

Moral values and Americans' trust in news

Media Insight Project

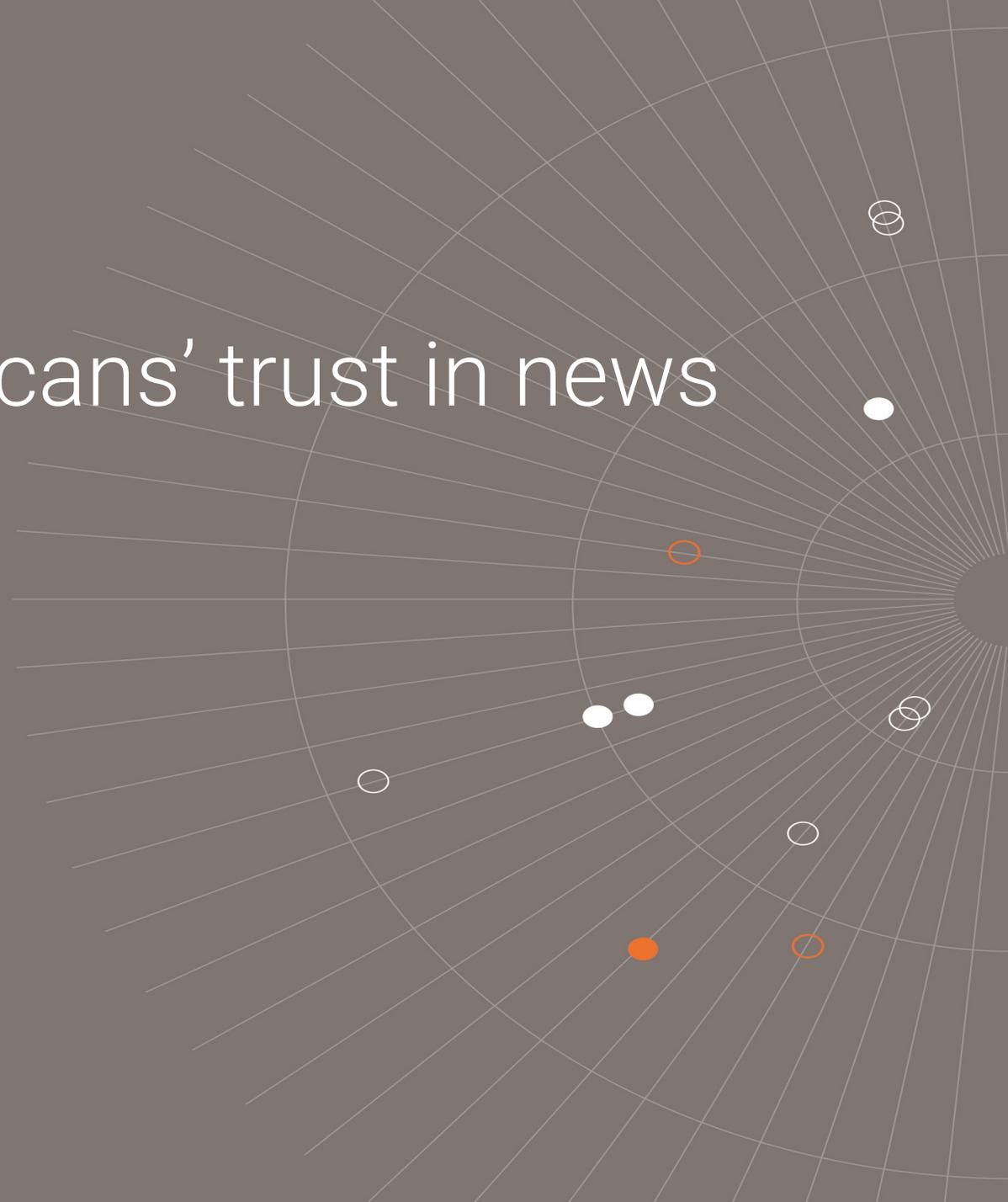
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Tom Rosenstiel
Jennifer Benz
Emily Swanson

AP

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Journalists **assume the public supports** and understands **the journalistic mission.**

“We’re just doing our job.”

“We’re just a watchdog.”

Much of the effort to rebuild **trust is tied to greater transparency**
(Trust Project, Trusting News, etc.)

But the debate is stuck.

Critics, especially on the right, see conscious media bias.

Journalists argue they're just doing their jobs, and assume the public knows what that is.

The debate often feels like people talking past each other.

What if the problem is more fundamental?

We set out to discover how many people support what journalists see as their mission.

Maybe suspicion over journalism values is a key component of the trust problem.

Do journalists define their mission too narrowly, leaving too many people out?

Can small changes in thinking about audiences make a big difference in building trust?

We took a new approach to understanding media trust

- Identified five basic journalism values
- Assessed public support or skepticism of those values
- Leveraged extensive research on “foundational moral values”

We believe this work opens an entirely new window into understanding the trust crisis that threatens the future of journalism.

