

An Analysis of the Political Affiliations and Professions of Sunday Talk Show Guests Between the Obama and Trump Administrations

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Abstract

The Sunday morning talk shows have long been a platform for high-quality journalism and analysis of the week's top political headlines. This research will compare guests between the first two years of Barack Obama's presidency and the first two years of Donald Trump's presidency. A quantitative content analysis of television transcripts was used to identify changes in both the political affiliations and profession of the guests who appeared on NBC's "Meet the Press," CBS's "Face the Nation," ABC's "This Week" and "Fox News Sunday" between the two administrations. Findings indicated that the dominant political viewpoint of guests differed by show during the Obama administration, while all shows hosted more Republicans than Democrats during the Trump administration. Furthermore, U.S. Senators and TV/Radio journalists were cumulatively the most frequent guests on the programs.

I. Introduction

Sunday morning political talk shows have been around since 1947, when NBC's "Meet the Press" brought on politicians and newsmakers to be questioned by members of the press. The show's format would evolve over the next 70 years, and give rise to fellow Sunday morning competitors including ABC's "This Week," CBS's "Face the Nation" and "Fox News Sunday." Since the mid-twentieth century, the overall media landscape significantly changed with the rise of cable news, social media and the consumption of online content. There is more political opinion in the news media today than ever before, with viewers becoming confused on what sources they can trust for political news (Guskin, 2018). Despite the all of the "noise" in the news business, the network Sunday morning shows have always branded themselves as an unbiased source covering the week's political headlines.

However, these programs have had to adapt to a changing media environment as President Donald Trump has consistently attacked the news media, while also abruptly changing the news cycle through tweets and unannounced statements. This new style of governance has forced the Sunday news shows to quickly adapt to the Friday news dumps. This has forced broadcast networks to book and rebook guests at the last minute in order to get the most relevant people on the air. On top of this, Trump and his administration have made several attempts to limit the amount of Democrats that appear on both network and cable television (Stelter, 2019; Johnson, 2019).

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While the number of Sunday programs has increased over time, the general format has not. In an effort to see how the party of the president affects the people welcomed on to the Sunday talk shows, this study will examine the political ideology and professions of the guests who appeared. Specifically, this research will compare guests on the Sunday shows during President Barack Obama's first two years in office and those appearing during President Trump's first two years. This research will examine the sources and content of the four major Sunday shows using transcripts provided by networks. This data will be supplemented with outside research on the political affiliations of those who appear on the Sunday programs. The goals of this study are to expand knowledge about political biases and routines of those working in the news industry. This research will inform Americans of potential bias in broadcast news programs as they constantly work to compete with growing partisan cable news competitors.

II. Literature Review

Since NBC's "Meet the Press" began over 70 years ago, guests have always been invited on the program to discuss their career or the ongoing issues facing the country. When finding guests for the Sunday shows, producers may make upwards of 100 calls to a list of thirty prospective guests. "We all hate sharing guests," one producer is quoted saying (Cox, 2002, p. 32). The entire process is very fluid with guests saying they can attend one day, and cancelling the next due to personal or professional reasons. Often times the White House will only offer select members of the administration to appear on the shows. "If the booking process is a card game, the White House is top dealer. The administration's senior officials are among the most sought-after guests for the Sunday talk circuit" (Cox, 2002, p. 32). The goal of the Sunday morning programs is to make news, which results in high ratings and future "high-quality guests" (Cox, 2002, p. 34).

An analysis of the Sunday morning talk show programs – including CBS's "Face the Nation," NBC's "Meet the Press," and ABC's "This Week" – found that policy experts and administration officials were the highest-rated guests (Baum, 2017). It would be fair to assume that these were guests that were highly sought after for producers. This dynamic would explain why there would be more Democratic guests on the Sunday talk shows during a Democratic presidential administration. In contrast to the highest-rated guests, judiciary, state/local officials and private sector citizens brought the lowest ratings (Baum, 2017).

