

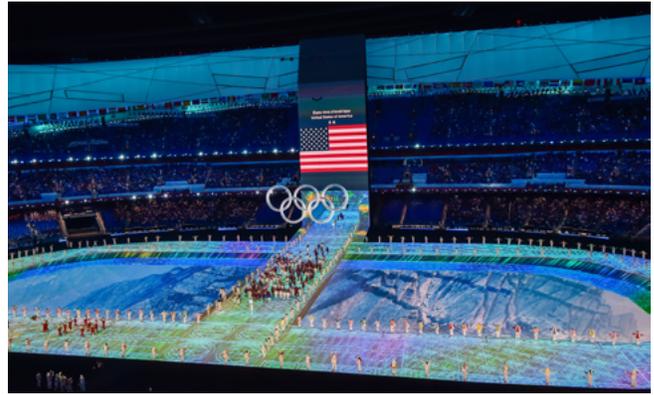
INTRODUCING SURVEY 2: AUDIENCE PERCEPTIONS OF SPORTS MEDIA BRANDS

Natalie Brown-Devlin

Bookended by two key mega-sporting events, 2022 opened with the [Olympic Games in Beijing](#), ended with the [World Cup in Qatar](#), and featured a plethora of gripping headlines in the interim. From [WNBA star Brittney Griner's](#) arrest, detention, and release in Russia to former Heisman Trophy winning running back [Herschel Walker running for a U.S. Senate seat](#) in Georgia, the intersection of sports and politics certainly commanded sports media's headlines. How each leading sports brand covers such stories can influence audiences' perceptions of the brand, itself, as was seen in our [inaugural report](#).

For sports media brands, many argue that the intersection of sports and politics is an [unavoidable, inseparable pairing](#). As [Dr. Muqtedar Khan, professor from the University of Delaware](#) surmised, "Politics is as much a part of sports as it is a part of life." Perhaps no year signaled the importance of this pairing for sports media outlets more than a year that was marked by two, large, international sporting events, as the [connection between international sports and nationalism](#) has been well documented by scholars. Coverage included [Olympic skier Eileen Gu](#) switching her country affiliation from the U.S. to China for the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics and [FIFA outlawing European teams](#) from wearing armbands as a sign of support for the LGBTQ community during a World Cup hosted by a country that deems homosexuality illegal.

Given the stories outlined above, perhaps it is not surprising that sports coverage often [incidentally exposes audiences](#) to political content in their coverage, as the two are undoubtedly linked. Yet, how sports media brands cover these topics can have large influences on how their overall brands are perceived by audiences. As noted in last year's report, perhaps no other sports media brand has endured as much ire and [accusations of bias as ESPN](#). Yet, scholars have also noticed that while a sports media brand can be impacted, one's feeling toward the brand might not actually influence their media consumption habits. [Peterson and Muñoz \(2022\)](#) examined audience perceptions of ESPN, finding that exposure to political media influenced sports media consumers' perceptions of the top sports media brand. However, the authors noted that despite having politicized attitudes about the company, participants did not necessarily watch ESPN less often, as those who are motivated to watch sports will continue to tune in.



Asatur Yesayants/Shutterstock.com

Team USA is introduced at the Opening Ceremony of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics.

While ESPN clearly has received significant attention elsewhere, this report seeks to provide more thorough analysis of the sports media landscape by conducting an annual analysis of six top sports media brands: ESPN, NBC Sports, CBS Sports, FOX Sports, Yahoo Sports, and Bleacher Report.

Results showed that trends observed from the [prior year's report largely continued](#), as ESPN continued to be ranked highest in terms of the journalistic ideals of Credibility, Accuracy, and Trustworthiness by the overall sample. Notably, these rankings do appear to be influenced by one's political party affiliation, as those participants who self-identified as Republicans rated Fox Sports highest in terms of Credibility, Accuracy, and Trustworthiness.