How we conducted the study.

First Survey:

- Questions to measure respondents' scores on **Moral Foundations values** and **common journalistic values**.
- Attitudes toward the news and news behaviors.
- Common news headlines and leads of stories that reflected these journalism values. We measured feelings, reactions, and interest on each story.

How we conducted the study.

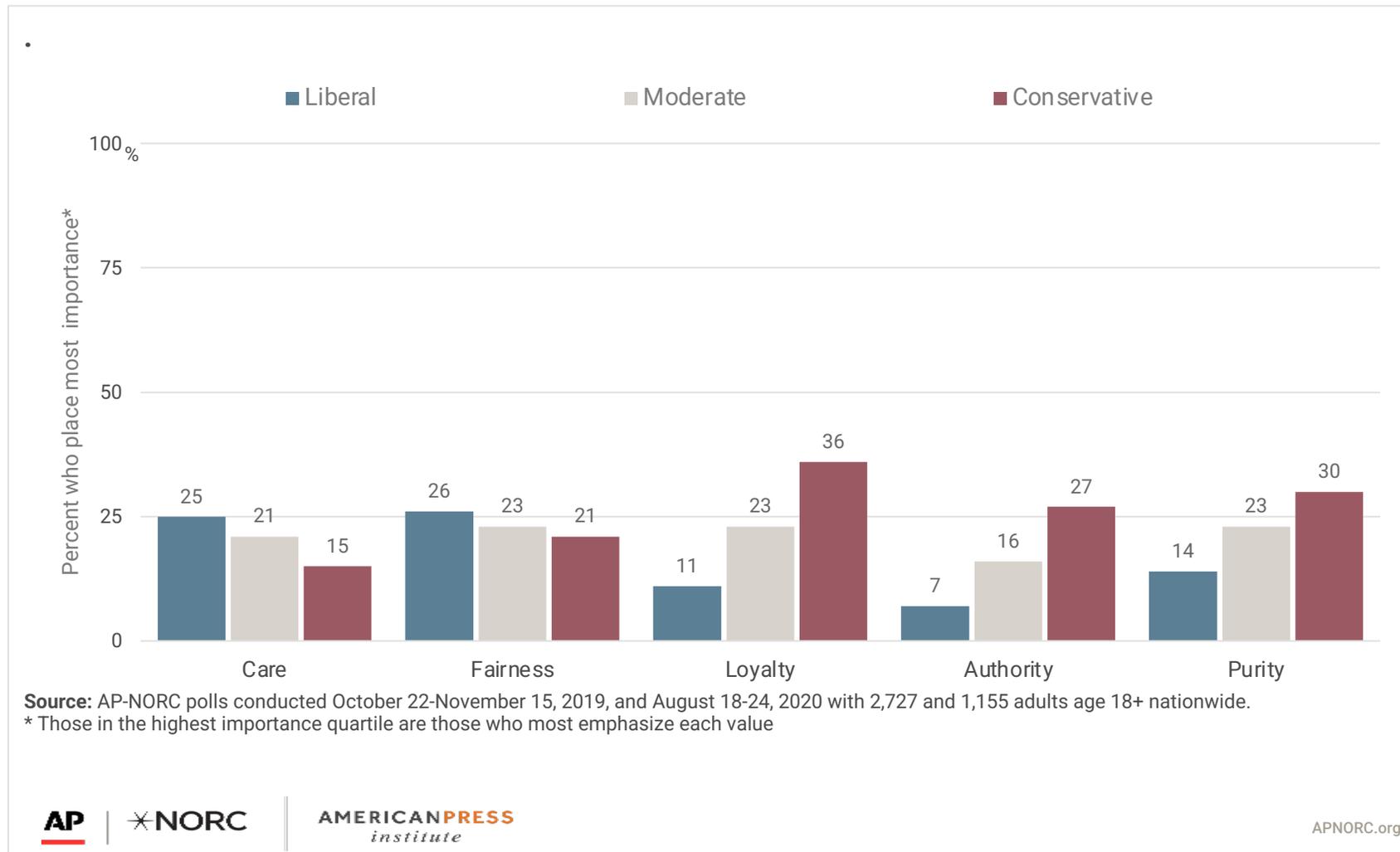
Second Survey:

- We gave the same respondents from Survey 1 additional news stories to read.
- Each story had two versions – **standard** vs. **revised to tap additional moral values**
- Questions about their attitudes toward the story and engagement with the material.

Moral Foundations Theory: Innate Values

- **Care vs. harm** - Cherishing and protecting others.
- **Fairness vs. cheating** - Justice, equality, and reciprocal altruism
- **Loyalty vs. betrayal** - patriotism and self-sacrifice for group gain
- **Authority vs. subversion** - social hierarchy and respect for leadership
- **Purity vs. degradation** - religious virtues of sanctity, cleanliness or nobility

Liberals and conservatives tend to differ on moral values they most emphasize.