However, the Sunday shows have been systematic in their way of handling guests. While examining more than 4,200 "Meet the Press" appearances, Baitinger (2015) found that there were significantly fewer women who appeared on the Sunday talk shows than men. This is not reserved to one party: Democratic and Republican women were both less likely to make an appearance on the major Sunday morning programs. This study placed the blame on the fact that there are fewer women in positions of power (Baitinger, 2015). In addition, white males continue to make up a majority of the guests on these programs, but more African American guests have appeared recently than in the 1980s. Ethnic diversity began to improve as the 21st century rolled around, with the Sunday talk shows beginning to encourage more representative guests and panels for discussions (Baum, 2017).

While administration officials are desired as guests for the Sunday talk shows, congressional representatives often frequent these programs as federal policymakers. However, the members of Congress who were hosted on the Sunday shows did not hold average beliefs that aligned with their party as a whole. Congressional guests that were interviewed on "Meet the Press" between the years 1947 and 2004 tended to have more extreme views compared to the typical Democrat and Republican (Harmon & Foley, 2007). In addition, it was the same handful of congressmen that were invited on the shows, and many of them had leadership titles. It was also concluded that Democrats outnumbered Republicans before 1995, but then for the next ten years, more Republican members of Congress appeared on the program. Senators were also found to have appeared more frequently than House members (Harmon & Foley, 2007).

Political bias in news

Most of time, the bias embedded into the television network reporting is never blatantly stated, but rather it is shown through selective reporting of stories and information. In one study that looked at ABC, CBS, NBC and the news program "Special Report" on Fox News, one researcher examined when and how the newscasts mentioned both President Bill Clinton's and President George W. Bush's approval ratings. The results found that ABC, CBS and NBC would all favor good news for Clinton and bad news for Bush,

based off of the polls they decided to air in their newscast. Fox News was the reverse, airing more favorable numbers for Bush and negative numbers for Clinton (Groeling, 2008).

While the mention of presidential approval would occur while an individual is already in office, there is also detected media bias on the campaign trail. When looking at the race for the White House in 2000, 2004 and 2008, researchers Diddi, Fico and Zeldes (2014) looked at news transcripts from the three broadcast evening programs. They defined systemic bias in an election by studying which candidate was presented first on the program, which candidate got more airtime, whether video of the candidates' campaign activities appeared and whether there were sound bites from partisans. When looking at the networks in general, all networks favored Senator John McCain over Obama in the 2008 election. CBS and NBC favored Democrats in 2000, and ABC and CBS favored Democrats in 2004. ABC favored Republicans in 2000 and NBC did so in 2004. In the end, it seemed that there was no consistent pattern of systematic bias across the networks (Diddi et al., 2014).

Effects of political framing

Political biases can be evident in a news broadcast, but they can also have a great effect on its audience. This is seen in numerous studies looking at political framing, which packages material in a certain manner that can lead to certain perceptions. "Frames in the news may affect our perception of issues and generate specific evaluations about politics. By means of activation of certain constructs, news can encourage particular 'trains of thought' which citizens may make use of in subsequent judgments" (de Vreese, 2004, p. 36). Using the frames of conflict or economic consequence, context can be as important as news facts presented in a story. Viewers' thoughts are often built off of frames presented to them in television news stories (de Vreese, 2004).

These results are similarly seen in studies looking to measure the effect of repetitive frames on the viewer. Repetitive frames lead to stronger and more persistent ideologies compared to a single exposure (Lecheler et al., 2015). The consequences of single-framed exposure providing only one perspective can create a misinformed view on a political actor or developing political scandal. One such study tested individuals using both a positive and negative frame on a story about elderly care in the Netherlands. Positive framing repetition had little to no effect on the political opinions across time. However, there was receptive exposure to negative news frames, which significantly changed political opinions over time (Lecheler et al., 2015).

Research Questions

Given the prior research related to the Sunday talk show guests and the effect it has on viewers, it may be that these programs' guests and biases will reflect the party in control of the executive branch of the White House. Thus, this study asks:

RQ1: Did the political affiliation of guests on the broadcast Sunday talk shows change between the first two years of the Obama and the first two years of the Trump administrations?

RQ2: Did the type of guests being invited to speak on the Sunday talk show programs change between the two presidencies?

The Sunday broadcast talk shows have been a place for Americans to receive straightforward news about what has happened in the previous week of politics. This study seeks to find if this tradition has been kept during the modern era of politics, given Trump's brash nature of criticizing the media and political insiders.

