

Public Wise

Research & Education Fund

Local news: Democracy's first line of defense

NOVEMBER 2024



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Data

Polling data

April 13-19, 2023

Nationally representative sample of 3,637 adults

Paid for by PWREF 510(c)3;

Fielded by Change Research

Key Takeaways



- We find local news consumption in any form (TV, radio, or newspaper) is associated with a lower likelihood of holding election denialist views. Local news consumers:
 - Are less likely to believe Trump got more votes in 2020 and other election denier lies
 - Are less willing to vote for an election denier
- We find the top three news sources among registered voters are TV (63%), Social media (61%) and Newspapers (53%).
- Local newspapers are the most popular types of newspapers across political and ideological groups. Local TV is the most popular TV news source among Democrats, liberal Independents and moderate Independents, and second most popular among Republicans and conservative Independents behind Fox News.
- Consuming local news is associated with fewer moderate Independents, conservative Independents and Republicans saying they are 1) likely to vote for election deniers and 2) believe the Big Lie, even if they also consume right-wing news.
- Local newspapers are particularly effective at combating election denialism and defending democracy: local newspaper readers are significantly less likely to think Trump got more votes in 2020 compared to Biden, less likely to be willing to vote for an election denier, less likely to believe election denier claims, and more likely to believe ceding power after losing an election is essential for a democracy.

Background

Where goes local news, so goes democracy

In a functioning democracy, the press plays the critically important role of informing the public about policies, politicians, and elections. In the US, investigative journalism has been instrumental in [exposing corruption, debunking conspiracy theories](#), and [communicating election information to the public](#). For example, the locally focused [Des Moines Register](#) and the [BBC](#) spotlighted a grassroots effort to oust an election denier overseeing elections in a county in Iowa. This attention raised awareness about the election denier and the campaign to unseat him, informing residents who [ultimately voted him out](#) against all odds during a special election in a county that leans to the right.

Exposing a county-level election denier seeking to oversee local elections in Iowa exemplifies the pivotal role of news media in support of democracy. However, this role may be harder for local news to fulfill in light of recent changes in the media industry. News media in the US has consolidated over the years, [as large conglomerates buy up local TV stations and print newspapers](#). Indeed, [local news coverage has been declining at a rapid pace](#), particularly in the most [rural and remote areas](#).

Today, the national news media prioritizes national and state-level politics, sidelining information about issues at the local level, including critical down-ballot elections. And, the vast majority of those who consume local news [find coverage of local government and politics unsatisfactory](#).

Top-of-ticket focused news coverage overlooks the importance of local positions for democracy and leaves voters without the information they need to make informed choices when they vote. For example, the national media [widely focused on the defeat of election denier candidates in the 2022 midterm elections at the state and national-level](#). While this narrative highlights a win for democracy against anti-democratic actors, it ignores the fact that [election denier and insurrectionist candidates were running at all levels of government](#). Research conducted by Public Wise reveals [more insurrectionist candidates won than lost](#) among those running for the US house. What's more, [election deniers continue to pursue and obtain local elected positions that oversee elections](#), raising alarms about the prospect of free and fair elections in 2024 and beyond.

[Locally elected positions are essential to a functional democracy](#). County-level elected positions such as county commissioners, county boards of elections, and county recorders directly oversee and administer voter rolls and elections. Elected officials in these positions manage the allocation of voting machines, organize polling locations, coordinate poll workers, and oversee security. This also includes [sheriffs](#)¹, who generally oversee jail-based voting, enforce certain election laws, and handle some threats against election workers.

Local news plays the vital role of informing the public about these locally elected positions. Research shows that as local newspaper coverage declines, so too does knowledge of local elected officials, local elections, and even voter turnout for local elections ([Hayes & Lawless, 2021](#); [Moskowitz, 2020](#)). Moreover, local news coverage provides important information about local government and voting processes, exposes corruption, and increases name-recognition of down-ballot candidates ([Hayes & Lawless, 2021](#), [Mahone et al., 2019](#); [Rubado & Jennings, 2019](#)). Without consistent coverage of locally elected officials and policies, voters do not get relevant and timely information to make informed decisions at the ballot box or hold their local representatives accountable.

The concentration of national outlets and corresponding decline of local news coverage has additional negative consequences for democracy.

Many right-wing news outlets such as Fox, OANN, and Newsmax, have been instrumental in [perpetuating the Big Lie of election fraud and spreading election misinformation](#) ([Garrett et al., 2019](#); [Hollander, 2018](#); [Stecula & Pickup, 2021](#)). For example, Fox News settled a lawsuit for 787.5 million dollars related [to promoting the conspiracy theory that voting machines switched votes in the 2020 presidential election](#) from Trump to Biden. Spreading these false conspiracies has real-world consequences: after the 2020 election, [many local elected officials around the country](#) have [faced threats of violence](#) associated with the [persistent](#), widely [debunked](#) conspiracy theory of election fraud. As such, [local elections officials have been resigning in droves](#), leaving local election staff stretched thin and/or vulnerable to [election deniers taking positions of authority over election administration](#).



