



Does Listening to Trustworthy News Affect Political Attitudes and Trust?

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Abstract

Despite the increasing popularity of podcasts as a source of news for many Americans, little is known about their precise impact. We conduct a mobile field experiment that examines how consumption of trustworthy news via daily podcasts affects attitudes about politics and the media over a one-week period. Our treatment, deployed at the end of the first of two survey waves, asks subjects to subscribe to a specific high-quality daily news podcast, NPR's *Up First*. In addition, treated subjects are asked to turn on mobile push notifications for the podcast. The intervention successfully increased participants' consumption of news from the podcast, with minimal substitution from other programs. We find that podcast consumption significantly increased event knowledge ($d = 0.29$), but only for topics covered in that week's episodes. Trust specifically in news from podcasts also increased ($d = 0.09$), but not in mainstream news more generally. Our results shed light on outcomes linked to the unique possibilities of this medium and, more broadly, on the malleability of attitudes toward the media.

Keywords Political news · Podcasts · Knowledge · Experiment · Media trust

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Introduction

How do citizens learn facts about society and the world? This crucial question motivates scholarly inquiry on the nature and extent of news consumption, the limits of political knowledge, the origins of misperceptions, and the credibility of information sources. The importance of such questions — which concern a core input into the democratic process — has only increased as technological and other societal changes erode the dominance of traditional gatekeepers in politics and the media. The resulting fragmentation of the media, and the subsequent growth of untrustworthy news sources and alternative news ecosystems, underscore the urgency of exploring how reliable information can continue to reach citizens when they need it (Lazer et al. 2018; Persily et al. 2020; Angelucci and Prat 2024).

Amid rapidly changing technologies and media habits, scholars have focused on mobile phones and social media platforms as emerging channels of information. News habits have shifted broadly, with adults under 30 now relying more on social media than traditional news sources (Pew Research and Center 2024; Pew Research Center 2025c) — making them potentially more susceptible to the sensational and emotionally engaging content that dominates these platforms (Schmitt et al. 2018). Much of this research has documented how, in a context of increased media choice, citizens can have news diets that contain more misinformation and polarized views, and even avoid news altogether (Barberá et al. 2015; Settle 2018; Eady et al. 2019; Grinberg et al. 2019; Bail 2022). At the same time, even platforms built with personalized ranking or recommendation algorithms can provide opportunities for exposure to cross-cutting and diverse news sources (Bakshy et al. 2015; Nyhan et al. 2023; Napoli 2014). Whether publishers in an era of increased media fragmentation can continue to produce high-quality news depends in part on whether their audience perceives them as trustworthy and on whether they maintain interest in the face of increasing demands on people's attention (Toff 2022; Hopkins and Gorton 2024).

Though scholarly attention has to date centered on social media, commentators have increasingly pointed to the importance of podcasts as a source of information and entertainment, especially for younger people who are less engaged with the formal political process (Alba et al. 2025). Even as podcasters such as Joe Rogan and Theo Von attract large audiences to their freewheeling, longform shows, more focused programs such as *The Daily* and NPR's *Up First* continue to rank highly on Spotify's list of top news podcasts.¹ The sheer diversity of formats in podcasting — as well as the medium's decentralized, non-algorithmic structure — are reminiscent of talk radio at the height of its cultural influence, though with far greater reach. And, as with talk radio, the potential power of podcasts stems from the trust that they inspire among their audiences, both those seeking authoritative voices from traditional media and those attracted to skeptical, anti-establishment messages (Ladd 2011; Barker 2002).

In this study, we focus on the ability of short, professionally produced news podcasts to inform listeners who might not seek news through other channels. Much research on digital media effects has focused for understandable reasons on attitudes

¹ See: <https://podcastcharts.byspotify.com/>

and polarization (Lorenz-Spreen et al. 2023). While podcasts and their precursors in talk radio certainly include content intended to persuade, their importance stems at least partly from the information (or misinformation) that they disseminate (Rasul et al. 2025). Thus when focusing on short-term exposure, as this study does, we expect the likeliest impact to take the form of conveying facts. Recent research on television issue advertisements and social media use bolster the expectation that boosting recall of factual information is an important, if under-appreciated, potential effect of consuming media (Kalla and Broockman 2022; Altay et al. 2025). Though we acknowledge that much of the recent interest in podcasts has centered on the ability of non-explicitly political programs to mislead or mobilize disaffected voters, we are primarily interested in the potential civic benefits of trustworthy news podcasts — their ability to reach new audiences with accurate policy-relevant information. This is of critical importance for understanding whether current consumption patterns are driven by ingrained habit or, alternatively, by perceptions of trustworthiness that can be changed.

To explore these effects, we conduct a field experiment embedded in a survey of American podcast listeners, encouraging a random subset to listen to a specific morning news podcast, National Public Radio's (NPR's) *Up First*, five weekdays in a row. We gauge compliance with this treatment via short daily quizzes and collect outcomes in a follow-up survey approximately one week later. Our primary dependent variables are knowledge of recent events in the news, affective and issue polarization, and trust in the media (as well as news podcasts specifically). Our results indicate that the podcast caused an increase in the accuracy of participants' knowledge about events in the news, both overall and those covered by the podcast that week. It also improved trust in news podcasts. In contrast, the treatment did not have a detectable impact on affective polarization or issue polarization, and the effect on mainstream news trust cannot be distinguished from zero at a fairly high level of precision.

Our results clearly demonstrate that trustworthy news delivered via audio podcasts can be an effective way for citizens to learn information about politics and current events. Specifically, they learn about facts covered in the episodes, but the increase in knowledge does not spill over into non-covered topics. As listeners in our study acquired factual knowledge about the news, their trust in news from podcasts increased, showing that attitudes toward less-familiar media sources can be changed. As other recent studies suggest (e.g., Broockman and Kalla 2025a), it is possible for people to overcome biased preconceptions about media sources once they consume information from them. Still, these effects do not seem to carry over into measures of issue opinions and partisan affect, suggesting that exposure to balanced reporting about the news is unlikely by itself to reverse the polarization trends of recent decades. Finally, while our study could not assess the long-term effects of our treatment on podcast news consumption, we show that our intervention mostly complemented existing podcast listening rather than acting as a substitute, suggesting that news consumption for moderate podcast listeners need not be zero-sum.

Podcasts and News Consumption

The U.S. podcast audience has steadily grown since 2006 (when the term, referring to the iPod, was slightly more meaningful) from an estimated 10% to more than 70% having ever listened to or watched a podcast in 2025 (Edison Research 2025). Edison Research estimates 115 million weekly podcast listeners age 12 or over in 2025, more than quadruple the number a decade earlier. The most popular podcasts have held fairly stable in recent years, with both Edison and Spotify's rankings showing Joe Rogan's podcast in the top spot. Looking at Spotify's rankings for news podcasts specifically, *The Tucker Carlson Show* is the highest-rated, but the next two programs on that list are *New York Times's The Daily*, followed by NPR's *Up First*. Candace Owens is ranked fourth, followed by *NPR News Now*, the *Wall Street Journal's* news podcast, and left-leaning *Pod Save America*. While total audience numbers are not publicly available for podcasts, a substantial share of the top 10 is devoted to non-partisan journalistic news. In our survey data, Joe Rogan received the highest listener share among our participants, with 19% saying they had listened to the show in the past month.² At the same time, 18% said they listened to *NPR News Now* and 13% said they listened to *The Daily*, with a combined audience of 25%.

Thus the evidence is clear that news podcasts, often sponsored by traditional media organizations, are proving increasingly popular with audiences seeking reliable content, high production values, and journalism from trusted sources. For example, *The Daily* podcast garners more than 4 million downloads per episode, approaching the number of readers of the newspaper's morning email newsletter.³ Though little is known about this audience, it likely shares characteristics with readers of the *Times* and similar national publications — affluent professionals who are disproportionately educated, liberal, and living in metropolitan areas. And while podcast audiences are likely segregated by political leaning, evidence from the trajectories of podcast guests suggests that exposure to cross-cutting information through podcasts is frequent (DeMets and Spiro 2025).

