

Insights on Chicago's Local Media Consumers

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A look at local news organizations' quests to best serve their audiences



An analysis of more than 6,000 respondents across 38 newsrooms serving the Chicago area



Press Forward
Chicago

Northwestern
MEDILL

Local News Accelerator



INTRODUCTION

Beginning in December 2025, 38 newsrooms across the Chicago area came together to gather bespoke insights from the vast audiences they reach. Over the course of five months, Press Forward Chicago sponsored research as part of a collaboration with the Northwestern University Local News Accelerator (LNA) at the Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications, and this group of more than three dozen organizations distributed audience surveys to better understand who engages with their content.

Organizations distributed the surveys through newsletters, websites and social media posts, videos, podcasts and more. Overall, the 38 organizations combined gathered 6,116 valid responses.

“Demographics info was the No. 1 need listed from media outlets in our 2025 shared services survey,” said Press Forward Chicago Executive Director Tracy Baim. “We learned so much from doing this first survey with more than three dozen local outlets. This information is critical for the media to know about their audience.”

Key Findings

- Respondents are highly engaged civically – 64% have voted in an election after engaging with local media; 62% have had conversations about local issues.
- More than two-thirds of respondents already give money to local media – those who donate are **significantly more likely** to believe they can depend on local news to cover events and that local news will provide clear coverage of public officials.
- The vast majority (88%) of respondents turn to local news to be better citizens and to feel connected to their community (82%).

WHAT THE NEWS ORGANIZATIONS LEARNED

We conducted research in partnership with 38 news organizations across Chicago and its surrounding suburbs.

Audience research delivered new and detailed analysis for participating organizations.

The goal of these surveys was to help the clients capture a snapshot of who their work reaches to help inform future business decisions and content strategies.

"No matter how well you think you know your audience, concrete data is a vital complement to gut instincts," said Lizzie Schiffman Tufano, vice president of revenue at Block Club Chicago. "Identifying the areas where our expectations align with reality is important, and data that challenges our understanding of our readership is crucial. Our audience is dynamic, and our strategies to reach them must be, too."

Participating newsrooms spanned from more robust organizations with large teams to smaller outlets that have developed strong connections with the communities they serve.

"As a hyperlocal news outlet, Chinatown Spotlight gained crucial insight into our audience through our audience research

project with Northwestern's Medill Local News Accelerator," said Sarah Tang, the director of programs with the Coalition for a Better Chinese American Community which runs Chinatown Spotlight. "With a small team focused on bringing fact-based, in-language news to Chinatown residents and Chinese readers, understanding our audience's consumption behavior and desires helped us focus our strategies and priorities."

Added Jake Wittich, managing editor of Windy City Times, a Chicago-based LGBTQ+ newsroom: "The audience research gave Windy City Times concrete data on what our readers value. It let us know what we're doing right — and just as importantly — where we're falling short. We identified coverage gaps, like a desire for more stories on income inequality and affordable housing. We're now thinking about how to report on those issues through a local LGBTQ+ lens. ... In a small newsroom like Windy City Times, every decision about what we cover matters. This audience research gave us clarity to prioritize stories that will have the most impact for our readers."



"Our audience is dynamic, and our strategies to reach them must be, too."

-Lizzie Schiffman Tufano, VP of revenue, Block Club Chicago

KEY FINDINGS

While respondents to these surveys were overwhelmingly white, older, female and college or graduate degree recipients — demographics that don't necessarily mirror those of Chicago more broadly — there were still key data points to take away.

Among them:

- **High civic engagement:** Respondents are highly engaged civically — 64% have voted in an election after engaging with local media; 62% have had conversations about local issues.
- **Supporters of local media:** More than two-thirds of respondents already give money to local media — 69% said they already either donate or subscribe to a local news organization, and those who currently do so are **significantly more likely** to believe they can depend on local news to cover events and that local news will provide clear coverage of local public officials.
- **Community connection:** The vast majority of respondents turn to local news to be better citizens — 88% said they use local news to stay informed to be a better citizen, while 82% said they use local news to feel connected to their community.

