

How Fox News Changed American Media and Political Dynamics

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The creation of Fox News in 1996 was an event of deep, yet unappreciated, political and historical importance. For the first time, there was a news source available virtually everywhere in the United States, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with a conservative tilt. Finally, conservatives did not have to seek out bits of news favorable to their point of view in liberal publications or in small magazines and newsletters. Like someone dying of thirst in the desert, conservatives drank heavily from the Fox waters. Soon, it became the dominant – and in many cases, virtually the only – major news source for millions of Americans. This has had profound political implications that are only starting to be appreciated. Indeed, it can almost be called self-brainwashing – many conservatives now refuse to even listen to any news or opinion not vetted through Fox, and to believe whatever appears on it as the gospel truth.

When Fox News went on the air in 1996, it advertised itself as “fair and balanced,” which implied that its competitors were neither. At the time, there was unquestionably a liberal bias in the major media; not a huge one, but it was pretty consistent across the three major networks, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times* and the rest of the elite media. As Dartmouth communications professor Jim Kuypers put it in a 2002 study, “There is a demonstrable liberal bias to the mainstream press in America.”¹

Surveys regularly showed that very few reporters were Republicans; the bulk said they were independents, with a large percentage belonging to the Democratic Party.² Journalists argued that their professionalism kept bias out of their reporting and that, insofar as there was apparent bias, it was due to the nature of the news itself and the discipline of fact-based reportage. But even if the reporting itself was free of bias, there is no question that the issues that most interested reporters tended to be ones more likely to be liberal in nature than conservative. As the late journalist Michael Kelly once explained, “What journalists choose and how journalists frame inescapably arises out of what journalists believe. And, as a group, journalists believe in

¹ Jim A. Kuypers, *Press Bias and Politics* (NY: Praeger, 2002): 202. Arguably, the generally positive coverage of Bill Clinton in the major media during the Monica Lewinsky scandal is evidence of liberal bias. See Dhavan V. Shah et al., “News Framing and Cueing of Issue Regimes,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 66:3 (September 2002): 339-70.

² William Glaberson, “More Reporters Leaning Democratic, Study Says,” *New York Times* (November 18, 1992).

liberalism and in electing Democrats.”³ In any event, the view that the media was generally liberal was widespread among the public.⁴

Liberal media Dominance

Liberal media dominance arose from several factors. One was simply the fact that liberal views were dominant in the country from the Great Depression through the civil rights struggle of the 1960s. The conservative view on civil rights, that racial segregation and discrimination were not problems justifying federal contravention of states’ rights, was deemed to be illegitimate among the vast bulk of Americans after being exposed to police brutality against civil rights demonstrators and details about the reality of racism. The Vietnam War and Watergate made the media’s liberal bias even more pronounced even as the country had started to move to the right in many ways.

Another factor is that big cities, where the major newspapers have always been located, tend to be more liberal than small towns and rural areas. This is especially true for New York and Los Angeles, where the major networks and media companies are based. In part, big city liberalism is just a function of their nature, but also because liberally-minded people gravitate there from the more conservative countryside. This has been true forever.

It should be added that liberally-minded people have long tended to gravitate as well to journalism, just as conservatives are attracted to careers in the military, law enforcement and business. Newspapers have long complained that the liberalism of their reporters was less intentional than due to the lack of conservatives getting degrees in journalism and seeking careers as reporters.

A final factor contributing to liberal bias is that newspaper consolidation tended to eliminate ideological competition in the industry. As a competitive business, politics and ideology were ways in which newspapers differentiated their product and attracted readers wanting to read news and commentary friendly to their point of view. Thus in any 2-newspaper town, one would generally be conservative if only for competitive advantage.⁵ For historical reasons, the afternoon paper was usually the conservative one. But as growing traffic congestion made it harder and harder to deliver afternoon papers in a timely manner and work and lifestyle changes

³ Michael Kelly, “A Press Obsession With the Death Penalty,” *Washington Post* (June 28, 2000).

⁴ “Are the News Media Too Liberal?” [Gallup Poll](#) (October 8, 2003); “Republicans Remain Deeply Distrustful of News Media,” [Gallup Poll](#) (October 8, 2007).

⁵ Numerous studies have shown political slant to be a business decision more than one driven by the ideology of a newspaper’s owner. See Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse M. Shapiro, “What Drives Media Slant? Evidence from U.S. Daily Newspapers,” *Econometrica*, 78:1 (January 2010): 35-71; Sendhil Mullainathan and Andrei Shleifer, “The Market for News,” *American Economic Review*, 95:4 (September 2005): 1031-53.

reduced demand for them, afternoon papers began to die out. This gave the morning paper, which was usually the more liberal, a dominant position in many markets.

