

# Political Orientation and Information Sources

Research Report: SPAS-007 | August 28, 2020

## Background

In this report, we asked, “Do sources of information differ by political orientation?” To investigate this, we assessed which information sources 600 self-identified liberals, moderates, and conservatives reported using.

## Methodology

### Data Source

- Social and Political Attitudes Study (SPAS)
  - A nationally representative sample reflecting the U.S. adult population in terms of educational attainment, ethnicity, gender, and household income.

### Participants

- 600 adults that identify as fiscal and social:
  1. Liberals: n = 159, 51% female, average age = 42.33 years
  2. Moderates: n = 241, 63% female, average age = 43.46 years
  3. Conservatives: n = 200, 39% female, average age = 52.16 years

### Measures

1. To measure political orientation, participants were asked, “When thinking about the following issues, where would you place yourself on the political continuum?” Participants were asked about (a) financial and economic issues, and (b) social and cultural issues.
  - If participants answered “liberal” for both, they were labeled “liberals.” If they answered “moderate” or “conservative” for both, they were labeled “moderates,” and “conservatives” respectively.
2. Participants were asked how often they use the following as sources of information: (a) social media, (b) television news, (c) online/offline magazines, (d) online/offline newspapers, (e) friends, and (f) family. Answers ranged from “0” (i.e., never) to “4” (i.e., daily).
3. Given the age and sex differences between the three groups, the analysis presented here controlled for participants’ age and gender.

## Summary of Findings

1. All three groups reported using social media and television news more often than other news media sources, approximately weekly on average (Figure 1).
2. Liberals reported using magazines and newspapers (online and offline) more often than moderates and conservatives (Figure 1).
  - Still, all three groups reported using these sources infrequently (i.e., yearly to monthly).
3. All three groups reported using their social network (i.e., friends and family) as sources of information often (Figure 2).
  - However, moderates and conservatives reported using family more often than friends; Liberals reported using friends and family at a similar frequency.

### What do we make of these findings?

1. Why might liberals be utilizing magazines and newspapers more than the other groups?
  - First, this is a self-report measure which means we do not know if liberals are, in fact, using these sources more often, or if liberals just conceptualize themselves as doing so.
  - Second, the difference we found was small, however, recent research shows that mainstream outlets began targeting liberal readers more concerted around 2011 (Goldberg, 2020).
2. Why might moderates and conservatives use family as sources of information more than using friends?
  - In this sample, moderates and conservatives reported significantly higher rates of marriage, cohabitation and time spent with family generally. Is it political orientation or family dynamics that account for this difference?
  - Have an interpretation of this you want to share? Email it to [research@skeptic.com](mailto:research@skeptic.com)

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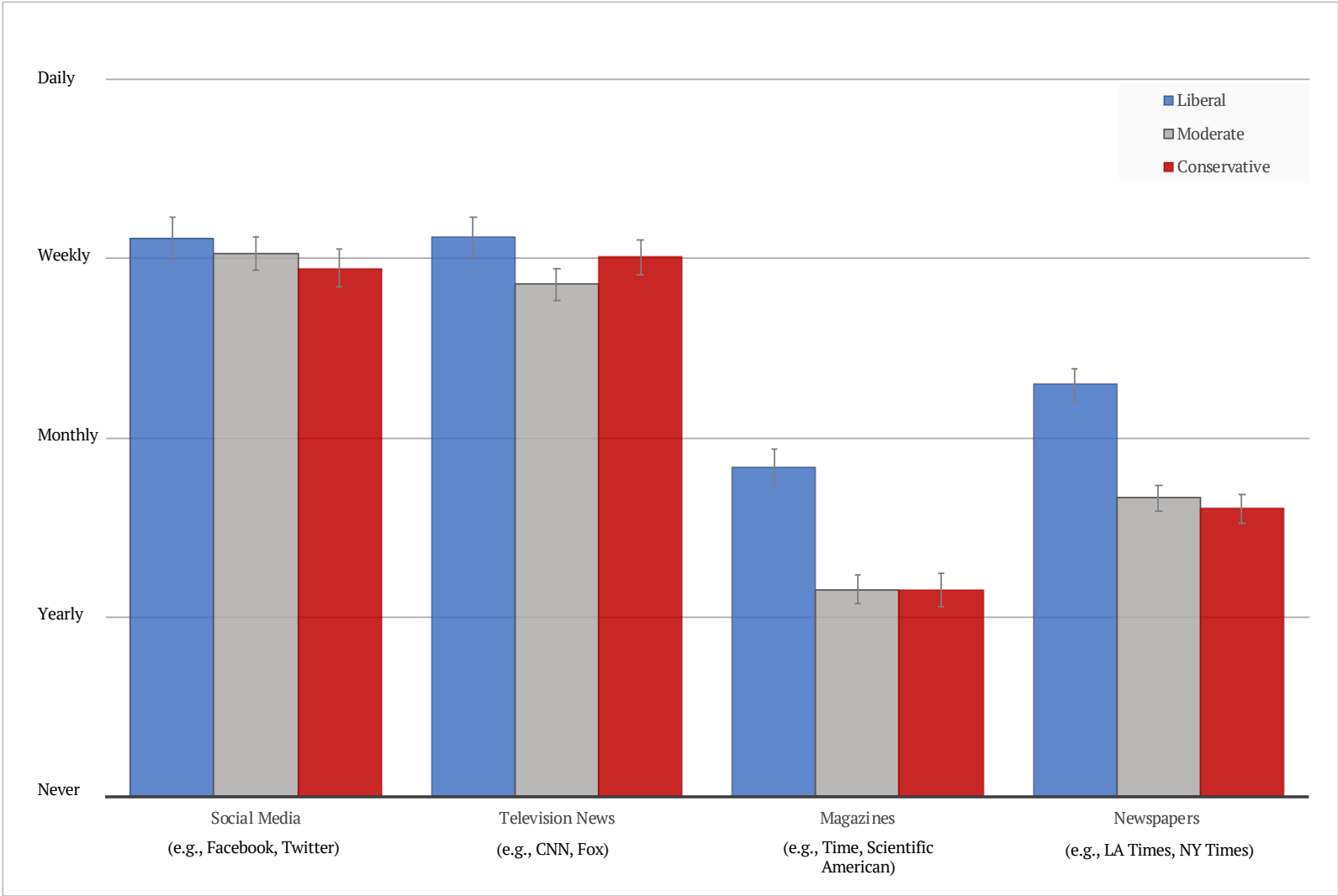
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Figure 1. Political Orientation and Information Sources: News Media



