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# TRUTH OR LIES?

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Fake News & Political Polarization



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## **Abstract**

The phrase “fake news” has widely encapsulated the world following the election of Donald Trump to the office of President of the United States. Media outlets, both conservative and liberal, have come under attack from their opposing counterparts. The headlines which they run, rather than the substance of what is presented under that headline are now even more widely judged by the audiences who view that material than before. This paper, and the survey questions that accompany it, attempts to analyze whether the trustworthiness a viewer has of a certain headline, comes from the headline itself, or rather from the news outlet which runs it. The responses compiled widely support the hypothesis that individuals more times view trustworthiness with the name of the media outlet in television media, but those are not the same circumstances as other types of media.

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## Introduction

“Fake news”, a term until recently unused at all, has now divided the purpose of the political media. Candidates, career politicians, and even competing media outlets now use the term to describe their opponents, and more specifically the headlines which surface against their own favor. Media outlets in print and online that circulate nationally within the United States have seen an even greater increase of partisan viewership, as well as increased backlash towards their work. There has become a wide belief by both sides of the political spectrum in America, that their counterparts spread news that is not justified, is not researched, and is meant only to widen the gap between groups. The PEW Research Center first conducted a survey in March-April of 2014, asking respondents to describe their trust in certain news outlets (See Appendix A). However, since this date there has been no other survey of the same kind. The survey also is limited to broad trust or distrust due to the history the respondent had with that media. Then, in May of 2017, now following the use of the term “fake news” and the election of Donald Trump, PEW created a new survey asking an individual’s interest in national news (See Appendix B). This survey included questions regarding where trust or distrust of the news outlets comes from, including the sources, the organization that published the story, gut instinct, and the person that shared the story with them.

The focus thus far has only been concerned with the trust in a news outlet for their name, or for the reasons as to why there is a lack of trust in that name. These two fields had not yet been combined into one study. Respondents had not been given the opportunity as to see actual headlines combined with the name of the outlet which ran the story, and then describe their trust. By doing this, the respondent then has direct contact with both fields that PEW had researched, and thus a determination can be made whether it is the name or the substance that is most prevalent when individuals watch, read, or scroll through their news. Do individuals trust the news that is given to them through the media by the name of the organization running the story, or by what the headline reads?

## Methodology

To begin, respondents were asked to rate their trust, from 0% to 100%, in the following news outlets: MSNBC, Fox News, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, Huffington Post, and Breitbart News. The respondents answers, coupled with the ideological spectrum laid out by PEW in their study (Appendix A), would determine whether that respondent was more liberally or more conservatively aligned politically.

Then, using the baseline of PEW Research Center's analysis of American trust in certain news media organizations (Appendix A), respondents were asked to complete a survey concerning the topic of immigration. The number of outlets were reduced in comparison to the PEW study, utilizing those who were in direct contrast to one another. These outlets included coupling MSNBC with Fox News for television news, The Wall Street Journal with The New York Times for print (digital) media, and Huffington Post with Breitbart News for online news sources. As a control, a headline from the Associated Press that ran on all of the previously listed outlets was given before questions concerning the others began. This would help to determine a generic variance that could be expected in the questions to follow. When answering the question of how trustworthy the headline is, respondents had five separate choices: very trustworthy, moderately trustworthy, neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy, moderately untrustworthy, and very untrustworthy.

After the controls were established, the respondents moved onto headlines from the previously listed six media outlets. Each organization's logo accompanied two headlines concerning immigration. The first of the headlines, was a legitimate headline that had run from the shown organization. The second of the headlines however, while paired with that logo, actually had run on their counterpart's media. Comparisons could then be drawn as to whether respondents answered based upon the substance of the headline, or the name of the organization, as well whether there was any variance between conservatives and liberals, or the types of outlets.

**Results**

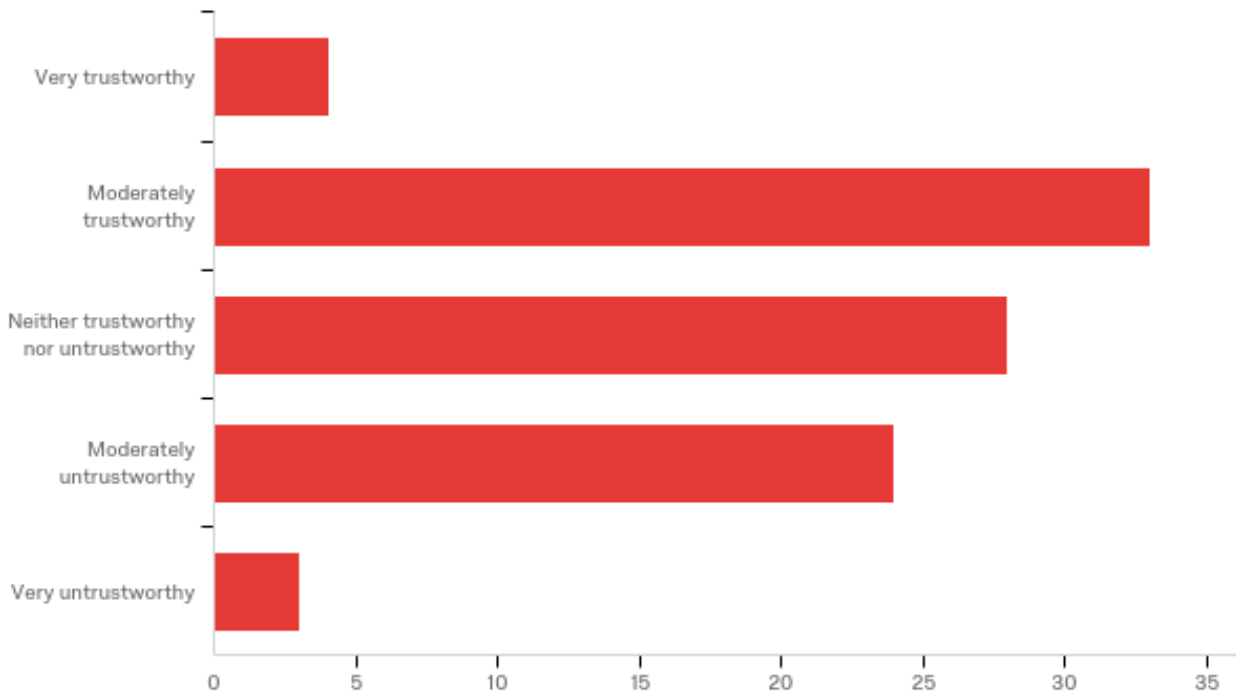
**Q2 - When applicable, please select the percentage of trust which you have in the following news outlets:**

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	MSNBC	1.00	94.00	48.12	24.06	578.64	328
2	Fox News	0.00	100.00	43.01	27.79	772.36	340
3	New York Times	7.00	100.00	64.39	24.90	619.99	360
4	Wall Street Journal	7.00	100.00	66.27	21.26	451.99	340
5	Huffington Post	0.00	95.00	45.05	27.93	780.21	332
6	Breitbart	0.00	100.00	27.39	27.54	758.48	164

**Q3 - The following is a headline that ran through the Associated Press, and was then disbursed by multiple cable news outlets.**

