# Social Issues & Entertainment Preferences

Participants were asked to select the three most and least important topics in the US today from a list of 19 topics.[31] The chart below shows the five selected most important overall, with the relative frequencies of each group.

How Americans Rank Social Issues

Overall, health care/insurance is the number one concern Americans shared (45%) trailed at some distance by terrorism/security (28%) and Social Security (24%). The healthcare ranking was in part driven by the Blues, as Purples and Reds were more likely to rank terrorism/security as their top concern, with health care second. Environment and education/schools were the second and third most frequently selected by Blues; while Purples and Reds chose them far less frequently. Purples were more likely to select crime/violence among their most important issues than other groups, while immigration was selected much more frequently by Reds.

RANKING OF SOCIAL ISSUES
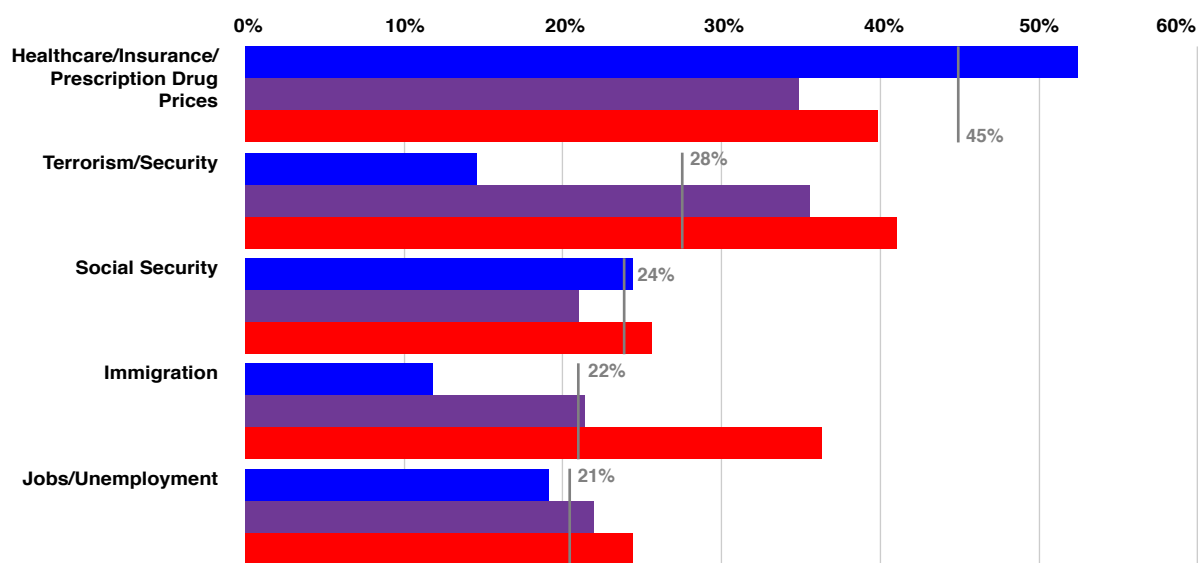
On average, health care was selected as the most important issue to Americans, a result driven by Blues. Purples and Reds more frequently selected security and terrorism as most important.

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31   See Appendix B for full list of all Social and Political Issues.

Social Justice Issues

Despite some support from Blues, social justice issues related to race, gender and sexual discrimination were not priority issues for Americans. In fact, a majority of Reds ranked these issues at the very bottom of their priority lists, and Purples were aligned more closely with Reds than Blues in their lack of interest in these topics. As for least important issues, Americans most frequently selected LGBTQ+ rights (41%) overall, followed by gender equality (30%) and utility rates/gas prices (29%). Reds and Purples identified LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality as their least important issues far more frequently than Blues, who instead selected utility rates and morality/values. Reds were also the most likely to identify race relations/discrimination as least important to them.

> "Despite some support from Blues, social justice issues related to race, gender and sexual discrimination were not priority issues for Americans."