¹[In the vast majority of states and counties, sheriffs are elected. While the specifics of their role can vary from state to state, they generally oversee local jails and investigate crimes.](#)

Overview of findings

Investigating the link between local news and election denial

Given the demonstrated link between local civic engagement and local news, we explored whether local news might help combat widespread acceptance of the Big Lie and [election denialism](#). Using a [nationally representative survey of US registered voters](#), we find that the answer is yes; local news plays a role in combating election denialism and belief in the Big Lie. Specifically, those who consume local news are less likely to say they would vote for election deniers or to think Trump got more votes than Biden in 2020, even after accounting for political affiliation and other demographic characteristics. [Consistent with](#) prior studies, we find local news counteracts election denialism perpetuated by right-wing media. Specifically, consuming local news is associated with fewer moderate Independents, conservative Independents and Republicans saying they are 1) likely to vote for election deniers and 2) believe the Big Lie, even if they also consume right-wing news.

Local newspapers in particular have a strong association with combatting election denialism. We find reading local papers is associated with not finding common election denier claims believable, as well as correctly identifying key aspects of democracy that are essential for a country to be considered democratic.

Public Wise is committed to providing timely, publicly available information about the [threat of election denier candidates up and down the ballot](#). However, getting this information to voters is an uphill battle without trusted local messengers to clearly communicate and make accessible such crucial election information. Pro-democracy organizations and advocates working to get out the vote and defeat election deniers in 2024 and beyond can expand on their already impactful work in defense of democracy by working to a) understand the role of local news in their communities and b) working together with local news outlets to inform the public about local issues in their community, especially those that impact democracy.



Analysis

Where do US registered voters get their news?

In our nationally representative poll, virtually all (99%) of US registered voters reported consuming news in some format. A quarter of all US registered voters use only one medium to get their news, but most (75%) use two or more outlets for news.

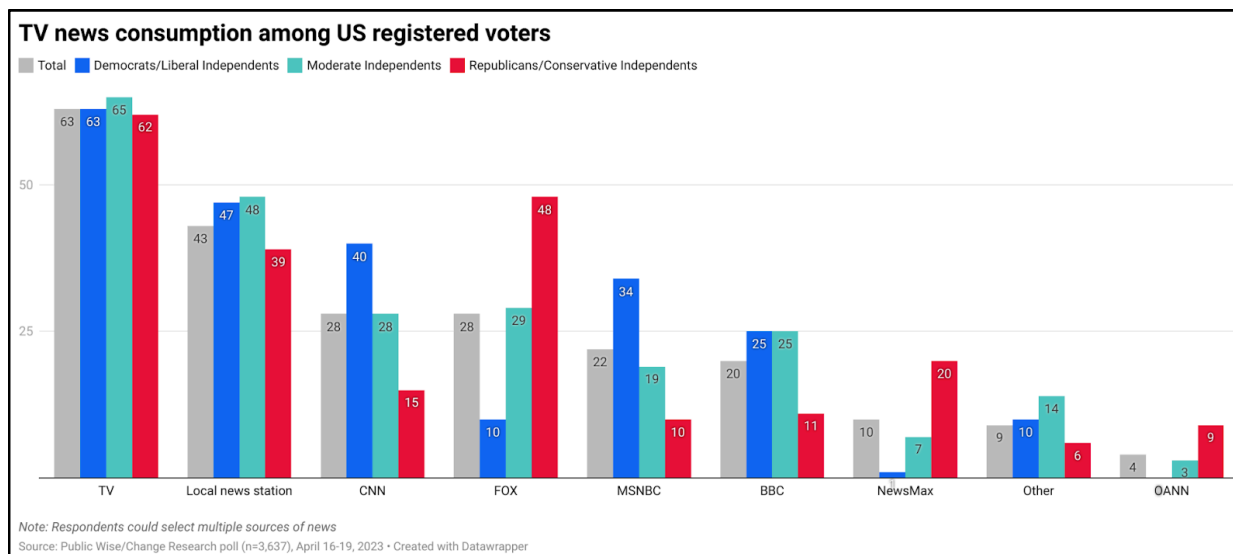
Consistent with our previous [research in battleground states](#), registered voters across the US prefer TV, social media, and newspapers to get their news. 63% of registered voters watch TV for their news, 61% use social media, and 53% read newspapers (either print or online). Radio and podcasts were less popular, at 37% and 29% respectively.