**"End to 'temporary' status for US migrants feared under Trump"<sup>1</sup>**

**How trustworthy is this headline?**



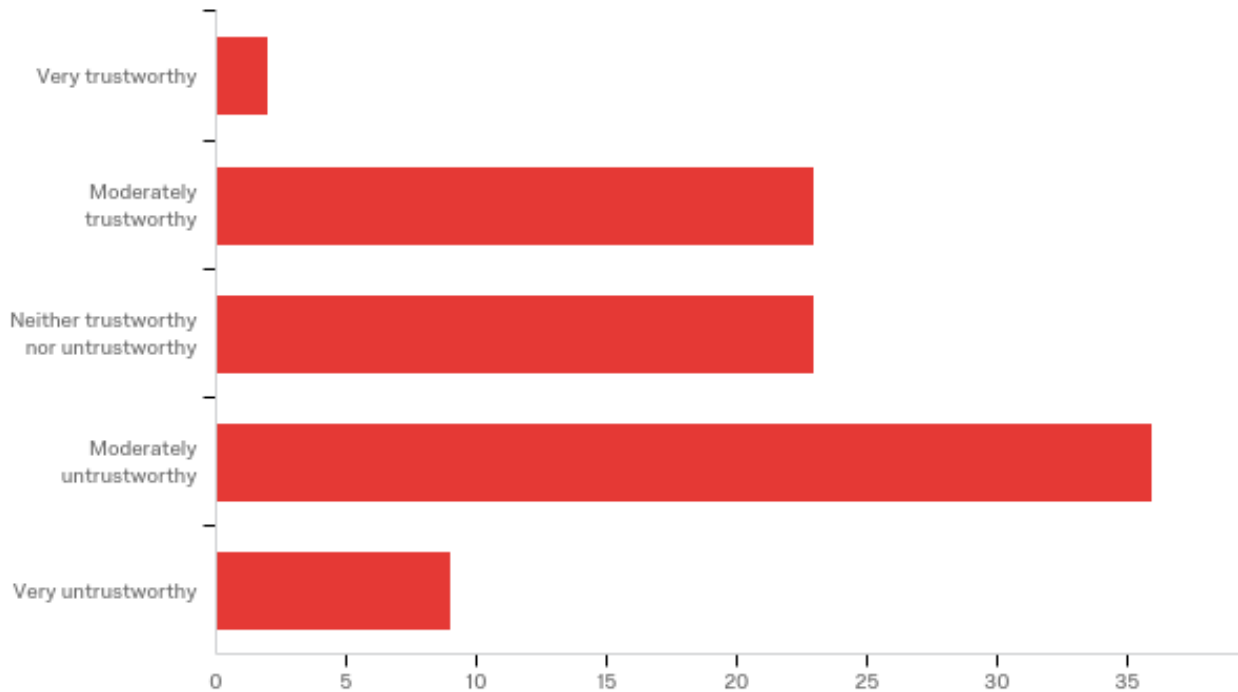
#	Answer	%	Count
1	Very trustworthy	4.35%	16
2	Moderately trustworthy	35.87%	132
3	Neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy	30.43%	112
4	Moderately untrustworthy	26.09%	96
5	Very untrustworthy	3.26%	12
	Total	100%	368

<sup>1</sup> Luis Alonso Lugo and Ben Fox, "End to 'temporary' status for US migrants feared under Trump," AP News, May 29, 2017, , <https://apnews.com/2c9d9921f7984ae081f1a1b36190196a>.

Q4 - The following is a headline that ran on MSNBC.

"Trump's false start on immigration leaves everyone guessing"<sup>2</sup>

How trustworthy is this headline?



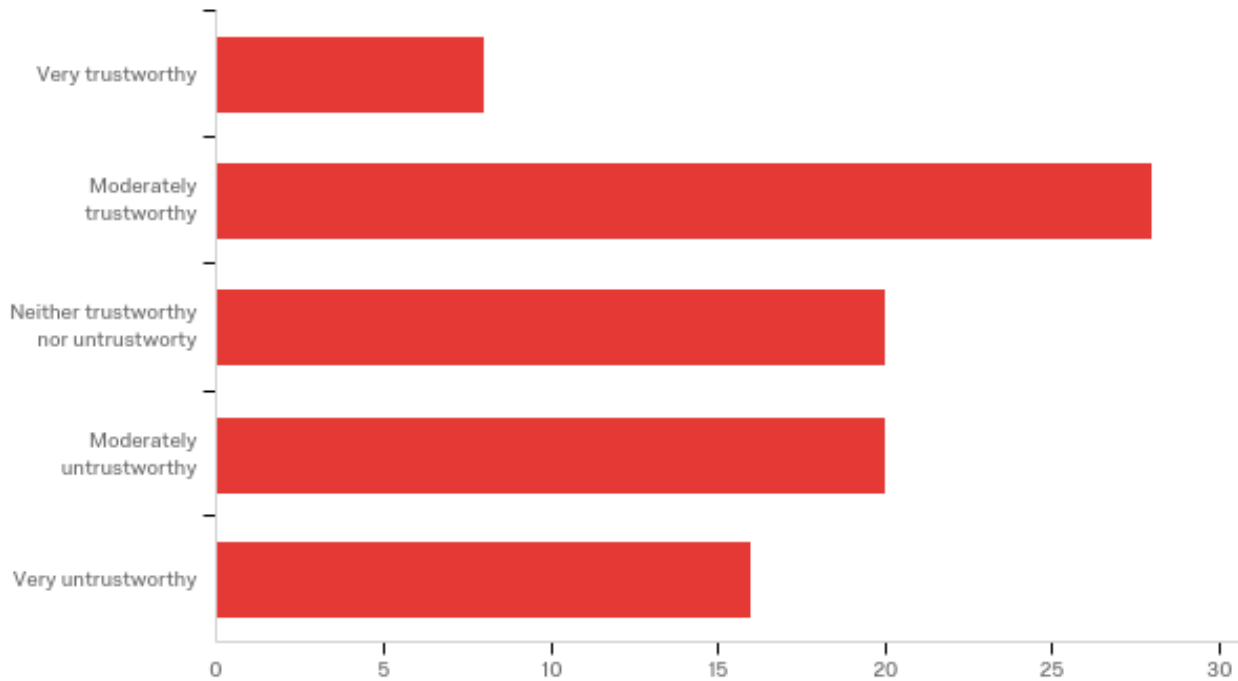
#	Answer	%	Count
1	Very trustworthy	2.15%	8
2	Moderately trustworthy	24.73%	92
3	Neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy	24.73%	92
4	Moderately untrustworthy	38.71%	144
5	Very untrustworthy	9.68%	36
	Total	100%	372

<sup>2</sup> Steve Benen, writer, "Trump's false start on immigration leaves everyone guessing," in *The Rachel Maddow Show*, MSNBC, March 1, 2017, March 1, 2017, <http://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/trumps-false-start-immigration-leaves-everyone-guessing>.

Q5 - The following is a headline that ran on MSNBC.

"Does 'ignorance' fuel immigration concerns?"<sup>3</sup>

How trustworthy is this headline?



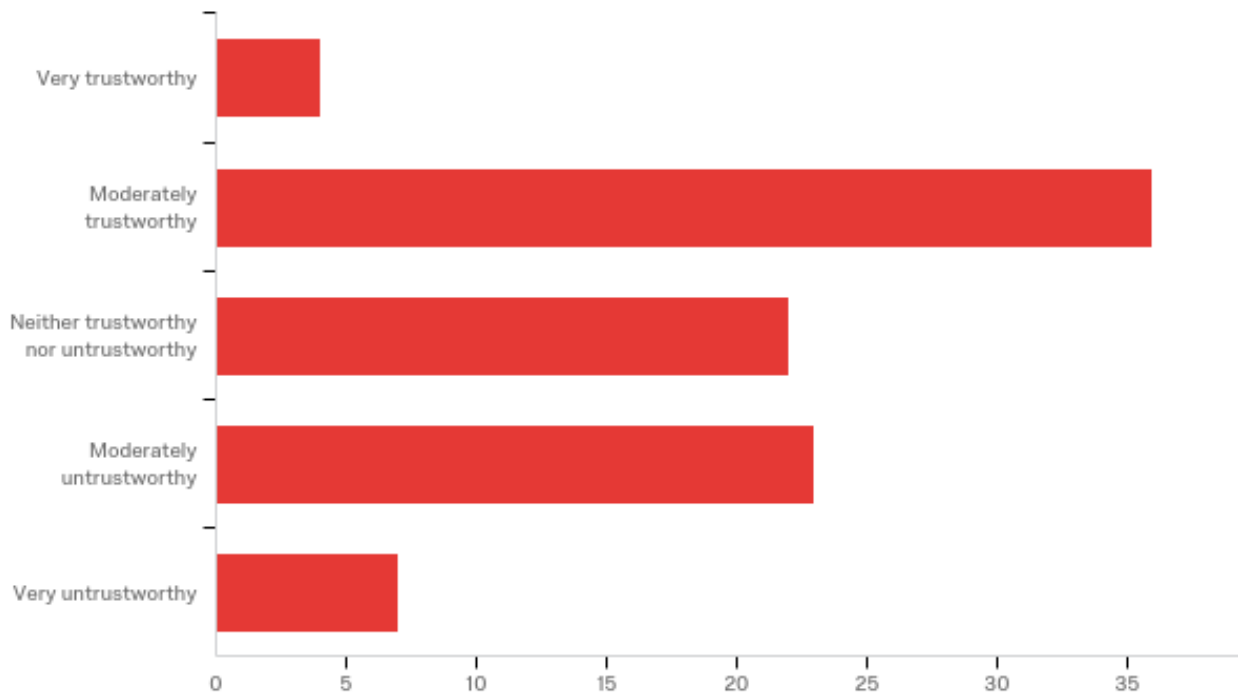
#	Answer	%	Count
1	Very trustworthy	8.70%	32
2	Moderately trustworthy	30.43%	112
3	Neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy	21.74%	80
4	Moderately untrustworthy	21.74%	80
5	Very untrustworthy	17.39%	64
	Total	100%	368

<sup>3</sup> "Does 'ignorance' fuel immigration concerns?" in *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, Fox News, April 17, 2017, April 17, 2017, <http://video.foxnews.com/v/5401465676001/?#sp=show-clips>.