The loss of competition from the right reinforced the liberalism in already liberal newsrooms. As former *Washington Post* editor Richard Harwood noted in the mid-1990s, after the first big wave of media consolidation:

One of the most interesting aspects of today's premier news corporations – the ones with the rich editors, officers and shareholders – is the counterintuitive fact that almost without exception they have encouraged or acquiesced in the leftward drift of their newspapers over the past quarter-century.⁶

And even in cases where the dominant morning paper was the conservative one, loss of competition tended to push it toward the left; that is, leftward toward the center from a position on the right. The reason is that monopoly newspapers often sought to be all things to all people and therefore as inoffensive as possible. The Gannett chain was known for shaving the rough political edges off all the papers it acquired, giving them a mushy liberal sameness in every market.

Of course, there was demand for conservative media. But prior to the expansion of cable television and the rise of the Internet in the 1990s, there was simply no easy way to satisfy it. There were only three networks that broadcast just half an hour of news each day, and they tended to take their cues from the major newspapers, adding only video to more or less the same reporting one got in the papers. Magazines filled the gap to some extent and competition continued to provide conservative alternatives. Among the news weeklies, *Newsweek* tended to be liberal, *Time* was centrist, and *U.S. News and World Report* was moderately conservative. One could subscribe to explicitly conservative publications such as *National Review* and *Human Events*, as well as the liberal *New Republic* and left-wing *Nation* magazines. But the lead time for printing and distributing magazines, which tended to be monthlies or semimonthlies, made them unsatisfying for those craving immediate news with a political or ideological edge.

Radio and television were also subject to the “fairness doctrine,” which said that equal time needed to be provided whenever a political opinion was expressed.⁷ This tended to eliminate the expression of any opinions at all unless they were so close to the conventional wisdom it was

⁶ Richard Harwood, “When Downsizing Hits the Newsroom (Cont’d),” *Washington Post* (April 17, 1996).

⁷ On the history and operation of the fairness doctrine, see Thomas G. Krattenmaker and L.A. Powe Jr., “The Fairness Doctrine Today: A Constitutional Curiosity and An Impossible Dream,” [*Duke Law Journal*](#), 1985:1 (February 1985): 151-76.

difficult to take issue with them.⁸ While the fairness doctrine, which was a Federal Communications Commission regulation, didn't apply to print media, it nevertheless had a spillover effect that reinforced the moderate liberalism of most newspapers.

The Rise of Talk Radio

In August 1987, under pressure from Ronald Reagan's drive for deregulation, the FCC abolished the fairness doctrine. A local radio broadcaster in Sacramento, California, named Rush Limbaugh quickly recognized the opportunity this afforded. A strong conservative, he realized that he could now do an entire show consisting of nothing but controversial opinions, without the burden of offering equal time to other views. His program went national in 1988, based at WABC in New York City, which had a signal powerful enough to reach 200 miles beyond Manhattan.

Limbaugh's move was fortuitous. At the exact moment he launched his show, the AM band on the radio dial was essentially dying. Since the late 1960s, music programming and listeners had deserted AM radio in droves. The FM dial provided a better signal and could broadcast in stereo, which became increasingly important as musical styles changed. Unable to compete by broadcasting music, AM stations searched for alternative programming. Talk proved to be very viable. Soon there were talkers across the AM dial, many expressing a conservative viewpoint.⁹

There are many reasons why conservative talk radio worked so well.¹⁰ One is that conservatives finally had a news source that fed their philosophy. Another is that conservatives viewed themselves as outsiders and were attracted not only to the philosophy of conservative talk radio, but its tone and articulation of outrage toward liberals that many listeners themselves had long felt.¹¹

In his early years, much of Limbaugh's program, which ran 3 hours a day, consisted of news that conservatives were unable to read in their local paper or hear on television.¹² Conservatives in

⁸ Thomas W. Hazlett and David W. Sosa, "Was the Fairness Doctrine a 'Chilling Effect'? Evidence from the Postderegulation Radio Market," *Journal of Legal Studies*, 26:1 (January 1997): 279-301.

⁹ Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj, "Understanding the Rise of Talk Radio," *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 44:4 (October 2011): 762-67.

¹⁰ William G. Mayer, "Why Talk Radio Is Conservative," *The Public Interest* (Summer 2004): 86-103.

¹¹ Sarah Sobieraj, Jeffrey M. Berry and Amy Connors, "Outrageous Political Opinion and the Political Anxiety in the US," *Poetics*, 41:5 (October 2013): 407-32; Sarah Sobieraj and John M. Berry, "From Incivility to Outrage: Political Discourse in Blogs, Talk Radio, and Cable News," *Political Communication*, 28:1 (2011): 19-41.

¹² Stephan Earl Bennett, "Who Listens to Rush Limbaugh's Radio Program and the Relationship Between Listening to Limbaugh and Knowledge of Public Affairs, 1994-2006," *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, 16:1 (May 2009): 66-82.

