

INTRODUCING SURVEY 1: AUDIENCE PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL CONTENT IN SPORTS MEDIA

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The primary purpose of this year's survey was to gather data that delineates the topics seen in sports media that sports fans, themselves, perceive as also being political. Contextualizing how those who consume sports media perceive the intersection of sports and politics can help scholars unpack how fans understand and categorize certain high-profile sports stories. This data can also aid scholars in understanding sports fans' perceptions of the extent to which sports and politics should mix, while uncovering key themes pertaining to the role that sports plays in the lives of various identity groups. Such examinations of audience perceptions can add to the ongoing debate about whether the two should mix, or whether [they are, indeed, inseparable](#). Lastly, this data should aid scholars' understanding of the *layers* of identity that fans possess, as these topics require them to navigate both their identity as a sports fan and their political identity, as well.

Results from this year's survey revealed that fans do perceive topics that scholars would also identify as political in nature. Similar to the [inaugural report results](#), participants rated issues that directly involve politics (i.e., athletes running for office, athlete protest policies, coverage of a politician's fandom, etc.) as highly political types of content. This year, the issue of transgender rights was, again, noted as a top-ranked political topic in sports, moving into the second overall spot. For participants who self-identified as Republicans, the issue of transgender rights in sports was named the most political topic, and for participants who self-identified as Democrats, current or former athletes running for public office was identified as the most political topic.

Notably, the World Cup's ranking increased substantially compared to the previous year's findings. Since the World Cup occurred later in the year, it is likely that the movement in the rankings are also due to a recency bias, as participants were likely exposed to World Cup coverage around the time of data collection. This year, the World Cup and the Olympics were nearly tied in their ratings, perhaps signaling that participants do respond to the frequency of coverage and the amount of political content that accompanies these mega-events during Olympic/World Cup years.

Respondents were also asked whether they felt participants should share their political beliefs publicly on sports media

platforms. Overall, 59.4% of participants felt that athletes should not share their political beliefs on sports media platforms, a slight increase from last year's results (n = 56.5%). Broken down by party affiliation, 79.75% (n = 84.66%) of Republicans felt athletes should not share their political beliefs and 57.83% (n = 67.57%) of Democrats felt that athletes should be able to share their political beliefs. When comparing this year's responses to the previous year's report, it is noticeable that these slight differences suggest a potential trend toward slightly less polarization pertaining to this topic.



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A campaign sign in Georgia for U.S. Senate candidate Herschel Walker

Lastly, participants were asked to identify the top sports moment that occurred during 2022 that they felt was also political. Perhaps participants' answers to this question highlighted most prominently how frames from various political media can influence how we consume and contextualize events in the sports media, as well. Both those who self-identified as Republicans and those who self-identified as Democrats agreed that events such as the World Cup and [WNBA star Brittney Griner's arrest in Russia](#) were the most frequently cited political sports events of 2022.

However, those with differing party affiliations also highlighted events that showcased notable differences that could, potentially, point to larger political media influences. Perhaps surprisingly, [U.S. Senate candidate Herschel Walker's](#) candidacy in the 2022 Georgia Senate race was highlighted by those who identified as Democrats; however, despite the fact that Walker ran as a Republican, his candidacy was not highlighted by our Republican participants. Lastly, those who self-identified as Republicans highlighted [LeBron James](#) as a leading topic that intersected sports and politics, echoing a perception that he did not speak about labor practices in China that contribute to the production of Nike products. This storyline was not echoed by participants who self-identified as Democrats.

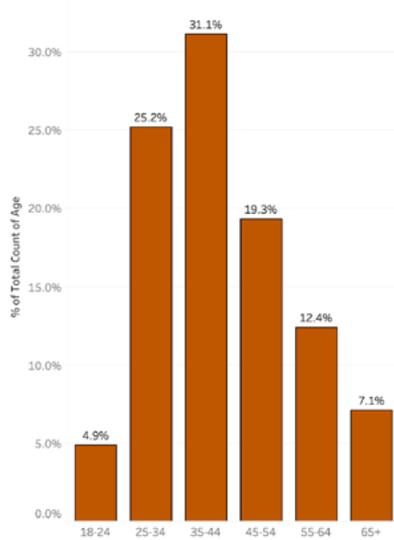
Overall, this survey begins to provide some longitudinal data pertaining to the ways sports fans perceive key topics covered on sports media, thereby, further defining how the intersection of sports and politics is perceived by sports media consumers. ■

