AEI

The Exit Polls

A HISTORY AND TRENDS OVER TIME, 1972–2020

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In the following pages, the editors of this AEI Public Opinion Study look at how key demographic groups have voted over time. This compilation covers 13 presidential elections, and it will be invaluable for scholars, journalists, and others interested in how voting patterns have changed over time. To complement the data, the editors interviewed Joe Lenski (cofounder and executive vice president of Edison Research), who has been involved with the national exit poll since 1988 and who now, with a small army, conducts the exit poll for the four networks called the National Election Pool. Karlyn Bowman and Samantha Goldstein conducted the interview in June 2021. The interview has been edited for clarity.

An Interview with Edison Research Cofounder and Executive Vice President Joe Lenski

AEI: How did you get interested in the polling business?

Joe Lenski: My background is a little odd. My degree from Princeton University in 1987 was in mechanical engineering. I was always interested in politics, in numbers and statistics. As a high school senior, I worked as an intern in my congressman's office. I took six courses in politics at Princeton—that was probably a record for a mechanical engineering graduate. Like any other 21-year-old graduating college, I had no idea of what I wanted to do after graduation. I looked at a bunch of things. I thought I might teach math or work as an engineer. I had done three summers at Boeing Helicopters, where my dad worked as an engineer for more than 50 years. One day a friend who worked in career services at Princeton told me he had found the perfect job for me. It was a statistical associate position in the CBS News election and survey unit. I decided this was exactly what I wanted to do. So we pulled an all-nighter to try to put together a resume to convince them I knew enough statistics and enough about elections and had the programming skills to do the job. CBS used a very obscure statistical language then called APL, and I had taken a few courses in it. I met with the big three there, Murray Edelman, the late Warren Mitofsky, and Kathy Francovic, and somehow convinced them to hire me.

I worked on the 1988 election, which was the last election year where each network and several other news organizations did their own exit polls. It was the last real competition among them. It was also the last time the networks had significant amounts of money to invest in exit polls, and it enabled a 22-year-old like me to go to the Iowa caucus and the New Hampshire primary and to both conventions. I was very fortunate to be one of the last few in the door to see that competition when the networks had the resources to cover elections that competitively and in that much depth.

I went back to graduate school at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania for two years and stayed in touch with the election unit. Then Edelman and Mitofsky became head of the new network exit poll consortium called Voter Research and Surveys (VRS) that operated from 1989 to 1992. I consulted with VRS in 1990 and 1992 and did some freelance programming and statistical work, and I worked on the decision teams on election nights.

In 1993, VRS merged with News Election Service—the consortium that had counted the votes for the networks since 1964—to form the Voter News Service (VNS). I worked there as a consultant in 1994, and that same year, Larry Rosin and I started Edison Research, a media research company specializing in research for radio, cable TV, and music companies. At

Edison, we also started doing our own exit polls—a mayor's race in New York City, a couple of governor's races in New Jersey, and international exit polls.

1994 was a critical year. In 1990 and 1992, the networks used the consortium projections for their election night work. But in 1994, ABC put together a decision team that would take the consortium's information and make its own calls faster, in many cases, than the consortium calls. Once that happened, the other networks got into the game. So I was hired with Mitofsky to be on a shared CNN and CBS decision team for the 1996, 1998, and 2000 elections.

In 2000, the fallout from the disputed presidential election in Florida led VNS to do a massive internal review of what happened and to revamp its system for 2002. At the same time, Mitofsky and I were asked by CNN in 2002 to put together a backup system using precinct returns to call elections. It was called CNN Real Vote. And in 2002, when there were problems with the exit polls and there were no state exit polls, CNN used the CNN Real Vote precinct model to call races.

After 2002, the networks pulled the plug on VNS and started to look for alternatives. Mitofsky and I put together a proposal to take over the exit poll using the system we had developed in 2002, enhancing it to do exit polls and provide precinct models and projections. It became known, starting in 2003, as the National Election Pool (NEP). The California recall in 2003 was the first exit poll we did for the NEP, and every four years since, we have done the work for the NEP. From 2003 to 2016, NEP had six partners: CBS, NBC, ABC, CNN, Fox, and the AP. The AP and Fox left after 2016 to form online AP VoteCast with the polling firm NORC at the University of Chicago. Since the AP left, we at Edison have also taken over the vote count responsibilities that the AP did. So, since 2017, Edison has been doing the vote count, the exit surveys, and the precinct models. We have just signed a four-year renewal through 2024. With that, Edison will end up being contracted with the NEP for over 21 years.

THE MECHANICS

AEI: How many people worked on the exit poll in 2020?

Joe Lenski: For presidential general elections or midterms, we typically have people at 700 to 1,000 precinct locations. In 2020, we also had people at 200 early voting centers around the country. We interviewed about 30,000 people by telephone before Election Day to identify by mail and early voters. Every survey you saw in 2020 was some mix of these three modes.

Seventy percent of the vote in 2020 was early or by mail. So we increased the number of telephone interviews of by-mail voters and increased the number of early voter locations where we interview people in person. The techniques are the same as an exit poll. We interview people right after they cast their ballot, but now it is during the weeks leading up to the election at early voting centers. So in every survey you see some mix of those three modes.

AEI: How does the process of writing the questionnaire unfold?

Joe Lenski: The exit poll questionnaire is written by a committee made up of the polling directors at the news organizations of the NEP. Three of the four members have to agree to put a question onto the questionnaire. There is usually consensus. The real issue is that you have a limited amount of space on a self-administered questionnaire. Typically, it is a 5.5 by 8.5 piece of paper. It usually fits 18–20 questions. If there is a sufficient sample size, we have multiple versions of the questionnaire. In most states in 2020, we used two versions of the questionnaire. There were four national versions. The questionnaire is basically the same for Election Day voters, for mail and early voters, and for telephone surveys with some adaptations. (See page 3.)

Sample 2020 Exit Poll Questionnaire

edison research

YOUR ANSWERS ARE CONFIDENTIAL
Please check only **ONE** response for each question.
Version 1

[A] **Are you:**
1 ☐ Male
2 ☐ Female

[B] **Are you:**
1 ☐ White
2 ☐ Black
3 ☐ Hispanic/Latino
4 ☐ Asian
5 ☐ American Indian
6 ☐ Other

[C] **In today's election for president, did you just vote for:**
1 ☐ Joe Biden (Dem)
2 ☐ Donald Trump (Rep)
9 ☐ Other: Who? _____
0 ☐ Did not vote

[D] **Which best describes your education? You have:**
1 ☐ Never attended college
2 ☐ Attended college but received no degree
3 ☐ Associate's degree (AA or AS)
4 ☐ Bachelor's degree (BA or BS)
5 ☐ An advanced degree after a bachelor's degree (such as JD, MA, MBA, MD, PhD)

[E] **Are you of Hispanic or Latino descent?**
1 ☐ Yes   2 ☐ No

[F] **In which age group are you?**
1 ☐ 18-24   6 ☐ 45-49
2 ☐ 25-29   7 ☐ 50-59
3 ☐ 30-34   8 ☐ 60-64
4 ☐ 35-39   9 ☐ 65-74
5 ☐ 40-44   10 ☐ 75 or over

[G] **In today's election for U.S. Senate, did you just vote for:**
1 ☐ Dick Durbin (Dem)
2 ☐ Mark Curran (Rep)
9 ☐ Other: Who? _____
0 ☐ Did not vote

[H] **In today's election for U.S. House of Representatives, did you just vote for:**
1 ☐ The Democratic candidate
2 ☐ The Republican candidate
9 ☐ Other: Who? _____
0 ☐ Did not vote

[I] **In your vote for president, how would you rate the importance of**
_____?
1 ☐ The most important factor
2 ☐ An important factor
3 ☐ A minor factor
4 ☐ Not a factor at all

PLEASE TURN THE QUESTIONNAIRE OVER ➤

Illinois (G-2-V1-2020)

Note: The exit pollsters use different questionnaires in different states. This is one of four versions used in Illinois.
Source: Edison Research.