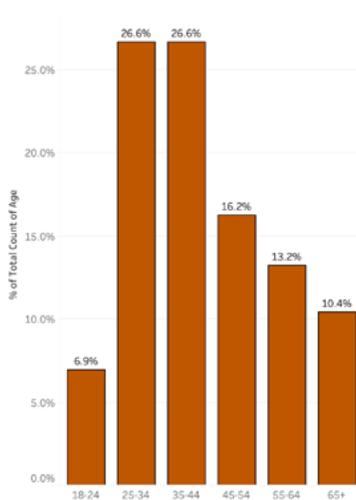
Participants continued to rank most sports networks fairly neutrally in terms of their perceived bias, naming Fox Sports as the most "biased" sports media brand, a result driven primarily by those who self-identified as Democrats or Independents. Participants also continued to perceive FOX Sports as the most "Conservative" sports media brand; however, this year, participants rated ESPN (rather than NBC Sports) as the most "Liberal" sports media brand. Overall, these results continue to provide insight into how layers of one's identity, namely political and sports affiliations, influence overall media perceptions. ■

SURVEY 2: DEMOGRAPHICS OF SAMPLE

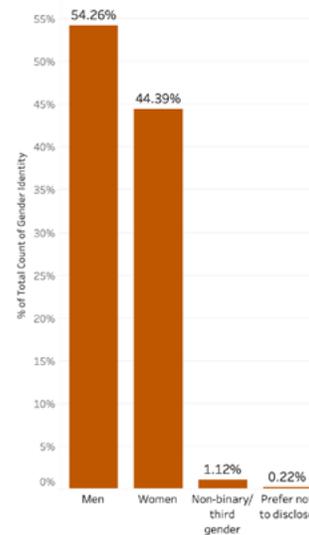
Natalie Brown-Devlin, Josh Anderson, Qinyan Gao, Mackenzie Pike, and Jingyue Tao

In order to measure sports fans' perceptions of top sports media brands, researchers surveyed 447 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 11.55 hours a week, and reported consuming live sports content for approximately 9.60 hours per week. The charts below highlight the demographics of the sample.

Age Range

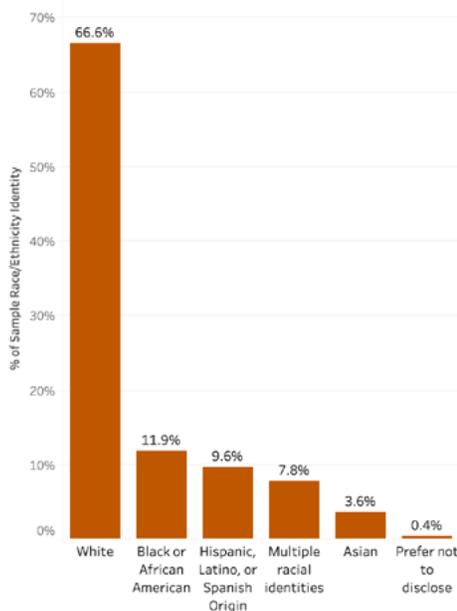


Gender Identity Labels

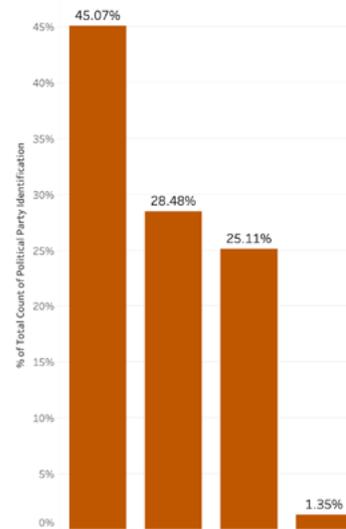


% of Total Count of Gender Identity for each Gender Identity Labels. The marks are labeled by % of Total Count of Gender Identity.

