



STUDY: Sunday News Shows Are Not Informative or Representative

by The Media and Democracy Project
June 13, 2022

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This study is dedicated to the memory of media critic Eric Boehlert. Eric was a constant source of inspiration for us. He was the strongest voice we knew confronting the uninformative journalism and media failures this study highlights. As Philadelphia Inquirer columnist Will Bunch said after his death, "[This country needs a small army of Eric Boehlerts.](#)" We hope this research report inspires others to join the fight for a better-informed American public.

The Media and Democracy Project is a not-for-profit community of grassroots activists fighting for more informative and pro-democracy media.

STUDY: Sunday News Shows Are Not Informative or Representative

Executive Summary

The Sunday Shows are the flagship political and civic discussion TV programs of the major broadcast networks. They are watched by over 10 million people each week but have a much broader reach beyond that, often setting the agenda for news coverage and discussion across all media platforms. Who appears and what topics are discussed, reflects “who” and “what” the mainstream media considers to be most important. To understand this better we, the **Media and Democracy Project**, collected and analyzed information on every guest of the five major Sunday Shows in 2021. We covered ABC’s *This Week*, CBS’s *Face the Nation*, NBC’s *Meet the Press*, CNN’s *State of the Union*, and Fox’s *Fox News Sunday*. There were 816 guests appearing on 251 shows. We performed data analysis on characteristics of the guests and textual analysis of show transcripts.

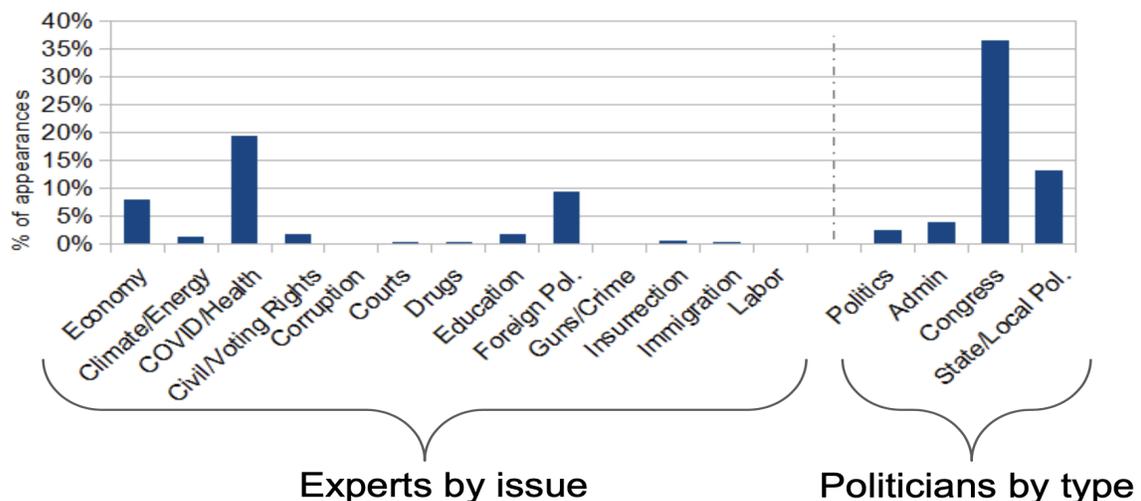
Politicians invited more than experts

We found that the most common type of guests were members of Congress and that politicians overall, including state and local politicians made up the majority of the guests. Other guests were experts who were invited to discuss topics they have deep knowledge of: medical professionals, cabinet secretaries, climate experts, CEOs, professors, community members, foreign leaders and others. Extensive analysis of the content of show transcripts found that when members of Congress discuss topics, they are more likely to talk about politics and process than substance and their policy prescriptions are more superficial.

COVID covered well but climate, and most other topics were not

We then categorized experts by policy area. Figure 1 shows the breakdown of experts by policy area and politicians by type.¹ The Sunday Shows clearly recognized the need for expertise when discussing the pandemic. 20% of the guests were health professionals — 17% were medical experts. But they had very few experts on most other vital issues. [About half a million Americans died of COVID in 2021](#), 250,000 [died of drugs](#) and [alcohol abuse](#) combined but while there were 141 experts on COVID, there was only one drug policy expert. There were 11 appearances by experts on climate change — just over 1% of all guests and much fewer than the 19 by Gov. Asa Hutchinson alone (R-AR), the most frequent political guest across the five shows.

Figure 1: Shows Lack Experts on Vital Issues



¹ Most administrators were categorized as experts but a small number do not policy specialties. Some guests, such as RNC Chair Ronna McDaniel, were categorized as experts in politics. These were listed with the politicians.

Focus on DC insider topics increases cynicism and polarization

When politicians are the primary commenters, issues are viewed through a political lens which increases polarization. Studies have shown that a focus on political gamesmanship not only leaves the public uninformed but that [“this type of reporting elevates the public’s cynicism toward politics and the issues.”](#)² This type of coverage, rather than the current reliance on politicians, would serve to inform the public much better. As a report from the Shorenstein Center documents, [in the past Sunday Shows featured fewer politicians and more substance.](#)³

Dramatic under-representation of women and people of color, most notably Latinas/Latinos

Figure 2 compares the distribution of guest appearances by gender and broad racial categories to the U.S. population. White men were 64% of the guests despite being less than 30% of the country’s population. A finer distribution by race is shown in Figure 3. This shows that the under-representation of people of color is the result of very dramatic under-representation of Latinos and Native Americans. Blacks appear not to be under-represented, but when multi-racial people are accounted for, they are. Fox was most extreme in gender bias. Nearly 90% of NBC’s guests were White.

Figure 2: Gender and Race of Guests v US Population

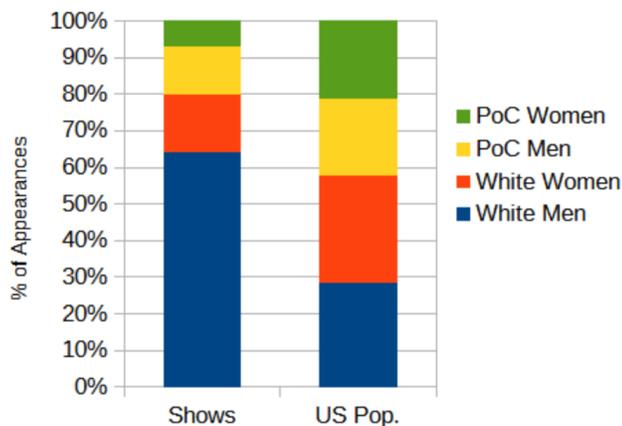
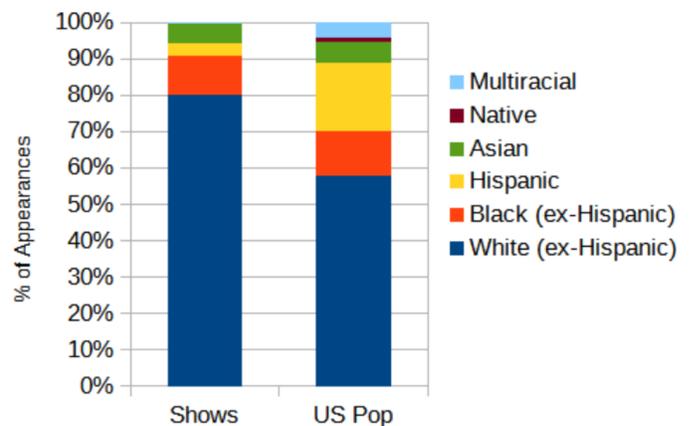


Figure 3: Race of Guests v US Population



All networks hosted coup supporters

We tabulated the Congressional guests who supported the failed coup using grades from the Republican Accountability Project, listing all guests in 2021 who received grades of F, D- or D. Fox hosted by far the most but all of the networks hosted people who supported the insurrection and spread the Big Lie. We object to normalizing any of them.

Sunday Shows can and should do a much better job informing the public on vital topics.

As they illustrated with the coverage of COVID, the shows can use experts to cover vital topics. If they cut the number of Congressional guests in half, there would be room to cover several more topics well. They should not be a propaganda platform for people who deny basic facts and undermine democracy.