Core journalism values measured

- **Oversight** - a journalist's job is to act as a watchdog
- **Transparency** - society is better if things are out in the open
- **Factualism** - the more facts people have, the closer they will get to the truth
- **Giving voice to the less powerful** - amplify the voices of people who aren't ordinarily heard
- **Social criticism** - spotlighting problems helps society solve them

NEWS VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

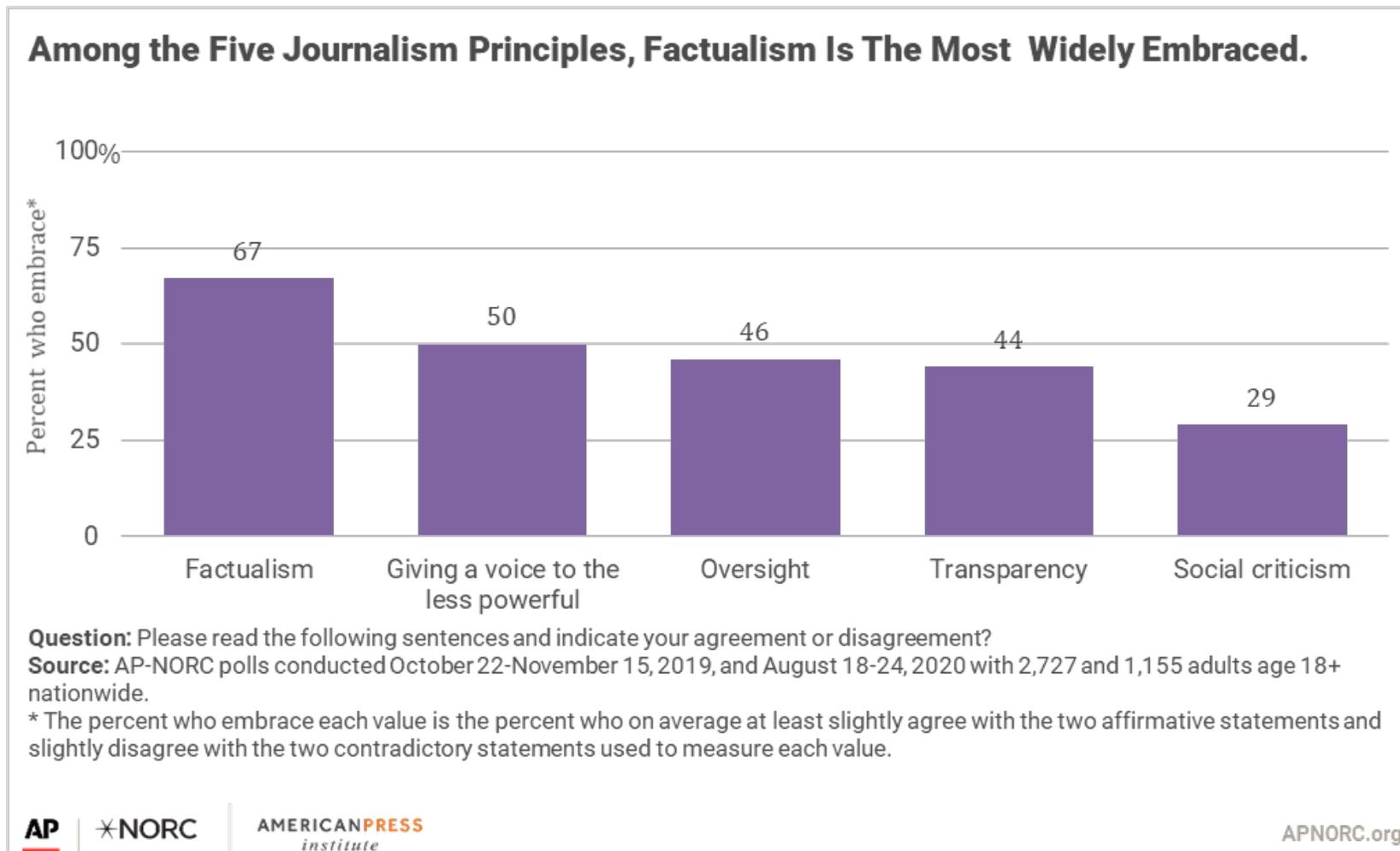
We are The Associated Press. We have a long-standing role setting the industry standard for ethics in journalism. It is our job — more than ever before — to report the news accurately and honestly.

These are **not the only journalism values**

But these five were drawn from Elements of Journalism, survey work of journalists, Associated Press Principles, and tested in an API/AP-NORC day-long session with a wide array of journalists from different areas in the field.

Now, the findings in more detail...

The public doesn't universally embrace our mission. Only 11% embrace all 5 journalism values without reservation.