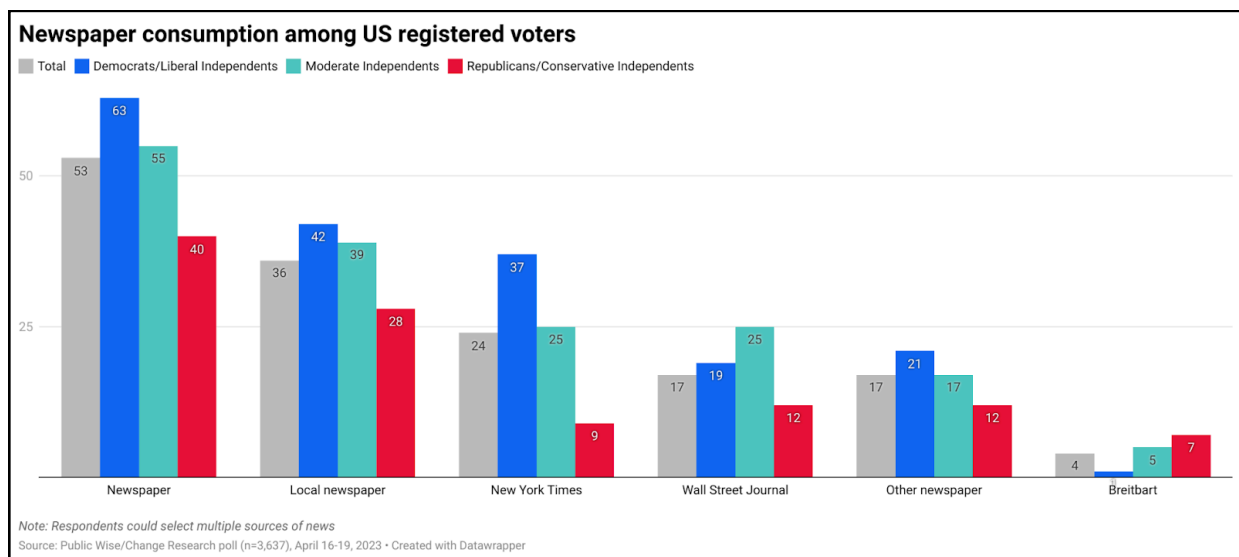
We find social media users largely prefer Facebook to other platforms, even across party and ideological divides. Where divisions across the political spectrum begin to emerge is regarding specific TV stations and newspaper outlets.

Fewer than 10% of Democrats watch Fox News, compared to 49% of Republicans, while 42% of Democrats watch CNN compared to just 14% of Republicans.

On the other hand, *local* TV news stations are consumed across the political spectrum. Local TV is the most popular form of TV news among Democrats, liberal Independents, and moderate Independents, and the second most popular source of TV news among conservative Independents and Republicans.

While TV viewership is popular across the political spectrum, newspaper readership is slightly more popular among those in the ideological center and those who lean left. 63% of Democrats and liberal Independents reported reading newspapers for their news, compared to 40% of conservative Independents and Republicans.





The continued relevance of local news

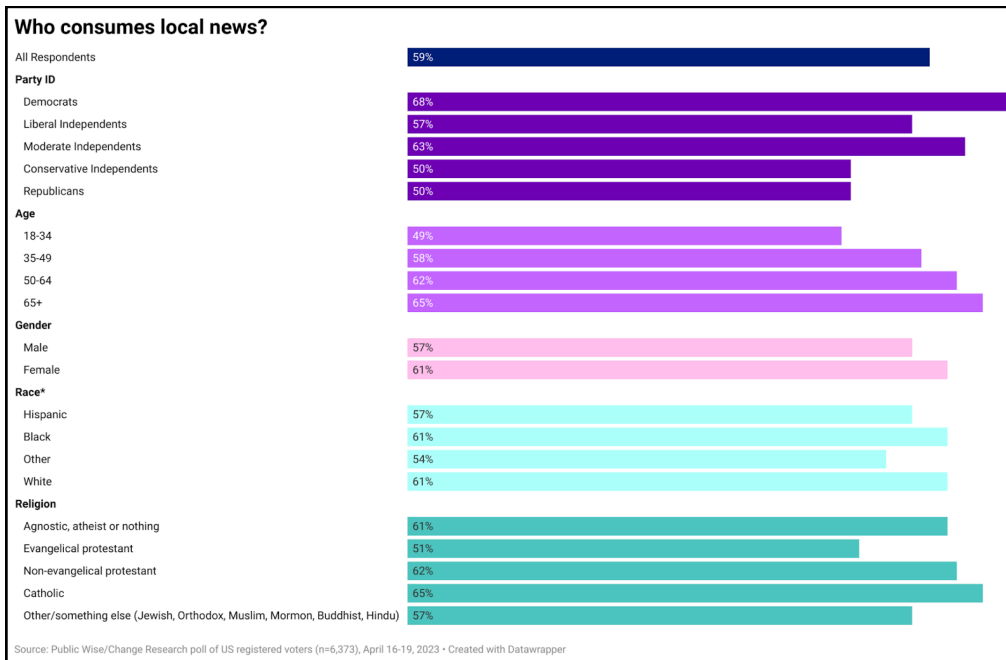
Despite ideological differences in preferred TV and newspaper outlets, local news is consumed across political affiliations and demographics, although it is slightly less popular among those on the right. Local TV stations are a source of news for about half of all Democrats and moderate Independents as well as 38% of Republicans. Over a third of both liberal and conservative Independents also reported watching local TV. A similar pattern emerges for local newspaper readership: Roughly 40% of moderate Independents, liberal Independents and Democrats and over a quarter of conservative Independents and Republicans selected local newspapers as a source of news.