Congress, at think tanks and other activists saw there was now an outlet for their legislation and studies and eagerly provided them to Limbaugh, who gave them priceless publicity to a highly receptive audience.

As time went by, Limbaugh had many imitators, but no real competitors. For all his faults, he has a great voice and a genuine knack for radio broadcasting; his venture into television never worked. Limbaugh is also entertaining, a fact that even his critics acknowledge.¹³ Eventually, many local radio stations decided it was cheaper to buy Limbaugh's syndicated show rather than pay a local talker. His broadcast reach broadened and his power grew.

Among Limbaugh's friends and admirers was Roger Ailes, a Republican political consultant and producer who had long dreamed of a conservative television network. In 1970, he worked with the Nixon White House to bring such a network into being.¹⁴ The idea didn't go anywhere, but Ailes continued to work on it, convincing beer baron Joseph Coors to bankroll a conservative news service called TVN in the mid-1970s. That effort failed as well, but Ailes learned a lot about how to make a conservative network succeed.¹⁵ Finally, in the mid-1990s, he convinced Australian newspaper magnate Rupert Murdoch to let him build the news network Ailes had always dreamed of.

The Origins of Fox News

Ailes recruited conservative broadcasters wherever he could find them, sometimes on the fringes of the industry; one of his stars, Bill O'Reilly, got his start doing gossip for "Inside Edition," a syndicated tabloid-style program. According to a Fox producer, all the top people at Fox were conservative or did a good job of playing the part:

The ideology at Fox was strictly a top-down affair. Roger [Ailes] was a conservative. All of his deputies were conservatives. Most of the hosts were conservatives, or at least were good at pretending to be while on television, if they knew what was good for them....The VPs, as near as I could tell, were all staunch conservatives, too. Whether by coincidence or design, Roger had effectively surrounded himself with fellow travelers.¹⁶

¹³ Lewis Grossberger, "The Rush Hours," *New York Times* (December 16, 1990).

¹⁴ John Cook, "Roger Ailes' Secret Nixon-Era Blueprint for Fox News," [Gawker](#) (June 30, 2011). This report is based on documents obtained from the Nixon Library.

¹⁵ Tim Dickinson, "How Roger Ailes Built the Fox News Fear Factory," [Rolling Stone](#) (May 25, 2011).

¹⁶ Joe Muto, *An Atheist in the Foxhole* (NY: Dutton, 2013): 78-79.

In its early years, Fox only needed to be in the objective center to be to the right of the other major networks, because they tilted to the left.¹⁷ But Fox viewers were very right-wing from the start.¹⁸ Numerous surveys show that Republicans and conservatives overwhelmingly favor Fox in their news viewing. A 2010 Pew survey found that Republicans and conservatives favored Fox over all other news sources except Rush Limbaugh. The survey also revealed that Fox had fewer well-educated (college graduate) and well-to-do (\$75,000+/year income) viewers than other news sources.¹⁹ A 2015 PPP poll found that for 56 percent of Republicans, Fox was their most trusted news source.

Table 1
Most Trusted Media Outlet, 2015
(percent)

Most Trusted Outlet	Republicans	Democrats
ABC	10	14
CBS	8	11
CNN	10	21
Comedy Central	0	6
Fox	56	11
MSNBC	2	6
NBC	2	6
PBS	7	18
Other	6	7

Source: Public Policy Polling²⁰

¹⁷ Tim Groeling, “Who’s the Fairest of them All? An Empirical Test for Partisan Bias on ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox News,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 38:4 (December 2008): 631-57; Tim Groseclose and Jeffrey Milyo, “A Measure of Media Bias,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 120:4 (November 2005): 1191-1237; Jeffrey N. Weatherly et al., “Perceptions of Political Bias in the Headlines of Two Major News Organizations,” *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 12:2 (April 2007): 91-104.

¹⁸ Jonathan S. Morris, “The Fox News Factor,” *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 10:3 (Summer 2005): 56-79; Shanto Iyengar and Kyu S. Hahn, “Red Media, Blue Media: Evidence of Ideological Selectivity in Media Use,” *Journal of Communication*, 59:1 (March 2009): 19-39.

¹⁹ “Americans Spending More Time Following the News,” [Pew Research](#) (September 12, 2010). Note: Sean Hannity, Bill O’Reilly and Glenn Beck were all on Fox at the time.

²⁰ “Americans Closely Divided on Brian Williams,” [Public Policy Polling](#) (February 26, 2015).