Since 2020, news organizations have seen podcasts as a major growth area, especially for attracting loyal, younger audiences. Investments in these programs accelerated during the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, when demand for quality information increased: Today, daily news podcasts “make up less than 1% of all those produced but account for more than 10% of overall downloads” (Newman and Gallo 2020). Despite surveys now indicating that approximately 32% of Americans get news from podcasts “sometimes” or “often” (Pew Research Center 2025a), there is relatively little research on podcasts' role in the news ecosystem. It is clear, however, that a significant share of the podcast audience turns to the medium for news. Pew's survey data reports that 23% of podcast consumers listen to news summaries often or extremely often, an additional 34% sometimes; 24% often listen to podcasts with

²For survey evidence on listeners of Joe Rogan's podcast, see: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/05/03/joe-rogan-told-his-millions-listeners-not-take-his-anti-vaccine-advice-seriously-is-it-too-late/>.

³<https://www.thewrap.com/new-york-times-the-daily/>

opinions, 37% sometimes; and 29% often listen to explanations, 40% sometimes (Pew Research Center 2025a).

Despite this nuanced reality, commentary on the role of podcasts in the U.S. information ecosystem tends to be framed around the dominance of the so-called “manosphere,” anchored by hosts such as Joe Rogan and Theo Von, and their willingness to entertain the unconventional or even harmful views of their guests (Barrett 2024; Remnick 2026). More broadly, podcasts are taken to be dominated by right-wing or right-leaning shows whose freewheeling style and content appeal to a largely male, relatively young and disaffected audience. Yet the above-cited data reveals that this picture is incomplete. Indeed, an analysis of podcast transcripts suggests that high-profile shows like Rogan mainly cover non-political topics, and that when they do focus on politics, balanced perspectives are typically represented (Much et al. 2025).⁴

As suggested, the effects of podcasts’ growing importance as a source of news and commentary about politics has not been fully appreciated by scholars studying news consumption patterns and their consequences. Regardless, podcasts can arguably be seen as an extension of radio, a broadcast medium that has historically been associated with powerful persuasive capabilities (see e.g., Adena et al. (2015)), particularly in contexts related to intergroup attitudes and extremist propaganda (Yanagizawa-Drott 2014; Wang 2021). A limited number of studies have also focused on the impact of talk radio on political polarization in the United States (Barker 2002; Vandeweerd 2023), with special attention to the self-selection of audiences, potentially resulting in “echo chambers” but also leading to inferential challenges (Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Ladd 2011).

Existing research in political communication on the role of podcasts is almost entirely correlational in nature, making causal inferences similarly difficult; the dependent variable studied in most existing research is political participation rather than more proximate outcomes such as knowledge (Chadha et al. 2012; Lee 2021). Though there is scant research on the effects of listening to “quality” news podcasts, we found one experimental study on the effect of news podcasts on knowledge. Victor (2020) designed a survey experiment in which participants in some conditions listened to embedded audio files edited from real podcast episodes about an issue, while those in other conditions saw mock Twitter threads based on the same content. As there was no pure control condition, comparisons between the treatment groups was intended to identify the informative effect of one medium relative to the other. Separately, a recent study randomly assigned three variants of a fact-checking podcast designed to inoculate participants against misinformation in South Africa (Bowles et al. 2025).

⁴As another example, *Call Her Daddy*, another top-10 podcast, further challenges the narrative with its more female audience and forays into liberal-leaning politics.

Theory and Hypotheses

A functioning democracy requires that citizens share common knowledge of current political issues — a foundation for communicating and making political decisions collectively (Neuman et al. 1992; Carpini et al. 1996). The news media’s agenda-setting function has played this pivotal role by directing public attention toward common issues (McCombs and Shaw 1972). However, the shift toward a high-choice information environment poses challenges to this function (Prior 2007). When individuals select content that aligns with their existing preferences — and algorithms increasingly reinforce those selections (Napoli 2014) — a shared media agenda becomes harder to sustain (Magin et al. 2022). The rise of opinion-driven formats and the declining audiences of traditional outlets have contributed to this problem (Schmitt et al. 2018), producing a media landscape in which partisans argue over basic facts.

The diversification of news consumption patterns has become increasingly evident in recent years: for the first time, more Americans reported getting news from social and video networks than from television and news websites in the week following the January 2025 presidential inauguration (Reuters 2026). Much of this new wave of news is centered on personality-driven podcasts and online creators who prioritize opinion and commentary over factual reporting — potentially deepening divisions rather than building the shared informational grounding that democracy requires. Not all podcasts, however, follow this model. Daily news podcasts produced by established newsrooms — such as NPR’s *Up First*, the BBC’s *Global News Podcast*, and the *New York Times’ The Daily* — are organized around straightforward news reporting rather than ideological commentary, offering listeners a concise and editorially accountable summary of the day’s events. It is this type of podcast that our study focuses on, and we examine whether these podcasts can help restore a common informational baseline for the health of democracy.

By focusing on podcasts, we take advantage of a medium that is native to mobile devices and, as such, is potentially more generalizable to an increasingly mobile-first news audience (Walker 2022). In addition, rather than boost exposure to slanted news, as in some other research (Guess et al. 2021), the present study seeks to incentivize consumption of nonpartisan news from a trustworthy source. In addition to the theoretical motivation we outlined, we do this for two practical reasons. First, providing a realistic “nudge” to consume quality news, as our treatment is designed to do, aligns with efforts to promote “middleware” tools that facilitate user engagement with reliable news sources (e.g., Aslett et al. 2022). And second, since the average share of Americans’ news diets from untrustworthy sources — i.e., publications lacking standard journalistic features such as factual verification and transparent sourcing — is fairly low (Guess et al. 2020; Allen et al. 2020), promoting reliable sources may be a more effective means of improving overall news diet quality than discouraging consumption of hyperpartisan or “fake” news (Acerbi et al. 2022).

The content and style of the podcast that we choose as our treatment is factually dense, spanning three top stories of the day. Coverage of each story typically includes the standard “who, what, where, when” as well as more in-depth explanatory journalism via “two-way” interviews with reporters in the field. As prior studies have shown,

people absorb factual information, at least temporarily, when exposed to news content or, relatedly, issue advertising (Barabas and Jerit 2009; Kalla and Broockman 2022). As an illustration of the potential power of sustained exposure to factual information in the news, Broockman and Kalla (2025a) found that after incentivizing habitual Fox News viewers to switch to CNN, these participants' beliefs about factual matters became more flattering toward liberals regarding stories covered on the channel, on the order of 0.20 SD or more on topics such as whether Democrats were trying to steal the 2020 election using fraudulent mail-in ballots. This pattern of differential learning is a key finding of that study: Participants' knowledge was strongly related to their assigned channel during the treatment period, reflecting diverging editorial decisions about which stories to cover (or not cover), and which stories to emphasize. *Up First* does not have a stated partisan orientation and aims for balance; whether or not one believes it achieves these aims, its coverage priorities are unlikely to match those of top non-news podcasts, and they may also differ from other news podcasts with different editorial philosophies. While a week of listening to *Up First* may not be as powerful in intensity or duration as the four-week dose of CNN administered in the aforementioned study, it has other advantages in its flexibility, brevity, and easy-to-digest format. Taken together, these considerations lead to our primary expectation that participants in our treatment group will more accurately recall recent events in the news, especially ones covered in the episodes released during the study period.⁵

H1a: Subjects assigned to the treatment group will exhibit greater belief accuracy on questions about news reception of recent events compared to those assigned to control.

H1b: Subjects assigned to the treatment group will exhibit greater belief accuracy on questions about news reception of recent events *covered by the podcast during the treatment week* compared to those assigned to control.

