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The Impact of Partisan Media on Individual Voting Habits

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BACKGROUND

According to Dilliplane's research on the impact of partisan news on voting habits, we used the following concepts to shape our research, focusing primarily on the concept of selective exposure:

The Theory of Selective vs. Diverse News Exposure

- Selective News Exposure is exposure to solely news sources that represent one political ideology
- Diverse News Exposure is exposure to a variety of news sources spanning a diverse range of political ideologies.

Partisan News Media's Three Possible Outcomes:

- Activation: Motivating undecided voters to switch back to a candidate from the party they traditionally support.
- Conversion: Causing partisans to vote for the candidate from the opposing political party.
- Reinforcement: Strengthening partisans' preference toward the candidate they already supported.

PURPOSE AND HYPOTHESIS

Hypothesis: Selective Exposure to partisan news sources causes moderate voters to adopt more partisan voting habits in national elections.

(I.e., Exposure to liberal/Democrat news outlets such as CNN and MSNBC would cause more Democrat voting habits and exposure to conservative/Republican news outlets would cause more Republican voting habits.

Our purpose in doing this research was to evaluate the role of the news media in shaping election outcomes. Political talking points classify the media as largely influential in determining individuals' voting habits., but data shows that this claim may prove to be inaccurate.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To evaluate the persuasive effect of the media on voting habits we used the following methods of measurement (applied across all 50 states):

1. A state's voting habits over time – measured across the 2012, 2016, and 2020 Presidential elections. We included data from all 50 states that showed the percentage of Democrat votes and the percentage of Republican votes in each election.
2. A state's most common news media source. We gathered this data using 2016 and 2020 Google Trends data and the Forbes 2012 Media Map. Google Trends data was gathered by identifying the news sources that were most often searched in each state.
3. The bias of the state's most common news media source(s). We used data from AllSides who evaluated the bias of media sources using a 5-point scale, ranking each media source as far Left (1), Left-leaning (2), Center (3), Right-leaning (4), and Right (5). (See Figure 1, 5, 6, 7)

In our graphs for showing voting changes for the three elections, we used the percentage of the vote that the Democratic Candidate received in each state. (See Figures 2, 3, and 4.)

RESULTS

- Much of the data does not show a clear correlation between partisan news media consumed and more partisan voting habits in national elections.
- Our data shows a few cases where an increased level of exposure to partisan news increases partisan voting. (Ex: West Virginia's main media sources were the Huffington Post in 2012 (62.3% Republican vote), Fox News in 2016 (67.9% Republican) and Fox News 2020 (68.6% Republican))
- However, this trend was not consistent enough to extrapolate the conclusion that partisan news exposure is the primary driving factor of more partisan voting habits.

CONCLUSIONS

- From our research, we conclude that exposure to partisan news sources has a negligible impact on voting habits. We anticipated seeing a strong correlation between selective exposure to partisan sources and more partisan voting habits, but no clear evidence supporting this conclusion could be drawn.
- Specifically, we noticed that many Republican voting states had left leaning news sources as their most popular source, as well as no right leaning sources at all for any state's most popular source.
- Our data show that the pervasive political refrain that partisan news coverage plays a significant role in determining the outcome of national elections is largely untrue.
- As our research is just concerned with the impact of partisan news media on presidential vote choice, it does not purport to draw any other conclusions about the nature of the news media or any other societal impacts partisan media may have.