² Zoizner, Alon. “The Consequences of Strategic News Coverage for Democracy: A Meta-Analysis.” Communication Research, vol. 48, no. 1, Feb. 2021, pp. 3–25. SAGE Journals, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650218808691>.

³ See Matthew Baum, Report on Network Sunday Morning Talk Show Content and Ratings, Comparing 1983, 1999, and 2015, Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Policy <https://shorensteincenter.org/network-sunday-morning-talk-shows/>

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	4
Research Methodology	4
Findings	6
Distribution of experts by topic	6
Absence of climate discussion	7
Judiciary	8
COVID-19	9
Immigration	10
Rule of law, corruption and democracy	10
Drug policy	11
Threats to the Republic	11
Coverage of other topics	14
Negative impacts of focus on politics	14
Party representation	15
Demographics	17
Race and ethnicity	17
Gender balance	18
Age Distribution	19
Value of diversity	19
Individual Guests	20
Conclusion and Recommendations	20
References	22

Introduction

The Sunday morning news shows are the flagships of the major TV networks. This report examines all the guests of *This Week* on Disney/ABC, *Face the Nation* on Paramount/CBS, *Meet the Press* on Comcast/NBC, *Fox News Sunday* on Fox/News Corp/Rupert Murdoch, and *State of the Union* on AT&T/CNN.¹ Collectively, they have over 10 million viewers weekly but, more importantly, they help set the agenda for news coverage across all media platforms. Who appears and what topics are discussed influences who and what the mainstream media considers to be most important.

The shows portray themselves as news programs. Fox puts “news” in the title, *This Week* is a “news forum” while CNN declares that they “bring together major newsmakers and analysts and experts to tackle pressing domestic issues and diplomacy on the global stage.”

To understand the content of the shows, we, the **Media and Democracy Project**, collected and analyzed information on everyone who was a guest on the five major Sunday news shows in 2021. We compiled a database of all guests appearing on the shows.² We confirm that the gender, racial and other biases that have been documented by others continued with little change in 2021. We found that the most common type of guests were members of Congress and that politicians overall, including state and local politicians made up the majority of the guests. Other guests were experts who were invited to discuss topics they have deep knowledge of: medical professionals, cabinet secretaries, climate experts, CEOs, professors, community members, foreign leaders and others.

We used Nexis to access show transcripts and search for keywords indicating subject matter. On several topics, we found characteristic differences between discussions by politicians and those by experts. Politicians viewed issues from a political lens while experts were more likely to discuss substances. For example, on climate change a cabinet secretary would mention how encouraging funding for increasing electrical generation from renewables and encouraging electric vehicles would reduce dependence on fossil fuels while a senator might call for more money in the Build Back Better bill for climate change and discuss its prospects for passage.

For clarity, and because we believe the character of these shows largely reflects that of the networks as a whole, we refer to the shows by their networks, which are more familiar to readers. So, for instance, we will refer to “Meet the Press” as NBC.

Research Methodology

We tabulated all of the guests on each of the five shows as listed weekly in the AP News hub: <https://apnews.com/hub/news-shows>. When a week’s information was not available on the AP site, we used an alternative source such as the LA Times posting of the same information. We tabulated the guests appearing each week from the AP listing, and then found their Title, Organization, Age, Race and Gender from sources we considered to be reliable, most commonly Wikipedia. We assigned party affiliations to current and former elected officials and many administration officials, excluding those in non-partisan roles such as the public health administrators, and some others. We have been as careful as we could but apologize in advance if we have mis-identified anyone’s race or gender.

For members of Congress (MoCs), we added to the database fields indicating their political ideology as calculated by GovTrack.³ For Republicans, we also added their grades from the GOP Democracy Report Card,

¹ While we do not delve into it in this report, we think it is important to keep in mind corporate influences on these networks and the media as a whole.

² Data available on reasonable request to info@MediaAndDemocracyProject.org

³ <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/members/report-cards/2020/house/ideology>

which was based on actions those in Congress took relating to the attempted coup and statements they made countering, or supporting, the Big Lie of a fraudulent election, as determined by the Republican Accountability Project.⁴

To determine topics of focus, we categorized non-politicians according to their expertise into the categories: Economy, Climate/Energy, COVID/Health, Civil Right and Voting Rights, Corruption, Judiciary, Drug policy, Education, Foreign Policy. Guns/Crime, Insurrection, Immigration, and Labor. Whenever possible, guests, including administrators with clear policy focuses, such as Sec. of State Blinken, were placed into the appropriate categories. Those, such as White House Spokesperson Jen Psaki, who do not have a specific policy domain were classified as Administration, while political operatives such as RNC Chair Ronna McDaniel were classified in Politics. We use “expert” very expansively. We include people with deep knowledge of the field they are commenting on but this could be from being a member of the community affected or someone who is working to alleviate a problem – not just people with advanced degrees.

We did not categorize politicians into policy areas. Our review of the transcripts found that while they often comment on specific topics, politicians largely saw them through a political lens, focusing on the politics of the issue, e.g. the likelihood a bill would pass or procedural issues like budget reconciliation or the filibuster would fail or succeed, and less on the content of the bills or their impact. This was particularly true for members of Congress.

State and local officials are more directly involved in policy implementation and, as such, their comments often were more substantive. Ideally some of their appearances would have been categorized. We did not have the resources to do so. But, judging from those we did review, most often they were discussing matters related to COVID such as mask or vaccination policy and in total they were only 13% of all guests. So, categorizing them would primarily have increased the measurement of air time allotted to COVID and not have materially changed the conclusion regarding the absence of expert coverage of the other subjects.

The unit of observation is a guest appearance. We calculated statistics such as the gender or racial bias or the frequency of topics by counting the number of appearances on the shows. Guests appearing multiple times are counted for each time they appear. The tabulation and analysis were performed in LibreOffice and we appreciate RawGraphs for the beautiful beeswarm charts.

It is important to note here that we did not tabulate information on the panelists or hosts. We do believe that they play a very crucial role in determining the topics and tone of these shows and should be studied as well. They have been included in other studies of Sunday Shows. We excluded them because we believe they are a distinct group from the guests, should be examined separately and were beyond the scope of this project. We do hope to include them, as a separate class, in subsequent work.

We will make data available to researchers on reasonable request. We invite collaboration on future work in this area.