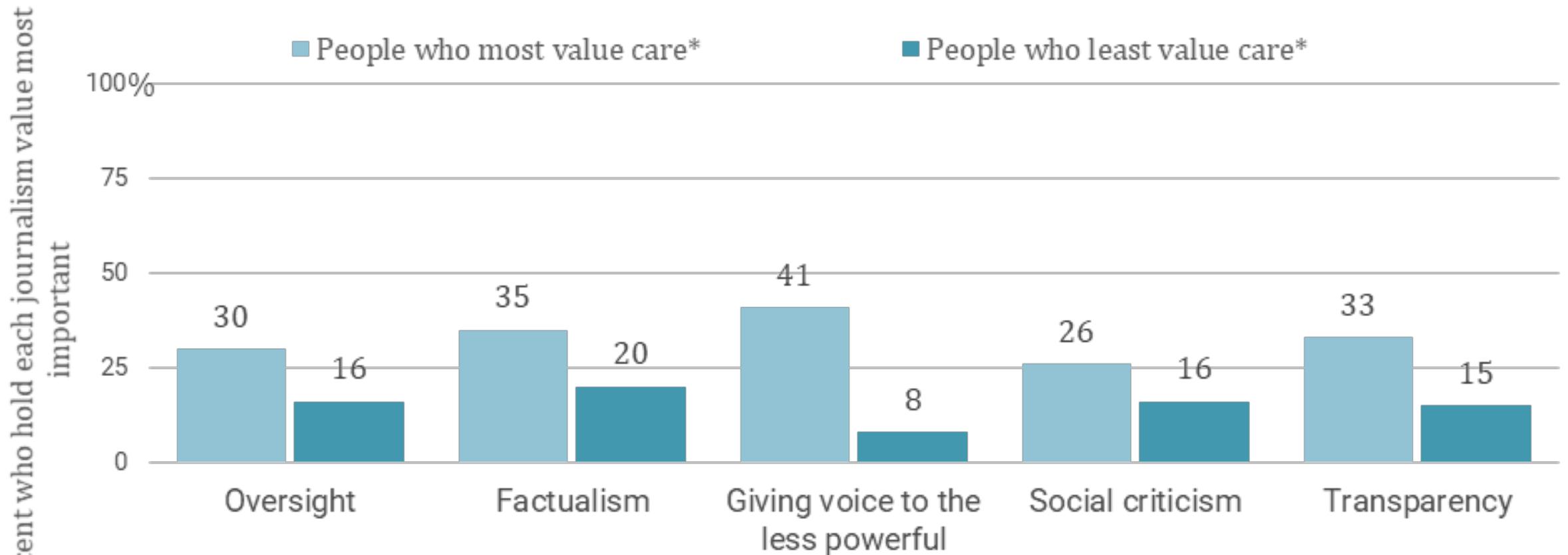


Support for journalism values does not break cleanly around party or ideology, but there are substantial differences by people's moral foundations.

People who place most importance on care and fairness are more likely to endorse journalism values

This is particularly important for the news media because it provides a deeper understanding of how people's moral framework associates with journalism's core principles.

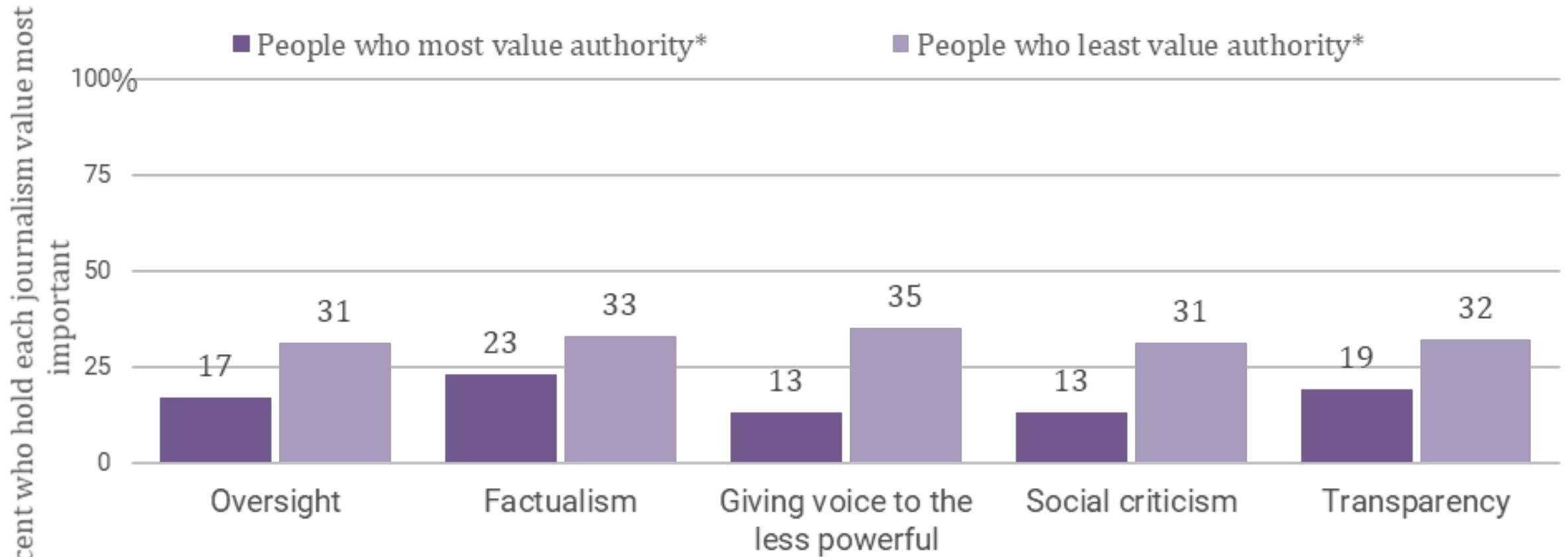
People Who Emphasize "Care" More Likely To Support Journalism Values.