Racial Identification



Political Party Identification

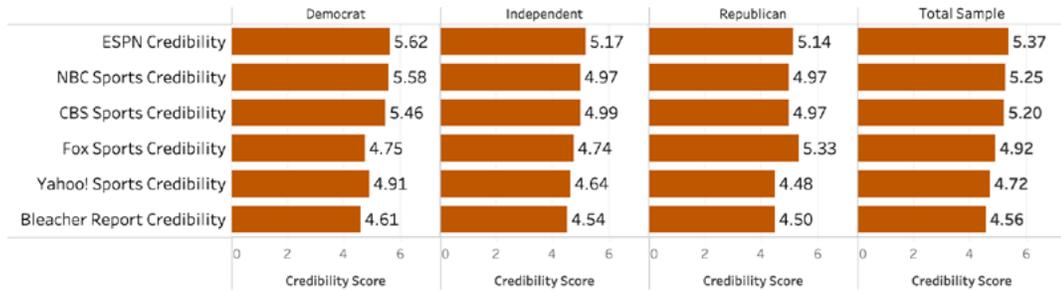


% of Total Count of Political Party Identification for each Political Party Labels. The marks are labeled by % of Total Count of Political Party Identification.

VIEWERS' EVALUATIONS OF SPORTS MEDIA

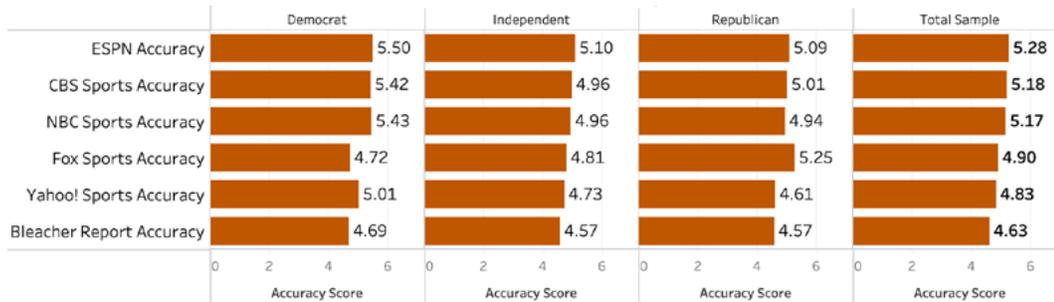
Participants also evaluated six top sports media brands (ESPN, Fox Sports, Bleacher Report, CBS Sports, NBC Sports, and Yahoo Sports) in terms of their perceived credibility, accuracy, and trustworthiness. Overall, participants continued to rate ESPN the highest in terms of credibility (n = 5.37), accuracy (n = 5.28), and trustworthiness (n = 5.08). When examining the evaluations by political party, results followed trends similar to [last year's results](#), as Republicans tended to be more favorable of Fox Sports, ranking it highest in terms of credibility (n = 5.33), accuracy (n = 5.25), and trustworthiness (n = 4.98). Democrats and Independents ranked ESPN highest in all three areas.

Credibility by Political Party (1 = Strongly disagree; 7 = Strongly agree)



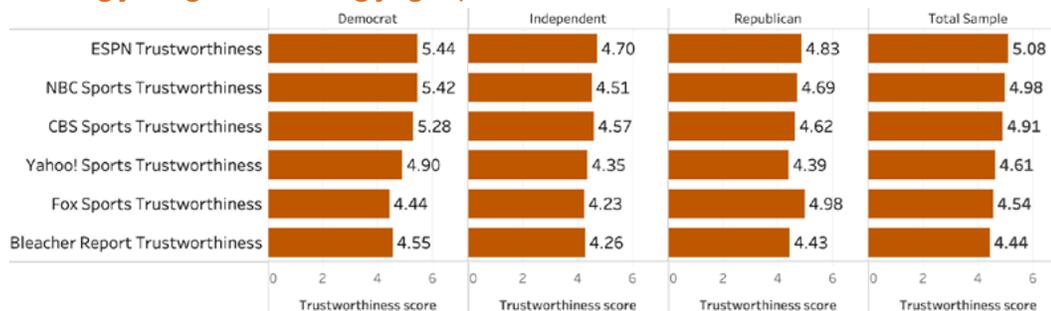
ESPN Credibility, NBC Sports Credibility, CBS Sports Credibility, Fox Sports Credibility, Yahoo! Sports Credibility and Bleacher Report Credibility broken down by Political Party Labels. The view is filtered on Political Party Labels, which keeps Democrat, Independent and Republican.