If subjects in our study learn facts over the course of the experiment, then it is plausible that relevant attitudes could change as well. While the literature is mixed on the link between factual beliefs and attitudes (Gilens 2001; Coppock et al. 2022), learning new facts could lead to updating attitudes on associated issues, as predicted by accounts such as Bayesian reasoning, Zaller's Receive-Accept-Sample model, and on-line processing (Zaller 1992; Lodge et al. 1995; Guess and Coppock 2018). Prominent theories of motivated reasoning might additionally predict that individuals would incorporate new information into their pre-existing worldviews, reinforcing or even strengthening their attitudes (Taber and Lodge 2006). This would imply greater issue polarization about topics covered in the news.

An alternative perspective suggests that people, especially when engaged in effortful processing, will weigh competing factual considerations when forming or updating

⁵ We pre-registered our expectations at OSF here: <https://osf.io/hnmj5>. Our pre-analysis plan was posted on the final day of Wave 2 data collection before survey data was received and analyzed. We did not specifically register expectations for treatment effect heterogeneity. Our pre-specified analysis plan indicates a procedure for covariate selection and adjustment, which we implement using LASSO. DV coding and hypothesis tests are as specified unless otherwise noted.

their attitudes. Consistent with this, Stagnaro and Amsalem (2025) find that randomizing exposure to balanced factual information about gun control caused participants to moderate their attitudes about the issue. If the nonpartisan news reports participants receive in our study's treatment group tend to reflect balanced consideration of newsworthy topics, such updated issue positions could lead to an aggregate depolarizing effect as partisans engage with potentially counter-attitudinal information.

By the same token, if balanced presentation of news and the professional nature of the program de-emphasize partisan identities and the salience of partisanship, then affect toward the in-party and out-party could become less heightened, ultimately weakening affective polarization (Bail 2022). This is especially likely if the treatment podcast operates at least partially as a substitute for other, potentially more partisan sources of news participants could consume, including other podcasts (Allcott et al. 2020).

H2a: Subjects in the treatment group will report lower levels of affective polarization than those in the control group.

H2b: Subjects in the treatment group will report lower levels of issue polarization than those in the control group.

Finally, we draw on a rich literature on trust and perceived bias in media content. Our study partially builds on prior work that sought to understand how consumption of partisan online news influences attitudes about the media in general. In an experiment conducted during the 2018 U.S. midterm election campaign, Guess et al. (2021) incentivized participants in the treatment group to change their default browser homepages to Fox News or HuffPost and tracked visits to news articles as well as media trust, knowledge, and opinions via follow-up surveys. The study found that consumption of either source resulted in both more accurate recall of events in the news in the short term and persistent lowered trust in the media.

By encouraging consumption of less partisan, potentially more reliable news, we can further test theoretical expectations about effects of news reception on trust in news sources (and in the news media more generally). In numerous studies, participants holding opposite positions on an issue have been shown to perceive bias against their positions after watching identical news clips (e.g., Vallone et al. 1985). This hostile media phenomenon was demonstrated in scenarios modeled on the broadcast era, with ostensibly neutral or balanced stimuli. Related dynamics have also been shown in response to partisan news shows, in what Arceneaux et al. (2012) call "oppositional media hostility." In both sets of studies, outcomes focus on subjects' attitudes toward the specific clips, shows, or hosts shown as treatments rather than the media writ large.

Similarly, if subjects in our study's treatment group acquire knowledge about events in the news, they may form opinions about the news source itself. This is especially plausible since they are asked to listen to five daily episodes during the study period, allowing them to familiarize themselves with the hosts and format and crystallize their perceptions of the show's orientation and slant. The literature on source credibility implies that certain characteristics can be associated with trustworthiness,

such as expertise and professionalism (Hovland and Weiss 1951). To the extent that participants perceive such characteristics, they may form positive views of the show (and perhaps NPR/public radio more generally). Further, since attitudes about the media, including trust, may be shaped more by elite cues than by personal experience with specific news sources (Ladd 2011; Peterson and Allamong 2022; von Hohenberg and Guess 2023), direct exposure might lead to more positive assessments. We look both at attitudes toward news podcasts and about the media in general.

H3a: Subjects assigned to the treatment group will have more trust in information from mainstream news than those in the control group.

H3b: Subjects assigned to the treatment group will have more trust in information from news podcasts than those in the control group.

Design

Our study takes inspiration from recent innovative experiments on media effects (Chen and Yang 2019; Broockman and Kalla 2025a). By offering incentives and repeatedly checking treatment compliance using short quizzes, scholars maximize the dosage of a sustained media treatment in an ecologically valid setting. The encouragement design can also identify effects on marginal consumers — those who have not already self-selected, but who can be induced to change their consumption habits. Broockman and Kalla (2025a) pay frequent Fox News viewers to watch CNN instead for a month, finding substantial (but mostly not durable) changes in political awareness, attitudes, and perceptions of the channel’s bias. Chen and Yang (2019) distribute VPN software to Chinese university students and find that habitual use of the tool (and the downstream impacts on knowledge and attitudes that result) occurs mainly when it is accompanied by incentives.

Our experiment was embedded in a panel survey fielded initially to 2,071 YouGov respondents who, prior to our intervention, listened to podcasts at least once a month. The timeline for the data collection of our study was as follows. We conducted two survey waves: a baseline survey (Wave 1, March 13–24, 2023), at the end of which the encouragement was administered, and an endline wave (Wave 2, beginning April 3) one week later, which featured post-treatment measures of our outcome variables. In addition, following Chen and Yang (2019) and Broockman and Kalla (2025a), we administered brief email-based quizzes on each day of the experimental period (5 weekdays in all, Monday–Friday, March 27–31) to check for compliance with the treatment encouragement.

Despite targeting somewhat frequent podcast listeners, the resulting sample is fairly representative of the U.S. adult population in terms of demographics, although it reflects common characteristics of high-quality online samples (see also Table 2 in the Appendix): While gender (49% female) and the proportion of white respondents (74%) are close to population targets, Black respondents are somewhat underrepresented (9%), and those with a college degree (54%) and Democrats (41%) are overrepresented. The sample also skews high on political interest.

We designed the experiment to focus on participants who already listen to any podcasts with moderate frequency. By focusing on *Up First*, a relatively popular podcast in our data but not overwhelmingly so (10.4% listened in the past month), we induce consumption of a plausible news alternative to current listeners of podcasts, a significant share of whom regularly listen to Rogan-style hangout podcasts. Similar to Broockman and Kalla (2025a), we can observe whether our encouragement functions as a substitute for certain kinds of podcasts, or as a complement. Thus we are not studying the effects of Rogan, Ben Shapiro, or other right-leaning podcasts with large audiences. Nor are we studying what happens if people stop listening to such shows; given their enduring popularity, it is unlikely that such a counterfactual would generate useful externally valid evidence. Rather, we are interested in what happens when typical podcast listeners are asked to additionally listen to a short, professionally produced explanatory news show. This is both more practical from the standpoint of interventions that might lead to changes in news consumption habits, and consistent with informational treatments most likely to change factual beliefs.

Logistics

In partnership with YouGov, we recruited a total of approximately 2,000 panelists whose participation was rewarded using YouGov's proprietary point system. At the beginning of Wave 1, after obtaining informed consent, we asked participants the following question: "How often, if at all, do you listen to podcasts (including radio shows you are subscribed to as podcasts)? Podcasts are on-demand episodic series in audio or video digital format that can be downloaded or listened to live on a variety of devices." We initially kept only respondents who said that they listen to podcasts at least "One day a week." At approximately 1,500 completes, we relaxed this to at least "1–3 days a month," screening out everyone who responded with less frequent podcast listening behavior.