Table 2
Audience Profiles: Party and Ideology
(percent)

Percent of each audience who are	Republican	Democrat	Independent
Rush Limbaugh	63	10	23
Sean Hannity	62	6	29
O'Reilly Factor	54	10	32
Glenn Beck	53	9	33
Fox News	44	21	28
Wall Street Journal	36	22	41
USA Today	33	26	35
News blogs	28	34	34
Daily paper	28	34	33
Local TV news	25	35	32
TOTAL	25	33	34
Sunday shows	24	37	32
Network evening	24	35	34
Morning shows	23	43	30
News magazines	22	40	34
CNN	17	47	31
MSNBC	14	53	30
Daily Show	14	41	38
NPR	14	40	41
Colbert Report	14	39	44
Hardball	13	51	29
Rachel Maddow	12	50	34
New York Times	9	49	39
Countdown	3	60	29

Source: Pew Research²¹

A 2014 poll showed that Fox's popularity among Republicans has only grown, especially among seniors.²² Fox has a very old viewership; according to Nielsen, its median viewer is 68 years old – great for ratings, but bad for advertising.²³ Companies tend to shun programs with an older demographic because seniors are assumed to be set in their ways and unlikely to be swayed by advertising to buy different products from those they are already using.²⁴

²¹ "Americans Spending More Time Following the News," [Pew Research](#) (September 12, 2010): 56. Note: The Daily Show and the Colbert Report are comedy shows, not straight news.

²² [Ibid.](#)

²³ Frank Rich, "Stop Beating a Dead Fox," [New York](#) (January 26, 2014); Bill Carter, "Fox Viewers May Be Graying, But Their Passion Still Pays," [New York Times](#) (July 23, 2013).

²⁴ Isabelle Szmigin and Marylyn Carrigan, "Learning to Love the Older Consumer," [Journal of Consumer Behavior](#), 1:1 (June 2001): 22-34.

Studies show that Fox viewers have a distinct set of political attitudes and voting patterns that are as much anti-liberal as they are conservative. Indeed, they have a different perception of political reality than those of all other television news viewers.²⁵ As media critic Michael Wolff put it early in the Fox era:

Fox is not really about politics....Rather, it's about having a chip on your shoulder; it's about us versus them, insiders versus outsiders, phonies versus non-phonies, and, in a clever piece of postmodernism, established media against insurgent media.²⁶

Fox Moves Rightward

In the George W. Bush years, however, and especially after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, there was a noticeable shift in tone at Fox. Rather than being satisfied with a position relatively to the right of the other news networks, it began objectively tilting well to the right of center. The shift was immediately noticed by media observers.²⁷ Whether driven by politics and ideology or simply by ratings, the shift proved highly successful.²⁸ As Harvard press analyst Alex Jones observed:

In a conservative time, a time of war, Fox viewers like their news from a strong American perspective, with flags rippling in graphics and a pugnacity toward the nation's critics – the people John Gibson, host of Fox's nightly "Big Story," referred to last week as the peanut gallery. Such blunt speaking is a point of pride at Fox, which, for example, reports on "homicide bombers" in Israel, rather than "suicide bombers."²⁹

Economists and political scientists began studying the "Fox News Effect," in which the introduction of Fox News on a cable system had a significant impact on voting for Republican candidates in that area.³⁰ It also caused both Republicans and Democrats in Congress to increase their support for Republican policies.³¹

²⁵ Jonathan S. Morris, "Slanted Objectivity? Perceived Media Bias, Cable News Exposure, and Political Attitudes," *Social Science Quarterly*, 88:3 (September 2007): 707-28.

²⁶ Michael Wolff, "One Nation Under Fox," *New York* (December 9, 2002): 22.

²⁷ Jim Rutenberg, "Fox Portrays a War of Good and Evil, and Many Applaud," *New York Times* (December 3, 2001).

²⁸ On how 9/11 increased support for Republicans, see Mark J. Landau et al., "Deliver Us from Evil: The Effects of Mortality Salience and Reminders of 9/11 on Support for President George W. Bush," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 30:9 (September 2004): 1136-50.

²⁹ Alex S. Jones, "Fox News Moves from the Margins to the Mainstream," *New York Times* (December 1, 2002).

³⁰ Stefano DellaVigna and Ethan Kaplan, "The Fox News Effect: Media Bias and Voting," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 122:3 (August 2007): 1187-1234; Daniel J. Hopkins and

Buoyed by its success as an explicitly conservative network, it appears that right-wing bias, including inaccurate reporting, became commonplace on Fox. For example:

- A study of network coverage of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars in 2005 found that Fox was alone in supporting the Bush administration during a period when the wars were going badly by any objective standard. It concluded that “scholars should consider Fox as alternative, rather than mainstream, media.”³²
- Fox instructed its on-air talent to avoid using the term “public option” when discussing health reform and are required to say that global warming is merely a theory “based on data that critics have called into question.”³³
- A 2010 study found that Fox actively spread rumors and inaccurate information about a proposed mosque planned for lower Manhattan.³⁴
- A 2012 study found that Fox takes a dismissive tone toward climate change and interviews a much larger number of doubters than believers. Fox viewers are much more likely to be skeptical of global warming.³⁵ A 2014 study found that 72 percent of references to climate change on Fox in 2013 were misleading.³⁶
- Fox consistently downplays gun violence.³⁷

Jonathan McDonald Ladd, “The Consequences of Broader Media Choice: Evidence from the Expansion of Fox News,” [Social Science Research Network](#) (December 11, 2013); Gregory J. Martin and Ali Yurukoglu, “Bias in Cable News: Real Effects and Polarization,” [NBER Working Paper No. 20798](#) (December 2014).