Accuracy by Political Party (1 = Strongly disagree; 7 = Strongly agree)



ESPN Accuracy, NBC Sports Accuracy, CBS Sports Accuracy, Fox Sports Accuracy, Yahoo! Sports Accuracy and Bleacher Report Accuracy broken down by Political Party Labels. The view is filtered on Political Party Labels, which keeps Democrat, Independent and Republican.

Trustworthiness by Political Party (1 = Strongly disagree; 7 = Strongly agree)



ESPN Trustworthiness, NBC Sports Trustworthiness, CBS Sports Trustworthiness, Yahoo! Sports Trustworthiness, Fox Sports Trustworthiness and Bleacher Report Trustworthiness broken down by Political Party Labels. The view is filtered on Political Party Labels, which keeps Democrat, Independent and Republican.

VIEWER EVALUATIONS OF SPORTS MEDIA POLITICAL CONTENT

Participants also rated six top sports media brands (ESPN, Fox Sports, Bleacher Report, CBS Sports, NBC Sports, and Yahoo Sports) in terms of their perception of politically biased content, political leanings, and the frequency with which they feature political content. Participants were asked to evaluate whether each sports media brand was *biased* in their reporting (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree). Consistent with last year's results, participants continued to score each media network rather neutrally, with participants rating most media brands around the scale's neutral midpoint. When examining perceptions of bias according to participants' party identification, Democrats still rated Fox Sports as the most biased (n = 4.41) and Republicans rated ESPN as the most biased (n = 4.31).

Bias by Party

(1 = Strongly disagree; 7 = Strongly agree)

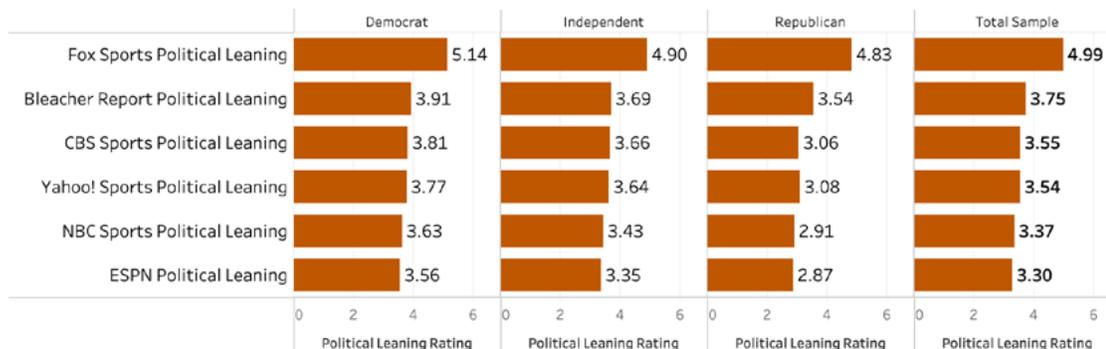


Fox Sports Bias, ESPN Bias, Bleacher Report Bias, CBS Sports Bias, NBC Sports Bias and Yahoo! Sports Bias broken down by Political Party Labels. The view is filtered on Political Party Labels, which keeps Democrat, Independent and Republican.