SURVEY 1: DEMOGRAPHICS OF SAMPLE

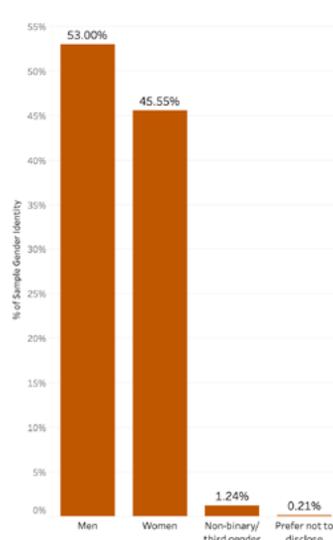
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In order to examine the intersection of sports media and politics, this first survey analyzed the extent to which *sports media viewers* find certain sports-related topics to be political. Researchers surveyed 471 participants from the United States who self-identified as sports fans, using Prolific panel service in November 2022. Participants reported consuming sports-related content for approximately 10.3 hours a week, and reported consuming live sports content for approximately 8.5 hours per week. The charts below highlight the demographics of the sample.

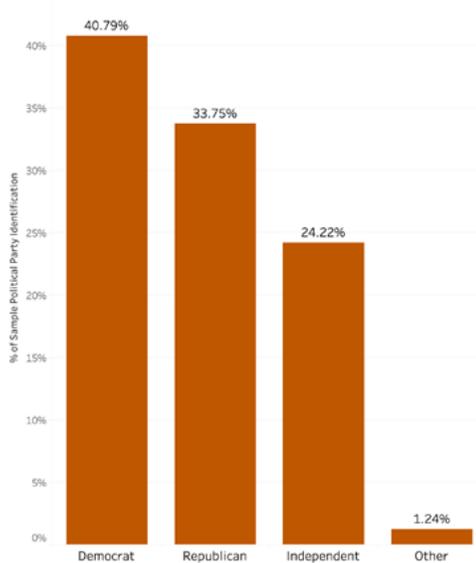
Age Range



Sample Gender Identity

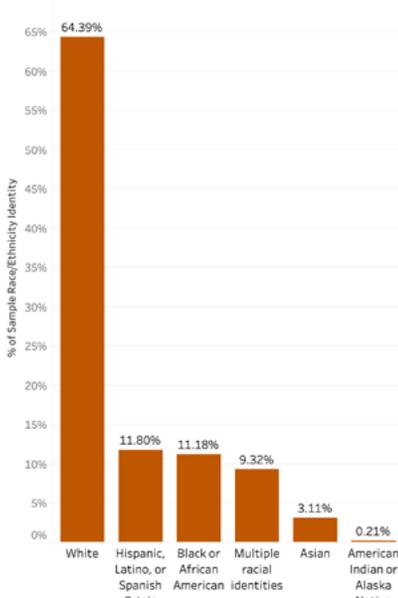


Political Party Identification



% of Total Count of Political Party Identification for each Political Party. The marks are labeled by % of Total Count of Political Party Identification.