**Q6 - The following is a headline that ran on Fox News.**

**"Our immigration mess needs real solutions not militarized enforcement"<sup>4</sup>**

**How trustworthy is this headline?**



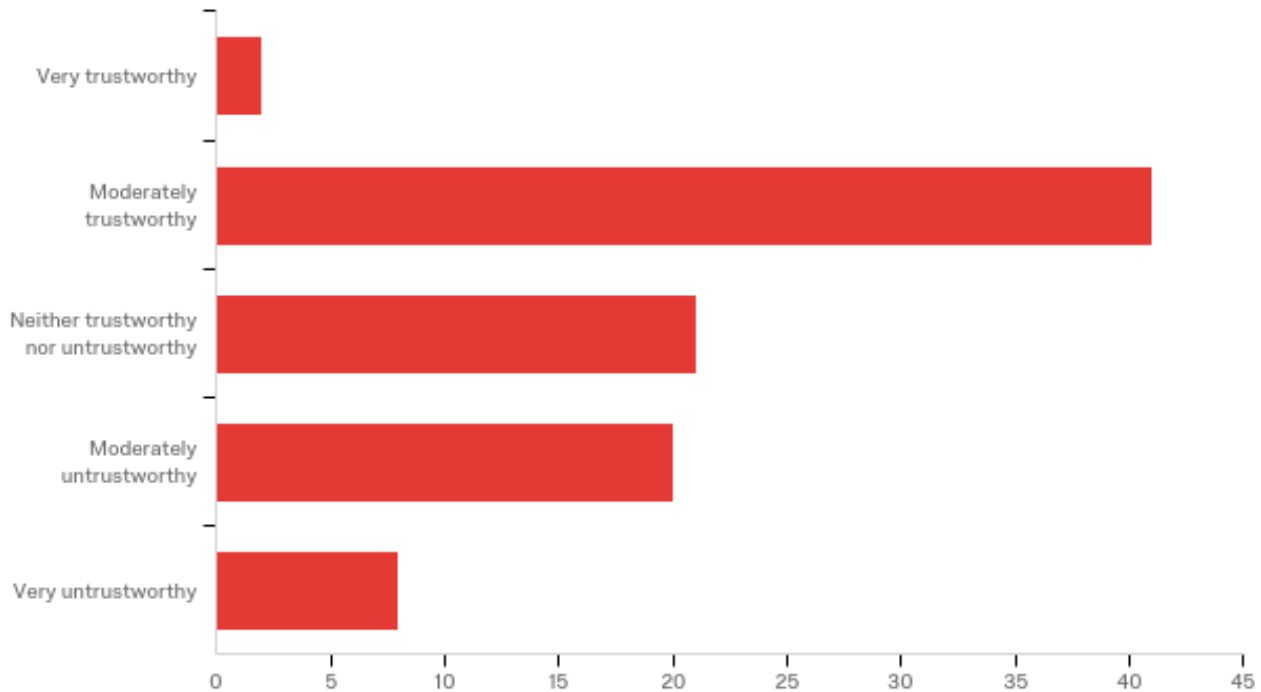
#	Answer	%	Count
1	Very trustworthy	4.35%	16
2	Moderately trustworthy	39.13%	144
3	Neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy	23.91%	88
4	Moderately untrustworthy	25.00%	92
5	Very untrustworthy	7.61%	28
	Total	100%	368

<sup>4</sup> William Stock, "Our immigration mess needs real solutions not militarized enforcement," Fox News, May 20, 2017, , <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2017/05/20/our-immigration-mess-needs-real-solutions-not-militarized-enforcement.html>.

Q7 - The following is a headline that ran on Fox News.

"Trump stumbles into international crisis with Muslim ban"<sup>5</sup>

How trustworthy is this headline?



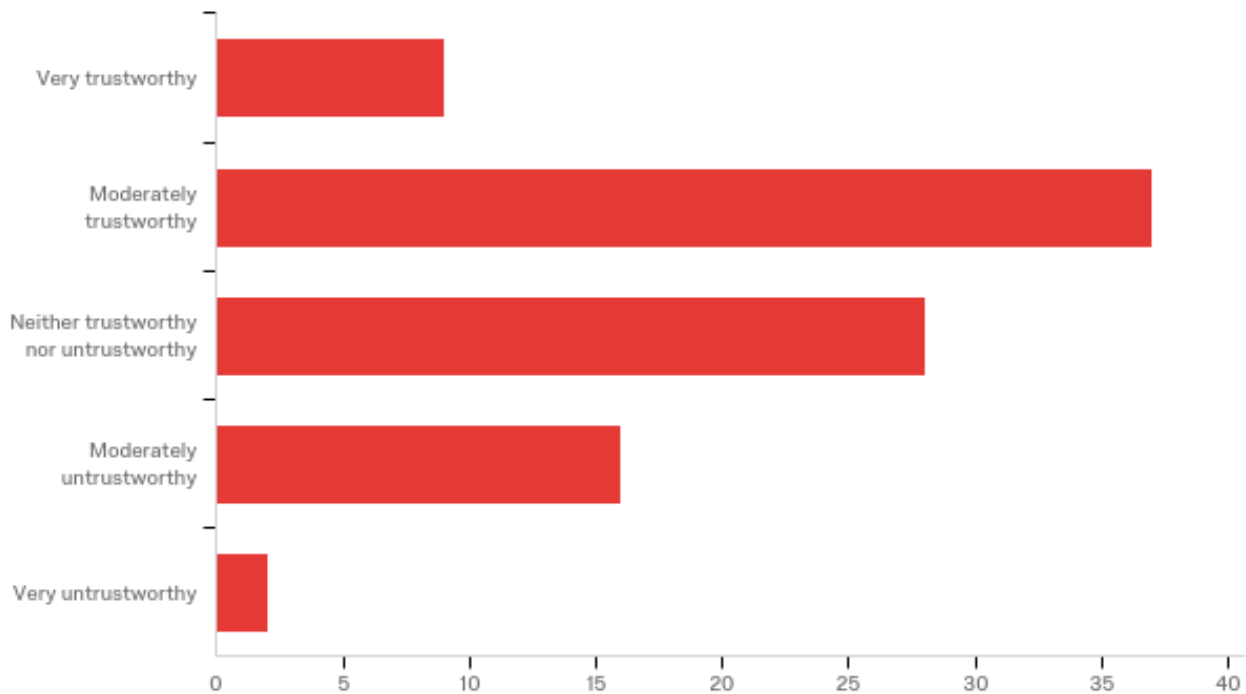
#	Answer	%	Count
1	Very trustworthy	2.17%	8
2	Moderately trustworthy	44.57%	164
3	Neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy	22.83%	84
4	Moderately untrustworthy	21.74%	80
5	Very untrustworthy	8.70%	32
	Total	100%	368

<sup>5</sup> Steve Benen and Rachel Maddow, writers, "Trump stumbles into international crisis with Muslim ban," in *The Rachel Maddow Show*, MSNBC, January 30, 2017, January 30, 2017, <http://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/trump-stumbles-international-crisis-muslim-ban>.

Q8 - The following is a headline that ran in the New York Times.

"To Be Great Again, America Needs Immigrants"<sup>6</sup>

How trustworthy is this headline?