Source: AP-NORC polls conducted October 22-November 15, 2019, and August 18-24, 2020 with 2,727 and 1,155 adults age 18+ nationwide.

* Refers to people whose value of care was in the top or bottom quartiles among all respondents

People Who Most Value "Authority" Less Likely To Support Journalisms Values.



Source: AP-NORC polls conducted October 22-November 15, 2019, and August 18-24, 2020 with 2,727 and 1,155 adults age 18+ nationwide.

* Refers to people whose value of authority was in the top or bottom quartiles among all respondents

Values clusters among the public

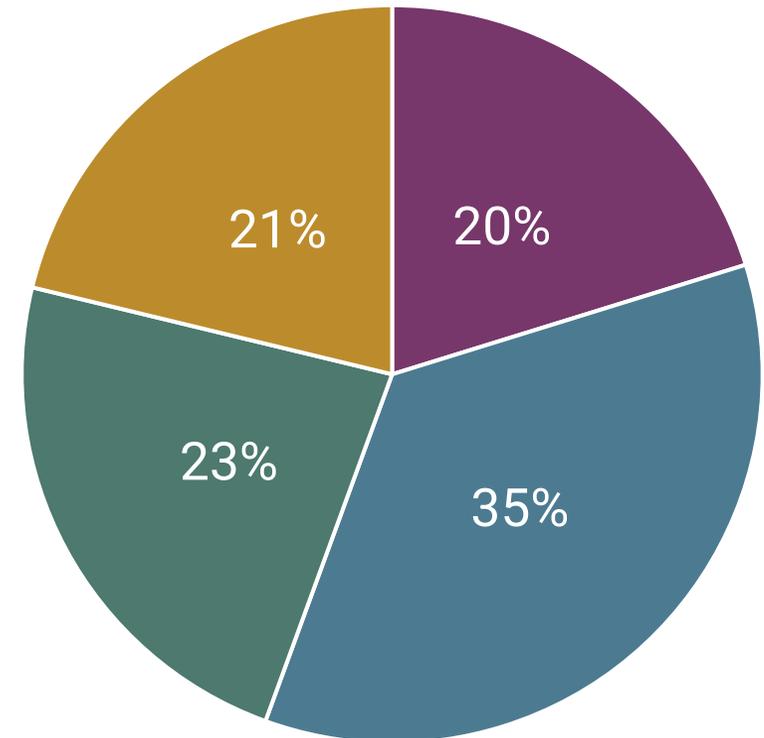


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Members of the public fall into four categories.

- **The Journalism Supporters** - align with the profession's values
- **The Upholders** - high value on respect for leaders and groups
- **The Moralists** - strongly endorse moral foundation values
- **The Indifferent** - mostly ambivalent about values and news



The Journalism Supporters (20%)

- Endorsements of all five journalism values
- Strongly emphasize the moral values of care and fairness
- Rosy views of journalism and high trust in news
- 78% Democrats; 62% liberals.
- Mostly white (68%), younger (24% under 30) and more educated (51% college degree) than other clusters

The Upholders (35%)

- They value loyalty and authority, and do not place much importance on journalism values
- Highly engaged news consumers, but don't think the media help protect democracy or tell the truth
- 52% Republican; 43% are politically conservative or moderate
- Mostly white (70%), but still 10% Black and 15% Hispanic
- Diverse educational backgrounds; roughly 1/3 high school grad or less, 1/3 some college, and 1/3 college grads

The Moralists (23%)

- Ringing endorsements of all five moral values
- They also view journalism values positively
- A mix of partisans and moderates
- Older (49% over 60)
- Slightly less white than upholders (65%); 16% Black, 12% Hispanic
- Most seek out news and believe the media are trustworthy

%

The Indifferent (21%)

- They aren't particularly supportive of any moral foundations nor journalism values
- They follow news less than most, and are unlikely to pay for it
- Mix of all political parties (34% Democrat and 39% Republican)
- Roughly 1/3 high school grad or less, 1/3 some college, and 1/3 college grads
- 66% white, 8% Black, 16% Hispanic
- Mainly middle aged (19% under 30 and 20% over 60%)

Solutions: What can journalists do?