III. Methods

This study employed a content analysis of 192 television transcripts of four Sunday morning show programs using resources such as the network's websites as well as third-party transcript services. This study chose to look at the four broadcast Sunday talk shows: "Meet the Press," "This Week," "Face the Nation" and "Fox News Sunday." While several cable channels and media groups also have their own Sunday morning programs, their reach and reputation for impartiality are not as strong as these broadcast programs.

Each program has its own format, but all of them typically begin with newsworthy guests on the show before bringing in either a panel of partisan spokespeople, journalists, or a combination of both. This was true for all the Sunday shows except for CBS in 2009 and 2010. While all the other networks had a one-hour Sunday morning political program, “Face the Nation” with Bob Schieffer had a 30-minute broadcast. During those same years, ABC’s “This Week” was hosted by a combination of George Stephanopoulos, Jake Tapper and Christiane Amanpour. NBC’s “Meet the Press” was hosted by David Gregory, and “Fox News Sunday” was hosted by Chris Wallace. In 2017, “Face the Nation” was anchored by John Dickerson before Margaret Brennan took over in February 2018. George Stephanopoulos and Martha Raddatz shared moderating duties of “This Week” during the Trump era. At “Meet the Press,” Chuck Todd was the host from 2017 to 2018, and the reign of Chris Wallace continued on “Fox News Sunday.”

The first two years of both administrations were studied because one party controlled the House, Senate and Presidency – the Democrats in 2009 and 2010, and the Republicans in 2017 and 2018. For each Sunday program, a sample of 24 shows were collected during the first two years of the Obama administration, and an additional 24 were collected during the first two years of the Trump administration. The sample was collected systematically, pulling the transcripts from the fourth Sunday of every month. In the case that a Sunday show was cancelled for the fourth Sunday, samplers would pull data from the third Sunday of the month. Over the course of this study, this was only documented once, with “Meet the Press” cancelling its July 23, 2017 program.

During 2009 and 2010, both CBS and NBC had readily available transcripts of their respective programs on their website. Transcripts from “Fox News Sunday” and ABC’s “This Week” during this period were found on third-party transcript services NewsBank and LexusUni. Between 2017 and 2018, all transcripts were able to be obtained through the respective network’s website.

When analyzing a transcript, a single coder would scan for all the different individuals who were interviewed on the program. For the purposes of this study, individuals who were featured in soundbites or who filed news reports for the program did not count as a guest. Journalists who would respond to a series of questions from the moderator would count as a guest on the show. For guests that did appear, the date, the program they appeared on, their name, their job category and their political leanings were all coded into a Google Sheet. The spreadsheets were separated by the yearly tabs of 2009, 2010, 2017 and 2018. Guests would be assigned one of 41 job categories based off of several factors, including how the program introduced them and their previous career experience based on additional research. This was similarly done when seeking a guest’s political affiliation. Guests would be assigned a label of Republican, Democrat, Independent or N/A. The N/A category was typically reserved for journalists and general citizens. Background research of these guests included previous work history and previous media interviews to discover common talking points and tones. This was done for every appearance to ensure that there were no major career changes after their prior appearance on a Sunday program. Examples of categories included terms such as U.S. Senator, administration official, television journalist, among others.

IV. Findings

All of the data were calculated in percentages in order to accurately analyze the proportion of guests on each program, given that CBS’s “Face The Nation” was the only 30-minute Sunday program during the Obama administration. For the first two years of the Obama and Trump administrations, this study examined a total of 533 and 737 guest appearances, respectively, from the four programs. Between the two administrations, all Sunday programs hosted more guests in the Trump administration, except “Fox News Sunday,” as seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Total guests

	NBC's "Meet the Press"	CBS's "Face the Nation"	ABC's "This Week"	"Fox News Sunday"	Total
Obama Administration	136	81*	147	169	533
Trump Administration	179	200	202	157	737
Total	313	281	349	325	1,268

Party affiliation among guests of the four major talk shows during the Obama administration can be found in Figure 1. Both NBC's "Meet the Press" and CBS's "Face the Nation" hosted more Democrats than Republicans during the Obama administration. For "This Week" and "Fox News Sunday," this was reversed with Republicans appearing more frequently than Democrats during the Obama administration. Interestingly, the most frequent guests on ABC's "This Week" were those who had no party affiliation. People who affiliated as Independent made up a very small portion of the total guests on the Sunday programs.