⁴ <https://accountability.gov/report-card/>

Findings

Figure 4: Type of Guests

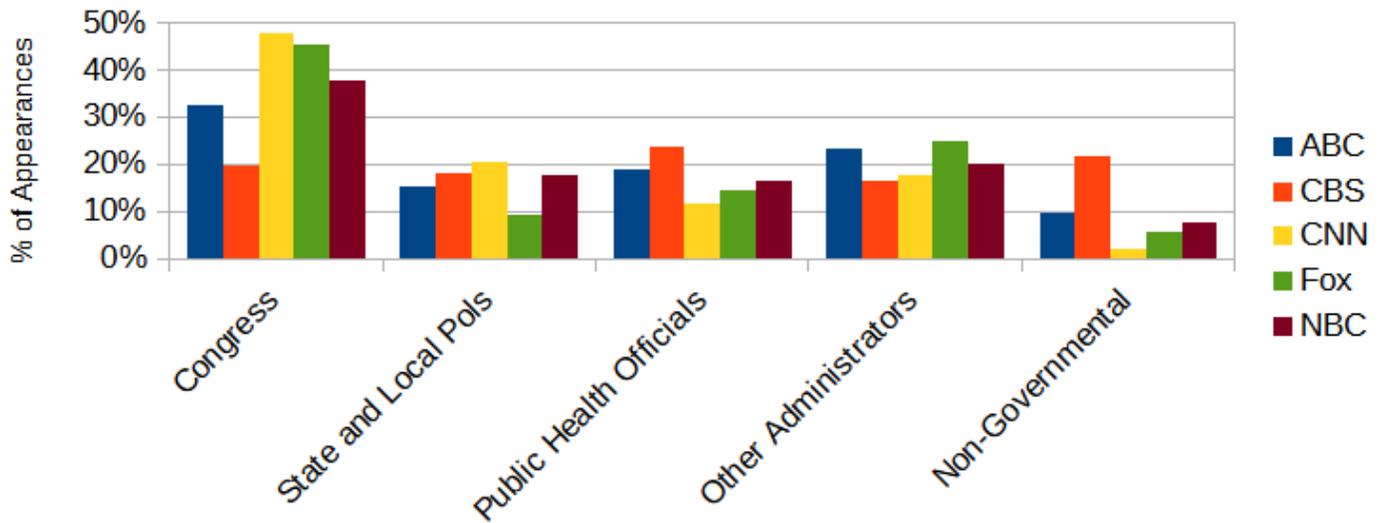


Figure 4 shows the distribution of guests according to their positions. As may be seen, two of the most common positions are members of Congress and state and local politicians, predominantly governors. Together, they make up nearly half of the total appearances of all guests during 2021. As a study by Prof. Matthew Baum of the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy found, MoCs and other politicians were less likely than other guests to discuss substantive policy.⁵ Baum observed that “[p]olitics and process have, over time, increasingly supplanted substantive policy expertise and content”. We are disturbed to report that the predominance of politicians as guests continued in 2021. Since the shows added a substantial number of public health experts that would not have been present in 2015, we would have hoped that they would have, at least in part, supplanted members of Congress. But since the number of MoCs has not diminished materially, the health experts took places from experts in other fields.⁶

Distribution of Experts by Topic

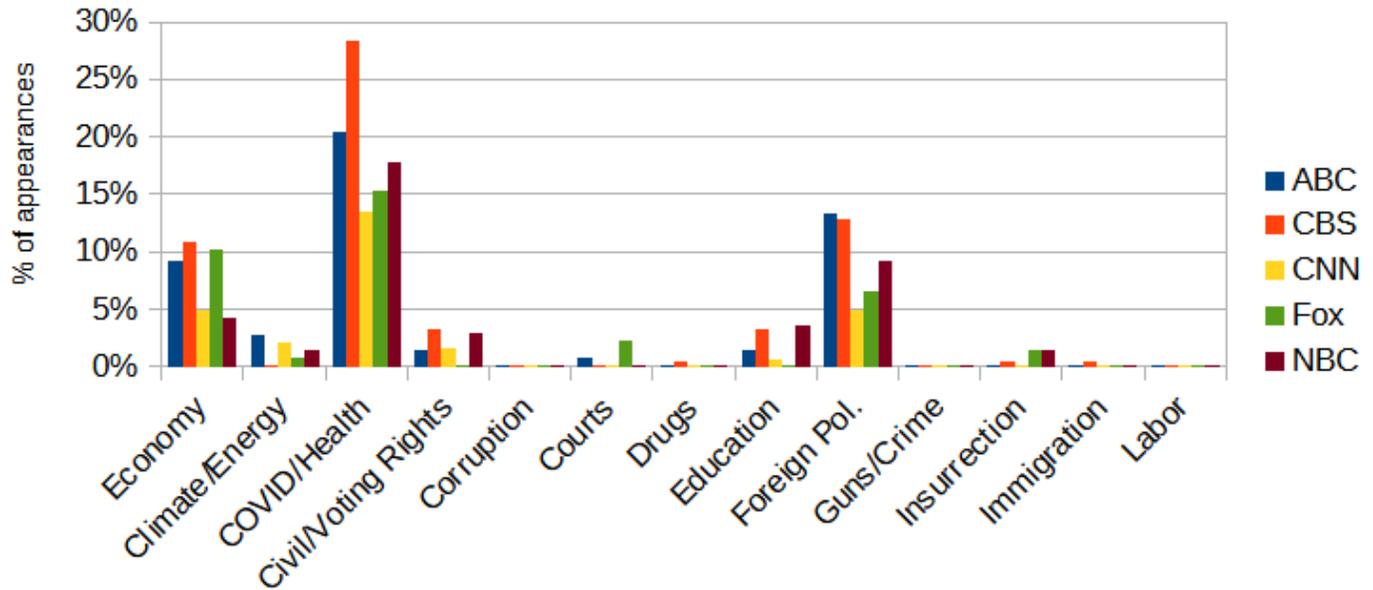
To assess how much air time was allocated to each broad topic, we categorized the experts into areas of expertise. We sought to categorize as many administration officials as possible. Figure 5 charts the distribution of experts for each show.⁷ For reasons we have given, we do not consider the politicians to provide substantive discussion and so did not categorize them and have excluded them from Figure 5. The percentage of politicians for each network were: ABC 51%, CBS 40%, CNN 73%, FOX 64% and NBC 59%.

⁵ Matthew Baum, Report on Network Sunday Morning Talk Show Content and Ratings, Comparing 1983, 1999, and 2015, Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Policy <https://shorensteincenter.org/network-sunday-morning-talk-shows/>

⁶ Our methodology is different and the Shorenstein report only tabulated ABC, CBS and NBC so precise comparison is difficult but any difference is small.

⁷ Whenever possible, people were assigned to an issue. So Sec. of State Blinken categorized as Administrator in Figure 4 is in Foreign Policy, here. But some such as WH Spokesperson Jen Psaki have roles that cannot be categorized and are in Admin. The Health category here has some who are not medical experts including WH Coronavirus Response Coordinator Jeff Zientz and the Illumina CEO who are not listed as public health officials in Figure 6, below.

Figure 5: Distribution of Experts by Topic



As you can see, there was substantial coverage of COVID-19 and other health matters. But other than that, and to a lesser degree economics and foreign policy, there were very few experts on important issues. In subsequent sections we will discuss the specifics of coverage, or lack thereof, for several issues. As the Shorenstein study found, the shows have relied more on expert opinion in the past and they did so for COVID-19. This underscores our takeaway that it is a choice of the Sunday Show to not inform viewers to the best of their ability, but rather to feature an entertainment style, political gamesmanship program. This may attract viewers but does not serve to inform them and fuels partisan division.

Absence of Climate Discussion

Climate change is the issue likely to have the most profound impact on American lives in the decades to come. Yet there were only two climate experts out of all 816 guest appearances during 2021. This is a striking omission considering the importance of the matter. This does not *necessarily* mean climate was not delved into in some depth by other guests, so we used Nexis to search transcripts of shows on ABC and CNN for mentions of ‘climate’ or words that might relate to solutions, such as ‘renewables’ and reviewed those discussions. We chose those networks to examine because, based on the guests, they seemed most likely to have substantive discussion. The two climate experts were on ABC, as was the only appearance by Gina McCarthy, White House Climate Advisor. Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm was on CNN three times, ABC once, as well as NBC twice.

We found that climate was mentioned on many shows but almost always only in passing or in superficial, political contexts. Solutions were very rarely discussed. For example, members of Congress or Administration officials would note that the infrastructure bill contained money to address climate change, and perhaps expressed confidence it would pass, but did so without any description of what the money would do or the benefits that would result. We found only 5 episodes on ABC and CNN that contained discussions of ways to tackle climate change (5% of shows, 1% of air time). As we noted, every indication is that there was even less coverage on the other networks.

While global warming does not fit neatly within the news cycle paradigm of addressing the latest scandals and momentous events, the enormity of its ongoing impact demands regular coverage. And there were many climate-related events that could have spurred the shows to invite experts. For instance, the Biden administration rejoined the Paris accords and hosted a global summit on climate in April. There were extreme weather events and a major shutdown of Texas's electric grid. The IPCC reported in August that the planet is warming faster than predicted. Biden signed an executive order on electric vehicles and put significant measures into the Infrastructure Bill and Build Back Better. In December, the world got together at COP26. With so many news events presenting as touchstones for climate coverage, it is clear the lack of climate experts as guests is a choice the Sunday Shows actively make.