We then asked participants who were not screened out at this stage the following question: "In the following survey, we are interested in learning about your experiences with podcasts. As part of the study, we may ask you to listen to a few short episodes over the next week, and then ask some questions about them. Would you be willing to consider listening to no more than 5 podcast episodes (each no more than 15 minutes long), *with extra compensation*, as part of this study?" In order to maximize compliance with potential treatment later, we only kept participants who answered this hypothetical question by selecting the option "Yes, I would consider listening to podcasts for this study" (as opposed to "No, I would not consider listening to podcasts for this study"). Out of 3,174 potential respondents who made it to the previous question about podcast listening, 732 (23%) reported a frequency of less than 1–3 days a month and were screened out as a result. Among those who remained and were asked the hypothetical question about participation, another 15% (371 out of 2,442) declined by saying that they would not consider listening to podcasts for this study.

The baseline survey wave included a battery of questions about news knowledge, media trust, political polarization, and political preferences (see Appendix). At the end of the baseline wave, we administered the randomized encouragement: 43% of

the sample was asked to agree to listen to the NPR *Up First* podcast for 5 days; the remainder received no treatment encouragement.⁶ The encouragement message (shown in Fig. 17 in Appendix B) framed the study as a user test in which “you have been randomly allocated to a group of participants who will be asked to regularly listen to a news and information podcast.” Respondents could answer yes or no when asked if they agree to try out the podcast for a week. Those who answered “yes” were presented with clear instructions on how to subscribe to the podcast with their favorite podcast app and turn on notifications for new episodes (see Fig. 18 in Appendix B). These instructions include screen shots where possible. To incentivize compliance over time, they were also told that they would receive an additional bonus for listening to each episode. Respondents who answered “no” were prompted with the following to give them one more chance: “Are you sure that you don’t want to try a news podcast for a week, for additional compensation of up to 15,000 in YouGov points?”

The final sample size of Wave 1 was $N = 2,071$, with 878 in the treatment group.⁷

At this point, participants in the treatment group should have been subscribed to the podcast via the instructions in Wave 1, with notifications enabled. On each morning of the treatment period, those in the treatment group received a quiz via email to gauge and encourage compliance. First, they were asked if they had already listened to that day’s episode. If they answered in the negative, an embedded audio file of the episode was presented so that they had a final opportunity to listen. Then, all quiz respondents were asked a single question: “What three topics were covered in today’s episode?” with six options, three of which were not covered in that day’s episode (see Appendix B). If they submitted any wrong answers, they were given one additional chance to answer the question before submitting. They were awarded points for each correct answer and told how many they got right. Participants received multiple reminder emails per day until they answered the quiz. The endline survey began fielding approximately 1 week after the baseline wave. The final analysis sample size varies somewhat due to item non-response, ranging from $N = 1,997$ for event knowledge to $N = 1,542$ for trust in podcast news.

Treatment

Our choice of podcast sharing trustworthy news was *Up First*, by NPR. Each episode is approximately 12–15 minutes long and generally covers three top stories per day. The show has a number of attractive features for our experiment. It features public-

⁶ Optimal treatment allocation based on Duflo et al. (2007) given our budget constraint and the more costly nature of the treatment compared to the control condition.

⁷ We opted against a placebo-control design for several reasons. First, given our naturalistic setting, we felt that it would be impossible to guarantee that ostensibly unrelated podcast programs (similar on other dimensions such as length, format, etc.) would never veer into politically relevant subjects. As it happened, Donald Trump was indicted by a Manhattan grand jury during our study period, a major event that garnered attention beyond typical political media channels. Incentivizing listening to podcasts in both a treatment and placebo group would also have reduced the statistical power of our design given a fixed budget. Finally, to guard against the real threat of differential attrition, we opted instead for the fairly aggressive screening approach discussed above. As shown in Table 4 in Appendix A, this strategy appears to have been successful.

radio reporters speaking with the host in a manner that focuses mainly on basic facts and background on each story. The program adheres studiously to professional norms of objectivity, which emphasize presenting both sides of a controversy or conflict. And though the producer, National Public Radio, may be perceived as left-leaning, the content itself strives to avoid partisan rhetoric and talking points.

In addition, *Up First* has some advantages relative to competing programs. As we verify with our own data below, *The New York Times'* *The Daily* is already very popular among podcast news consumers, which might have led to a large number of “always-takers” in the control group. That show is also much longer than *Up First* and typically focuses on a single topic per episode, which could have created both compliance issues in the treatment group and added variability from day to day. We also considered other NPR podcasts, but none seemed as well-suited to our needs. For example, NPR's *Consider This* focuses on local news and is customized to a listener's member station, which would have created an unwieldy amount of heterogeneity. Other candidate podcasts were too short, focused on specific types of news, or include a large amount of advertising.

Like many news organizations in the contemporary United States, NPR has experienced partisan polarization in trust perceptions among Americans. According to Pew, NPR has a net distrust among Republicans (including leaners) of -14 compared to $+44$ for Democrats (Pew Research Center 2025b). Since Republican distrust of sources other than Fox News, Newsmax, Joe Rogan, and Tucker Carlson is so pronounced, NPR is not an outlier in the survey; for example, *The New York Post* has a net distrust of -13 . Polarization in trust of NPR is similar to that of the Associated Press and less than that of *The New York Times*, CNN, ABC, CBS, and NBC News. Given this evidence, we argue that it would be difficult to find a podcast news alternative that would not be seen as potentially untrustworthy among some Republicans (recent evidence suggests this may even be the case with local news; see Hopkins and Gorton 2024). Indeed, having some of our participants be assigned to listen to a podcast that they are skeptical of provides additional leverage for us to test effects on trust. Fortunately, such trust gaps have not been insurmountable in prior research that incentivized consumption of news “from the other side” (Broockman and Kalla 2025a).

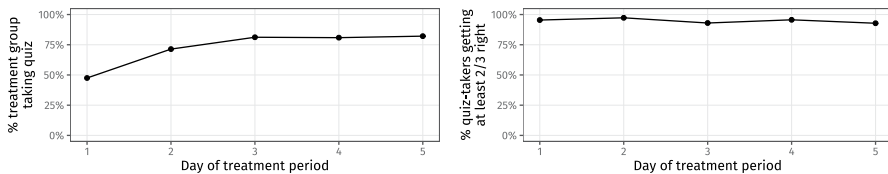
While podcast usage and interest are high overall in our sample because it was a screening condition, the average number of days per week that respondents in our sample reported listening to any podcast discussing “news about government and politics” is almost precisely at the midpoint (2.49). Relative to this baseline, our treatment was a meaningful but realistic increase in podcast consumption.

During the treatment period (March 27–31, 2023), *Up First* covered a mix of stories about domestic and international events in the news; Table 1 provides an overview. Though some of NPR's story selections were likely different from what other news outlets were emphasizing that week, Donald Trump's indictment by a Manhattan grand jury was universally covered as the top political story when it was announced that Thursday evening.

Figure 1 shows that compliance as measured via our quizzes was fairly high. We increased the number of email notifications sent to participants in the treatment group after the first day, which is reflected in the left panel of the figure. Next, Figure 2

Table 1 Stories covered on NPR *Up First* during treatment period (Mar 27–31, 2023)

Day	Story 1	Story 2	Story 3
Mar 27	Protests in Israel against proposed judicial overhaul	Devastating tornado in Mississippi	Trial of ex-Fugees rapper Pras Michel
Mar 28	School shooting in Tennessee	Turmoil over judicial reforms in Israel	Senate hearing on the Silicon Valley Bank collapse
Mar 29	Follow-up on Tennessee school shooting	Senate hearing of ex-Starbucks CEO Schultz about union-busting	Layoffs at Disney
Mar 30	Taiwanese-Central American relations	The end of pandemic-era Medicaid protections	Aftermath of the school shooting in Tennessee
Mar 31	Donald Trump's indictment over hush money payments	Follow-up: reactions from Republicans on Capitol Hill	Turkey's approval of Finland's request to join NATO

**Fig. 1** Treatment compliance: quiz completion and performance. The left panel shows the proportion of subjects in the treatment group who completed the quizzes. The right panel shows the proportion among quiz-takers who answered at least two out of three questions correctly

shows that our randomized encouragement powerfully altered participants' news consumption patterns, producing a more than 54-percentage-point increase in the self-reported likelihood of reporting listening to *Up First* in the past week. Among the other podcasts that we asked about, we see some modest indication that the treatment could have substituted for the conservative *Ben Shapiro Show*. In Table 4 in the Appendix, we provide evidence that there was no significant differential attrition by treatment condition.