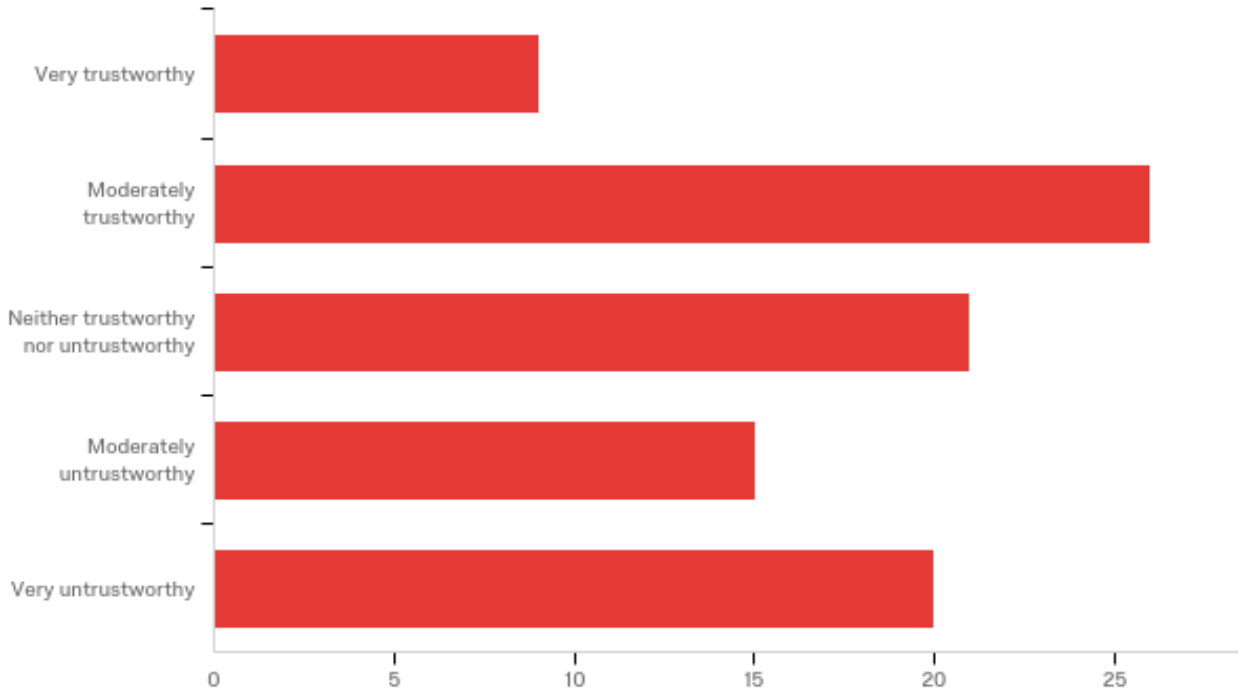
#	Answer	%	Count
1	Very trustworthy	9.78%	36
2	Moderately trustworthy	40.22%	148
3	Neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy	30.43%	112
4	Moderately untrustworthy	17.39%	64
5	Very untrustworthy	2.17%	8
	Total	100%	368

<sup>6</sup> Ruchir Sharma, "To Be Great Again, America Needs Immigrants," *The New York Times*, May 6, 2017, , [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/06/opinion/sunday/to-be-great-again-america-needs-immigrants.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/06/opinion/sunday/to-be-great-again-america-needs-immigrants.html?_r=0).

Q9 - The following is a headline that ran in the New York Times.

"Many Illegal Immigrants Arrive Legally"<sup>7</sup>

How trustworthy is this headline?



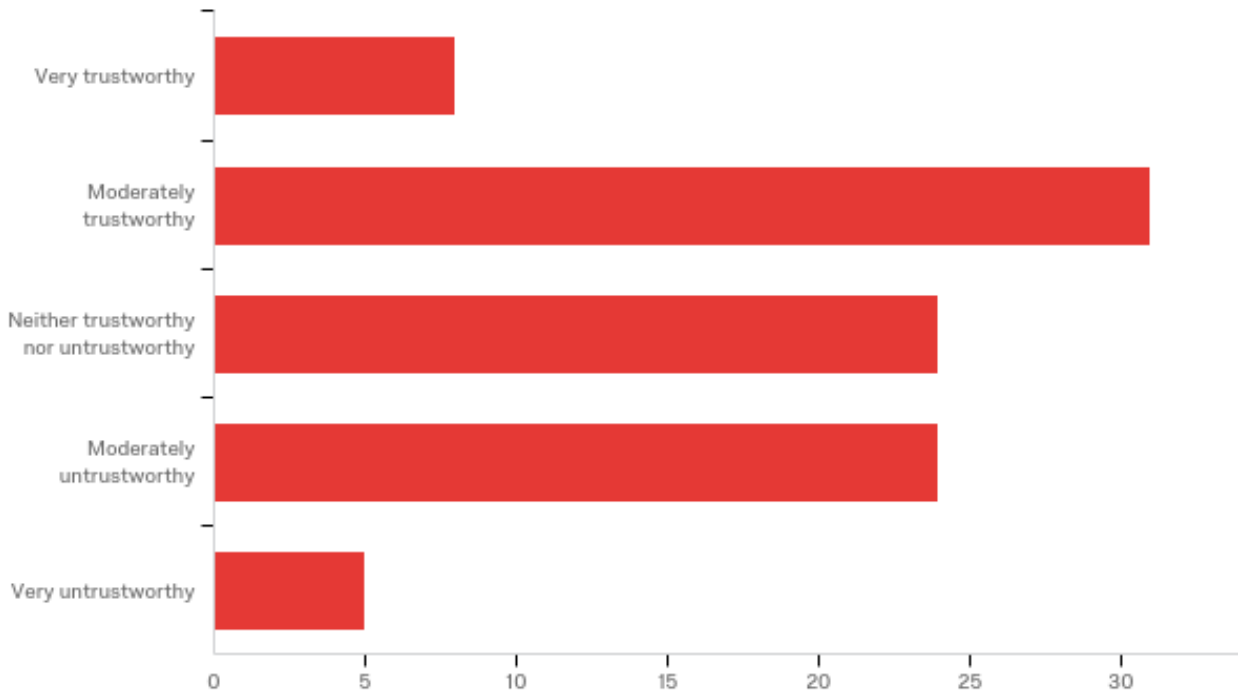
#	Answer	%	Count
1	Very trustworthy	9.89%	36
2	Moderately trustworthy	28.57%	104
3	Neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy	23.08%	84
4	Moderately untrustworthy	16.48%	60
5	Very untrustworthy	21.98%	80
	Total	100%	364

<sup>7</sup> Laura Meckler, "Many Illegal Immigrants Arrive Legally," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 22, 2017, , <https://www.wsj.com/articles/many-illegal-immigrants-arrive-legally-1495490235>.