We also should note that there are [many other pressing environmental issues](#) that merit attention. We did not find any evidence that any of them were discussed.⁸

Some of the responsibility for the lack of substance lies with guests who appeared and made less of their opportunities than we would have hoped. For instance, the politicians, while discussing the infrastructure bill, should have described the contents of it and how it would mitigate global warming. But some responsibility surely falls to the networks for not inviting guests with more expertise who would also be less apt to get into the politics and more likely to discuss what needs to be done.⁹

Judiciary

The rulings of the Supreme Court and other important lower courts also have substantial effects on all Americans, both directly and indirectly. There were many notable cases working their way through the court system in 2021. This was not apparent to watchers of any of the Sunday Shows. It is ironic that there is too much attention paid to, and representation of, Congress and Executive branch officials while the Judiciary is largely ignored. The Judiciary profoundly affects people's lives. Fox interviewed Justice Stephen Breyer when his book was published. A Federal judge and two state Attorneys General were hosted. These are 0.5% of all guests. By the nature of their work, judges and AGs are not able to speak freely on current cases but there are many others experts in the legal field who could. Advocates, people directly impacted by court decisions, and legal commentators could all illuminate the issues at play. We did not find any legal experts as guests on any show in 2021.

While there were no experts, politicians are likely to have discussed pending cases to some extent so we reviewed show transcripts on CBS and Fox. We found that, except for the issue of abortion, the Supreme Court was infrequently discussed. The important matters the Supreme Court is dealing with were ignored, or politicized, as was court reform. There was some discussion of the rulings by which abortion was effectively banned in Texas. But for this, CBS relied on a Texas congresswoman. It is not clear why a Congressperson is best suited to discuss a state law being adjudicated in the courts. More importantly, there was no discussion of the many other issues the Court was tackling such as the authority of government agencies, religious liberty, gun restrictions or voting rights.

There *was* gratuitous fanning of partisan flames. For instance, on Fox, Sen. Loeffler asserted in January that Sen. Schumer would "pack" the courts; In March, Sen. Manchin was asked if he supports court packing and replied that he would not; The following month, Sen. Graham again mentioned court packing. There has been no serious effort to pack (reform) the Supreme Court but the topic received a significant fraction of the small

⁸ 20 Current Environmental Problems That Our World Is Facing - Conserve Energy Future. 27 June 2014, <https://www.conserve-energy-future.com/15-current-environmental-problems.php>. Accessed 3 June 2022.

⁹ A Media Matters for America study shows that prior years were even worse in terms of climate coverage. <https://www.mediamatters.org/broadcast-networks/how-tv-coverage-climate-solutions-has-evolved-past-5-years>

amount of air time devoted to the judiciary in total. Fox and CBS rarely had anyone but politicians discussing the judiciary and they were the ones with the most experts so it would be surprising if the others were better.

They could have done much better. They could have hosted legal experts, parties to the cases, or members of communities affected by pending cases to discuss both the legal issues and the real world impact of the cases.

COVID-19

The coverage of COVID was a bright spot. It also illustrated what is missing on most other topics. Figure 6 lists all of the public health experts who appeared on the shows with a breakdown of how many appearances on each network.

Figure 6: Medical Experts by Number of Appearances

Name		Appearances					
		Total	ABC	CBS	CNN	Fox	NBC
Dr Anthony Fauci	Director of NIAID	55	16	10	14	3	12
Dr Scott Gottlieb	American Enterprise Inst., former FDA Commissioner	26	0	26	0	0	0
Dr Vivek Murthy	Surgeon General	15	5	1	4	4	1
Dr Rochelle Walensky	Director of the CDC	13	2	3	2	3	3
Dr Francis Collins	Director of NIH	11	1	2	1	5	2
Dr Michael Osterholm	Dir., Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at U. of Minn.	5	0	1	0	1	3
Dr Ashish Jha	Dean of the Brown Univ. School of Public Health	4	2	0	0	2	0
Dr Jerome Adams	former U.S. Surgeon General	2	0	1	1	0	0
Dr Seth Berkley	CEO Gavi (Vaccine Alliance); epidemiologist	2	0	1	0	0	1
Dr Claire Boogaard	Medical Dir., COVID-19 Vaccine Program for Children's National	1	0	1	0	0	0
Dr Deborah Birx	Former WH Coronavirus Response Coordinator	1	0	1	0	0	0
Dr James Versalovic	pathologist in chief, Texas Children's Hospital	1	0	1	0	0	0
Dr Marcella Nunez-Smith	WH COVID Advisor, Chair of WH COVID Equity Task Force	1	0	1	0	0	0
Dr Richard Besser	Former Acting Director, CDC	1	1	0	0	0	0
Dr Sharon Alroy-Preis	Israel's Director of public health services	1	0	1	0	0	0
Dr Tom Frieden	CEO and Pres. of Resolve to Save Lives; former dir. of CDC	1	0	0	0	1	0
Dr Tom Inglesby	Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security	1	0	0	0	1	0
	Total	141	27	50	22	20	22
	% of all appearances	17%	19%	24%	12%	15%	16%

As may be seen, public health officials represented 17% of all the guest appearances on the shows, on average.¹⁰ In addition, governors and other local officials often discussed the substance and reasons for vaccine and masking policies. CBS had a good segment on the impact of COVID on marginalized communities which included the only Native American guest and the only representative of an immigrant community on any shows all year. CNN and Fox hosted the fewest public health officials, which is consistent with those networks' overall greater representation of politicians relative to experts.

Fox was exceptional in hosting Dr. Fauci by far the fewest times but the experts who did appear were other current administration officials.

CBS's COVID coverage was idiosyncratic. Scott Gottlieb was on 26 times. His appearances constituted more than half of their total coverage of the issue. While he does have medical expertise and served for two years as FDA commissioner, Gottlieb's principal occupation both now and before his term at the FDA was as resident fellow at a conservative think tank. He is also on the board of vaccine manufacturer Pfizer¹¹. Considering this, he is a questionable choice to be given the bulk of their air time on the issue rather than the current administration officials all the other shows relied on.

Overall, we think that the Sunday Shows covered COVID well. Public health professionals, largely those working for government agencies, are the most informed and expert people to discuss COVID-19. State and local officials also discussed policy regarding the pandemic and countermeasures being taken. We believe the public would be much better served if other issues were covered in a similar way, by experts outside of the political process.

Immigration

Our findings on immigration were consistent with those elsewhere. Judging from the guests, and confirmed by a review of CBS and NBC, immigration was almost entirely discussed through a political lens. For instance, Sen. Barrasso complained that immigrants were receiving COVID relief funds. Sen. Graham noted that it would be a winning political issue for the GOP. But there were no discussions of ways to solve our many acute and chronic problems related to immigration and, across all shows, there was only one guest who represented the immigrant community. That segment was not about immigration policy, but rather how COVID was impacting immigrants.

Rule of Law, Corruption and Democracy

When asked, Americans of all political persuasions, and especially those disengaged from the political process, are very concerned about corruption, as POGO, the Project On Government Oversight found in a 2021 poll.¹² What's more, the Trump's administration was very innovative in testing the boundaries of our existing rules and laws regarding conflict of interest, merging of government business and politics, and profiting from government connections. They demonstrated that our current structure is entirely toothless, longstanding measures such as the Hatch Act and the ethics oversight bodies can be ignored and there are also no repercussions to firing the Special Inspectors General for doing their job, a role created after Watergate to avoid abuse of power. The Biden administration has been more restrained but not entirely without blemish.

News of separate scandals related to stock trading or ownership by Congress, the Judiciary and Federal

¹⁰ The networks featured different numbers of guests. As a result, even though Fox and NBC both had 19 appearances, NBC had fewer guests overall and so this was a larger percentage for NBC and presumably they had more air time.

¹¹They did carefully disclose the Pfizer association but not the American Enterprise Institute connection. ex

¹² "Corruption Is Public Enemy Number 1." *Project On Government Oversight*,

<https://www.pogo.org/analysis/2021/10/corruption-is-public-enemy-number-1>. Accessed 1 June 2022.

Reserve officials emerged in 2021 but this was apparently not sufficiently newsworthy to merit significant attention.¹³ Dark money is flooding the airwaves and public sphere. These issues are vital but not covered. There were no guests with expertise on ethics in government from organizations working to address these problems. We did find an excellent segment in which Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse discussed dark money in the context of the attempt but it seems clear that these topics received very little coverage. There were 16 appearances (2%) by experts in civil rights and voting rights.

