Public Television for Liberals? The Demographic and Behavioral Characteristics of *The PBS Newshour* Viewers

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Abstract

Non-academic sources suggest that PBS, an American public broadcast service, mostly serves liberals. However, there is little scholarly evidence on the demographic and behavioral characteristics of those who get news about government and politics from PBS. Using the data from the American National Election Study's 2020 Time Series (N=8,280), this research examines how PBS viewership is related to party identification, ideology, education, sex, race, political knowledge, religion, income and age. It also explores how PBS viewers are different from MSNBC, CNN, and Fox News viewers in their political attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs.

Keywords: PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, PBS NewsHour, Liberal bias

1. Introduction

Research shows that conservatives/Republicans tend to watch Fox News while liberals/Democrats rely on CNN and MSNBC (Stroud, 2010). What about PBS? Public television news is important because it is more accessible (e.g., no need to have an active paid membership to watch a full episode online). Public broadcasting is at least partially funded by taxpayers with the expectation that it serves the public as a whole rather than strategically targeting a segment or niche (e.g., conservative or liberal viewers).

In practice, however, there is a concern that PBS mostly serves liberals. While evidence from other countries such as the Netherlands (Bos et al., 2016) is examined through the academic peer review process, what we know about Americans relying on public television for news comes mostly from think tank reports (Jurkowitz et al., 2020; Mitchell et al., 2014), viewer comments (Schaffer, 2021), or complaints by politicians (Hoynes, 2002). In this research, I try to provide more systematic evidence on the characteristics of those who rely on public television for news. In doing so, I address the following questions: Who watches public television news in America? How are they different from those watching more partisan news (i.e., MSNBC, CNN, and Fox News) in their vote choice and in the levels of ideological/affective polarization?

Using the data from the American National Election Study's 2020 Time Series (pre-election, N=8,280), I find that, controlling for age, education, religion, race, gender, and income, Democrats and liberals were more likely to watch *The PBS NewsHour*, the public television's evening news program. Those who reported watching *The PBS NewsHour* at least once a month ("The Viewers" or "PBS viewers" hereafter) were more similar to MSNBC/CNN viewers than to Fox News viewers in their political beliefs and attitudes. That said, PBS viewers were clearly distinguishable from MSNBC/CNN viewers in most cases (The former were more moderate). Specifically, The Viewers were more likely than non-viewers to vote for Biden in the 2020 presidential election. The Viewers were less likely than regular MSNBC and CNN viewers to vote for Biden while they were much more likely than Fox News viewers to support the Democratic candidate. As for their issue positions, The Viewers' positions on Abortion, Welfare Spending, Immigration, Vaccines in Schools, and Using Military Force to Solve International Problems were significantly different from the positions reported by regular Fox News viewers. The Viewers' issue positions were more moderate than those reported by regular MSNBC and CNN viewers on some issues while, on other issues, The Viewers' positions were not significantly different from those held by MSNBC and CNN viewers. On one issue, The Viewers' position (i.e., against using military force to solve international problems) was the strongest or most extreme. The Viewers were more likely than MSNBC and CNN viewers – and less likely than Fox News viewers – to approve Trump on dealing with COVID-19, Economy, Foreign Relations, Healthcare, and Immigration. Compared to those who regularly watch MSNBC, CNN, or Fox News, The Viewers reported more moderate feelings toward liberals, conservatives, the two major political parties, and the 2020 presidential candidates.

This study improves our understanding of those who rely on PBS for political news and information. While the evidence

reported here is more systematic and thorough than what was previously available, it is impossible to estimate the extent to which the findings would be robust in the absence of overreporting by survey respondents (Prior, 2013). Future studies should devise a research design that does not rely on respondents' self-reported answers for measuring whether they watch a news program or not (e.g., tracking data). Furthermore, more direct evidence on what the members of the public think about PBS (and other news sources) and why they choose one source over others should strengthen the scholarship on the role of the public media in increasingly divided America.