As it relates to demographics, this project served as an indicator that in order to reach a more diverse group of audience members, news organizations will need to experiment with different tactics beyond newsletter and digital distribution.

Chinatown Spotlight, for example, found success reaching some audience members at in-person events they held.

As such, more work needs to be conducted to gather data that better captures the different perspectives of audience members who consume local news across the Chicago area.



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-Jake Wittich, managing editor, Windy City Times

WHAT THE NEWSROOMS SAID

“The key to our work, the most important thing on our minds every day is to serve our audience. Audience research is one of the ways we can keep up with their needs. Uncovering their unmet needs and then helping fill those gaps is vital to the service we provide as well as being crucial to growing our audience and becoming even more essential to them.

“This research helped us better understand who our audience is and will be part of the mix of factors we use as we look for new ways to serve them and to expand our reach.”

-Jay Smith, news director, WTTW News



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NEWS SOURCES

Respondents demonstrated a reliance on more traditional forms of media for local news and information, with newspapers, TV stations and radio stations as the three most-common selections.

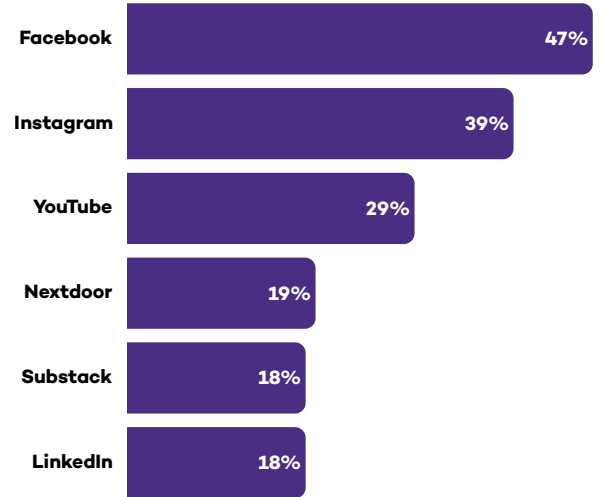
Friends and family (44%) ranked as a more common choice than social media (35%), though that difference could be explained by the age of the sample.

In terms of social media sources, Facebook (47%), Instagram (39%) and YouTube (29%) were the most common choices.

And, smartphones (80%), email/newsletter (67%) and desktop/laptop (63%) were the most common devices and platforms used to stay on top of local news. Notably, printed newspapers or magazines were selected by just 30% of respondents.

SOCIAL MEDIA HABITS

Facebook was the number one choice for local news consumption, but no platform exceeds 50%.



WHY CONSUME LOCAL NEWS?

Respondents demonstrated a clear civic focus when it comes to their local news and information consumption, with 88% saying it helps them stay informed to be better citizens. In addition, 82% said it helps them feel connected to their community, and 71% said it helps them find places to go and things to do.



WHAT THE NEWSROOMS SAID



"The Northwestern Medill and Press Forward Chicago demographic survey project is fulfilling a major need of La Raza, and of other local media outlets: to have access to high-quality demographic studies to better know and better serve our audiences, something that frequently was beyond the reach of hyperlocal media due to high costs of the studies, the singularities of our markets and audiences, and the specialized expertise required to do it.

"This shared service by Medill and PFC filled that need and provide us with very valuable information to enhance our engagement and improve our journalism services."

-Jesús Del Toro, general manager/editor-in-chief, La Raza

"At Block Club, we're confident that our coverage provides valuable information for Chicagoans in every corner of the city: we just need to make sure we're reaching them.

"Viral stories and pageview volume aren't as meaningful for local news as density of reach, and audience surveys like this one give us a solid foundation to develop new strategies focused on the readers we may be missing."