Drug Policy

While they were not as deadly as COVID-19, drugs and alcohol caused a distressing number of deaths in 2021. And, while it was not as new a concern, the abuse of alcohol and drugs appear to have increased markedly. More than 250,000 Americans died from alcohol abuse and drug overdoses. While not as bad as the nearly 500,000 deaths from COVID, they are still quite serious problems that have been worsening. As such, we believe that they deserved attention from the Sunday Shows. Figure 7 lists all of the experts we identified with expertise on addressing this concern.¹⁴

Figure 7: Drug Experts by Number of Appearances

Name		Appearances					
		Total	ABC	CBS	CNN	Fox	NBC
Anne Milgram	Drug Enforcement Administration	1	0	1	0	0	0
	Total	1	0	1	0	0	0
	% of all appearances	0.1%	0.0%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

This chart contrasts starkly with Figure 6 of medical experts. CBS hosted DEA Administrator Anne Milgram once and that was the total of expert discussion of drug policy. Considering the death toll, it deserves more attention.

Threats to the Republic

Following the 2020 Presidential election, the Trump White House organized a concerted effort to overturn the election result via both intimidation and through the legal system which culminated in the January 6th coup

¹³ Smialek, Jeanna. “Fed Officials’ Trading Draws Outcry, and Fuels Calls for Accountability.” *The New York Times*, 9 Sept. 2021. *NYTimes.com*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/09/business/economy/fed-stock-trading.html>. Palazzolo, James V. Grimaldi, Coulter Jones and Joe. “131 Federal Judges Broke the Law by Hearing Cases Where They Had a Financial Interest.” *WSJ*, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/131-federal-judges-broke-the-law-by-hearing-cases-where-they-had-a-financial-interest-11632834421>. Lieber, Ron. “We Asked Congress’s Freshmen to Give Up Stock Trading. Few Were Willing.” *The New York Times*, Apr. 10, 2021. *NYTimes.com*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/10/your-money/congress-stock-trades.html>.

¹⁴ While over 1 million have now died from COVID many were in 2020 or 2022. CDC. Provisional Death Counts for Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). 3 June 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/covid19/index.htm>. CDC. “Alcohol-Related Deaths.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 19 May 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/features/excessive-alcohol-deaths.html>.

McPhillips, Deidre. “In 2021, US Drug Overdose Deaths Hit Highest Level on Record, CDC Data Shows.” *CNN*, 11 May 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/11/health/drug-overdose-deaths-record-high-2021/index.html>.

attempt, events that GOP Senate Leader Mitch McConnell called ‘terrorism’¹⁵¹⁶. A Congressional investigation began in July 2021. Looking at the guests, it is clear that the Sunday Shows gave this a serious amount of attention but again mostly by interviewing the members of Congress about the events at the Capitol and who are leading the investigation. There were a few appearances, such as the Senate sergeant-at-arms, related to the violent invasion of the Capitol but as far as we can find, no journalists or others who independently probed into the larger context. We have not reviewed the show transcripts but those involved in the Congressional investigation are constrained in what they can discuss publicly and will be viewed as partisan so we believe something was lost by not inviting outside experts.

Another important question is how the Sunday Shows treated those who were actively involved in the failed coup. Were those who worked to overturn the election or set the stage by circulating unsubstantiated falsehoods undermining confidence in the election invited onto the shows? If so, were they confronted on their actions? We used the Republican Accountability Project’s *GOP Democracy Report Card* to determine whether coup supporters appeared on the shows and if so, which ones and how often.^{17, 18} The Report Card grades each GOP member of Congress on their actions and statements to undermine democracy including supporting the lawsuit to nullify votes cast in several states, objecting to certification of electors, making public statements supporting efforts to question the election result and opposing an independent investigation of the insurrection or efforts to hold Trump accountable. The Fs are those who took *every* opportunity they had to undermine democracy and D’s took most of them. Figure 8 lists all of the guests on the Sunday Shows during 2021 who received D’s or worse.

As may be seen, Fox stood out as fully embracing the coup plotters. Considering that well more than half of congressional Republicans received failing grades, the other networks clearly avoided such guests, but not entirely. All of the shows hosted guests who made claims about the election that had been rejected in multiple court cases, and impeded efforts at an independent investigation. But we wonder why they are on at all. Alex Shepard noted that the simplest course is “not to have them on if they deny basic facts—otherwise these shows become vehicles for propaganda.”¹⁹

Media Matters for America has published excellent reports that focus on many of the worst offenders and the ways in which they undermined democracy and their appearances on the Sunday Shows.²⁰ Our tabulation is a good complement to that, giving a fuller list of the coup supporters who appeared. But, as we only had third-party assessments of members of Congress. Non-MoC guests who have undermined democracy such as Gov. Tate Reeves of Mississippi or former Trump campaign manager Corey Lewandowski are not listed.

¹⁵ *READ: McConnell Speech After Trump’s Impeachment Trial Acquittal | Politics | US News.* <https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2021-02-14/read-mcconnell-speech-after-trumps-impeachment-trial-acquittal>. Accessed 1 June 2022.

¹⁶ Actually, the disinformation campaign that prepared for the coup attempt began long before the election and the events of January 6, 2021 are just a temporary peak in a long campaign, as portrayed in the podcast Will Be Wild “Will Be Wild: E6: The War on Pineapple.” Wondery - Feel The Story, <https://wondery.com/shows/will-be-wild/episode/10652-the-war-on-pineapple/>. May 23, 2022.

¹⁷ “GOP Democracy Report Card.” *Republican Accountability Project*, <https://accountability.gop/report-card/>. Accessed 4 April 2022.

¹⁸ We note that the grading scale is quite lax. In 2006, all Republicans supported the Voting Rights Act. Now, people get A’s for democracy even though they do not.

¹⁹ Arguably, it would be acceptable to invite coup plotters and confront them about their involvement but Media Matters for America reviewed the appearances of many and found the moderators wanting while Alex Shepard concluded they were “hopeless” in this regard. Shepard, Alex, et al. “The Sunday Shows Are Hopelessly Broken.” *The New Republic*, 23 Feb. 2021. *The New Republic*, <https://newrepublic.com/article/161460/sunday-shows-hopelessly-broken>. Media Matters for America “*Sunday Shows Provide a Safe Haven for Architects of the Big Lie.*”, <https://www.mediamatters.org/january-6-insurrection/sunday-shows-provide-safe-haven-architects-big-lie> Jan 6, 2022.

²⁰ <https://www.mediamatters.org/january-6-insurrection/sunday-shows-provide-safe-haven-architects-big-lie>

Figure 8: Congresspeople Who Spread the Big Lie and Appeared on the Sunday Shows

			Appearances						
			GOP	Total	ABC	CBS	CNN	Fox	NBC
			Accountability						
			Grade						
Rick Scott	Senator	F	5	1	0	0	3	1	
Jim Banks	Representative	F	3	0	0	0	3	0	
Steve Scalise	Representative	F	3	1	1	0	1	0	
Dan Crenshaw	Representative	F	1	0	0	0	0	1	
Geoff Duncan	Representative	F	1	0	0	0	0	1	
Kevin McCarthy	Representative	F	1	0	0	0	1	0	
Roger Marshall	Senator	F	1	0	0	0	0	1	
Ted Cruz	Senator	F	1	0	1	0	0	0	
Lindsey Graham	Senator	D-	7	0	2	0	5	0	
Michael McCaul	Representative	D-	7	2	0	2	3	0	
Rand Paul	Senator	D-	2	1	0	0	1	0	
Ron Johnson	Senator	D-	1	0	0	0	0	1	
John Barrasso	Senator	D	6	3	0	0	2	1	
Joni Ernst	Senator	D	3	1	1	0	1	0	
Roger Wicker	Senator	D	3	2	0	0	0	1	
Tim Scott	Senator	D	3	0	2	0	1	0	
Shelly Moore Capito	Senator	D	2	0	0	1	1	0	
Dan Sullivan	Senator	D	1	1	0	0	0	0	
John Cornyn	Senator	D	1	0	0	0	1	0	
John Thune	Senator	D	1	0	0	0	1	0	
Julia Letlow	Representative	D	1	0	1	0	0	0	
Kevin Cramer	Senator	D	1	0	0	0	0	1	
Marco Rubio	Senator	D	1	0	0	0	1	0	
Mitch McConnell	Senator	D	1	0	0	0	1	0	
Tom Cotton	Senator	D	1	0	0	0	1	0	
	Total	F	16	2	2	0	8	4	
	Total	D-	17	3	2	2	9	1	
	Total	D	25	7	4	1	10	3	
	Total	Total	58	12	8	3	27	8	

We have not reviewed the transcripts and are not asserting that they spread the Big Lie on the Sunday Shows. Alex Shepard and The Media Matters report cited above provide more information as to what they said on the shows. But the people listed above had received failing grades for democracy and were still invited to appear.