2. Expectations

Academic studies and the dominant discourses on public television in America and its coverage of politics can be categorized into the supply side (e.g., how PBS covers politics) and the demand side (e.g., who watches PBS). Most academic studies on the subject focus on the former while most evidence on the latter is based on think tank reports.

Groseclose and Milyo (2005) suggest that *The PBS NewsHour* was left of center or more liberal than the average member of Congress. The authors estimate a news outlet's ideology based on the extent to which it cites the think tanks and policy groups that were also cited by ideological members of Congress in their speeches, which is challenged by some political scientists (e.g., Nyhan, 2012). Other studies do not focus on PBS's liberal bias, but on its reporting style and content. Kerbel et al. (2000), for example, argues that PBS failed to inform the public during the 1996 presidential election in that it focused too much on horse-race and strategy frames. According to the authors, PBS's coverage of politics was not that different from network news coverage (i.e., ABC's). Hoynes (2002) similarly points out that PBS's reporting too often emphasizes strategy frames. The author also shows that more than 75% of PBS's on-camera sources were elites (e.g., corporate representatives, government officials, or professionals), and that the general public or citizen activists received little attention. Scott et al. (2010) also problematize PBS's sourcing practices and suggest that PBS could have relied on more diverse sources (e.g., foreign-based sources, individuals of color, or public interest advocates), using *Democracy Now!*, an alternative news media, as a comparison. These studies are not without methodological issues, but they improve our understanding of how PBS covers politics.

Non-academic sources also document viewers' and politicians' complaints that PBS has a liberal bias. A report by Corporation for Public Broadcasting Ombudsman (2021), for example, shows that some viewers believe that *The PBS NewsHour* has a liberal bias and fails to cover Republicans and Democrats in a balanced way. Republican politicians have long argued that the public television has a liberal bias. Criticisms from Republican presidents Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump are well documented in both academic (Hoynes, 2002) and non-academic sources (Gonzalez, 2017).

While there is little academic research on the demographic and behavioral characteristics of PBS viewers, some think tank reports suggest that the public television is mostly watched by liberals. For example, reports from the Pew Research Center (Jurkowitz et al., 2020; Mitchell et al., 2014) show that 60% of those who get news about government and politics from PBS were either consistently liberal or mostly liberal while 15% were either consistently conservative or mostly conservative. The same study shows that 44% of those who rely on CNN were liberal while 17% were conservative. In short, some of the sources cited above directly or indirectly introduce the idea that PBS is a pro-liberal source. If this perspective, which can be called "the PBS for liberals/Democrats perspective," is correct, we should find evidence supporting the following hypotheses:

H1: Liberals are more likely to watch *The PBS NewsHour*.

H2: Democrats are more likely to watch *The PBS NewsHour*.

Of course, the perspective can be grounded in the well-studied theory of partisan selective exposure (Stroud, 2010). To the extent that PBS is perceived to be a liberal source, liberals and Democrats are more likely to watch the channel's news program. If PBS viewers are predominantly liberals or Democrats, one can expect that their political behaviors will be similar to liberals' and Democrats'. By extension, PBS viewers should behave more similarly to CNN/MSNBC viewers than to Fox News viewers. Therefore, I also test the following hypotheses:

H3: PBS viewers are more likely than non-viewers to vote for Joe Biden.

H4. PBS viewers should be more similar to CNN/MSNBC viewers than to Fox News viewers in their policy positions.

H5. PBS viewers should be more similar to CNN/MSNBC viewers than to Fox News viewers in their evaluation of the U.S. president (Donald Trump).

H6. PBS viewers should be more similar to CNN/MSNBC viewers than to Fox News viewers in how they feel about both political sides.

To test the six hypotheses about the characteristics of those who watch PBS news, I rely on 2020 ANES Time Series Study. In the study, 8,280 U.S. eligible voters were interviewed prior to the 2020 election (i.e., August 2020-November

3), which included 5,441 fresh cross-sectional samples and 2,839 ANES 2016-2020 panel samples. The survey mode included internet, phone, and video. More information about the data is available from the ANES website (https://electionstudies.org/).