Proportion of Party Affiliated Guests on the Sunday Shows during Obama's First Two Years

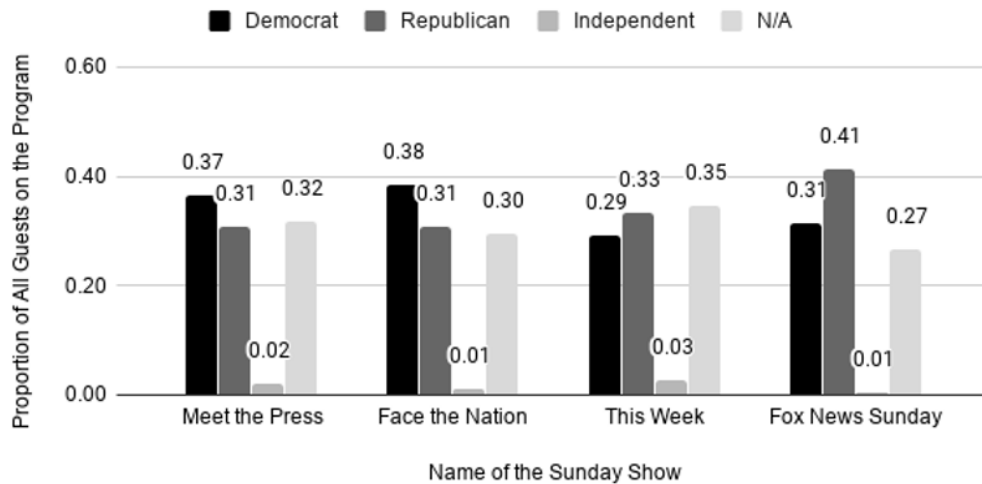


Figure 1.

As seen in Figure 2, during the first two years of the Trump presidency, all of the shows clearly had more Republican guests than Democrats. Furthermore, during the Trump administration, all shows saw an increased number of people who classified themselves as Independents. It should also be noted that the difference in proportion between Republican and Democrat guests also increased in every show. Notably, "Fox News Sunday" went from having 10% more Republican guests than Democrat guests during the first two years of the Obama administration, to 26% more Republicans during the first two years of the Trump Administration.

Proportion of Party Affiliated Guests on the Sunday Shows during Trump's First Two Years

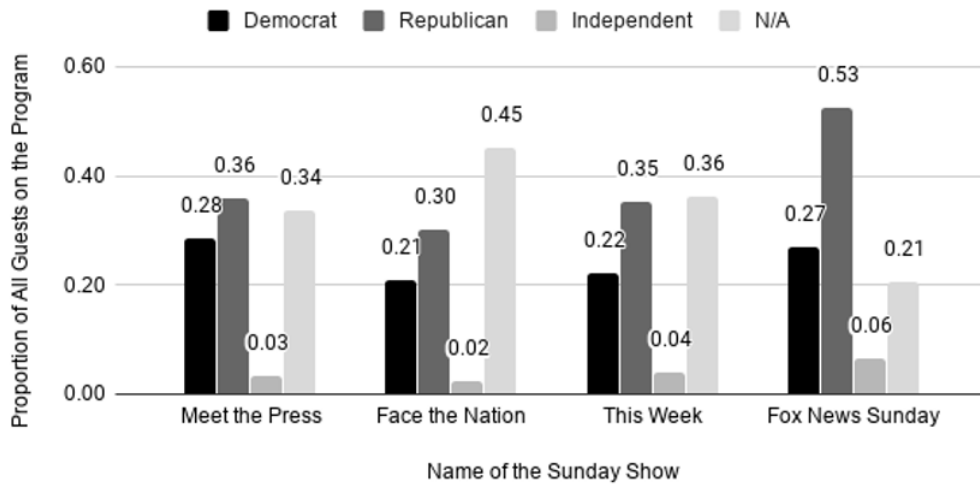


Figure 2.

When the first two years of both presidents are combined, Figure 3 shows that overall, the Sunday shows featured more Republican guests than Democrats. CBS's "Face the Nation" and ABC's "This Week" actually featured more non-affiliated guests than those from a single party.