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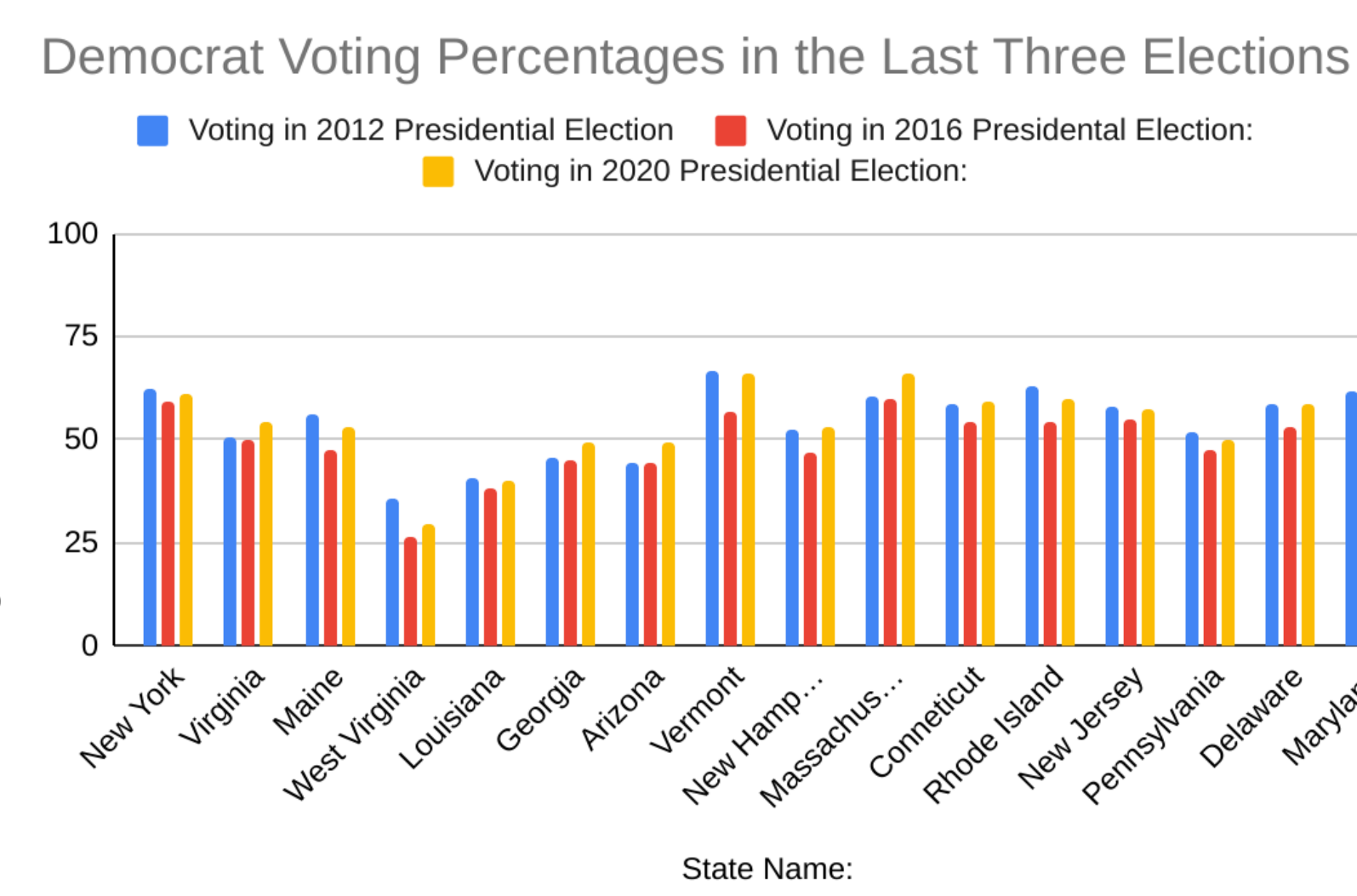