For those working in the social justice media space, this finding has serious implications: instead of focusing chiefly on the best methods to harness media storytelling to shift social norms, activists also need to convince Americans that social justice issues are actually important. This may mean placing more emphasis on raising awareness of discrimination and its profound social impact as opposed to proposing solutions to things that Americans don't consider pressing problems. Further research should be conducted to discover whether the chief reason these issues appear at the bottom of American priority lists is that most Americans are more aware of the progress that has been made against race, gender and sexual discrimination and less aware of continuing inequities and their effects.

Patterns of Viewership

We wondered whether we could detect any unique viewing patterns common among those who held more positive vs. more negative attitudes toward social justice topics.[32] Focusing on American attitudes toward three key social justice topics – immigration, gender equality and race relations/discrimination – we discovered distinct patterns of TV viewership.

Immigration: Those who believe immigrants want to work for a better life are more likely to watch *Saturday Night Live, The Tonight Show, Modern Family, Game of Thrones* and *The Daily Show*. Those who believe immigrants want to be handed a better life are more likely to watch *Duck Dynasty*. Regardless of their view of immigrants' motivations, those who believe immigration is among the top three most important issues selected from our list of 19 had a much greater propensity to select *The Walking Dead* as their best liked show.[33]

Gender equality: Viewership of *Saturday Night Live* distinguishes those who believe men and women should share parental and household duties equally. This group is also significantly more likely to watch NBC, CBS, HGTV and MSNBC. Those who believe a woman's primary responsibility is to her children and home were more likely to watch Fox News, CNN, ESPN and the History Channel. They were also significantly more likely to have been viewers of four reality TV shows: *Wipeout, Ridiculousness, Cake Boss* and *So You Think You Can Dance*; two scripted shows, *The Walking Dead* and *Adventure Time,* and the music video show *106 & Park*.