We experimented with **new ways of framing stories to see if it could win the interest and trust of skeptical audiences**

Good News

- **Broadening story framing** (and headlines) wins support of skeptics without losing support from traditional audiences
- It also **increases interest of all audiences**

The same story (**same facts**) two ways.

Standard

New recreation center for low-income neighborhood a casualty of parks scandal

A project aimed at helping the city's most marginalized, low-income neighborhood has been abandoned in the wake of a misuse of city funds by the Parks Director, according to documents obtained by a local media investigation.

The Mayor had designated the money for a recreation center in the city's poorest district, but the director funneled the money to a series of unauthorized projects.

(Additional paragraphs)

Revised

Parks boss deceived Mayor, misused taxpayer money

The city's Parks Director intentionally defied the orders of the Mayor and diverted city money from a key recreation project to businesses owned by his friends and family, according to documents obtained by a local media investigation.

The Mayor had designated the money for a recreation center in the city's poorest district, but the director funneled the money to a series of unauthorized projects.

(Additional paragraphs)

Overall, story redesigns increased appeal

In most cases, the revisions increased appeal for those high in the value for which they were designed.

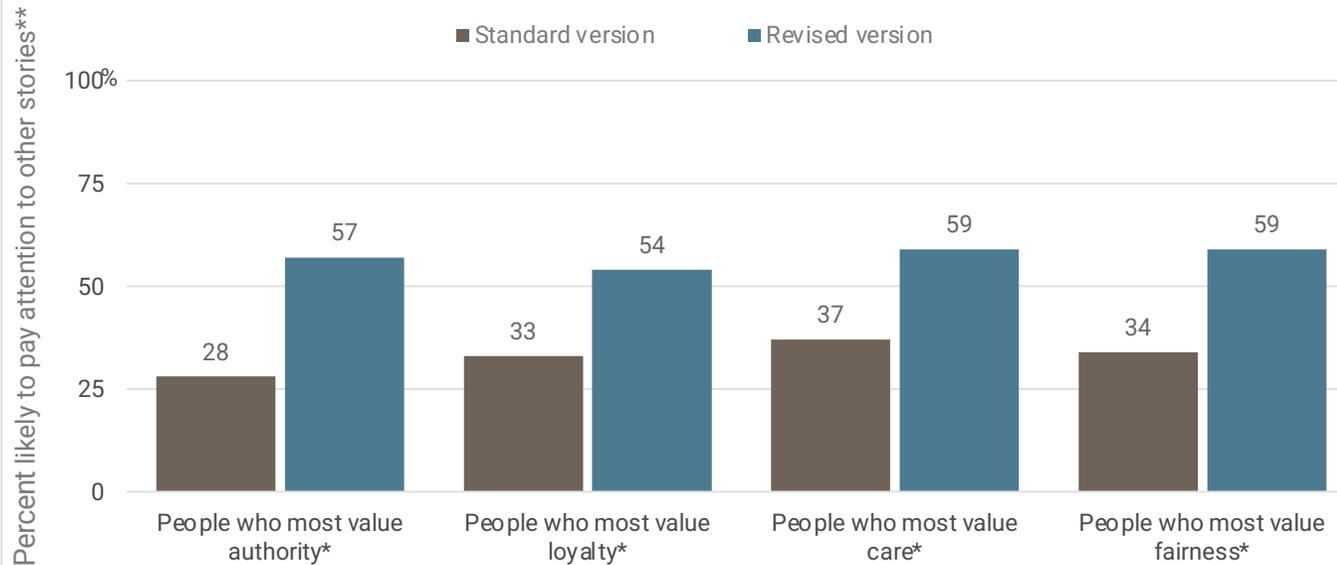
- A story designed to appeal to those high in loyalty increased interest and trust.
- Most revisions made stories even more appealing to the traditional audiences as well.

There were no instances of decreased appeal to those who trust news and media already.

- Stories designed to add appeal to loyalty, authority, and purity still appealed to those who don't endorse those values.

Small changes in stories and framing can appeal to wider audiences.

Revised Pollution Story is More Appealing to Most Audiences, Not Only Those Who Value Authority or Loyalty.



Question: After reading this news story, how likely are you to pay attention to other stories from the same news source?

Source: AP-NORC polls conducted October 22-November 15, 2019, and August 18-24, 2020 with 2,727 and 1,155 adults age 18+ nationwide.

* The groups are those who fall in the highest quartile for each moral value.

** Percent who are extremely or very likely to pay attention to other stories from this news source

Are there are ways to **diversify marketing messaging** for media to win support?

“We look out for our most vulnerable. Support us today.”

Likely to pay for news:

19% who most value care

vs.

4% who least value care.

“We’ve served our community since 1906. Support us today.”

Likely to pay for news:

15% who most value authority

vs.

6% who least value authority.