Measures

Political knowledge

Event knowledge was measured through a grid of event recall items in Wave 2. These items were designed to include events from the prior two weeks that were either covered by the podcast, not covered, or did not happen at all. See Appendix for exact question wording and response options.

These outcomes are calculated as the number of correct answers divided by the number of questions (for any given subset). We focus on three: (1) podcast events: number correct/total number for items that correspond to a topic covered by the pod-

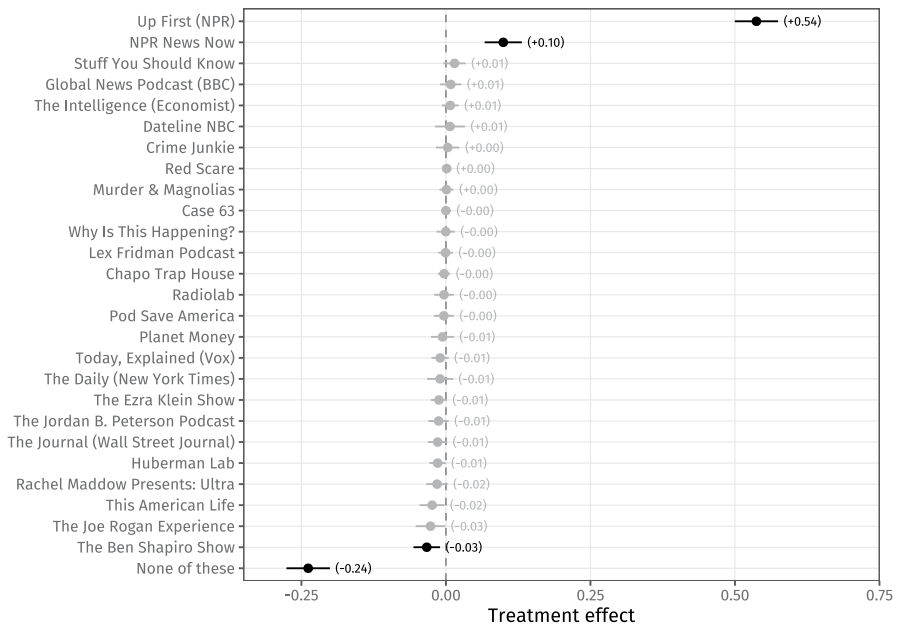


Fig. 2 Treatment effects on self-reported podcast consumption. Each row contains a treatment effect estimate (and associated 95% confidence interval formed using HC2 robust standard errors) from a separate OLS model (lasso-adjusted) with an indicator for whether or not a participant listened to the specified podcast in the past week (Wave 2) as the dependent variable. Estimates in black have Anderson (2008) FDR-adjusted q -values < 0.05 .

cast in the previous week; (2) non-podcast events: number correct/total number for items that correspond to a topic *not* covered by the podcast in the previous week; (3) knowledge accuracy: number correct/total number for all items. We chose these three operationalizations in order to assess whether knowledge effects carry over to other topics (e.g., via increased interest or other mechanisms), or if they are specific to covered stories.

Polarization

We use two different metrics of polarization: one that seeks to measure affective polarization (Iyengar et al. 2012) and another one related to polarization of our respondents' issue positions.

The first metric is a feeling thermometer that asks respondents about their feelings toward each of the two main parties, on a scale from 0 to 100. The difference between the panelist's response to the question with respect to their out-party and their in-party is the outcome variable. For independents, we select the absolute difference between their two responses.

The second metric uses differences in issue positions. We measure the extent to which respondents' issue opinions are conservative or liberal by conducting a principal components analysis (PCA) of their responses to a set of policy issue questions (see Appendix). We run PCA on the set of responses in the control group to derive a

policy opinions index by taking the first principal component, and then predict the policy opinions index in the treatment group by using the same set of weights. This index is oriented for each respondent so that higher values indicate greater support for the in-party position (liberal for Democrats, conservative for Republicans, including leaners).

Media Trust

We operationalize media trust as multiple dimensions derived from a battery of survey items. We use PCA on a set of pre-determined items in order to reduce noise and identify core substantive dimensions of interest. Media trust has been measured in a variety of ways in the literature (Ladd 2010; Arceneaux et al. 2012; Strömbäck et al. 2020), each tapping into related but potentially distinct constructs. Our scales are based on the following items:

- Media trust grid (each item separately, coded with higher values = more trust)
- Perceived media bias grid (each item separately, coded with higher values = less bias)
- Feeling thermometer: NPR
- Feeling thermometer: CNN
- Feeling thermometer: Fox News
- Feeling thermometer: *The New York Times*
- Trust in news podcasters
- Trust in TV reporters
- Trust in newspaper reporters
- Trust in podcasts for news (relative to TV)
- Trust in podcasts for news (relative to newspapers)

Based on analysis of Wave 1 soft launch data ($N = 33$, March 9–10, 2023), we anticipated up to three substantively meaningful dimensions in our pre-analysis plan: Trust in mainstream news (negatively correlated with positive assessments of Fox News), trust in news from social media, and trust in news podcasts. Per our pre-analysis plan, we run principal components analysis on the set of responses to the above questions in Wave 1 to derive trust indices, then predict the values for Wave 2 using the same set of weights. As anticipated, we find a mainstream news trust component highly correlated with our measures of pre-treatment trust in information from network news (0.87), newspapers (0.84), and public radio (0.78); a trust in podcast news component highly correlated with our measures of trust in information from news podcasts (0.75) and political commentary podcasts (0.74); and a third component not highly correlated with trust in most traditional news sources, but correlated more strongly with trust in information from YouTube (0.21) and seeing YouTube as unbiased (0.69), in addition to seeing podcasts as relatively unbiased.

Results

Descriptives

In order to contextualize our results, we first report descriptive statistics on our participants' podcast listening habits. The most common response to our pre-treatment survey grid on which news podcast they consumed was "None of these," indicating that consumption of news podcasts is not a majority habit even among our relatively targeted sample of podcast listeners. *The Daily* is one of the most popular podcasts among our sample, and in Fig. 3 we see splits among Democrats and Republicans similar to those commonly observed for other news sources. Approximately 10% of our sample said they listened to *Up First* in the past month. When we asked subjects who their favorite podcasts or podcasters were that we had not listed in our survey question, the top responses were Dan Bongino (56 participants listed this), Joe Rogan (47, though he was also listed in the closed-ended question), and Mark Levin (32) (see Fig. 5 in the Appendix).

Beyond particular shows, we asked participants which genres they regularly listen to. As shown in Fig. 6 in Appendix A, the top genres in our sample are political commentary (52%) and news (44%), followed by documentary (39%) and comedy (34%). One notable partisan difference is that self-identified Republicans are much more likely to say they listen to podcasts about religion and spirituality (34%) than Democrats (14%). The top three apps our participants said they used to listen to podcasts are YouTube, Spotify, and Apple Podcasts. As a final descriptive exercise, we asked in what settings or contexts participants usually listen to podcasts. The most common responses were commuting, eating, exercise, and other downtime. Figure 9 in Appendix A displays the self-reported frequencies of each of these contexts.

