

NBA Playoff Ratings Slip As Fans Grumble That League Has Become 'Too Political'



LeBron James has been an outspoken critic of President Trump. KEVORK DJANSEZIAN/GETTY IMAGES

Some basketball fans are souring on the NBA's support of teams and players bringing politics onto the court, tossing an assist to President Donald Trump in his attacks on the league.

"People are tired of watching the highly political @NBA. Basketball ratings are WAY down, and they won't be coming back. I hope football and baseball are watching and learning because the same thing will be happening to them. Stand tall for our Country and our Flag!!!" Trump tweeted to his 86 million followers yesterday.

Donald J. Trump@realDonaldTrump

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A new Harris Poll backs Trump's critique of the NBA, with 39% of sports fans saying they are watching fewer games. And the chief reason why? Politics. The longtime polling agency surveyed nearly 2,000 people over the weekend and gave those who identified as sports fans—two-thirds of the total—ten options to choose from on why they are watching less basketball.

"The league has become too political" was the clear choice, with 38% of respondents who identified themselves as sports fans. "Boring without fans" captured 28% of the vote while the NBA's association with China caused 19% of sports fans to turn the dial, another nod to a league Trump labeled a "political organization" last week after players boycotted games in response to a police officer shooting Jacob Blake seven times in the back in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

While 39% of sports fans say they are watching fewer games, 32% answered they are consuming more basketball this summer (28% say the same amount). Harris did not ask those fans why they were watching more.

NBA ratings are in fact down overall through the first round of the playoffs compared with last year, but it's hardly an apples-to-apples comparison. Summer TV viewership typically lags springtime watching, when the playoffs are normally aired. This year, the overall numbers are skewed by the need to air games during the day to accommodate a playoff calendar that has been condensed because of the pandemic. Ratings are up over last year's playoffs for the games that have aired in prime time.

"While the data shows the league's political leanings will undoubtedly cause some not to watch, the NBA is balancing the issue of racial injustice, supporting its players and completing a successful finish to the season," says John Gerzema, the Harris Poll CEO. "The basketball bubble has kept the league immune from cases of (COVID) infection but not immune from the impact politics can have on ratings and public sentiment."

Trump and the NBA's star players have been at odds since he took office in 2017. It's a tradition for teams that win championships to visit the White House, but the Golden State Warriors, who won the 2017 NBA Finals, followed the lead of their star Stephen Curry and refused to visit. Trump quickly withdrew the invitation after the slight. LeBron James has called Trump a "bum," and Trump targeted James after the four-time MVP appeared on CNN discussing the opening of his charter school.

Donald J. Trump@realDonaldTrump

Lebron James was just interviewed by the dumbest man on television, Don Lemon. He made Lebron look smart, which isn't easy to do. I like Mike!

The responses on why people are watching fewer games tilted based on party affiliation, not surprisingly. Fifty-seven percent of Republicans choose "too political" and 36% selected China as reasons they watched fewer games; the corresponding figures among Democrats were 22% and 8%. (Respondents could select more than one answer.)

Harris also found the NBA is more partisan than any other sport. Only 34% of Republicans say they "actively follow" the NBA, compared with 48% of Democrats. The gap of 14 percentage points is the largest of any sport. For comparison, 54% of Democrats actively follow the NFL versus 51% of Republicans.

Source:

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/kurtbadenhausen/2020/09/02/poll-38-of-sports-fans-say-nba-is-too-political-for-reason-why-they-are-watching-less/#c9ac3817aacd>

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