Conclusions



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To be clear, this study **does not suggest**:

- That journalists should abandon their professional standards & values.
- Or that the public's values are in opposition to core journalistic principles.
- That journalists should stop telling stories aligned with values like social criticism

But it **does suggest** that many Americans have reservations about journalism. Those doubts are not just ideological or demographic. And those doubts can be addressable, in part, with widening the framing in stories.

Innate moral values underlie journalism attitudes.

These values cut across partisanship and impact how people perceive the news media. Many Americans are not seeing their values reflected in the news.

Only a small percentage of people agree with most of journalism's main tenets tested, and they tend to be white, young, and Democrats.

Journalists can broaden the appeal of their work

Small changes designed to appeal to those with lower trust in news **can make big differences** in trust and interest.

Stories designed to add appeal to loyalty and authority appealed to people holding those values, while also appealing to those who don't endorse those values.

Journalists might also consider values during reporting

Can journalists also incorporate this thinking into the **process of reporting and writing** a story?

We often think of “stakeholders” in a story, and thinking of different stakeholders helps us ask different questions of experts for the benefit of those groups.

Does imagining “**stakeholders**” of **different moral values** help report and write resonant stories?

Thank you.

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When it comes to moral values...

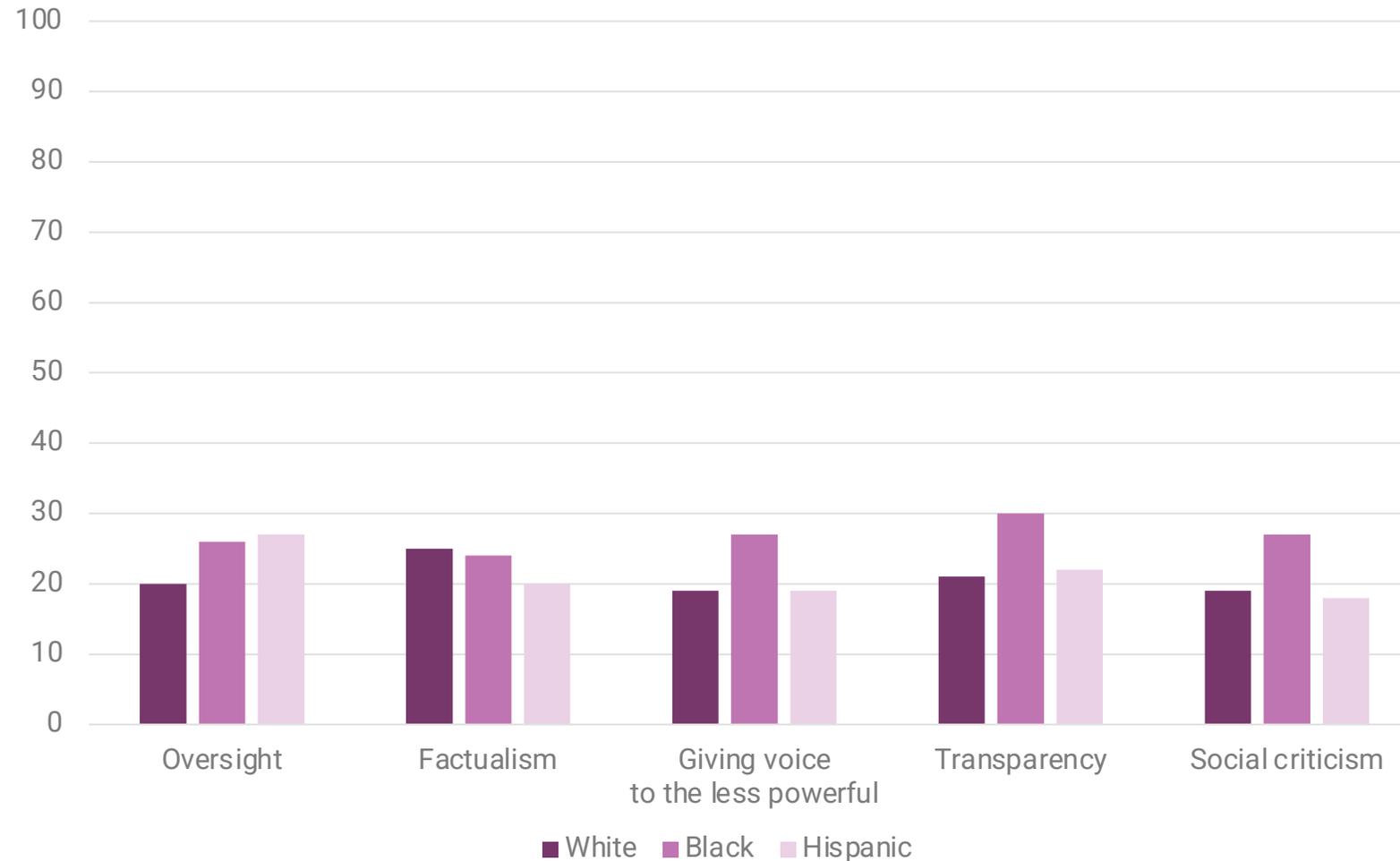
Older adults are more likely to emphasize the importance of all five values.