All told, 59% of US registered voters consume some form of local news through TV, newspapers, and/or radio². While slightly more

Democrats (68%) consume local news, half or more of all political and ideological groups read, watch or listen to some form of local news sources. [More recent polling by Pew](#) confirms our findings: a majority of Americans consume local news, though many have shifted from print to online local newspaper sources.

Local news appeals to registered voters across demographic and political groups. A roughly equal percentage across gender, racial/ethnic and religious groups consume local news. Local news consumers do skew slightly older, but nearly half (49%) of young registered voters ages 18-34 reported consuming some form of local news.

²We define local news consumers as anyone who selected "local TV", "local newspaper", or wrote "local" in open ended responses in the "other" TV/newspaper/radio open response boxes.



The role of local news in defending democracy and defeating election deniers

The [demonstrably false claim that Trump got more votes in the 2020 election](#) continues to be a key tenet of the election denier movement in 2024. But is consuming local news associated with a lower likelihood of believing in the Big Lie? We assess belief in this lie by asking respondents who they believe got more votes in the 2020 election: Biden, Trump or Not sure. We find local news consumers are significantly³ less likely⁴ to believe Trump got more votes compared to those who consume only non-local news sources, even after accounting for political affiliation. Nearly two thirds of registered voters who consume local news believe Biden got more votes in 2020, compared to only 44% of those who only consume only non-local news sources.

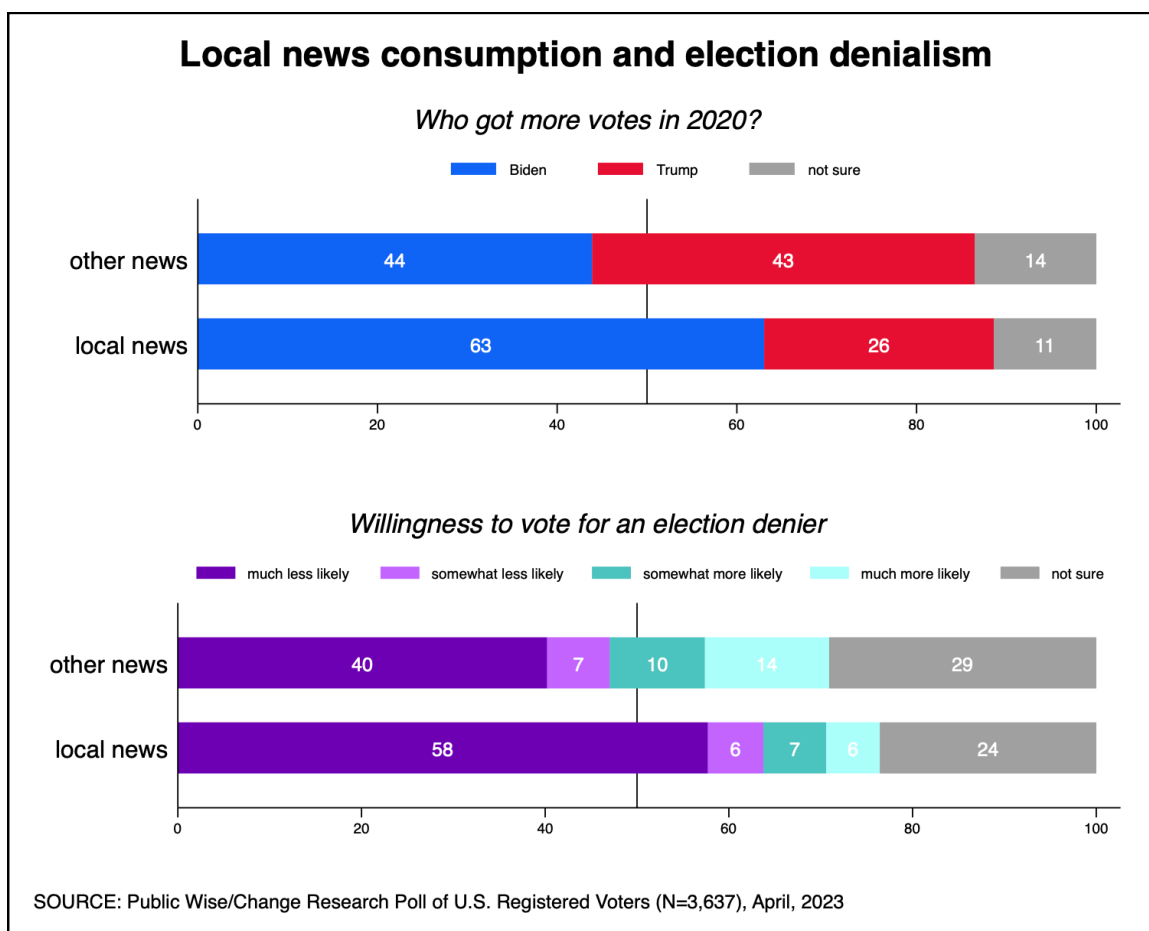
Additionally, we asked whether registered voters were more or less likely to vote for a candidate that has been widely characterized as an election denier⁵. We find **consuming local news is associated with being less willing to vote for election deniers**. Consuming local news is substantively meaningful: **Among those who reported consuming local news, roughly two out of every three respondents are less likely to vote for someone characterized as an election denier compared to fewer than half of respondents⁶ who consume only non-local news.** Just 13% of local news consumers said they are more likely to vote for an election denier compared to a quarter of those who only consume sources that are not local.