**Q10 - The following is a headline that ran in the Wall Street Journal.**

**"On Immigration, Washington Doesn't Know Best"<sup>8</sup>**

**How trustworthy is this headline?**



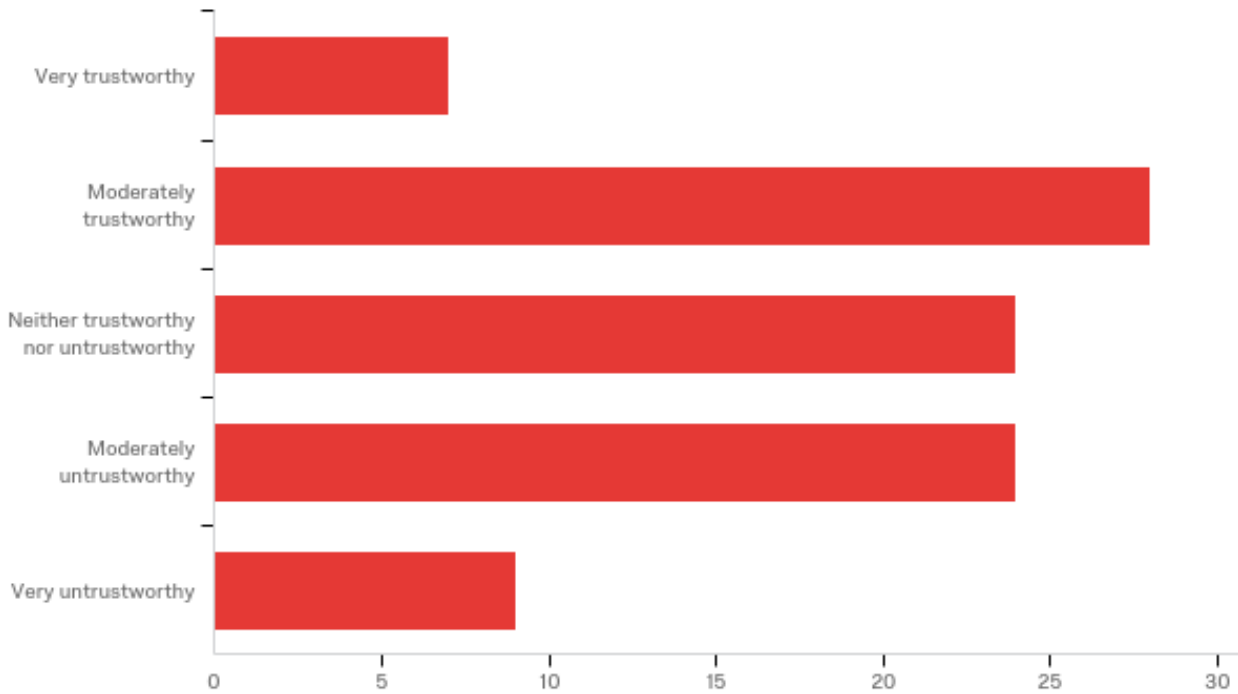
#	Answer	%	Count
1	Very trustworthy	8.70%	32
2	Moderately trustworthy	33.70%	124
3	Neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy	26.09%	96
4	Moderately untrustworthy	26.09%	96
5	Very untrustworthy	5.43%	20
	Total	100%	368

<sup>8</sup> Jason L. Riley, "On Immigration, Washington Doesn't Know Best," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 2, 2017, , <https://www.wsj.com/articles/on-immigration-washington-doesnt-know-best-1493765941>.

**Q11 - The following is a headline that ran in the Wall Street Journal.**

**"Don't Be Fooled, Trump's New Muslim Ban Is Still Illegal"<sup>9</sup>**

**How trustworthy is this headline?**



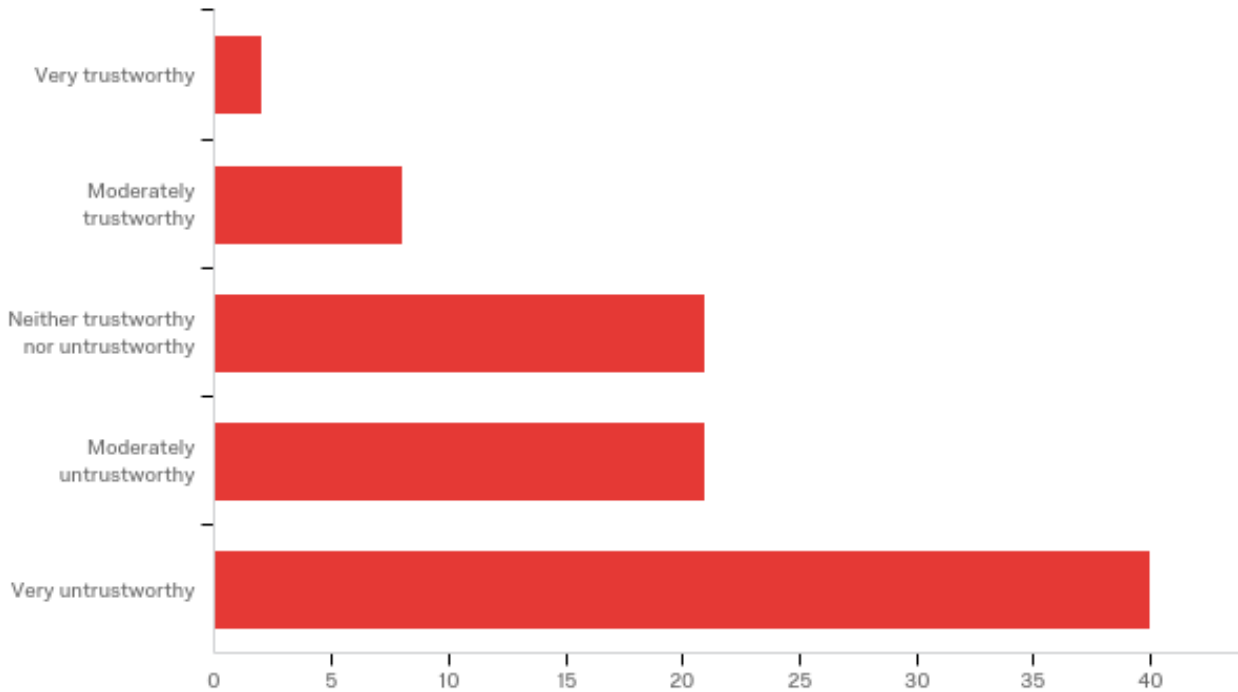
#	Answer	%	Count
1	Very trustworthy	7.61%	28
2	Moderately trustworthy	30.43%	112
3	Neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy	26.09%	96
4	Moderately untrustworthy	26.09%	96
5	Very untrustworthy	9.78%	36
	Total	100%	368

<sup>9</sup> Khera, Farhana, and Johnathan Smith. "Don't Be Fooled, Trump's New Muslim Ban Is Still Illegal." *The New York Times*, March 6, 2017. [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/06/opinion/dont-be-fooled-trumps-new-muslim-ban-is-still-illegal.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FImmigration%20and%20Emigration&action=click&contentCollection=timestopics%2FImmigration%20and%20Emigration&module=stream\\_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=237&pgtype=collection](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/06/opinion/dont-be-fooled-trumps-new-muslim-ban-is-still-illegal.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FImmigration%20and%20Emigration&action=click&contentCollection=timestopics%2FImmigration%20and%20Emigration&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=237&pgtype=collection).

**Q12 - The following is a headline that ran on Huffington Post.**

**"It's Time To Stop Trump And His Cronies From Pushing Black And Brown People Out Of The U.S."<sup>10</sup>**

**How trustworthy is this headline?**



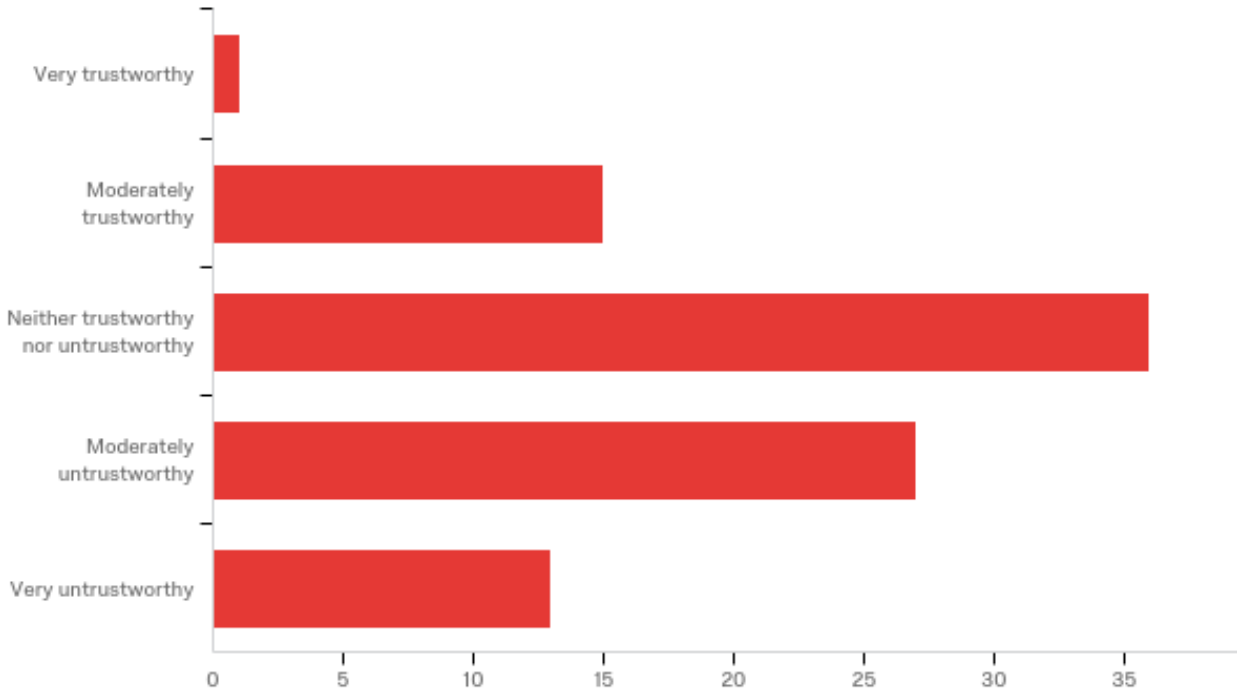
#	Answer	%	Count
1	Very trustworthy	2.17%	8
2	Moderately trustworthy	8.70%	32
3	Neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy	22.83%	84
4	Moderately untrustworthy	22.83%	84
5	Very untrustworthy	43.48%	160
	Total	100%	368