Sample Racial Identity

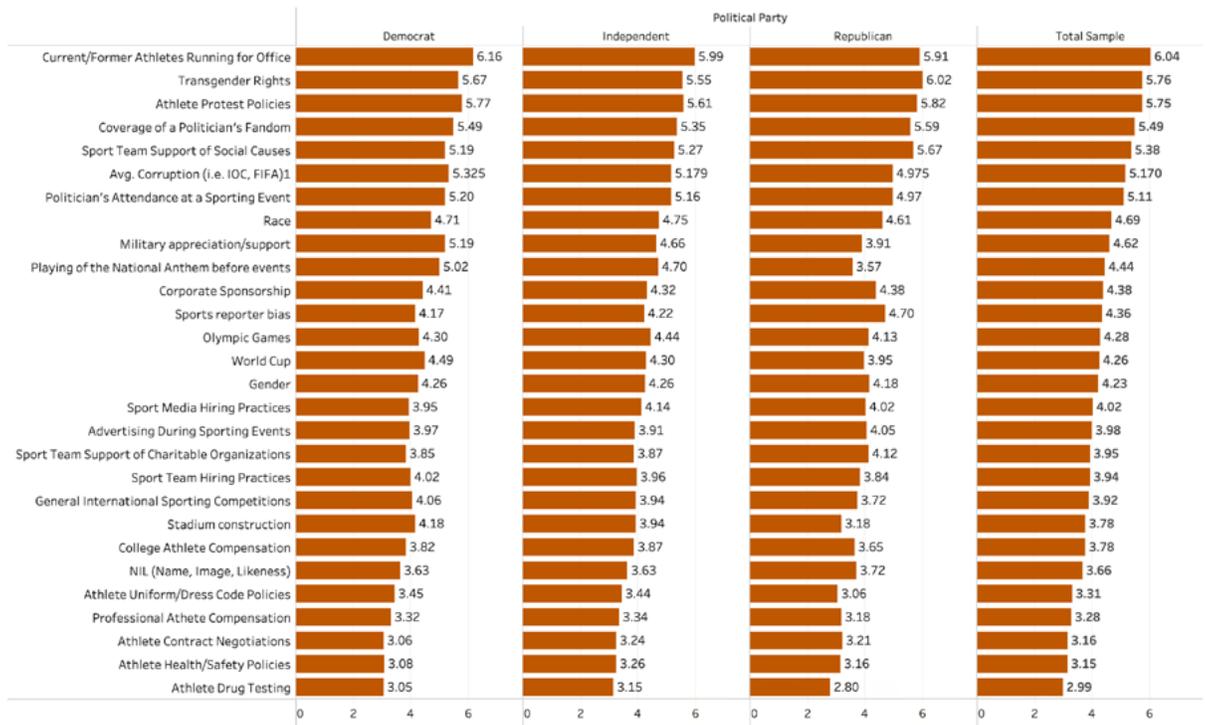


% of Total Count of Race/Ethnicity for each Racial Identity Labels. The marks are labeled by % of Total Count of Race/Ethnicity.

2022 SPORTS FAN PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL SPORTS MEDIA CONTENT

Study participants were asked to rate a list of topics on a scale of “1 = Not Political at All” to “7 = Very Political” to evaluate whether certain topics covered in sports media were political in nature. Results found that topics directly involving politics (i.e., athletes running for office, athlete protest policies, coverage of a politician’s fandom, etc.) were viewed as highly political content. [Similar to last year](#), participants rated transgender rights as one of the most political topics currently in sports, [a topic that continued to receive much attention](#) in various state legislatures during the past year. The issue of transgender rights was rated as the most “political” issue by those who identified as Republicans. Participants continued to rate transgender rights and the overarching politics of gender quite differently as gender was rated as more politically neutral. However, the 2022 results showcase that featured international sporting mega-events do influence participants’ ratings. In 2022, the World Cup was rated as being similarly political in nature as the Olympic Games, a difference from last year’s results, which saw the Olympics being rated much more “political” in nature than the World Cup. It seems that viewers do respond to the frequency of coverage in Olympic/World Cup years and acknowledge the political content that is on display during these mega-events once the events occurred.