³We fit a multinomial regression model predicting belief in who got more votes in 2020 (1 = much/somewhat less likely, 2 = much/somewhat more likely, 3 = not sure) by whether or not an individual consumes local news (0 = no, 1 = yes local news). Believing Biden got more votes is the category for comparison. We control for political party and ideological affiliation, vote choice in 2020, how closely they follow politics, whether or not they consume right-wing media, gender, age, race, education, religion, rurality and region.

⁴We combine much/somewhat responses for all references to less or more likely throughout this post.

⁵26% of respondents selected "not sure" for whether or not they would vote for an election denier, compared to 13% of respondents who were "not sure" who got more votes in 2020.

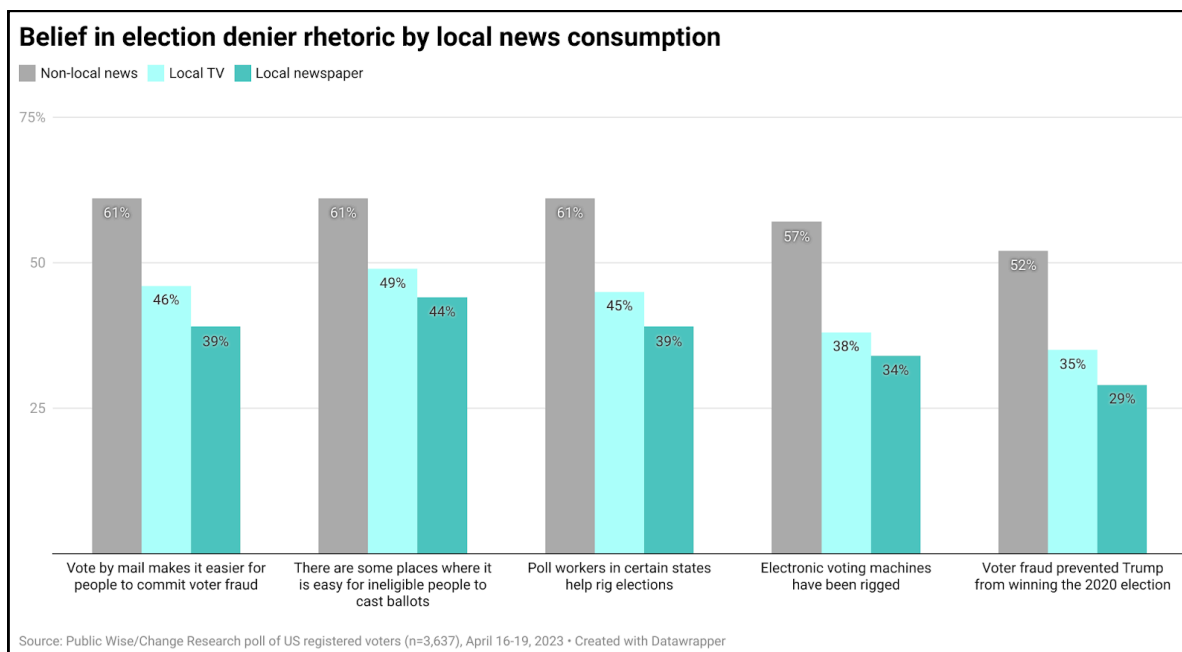
⁶Results reported are marginally significant ($p < .09$). We fit a multinomial regression model predicting the likelihood of voting for an election denier (1 = somewhat/much less likely, 2 = somewhat/much more likely, 3 = not sure) by whether or not an individual consumes local news (0 = no, 1 = yes local news). Being more likely to vote for an election denier is the comparison group. We account for whether participants watch right-wing news, belief about who got more votes in 2020, how closely they follow politics, gender, age, race, education, religion, rurality and region.