Experimental Results

Figure 4 summarizes our Intent-to-Treat (ITT) estimates via OLS, expressed in standard deviation units of the control group to facilitate comparisons across outcomes. In all models, we use the randomized encouragement assignment as the treatment variable and control for pre-treatment covariates selected via a pre-registered lasso procedure.⁸ Unstandardized estimates and unadjusted *p*-values are reported in Table 5 in the Appendix.

⁸For all of our models, we select covariates for inclusion using lasso with default options in glmnet. We run this separately for each DV. Our list of pre-treatment covariates for inclusion is: gender (4 categories), education (1–6), age (numeric), party ID (3 categories), race/ethnicity (8 categories), ideology (1–5), family income (1–16), political interest (1–5), frequency of political information consumed from media sources (separate variables coded 0–5: network news, cable TV, national newspapers, local news, public radio, social media, news podcasts, political commentary podcasts, YouTube), pre-treatment knowledge (1st principal component of all political knowledge items), pre-treatment version of the DV (if available). For categorical variables, if lasso selects only one of the levels, we include all other levels of the variable as well in the final model.

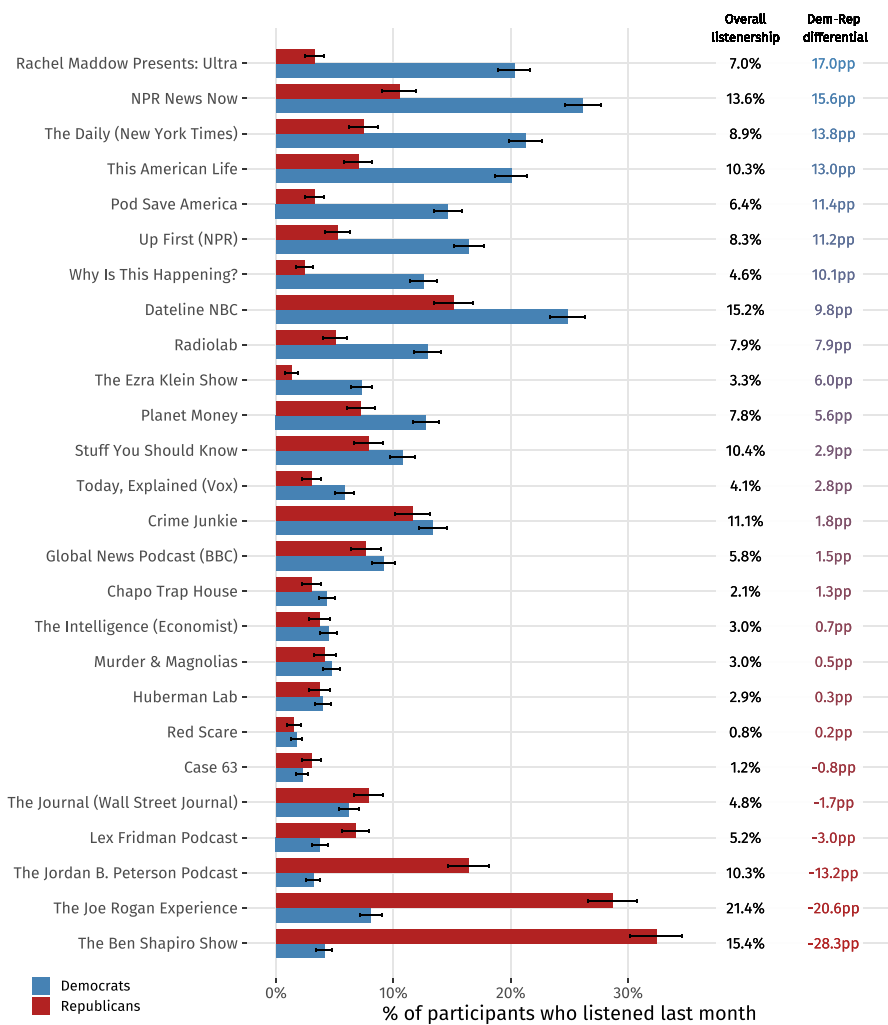


Fig. 3 Pre-treatment podcast listenership by party affiliation. Each bar represents the percentage of Wave 1 respondents who reported listening to the specified podcast in the past month. Red bars indicate self-identified Republicans; blue bars indicate self-identified Democrats. Partisan leaners are not included. Error bars denote 95% confidence intervals

First, we see that this treatment caused an increase in the accuracy of overall news event knowledge ($\hat{\beta}_{\text{std}}^{\text{ITT}} = 0.29$; $p < 0.001$), which was more pronounced for a measure that only includes events covered in that week's episodes ($\hat{\beta}_{\text{std}}^{\text{ITT}} = 0.45$; $p < 0.001$). The point estimate for the treatment's impact on items *not* covered in

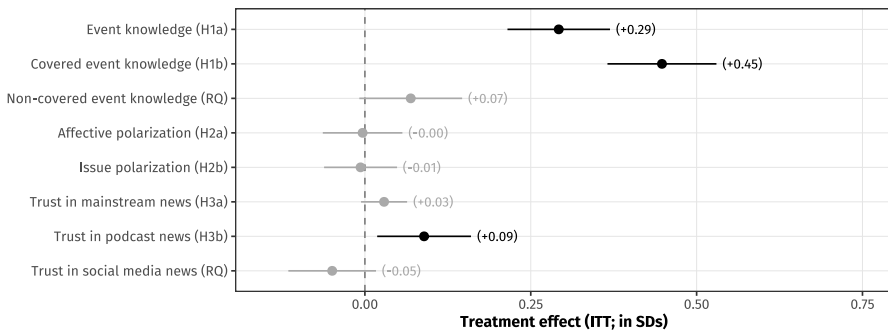


Fig. 4 Summary of main hypothesis tests and research questions. Each row contains a treatment effect estimate (and associated 95% confidence interval formed using HC2 robust standard errors) from a separate OLS model (lasso-adjusted). Outcome variables are expressed in standard deviation units of the control group. Estimates in black are statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level (FDR-adjusted).

the podcast that week is also positive, although much smaller in magnitude and not statistically significant at our pre-registered threshold ($\hat{\beta}_{std}^{ITT} = 0.069$, $p = 0.081$).

Neither of our polarization outcomes seem to be affected by the treatment. We also explore whether effects of issue polarization differ between issues covered vs. not covered in the podcast episodes and do not find evidence for significant effects in both (see Table 7 in the Appendix; not pre-registered).

Our results for trust indicate that our treatment modestly increased trust in news podcasts (captured in the third principal component of our index; $\hat{\beta}_{std}^{ITT} = 0.089$, $p = 0.013$). Though we were very well-powered to detect effects on mainstream news trust (the first principal component; Cohen's $d \approx 0.02$), we cannot reject the null hypothesis of no effect ($\hat{\beta}_{std}^{ITT} = 0.029$, $p = 0.103$). This suggests both that attitudes toward mainstream news outlets are highly crystallized in the U.S. context, and that experiences with the podcast largely did not spill over into general attitudes about the media.

The three outcomes for which we reject the null hypothesis of no effect — event knowledge (H1a), knowledge of events specifically covered in the podcast during the study period (H1b), and news podcast trust (H3b) — remain significant after we apply our pre-specified false discovery rate (FDR) adjustment (Anderson 2008), as indicated by the black estimates in Fig. 4.

To better understand the trust results, we conduct an exploratory analysis on several of the individual items used to form our indices. As shown in Fig. 10 in the Appendix, we find a positive treatment effect on feeling thermometer ratings of NPR ($\beta = 3.3$ points; $p < 0.001$) but no significant effects on any of the other figures for which we offered thermometers, including media outlets and political leaders. At the same time, we do not find treatment effects that are distinguishable from zero when we ask about the perceived fairness or bias of public radio programs, news podcasts, or political commentary podcasts (and in fact these were already quite high among

our sample prior to treatment). These results suggest, first, that the effect of listening to our *Up First* treatment was confined not simply to attitudes about news podcasts but perhaps more specifically to podcast content produced by NPR.⁹ Second, the lack of movement in our bias measures suggests that perceptions of increased fairness are not a likely mechanism of the increase in trust that we detect. Instead, the increase in familiarity with *Up First* over the course of the treatment period may have contributed to more positive feelings about the program (e.g., Koch and Zerback 2013).