Women are more likely than men to highly value care and fairness. **Men** are more likely to emphasize loyalty.

Black Americans are more likely than white Americans to highly value fairness, authority, and purity.

Those **without college degrees** are more likely to highly value care, loyalty, and purity.

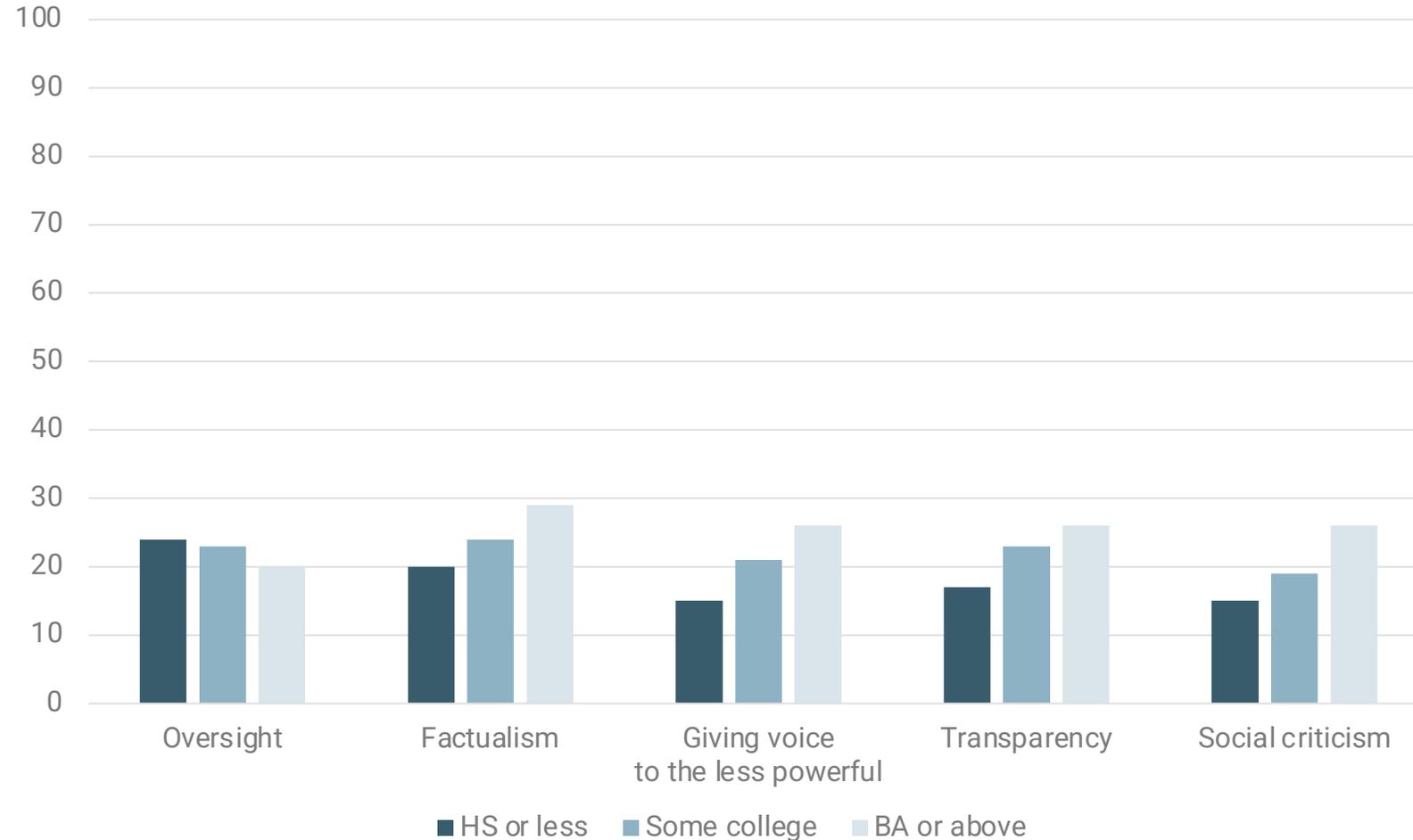
Black Americans Are More Likely than Whites to Emphasize 4 out of 5 Journalism Values



Source: AP-NORC polls conducted October 22-November 15, 2019, and August 18-24, 2020, with 2,727 and 1,155 adults age 18+ nationwide.

*Those in the highest importance quartile are those who most emphasize each value.

People with College Degrees Are Less Likely than Others to Value Oversight



Source: AP-NORC polls conducted October 22-November 15, 2019, and August 18-24, 2020, with 2,727 and 1,155 adults age 18+ nationwide.

*Those in the highest importance quartile are those who most emphasize each value.