A related matter is how President Trump's coup plotting and election lies were treated by the Sunday Shows. GOP leader, Sen. Mitch McConnell called Trump's actions "unconscionable", a "disgraceful dereliction of duty" and said "There is no question that President Trump is practically and morally responsible for provoking the events of that day." Earlier in his statement he called the events of the day "terrorism".²¹ Did the Sunday Shows treat Trump as a threat to the Republic or an ordinary (or perhaps extraordinary) political actor? Everything we have seen indicates Sunday Shows made a choice to completely normalize a President who attempted a coup. Just one example is Chuck Todd's introduction to a panel just a few months following the insurrection. Todd asked:

[F]ormer President Trump is back on the stage. Does the Republican Party need him or need him to go away?

A more appropriate question would have been:

"[F]ormer President Trump is back on the stage. How in good conscience can the Republican party not repudiate him?"

Coverage of Other Issues

Relative to their general disregard of several major problems facing the American public, it appears Sunday Shows are adequately covering foreign policy and the economy. . There were many guests with foreign policy expertise, including foreign heads of state, foreign ministers, US officials (including Sec. of State Antony Blinken) and outside experts. The quantity of such coverage, 77 guests, nearly 10%, seems about right. Almost all of the outside experts are former military officers or intelligence officials. Considering President Eisenhower's warning about the military-industrial complex, this seems unfortunate.

The economy also received some attention with 48 guests (6%) and, as with foreign policy coverage, featured a mix of Administration officials and outside experts. Economic issues should perhaps be addressed more frequently but considering the number of important issues to cover, 6% is in the right ballpark.

Criminal justice reform is badly needed. Poverty is widespread. Polls show that voters are concerned about government corruption. While these issues received some attention from politicians and other guests, we did not find any guests who are focused on reform proposals or who are engaged in the many local efforts to solve these pressing problems. These are topics that the public needs to be informed about and doing so might help foster national efforts to address them.

Education is another important issue. There were 15 guests on this topic (2%) which would be low in any accounting. But, while we did not review the transcripts, given the general media coverage and the political orientation of these shows, we suspect the discussions were more about "critical race theory" than how to assure everyone receives a good education – meanwhile the U.S. continues to rank poorly on educational outcomes.

Negative Impacts of focus on politics

Even though politicians certainly do sometimes discuss substantive policy, we believe that relying heavily on them for discussion of news qualitatively changes the tenor of the conversation. In addition to discussing politics and process more often than other guests, when they address policy matters it will generally be in the context of legislation which gives it a partisan flavor. In addition, when politicians are guests, Sunday Shows will feel more obligation to represent "both sides" in the interest of bi-partisan objectivity. but when they have experts on there is less inclination to create false balance. For instance, if the shows featured an expert on renewable energy, it is unlikely that they would feel compelled to include an oil executive for balance—we certainly hope not. But if they have a Senator advocating subsidizing renewable energy, they may well feature another arguing against such subsidies.

Anand Giridharadas has noted that the media talks about process and politics rather than the important

²¹ (READ: McConnell Speech)

underlying issue which he calls “the thing”. He notes “We are always talking *around* the thing. About the process that might or might not bring the thing. About the players advocating for and obstructing the thing. But we never, ever talk about the thing.” So, for example, politicians spoke about the size of the infrastructure bill and its prospects of passage but there was almost no discussion of the contents of the bill and what benefits it would bring. Based on our study, avoiding discussion by experts of the most pressing issues of the day, the things, is the paradigm on Sunday Shows.

We do not recommend that political and legislative matters should be *excluded* from the Sunday Shows, but we do advocate cutting the allocation back to less than half the current levels so that they receive perhaps one-fifth of the air time, as the Shorenstein study found was the case in 1983, rather than the nearly 50% we observed in 2021. The focus on politicians has been found to portray public policy as a political game and lead people to view it as a spectator sport. We believe that this reflects the corporate networks commercial incentives to promote the shows as infotainment more than news. But, among other problems, it results in excessive focus on politics and the political process rather than the substance. Further examination of this is beyond the scope of this report but we encourage review of the many studies that have documented how this worsens public discourse, civic engagement and increases the partisan divide.²²

Party representation

Past studies of the Sunday Shows found strong biases towards Republicans and conservative guests²³. So, we were surprised that we found a more ambiguous picture – both that there is ambiguity as to how to measure it and as to the results. However we look at it, CNN skews towards Democrats and progressives; Fox towards Republicans and authoritarians. But as to the other shows we will discuss the questions, present the data and allow the readers to make their own judgments. Some studies only look at Congress or only at elected officials, perhaps because their partisan leanings are well defined.²⁴ On this basis, CNN and CBS hosted more Democrats, Fox, ABC and NBC more Republicans and overall there were 218 Republicans versus 206 Democrats. But why look only at elected officials? Some administration officials, such as Pete Buttigieg, have clear partisan affiliations but others, like Antony Blinken, have less obvious so judgment is required. Other guests such as Corey Lewandowski should be accounted for in a tabulation of bias. Since we currently have a Democratic president, counting administrative officials as partisan moves the balance towards Democrats. How we categorize Scott Gottlieb has a substantial effect on assessment CBS’s balance, as he represented 12% of all appearances on the show. Despite some reservations, we categorized him, and all public health professionals, as non-partisan. Overall, primarily due to our counting most administrative officials other than public health as Democrats, we total 306 Democrats (and Democratic-leaning Independents) versus 243 Republicans. We have given a breakdown by category in Figure 9 so you can draw your own conclusion. We will make the individual data available on request for further analysis.

²² See <https://journalistsresource.org/politics-and-government/horse-race-reporting-election/> for a good compilation.

²³ See, for example, Willis, Derek. “Congressional Conservatives Tip Scales to the Right on the Sunday Shows.” The New York Times, 19 Sept. 2014. NYTimes.com, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/20/upshot/congressional-conservatives-tip-scales-to-the-right-on-the-sunday-shows.html> and Power, Lis, and Gabby Miller. “STUDY: Over the Past 3 Months, Guest Panels on Sunday Shows Have Been Overwhelmingly Conservative.” *Media Matters for America*, 2 November 2010. <https://www.mediamatters.org/nbc/study-over-past-3-months-guest-panels-sunday-shows-have-been-overwhelmingly-conservative>. Media Matters for America. “If it’s Sunday, It’s Conservative: An analysis of the Sunday talk show guests on ABC, CBS, and NBC, 1997 – 2005” *Media Matters for America*, 14 February 2006. Archived at http://web.archive.org/web/20140425231513/http://cloudfront.mediamatters.org/static/pdf/MMFA_Sunday_Show_Report.pdf.

²⁴ Even there, Bernie Sanders and other independents introduce some ambiguity. We list independents separately but have included Sanders and Angus King as Democrats in the assessment as they caucus with them. This has no impact on the conclusions we make.

