

Eric Schmidt's Programmed Media Bias in Google Search Results Changes Election Results

News

By Henry A. Brechter

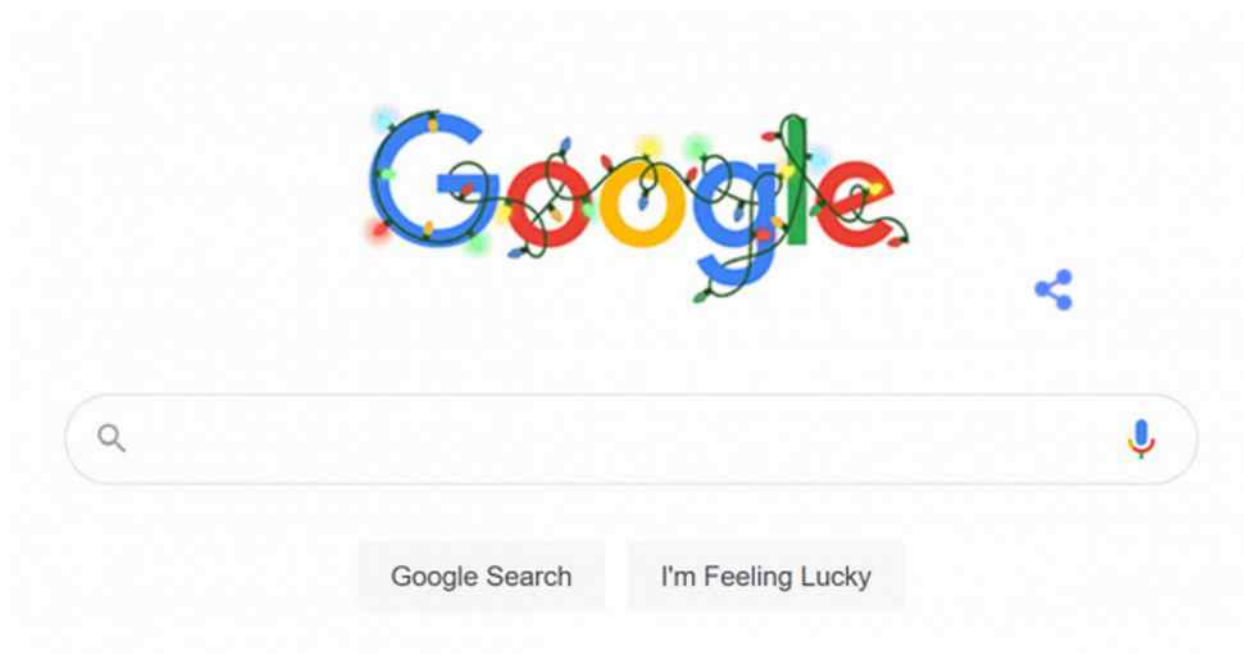
Tags:

Media Bias

Media industry

Google bias

Google News



A middle-schooler recently used [AllSides Media Bias Ratings](#) to dissect how bias in Google search results might influence people's political opinions.

We love when our audience uses our tools to investigate media bias. But it's even better to see a teenager apply those resources to researching a tool that holds power over what hundreds of millions of people see and read.

The AllSides team applauds San Diego, California middle-school student Agastya Sridharan for his research on biased search results that was [recently featured by Forbes](#). Writer Kevin Anderton described how Sridharan, 13, used AllSides Media Bias Ratings to analyze whether the order of Google search results for stories about political figures impacted a user's partisan opinions.

The student's findings were impressive, and spoke truth to something we at AllSides have long suspected. Anderton summarizes how Sridharan pulled off the research:

“... [Sridharan] came up with a two-survey system that asked people to choose between two candidates after reading their biographical information. Afterward, the volunteers were shown pages of search results that compared the candidates. **The idea was to find out if the order of the search results would change their opinion of the candidates.**

In the first survey, he used two fictional candidates — Ronald Bush and Julia Hillard — that were based on Donald Trump and Kamala Harris. **After a thorough interview in which 100 volunteers gave some demographic information, they were asked to read biographical information on each candidate and asked to form an opinion on who they would vote for in an upcoming election.** Afterward, each volunteer was shown Google search results for the phrase “Julia Hillard vs Ronald Bush.” The volunteers then were allowed to click on and read as many of the results as they wanted and **state whether or not this information had changed their vote.**