-Lizzie Schiffman Tufano, VP of revenue, Block Club Chicago



ISSUES

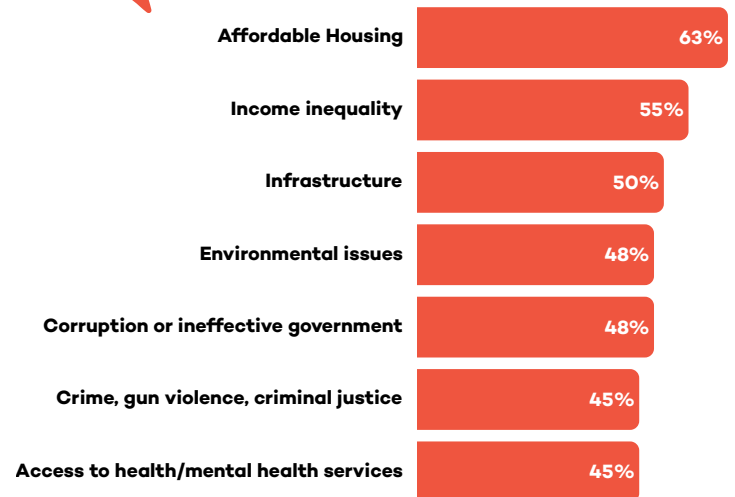
Among the top issues, respondents identified an array of topics. At the top were affordable housing (63%), income inequality (55%) and infrastructure (50%). Notably, corruption and ineffective government (48%), environmental issues (48%), access to health and/or mental health services (45%) and crime, gun violence, criminal justice (45%) all received substantial attention as well.

In addition, we asked respondents to identify the type of content they find most helpful and the content they find most interesting. Election and politics, arts and culture and local nonprofits and programs ranked as the top three selections for both questions.

Diving deeper into the numbers, there was a relative mirroring of the topics people ranked as most helpful and interesting, but there were some gaps. For example, among 25-34 year olds, housing or rental resources were identified as 24 points more helpful than interesting; among 35-44 year olds, that gap was 13 points, the largest gap for any of the options. This suggests that perhaps housing and rental resources could be a topic of coverage for news organizations looking to reach audience members in those age ranges.

COMMUNITY ISSUES

Affordable housing and income inequality ranked highest, but respondents identified a variety of key issues facing their communities.



COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

Part of the survey measured participants' engagement in various community activities. Nearly three-quarters (72%) said they participate in recreational activities at least once a month and nearly four in 10 said they engage in community service or volunteering (38%).

Meanwhile, religious services (45%), political rally or protest (36%) and sporting event (32%) were the most common activities that respondents said they never participate in.

72% of respondents participate in recreational activities at least once a month.



Nearly four in 10 respondents said they participate in community service or volunteering at least once a month.

WHO PARTICIPATED?

There were 38 newsrooms that distributed this survey. WTTW, Chicago's PBS station, received the most responses with 655. Combined, the newsrooms received 6,116 valid responses (161 responses per outlet on average).

All organizations received a report detailing the combined findings, and those whose surveys received at least 50 responses received a second report breaking down their specific data. The participants, listed alphabetically, were:

Block Club Chicago	Investigative Project on Race and Equity
Board Rule	Journal & Topics
Chicago Access Network TV	La Raza
Chicago Defender	Loop North News
Chicago News Weekly	Midway Broadcasting
Chicago Public Media	Nadig Newspapers
Chicago Public Square	Newcity
Chinatown Spotlight	Pigment International
CHIRP Radio 107.1 FM	Polish Daily News
Cicero Independiente	Reparations Media
City Bureau	SoapBox Productions and Organizing
City Cast Chicago	Streetwise
E3 Radio	The Beverly Review
Evanston Now	The Bigs
Evanston RoundTable	The Culture
Homewood-Flossmoor Chronicle	The Record North Shore
Illinois Answers Project	The Shopper
Inside Publications	Windy City Times
Investigate Midwest	WTTW News