Combined Proportion of Party Affiliated Guests During the First Two Years of the Obama and Trump Administrations

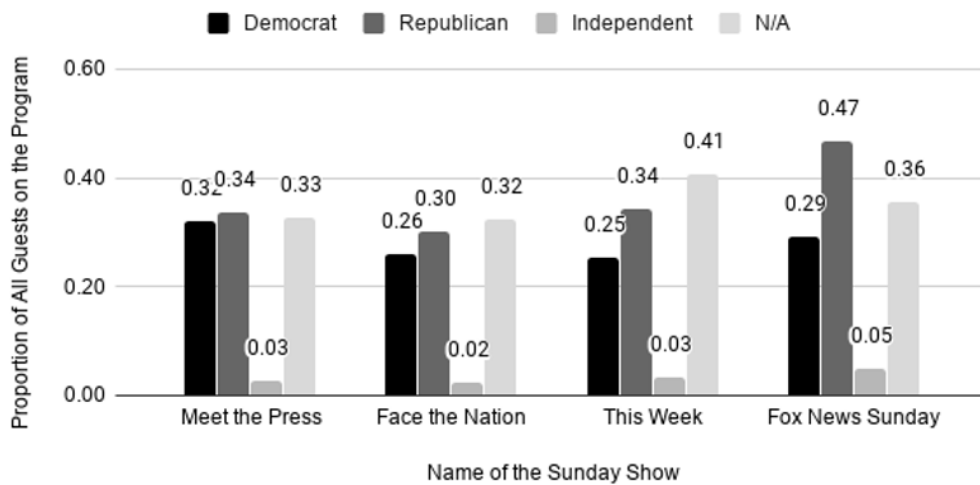


Figure 3.

In terms of the professions of guests, U.S. Senators seemed to be the favorite appearing on all of the Sunday shows a total of 191 times between the two administrations, as seen in Figure 4. The next most frequent guests were TV/Radio journalists other than the host (168), followed by partisan personalities (117).