AEI: How much do the exit polls cost?

Joe Lenski: It is not a secret that each of the four NEP members put up multimillions of dollars for this work.

CORONAVIRUS

AEI: How did COVID-19 affect the work you did in 2020?

Joe Lenski: Through March 10, we did about 20 state surveys on six different election days with different combinations of modes. Our entrance poll in Iowa showed a tight race between Bernie Sanders and Pete Buttigieg. That was the only data the

networks had to talk about. New Hampshire was a traditional exit poll because most votes there are cast on Election Day. For the Nevada caucus, we used a combination of an early voting survey and a caucus entrance poll. South Carolina was a traditional exit poll. On Super Tuesday, we used different modes in different states.

Even leading up to March 10, COVID-19 was becoming an issue. We were ready to field exit polls in three more states on March 17. But we pulled the plug on all the in-person interviews. So the March 17 polls in Arizona, Illinois, and Missouri were all telephone surveys.

After that, we took a break, just like the rest of the country, thinking through what would happen next. We didn't do any more surveys for the presidential primaries; we just did the vote count. Once we got to June and July, we wanted to conduct polls in a safe manner for voters and for our interviewers, so we started testing procedures in Delaware, Georgia, Kentucky, and New Jersey. We equipped interviewers with face masks and personal protective equipment. Instead of handing questionnaires to voters, we placed them on a table, and our interviewers invited people to take the questionnaire to fill it out. There was no close contact between our interviewers and voters. We bought 226,080 disposable golf pencils and shipped them to interviewers around the country.

With those procedures in place, we were able to maintain response rates. Typically, for the last decade for in-person exit polls, 40 to 45 percent of voters who are approached end up filling out the questionnaire. When I first started in 1988, response rates were probably around 60 or 65 percent. They are down, but not down as much as response rates for telephone and online surveys over the same period.

CHALLENGES

AEI: What will you do in 2022 or 2024 if vote by mail continues to be popular?

Joe Lenski: Early and mail voting accounted for only 10 to 15 percent of all votes in 2000. Promoting

early and by-mail voting happened after Florida and because the parties prioritized increasing turnout. It also coincided with the goals of election officials. If more people voted before Election Day, they could hire fewer people to work at polling locations on Election Day. In 2020, 70 percent of the vote was cast before Election Day.

Since response rates of telephone polls have dropped, the cost has increased dramatically. Part of the exit poll story over the years is that the networks have pooled resources because they have fewer resources than they used to have. The networks spend less now in actual and non-inflation-adjusted dollars on survey research and vote count over a four-year cycle than when I started in 1988. So there is financial pressure on all these news organizations. We are looking at alternatives to telephone polling. We have done testing on both address-based sampling (mailing out invitations to take a survey), on text to web surveys, and we are doing email surveys.

Address-based sampling is universal, but there are time constraints with this sampling technique. We can get email addresses for a portion of voters. We can get cell phones for a portion of voters. Most of the partisan polling firms have been doing some combination of mixed modes for several cycles. Those of us doing media polling have tried to stay with the gold standard of random-digit dialing or registration-based sampling telephone surveys. We have reached the point in terms of cost, productivity, and coverage that it is not feasible to do only telephone interviewing going forward. Telephone surveys will be adapted over the next four years to include other modes.

AEI: How are you dealing with differential response rates and the criticism that the polls skew Democratic?

Joe Lenski: We have always had differential response rates with the exit poll. We are still using a lot of the procedures Mitofsky developed in 1967 for a Kentucky's governor's race, the first exit poll for a news organization. He realized, for example, that there would be differential response rates by demographic characteristics that interviewers could observe. We

have always measured refusals by gender, age, and race. We know the response rate for these groups historically, and we have always adjusted for them. Age is the main issue. Older people, for example, are less likely to take the exit poll questionnaire. We adjust for it.

Over the years, we have found differences by education levels in response rates, with college-educated voters being more likely to fill out the exit poll than noncollege-educated voters. That difference has become much more partisan. Democrats have done better with college-educated voters, Republicans with noncollege-educated ones. We have evaluated these differences and compared them to the Census surveys, and we have added adjustments. Since 2016, where we trend data by education, we note that the weighting routines have been changed to account for this. That alleviates a lot of the partisan difference, but not all of it.

We started seeing partisan differences in 2004. That year there was criticism when exit polls in some states showed John Kerry up by a few points but Bush ended up winning. It was taken by some as evidence that something nefarious was going on. The explanation was differential nonresponse among partisan groups. We see it in telephone and online polls. I've heard that the American Association for Public Opinion Research report, which is coming out soon, will show that even while controlling for party identification, there are still partisan differences in response.

The biggest challenge for our business is that the basic handshake agreement that started in George Gallup's time may be broken. We as an industry would keep the data we collect private and confidential, and we would share the results being truthful and transparent. Respondents would agree to participate because they trusted that we would live up to these standards. What has happened over the years, and what was exacerbated by Donald Trump's tenure, is that polling has become politicized as part of the fake news concept. A good chunk of voters no longer trusts that handshake agreement with polling organizations, especially polling organizations like ours associated with the media. For a small group of

voters, there is a complete lack of trust in the news organizations we represent, and they are much less likely to participate.

AEI: Are there ways you can get to people who don't trust interviewers to respond?

Joe Lenski: Using a variety of modes will help to some extent. But we will always have nonresponse issues by different modes. Text skews younger in terms of who will respond, for example. Telephone skews older. Email has a middle-aged skew. Surveys are going to adapt because no mode is perfect, but by combining multiple modes, you have a better chance of eliminating biases in any one.

AEI: Are you optimistic about the future of the exit poll?

Joe Lenski: I'm optimistic polling in general still works. As much as our work in 2004, 2016, and 2020 has taken hits for specific errors in specific states and races, the overall average error in surveys is less than it was decades ago. The real issue is educating about the kind of precision you can and can't demand from these data. The average errors in 1996 were larger than they have been in more recent elections. But Bill Clinton was winning by a landslide, so it didn't matter. Now we have races decided by 1 or 2 percentage points. Surveys were never designed for that kind of precision. We live in a time where national elections or crucial elections like the Georgia recall are decided by small margins. There is no way survey research, even without the problems I mentioned, can handle this. There are several things going on. There is a real problem contacting a representative sample. Then there is the trust issue, and then you have really close elections that decide the Electoral College and control of the Senate and House.

But we can still tell the story about Trump doing better than expected among Hispanics in certain places. We told the story of the growing cleavage between White college-educated voters and White noncollege-educated voters. We told the story of red states becoming redder and blue becoming bluer. I don't see 2022 or 2024 being that different.

AEI: What are the pros and cons of having one consortium exit poll and having AP VoteCast?

Joe Lenski: Multiple exit polls are better. You had different groups with different questions, with different sampling techniques. With multiple exit polls, it is easier to communicate that the exit polls do not give us a precise number.