Figure 9: Party Affiliation by Type of Guests

	Appearances					Total
	ABC	CBS	CNN	Fox	NBC	
Public Health Officials	27	50	22	20	23	142
Dems	0	0	0	0	0	0
Reps	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ind	0	0	0	0	0	0
No Party	27	50	22	20	23	142
Current Admin	26	20	31	22	22	121
Dems	23	17	23	15	17	95
Reps	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ind	0	0	0	0	0	0
No Party	3	3	8	7	5	26
Former Admin	7	15	2	12	6	42
Dems	0	1	0	1	1	3
Reps	0	4	1	10	4	19
Ind	0	0	0	0	0	0
No Party	7	10	1	1	1	20
Congress	46	42	89	62	53	292
Dems	15	24	53	21	21	134
Reps	28	16	28	41	28	141
Ind	3	2	8	0	4	17
No Party	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other Pols	22	38	38	13	25	136
Dems	11	17	11	3	11	53
Reps	11	16	27	10	13	77
Ind	0	2	0	0	0	2
No Party	0	3	0	0	1	4
Other Guests	36	84	42	21	36	219
Dems	12	19	12	3	11	57
Reps	11	18	27	11	16	83
Ind	0	2	0	0	0	2
No Party	13	45	3	7	9	77
Total	142	211	186	137	140	816
Dems	50	61	88	40	50	289
Reps	39	38	56	62	48	243
Ind	3	4	8	0	4	19
No Party	50	108	34	35	38	265

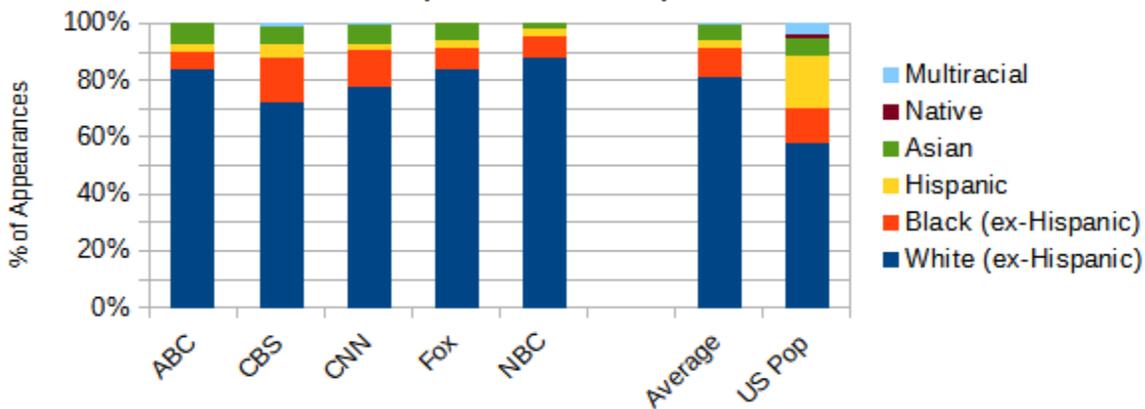
We recommend that the shows reduce the number of politicians they invite and invite more experts who generally do not have strong partisan affiliations. In 2021, there were 265 such guests, most of whom were public health officials. We would like to see many more. These guests will be inclined to talk about substance and policy rather than politics.

Demographics

Race and Ethnicity

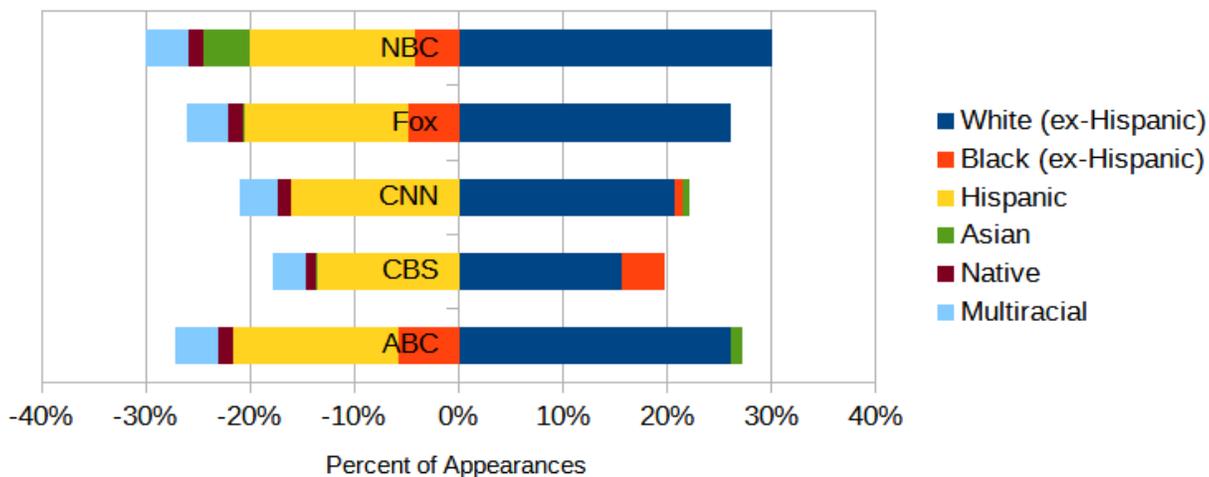
Figure 10 compares the racial and ethnic distribution of guests on each network. The far right side of the graph compares the average distribution across all shows in our study and contrasts that to the U.S. population. As you can see, White people were very over-represented on all networks. NBC outdid Fox for the whitest network with just over 10% people of color.

Figure 10: Racial Composition of Sunday Show Guests Compared to US Population



The predominance of White people on Sunday Shows, and the dramatic under-representation of Latinos, becomes even clearer when we graph the differences between the distributions of guests on each network and the U.S. population as a whole, as is shown in Figure 11.

Figure 11: Under/Over-Representation by Race

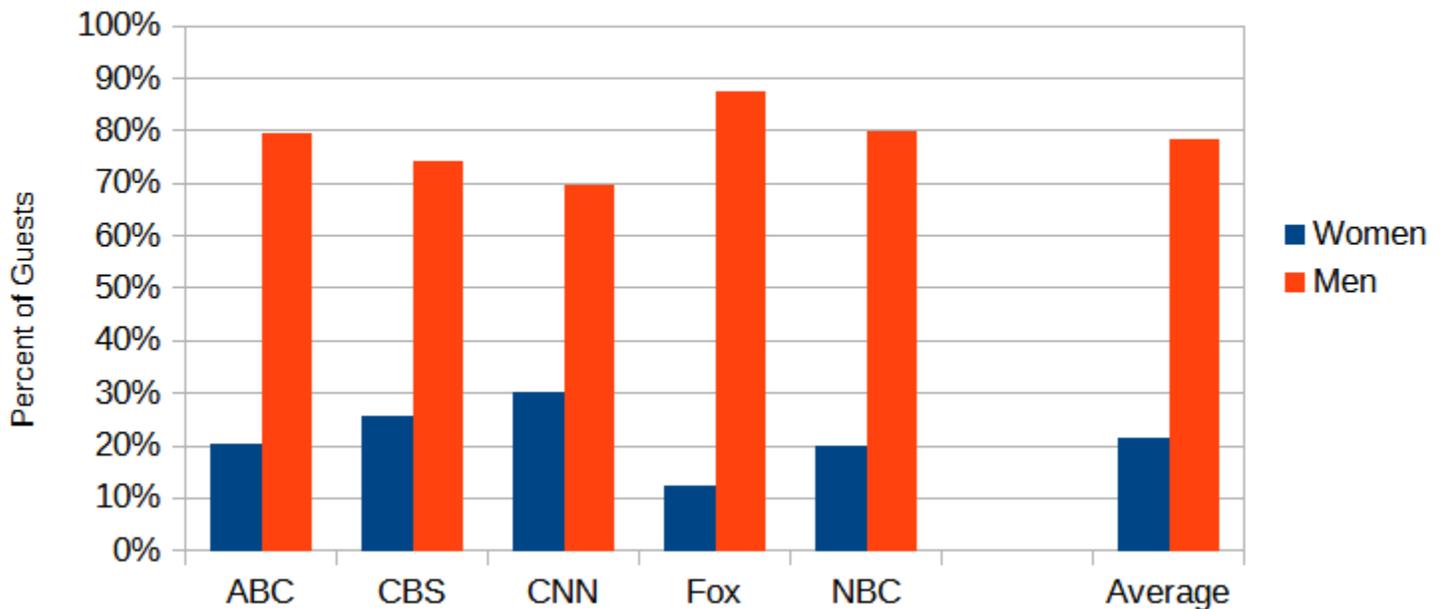


Hispanic people make up 19% of the U.S. population but comprised only 3% of the guests on major network Sunday Shows during all of 2021. That is, of 816 appearances, only 28 were Latinas or Latinos while there would have been 153, more than five times as many, if they were invited in proportion to the population. 125 Hispanic voices were missing from the shows. Only one Native American was hosted on any of the shows even though their proportion of the US population suggests there might have been nine, even more if people with multiple racial identities were considered. Hispanic people are much more under-represented than Black people while multi-racial people and Native Americans are almost completely absent.