Number of Sunday Show Appearances by Guest Type

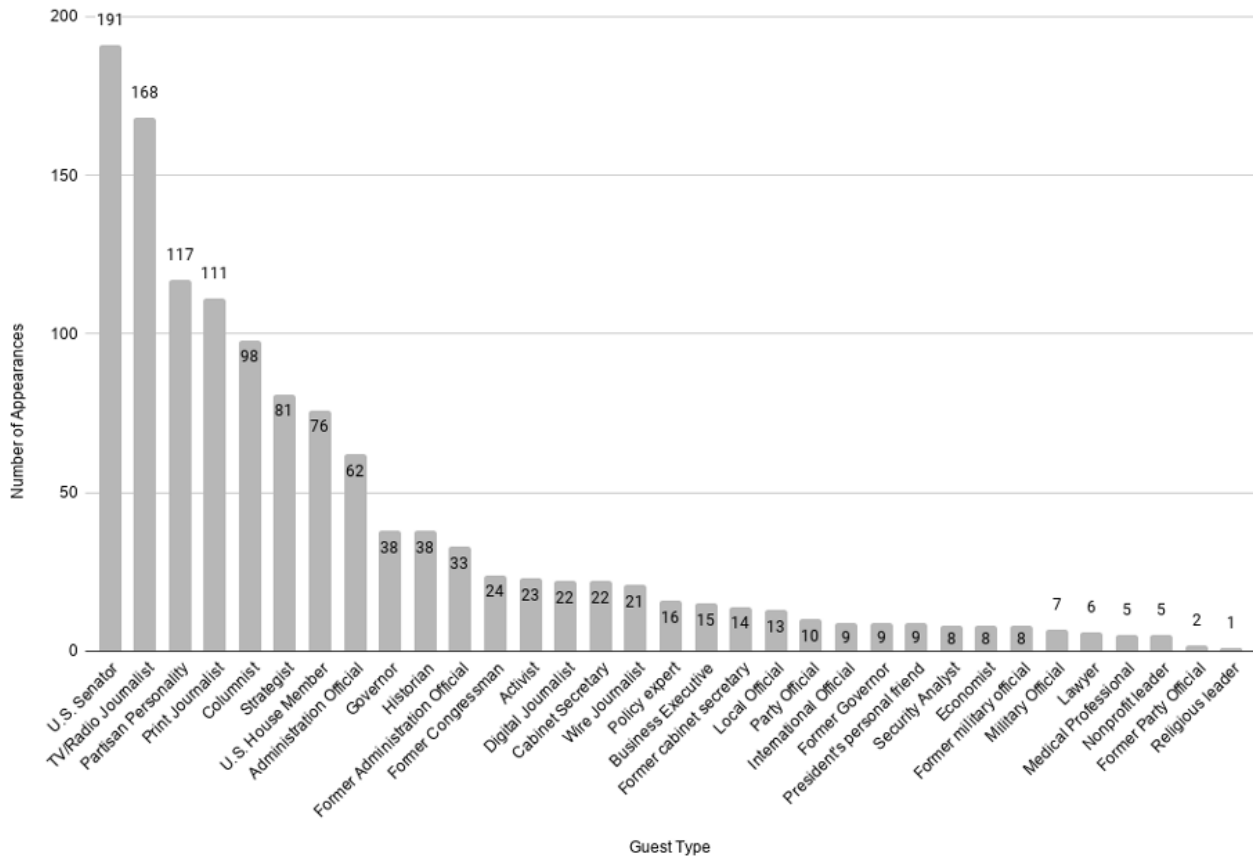


Figure 4.

There also were interesting differences in the types of guests who appeared on the Sunday talk shows between the first two years of the Obama administration and the first two years of the Trump administration. As seen in Figure 5, between the two presidencies, the proportion of state governors and radio journalists declined during the Trump presidency, while the number of policy experts, activists, digital journalists, strategists and print journalists increased during the period. Cumulatively, the number of overall non-partisan journalists also saw a significant increase, making up 29% of all the guests on the Sunday talk shows during the first two years of the Trump administration.

Differences in Types of Guests Between the First Two Years of Obama and Trump's Presidency

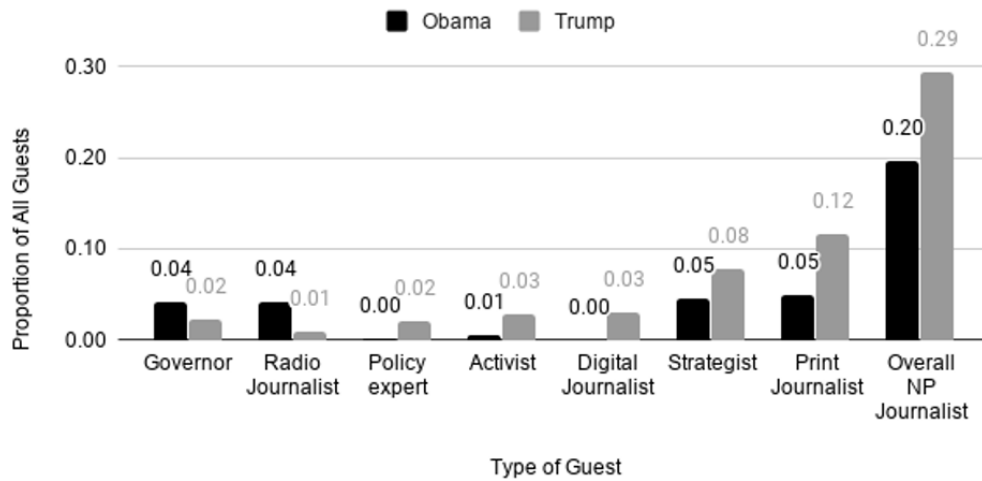


Figure 5.

Each Sunday show also saw a significant difference in guests between the two administrations. During the Trump administration, “Meet the Press” and “This Week” had more strategists appear on the program, with the former having more partisan personalities and the latter seeing more television journalists and lawyers on. This is while “Face the Nation” and “Fox News Sunday” had fewer U.S. Senators as guests, with the latter also seeing a drop in the number of partisan journalists and radio journalists.