Local newspapers in particular may be instrumental in combating election denialism. In our survey, we asked whether registered voters found five different election denier claims believable. Compared to respondents who only consume non-local news, local newspaper readers were the least likely to believe election denier claims, ranging from fewer than a third believing that voter fraud prevented Trump from winning in 2020 to well under half believing there are some places where it is easy for ineligible people to cast ballots.

A majority of those who only consume non-local news found each election denier claim believable, compared to less than half of local TV news consumers. However, this finding is largely driven by those on the political right. Indeed, Republicans and conservative Independents are less likely than moderate Independents or those on the left to read local newspapers (28%) or watch local TV (39%). They are also more likely to believe election denier lies, with 80% or more reporting that each election denier claim is believable.

²We distinguish between those who watch local TV or read local newspapers. We do not separately analyze those who reported listening to local radio due to insufficient sample size (only 1% of respondents).



We also find local news is associated with holding more pro-democracy beliefs. Our survey asked respondents whether they believed certain characteristics are essential for a democracy. In our [previous research](#), we were concerned to find two characteristics that are critical for a functional and stable democracy were not viewed as essential by over a third of registered voters: 1) that a party should cede power after losing an election and 2) that policies should reflect the preferences of the majority.

But these beliefs appear to vary substantially based on types of media consumption, with local newspaper readers professing more pro-democracy beliefs. For example, **local newspaper readers are statistically**

significantly⁸ more likely to think ceding power after losing an election is essential for democracy compared to those who only consume non-local news. Nearly 3 of every 4 registered voters who read local newspapers believe ceding power is essential for a democracy, compared to 57% of those who only consume non-local news.

Similarly, local newspaper readers were more likely to think that it is an essential characteristic of a democracy for policies to reflect the preferences of the majority⁹. 64% of local newspaper readers believe policies that reflect the majority preferences are essential for a democracy, compared to 60% of local TV news viewers and 56% of non-local news consumers.

⁸We use a logistic regression model predicting whether they believing ceding power is essential (0 = no, 1 = yes) by whether or not an individual consumes local newspaper (0 = no, 1 = yes local news). We control for political party and ideological affiliation, belief about who got more votes in 2020, how closely they follow politics, whether or not they consume right-wing media, gender, age, race, education, religion, rurality and region.

⁹Note: Differences between local newspaper readers, local TV viewers and non-local media consumers did not rise to the level of statistical significance.

What is essential for a democracy?

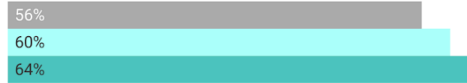
Local news consumers vs. other, non-local news sources

Other news Local TV Local newspaper

When a party in power loses an election, they give up their power to the winning party*



Policies generally reflect the preferences of a majority of citizens



*Difference between local newspapers and non-local news statistically significant ($p < .001$)

Source: Public Wise/Change Research poll of US registered voters (n=3,637), April, 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

Local news combats misinformation perpetuated by right-wing media

Does local news help combat election denialism perpetuated by right-wing media? While only 10% of those who lean left ideologically consume right-wing media¹⁰, 30% of moderates, 43% of conservative Independents and 50% of Republicans do. In our research, we identify moderate Independents¹¹ as a persuadable political group given their [uncertainty about common claims of election deniers](#) and [mixed perceptions](#) of whether voter fraud or voter suppression are bigger threats to democracy. 63% of moderate Independents consume local news, but unlike politically left- and right-leaning individuals, moderate Independents are equally as likely to watch right-wing media, particularly Fox News (29%), as they are to watch CNN (28%) or MSNBC (20%), which are generally understood to be a more centrist outlets in comparison.