3. Results

Demographic Characteristics of The PBS NewsHour Viewers

Who watches *The PBS NewsHour*? As shown in Appendix 1, Democrats and liberals were more likely to watch the program. For example, 10.27% of strong Democrats and 12.08% of extremely liberal respondents reported watching the program while only 3.27% of strong Republicans and 1.21% of extremely conservative respondents did. Independents (6.04%) and moderates (7.44%) were in the middle. Overall (not reported here), Democrats accounted for 48.5% of The Viewers, followed by Independents (32.4%), and Republicans (19.2%). The level of education seems to be positively related to watching *The PBS NewsHour*. Respondents with less than high school credentials were least likely to watch the program (3.61%) while those with graduate degrees reported the highest level of viewership (11.51%). Similar patterns exist for CNN and MSNBC while this was not the case for Fox News. For example, 23.47% of the respondents with less than high school credentials watched Fox News at least once a month whereas 18.07% of those with graduate degrees watched the channel. Sex does not seem to be related to whether an individual watches *The PBS NewsHour* (Female = 6.11%, Male = 6.81%). In terms of race and ethnic backgrounds, respondents who identified themselves as multiple races (non-Hispanic) were most likely to watch the program (9.71%) which was not the case for whether a respondent watches CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News. In terms of political knowledge, those who can answer basic questions about American politics correctly were more likely to watch *The PBS NewsHour* (7.11% vs. 3.80%). When it comes to religion, "Other religion" showed the highest viewership of *The PBS NewsHour* (14.16%) followed by Black protestants (9.30%), and Jewish respondents (8.22%). The level of income does not seem to be strongly related to whether one watches *The PBS NewsHour* or not. Finally, 56 or older were most likely to watch the program (8.92%).

Table 1. OLS Predictors of *The PBS NewsHour* Viewership

	Coef.	SE	p	R^2	N
Democrat	0.0414	0.0067	<.0001*	0.0314	5766
Liberal	0.0335	0.0081	<.0001*	0.0295	4997

Table 1 shows that the relationship between one's party identification (and ideology in a separate model) and whether she watches *The PBS NewsHour* is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level (see Appendix 2 for the full results which include Intercept, Age, Education, Religion, Race, Gender, and Income). Other things being equal, the percentage of The Viewers was 4.14 points higher for Democrats than for Republicans and Independents ($p<.0001$). This means that if 9% of Democrats watched *The PBS NewsHour*, 4.86% of the reference group (Republicans and Independents) would have watched the program, controlling for other factors. Similarly, liberals were more likely than conservatives and moderates to be The Viewers ($p<.0001$). Therefore, both H1 and H2 are not rejected at the 95% confidence level. Age, education, and religion are also related to *The PBS NewsHour* viewership (Appendix 2).

Behavioral Characteristics of The PBS NewsHour Viewers

As expected in H3, The Viewers were more likely to vote for Biden (Table 2). 79.3% of those watching the program at least once a month voted for Biden while 55.7% of the non-viewers supported the Democratic candidate in the 2020 presidential election ($p<.0001$). The difference (5.4 percent points) is significant even after controlling for party identification ($p = 0.0016$). As shown in Table 3, The Viewers were less likely than MSNBC and CNN viewers – and more likely than Fox News viewers – to vote for Biden (in all three cases, $p<.0001$). In other words, PBS viewers were more similar to MSNBC/CNN viewers (as expected in H3), but they were still more moderate.