Figure 2

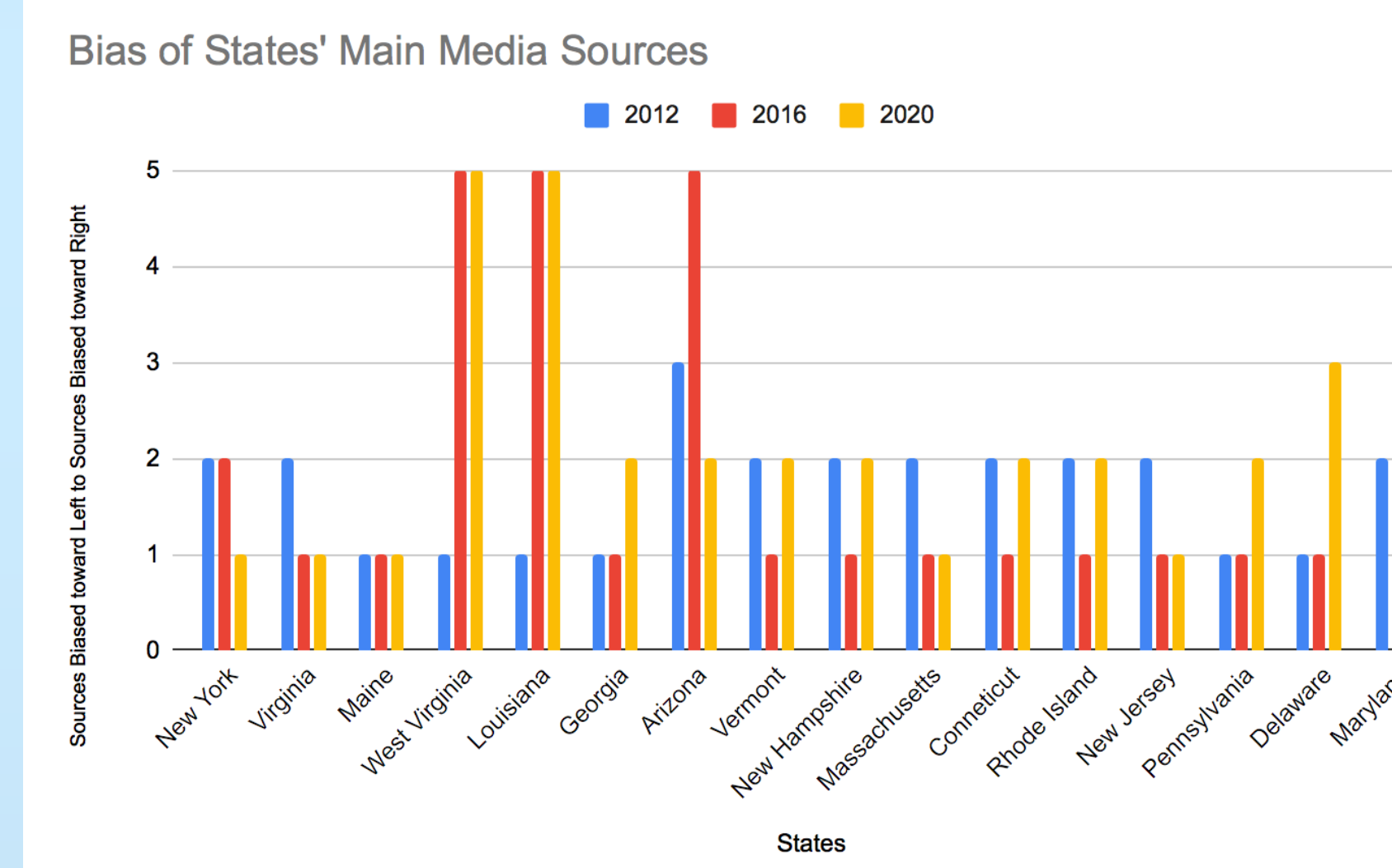


Figure 5