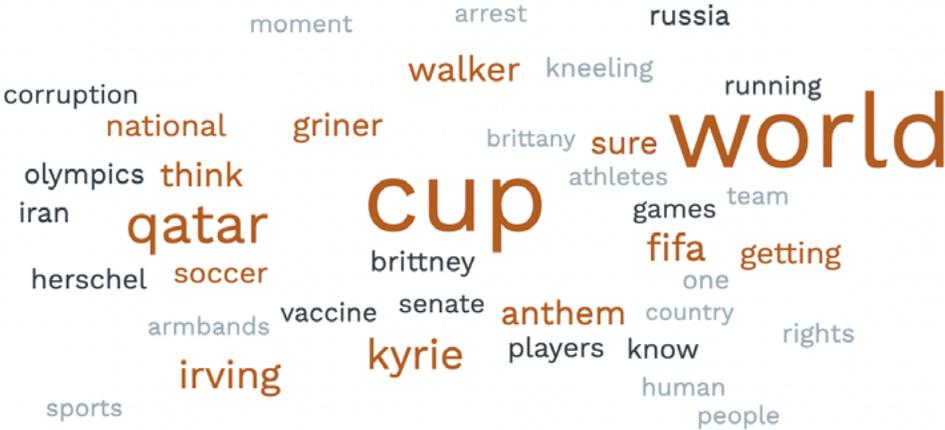
Do You Believe the Following Topics Are “Political” In Nature? (1 = Not Political at All; 7 = Very Political)



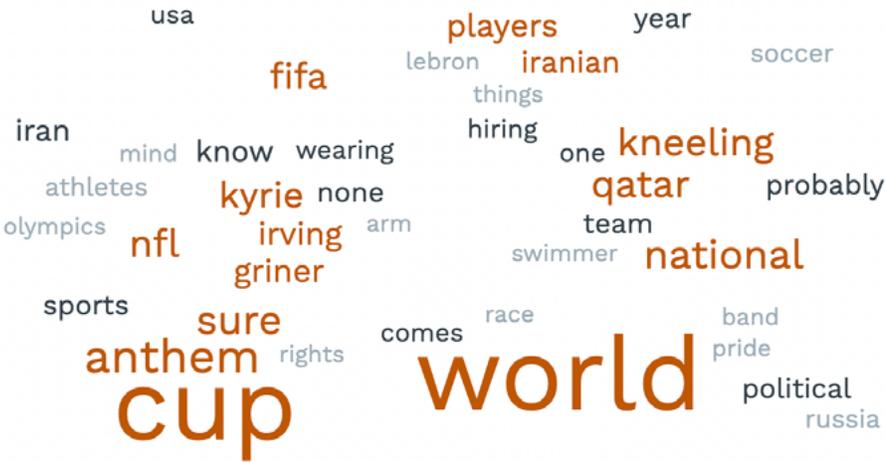
¹ Current/Former Athletes Running for Office, Athlete Protest Policies, Transgender Rights, Coverage of a Politician’s Fandom, Politician’s Attendance at a Sporting Event, Sport Team Support of Social Causes, Avg. Corruption (i.e. IOC, FIFA)¹, Race, Military appreciation/support, Corporate Sponsorship, Sports reporter bias, Playing of the National Anthem before events, Gender, Olympic Games, Advertising During Sporting Events, Sport Media Hiring Practices, Sport Team Support of Charitable Organizations, College Athlete Compensation, Sport Team Hiring Practices, NIL (Name, Image, Likeness), General International Sporting Competitions, Stadium construction, World Cup, Athlete Uniform/Dress Code Policies, Professional Athlete Compensation, Athlete Contract Negotiations, Athlete Health/Safety Policies and Athlete Drug Testing broken down by Political Party. The view is filtered on Political Party, which keeps Democrat, Independent and Republican.

When examining the data by party identification, results continued to show differences in perceptions of the playing of the national anthem and displays of military appreciation and support. As they did last year, Democrats (n = 5.02) rated the playing of the national anthem to be much more political in nature than Republicans (n = 3.6), and Democrats also rated displays of military appreciation and support (n = 5.19) to be much more political than Republicans (n = 3.91). This year, sports teams' support of social causes moved into the Top 5 (previously 7) rankings of the most "political" issues of 2022.