ACTIONS AND TRUST

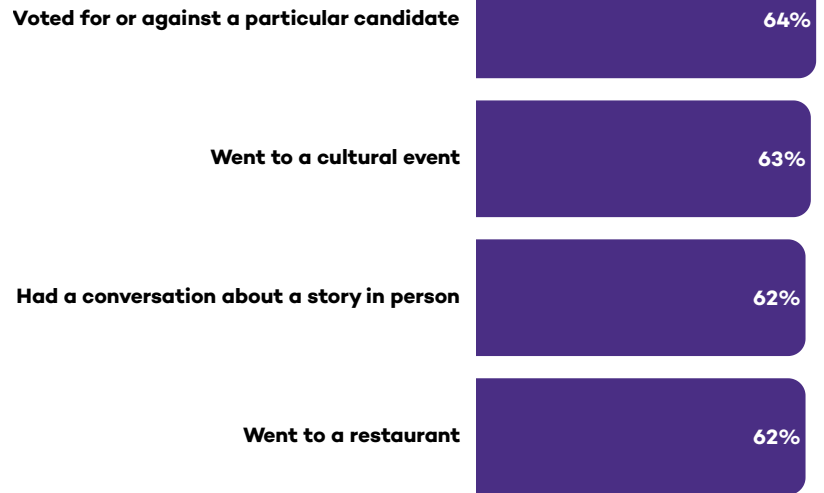
In response to engaging with local media, respondents said they've voted for or against a particular candidate (64%), gone to a cultural event (63%), had a conversation about a story in person (62%) and gone to a restaurant (62%).

In addition, 75% said they agree with the statement that they can depend on local news to cover a significant event, and 72% said they trust local news to provide clear coverage of local public officials. And, 83% said they feel connected to the city they live in.

Analysis of the data showed that respondents who take any action based on what they saw or heard in local media are significantly more likely to feel connected with their city, while those who took no action are significantly more likely to feel a lesser connection.

ACTIONS TAKEN BECAUSE OF LOCAL MEDIA

Respondents indicate having taken a variety of actions in response to local media.



75% AGREE THAT THEY CAN DEPEND ON LOCAL NEWS TO COVER A SIGNIFICANT EVENT

83% FEEL CONNECTED TO THE CITY THEY LIVE IN



WHAT THE NEWSROOMS SAID

“Audience research like this is crucial because local journalism should be rooted in community listening. This input directly shapes the stories we prioritize and ensures we're reflecting the real concerns and interests of the communities we serve.

“The findings also gave us insight into how our audience engages digitally. We learned many of our readers are active on Reddit and Instagram, highlighting clear opportunities for us to expand our reach by investing in those platforms.

“This kind of research is not just critical for our editorial strategy, but also for our sustainability. Funders want to know that our work is informed by real community input—and this project gave us data to back that up.”

-Jake Wittich, managing editor, Windy City Times



WILLINGNESS TO PAY

Respondents show a high rate of already paying for local news, with 69% saying they currently subscribe or donate to a local newspaper, media company or nonprofit media organization. More than half (52%) also said that those who can should pay for local news, while just 13% said no one should pay.



Nearly seven in 10 respondents said they currently donate or subscribe to a local newspaper, media company or nonprofit media organization.

These numbers are quite different from the Chicago area at large. In a Medill survey of 1,101 Chicagoland residents encompassing Cook County and 13 counties surrounding Chicago conducted in May and June 2025, just 15% said they currently subscribe or donate to a local news organization.



Perhaps unsurprisingly, respondents in this survey who said that they agree with the statements that if a significant event happens in a community, they can depend on local news to cover it and that they trust local news and information sources to provide clear coverage of what their public officials are up to are more likely to give money to a local news organization.

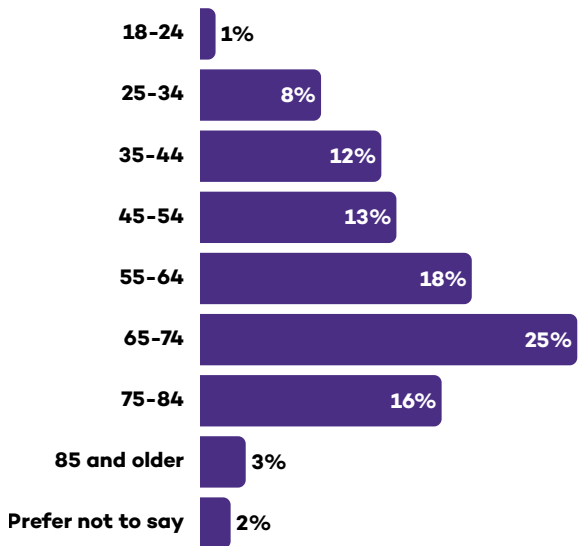
This contrasts sharply with the Chicago area more broadly. In a 2025 Medill survey, just 15% said they currently subscribe or donate to local news.