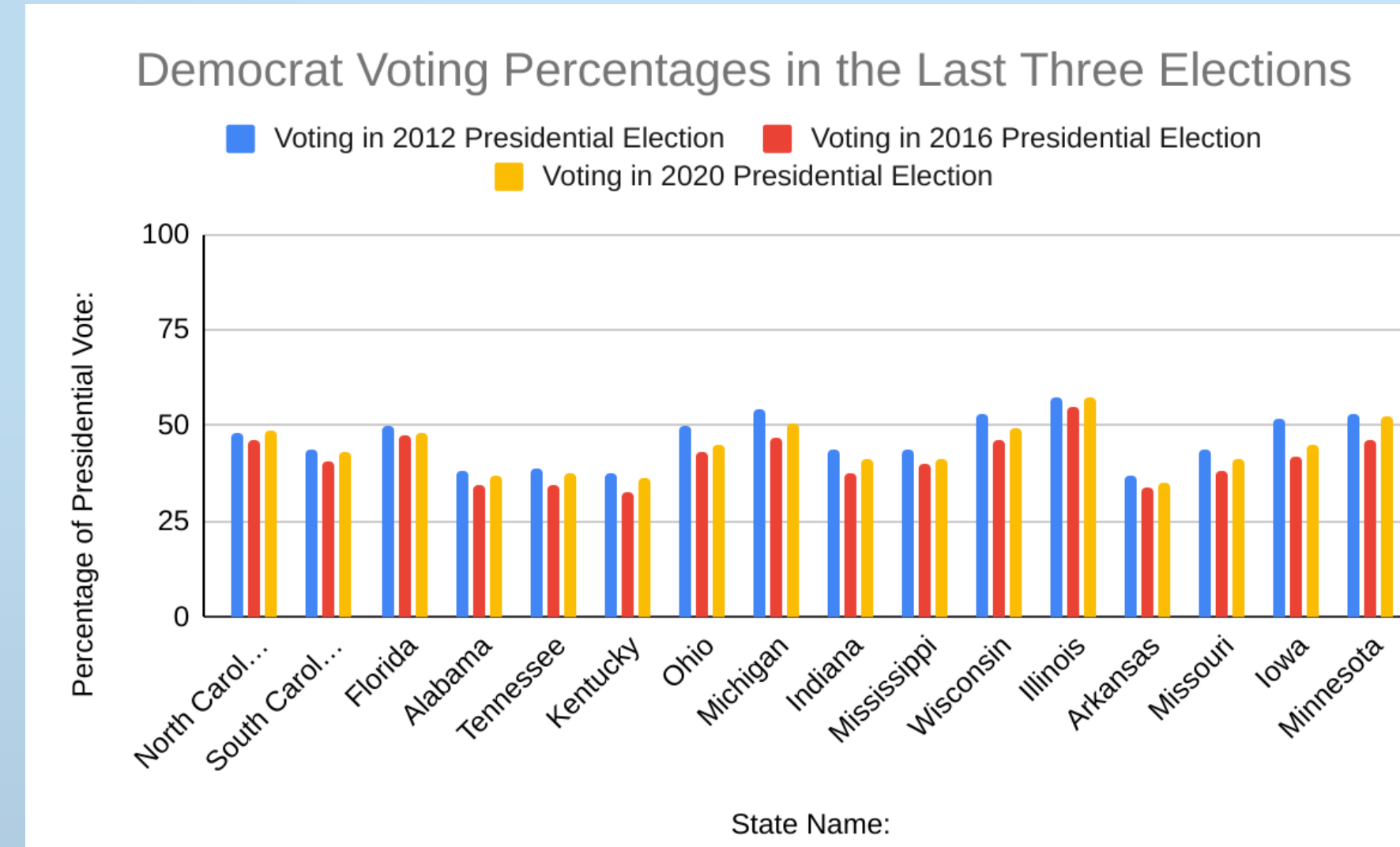


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