Democrats' Top Sports Moments



Republicans' Top Sports Moments



For this year's report, participants were also asked an open-ended question to identify the top "sports moment" of the past year that they felt was political in nature. Participant responses were then used to form a word cloud to better understand the apparent frequency with which certain events were highlighted by sports fans. Word clouds were also generated based on political party identification to better understand how this key social identity variable potentially influences how participants rate certain events from 2022. Notably, both Republicans and Democrats agreed that the 2022 World Cup was the marquee event of the year that featured the intersection of sports and politics. The political nature of the World Cup was also frequently contextualized by participants alongside [FIFA's decision to hold the event in Qatar](#), despite that nation's history of human rights abuses. This context was more often cited by those affiliated with the Democrat Party. Both Republicans and Democrats also contextualized the political nature of the event by citing the issues with the World Cup [preventing athletes from wearing rainbow armbands](#) in support of the LGBTQ community. Both Democrats and Republicans mentioned athletes kneeling during the national anthem as a top moment in sports, a moment that was more frequently cited by those who identified as Republicans. Notably, 2022 did not see many athletes kneel during the national anthem compared to previous years, yet it remained entrenched in fans' minds as a key intersection of sports and politics. Also, both Republicans and Democrats cited the [detainment of WNBA star Brittney Griner in Russia](#) and [Kyrie Irving's antisemitic comments](#) as key events in 2022.

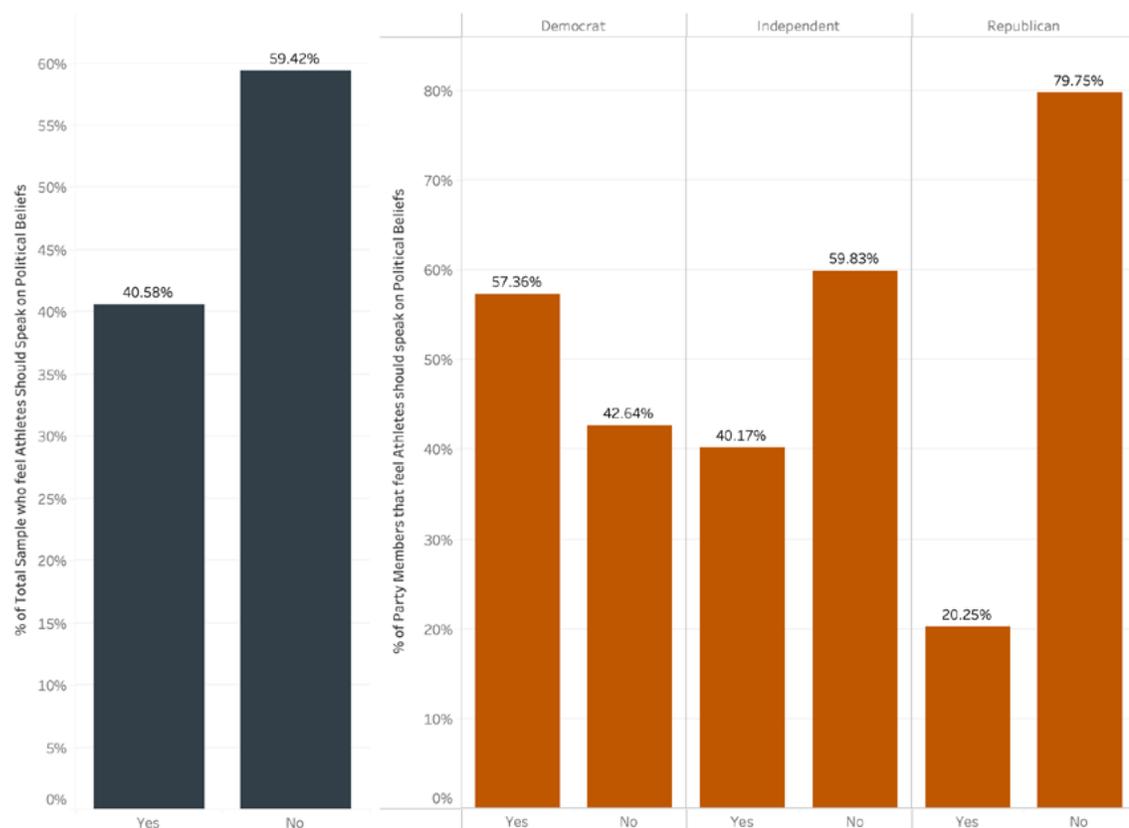
Some differences by party identification were observed in the events that were notable in participants' recollection of the year in sports. For instance, those who self-identified as Democrats cited various events that involved the COVID-19 vaccine, including the [NBA's COVID-19 vaccine mandate](#) and the [vaccine hesitancy of several notable athletes](#), including Aaron Rodgers, Kyrie Irving, and Novak Djokovic. For Democrats, they also cited the U.S. Senate candidacy of former running back [Herschel Walker](#) as a key moment of 2022.