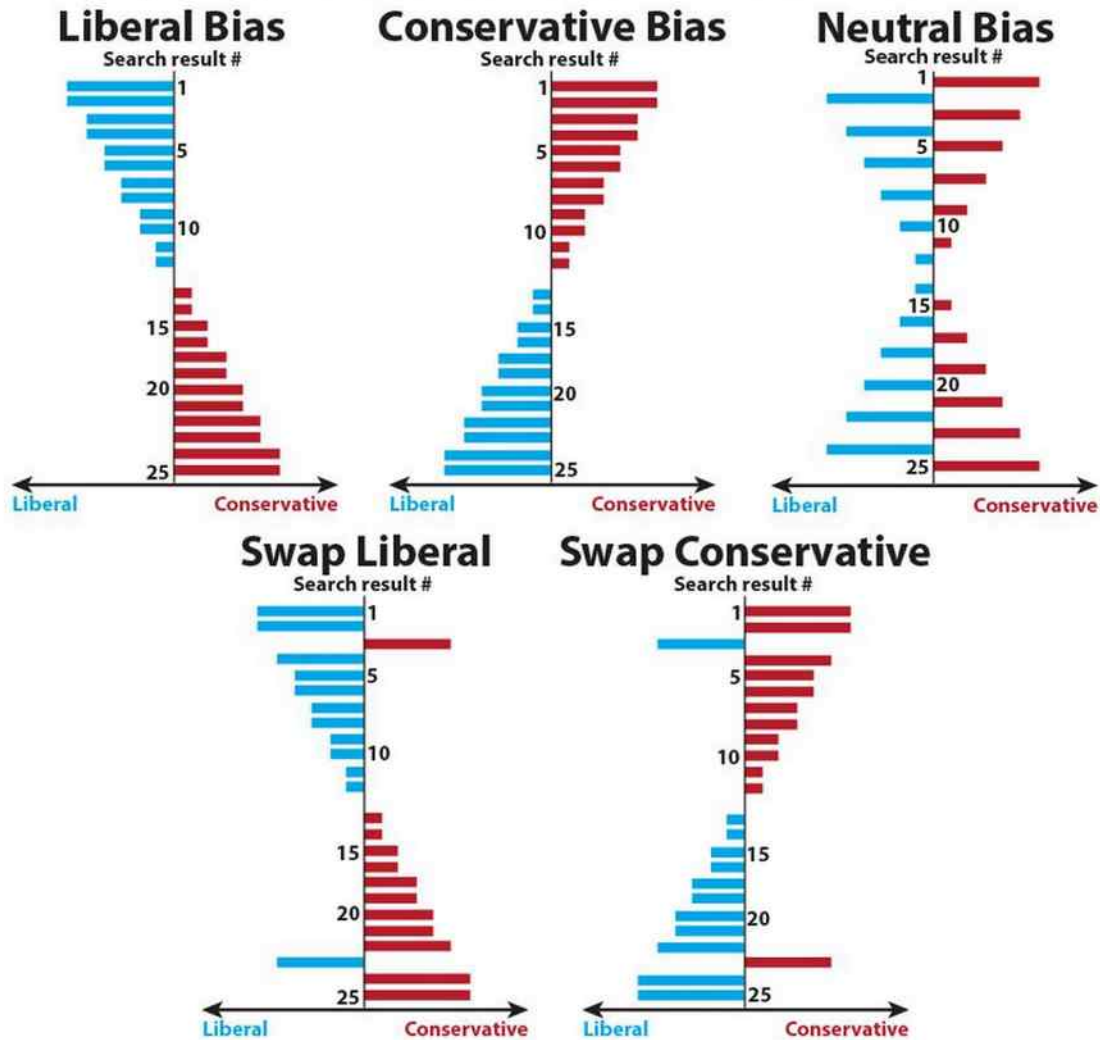
The search results were simulated using HTML to give the appearance of an actual Google search. **Each article was taken from allsides.com and altered only to show changes in the biographical information** (e.g. changing the name Donald Trump to Ronald Bush etc.)... the articles were carefully chosen to reflect liberal, conservative, and non-partisan viewpoints.”

Sridharan used 25 articles as search results — five each from Left, Lean Left, Center, Lean Right and Right-rated sources. Anderton continues:

“These results were then organized into five different sets. Each set ordered the results according to a different political bias. The first set put the liberal results first, the second put the conservative results first, and the third mixed liberal and conservative results equally. The fourth and fifth sets did something a little different — they took the liberal and conservative sets and switched the third and twenty-third results. The intention was to increase credibility by including a competing viewpoint. Each volunteer was shown only one of these sets. **The second survey used the same method but instead of the fictional candidates, the names Donald Trump and Joseph Biden were used.**”

Surveys sets with search result bias

Each survey set organized the search results to show a different bias



“After reading through the search results the volunteers and subjects were asked if they would like to change their vote. If they changed their vote in the direction of the search result bias, they were counted as having been influenced by the search results. To put it another way, if people were shown liberal search results first and then changed their vote to the liberal candidate they were counted as having been being influenced.”