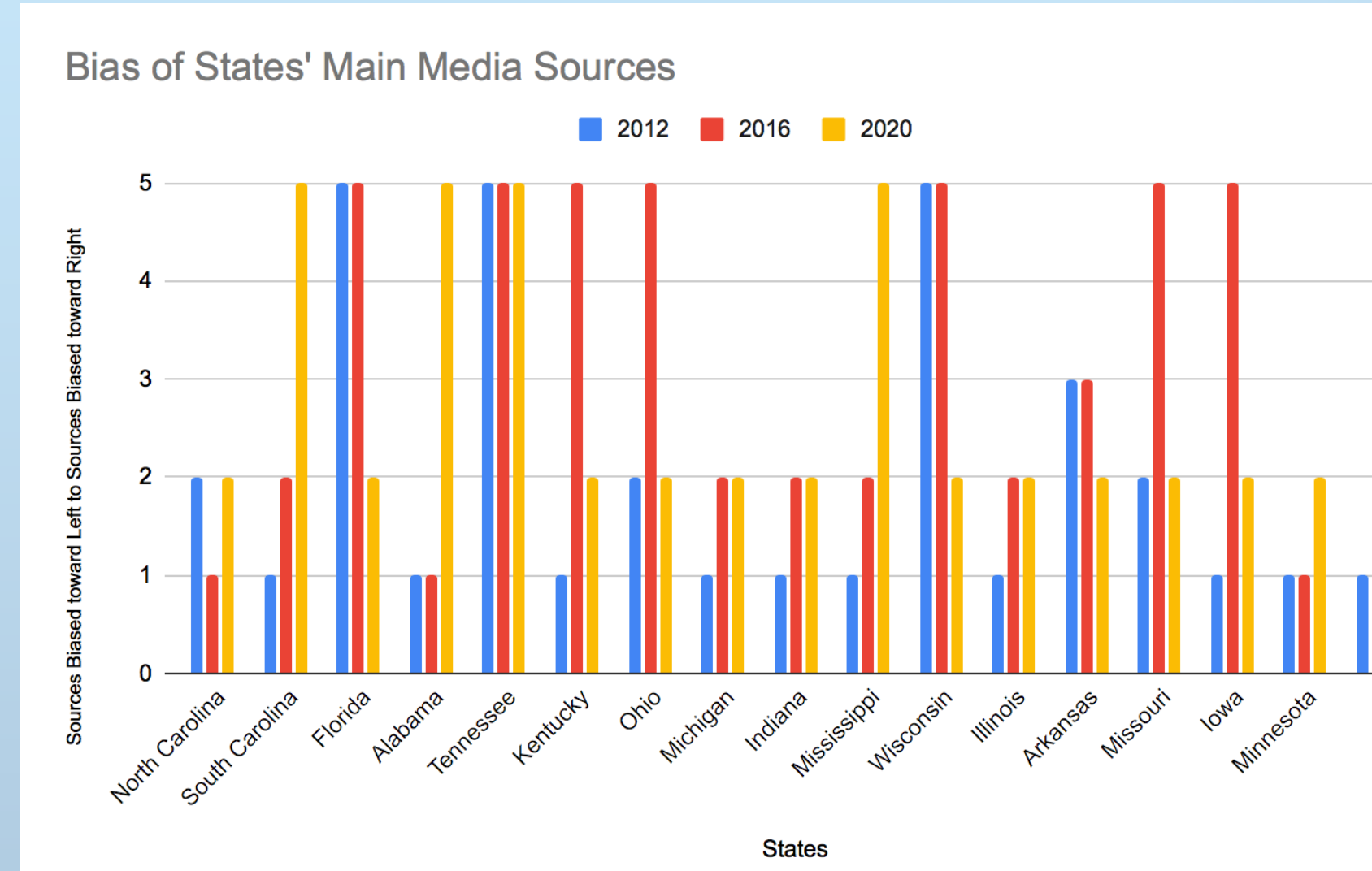