³¹ Kevin Arceneaux et al., “The Influence of News Media on Political Elites: Investigating Strategic Responsiveness in Congress,” *American Journal of Political Science*, forthcoming; Joshua D. Clinton and Ted Enamorado, “The National News Media’s Effect on Congress: How Fox News Affected Elites in Congress,” *Journal of Politics*, 76:4 (October 2014): 928-43.

³² Sean Aday, “Chasing the Bad News: An Analysis of 2005 Iraq and Afghanistan War Coverage on NBC and Fox News Channel,” *Journal of Communication*, 60:1 (March 2010): 144-64.

³³ “Fox’s Unbalancing Act,” *Los Angeles Times* (December 17, 2010).

³⁴ Erik Nisbet and Kelly Garrett, “Fox News Contributes to Spread of Rumors About Proposed NYC Mosque,” [Ohio State University](#) (October 14, 2010).

³⁵ Lauren Feldman et al., “Climate on Cable: The Nature and Impact of Global Warming Coverage on Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC,” *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 17:1 (January 2012): 3-31. See also Jon A. Krosnick and Bo MacInnis, “Frequent Viewers of Fox News Are Less Likely to Accept Scientists’ Views of Global Warming,” [Stanford University](#) (December 2010).

³⁶ “Science or Spin?: Assessing the Accuracy of Cable News Coverage of Climate Science,” [Union of Concerned Scientists](#) (April 2014). This was actually an improvement over 2011, when 93 percent of Fox references to climate change were found to be misleading: “Got Science? Not at News Corporation,” [Union of Concerned Scientists](#) (September 2012).

³⁷ Brian Stetler, “At Fox News, Less Attention Paid to Gun Debate Than Elsewhere,” *New York Times* (April 19, 2013).

Fox's bias is so bad that even some conservatives can't stomach it. Senator Tom Coburn of Oklahoma, one of the most conservative Republicans in Congress, has said, "There are certain shows on Fox I can't watch. Because they're totally not fair and totally not balanced."³⁸

And Fox's slipshod handling of facts was even acknowledged by Newt Gingrich during the 2012 campaign. "One of the real changes that comes when you start running for President – as opposed to being an analyst on Fox – is I have to actually know what I'm talking about," he said. "It's a severe limitation," Gingrich added.³⁹

It is widely known among public relations professionals that Fox has an "enemies list" of people who are not permitted to be interviewed on the network. All proposed guests are vetted by senior executives and banned if they have criticized Fox or hold views likely to rile its conservative viewers. Media reporter Jim Romenesko has documented many cases of Fox blacklisting.⁴⁰ I know for a fact that I am banned from Fox and blogger Andrew Sullivan and others have told me that they are, too. When I mentioned this publicly once, a *Washington Post* reporter looked into it and confirmed that I am indeed blacklisted.⁴¹ Until my book critical of George W. Bush was published, I appeared on Fox regularly.

Fox Viewers Misinformed

A number of surveys have found Fox views to be less well informed and more likely to have factually untrue beliefs than those who receive their news from mainstream sources. A 2003 University of Maryland study compiled a list of 9 misperceptions about the Iraq war, such as there being a link between Iraq and al-Qaeda and the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, neither of which were true, and asked people which of these misperceptions they believed. Fox viewers were more likely to be misinformed than those getting their news elsewhere.

³⁸ Quoted in "Here's One Republican Senator Who Isn't Exactly a Fan of Fox News," [Huffington Post](#) (August 15, 2014).

³⁹ "Newt Gingrich on Fox News: I Have to 'Know What I'm Talking About' Now that I'm Not on Network," [Huffington Post](#) (November 30, 2011).

⁴⁰ "Dealing with the Fox News PR Machine," [JimRomenesko.com](#) (January 19, 2012).

⁴¹ Greg Sargent, "Publicist Confirms It: Fox News Banned Book Critical of George W. Bush," [Washington Post](#) (November 28, 2012).