The members of NEP and Edison are committed to interviewing voters in person in as many cases as we can. We will always do Election Day interviewing. We will still need to include samples of voters we can't reach with an exit poll, whether that is adding online, text interviews, or other alternative approaches. We do not believe, however, that using only online surveys for all voters is the right way to go. There are time issues because people make up their minds late. One of my main issues with AP VoteCast is that it is majority non-probability. We try to maintain a probability sample. Its approach depends on a lot of modeling. The best likely voter model is to interview people at the polling place right after they vote. We do not have the benefit of doing that for people who vote by mail, because there is no opportunity to talk to them immediately after they made their decision and decided to mail in their ballot. We are committed to interviewing voters right after they vote. That will remain the main way we talk to voters, but we will cast the net widely.

How Voters Voted: 1972–2020

The following pages examine how key groups have voted for the president in every election since 1972 using the national exit polls. We also include the 2020 results from the new AP VoteCast poll, an alternative to the exit poll. Women comprise a slightly larger share of the electorate than men do today, and they have become more Democratic over time, while men have remained Republican. Married voters support Republican presidential candidates, and non-married voters vote for Democratic ones. The marriage gap is usually larger than the gender gap.

- ■ Vote for Democratic Presidential Candidate (Percentage)
- ■ Vote for Republican Candidate
- ■ Vote for Independent Candidate

———————————————— Exit Polls ———————————————— **AP VoteCast**

Men

	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
Dem	36	50	36	37	41	41	43	42	44	49	45	41	45	46
Rep	62	48	55	62	57	38	44	53	55	48	52	53	53	52
Ind			7			21	10	3						

Women

	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
Dem	37	50	45	44	49	45	54	54	51	56	55	54	57	55
Rep	61	48	47	56	50	37	38	43	48	43	44	42	42	44
Ind			7			17	7	2						

| *Gap* (Points) | 2 | 0 | 17 | 13 | 15 | 5 | 17 | 22 | 14 | 12 | 18 | 24 | 23 | 17 |

Married

	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
Dem	NA	NA	NA	38	42	40	44	44	42	47	42	43	46	44
Rep				62	57	41	46	53	57	52	56	53	53	54
Ind						20	9	2						

Not Married

	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
Dem	NA	NA	NA	47	53	51	57	57	58	65	62	55	58	58
Rep				52	46	30	31	38	40	33	35	38	40	40
Ind						19	9	4						

| *Gap* (Points) | | | | 19 | 22 | 22 | 28 | 28 | 33 | 37 | 41 | 27 | 25 | 28 |

Source: Roper Center US National Election Day Exit Polls, 1972–2016; National Election Pool, 2020; and AP VoteCast conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago for the Associated Press and Fox News, 2020.

Vote by Racial and Ethnic Group

Hispanics, 13 percent of voters in 2020, are a growing share of the eligible US electorate; Blacks are holding steady (13 percent); and Whites are slowly declining (67 percent). Asians, a fast growing racial/ethnic group, were 4 percent in 2020. In recent elections, White voters have supported Republican presidential candidates. Black Americans vote overwhelmingly for Democratic presidential candidates. Hispanics and Asians are solidly Democratic, but Republicans appear to be making some gains.

■ Vote for Democratic Presidential Candidate (Percentage)   ■ Vote for Republican Candidate   ■ Vote for Independent Candidate

──────────────────────────────── Exit Polls ────────────────────────────────   AP VoteCast

White

	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
Dem	31	47	36	35	40	39	43	42	41	43	39	37	41	43
Rep	67	52	56	64	59	40	46	54	58	55	59	58	58	55
Ind			7			20	9	3						

Black

	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
Dem	82	83	85	90	86	83	84	90	88	95	93	88	87	90
Rep	18	16	11	9	12	10	12	8	11	4	6	8	12	8
Ind			3			7	4	1						

Hispanic

	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
Dem	63	76	59	62	69	61	72	67	53	67	71	65	65	64
Rep	35	24	33	37	30	25	21	31	44	31	27	29	32	35
Ind			6			14	6	2						

Asian

	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
Dem	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	31	43	54	56	62	73	65	61	70
Rep						55	48	41	44	35	26	27	34	28
Ind						15	8	4						

Vote by White and Black Men and Women

White women are less enthusiastic about Republican presidential candidates than are White men, though they still vote Republican. More Black women than Black men usually vote for Democratic presidential candidates.

■ Vote for Democratic Presidential Candidate (Percentage)   ■ Vote for Republican Candidate   ■ Vote for Independent Candidate

─────────────────────────────── Exit Polls ───────────────────────────────   AP VoteCast

White Men

	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
Dem	31	47	32	32	36	37	38	36	37	41	35	31	38	39
Rep	66	51	59	67	63	40	49	60	62	57	62	65	61	59
Ind			7			22	22	3						

White Women

	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
Dem	31	46	39	38	43	41	48	48	44	46	42	43	44	46
Rep	68	52	52	62	56	41	43	49	55	53	56	53	55	52
Ind			8			19	8	2						

Black Men

	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
Dem	77	80	82	84	80	78	79	85	86	95	87	81	79	87
Rep	23	18	14	12	14	14	16	12	13	5	11	13	19	12
Ind			3			9	6	1						

Black Women

	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
Dem	86	84	88	93	90	87	89	94	90	96	96	94	90	93
Rep	14	13	9	7	9	8	8	6	10	3	3	4	9	6
Ind			3			5	2	1						

Vote by Age Group

In recent elections, 18–29-year-olds have voted solidly for Democratic presidential candidates. Among 30–44-year-olds, the Democratic preference has been less strong. Older voters are more Republican. In the 2020 exit poll, 18–29-year-olds comprised 17 percent of voters, 30–44-year-olds were 23 percent, 45–64-year-olds were 38 percent, and 65 and older voters were 22 percent.