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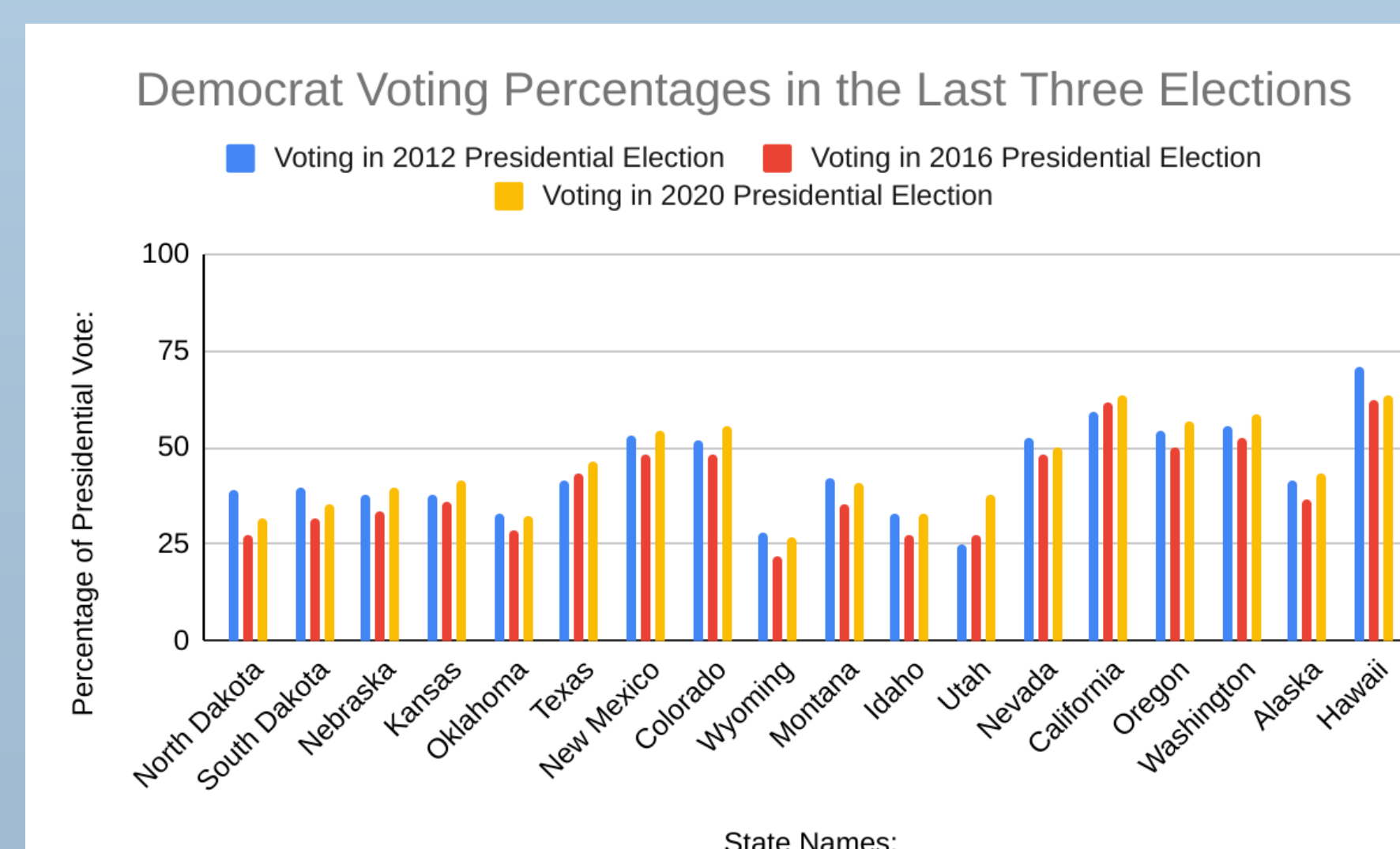