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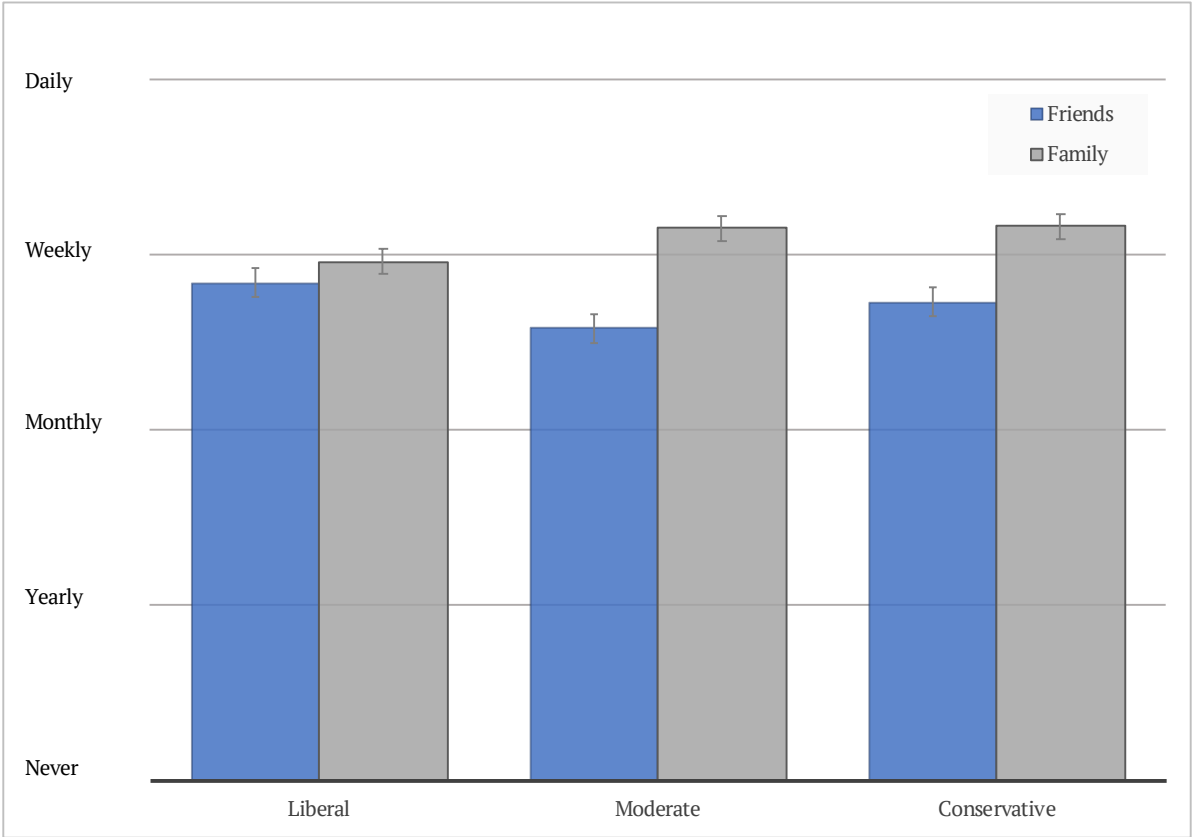
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Figure 2. Political Orientation and Information Sources: Social Network



Note: For additional information (e.g., statistical output, full citations) not included in this document, view the supplemental page for this report.