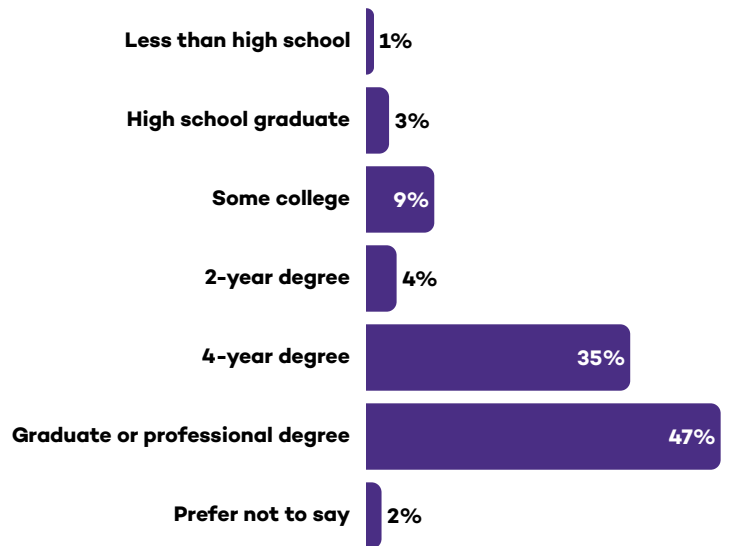
DEMOGRAPHICS

The demographics of the survey respondents broke down as follows:

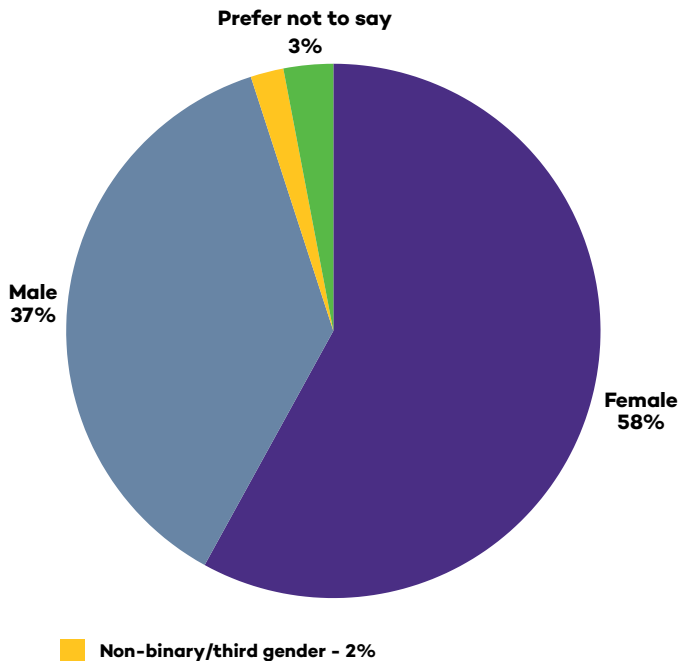
AGE



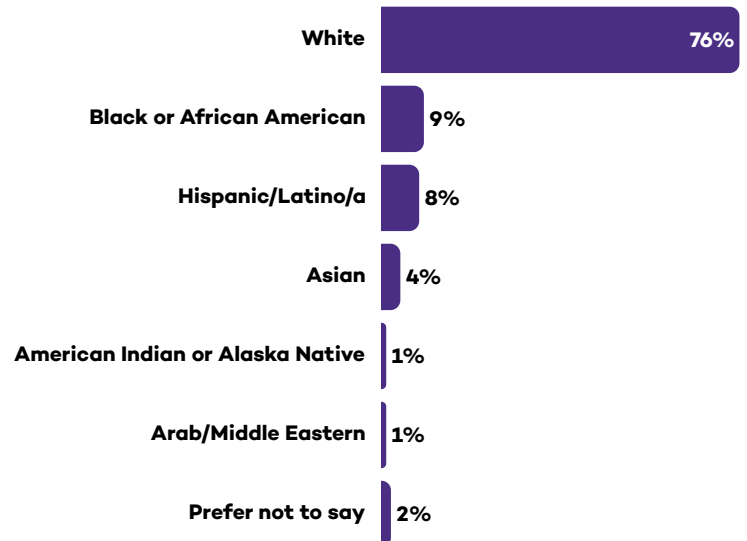
EDUCATION



GENDER

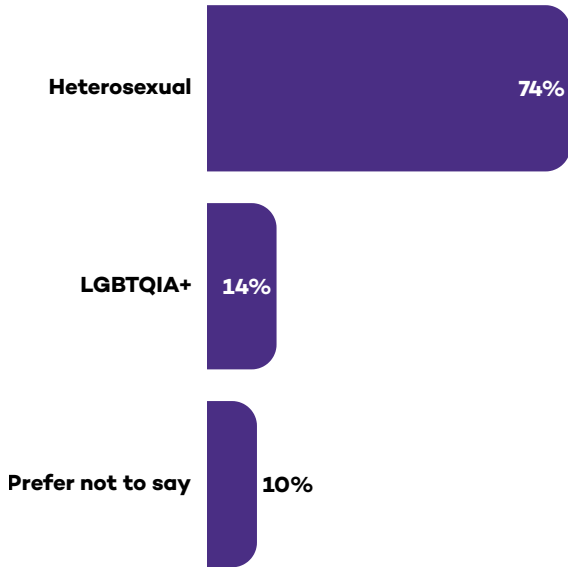


RACE/ETHNICITY

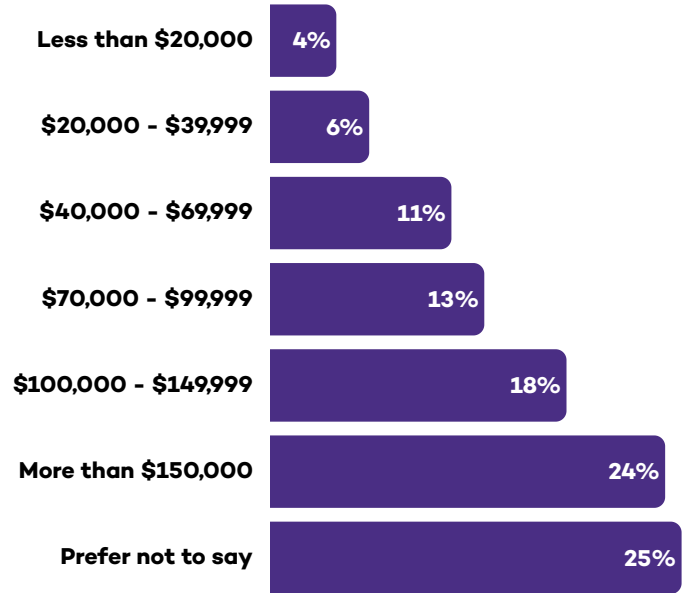


DEMOGRAPHICS CONT.