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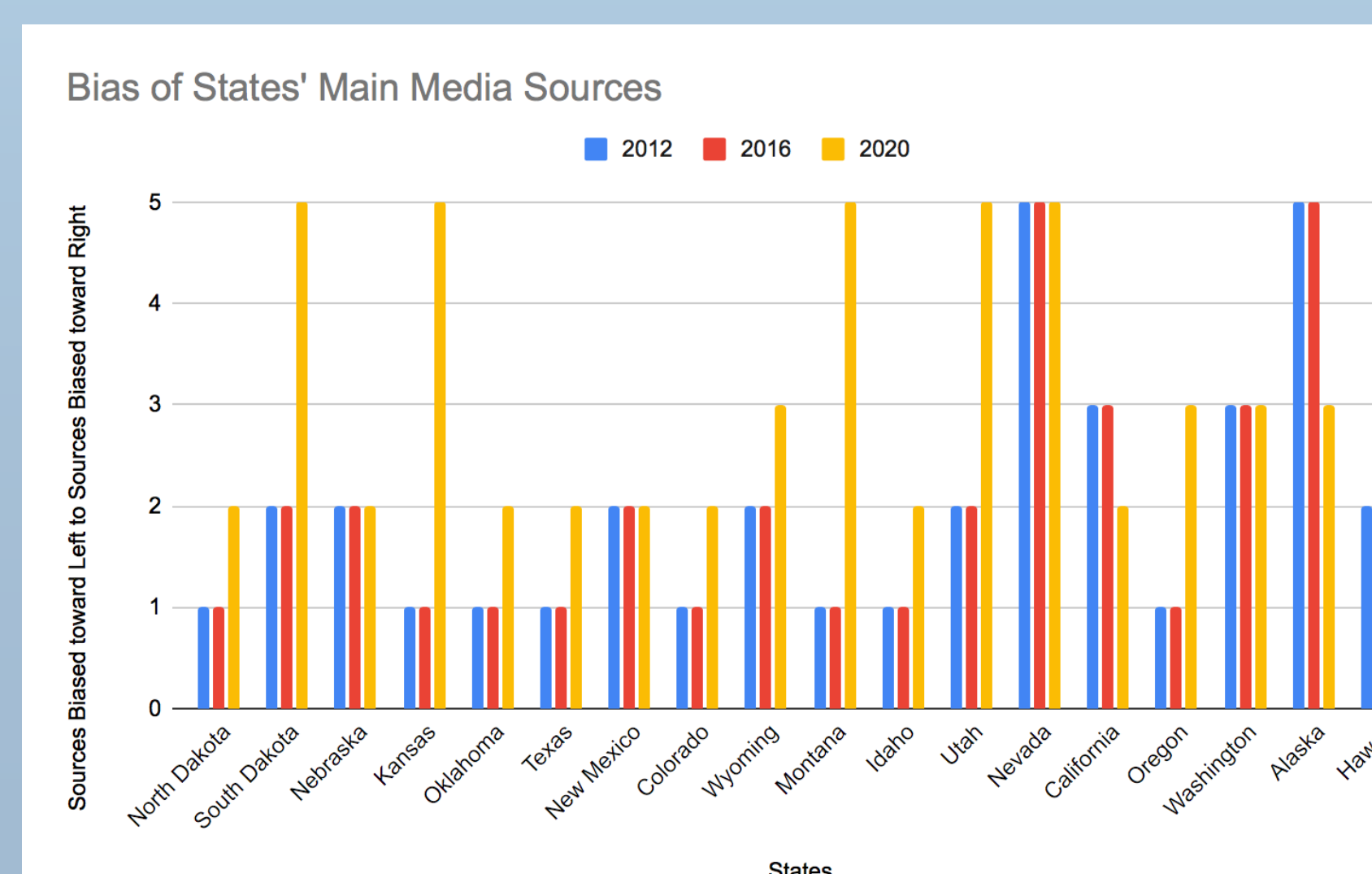