■ Vote for Democratic Presidential Candidate (Percentage)   ■ Vote for Republican Candidate   ■ Vote for Independent Candidate
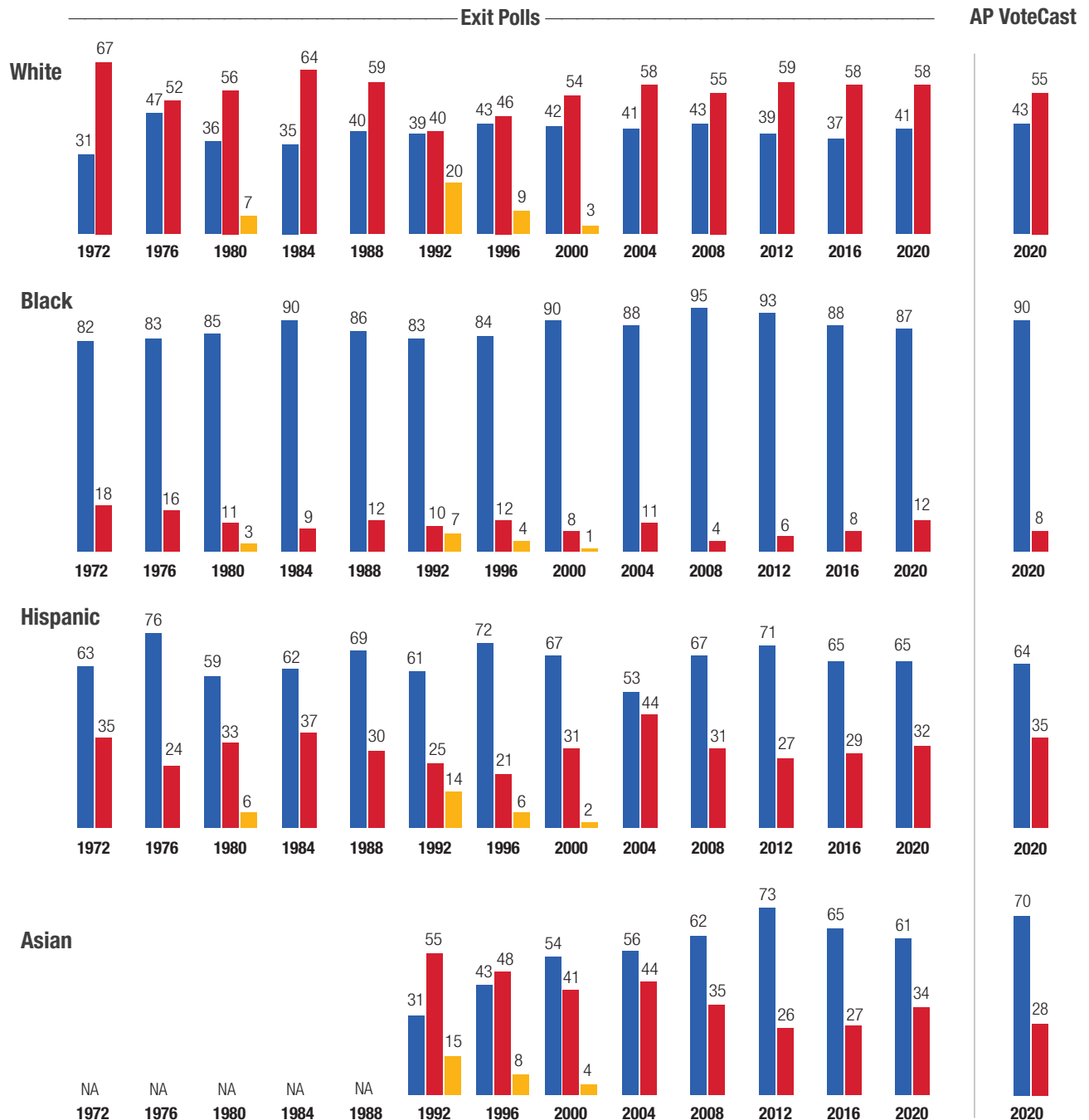
——————————————————————— Exit Polls ———————————————————————   AP VoteCast

18–29-Year-Olds
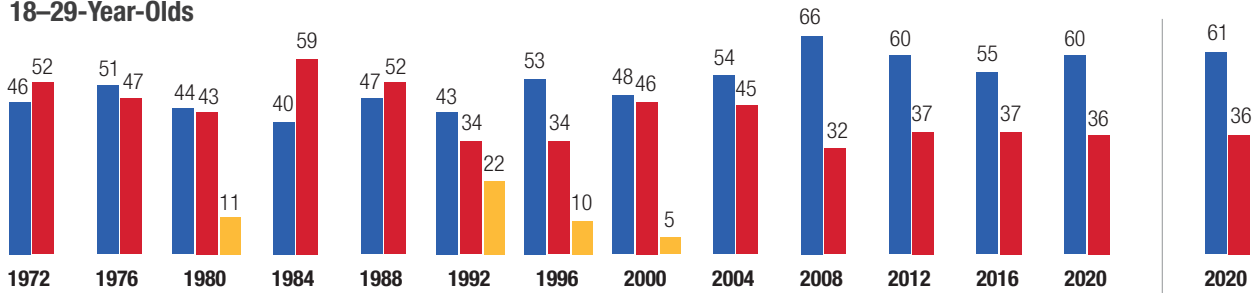
30–44-Year-Olds
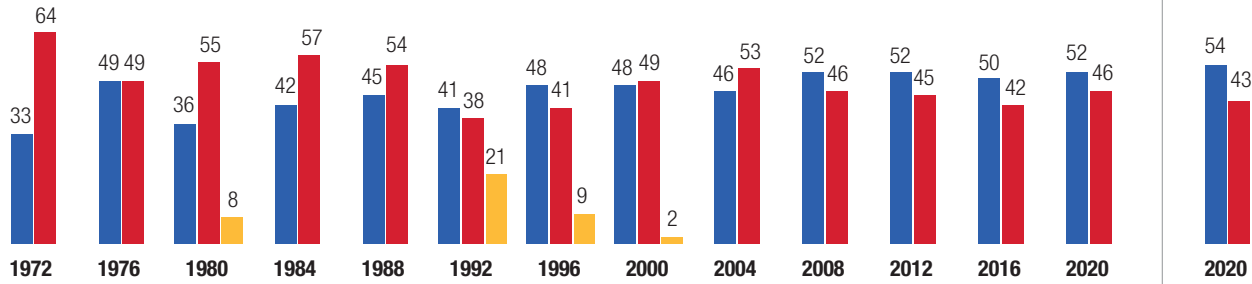
45–59-Year-Olds
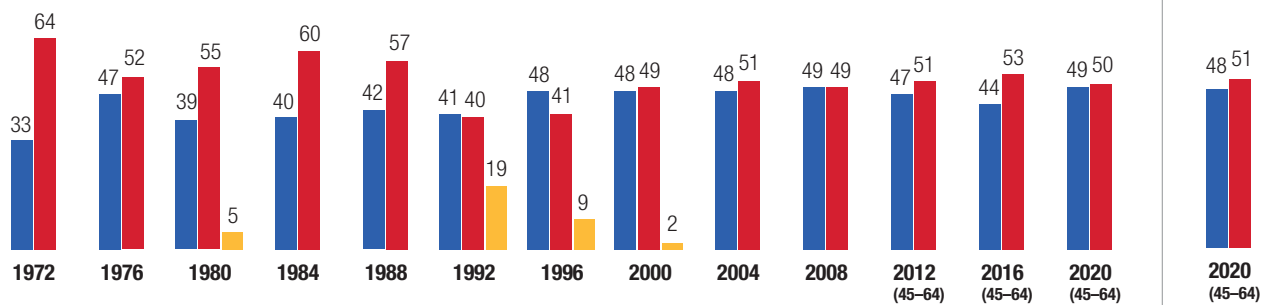
60-Year-Olds and Older
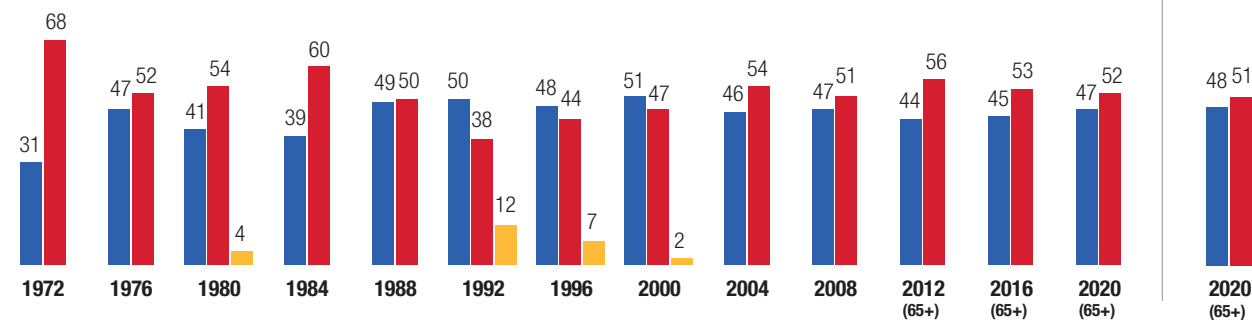
Vote by Education Level