<sup>10</sup> "It's Time To Stop Trump And His Cronies From Pushing Black And Brown People Out Of The U.S.," HuffPost, May 24, 2017, , [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/its-time-to-stop-trump-and-his-cronies-from-pushing\\_us\\_5925ed54e4b0627b74360cef?utm\\_hp\\_ref=immigration](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/its-time-to-stop-trump-and-his-cronies-from-pushing_us_5925ed54e4b0627b74360cef?utm_hp_ref=immigration).

**Q13 - The following is a headline that ran on Huffington Post.**

**"Pause Legal Immigration"<sup>11</sup>**

**How trustworthy is this headline?**



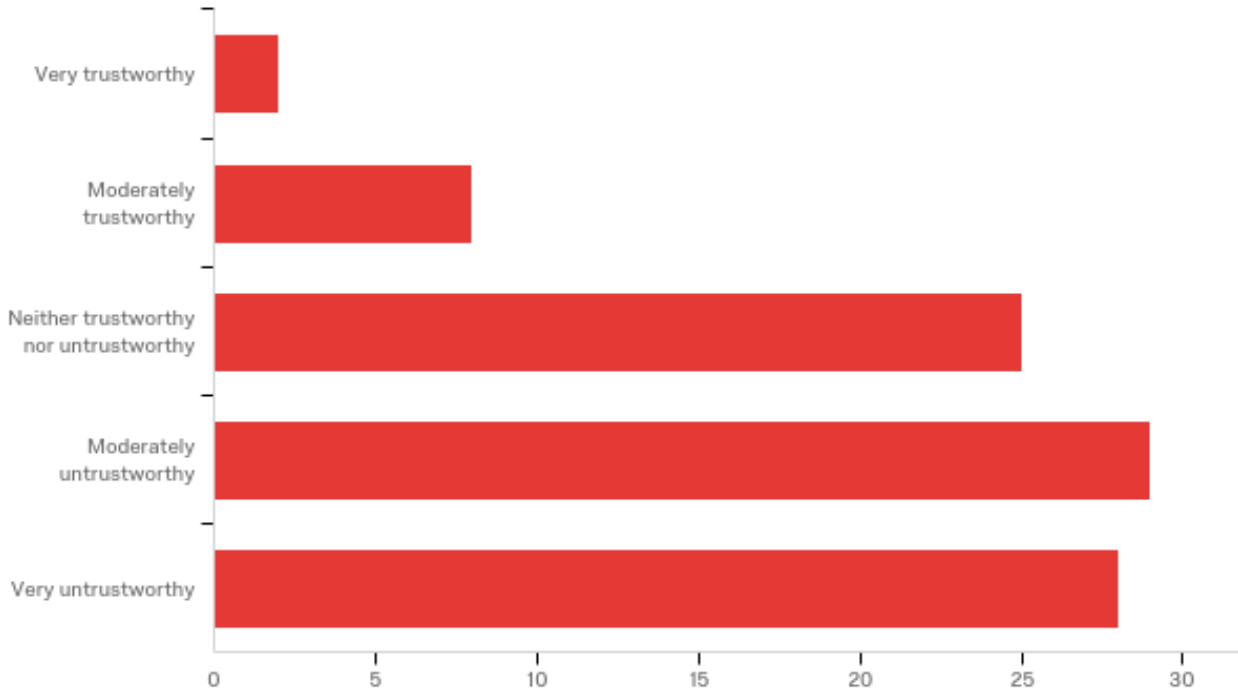
#	Answer	%	Count
1	Very trustworthy	1.09%	4
2	Moderately trustworthy	16.30%	60
3	Neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy	39.13%	144
4	Moderately untrustworthy	29.35%	108
5	Very untrustworthy	14.13%	52
	Total	100%	368

<sup>11</sup> Neil Munro, "Hidden Ipsos Poll: Public Strongly Backs Donald Trump's Plan To 'Pause' Legal Immigration," Breitbart, November 18, 2016, , <http://www.breitbart.com/2016-presidential-race/2016/11/18/poll-public-backs-trump-immigration-pause/>.

**Q14 - The following is a headline that ran on Breitbart News.**

**"Trump Goes Mushy, Incoherent on Immigration"<sup>12</sup>**

**How trustworthy is this headline?**



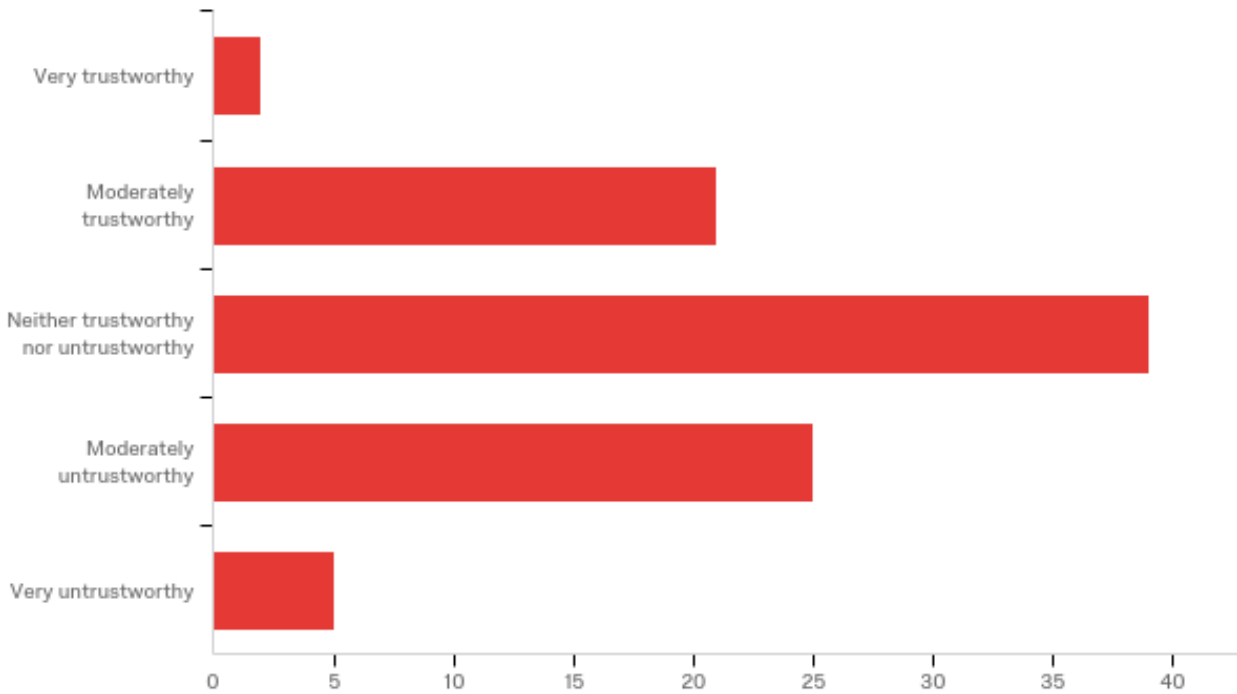
#	Answer	%	Count
1	Very trustworthy	2.17%	8
2	Moderately trustworthy	8.70%	32
3	Neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy	27.17%	100
4	Moderately untrustworthy	31.52%	116
5	Very untrustworthy	30.43%	112
	Total	100%	368

<sup>12</sup> Ben Shapiro, "Trump Goes Mushy, Incoherent on Immigration," Breitbart, July 30, 2015, , <http://www.breitbart.com/immigration/2015/07/30/trump-goes-mushy-incoherent-on-immigration/>.