Survey Results

The results of each survey show the percentages of people that changed their vote in the direction of the bias of the survey.

Survey 1 - Ronald Bush vs Julia Hillard			Survey 2 - Donald Trump vs Joseph Biden		
Survey Set Bias	Number of People	% who changed their vote	Survey Set Bias	Number of People	% who changed their vote
Liberal Bias	19	10.53%	Liberal Bias	51	19.61%
Conservative Bias	22	22.73%	Conservative Bias	62	17.74%
Neutral Bias	19	5.25%	Neutral Bias	50	8%
Swap Liberal	22	36.36%	Swap Liberal	50	66%
Swap Conservative	20	45.00%	Swap Conservative	50	74%

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Sridharan found that a notable number of people in the survey changed their vote based on the political bias of the search results they saw. The overall sample size was small and the number switching appeared to create extreme differences in responses, meaning the "real-life" percentages could likely be much lower. Still, the data supports the hypothesis that biased search results can change people's political attitudes and voting behavior when using a search engine like Google. While AllSides has not audited Google search results as a whole, we conducted an Aug. 2018 audit that [found Google News to have a Lean Left bias](#).

The order of results is critical. That's part of why we mix the order of left-center-right stories in our [balanced Headline Roundups](#) instead of always featuring the "left" article on the left-hand side. It's also why our news summaries and [Balanced Search tool](#) are superior to Google, which [often prioritizes several similar perspectives](#).

When we think of important societal figures, we usually think of adults. But it's America's youth, like Sridharan and millions of others, who will soon fill those roles. When they're empowered by balanced information online and receptive to diverse ideological perspectives, our country's future looks a lot brighter.

Henry A. Brechter is AllSides.com's Managing Editor. He has a Center bias.

This piece was reviewed by Daily News Specialist Joseph Ratliff (Lean Left) and Director of Marketing Julie Mastrine (Lean Right).

Google News media bias rating is Lean Left.

Google News is a website and app developed by Google that aggregates news from around the world. Its [AllSides Media Bias Rating™](#) is [Lean Left](#).

Launched in 2006, Google News is one of the most popular news aggregation tools in the world. It has been scrutinized for allegedly suppressing right-leaning and conservative news and opinions while magnifying those on the left. AllSides has done extensive research on Google News bias; our [39-page research report on Google News bias](#), released in October 2018, found **Google News is biased 65% toward Left and Left-leaning news sources**. A separate audit by Northwestern researchers Nicholas Diakopoulos and Daniel Trielli found more evidence of Google bias. The audit **revealed Google's "Top Stories" section, which often appears at the very top of search results, [favors a very small number of Left-leaning media outlets](#)**.

According to the 2014 Pew Research Study, [Where News Audiences Fit on the Political Spectrum](#), 37% *Google News* readers hold political values to the political left or left-of-center. 20% of *Google News's* audience is right or right-of-center (compared with 26% of all respondents to the survey). Roughly 43% of *Google News's* audience is considered mixed or center (compared with 36% of all respondents to the survey).

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2019 AllSides Google "Top Stories" Bias Audit

AllSides conducted an [audit of Google's "Top Stories" section](#) following two mass shootings that occurred in Dayton, OH and El Paso, TX in early August 2019. **The findings revealed the first three articles users saw in the "Top Stories" section for shooting-related queries were mostly from CNN and left-leaning media outlets, reinforcing previous audits completed by AllSides and researchers at Northwestern University.**

The audit was reviewed by a multipartisan team of individuals from the left and right. AllSides uses a [multi-partisan, balanced, patented system for measuring bias](#).