The US population is becoming more educated. Voters with some college split their votes in the 2020 presidential contest. In 2016 and 2020, voters with a college degree cast ballots for the Democratic presidential candidate. People with a postgraduate education vote solidly for Democratic presidential candidates. College graduates were 41 percent of voters in 2020, and noncollege graduates were 59 percent.
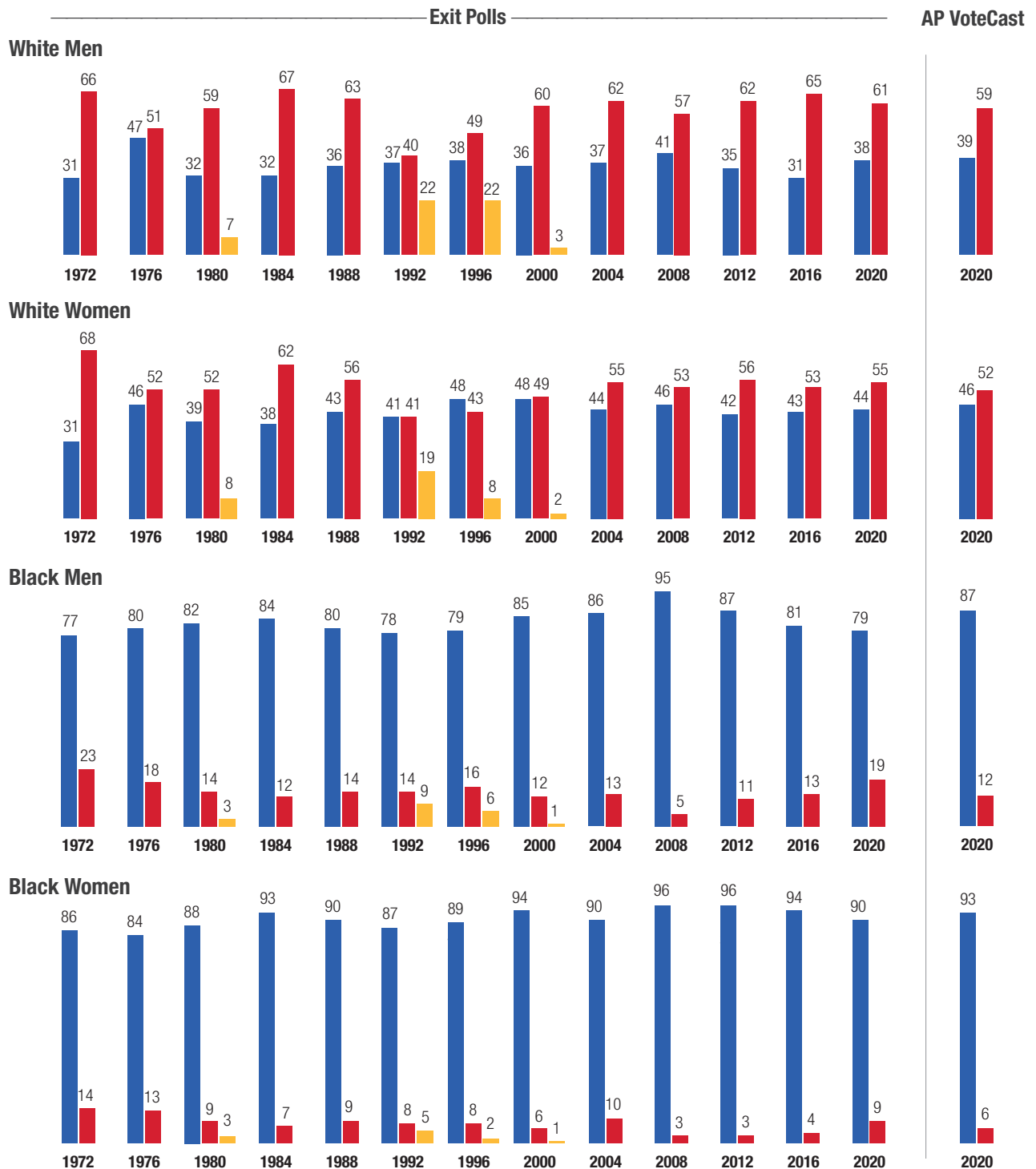
■ Vote for Democratic Presidential Candidate (Percentage)   ■ Vote for Republican Candidate   ■ Vote for Independent Candidate

Exit Polls ———————————————————————————————— AP VoteCast

High School Graduate

Year	Dem	Rep	Ind
1980	43	51	4
1984	39	60	
1988	49	50	
1992	43	36	21
1996	51	35	13
2000	48	49	1
2004	47	52	
2008	52	46	
2012	51	48	
2016	45	51	
2020	NA		
2020 (AP VoteCast)	46	52	

Some College

Year	Dem	Rep	Ind
1980	35	55	8
1984	38	61	
1988	42	57	
1992	41	37	21
1996	48	40	10
2000	45	51	3
2004	46	54	
2008	51	47	
2012	49	48	
2016	43	52	
2020	47	50	
2020 (AP VoteCast)	48	50	
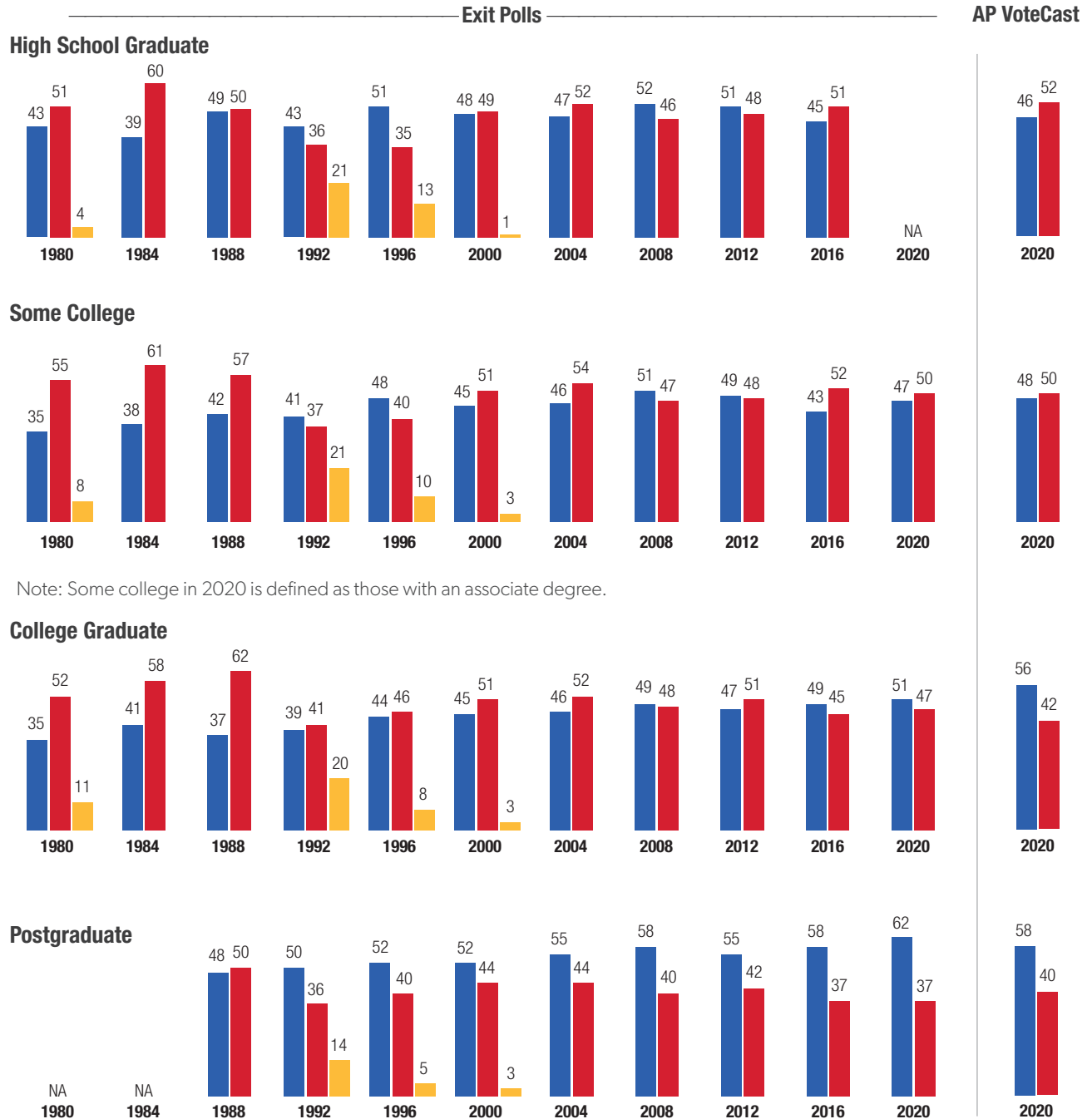
Note: Some college in 2020 is defined as those with an associate degree.