Q15 - The following is a headline that ran on Breitbart News.

"Restricting Immigration Won't Make American Industries Great Again"<sup>13</sup>

How trustworthy is this headline?



#	Answer	%	Count
1	Very trustworthy	2.17%	8
2	Moderately trustworthy	22.83%	84
3	Neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy	42.39%	156
4	Moderately untrustworthy	27.17%	100
5	Very untrustworthy	5.43%	20
	Total	100%	368

<sup>13</sup> Michael Niren, "Restricting Immigration Won't Make American Industries Great Again," HuffPost, February 26, 2017, , [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/restricting-immigration-wont-make-american-industries\\_us\\_58b2032fe4b0658fc20f9625?utm\\_hp\\_ref=immigration](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/restricting-immigration-wont-make-american-industries_us_58b2032fe4b0658fc20f9625?utm_hp_ref=immigration).

## **Analysis**

The hypothesis that the names associated with a headline are more important than the substance of the headline was essentially proven with reservations. As expected, people enjoy television. In analyzing the data, it did not matter the substance of the material, but rather whether the headline had been run by MSNBC or Fox News. There were no major changes to the percentages of individuals who trusted the differing headlines. The print media shockingly however, did experience change in those percentages. Wide variance in responses, mainly with the New York Times articles showed that the headline itself did matter more, and there were changes in the respondents' level of trust in those headlines. Print media was not consistent with other findings. Also, the most polarizing of the media outlets selected, Huffington Post and Breitbart, were either not as well read, or did experience change as well. Breitbart, an extremely conservative organization, was read by only approximately half of that of the other organizations, and Huffington Post, incredibly liberal, did not see consistent viewership with their ideals, regardless of the headline.

## **Conclusion**

This study can be the basis for future work. It must be recognized that the survey did not include social media, was limited to college-age level, and currently can't be applied in anyway. By expanding upon all of these areas, further research may help reaffirm the findings from this survey, and will allow further analysis of how individuals, specifically those in the United States utilize the media to understand political topics. Obviously the fact remains that individuals must first seek out the material that they disagree with in order to have issue with what is posted. In order for the term "fake news" to be actually valid, the individual labeling something as such must have prior knowledge of the incident at hand, have fully researched it, and understand all variations to the story. Overall however, the results are not meant to define what "fake news" is or is not, but rather to provide insight as to how the public views politics in a setting which they are not comfortable or are not as informed. This survey was conducted with a small group of students from the

University of Wyoming. Wyoming as a state is traditionally conservative, but in contrast the university setting provides more diversity in political viewpoint. To consolidate any argument of the results found in this paper, further action is required. A broader questionnaire to a mixed audience across the United States, concerning different topics than that of immigration could provide needed insight as to how Americans understand politics, and the ways in which they choose to view it.

Now, with the expansion of technology, the headline of an article has become more important than the article itself. The main issue, one that will go unresolved but is still at the heart of political media, is wondering whether or not media outlets truly wish to be less divisive. While their goals are meant to provide information to their viewers, all information is presented with bias. Their hope is to bring new viewers, maintain viewers that already watch or read their program, and delegitimize their opponents. Social media may soon take over the pedestal which television currently holds, and this only means that much further research will be needed in order to understand how to conquer the partisanship and lack of information which reaches individuals along the entire political spectrum.

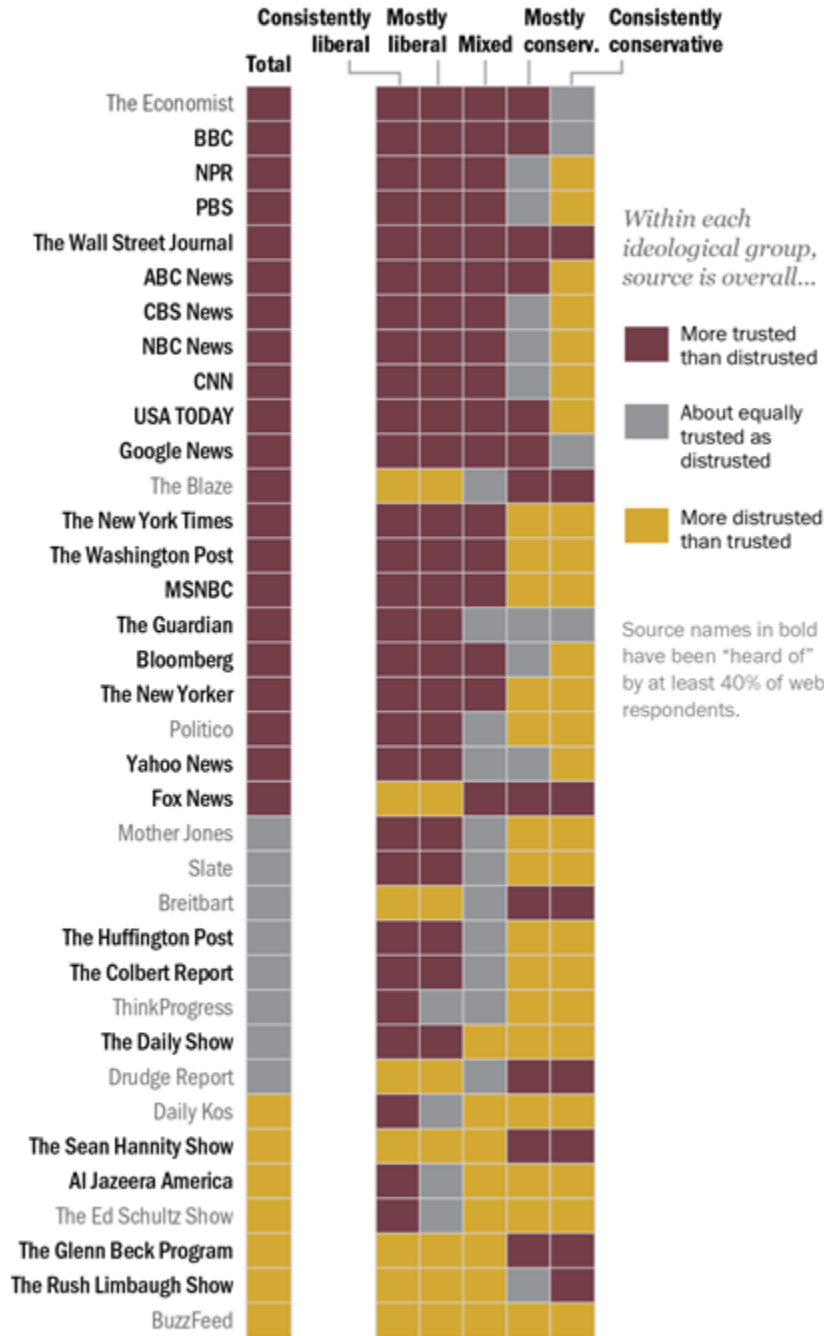
It is original stories and breaking news that are essential to the survival of news outlets. However, on widespread storylines, many organizations will cite headlines from outside resources, such as the Associated Press. This process of trickling down, from one source to many outlets, is currently the only process. A lack of diversity in what readers, listeners, and watchers experience may be one of the main issues as to why individuals are becoming less and less informed. Their biases only become reinforced with a continued exposure to the same news outlets. To apply the results of this study, and ideally studies that reaffirm these findings, would be the introduction of an outlet which reverses the process of trickling down. Rather, stories or headlines may funnel from all news outlets onto one platform. Those headlines will not be accompanied by the logo of the organization which ran or wrote the material, and only will be cited at the end of the article. As shown, in print media (also including digital print), substance is more important than title. Simple

changes in the media may have ramifications that could lead to a more informed, less divisive, and more appealing way to understand and enjoy the news of the United States and of the world as a whole.

Appendices

APPENDIX A

**Trust Levels of News Sources by Ideological Group**



American Trends Panel (wave 1). Survey conducted March 19-April 29, 2014. Q21a-21b. Based on web respondents. Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see about the survey). Grouping of outlets is determined by whether the percent who trust each source is significantly different from the percent who distrust each source. Outlets are then ranked by the proportion of those who trust more than distrust each.