Race Relations/Discrimination: Respondents who considered race among their most important issues were more likely to say that their favorite shows were *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, Orange is the New Black, Scandal* and *Fast N' Loud*, a reality show about refurbishing old cars. Respondents who ranked race among their least important issues preferred *NCIS, The Big Bang Theory, The Walking Dead* and *Law & Order: SVU*. For social change activists, these findings can be practically applied. For example, if a group working towards non-discrimination wanted to "rally the troops," they should seek out audiences who care about this issue, such as those who watch *The Daily Show*. Chances are these messages would not broaden awareness, though, as this group already cares about race issues. Nevertheless, activists could remind audiences to discuss these issues with friends and family members, and help to galvanize core supporters. If that same group wanted to reach people who rank non-discrimination among their least important concerns, then vaulting the ideological divide and getting a race relations storyline into an episode of *NCIS*, which attracts an audience cold about your issue, could increase awareness.
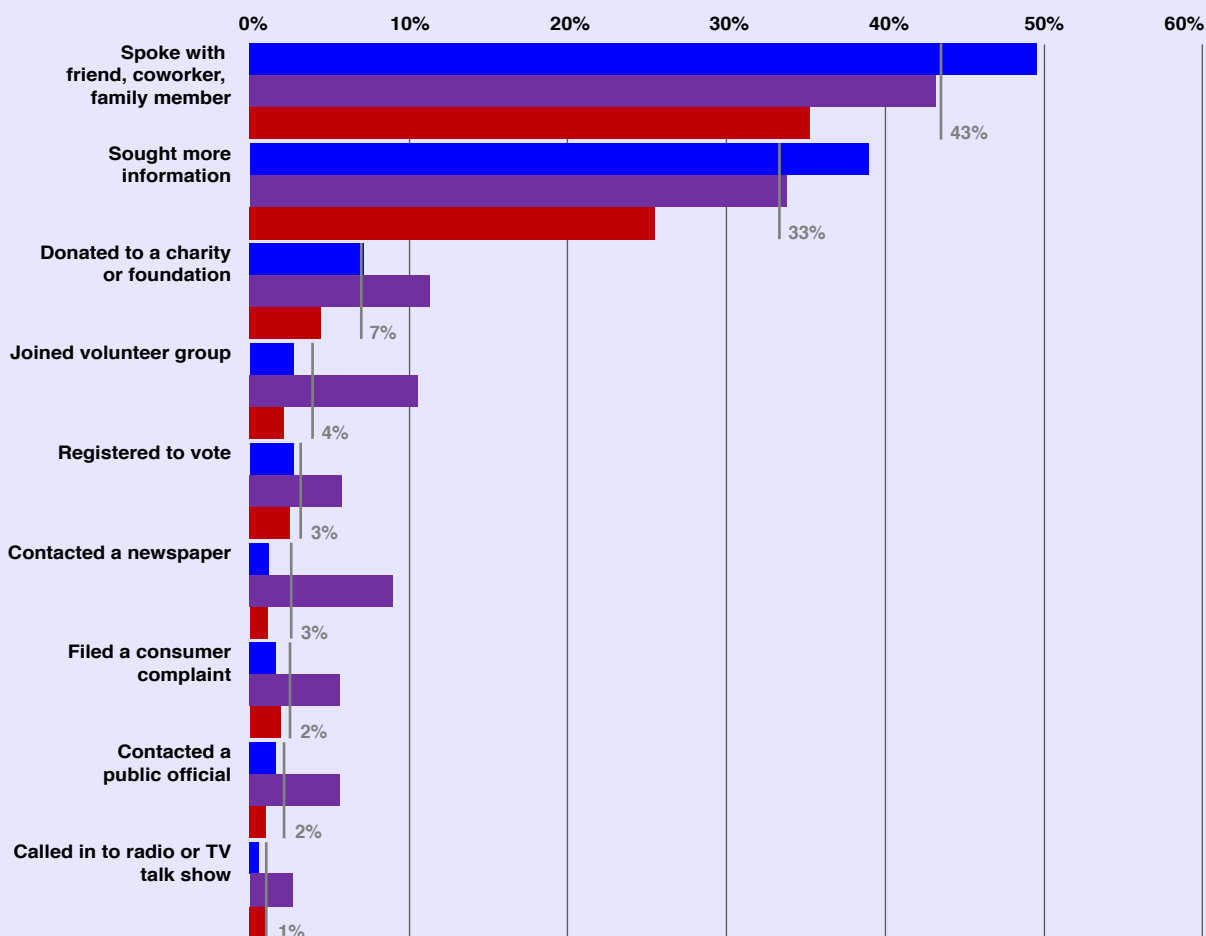
Do Viewers Take Action?

Over half (59%) of the respondents said they had taken some action based on something they had learned from a fictional movie or TV show. These actions included having conversations with friends, family and co-workers, a crucial step toward socializing new ideas that can lead to broader cultural shifts. These are a clear sign of social engagement, which requires taking a position and using critical thinking to explore the relevance and meaning of a story. Fictional stories and characters, in particular, provide a safe place to explore unfamiliar issues or viewpoints and contemplate new ideas about how the world works, and how it might work in the future.

Overall, one third of Americans said that they had sought more information about an issue after encountering it in a fictional story, demonstrating the porous boundary between fiction and fact. The ability to focus mass attention may be mass media's superpower: whether it intends to or not, mainstream

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32   Comparisons in this section were made on subsets of the data: Viewing preferences of those who ranked each of these issues among either their three most important or three least important issues.

33   Donald Trump's Presidential campaign also discovered this association, as reported in Bertoni, S. (2016, November 23). Exclusive Interview: How Jared Kushner Won Trump The White House. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/stevenbertoni/2016/11/22/exclusive-interview-how-jared-kushner-won-trump-the-white-house/#10452fc13af6

ACTION TAKEN AFTER WATCHING FICTIONAL MOVIE OR TV SHOW

Spoke with friend, coworker, family member — 43%

Sought more information — 33%

Donated to a charity or foundation — 7%

Joined volunteer group — 4%

Registered to vote — 3%

Contacted a newspaper — 3%

Filed a consumer complaint — 2%

Contacted a public official — 2%

Called in to radio or TV talk show — 1%

Viewers were most likely to talk with a friend or seek additional information. While far fewer called a politician, consumer group or newspaper, Purples were always more likely to do so.