College Graduate

Year	Dem	Rep	Ind
1980	35	52	11
1984	41	58	
1988	37	62	
1992	39	41	20
1996	44	46	8
2000	45	51	3
2004	46	52	
2008	49	48	
2012	47	51	
2016	49	45	
2020	51	47	
2020 (AP VoteCast)	56	42	

Postgraduate

Year	Dem	Rep	Ind
1980	NA		
1984	NA		
1988	48	50	
1992	50	36	14
1996	52	40	5
2000	52	44	3
2004	55	44	
2008	58	40	
2012	55	42	
2016	58	37	
2020	62	37	
2020 (AP VoteCast)	58	40	

Vote by Groups of White Voters

In 2020, White women with a college degree voted for Joe Biden; White noncollege women voted solidly for Donald Trump. White men with a college degree voted for Trump narrowly in 2020, while those without a college degree voted solidly for him.

■ Vote for Democratic Presidential Candidate (Percentage)   ■ Vote for Republican Candidate   ■ Vote for Independent Candidate

———————————————————————— **Exit Polls** ———————————————————————— **AP VoteCast**

White Women, College

	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
Dem	39	43	46	45	49	52	49	52	46	51	54	60
Rep	46	56	53	39	42	44	50	47	52	43	45	39
Ind	13			17	7	3						

White Women, Noncollege

	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
Dem	38	36	42	39	48	45	40	41	39	34	36	39
Rep	54	63	57	41	41	52	59	58	59	61	63	60
Ind	6			20	10	2						

White Men, College

	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
Dem	26	33	33	37	37	34	39	43	38	39	48	46
Rep	61	66	65	43	53	63	59	55	59	53	51	51
Ind	11			20	8	2						

White Men, Noncollege

	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
Dem	34	31	37	38	38	49	35	41	33	23	28	34
Rep	59	68	61	37	45	46	64	58	64	71	70	64
Ind	5			25	15	4						

Vote by Partisan Affiliation

Republicans and Democrats are very loyal to their party's presidential candidates as the results below show. In 2020, 37 percent of voters reported that they were Democrats, 36 percent Republicans, and 26 percent independents.

Legend: ■ Vote for Democratic Presidential Candidate (Percentage) ■ Vote for Republican Candidate ■ Vote for Independent Candidate

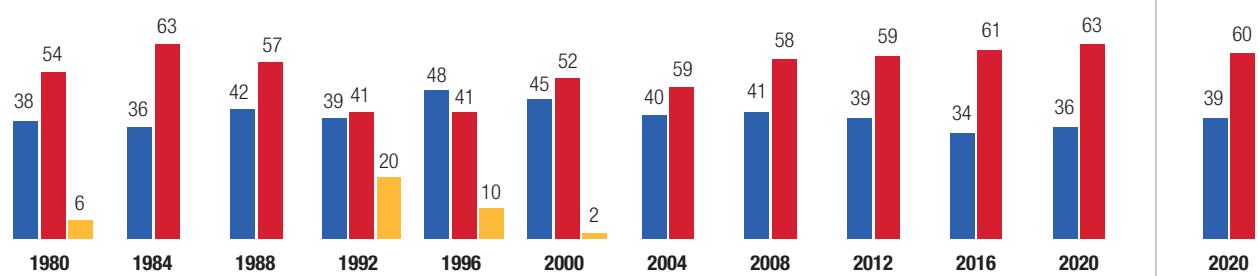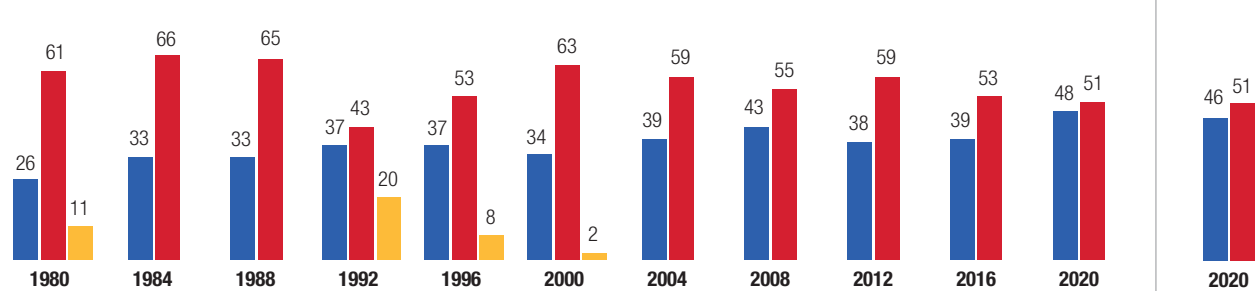**————— Exit Polls —————**   **AP VoteCast**
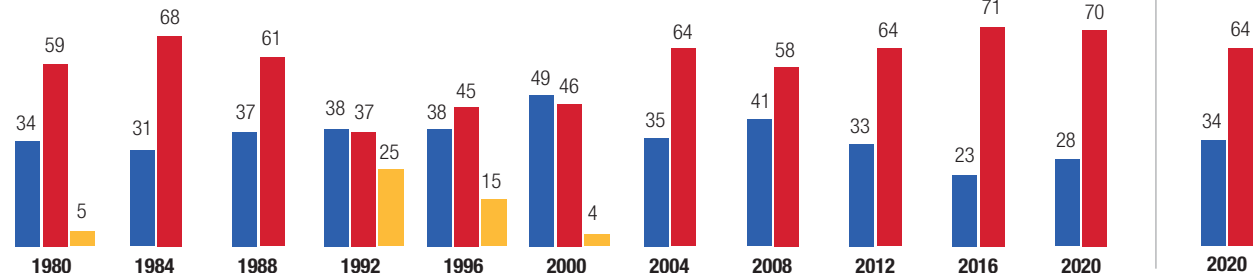
Republicans

Year	Dem	Rep	Ind
1972	7	92	
1976	9	90	
1980	9	86	5
1984	7	92	
1988	8	91	
1992	10	73	17
1996	13	80	6
2000	8	91	1
2004	6	93	
2008	9	89	
2012	6	93	
2016	8	88	
2020	6	94	
2020 (AP VoteCast)	8	91	