We find that local news plays an important role in combating the Big Lie among moderate Independents, and to some extent,

conservative Independents and Republicans. Compared to those who do not consume local news, moderate Independents, conservative Independents, and Republicans who consume local news are all significantly¹² less likely to believe that Trump got more votes in 2020. This finding holds even after accounting for whether or not individuals also watch right-wing news.

Local news consumption is also significantly¹³ associated with whether moderate Independents are willing to vote for an election denier. **Moderate Independents who consume right-wing news alone are twice as likely to vote for an election denier compared to those who consume local news in addition to right-wing news sources.** Moderate Independents who only watch local news and not right-wing news are the least likely to vote for election deniers: only 5% say they are more likely to vote for someone widely characterized as an election denier.

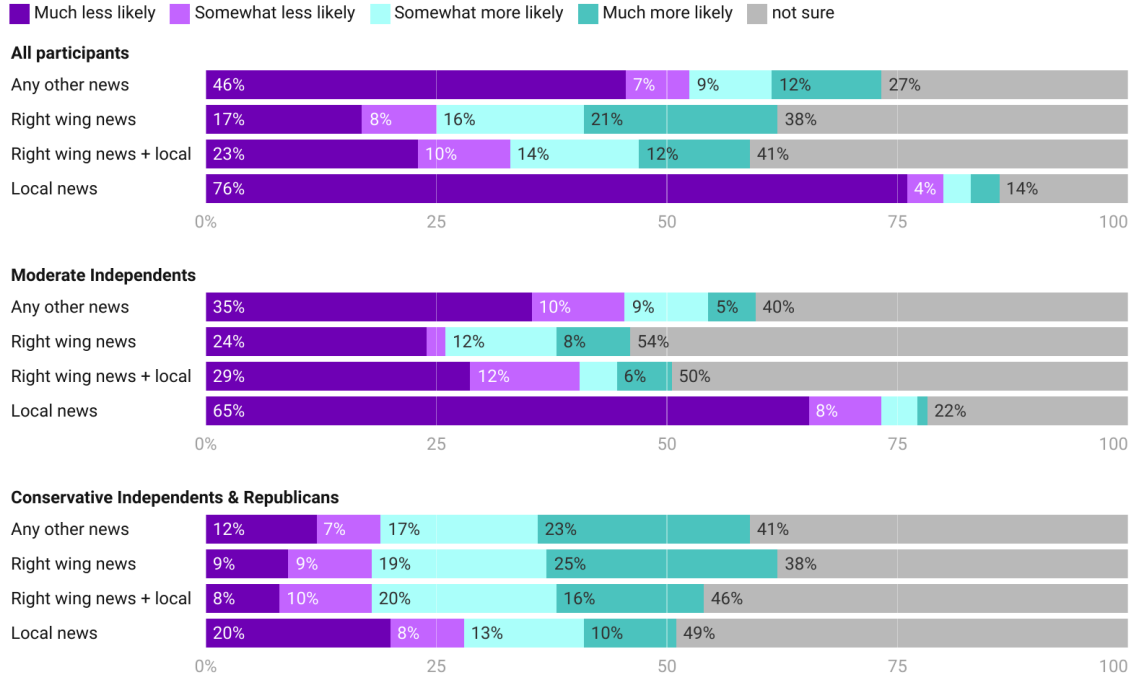
¹⁰ We define right-wing media as anyone who selected the following TV or Newspaper sources for their news: Fox, OANN, Newsmax, Breitbart, One America, Real America's Voice, Tucker Carlson, the Daily Wire, or anyone who wrote in "conservative outlets".

¹¹ Note: Moderate Independents make up 15% of respondents.

¹² We fit multinomial regression models separately for moderate Independents and conservative Independents/Republicans, predicting belief in who got more votes in 2020.

¹³ We fit a multinomial regression models separately for moderate Independents and conservative Independents/Republicans, predicting likelihood of voting for an election denier (1 = somewhat/much less likely, 2 = somewhat/much more likely, 3 = not sure) by whether or not an individual consumes local news (0 = no, 1 = yes local news). Being more likely to vote for an election denier is the comparison group. We account for whether participants watch right-wing news, belief about who got more votes in 2020, how closely they follow politics, gender, age, race, education, religion, rurality and region.

Are you more or less likely to vote for a candidate that has been widely characterized as an election denier?



Source: Public Wise/Change Research poll of US registered voters (n=3,637), April 16-19, 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

Slightly fewer conservative Independents and Republicans who consume local news and right-wing news say they are more likely to vote for an election denier (36%) compared to those who only watch right-wing news (44%)¹⁴. A, roughly a quarter of conservative Independents and Republicans who consume only local news and no right-wing media say they are more likely to vote for an election denier, over 10 percentage points less than among all conservative Independents and Republicans, regardless of what news they consume. We find the same patterns for local newspapers, suggesting local news in any form is instrumental to defending democracy from election denialism.