Table 3
Iraq Misperceptions Based on Primary News Source, 2003

Statement	Fox	CBS	NBC	CNN	ABC	Print Media	PBS/NPR
Is it your impression that the US has or has not found clear evidence in Iraq that Saddam Hussein was working closely with the al-Qaeda terrorist organization? Percent incorrectly saying yes.	67	56	49	48	45	40	16
Since the war with Iraq ended, is it your impression that the US has or has not found Iraqi weapons of mass destruction? Percent incorrectly saying yes.	33	23	20	20	19	17	11

Source: Program on International Policy Attitudes⁴²

A follow-up study in 2010 questioned people about misperceptions related to domestic issues. Again, Fox viewers were more likely to be misinformed and hold incorrect views than those primarily getting their information elsewhere. As the study found:

Those who watched Fox News almost daily were significantly more likely than those who never watched it to believe that:

- most economists estimate the stimulus caused job losses (8 points more likely)
- most economists have estimated the health care law will worsen the deficit (31 points)
- the economy is getting worse (26 points)
- most scientists do not agree that climate change is occurring (30 points)
- the stimulus legislation did not include any tax cuts (14 points)
- their own income taxes have gone up (14 points)
- the auto bailout only occurred under Obama (13 points)
- when TARP came up for a vote most Republicans opposed it (12 points)
- and that it is not clear that Obama was born in the United States (31 points)

These effects increased incrementally with increasing levels of exposure and all were statistically significant. The effect was also not simply a function of partisan

⁴² “Misperceptions, the Media and the Iraq War,” [Program on International Policy Attitudes](#), University of Maryland (October 2, 2003). See also Steven Kull, Clay Ramsay and Evan Lewis, “Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq War,” [Political Science Quarterly](#), 118:4 (Winter 2003): 569-98.

bias, as people who voted Democratic and watched Fox News were also more likely to have such misinformation than those who did not watch it – though by a lesser margin than those who voted Republican.⁴³

A 2011 survey found that Fox viewers were much more likely to be ill-informed about the Affordable Care Act than those of CNN or MSNBC. People were asked 10 questions about the legislation. Fox viewers tended to get more of them wrong.

Table 4
Statements About the Health Law
(percent)

Information source	Low scorers 0-4 correct	Moderate scorers 5-6 correct	High scorers 7-10 correct
CNN	27	39	35
Fox	36	40	25
MSNBC	24	36	39

Source: Kaiser Family Foundation⁴⁴

Another 2011 survey by the Public Religion Institute found that Fox viewers were more likely to believe that whites are as discriminated against as members of minority groups and to hold silly and bigoted views toward Muslims.

Table 5
Discrimination Against Whites Now as Big a
Problem as Minority Group Discrimination
(percent)

Group	Agree	Disagree
Most Trust Public Television	23	75
Blacks	29	68
Hispanics	30	66
Democrats	36	62
Millennials (18-29)	44	54
Independents	45	52
General Public	46	51
Seniors (65+)	51	46
Whites	51	46
Republicans	60	40
Tea Party	63	36
Most Trust Fox News	68	31

Source: Public Religion Institute⁴⁵

⁴³ “Misinformation and the 2010 Election,” University of Maryland, [Program on International Policy Attitudes](#) (December 10, 2010): 20.

⁴⁴ “Pop Quiz: Assessing Americans’ Familiarity with the Health Care Law,” [Kaiser Family Foundation](#) (February 2011).

Table 6
Attitudes Toward American Muslims by Trusted Media Source
(percent)

Statement	Fox	Broadcast News	CNN	MSNBC	PBS	General Public
Muslims want to establish Sha'ria law.	52	28	20	29	23	30
American Muslims NOT important part of U.S. religious community.	60	35	41	36	29	43
Values of Islam are at odds with American values.	68	45	37	39	37	47

Source: Public Religion Institute⁴⁶

Also in 2011, Fairleigh Dickinson University surveyed New Jersey residents on their knowledge of various foreign and domestic issues in the news. It found that Fox viewers were consistently more likely to have an incorrect understanding than those getting their news elsewhere. As the study found:

People who watch Fox News, the most popular of the 24-hour cable news networks, are 18-points less likely to know that Egyptians overthrew their government than those who watch no news at all (after controlling for other news sources, partisanship, education and other demographic factors). Fox News watchers are also 6-points less likely to know that Syrians have not yet overthrown their government than those who watch no news.

“Because of the controls for partisanship, we know these results are not just driven by Republicans or other groups being more likely to watch Fox News,” said Dan Cassino, a professor of political science at Fairleigh Dickinson and an analyst for the PublicMind Poll. “Rather, the results show us that there is something about watching Fox News that leads people to do worse on these questions than those who don’t watch any news at all.”⁴⁷

A follow-up poll in 2012 asked New Jersey residents 4 questions about domestic and foreign policy issues in the news. Again, Fox viewers were more likely to answer incorrectly. Said the report:

The study concludes that media sources have a significant impact on the number of questions that people were able to answer correctly. The largest effect is that of

⁴⁵ Robert P. Jones et al., “What It Means To Be An American,” [Public Religion Institute](#) (September 6, 2011): 9.