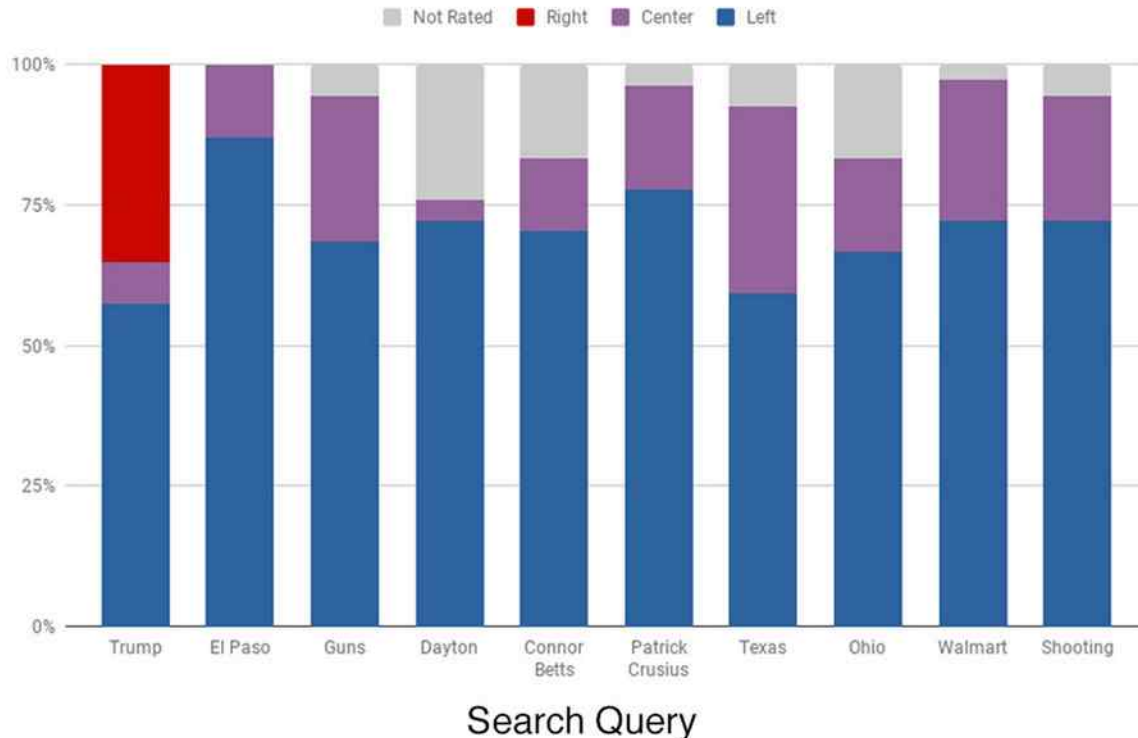
AllSides assessed 522 news articles that were featured as one of the top three results in Google's "Top Stories" section for 10 shooting-related queries over three days.

The audit found:

- 70% of results were from outlets that have an [AllSides Media Bias Rating](#) of [Lean Left](#) or [Left](#).
- 18% of stories were from outlets that have a [Center](#) media bias.
- 4% of stories were from [Lean Right](#) or [Right](#) biased outlets.
- 8% of results came from outlets not rated by AllSides.



AllSides Media Bias Rating of Outlets Featured in Google “Top Stories” Following August 2019 Mass Shootings



A search for each term was conducted six times at 30-minute intervals on Aug. 5, 6 and 7, 2019, for a total of 7.5 hours. This chart shows the bias of media outlets that appeared as part of the top 3 stories in Google’s “Top Stories” section for each query.

Visit [AllSides.com](https://www.allsides.com) to view over 600 media bias ratings and methodology.

In addition, nearly half (46%) of results came from just three news websites. [CNN](#) (25%), the [New York Times](#) (14%) and the [Washington Post](#) (7%) appeared in the first three results of the “Top Stories” box most often.

[Read the full Google bias audit here.](#)

2018 AllSides Google News Bias Audit

In August 2018, AllSides [Google News bias study](#) included 123 different measurements of Google News bias over two weeks, from August 23 to September 5, 2018. Eighty-eight of those measurements assessed the number of links that pointed to media sources AllSides rates as Left, Center, or Right.

Because the vast majority of traffic goes to the very first links displayed on Google, AllSides also took into consideration link position. We gave the top 5 links more weight than those that appeared lower on the page.

The aggregate result indicated that the overall bias of Google News is 65% Left, 20% Center, 16% Right. [View the AllSides study here.](#)