Table 2. OLS Predictors of Voting for Biden

Term	Coef.	SE	p	Coef.	SE	p
Intercept	0.557	0.007	<.0001*	0.180	0.006	<.0001*
PBS	0.236	0.028	<.0001*	0.054	0.017	0.0016*
Democrat				0.786	0.009	<.0001*
R^2		0.015			0.637	
N		4665			4661	

Table 3. Differences between PBS Viewers and MSNBC/CNN/Fox News Viewers: Vote Choice and Issue Positions

PBS vs.		Biden	Abortion	Welfare	Immigration	Vaccines	Military
MSNBC	Diff.	-0.1824	0.0977	0.3446	0.2043	0.3071	-0.1957
	SE	0.0378	0.0642	0.0862	0.0822	0.1232	0.0620
	p	<.0001	0.1281	<.0001	0.0129	0.0127	0.0016
CNN	Diff.	-0.1658	0.0304	0.1482	0.0330	0.1098	-0.1553
	SE	0.0365	0.0612	0.0832	0.0795	0.1190	0.0596
	p	<.0001	0.6200	0.0751	0.6783	0.3564	0.0092
Fox	Diff.	0.7667	-0.2687	-1.1365	-1.1468	-0.6303	-0.3424
	SE	0.0296	0.0589	0.0729	0.0693	0.1062	0.0532
	p	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001
	DF	4661	2346	6387	5801	5816	6389

On all five issues considered here (Table 3), The Viewers reported more liberal positions than Fox News viewers did ($p<.0001$ in all cases) while their issue positions were similar to (but not the same as) those held by MSNBC and CNN viewers. For example, on abortion, the difference between The Viewers and MSNBC viewers ($p=0.1281$) and the difference between The Viewers and CNN viewers ($p=0.6200$) were statistically insignificant at the 95% confidence level. Interestingly, The Viewers held the strongest or most extreme position on whether the United States should be willing to use military force to solve international problems. Specifically, The Viewers were most likely to oppose it, deviating from the pattern of being more conservative than MSNBC/CNN viewers and more liberal than Fox News viewers. The results might be related to the tendency that the public media is more likely to cover international news compared to commercial content providers (Iyengar & McGrady, 2007). This is an important finding that needs to be theorized and tested more rigorously in a future study. In short, H4 is partially supported – PBS viewers were more similar to MSNBC/CNN viewers than to Fox News viewers on most issues, but on other issues, The Viewers were distinguishable from MSNBC/CNN viewers.

Table 4. Differences between PBS Viewers and MSNBC/CNN/Fox News Viewers: Evaluation of Trump

PBS vs.		COVID	Economy	Foreign Relations	Healthcare	Immigration
MSNBC	Diff.	-0.4194	-1.2446	-0.4902	-0.4100	-0.4939
	SE	0.0898	0.0548	0.0931	0.0896	0.0950
	p	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001
CNN	Diff.	-0.3646	-0.3751	-0.3824	-0.2877	-0.4170
	SE	0.0859	0.0901	0.0893	0.0862	0.0909
	p	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	0.0008	<.0001
Fox	Diff.	1.9783	2.0096	2.0885	1.9489	2.0874
	SE	0.0705	0.0759	0.0738	0.0721	0.0754
	p	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001
	DF	6403	6391	6388	6378	6395

The Viewers were more moderate in evaluating then-President Donald Trump, compared to MSNBC, CNN, and Fox News viewers (Table 4). On all issues examined here (i.e., Handling COVID-19, Economy, Foreign Relations, Healthcare, and Immigration), those watching *The PBS NewsHour* at least once a month were more likely to approve Trump than MSNBC and CNN viewers – and less likely to approve him than Fox News viewers – did. Therefore, H5 is partially supported – PBS viewers, as expected, were more similar to MSNBC/CNN viewers than to Fox News viewers (in terms of the direction of the relationship), but their positions are clearly different from MSNBC/CNN viewers (in terms of the strength of the relationship).