V. Discussion

This research set out to find the types of people appearing on the Sunday TV talk shows and the changes noted between the first two years of the Obama and Trump presidencies. In an age where political parties and ideals have become so divisive, it is important that objective news organizations continue to try to offer opinion from both sides of the aisle. Since Obama is a Democrat and Trump is a Republican, it would be assumed that there may be a slight difference of people invited on to the programs between the two administrations. In addition, it should be noted that the Presidency and control of the House and Senate were both under one party rule during the first two years of the Obama and Trump administrations. Even though this was the case for Obama’s first two years in office, only two programs NBC’s “Meet the Press” and CBS’s “Face the Nation” favored the president’s party in terms of guests. Also, during this period, there was only a marginal gap between the proportion of Democrat and Republican guests on the programs. Instead of having a proportional difference of 4% and 10% between Democrats and Republicans during Obama’s first two years in office, this difference increased to between 8% and 26% during the Trump administration. When compiling the affiliations of guests between the first two years of the Obama and Trump administrations, NBC “Meet the Press” seems to be the most balanced by far, with 32% of their guests being Democrat and 34% of their guests being Republican.

There are several potential reasons for why the number of Republican guests outnumbered the number of Democratic guests by such a large margin during Trump’s administration. As previously noted, Trump’s brash style would often change the news cycle at the last minute, and often force bookers of the Sunday shows to cancel and re-book guests at the last minute. Partisans would argue that Trump would make numerous decisions on a whim. This includes the fact that Trump had more turnover among top officials during his first two years as president than any other president in the modern political era (Dunn Tenpas, 2020). Republican officials could have appeared on the Sunday shows in higher frequency in an effort to try and defend the president’s actions.

The political affiliation of guests between the first two years of the Obama and Trump administrations was strikingly different. When combined, there is a general favorability for Republican guests, but the proportion of Republican guests grew significantly larger during the Trump administration.

In terms of guest appearances, there were several differences between the two administrations. Some of these can be attributed to the advancement of technology, while others can be attributed to a guest's relevance to the news cycle. For example, the significant increase in digital journalists, such as those from Axios and FiveThirtyEight, appearing on the Sunday talk shows can be attributed to technological advancements. The decline of radio news may be why the number of appearances by radio journalists also decreased during this time. However, the number of print journalists appearing on the Sunday shows increased significantly between the Obama and Trump administrations. While this seems contrary to what is often heard about the "dying" newspaper industry, these publications are still proactively breaking stories coming out of Washington. In fact, their robust reporting has led to higher online traffic and subscriber growth (Spross, 2017). Another noticeable difference between the two administrations is the diminished presence of governors as talk show guests after Trump's election. With such a large focus on Trump's role in the federal government, it could be argued that the Sunday shows have devoted less time to state issues. It is interesting to note there are more lawyers on the programs since Trump's election, to discuss the legality of actions in Washington. There are also more of the president's personal friends who discuss Trump's governing style and thought process.

As this research has shown, Fox News is more conservative with the types of guests they feature. Interestingly, there was increased appearances by cabinet secretaries and administration officials that appeared on "Fox News Sunday" during the Trump administration compared to the Obama administration. Early on in his presidency, Obama took Fox News head on, claiming the channel was just an outlet for Republican talking points. At one point, the Obama administration offered officials to all the Sunday shows, except Fox News Sunday (Folkenflik, 2009).

VI. Conclusion

This study aimed to learn more about the evolving role of the Sunday TV shows in the age of increased partisan politics in media. Specifically, this study looks at the political biases and sources of information that these Sunday talk shows are providing to their viewers. This study concludes that cumulatively the Sunday shows hosted more Republican guests during the two administrations. In addition, this study found that there were more guests to provide insight during the first two years of the Trump presidency compared to the Obama presidency. This was seen through the increased appearances of journalists covering the federal government as well as the increased presences of personal friends of the president on the programs. This came at the sacrifice of the appearance of governors and several other key political players.

Just like any study, there are a few limitations that could be further investigated. This study did not take in to account airtime given to each guest. For example, some guests were invited on for the entire program, while others only received a minute of speaking time. Furthermore, this study takes a look at the guests who ultimately appeared on the program. It does not have any data to conclude what potential guests each program contacted for an appearance. Finally, a further study could potentially align appearances of certain individuals with domestic and world events occurring that would provide sound reason and expertise for inviting them on the program.

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