media sets de facto agendas as it produces and disseminates content. For example, it is unlikely that the viewers who tuned into the "Witness" episode of *Law & Order: SVU* did so in order to learn about the plight of asylum seekers, but a Lear Center study found that viewers increased their knowledge about US immigration and asylum policies, as well as learning about conflict minerals.[34]

While Blues are more likely to report that they had spoken to someone or sought more information, Purples were far more likely than the other groups to have taken higher level actions, including making donations to charity, volunteering, contacting newspapers and public officials, and registering to vote - apparent signs that they not only learn about political and social issues from fictional entertainment they sometimes act on that information. In comparison, Reds were generally the least likely to say that they had taken action.

Other Lear Center research has found that entertainment programming is particularly effective at shifting attitudes and even overcoming ideological bias. In a 2017 study of USA's popular scripted series *Royal Pains*, we discovered that viewers of an episode about a transgender teen were more likely to have supportive attitudes toward transgender people and policies than *Royal Pains* viewers who had not seen that episode. We also found that there was a cumulative effect: the more entertainment storylines about transgender issues that viewers had seen, the more supportive their attitudes were. Notably, exposure to news stories

34   Murphy, S.T., Hether, H.J., Felt, L.J., & Buffington, S.C. (2012). Public Diplomacy in Prime Time: Exploring the Potential of Entertainment Education in International Public Diplomacy. American Journal of Media Psychology, 5, 5-32.

about transgender people and issues had no effect. The most compelling finding, however, was that exposure to two entertainment storylines actually decreased the negative effect of ideological bias by half: that is, politically conservative viewers who saw multiple shows featuring transgender characters had more positive attitudes toward trans people than those who saw just one.[35]

Self-efficacy & Entertainment Consumption

Influential psychologist Albert Bandura has published studies since the 1970's demonstrating that people's sense of self-efficacy is affected by the media representations they encounter: when people see individuals like themselves succeeding at something, they are more likely to believe that they can do it, too.[36] This research provides the evidence base for efforts to diversify demographic representations in mainstream media.

"The wish-fulfillment fantasies on display in *Once Upon a Time* may be more appealing to people who have modest ideas about their ability to make a difference on a national level."

In this survey, we included a set of questions that gauge each respondent's sense of self-efficacy by asking them to describe their degree of confidence in their ability "to make a difference" in their home, local community, city, country and in other countries.[37] Focusing on the ideological groups, we discovered that all groups were equally confident about their self-efficacy within their homes, but Purples exhibited much higher levels of self-confidence in every other geographical sphere, particularly in the global context.

This finding appears to be in alignment with the fact that they were the most demographically diverse group — with the most Asians and Hispanics/Latinx in their ranks -- and the most likely to consume international news. Blues also consistently outpaced Reds in their sense of self-efficacy in every sphere except for the home.

CONFIDENCE YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE
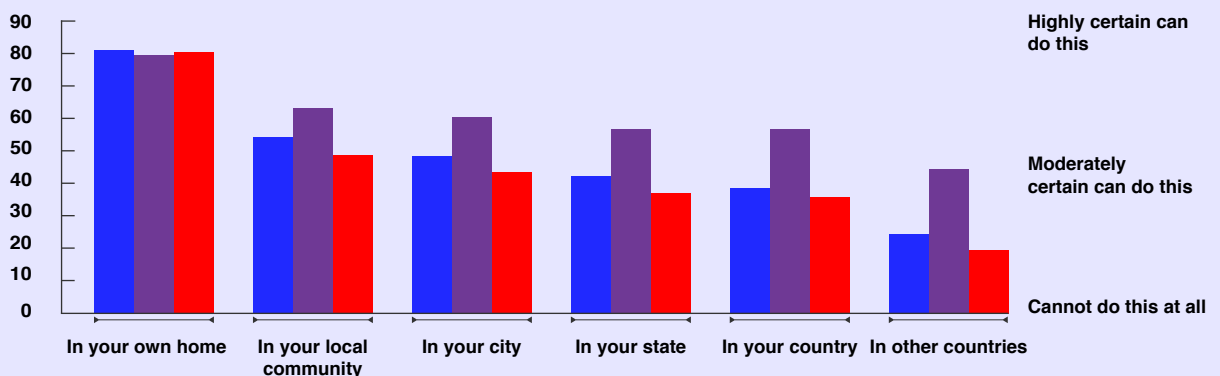
All groups tended to believe they could make a difference in their own homes, but Purples outpaced both groups in believing they could help change things elsewhere.