Similar patterns appear when looking at the way The Viewers felt about the two political parties, the 2020 presidential candidates, liberals, and conservatives (Table 5). In other words, there is evidence supporting H6. Specifically, The Viewers were less likely than MSNBC and CNN viewers – and more likely than Fox News viewers – to report positive

feelings toward Biden, The Democratic Party, and liberals. The opposite was true for the feelings toward Trump, The Republican Party, and conservatives. Although not reported here, The Viewers' feelings toward Blacks, Black Lives Matter Movement, Feminists, Labor Union, Gay and Lesbian, Big Business, Christian Fundamentalists, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) showed similar patterns (i.e., more moderate than MSNBC, CNN, and Fox News viewers). Again, H6 is partially supported in that PBS viewers are still distinguishable from MSNBC/CNN viewers.

Table 5. Differences between PBS Viewers and MSNBC/CNN/Fox News Viewers: Feeling Thermometer

PBS vs.		Biden	Dem	Lib.	Trump	GOP	Con.
MSNBC	Diff.	-16.8428	-16.3089	-9.7225	16.2846	16.9016	11.9695
	SE	2.5215	2.2332	2.0771	2.8531	2.2468	1.9845
	p	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001
CNN	Diff.	-14.4273	-10.8021	-5.6601	13.3336	10.7161	7.8043
	SE	2.4152	2.1473	2.008	2.7301	2.1716	1.1919
	p	<.0001	<.0001	0.0048	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001
Fox	Diff.	51.8914	46.3895	41.805	-62.9304	-46.9957	-35.5878
	SE	2.0535	1.82	1.7014	2.2411	1.8403	1.61
	p	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001
	DF	5802	6330	5764	5787	6318	5761

4. Discussion

This study improves our understanding of those who rely on public television for political news and information, and how they are different from those who regularly watch MSNBC, CNN, or Fox News. Empirically, it is hard to argue that PBS has a tremendous impact on American politics. The public television does not have the highest ratings, and it may not shape public opinion in a dramatic way. Normatively, the public media has an important role to play in the rapidly changing media environment. "With the airwaves more cluttered and more commercial and with the public fragmenting into bite-sized, demographically specific audience segments, public television's mission to provide free, universally accessible programming that is diverse and innovative may be more valuable than ever before." (Hoynes, 2002, p.35). It is lamentable that the news program that is widely accessible (e.g., no commercial ads during the program and no paywall on the Internet) does not enjoy a bipartisan viewership. As critics argue, it may be because PBS's coverage of politics has a liberal bias. Alternatively, it is possible that conservatives do not watch PBS for reasons other than the commonly discussed liberal bias (e.g., reporting style or stereotypes).

Future studies could use in-depth interviews with the members of the public – especially conservatives and Republicans – to better understand what people like and dislike about the public television and its coverage of politics. Such empirical analyses can be guided by broader goals and questions: Under what conditions will the public television's coverage of politics be seen as nonpartisan? What can be done to make the program reach both Democrats and Republicans?

In addition, future studies should more rigorously theorize and examine the role of public media in increasingly divided America. For example, the current study's main methodological limitation (i.e., the reliance on respondents' self-reported answers and susceptibility to social desirability biases) must be overcome in future studies. Overall, people may overreport their news viewership (Prior, 2013). PBS viewership may be particularly susceptible to overreporting among political Independents and those who want to avoid portraying themselves as ideological or partisan.

Finally, the relationship between public news viewership and viewer characteristics can be examined in a comparative perspective. For example, similar to the patterns shown in this study, public news broadcast was more likely to be chosen by the left-wing voters in the Netherlands (Bos et al., 2016). However, in the United Kingdom, BBC was frequently watched by both conservatives and liberals (Pew Research Center, 2018). A future study can theorize and test why the relationship between public news viewership and viewer characteristics is similar between some countries and different between others.