Participants also rated each sports media brand in terms of their perception of the brands' political leaning, with 1 = Very Liberal and 7 = Very Conservative. Overall, Fox Sports was rated as the most Conservative-leaning brand (n = 4.99) and this year, ESPN replaced NBC Sports as the most Liberal-leaning brand (n = 3.30).

Political Leaning

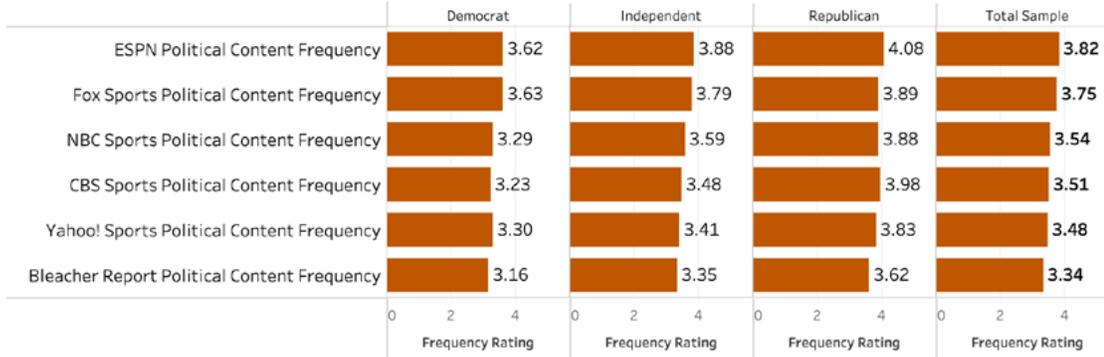
(1 = Very Liberal; 7 = Very Conservative)



Fox Sports Political Leaning, Bleacher Report Political Leaning, Yahoo! Sports Political Leaning, CBS Sports Political Leaning, ESPN Political Leaning and NBC Sports Political Leaning broken down by Political Party Labels. The view is filtered on Political Party Labels, which keeps Democrat, Independent and Republican.

Participants also rated each sports media brand in terms of their perception of the frequency with which they feature political content. Overall, participants, again, scored each media brand rather neutrally, with most media brands being rated around the scale's neutral midpoint. ESPN was rated as having the highest perceived political content frequency (n =3.82), however, there was minimal observed difference in participants' ratings of this measure.