Setting aside the ideological groups, we also segmented all survey respondents based upon their level of self-efficacy in making a difference in their country. When we analyzed the entertainment preferences of

35   Gillig, TK., Rosenthal, E.L., Murphy, S.T., & Folb, K. L. (2017, August 2). More than a media moment: The influence of televised storylines on viewers' attitudes toward transgender people and policies. Sex Roles.

36   Bandura, A. (1986). Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

37   See Appendix C for list of Demographic and Psychographic items

these subgroups we discovered that many liked the same perennial favorites – including *NCIS, The Big Bang Theory* and *Criminal Minds* but there were some statistically significant differences, as well.

Respondents with high self-efficacy levels were more likely to be fans of *Empire, Pretty Little Liars* and *Law & Order: SVU*, while those with low self-efficacy said they enjoyed *Once Upon a Time, The First 48* and *Orange is the New Black*. Two of these shows were particularly polarizing: *Once Upon a Time* was ranked low among those with high efficacy and *Pretty Little Liars* was distinctly unpopular among those with low efficacy. One potential (tantalizing) explanation for this is that people with high self-confidence about their ability to affect the course of a nation are drawn to the type of Machiavellian storylines that typify *Pretty Little Liars* and *Empire*. The wish-fulfillment fantasies on display in *Once Upon a Time* may be more appealing to people who have modest ideas about their ability to make a difference on a national level.

> "Those with high self-efficacy respond well to messages that provide concrete information about how to get involved to work toward change."

Calls to Action

Strategists working for social change through pop culture should take into account levels of self-efficacy among priority audiences when tailoring messages. Generally, those with high self-efficacy respond well to messages that provide concrete information about how to get involved to work toward change.[38] Activists who are working on global social justice campaigns could, for instance, craft more intense calls to action (such as signing a petition, contacting a government representative or attending an event) when targeting Purples. Reds would likely be a harder group to incite to action around global issues, and so more local calls to action would probably be more successful. People with lower levels of self-efficacy may be better motivated to take action by stories that feature people like themselves making a real difference.[39] Knowing specific entertainment preferences among these subgroups (such as a predilection for *Once Upon a Time*) enables activists to make more informed decisions about which TV shows to approach with relevant initiatives and campaigns.

Purples, in particular, represent an ideal target group for activists hoping to leverage the power of entertainment for social change. Purples account for about one in five Americans – a giant audience segment in the current highly-fragmented media landscape. Given their voracious appetite for entertainment TV, Purples are easily reached through mainstream entertainment content, and several attributes of this group make them ideal for social change campaigns, including their high self-efficacy, their respect for the educational value of entertainment TV and their self-reported openness to learning about political and social issues from entertainment programming. As a swing group, the Purples appear to be the most ideologically fluid: their lack of rigid allegiance to a single political party may signal the kind of open-mindedness that social change activists require in order to move the needle in public sentiment toward social justice issues.

38   Bandura, A. (1977) Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. Psychological Review. 84(2), 191-215. DOI:10.1037/0033-295X.84.2.191 Accessed 3/15/19: http://culturalmeded.stanford.edu/pdf%20docs/Bandura1977%20SelfEfficacy%20for%20Behavioral%20Change.pdf

39   Bandura, A. (1982). Self-efficacy mechanism in human agency. American Psychologist, 37(2), 122-147. DOI:10.1037/0003-066X.37.2.122 Accessed 3/15/19: https://www.uky.edu/~eushe2/Bandura/Bandura1982AP.pdf