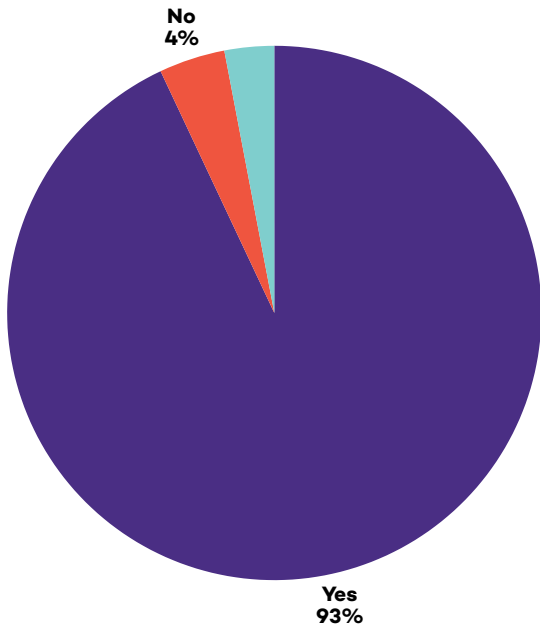
SEXUAL ORIENTATION



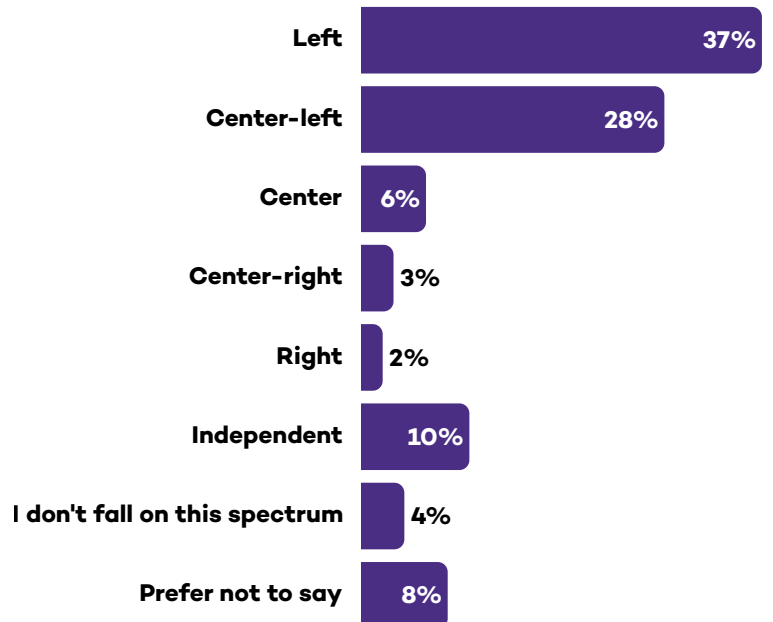
HOUSEHOLD INCOME



DID YOU VOTE IN THE 2024 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION?



POLITICAL LEANING



ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This project was fiscally sponsored by Press Forward Chicago and executed by the Medill School of Journalism's Local News Accelerator at Northwestern University using the software Qualtrics, designed for market research.

This project stemmed from an expressed desire among Chicago-area newsrooms to have a clearer understanding of who their work reaches. As such, the 38 organizations that participated in this opted in.

All 38 outlets distributed the exact same survey, and Spanish, Mandarin and Polish translations were made available. The news organizations themselves circulated the survey, which was built in Qualtrics.

The respondents were not a random sample; rather, the survey was open to any reader, listener, viewer and/or consumer of any of the participating newsrooms. The responses were anonymous, but participants were given the option to opt into a separate raffle for a \$100 gift card to incentivize participation.

All photos, except headshots, were taken by Hannah Carroll for the Medill Local News Initiative.

As noted, the decision to gather audience data directly had its limitations — notably that the sample of 6,116 people who completed the survey are not representative of the Chicago-area's demographics as a whole. Still, there are key learnings from this project.

Armed with this data, the participating outlets are positioned to build off this research, potentially pursuing advertising and sponsorship opportunities or investing time in continuing to further their connections to the communities they cover.

More work still needs to be done to better understand the needs of Chicago-area news consumers who were under-sampled during the course of this project. Such findings will be crucial to helping newsrooms expand their footprints strategically and authentically.

NORTHWESTERN MEDILL LOCAL NEWS ACCELERATOR

The [Local News Accelerator](#) at Northwestern University's [Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications](#) works to spur a more economically robust local news ecosystem. The Accelerator maximizes Chicagoland residents' access to the information they need to be civically engaged.

PRESS FORWARD CHICAGO

[Press Forward Chicago](#), a pooled fund for journalism based at [The Chicago Community Trust](#), seeks to create healthier communities through the support of strong and sustainable news and information ecosystems. Since 2023, Press Forward Chicago has supported more than 50 newsrooms in the Chicago area by investing \$4 million in grants and launching a suite of shared service programs to build the capacity of local news organizations.