Political Content Frequency

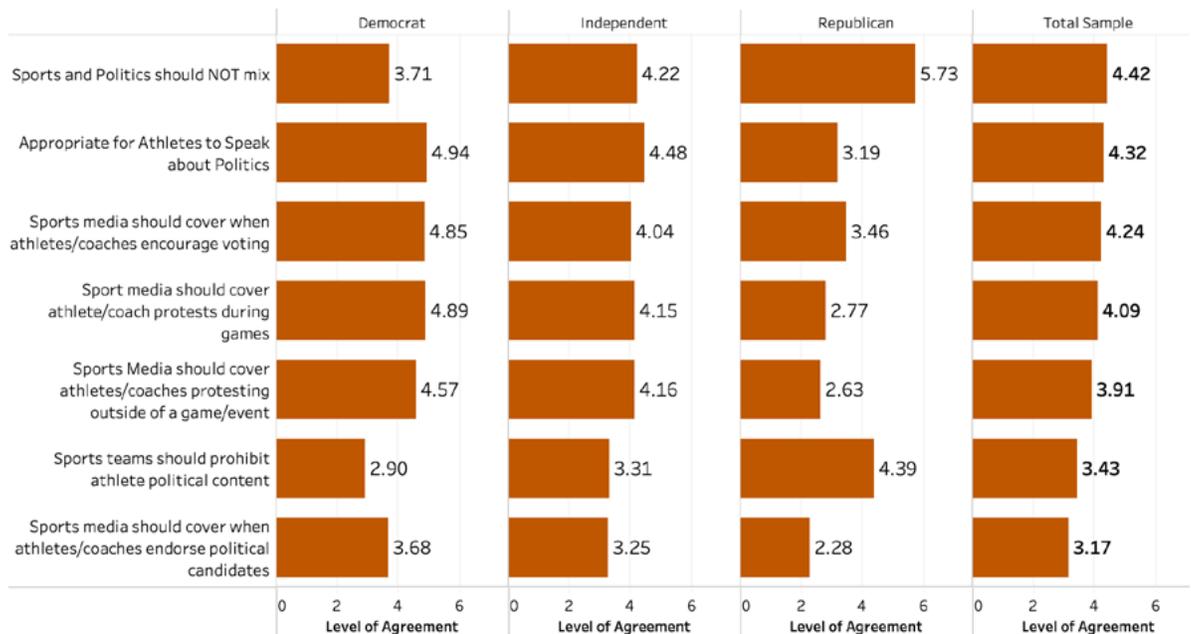


Bleacher Report Political Content Frequency, CBS Sports Political Content Frequency, ESPN Political Content Frequency, Fox Sports Political Content Frequency, NBC Sports Political Content Frequency and Yahoo! Sports Political Content Frequency broken down by Political Party Labels. The view is filtered on Political Party Labels, which keeps Democrat, Independent and Republican.

SHOULD POLITICS AND SPORTS MIX?

Participants rated their level of agreement with a series of statements intended to evaluate their perceptions of the intersection of sports media and politics, with 1 = Strongly disagree and 7 = Strongly agree. Results showed that, overall, Republicans were strongly in favor of sports and politics *not* mixing (n = 5.73), compared to Democrats (n = 3.71). Democrats (n = 4.94) rated the idea of athletes speaking about politics more highly than Republicans (n = 3.19). Republicans were not supportive of sports media covering athlete/coach protests, whether the protest occurred during a game (n = 2.77) or outside of a game/event (n = 2.63). Republicans also rated the idea of sports teams prohibiting athletes from engaging with political content (n = 4.39) more highly than Democrats (n = 2.90). All participants, regardless of political party identification, seemed generally unsupportive of sports media covering athletes or coaches engaging in the overt, political act of endorsing a particular political candidate.

Sports and Politics Mix (1 = Strongly disagree; 7 = Strongly agree)



Sports and Politics should NOT mix, Appropriate for Athletes to Speak about Politics, Sports teams should prohibit athlete political content, Sport media should cover athlete/coach protests during games, Sports Media should cover athletes/coaches protesting outside of a game/event, Sports media should cover when athletes/coaches encourage voting and Sports media should cover when athletes/coaches endorse political candidates broken down by Political Party Labels. The view is filtered on Political Party Labels, which keeps Democrat, Independent and Republican.

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR SPORTS COMMUNICATION & MEDIA

The Center for Sports Communication & Media brings together interests in the instruction, practice, and scholarship of sports journalism, broadcasting, media production, human communication, and more. It serves the mission of the Moody College of Communication and The University of Texas at Austin through its commitment to the highest quality of teaching, research, and interdisciplinary collaboration. The Center sponsors the Sports Media undergraduate minor, provides funding support for affiliate research, partners with organizations in sports media, and produces programming such as the Dan Jenkins Medal for Excellence in Sportswriting, the McGarr Symposium on Sports and Society, and the Frank Deford Lecture in Sports Journalism.

More information about the Center can be found at www.moody.utexas.edu/cscm, and our social media channels at Twitter ([@UT_CSCM](https://twitter.com/UT_CSCM)), Facebook ([ut.cscm](https://www.facebook.com/ut.cscm)) and Instagram ([ut.cscm](https://www.instagram.com/ut.cscm)).

Support for this report comes from the Governor Ann W. Richards Chair for the Texas Program in Sports and Media.



The University of Texas at Austin

Center for Sports Communication & Media

Moody College of Communication

Read (and download) the complete
second annual Politics in Sports Media report

www.politicsinsportsmedia.org