Democrats

Year	Dem	Rep	Ind
1972	61	37	
1976	77	22	
1980	67	26	6
1984	74	25	
1988	82	17	
1992	77	10	13
1996	84	10	5
2000	86	11	12
2004	89	11	
2008	89	10	
2012	92	7	
2016	89	8	
2020	94	5	
2020 (AP VoteCast)	95	4	

Independents

Year	Dem	Rep	Ind
1972	35	62	
1976	43	54	
1980	30	55	12
1984	36	63	
1988	43	55	
1992	38	32	30
1996	43	35	17
2000	45	47	6
2004	50	47	
2008	52	44	
2012	46	50	
2016	42	46	
2020	54	41	
2020 (AP VoteCast)	52	37	

Vote by Ideological Identification

As with partisan affiliation, self-identified conservatives and liberals vote for the ideologically aligned Republican and Democratic presidential candidate. In 2020, 38 percent of voters chose the label conservative, 38 percent moderate, and 24 percent liberal. In the exit polls in recent elections, self-identified moderates have voted for the Democrat.
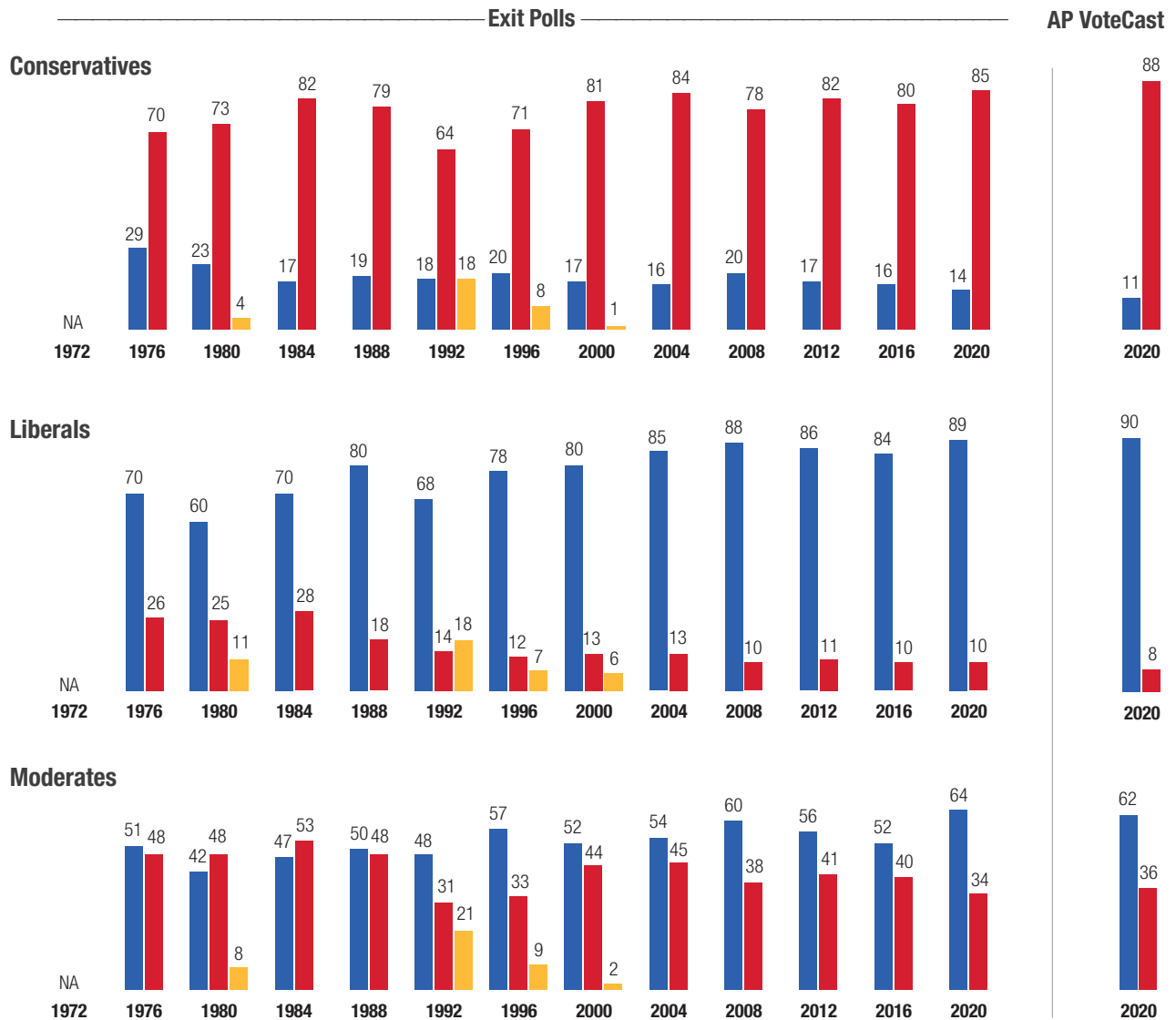
■ Vote for Democratic Presidential Candidate (Percentage) ■ Vote for Republican Candidate ■ Vote for Independent Candidate

─────────────── Exit Polls ───────────────   AP VoteCast

Conservatives

	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
Dem	NA	29	23	17	19	18	20	17	16	20	17	16	14	11
Rep		70	73	82	79	64	71	81	84	78	82	80	85	88
Ind			4			18	8	1						

Liberals

	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
Dem	NA	70	60	70	80	68	78	80	85	88	86	84	89	90
Rep		26	25	28	18	14	12	13	13	10	11	10	10	8
Ind			11			18	7	6						

Moderates

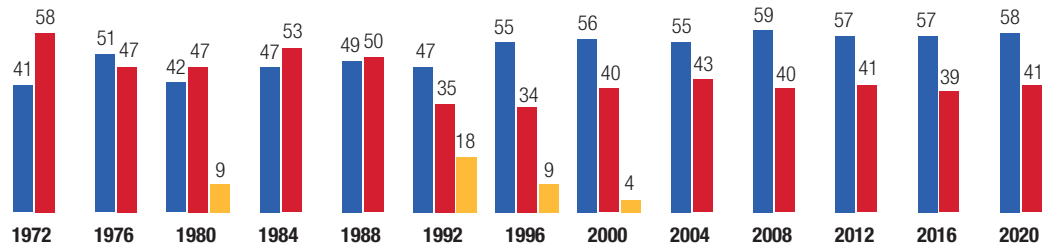|	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
Dem	NA	51	42	47	50	48	57	52	54	60	56	52	64	62
Rep		48	48	53	48	31	33	44	45	38	41	40	34	36
Ind			8			21	9	2						

Vote by Region

Since 1992, voters in eastern states have voted heavily for Democratic presidential candidates. The Midwest went for Barack Obama in 2008 but was less enthusiastic about his second term in 2012. Since then, midwestern voters have voted more for Republican than Democratic presidential candidates. The South has been solidly Republican at the presidential level since 2000.
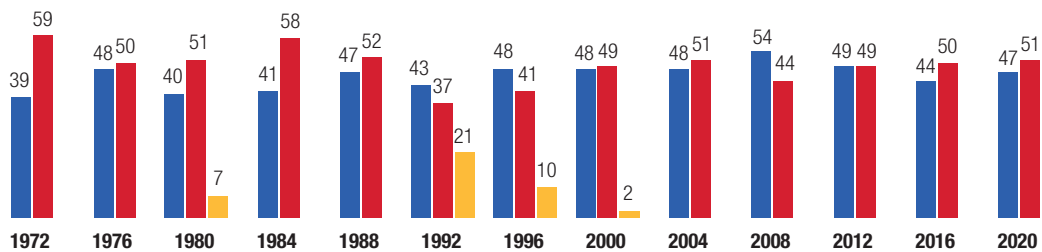
■ Vote for Democratic Presidential Candidate (Percentage)   ■ Vote for Republican Candidate   ■ Vote for Independent Candidate