¹⁴This difference does not rise to the level of statistical significance ($p < .05$) after controlling for whether participants watch right-wing news, belief about who got more votes in 2020, how closely they follow politics, gender, age, race, education, religion, rurality and region.

Conclusion

Leveraging local news to combat election denialism

Local news consumption across the nation is associated with less support for election denialism and better understanding of what is essential for a democracy. We also find consuming local news counteracts the spread of misinformation by right-wing media among a key persuadable group of voters: moderate Independents. Not only is local news associated with reduced support for election deniers and the tenets of election denialism, but a [majority of registered voters consume local news](#). And, local news is broadly popular across different demographic groups, those in the political center, and those to the political and ideological left. These findings are a call to action for those working to defend democracy: support, invest in, and learn more about local news in the communities you serve.

Fortunately, the importance of local news for our democracy is increasingly gaining recognition. Some local news outlets [have linked their mission directly to the service of democracy and to providing civic information to the public](#). Furthermore, some states are taking action to defend local news through policy. [New York](#) state recently included tax roll credits to hire local journalists in their annual budget. And, the California State Senate recently [passed a bill](#) that would tax online platforms such as Google, Facebook, and Amazon and reallocate funds to local news outlets. National news outlets and organizations are also taking action. [AP News created a nonprofit](#) to raise funds for local news, and the [Knight Foundation](#) committed

to five years of funding for local news outlets in order to “rebuild trust in democracy from the local level up.” Our research at Public Wise affirms the importance of elevating these efforts and encouraging democracy advocates to leverage local news to defend democracy in 2024 and beyond.

But leveraging local news is not without substantial hurdles. The rapid and continued conglomeration of local news outlets by a few large companies leaves many with minimal or no local news coverage at all, especially in rural and remote areas. Places with limited local news, often referred to as “news deserts,” are associated with a [decline in civic engagement](#). While some [alternative, locally-focused online news sources have popped up in recent years](#) to fill in the local news gap, [these news sources are primarily in more urban areas](#) and rely heavily on generous donors who are more likely to invest in more populated areas. Even more concerning, election deniers and those [involved with the January 6th attack on the US capitol](#) have started [targeting rural counties](#) to find a receptive audience for voter suppression tactics. Meanwhile, the rural-serving papers that do remain may face increased scrutiny. For example, a local rural newspaper in Marion County, Kansas was raided by police, [following critiques of local government officials and businesses](#). A year later, the [consequences of this raid](#) and its broader implications of threats to journalists holding local leaders to account are still felt in Marion County and beyond.

Moreover, the election denier movement shows no signs of fading away. Election deniers are [seeking positions of authority](#) over election administration and [voter suppression](#) policies continue to proliferate around the country. As we approach the 2024 election, the role of the media in tracking and exposing election deniers will be critically important to defending our democracy. Our national news environment must resist the pitfalls of the past, such as allowing one person or national story to dominate [the narrative](#) or creating false equivalencies about both sides of the political spectrum. Instead, [the media can work to strengthen our democracy](#) by centering communities over candidates; explaining how elections are conducted; providing information about ballot measures; recommitting to delivering objective, factual news; and reporting proactive stories that warn readers about what messages or strategies we might expect from election denying candidates.

Our research demonstrates the potential of local news to provide a persuasive, contextualized counter-narrative to the divisive and distracting discourse currently dominating much of the media environment. [More Americans trust local news than national news](#) and over half of Americans think [local newspapers and TV are the best source for news](#) about local politics. [Our own polling](#) reveals that 68% of registered voters think the mainstream media is a threat to democracy. Such high levels of trust in local news combined with broad distrust of the mainstream media provide an opportunity for

democracy organizations and advocates to leverage local news in the fight against election denialism. Democracy advocates can work with local news outlets to [create local news that encourages civic participation](#) by disseminating information not just about the timing and locations of local elections, but also about local candidates, ballot measures, and reminding voters about the issues at stake that will directly impact their daily lives. To promote civic engagement and a healthy democracy, democracy advocates can and should leverage local news to counteract the anti-democratic election denial movement.



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The Public Wise Research & Education Fund conducts nonprofit, nonpartisan polling and research to fill the gaps in voter and voting rights research to complement ongoing studies being conducted by others in the field. We also work with Public Wise's partner organizations to advise on research best practices and ensure organizers are using evidence based messaging when they are working in their communities.

To learn more about Public Wise, please visit www.publicwise.org, or reach out to info@publicwise.org.

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