Finally, we note a potential imbalance between the treatment and control groups that we discovered for some of our covariates (see Table 3 in the Appendix). After investigating possible sources of the issue, we did not uncover any problems with the treatment assignment procedure, which was implemented by YouGov as simple random assignment at the very beginning of the Wave 1 survey (after participants consented). From looking at Table 3, it is clear that the imbalance only occurs for variables created from survey items that were asked after this initial treatment assignment (though before the randomized encouragement was shown to participants assigned to the treatment group); variables collected prior to our experiment, such as demographics and party identification, are balanced. As a robustness check, we therefore re-run all analyses allowing only those variables that we know were collected prior to actual treatment assignment to be potentially included as covariates via the lasso procedure. Results of these analyses are presented in the Appendix in Table 6. The results and significance (including with FDR adjustment) are essentially unchanged from our original specification, though the magnitudes for the knowledge outcomes are slightly smaller.

Exploratory Analyses

The analyses in this subsection were not pre-registered and should be considered exploratory. We examine three extensions of our main results: compliance behavior and complier profiling, local average treatment effects, and treatment effect heterogeneity across pre-treatment characteristics.

Complier Profiling and Local Average Treatment Effects

Because our design is an encouragement experiment, it is informative to characterize the subset of participants whose behavior was changed by the treatment assignment. Using the post-treatment measure of self-reported *Up First* listening (Wave 2) as the endogenous variable and treatment assignment as the instrument, we apply the complier profiling framework of Marbach and Hangartner (2020) to compare covariate means among compliers, never-takers, and always-takers against the full sample. Figure 12 in the Appendix presents the results. Compliers are broadly similar to the overall sample on most covariates, though they appear more politically knowledgeable and exhibit higher levels of news literacy. On the other hand, never-takers differ sharply from always-takers on a set of political and behavioral covariates. They are

⁹ Interestingly, this also suggests that the attitudes in question are broader than trust in the specific show or host (Arceneaux et al. 2012).

more likely to be Republican and right-leaning, less likely to have college education, and have lower levels of political interest, knowledge, news literacy, and listen to radio and podcasts less often. This has important implications for the external validity of our findings. Since never-takers — those who did not listen to *Up First* regardless of assignment — tend to be more conservative and less engaged with news media, our LATE estimates below capture effects among a subset of compliers who were already somewhat predisposed to consuming mainstream news content. The treatment may therefore have been less effective at reaching the very audience that stands to benefit most from exposure to nonpartisan reporting. At the same time, the fact that compliers are not dramatically different from the full sample on most demographic covariates suggests that the encouragement design succeeded in shifting behavior among a reasonably broad group of participants, rather than merely intensifying consumption among a narrow set of dedicated news consumers.

Exploiting the same instrumental-variables setup, we estimate local average treatment effects (LATEs) via two-stage least squares. These estimates capture the causal effect of actually listening to *Up First* among compliers, as distinct from the intent-to-treat (ITT) effects reported in our main results figure. Figure 13 in the Appendix displays the ITT and LATE estimates side by side for all outcomes. Because the LATE rescales the ITT by the compliance rate, point estimates are mechanically larger, but the substantive pattern is preserved: the strongest effects remain on event knowledge (particularly for topics covered in the podcast; $\hat{\beta}_{\text{std}}^{\text{LATE}} = +0.79$ SD; $p < 0.001$) and trust in podcast news ($\hat{\beta}_{\text{std}}^{\text{LATE}} = +0.16$ SD; $p < 0.001$).

Treatment Effect Heterogeneity

We examine whether our main treatment effects vary across several pre-treatment characteristics: partisanship, age, pre-treatment trust in mainstream news, pre-treatment trust in podcast news, political interest, frequency of political podcast consumption, and whether the respondent is a listener of politically right-leaning podcasts. For the last of these, we construct an indicator (“*manosphere*” podcast listener) that takes the value one if a participant reported listening to any of the following shows in the month prior to the study: *The Joe Rogan Experience*, *The Jordan B. Peterson Podcast*, or *The Ben Shapiro Show*. The motivation for grouping these shows comes from the internally strong positive correlations among their listenership in our sample while at the same time being negatively correlated with pre-treatment *Up First* listenership, as shown in Fig. 14 in the Appendix, which suggests a distinct audience segment. For moderators with three categories (e.g., political interest: low, medium, high), we drop the middle category and test for significant differences between the extreme groups; p -values are adjusted for multiple comparisons using the FDR procedure of Anderson (2008).

Figure 15 in the Appendix presents the full set of heterogeneity results. The knowledge effects of the treatment are fairly consistent across most subgroups, suggesting that podcast-based news delivery can inform a broad range of listeners. Where heterogeneity emerges, it tends to be substantively meaningful: for example, effects on covered-event knowledge are somewhat larger among participants with low prior

trust in mainstream news, Republicans, and manosphere podcast listeners, consistent with the notion that the treatment provides the greatest informational benefit to those who are less likely to encounter high-quality nonpartisan news content in their regular media diets. On the other hand, effects on trust in podcast news are stronger for people with lower prior trust in podcast news and higher prior levels of political podcast consumption, but not manosphere podcast listeners.

We also explore a dose-response relationship by splitting the treatment group according to the number of days on which they correctly answered at least two out of three quiz questions. As shown in Fig. 16 in the Appendix, the knowledge effects increase monotonically with treatment dosage: participants who engaged with more episodes show larger gains, lending support to a causal interpretation of the treatment as operating through actual content exposure. This pattern is less pronounced for the trust and polarization outcomes, although the largest estimated gain in trust in podcast news is observed in the highest-dosage group.

Discussion

We study the naturalistic effects of listening to a real news podcast over the course of 5 days in a randomized field experiment. Our encouragement successfully increased consumption of the podcast, which appeared to serve primarily as a complement to existing programs. Listening to these episodes made participants more knowledgeable about events in the news, particularly those covered in the program, and they retained these facts for at least a week after the treatment ended. Exploratory analysis suggests that existing listeners of “manosphere” podcasts were especially likely to absorb factual information from the treatment. Participants in turn reported greater trust in information received from news podcasts (an increase of .09 SD), though broader attitudes toward the news media were not affected by our treatment. Intriguingly, when we look at effects on individual feeling thermometers, we find that the treatment substantially improved positive perceptions of NPR, suggesting that consumption of the podcast increased both trust in the *source* as well as the *medium*.

What do we learn about the relationship between news consumption and media trust? First, views about newer media such as podcasts are not as well-formed as those about established categories, leaving more room for attitudes to potentially shift. Our point estimate for the treatment effect on trust in mainstream media is much more precisely estimated than for any of our other dependent variables (the confidence intervals span .07 SD in the outcome), due to the strongly prognostic nature of the pre-treatment version of the index. Yet despite this, the effect is still statistically indistinguishable from zero. By contrast, the positive effect on the component of our index tapping into trust in podcast news is somewhat noisier, suggesting that corresponding pre-treatment attitudes about podcasts as a news source were malleable enough that they shifted in response to the treatment. We note, however, that our treatment only lasted for five days, which may not have been enough to produce durable shifts in longstanding attitudes about the media in general. By the same token, though our follow-up survey was fielded approximately one week after the

intervention, we cannot say precisely how long-lasting the knowledge and podcast trust effects were.

