016 Presidential election of Donald Trump was fraudulent because it was tampered with by high-ranking politicians and computer programmers in Russia.
2020	The 2020 Presidential election of Joe Biden was fraudulent because it was tampered with by high-ranking politicians, voting machine programmers, and poll workers.
COVID1	The COVID-19 vaccine contains tiny computer chips to help make government surveillance of people easier.
COVID2	Political and medical elites are hiding the truth about how the COVID-19 vaccines cause magnetic reactions.
Lab Leak	COVID-19 was developed in a Chinese lab and Chinese officials have covered it up
QAnon	The government, media, and financial worlds in the United States are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation.
Deep State	The actions of the US government are not determined by elected officials, but by an unelected secret group of business and cultural elites known as the Deep State.
Epstein	High ranking officials, powerful politicians, and noted celebrities are hiding information about the murder of Jeffrey Epstein to cover up illegal or immoral sexual activity.

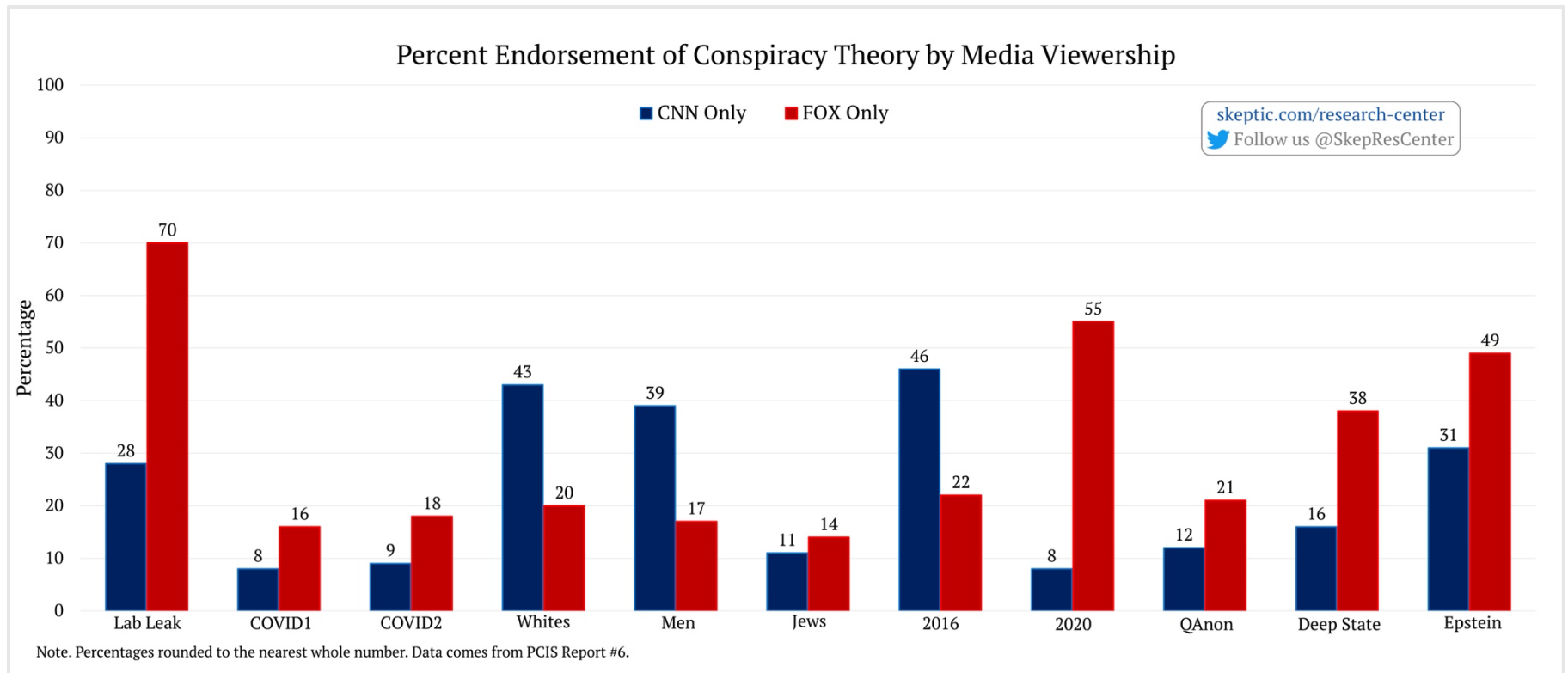
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Figure 1



For additional information (e.g., statistical output, citations) not included in this document, view the supplemental page for this report located at skeptic.com/research-center/paranormal-conspiratorial-ideation-study/

Figure 2



For additional information (e.g., statistical output, citations) not included in this document, view the supplemental page for this report located at skeptical.com/research-center/paranormal-conspiratorial-ideation-study/