⁴⁶ [Ibid.](#), 19.

⁴⁷ “Some News Leaves People Knowing Less,” [Fairleigh Dickinson University](#) (November 21, 2011).

Fox News: all else being equal, someone who watched only Fox News would be expected to answer just 1.04 domestic questions correctly — a figure which is significantly worse than if they had reported watching no media at all. On the other hand, if they listened only to NPR, they would be expected to answer 1.51 questions correctly; viewers of Sunday morning talk shows fare similarly well. And people watching only “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart” could answer about 1.42 questions correctly.⁴⁸

A 2015 Farleigh Dickinson national poll again found that Republicans and Fox viewers were more likely to be misinformed about factual matters relating to public policy such as the false beliefs that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and that Barack Obama is not a citizen of the United States.

Table 7
American Forces Found an Active Weapons of Mass Destruction Program In Iraq
(percent)

	Definitely true	Probably true	Probably not true	Definitely not true	Don't know/refused
Party					
Republicans	14	37	22	18	9
Democrats	8	24	24	38	7
Independents	8	38	21	21	12
Total	11	31	23	26	10
Primary news source					
CNN	12	29	23	28	8
Fox	18	34	26	15	8
MSNBC	2	12	24	55	7
Daily Show	11	20	37	28	5

Source: Farleigh Dickinson University⁴⁹

⁴⁸ “What You Know Depends on What You Watch: Current Events Knowledge Across Popular News Sources,” [Farleigh Dickinson University](#) (May 3, 2012). Note: the Daily Show is a satirical program, not straight news.

⁴⁹ “Ignorance, Partisanship Drive False Beliefs About Obama, Iraq,” [Farleigh Dickinson University](#) (January 7, 2015).

Table 8
President Obama Is Not Legally a Citizen of the United States
(percent)

	Definitely true	Probably true	Probably not true	Definitely not true	Don't know/refused
Party					
Republicans	10	24	27	30	9
Democrats	3	4	14	75	4
Independents	6	16	20	46	12
Total	6	13	21	51	8
Primary news source					
CNN	4	9	20	62	5
Fox	11	19	30	30	10
MSNBC	2	5	5	81	7
Daily Show	5	11	11	72	1

Source: Farleigh Dickinson University⁵⁰

Fox Peddles Propaganda

A number of Fox competitors and others have charged that Fox long ago ceased being anything remotely akin to an objective news source and now functions basically as a propaganda arm of the Republican Party.

- CNN president Jeff Zucker told the Television Critics Association in 2014, “The Republican Party is being run out of News Corp. headquarters masquerading as a cable news channel.”⁵¹
- Political scientist Jonathan Bernstein: “It’s a real mistake to call Fox a conservative channel. It’s not. It’s a partisan channel.... To begin with, bluntly, Fox is part of the Republican Party. American political parties are made up of both formal organizations (such as the RNC) and informal networks. Fox News Channel, then, is properly understood as part of the expanded Republican Party.”⁵²
- Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Thomas Ricks: “I think the emphasis on Benghazi [on Fox] has been extremely political, partly because Fox is operating as the wing of the Republican Party.”⁵³
- Former *New York Times* executive editor Howell Raines: “For the first time since the yellow journalism of a century ago, the United States has a major news organization devoted to the promotion of one political party.”⁵⁴

⁵⁰ [Ibid.](#)

⁵¹ Quoted on *TV Guide*’s [twitter feed](#) (January 10, 2014).

⁵² Jonathan Bernstein, “Understanding Fox News,” [The New Republic](#) (October 27, 2010).

⁵³ Quoted in “Thomas Ricks Accuses Fox News of ‘Operating as a Wing of the Republican Party,’” [Huffington Post](#) (November 27, 2012).

In the wake of a rare Fox apology for the extreme anti-Muslim views of one of its contributors, which were widely ridiculed in the European press, Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Leonard Pitts Jr. of the *Miami Herald* said of the news channel:

In America, it has come to seem normal that a major news organization functions as the propaganda arm of an extremist political ideology, that it spews a constant stream of racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia, paranoia and manufactured outrage, and that it does so with brazen disregard for what is factual, what is right, what is fair, what is balanced — virtues that are supposed to be the sine qua non of anything calling itself a newsroom.⁵⁵

Although this arrangement unquestionably aids Republicans in winning elections and votes in Congress, it is not without its downsides. One is that Fox now exercises such powerful control over the GOP that it has become the party's kingmaker in presidential primaries.⁵⁶ Indeed, during the 2012 election cycle, a number of aspirants for the Republican nomination had been paid Fox commentators, including Newt Gingrich, Rick Santorum, Sarah Palin and Mike Huckabee.⁵⁷ And woe to the Republican who runs afoul of Fox's top brass or ignores their advice, as Mitt Romney did on one occasion in 2012.⁵⁸ Fox is now so important in GOP primaries that candidates must put aside pressing campaign concerns when summoned to a Fox interview, where any error is magnified within the Republican bubble.⁵⁹