Gender balance:

Figure 12 shows the proportions of male and female guests by network.²⁵ As you can see, male guests dominated all of the shows. Fox News Sunday was particularly egregious with just over 10% female guests. The Women’s Media Center (WMC) and others have done excellent work documenting this for many years.²⁶ Our results show significantly more gender bias than the WMC. We speculate that is because they include panelists and perhaps moderators while we did not. We plan to explore this question in greater depth in the future.

Figure 12: Gender Distribution of Guests by Show



²⁵ To the best of our knowledge, there were no transgender or non-binary guests, but we did not focus on this in our data collection and apologize if we mis-gendered anyone.

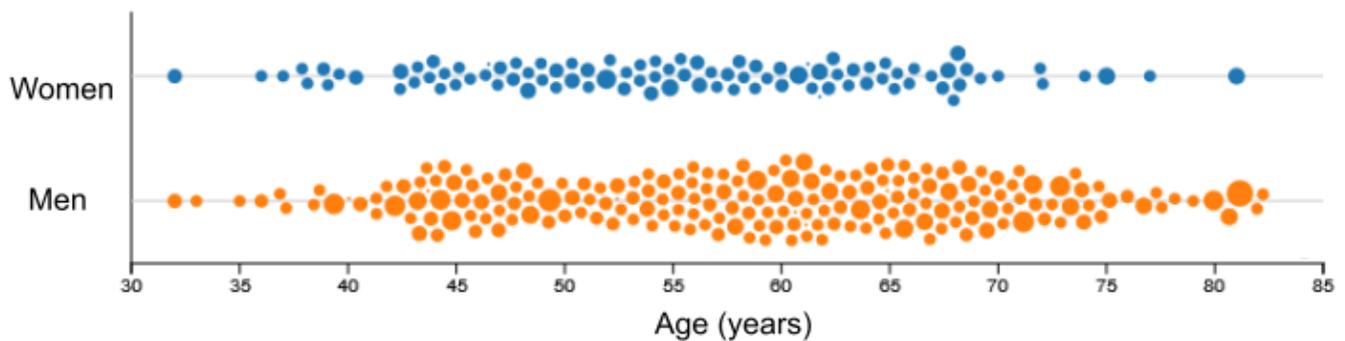
²⁶(WMC Report)

<https://womensmediacenter.com/reports/wmc-report-gender-and-race-representation-on-five-big-sunday-shows-january-1-december-31-2020-full-report>

Age Distribution

We also tracked guest age. The average age was 59.6 years. Men are older at 60.5, while women average 56.6. We graphed this distribution in Figure 13. Each dot represents an individual. Orange dots represent men, and the blue dots represent women. The size of the dot reflects the number of appearances. The larger the dot, the more appearances. You can see both the predominance of men and the number over age 70.

Figure 13: Age Distribution of the Guests



Value of diversity

This report focuses mainly on the content of the Sunday Shows rather than the representation of the guests because we think that is where we are adding the most value and the most new information. But we believe that racial and gender balance are crucial for reasons much deeper than appearances. We can't do better on this than to quote what others have said:

"Diversity is not just about replacing white male faces with female, Black, and brown ones, but rather assuring that questions and issues of interest to those constituencies are part of national discussions on current affairs. The points and perspectives raised on these programs help set the agenda for other journalists and political leaders, and the guests who raise them become viewed as legitimate spokespeople in the news environment. Their absence contributes to omission of information about challenges these constituencies face, and to the silence of those who can speak most knowledgeably about them." - Women's Media Center report, 2020 ²⁷

"If your newsroom does not reflect or represent the country that we live in, you are incapable of practicing excellence in journalism." - Democracy-ish podcast ²⁸

²⁷ (WMC Report)

<https://womensmediacenter.com/reports/wmc-report-gender-and-race-representation-on-five-big-sunday-shows-january-1-december-31-2020-full-report>

²⁸ "Why White Media Fails - Democracy-Ish (Podcast)." *Listen Notes*,

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Podcast also here: <https://www.dcpofficial.com/democracy-ish>

Individual Guests

Figure 14 lists the most frequent guests, other than the public health officials previously listed in Figure 6.

Figure 14: Frequent Guests by Number of Appearances

Name		Appearances					
		Total	ABC	CBS	CNN	Fox	NBC
Asa Hutchinson	Governor	19	2	4	8	2	3
Adam Kinzinger	US Representative	17	4	3	5	1	4
Pete Buttigieg	Secretary of Transportation	17	5	1	4	4	3
Joe Manchin	US Senator	16	4	2	5	3	2
Bernie Sanders	US Senator	15	3	2	7	0	3
Antony Blinken	Secretary of State	13	4	2	2	1	4
Jake Sullivan	US National Security Advisor	13	2	2	3	3	3
Bill Cassidy	US Senator	12	3	0	1	4	4
Larry Hogan	Governor	10	0	1	5	1	3
Amy Klobuchar	US Senator	9	2	0	4	1	2
Brian Deese	Director of the National Economic Council	9	1	0	2	4	2
Cedric Richmond	Director of the White House Office of Public Engagement	9	1	3	2	2	1

As the most common guests are members of Congress, we would not have expected Gov. Asa Hutchinson (R-AR) to be the most frequent guest. The Shorenstein Center report noted that Donald Trump was by far the most frequent guest in 2015 so perhaps this is an indication of Presidential ambition. We are dismayed but not surprised that the top eight most frequent guests are all White men.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Sunday Shows do a poor job of informing the public. We have documented that many vital issues are getting little or no substantive coverage on what are widely considered the most prestigious journalistic offerings by the major networks. The shows had very few or no experts on climate and other environmental matters, court cases, criminal justice reform, immigration, voting rights, civil rights, or drug policy. Nearly half of the guests were elected officials or former elected officials rather than people with expertise in specific policy areas or who are significantly impacted by the problems facing our country.

After a review of select show transcripts we assessed that what discussion there was on these issues focused more on politics than substance, more on process than policy. Discussions most often raised DC insider concerns such as the filibuster or framed important issues with a political lens.

There were a few topics that were well covered by experts. Not surprisingly, COVID was regularly and thoroughly covered. And those segments largely featured medical experts, predominantly current government

public health officials. Foreign policy and the economy also received significant attention from well-qualified guests. While we have some criticisms of how those two topics were handled, such as the predominance of former military officials on foreign policy, for the most part we found the treatment of these issues a good model that we recommend the shows apply to all issues. Unfortunately, while there were 141 expert appearances related to COVID, there were only 2 expert guests on climate change.

Much too much air time is given to politicians. As a result, discussion focuses on partisan politics and questions of process such as the filibuster or the chances that a bill, whose contents are not described, will pass. They focus far too much on politics as a means of informing the public of the important issues of the day. This politicization worsens political discourse and adds to division.

We also found substantial bias towards older White men. Only 3% of the guests were Latino even though 19% of the U.S. population is. Women represent only 23% of the guests. These statistics are appalling. Though these failings of representation have been highlighted by several past studies, there has been no significant effort made by major Sunday Shows to be more representative.

Perhaps we are asking too much. Perhaps they are just shows about inside the beltway politics and the biases we observe are endemic in the system. Perhaps we shouldn't expect more. But the shows seem to have higher aspirations and both their history and the recent coverage of COVID indicate that **they can do better**. As they illustrated with the coverage of COVID, the shows can use experts to cover vital topics. If they cut the number of Congressional guests in half, there would be room to cover several more topics well. They should not be a propaganda platform for people who deny basic facts and undermine democracy.

We intend to continue to monitor the Sunday Shows and hope to expand our work to cover the panelists and to explore the content in more depth. We invite collaboration in this endeavor. We hope that this report and others will spur the shows to improve. We look forward to documenting this progress in the future.

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