Figure 7

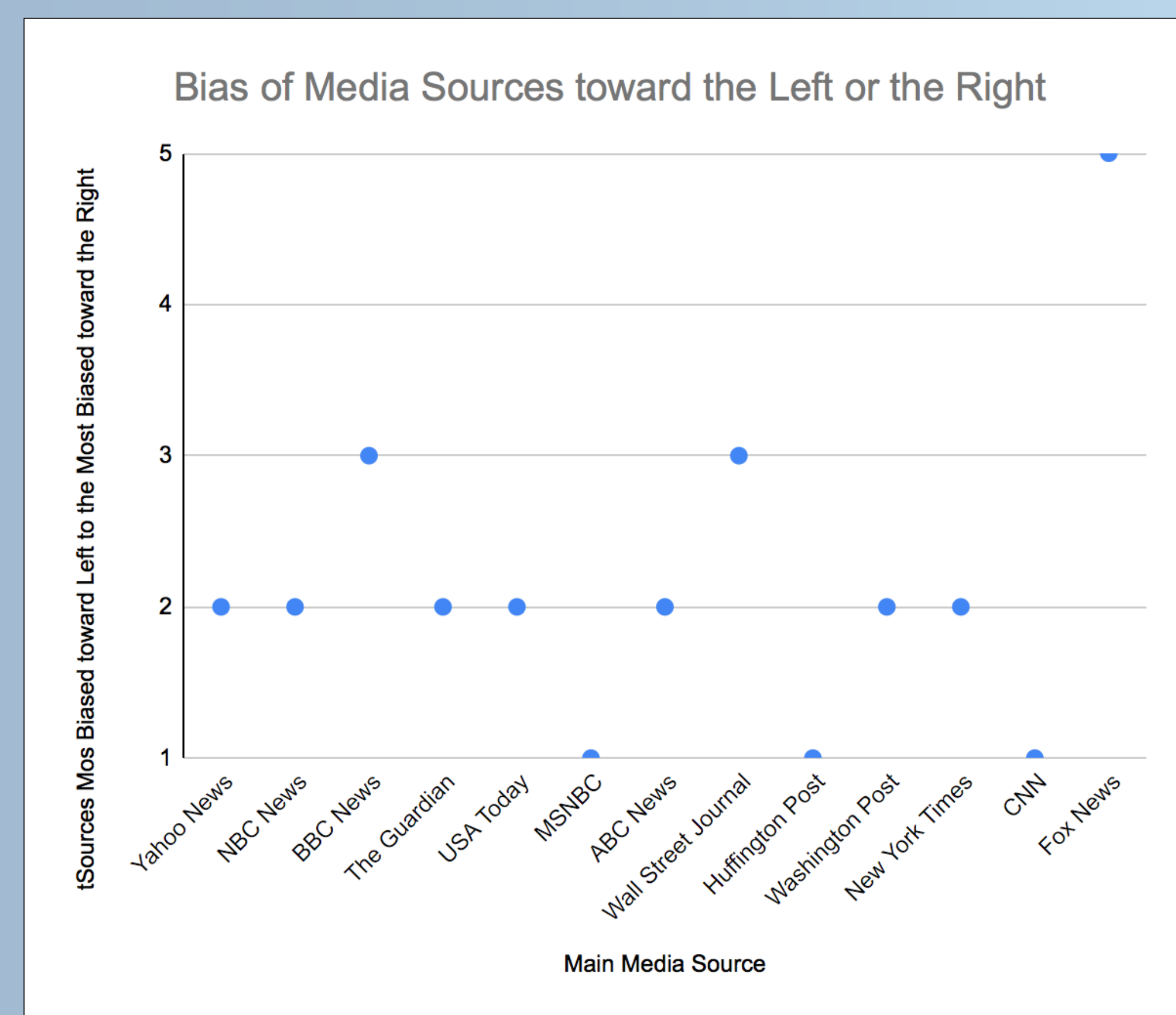


Figure 1