Authors contributions

Not applicable.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Characteristics of *The PBS NewsHour* Viewers

	PBS	CNN	MSNBC	Fox
PID				
Strong Democrat	10.27%	30.38%	27.10%	5.45%
Weak Democrat	4.82%	18.69%	10.51%	7.74%
Leaning Democrat	10.31%	22.28%	17.13%	6.55%
Independent	6.04%	13.70%	7.36%	15.32%
Leaning Republican	4.81%	8.99%	3.88%	38.29%
Weak Republican	3.03%	7.11%	3.78%	23.75%
Strong Republican	3.27%	2.70%	1.85%	52.06%
Ideology				
Extremely Liberal	12.08%	23.77%	23.40%	3.02%
Liberal	10.29%	28.68%	24.68%	3.57%
Slightly Liberal	8.82%	21.49%	17.91%	6.89%
Moderate	7.44%	19.41%	12.61%	13.88%
Slightly Conservative	6.67%	11.63%	5.74%	29.30%
Conservative	4.02%	4.27%	3.27%	50.42%
Extremely Conservative	1.21%	2.12%	1.52%	59.39%
Education				
Less than high school	3.61%	9.03%	5.42%	23.47%
High school	2.86%	11.45%	7.70%	24.28%
Some post-high school	5.07%	14.83%	10.50%	24.24%
Bachelor's degree	6.93%	16.09%	13.06%	21.60%
Graduate degree	11.51%	22.29%	17.50%	18.07%
Sex				
Female	6.11%	16.21%	11.13%	19.11%
Male	6.81%	15.41%	12.69%	26.11%
Race				
Asian	6.91%	23.94%	12.77%	14.36%
Black	5.24%	29.55%	19.93%	14.16%
Hispanic	3.72%	13.45%	7.61%	15.75%
Multiple	9.71%	16.99%	13.59%	19.42%
Native American	4.41%	14.71%	13.24%	27.94%
White	6.79%	14.24%	11.23%	24.39%
Political Knowledge				
Higher	7.11%	17.35%	13.59%	23.44%
Lower	3.80%	10.15%	5.42%	18.20%
Religion				

Black Protestant	9.30%	18.60%	9.30%	13.95%
Evangelical Protestant	4.76%	13.63%	9.90%	31.84%
Jewish	8.22%	34.25%	24.66%	15.75%
Mainline Protestant	6.04%	18.32%	12.38%	25.28%
Not religious	8.08%	17.62%	14.46%	10.62%
Other Christian	4.97%	12.04%	9.03%	22.91%
Other religion	14.16%	22.37%	19.18%	15.98%
Roman Catholic	5.80%	14.81%	10.57%	24.26%
Undifferentiated Protestant	5.52%	11.66%	9.00%	26.79%
Income				
Below $40,000	6.28%	14.65%	10.52%	20.19%
$40,000-79,999	6.07%	15.26%	10.70%	24.22%
$80,000 or more	6.86%	17.14%	13.34%	21.64%
Age				
18-39	3.86%	11.47%	6.18%	14.09%
40-55	4.77%	16.21%	9.40%	18.99%
56 or older	8.92%	18.40%	16.39%	28.26%

Notes: N=6,421.

Source: American National Election Studies – 2020 Time Series Study.

Appendix 2. OLS Predictors of *The PBS NewsHour* Viewership (Full Results)

	Coef.	SE	p
Intercept	-0.0057	0.0087	0.5140
Democrat	0.0414	0.0067	<.0001*
56 or older	0.0577	0.0065	<.0001*
BA or more	0.0458	0.0069	<.0001*
Other religion or not religious	0.0251	0.0078	0.0012*
Multiple race	0.0290	0.0179	0.1059
Male	0.0072	0.0065	0.2679
Higher income	-0.0006	0.0005	0.2307
R^2	0.0314		
N	5766		

	Coef.	SE	p
Intercept	0.0102	0.0098	0.2985
Liberal	0.0335	0.0081	<.0001*
56 or older	0.0655	0.0074	<.0001*
BA or more	0.0458	0.0078	<.0001*
Other religion or not religious	0.0263	0.0089	0.0030*
Multiple race	0.0352	0.0199	0.0766
Male	0.0035	0.0073	0.6276
Higher income	-0.0011	0.0006	0.0699
R^2	0.0295		
N	4997		