Gingrich complained that Fox opted in favor of Mitt Romney early on. "I think Fox has been for Romney all the way through," Gingrich said behind closed doors in April 2012. "In our experience, Callista [Newt's wife] and I both believe CNN is less biased than Fox this year. We are more likely to get neutral coverage out of CNN than we are of Fox, and we're more likely to get distortion out of Fox. That's just a fact."⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Howell Raines, "Why Don't Honest Journalists Take on Roger Ailes and Fox News?" [Washington Post](#) (March 14, 2010).

⁵⁵ Leonard Pitts Jr., "Fox Faux News Forces Rare Apology," [Miami Herald](#) (January 24, 2015).

⁵⁶ Howard Fineman, "Fox News' Roger Ailes Is the Real GOP Kingmaker," [Newsweek](#) (January 14, 2010); Paul Farhi, "Despite Kingmaking Expectations, Fox News Seems Neutral Among GOP Field," [Washington Post](#) (December 30, 2011); Bob Woodward, "Fox Chief Proposed Patraeus Campaign," [Washington Post](#) (December 4, 2012).

⁵⁷ Jonathan Martin and Keach Hagey, "Fox Primary: Complicated, Contractual," [Politico](#) (September 27, 2010).

⁵⁸ Jeremy Peters, "Shots By Murdoch at Romney Play Out to Conservative Core," [New York Times](#) (July 6, 2012).

⁵⁹ Alessandra Stanley, "The Republican Primary Campaign in Iowa Is Right at Home on Fox News," [New York Times](#) (December 10, 2011).

⁶⁰ Quoted in Scott Conroy, "Gingrich Unloads on Fox News in Private Meeting," [Real Clear Politics](#) (April 12, 2012).

In 2015, however, Romney found himself on the wrong side of the Fox News primary, when Rupert Murdoch turned thumbs down on his candidacy. As the *New York Times* reported, “It is hard to recall a display of animus as unsubtle as the one Mr. Murdoch and corners of his media empire have unleashed on Mr. Romney in the past few weeks as he has tried to build support for a third presidential run.”⁶¹ Romney soon dropped out of the 2016 race.

Another problem is that Republican voters get so much of their news from Fox, which cheerleads whatever their candidates are doing or saying, that they suffer from wishful thinking and fail to see that they may not be doing as well as they imagine, or that their ideas are not connecting outside the narrow party base. As a recent academic study found:

Exposure to programs featured on Fox News, such as those hosted by Bill O’Reilly and Sean Hannity, resulted in a greater wishful thinking effect by Romney supporters. In other words, while Romney supporters were substantially more likely to predict their candidate would win the 2012 presidential election, watching Fox News programming exacerbated this effect.⁶²

It may be that some Republican Fox viewers became complacent and didn’t work as hard as they might if they had been more aware of how badly Romney was doing in the final days of the campaign.

Conservative Blowback

Consequently, some political observers now question whether Fox is a net plus or a net minus for Republican presidential candidates. As Columbia University political scientist Lincoln Mitchell put it after Romney’s loss:

Fox has now become a problem for the Republican Party because it keeps a far right base mobilized and angry, making it hard for the party to move to the center or increase its appeal, as it must do to remain electorally competitive....One of the reasons Mitt Romney was so unable to pivot back to the center was due to the drumbeat at Fox, which contributed to forcing him to the right during the primary season. Even after the primary season, when Fox became a big supporter for Romney, the rift between official editorial position and the political feelings of Fox viewers and hosts was clear.⁶³

⁶¹ Amy Chozick and Michael Barbaro, “Again for Murdoch, Romney Can Do Not Right,” [*New York Times*](#) (January 27, 2015).

⁶² Barry A. Hollander, “The Surprised Loser: The Role of Electoral Expectations and News Media Exposure in Satisfaction with Democracy,” [*Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*](#), 91:4 (December 2014): 651-68.

⁶³ Lincoln Mitchell, “Is Fox Even Helping the Republicans Anymore?” [*Huffington Post*](#) (November 29, 2012).

Former George W. Bush speechwriter David Frum perhaps put the complicated, double-edged relationship between Fox and the GOP best when he said, “Republicans originally thought that Fox worked for us and now we're discovering we work for Fox. And this balance here has been completely reversed. The thing that sustains a strong Fox network is the thing that undermines a strong Republican party.”⁶⁴

⁶⁴ “David Frum on GOP: Now We Work for Fox,” [ABC News](#) (March 23, 2010).