Remarkably, despite the fact that Walker ran as a Republican, his candidacy was not mentioned frequently by participants who identified as Republicans. Lastly, Republicans also mentioned [LeBron James and his perceived silence](#) on labor issues in China. This issue was not cited by any participant who identified as a Democrat. Interestingly, these results do suggest that key narratives from political media that seemingly lean to a specific political ideology perhaps also influence sports fans' perceptions of key sports-related stories, as well.

ATHLETES AND SHARING OF POLITICAL BELIEFS

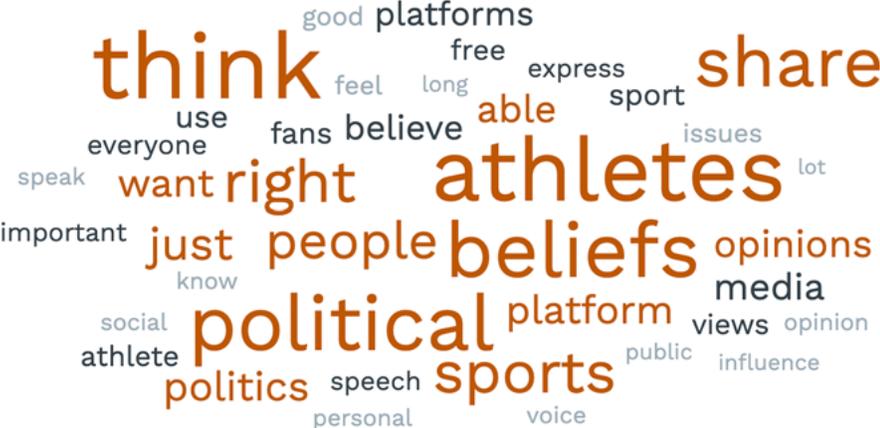
All participants were asked a binary yes/no question: “Do you think athletes should share their political beliefs publicly on sports media platforms?” Overall, a majority of the sample (n = 59.4%) replied that athletes should *not* share their political beliefs on sports media platforms, a slight increase from last year’s response (n = 56.5%). When examined by party identification, results reveal a clear distinction in the opinions of Republicans and Democrats on this issue. A resounding 79.75% of Republicans do not support athletes sharing their political beliefs, while 57.36% of Democrats do support athletes sharing their beliefs. A majority of those who identify as Independents (n= 59.83%) also do not support athletes sharing their political beliefs publicly.

Sharing beliefs by political party



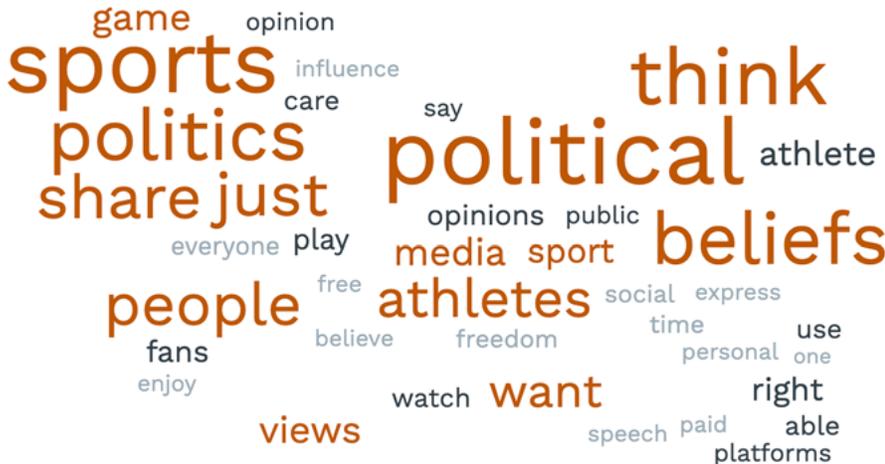
Participants were also asked why they did or did not feel athletes should share their beliefs publicly on sports media platforms. Their open-ended responses were used to generate two word clouds by party identification. The word cloud generated from Democrats' responses featured keywords such as "right," "able," "believe," and "free," which highlights the fact that they were, generally, more supportive of athletes using their platforms to express their thoughts on political subjects. As one Democratic participant stated, "These people are human beings who put their bodies on the line for our entertainment. Who are we to tell them when and how they should speak up? That being said, actions have consequences and if there is backlash due to their opinion, they should be prepared to handle it."