Northwestern University Research on Google News Bias

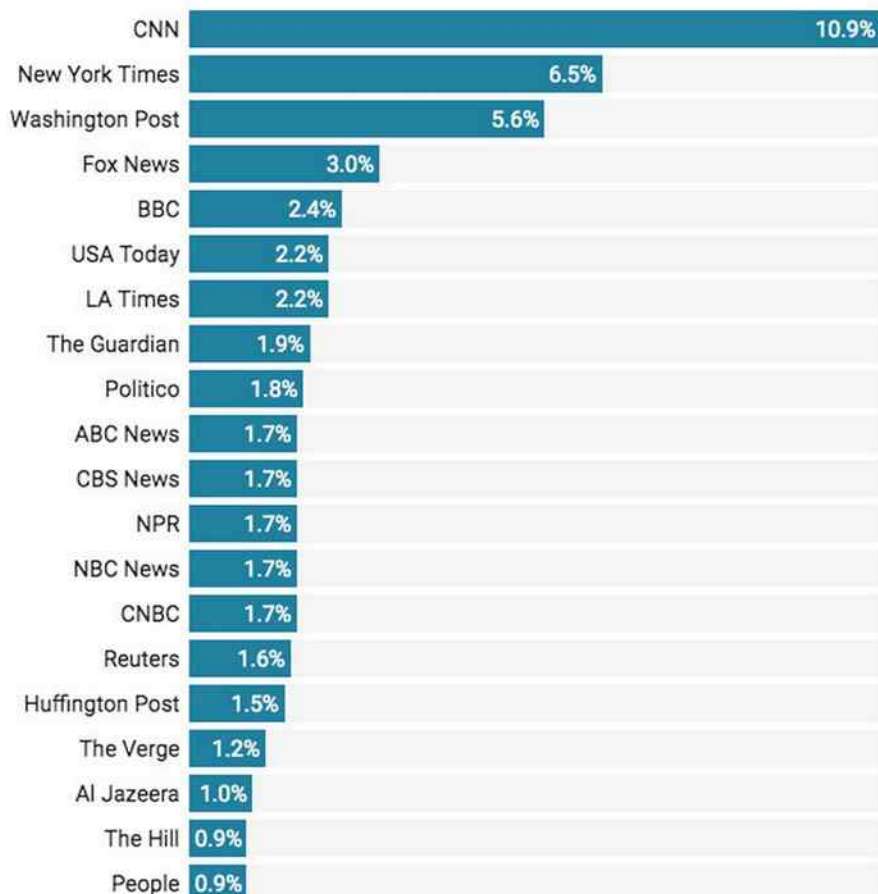
The [audit](#) by Northwestern involved researchers collecting Google results for more than 200 queries related to the news (such as “colin kaepernick,” “earthquake,” “tax reform,” or “healthcare.gov”) in November 2017. They took measures to reduce the impact of result personalization and ran each query once per minute for 24 hours. They collected 6,302 unique links to news articles that appeared in the Top Stories section, with each link amounting to an impression each time it appeared.

Researchers found that just 20 news sources account for more than half of article impressions on Google Top Stories.

Media Bias Rating



Percentage of Google “Top Stories” Impressions for Top 20 Sources



Bias Ratings: AllSides Media Bias Ratings, AllSides.com

Data: Trielli, D., & Diakopoulos, N. (2019) Search as News Curator: The Role of Google in Shaping Attention to News Information

Bar graph: Columbia Journalism Review

The top 20 percent of sources (136 of 678) accounted for 86 percent of article impressions. The top three accounted for 23 percent: [CNN](#), [The New York Times](#), and [The Washington Post](#). Each of these outlets has a [Lean Left AllSides Media Bias Rating](#). [Learn more about this study on the AllSides blog](#).

Conservative Claims of Google and YouTube Bias

In August 2018, [President Donald Trump claimed Google is “rigged” against him](#), and that Google is “suppressing voices of conservatives.” In December 2018, [Google CEO Sundar Pichai appeared on Capitol Hill](#) and was grilled about bias, which he denied. In July 2019, [President Trump held a social media summit](#) to discuss alleged anti-conservative bias by big tech companies like Google, telling attendees “we’re not going to be silenced.”

While AllSides has independently verified claims that Google News is biased to the Left, claims have also been made that Google's main search engine, as well as YouTube (which Google owns) are also

biased against conservatives. For example, in late June 2019, [YouTube removed a video](#) created by [Project Veritas](#) (Lean Right media bias rating), a nonprofit founded by conservative James O’Keefe that is dedicated to exposing corruption. The video showed undercover footage of Google executive Jen Gennai discussing the tech giant’s search algorithm. Some of those on the right said Gennai’s comments confirmed Google is biased and that the search giant is taking a role in shaping elections. AllSides found the story was largely ignored by media outlets on the Left.

In October 2017, conservative nonprofit [PragerU sued Google and YouTube](#) for "unlawfully censoring its educational videos and discriminating against its right to freedom of speech." The lawsuit cited over 50 [PragerU](#) videos with a conservative bent that were “restricted” or “demonetized” by Google and YouTube. A judge [threw out the case](#).