Aside from improving knowledge and trust in podcasts as a news medium, we hypothesized that listening to *Up First* could also potentially decrease polarization. Despite the promise of interventions designed to boost habitual exposure to nonpartisan information sources (rather than reduce exposure to partisan or untrustworthy sources, which may be limited to begin with), we did not find that our treatment meaningfully reduced either affective polarization or an index of issue polarization that we designed to include items on some of the topics covered in the show that week (see Appendix B for full question wordings). We believe that encouraging consumption of quality information sources continues to be a promising and understudied approach to mitigating the negative consequences of exposure to content from social media and hyperpartisan online publishers (see also, Altay et al. 2025). A hint of this can be seen in the small decline in reported listening to the hyperpartisan *Ben Shapiro Show* among treated participants, suggesting an important mechanism for depolarization (e.g., Allcott et al. 2020). Similarly, we document an increase in feeling thermometer ratings toward NPR, which could make future reception of content from public radio more likely at a time when it is under political attack. But, as news events during our treatment period illustrated, some topics are inherently more divisive than others — and few could be seen as more polarizing than Trump’s indictment, regardless of how even-handed it is treated by journalists.

Consistent with the aforementioned study finding a corrosive effect of consuming partisan news on attitudes toward the press in general (Guess et al. 2021), we argue that it is harder to build trust than to destroy it. It has long been understood that trust emerges from repeated interactions which establish mutual expectations of future behavior or, in the case of news, reliable information (Strömbäck et al. 2020). Without formal guarantees, such trust can take time to gradually solidify. But breaking that trust happens quickly and it may be difficult or even impossible to fully re-establish it (e.g., Foos and Bischof 2022). This dynamic ensures that competitive and/or political pressure will continue to incentivize attacks on the press (Ladd 2011).

Although we designed this study to overcome limitations of past research, the present design is not without tradeoffs. It is important to note that the treatment consists of components bundled with the encouragement to listen to the podcast, most notably the factual quizzes. We felt that the risks of non-compliance outweighed concerns about experimenter demand effects (which have limited empirical support in survey experiments; Mummolo and Peterson 2019), but we cannot fully rule out the possibility that some of our results are due to a combination of news podcast consumption and attentiveness induced by the quizzes. We argue that this concern is most relevant for the knowledge outcomes, but it is less obvious that knowledge quizzes would induce more positive attitudes toward the source or medium of information, as opposed to some aspect of the content.

Additionally, our design does not directly incorporate users’ preferences for content, which are important for understanding how media effects operate in the context of real-world consumption choices (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; de Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2019). We acknowledge this important caveat to the generalizability of our findings but argue that our results, interpreted as estimates of counterfactual

effects, are substantively important because they demonstrate how news podcast consumption can shape knowledge and trust (and potentially subsequent consumption behavior) when people listen, as can easily occur during crises or political campaigns. When the opportunity to discover informative news does arise, our data suggests that podcast news consumption is positive sum among our sample of existing listeners; their information consumption is well within the Pareto frontier. Our analysis of study compliance further suggests that a broad cross-section of participants was willing to accept the treatment (though more educated and news-literate subjects were somewhat overrepresented among compliers); among those who did comply, knowledge effects were particularly pronounced among listeners of Rogan-style podcasts. Finally, just as our results shed light on how podcast consumers are affected when they do tune in, they suggest the consequences of tuning out, as demand for local news and support for public radio stations continue to deteriorate.

As suggested by our survey of the literature, the role of podcasts in news consumption and their effects on political attitudes, behavior, and trust are severely understudied relative to their current prominence in the media ecosystem. As shown in the descriptive data that we collect, podcasts produced by public radio broadcasters are among the most popular shows in our sample, which targeted podcast listeners. In addition to NPR programs and *This American Life*, respondents also commonly reported listening to *Dateline NBC*, *The Daily* from *The New York Times* and political commentary shows from the left (Rachel Maddow) and right (Tucker Carlson, Ben Shapiro). While our focus on NPR's *Up First* highlights features that we hypothesized would cut against partisanship and skepticism of the news, other popular podcasts speak to partisan audiences and have been accused of spreading conspiracy theories.¹⁰ Future research should focus on the role of these podcasts and explore their similarities and potential differences with other mediums, such as partisan cable news. Such research can use designs similar to the one employed in this study. For some shows with very high audience penetration, however (such as Rogan), deactivation-style designs that find existing consumers and incentivize them to stop listening or watching (or to substitute a different show) may be more practical (e.g., Allcott et al. 2024; Ventura et al. 2025; Broockman and Kalla 2025a).

Podcasting as a medium incorporates a number of features that could be studied as potential mechanisms in future research. For example, while our study takes the format and structure of balanced NPR-style news as a given, future work could create variations of the same content that relies less on interviews and more on authoritative narration. More fundamentally, communication scholarship has identified characteristics thought to be associated with greater openness to persuasion and less polarization. Scholars have documented so-called “parasocial” relationships in which the media audience begin to perceive a bond akin to friendship with public figures or even with fictional characters (Labrecque 2014; Giles 2002). Podcasts, as we document in the Appendix, are often experienced while the listener is engaged in everyday solitary activities such as commuting, doing chores, or exercising; listeners may be especially receptive to new information in these moments. The sense of intimacy that podcasts create through voice-based delivery may foster parasocial relationships between the

¹⁰ See, for example, <https://news.yahoo.com/joe-rogan-amplifies-conspiracy-theory-161422469.html>.

listeners and the host(s) as news hosts can increase perceived news realism and credibility of the information they provide (Rubin et al. 2006). Relatedly, podcasts make it easier to convey empathic or other emotional content, which can bolster uptake of factual information (Bowles et al. 2025). Finally, just as personal relationships and face-to-face norms of civility may encourage consideration of alternative viewpoints, the intimate nature of the medium — allowing for hesitation, expressions of agreement and shared understanding via nonverbal cues — could open a space for nonjudgmental engagement with cross-cutting perspectives (Mutz and Reeves 2005; Kalla and Broockman 2023; Santoro et al. 2024; McClung and Johnson 2010).

To more precisely study whether such mechanisms or others — e.g., the lack of immediate social feedback from one's network, substitution from other media — might be at play, researchers could design studies that manipulate the medium (or aspects of it; see Victor 2020). For example, future experiments may want to compare delivering the treatment via text only (by providing the podcast's transcript), audio only, or both audio and video (given that podcasts are increasingly available in multiple modalities). Future research can also design experimental treatments around different genres and styles of podcasts, in audio or video format. Using AI-assisted tools, it would be possible to design synthetic treatments that vary stylistic, emotional, and other features while holding the content constant (see Barari et al. 2025; Liu and Velez 2026).

Most urgently, while estimating substantively and practically relevant causal quantities related to this important medium is a promising avenue for continued research, there remains an immediate need for comprehensive descriptive research about the podcast ecosystem, its growth and contours, and its relationship to other media channels (e.g., Patterson et al. 2026). Podcasting is a rich medium that lends itself to study across multiple overlapping dimensions. Podcast feeds themselves are widely accessible, and transcripts of individual episodes are easily generated if not already available, facilitating analysis of show content. Unlike social media, podcasts do not have a strong network component, but networks can be generated via co-occurrence, for example by looking at audience overlap or guest appearances. Finally, the survey data we collected provides rare (though self-reported) detail on podcast consumption, but we focused on a particular population of interest to the experiment. Fine-grained podcast consumption data linked to representative surveys would shed much-needed light on the extent and potential impact of different podcasts on individuals' political knowledge, attitudes, and behavior (e.g., Stier et al. 2020; Broockman and Kalla 2025b).

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-026-10193-0>.

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Data Availability Data and code necessary to replicate the study's results are available at the Harvard Dataverse: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/OHB2T1>.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. This study was conducted in accordance with the APSA Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research.

Ethics Approval This research has been approved by the IRBs of Princeton University (protocol 15421), the University of Illinois, and the University of Southern California (protocol UP-23-00148).

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