Democrats' Responses



The word cloud generated from Republicans' responses featured keywords, such as "game," "play," "opinions," and "enjoy," which highlights the fact that they generally preferred that athletes separate their personal beliefs from the playing of the sport, preferring that political beliefs and sports remain separate for game enjoyment purposes. One Republican participant stated, "A large majority of fans just want to enjoy the game and not be lectured to or be made to watch a political campaign speech etc. Sports fans like me just want to be entertained by the game and focus on the sport itself."

Republicans' Responses

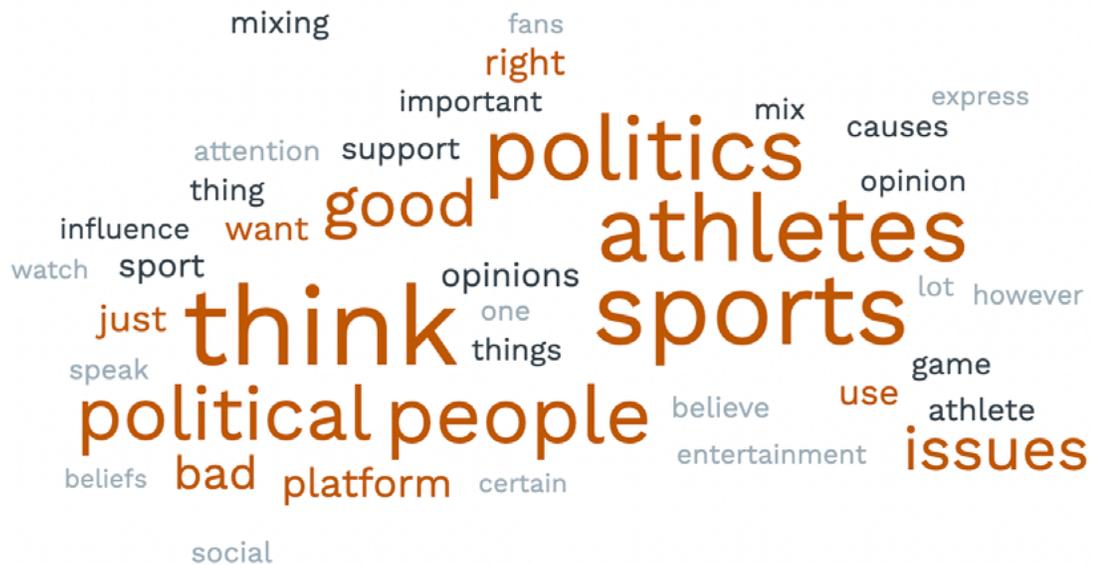


VIEWER PERCEPTIONS OF THE OVERLAP BETWEEN POLITICS AND SPORTS MEDIA

Participants were also asked another open-ended question that requested that they reflect on what is good and/or bad about politics and sports mixing. In order to examine responses, two word clouds were generated that highlight the most frequently used terms in participants' responses. One word cloud was generated for sports fans who identified as Republicans and another for sports fans who identified as Democrats.

The word cloud generated from Democratic participants' responses featured keywords such as "platform," "important," "influence," and "support." Also, the keyword "good" was used more frequently than "bad," highlighting that Democrats were more likely to view the mixing of sports and politics more positively. For instance, one Democratic participant stated, "I think what is good of this is that athletes, who have a very large platform, are able to advocate for what they believe is right. This can highlight social and political issues that may have grassroots support, but not high-level attention. At the same time, this platform can be abused, and lead to poor outcomes if athletes are advocating for dangerous ideas."

Democrats' Responses



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