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<sup>14</sup> Amy Mitchell, Jeffrey Gottfried, and Katerina Eva Matsa, "Political Polarization & Media Habits," PEW Research Center, October 21, 2014, , <http://www.journalism.org/2014/10/21/political-polarization-media-habits/>.

## Main Source of Government and Political News

% whose main source for news about gov't and politics is...

Total	Consistently liberal	Mostly liberal	Mixed	Mostly conservative	Consistently conservative
CNN 16%	CNN 15%	CNN 20%	CNN 20%	Fox News 31%	Fox News 47%
Fox News 14	NPR 13	Local TV 11	Local TV 16	CNN 9	Local radio 11
Local TV 10	MSNBC 12	NPR 9	Fox News 8	Local TV 6	Local TV 5
NPR 5	New York Times 10	Fox News 5	Yahoo News 7	Local radio 6	Local newspaper 3
Local radio 4	Local TV 5	MSNBC 5	Google News 6	Yahoo News 6	Google News 3

American Trends Panel (wave 1). Survey conducted March 19-April 29, 2014. Q19-Q19d. Based on web respondents. Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see About the Survey for more details). Respondents were first asked what platform (TV, radio, etc.) they most use for news about government and politics, and then were asked to name the outlet they most turn to. Up to three answers were accepted.

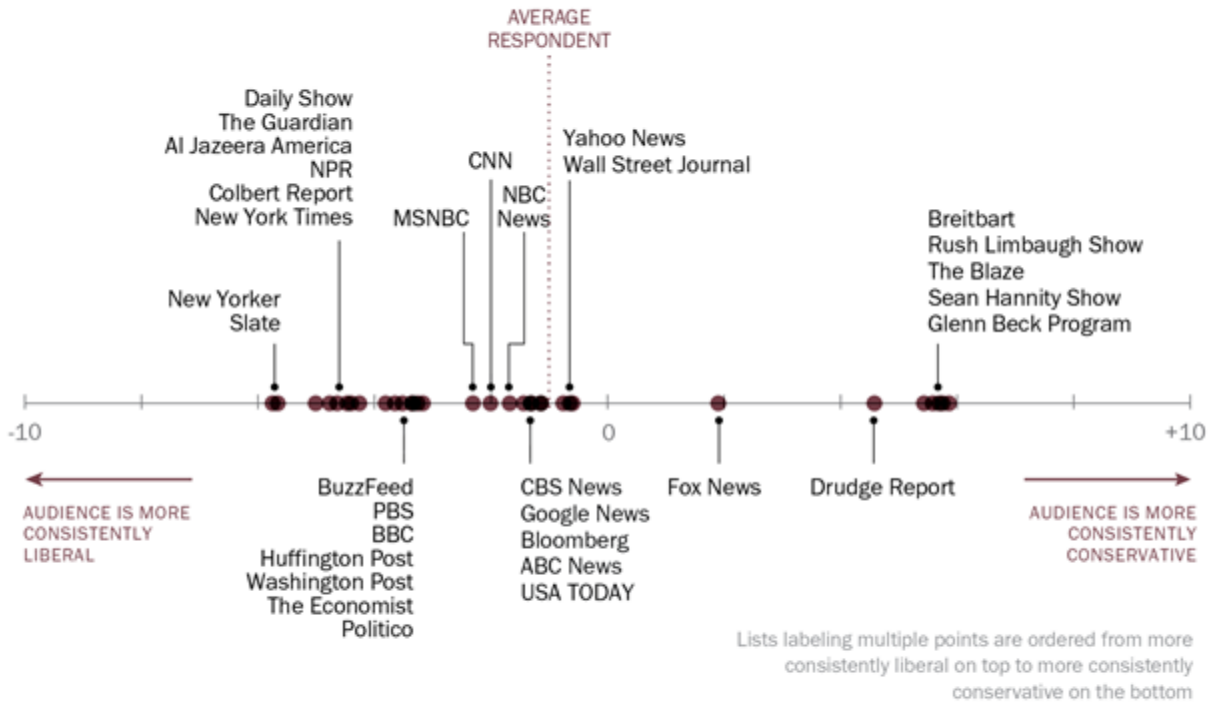
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<sup>15</sup> Mitchell, "Political Polarization & Media Habits."



### Ideological Placement of Each Source's Audience

Average ideological placement on a 10-point scale of ideological consistency of those who got news from each source in the past week...



American Trends Panel (wave 1). Survey conducted March 19-April 29, 2014. Q22. Based on all web respondents. Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see About the Survey for more details.) ThinkProgress, DailyKos, Mother Jones, and The Ed Schultz Show are not included in this graphic because audience sample sizes are too small to analyze.

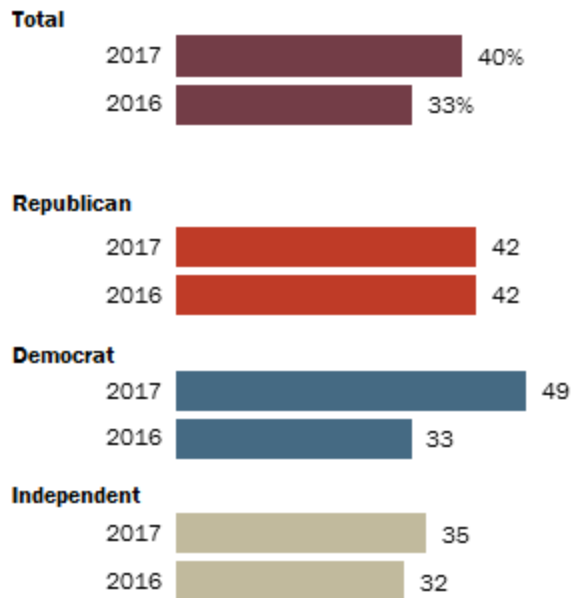
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

<sup>17</sup> Mitchell, "Political Polarization & Media Habits."

## APPENDIX B

### Higher interest in national news driven by Democrats

*% of U.S. adults who very closely follow national news*



Source: Surveys conducted March 13-27, 2017, and Jan. 12-Feb. 8, 2016.  
 "Americans' Attitudes About the News Media Deeply Divided Along Partisan Lines"

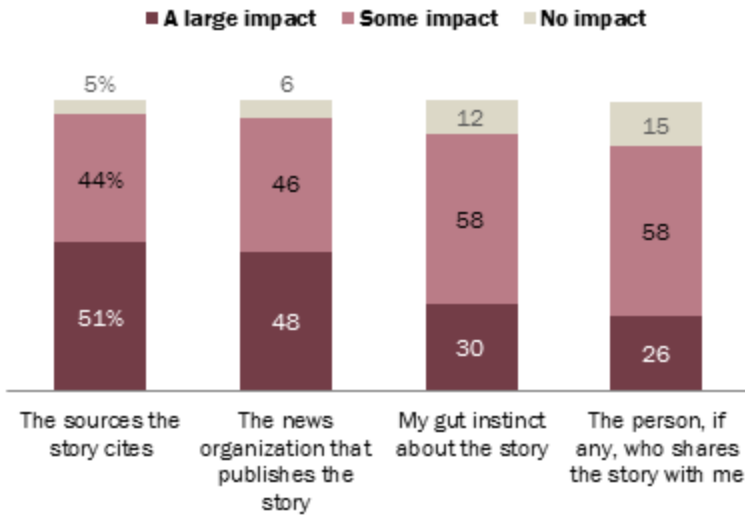
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Barthel and Amy Mitchell, "Interest in national news increases sharply among Democrats," PEW Research Center, May 10, 2017, , <http://www.journalism.org/2017/05/10/interest-in-national-news-increases-sharply-among-democrats/>.

## Several factors have an impact on perceived trustworthiness of news stories

% of U.S. adults who say each has \_\_\_\_ on whether they think a news story is trustworthy



Note: "No answer" not shown.

Source: Survey conducted March 13-27, 2017.

"Americans' Attitudes About the News Media Deeply Divided Along Partisan Lines"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

<sup>19</sup> Barthel and Mitchell, "Interest in national news increases sharply among Democrats."

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