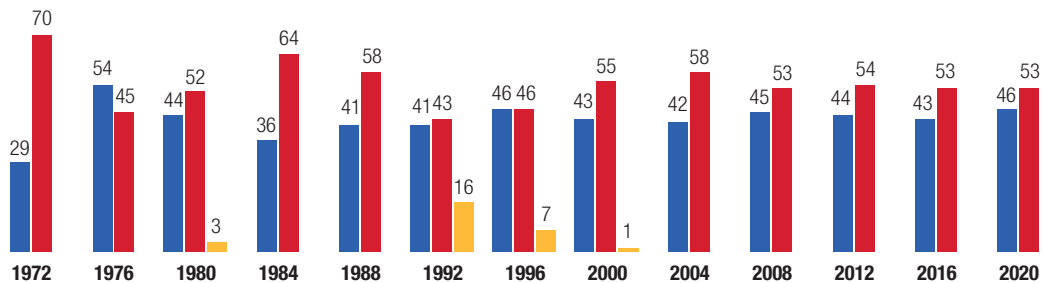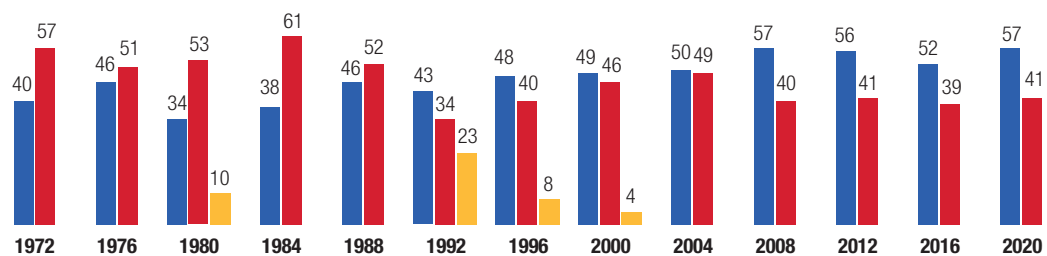──────────────── **Exit Polls** ────────────────

East

Year	Dem	Rep	Ind
1972	41	58	
1976	51	47	
1980	42	47	9
1984	47	53	
1988	49	50	
1992	47	35	18
1996	55	34	9
2000	56	40	4
2004	55	43	
2008	59	40	
2012	57	41	
2016	57	39	
2020	58	41	

Midwest

Year	Dem	Rep	Ind
1972	39	59	
1976	48	50	
1980	40	51	7
1984	41	58	
1988	47	52	
1992	43	37	21
1996	48	41	10
2000	48	49	2
2004	48	51	
2008	54	44	
2012	49	49	
2016	44	50	
2020	47	51	

South

Year	Dem	Rep	Ind
1972	29	70	
1976	54	45	
1980	44	52	3
1984	36	64	
1988	41	58	
1992	41	43	16
1996	46	46	7
2000	43	55	1
2004	42	58	
2008	45	53	
2012	44	54	
2016	43	53	
2020	46	53	

West

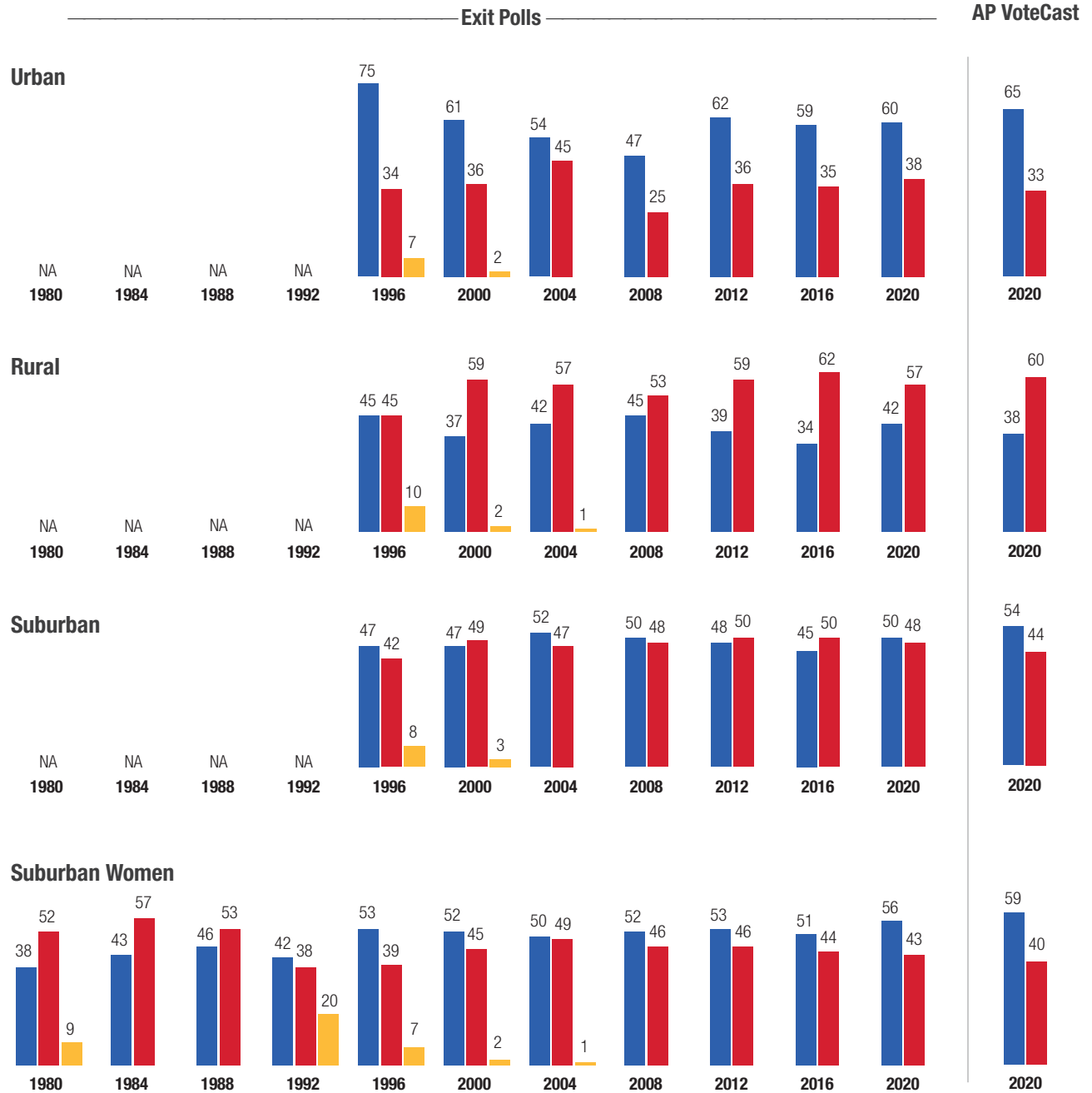| Year	Dem	Rep	Ind
1972	40	57	
1976	46	51	
1980	34	53	10
1984	38	61	
1988	46	52	
1992	43	34	23
1996	48	40	8
2000	49	46	4
2004	50	49	
2008	57	40	
2012	56	41	
2016	52	39	
2020	57	41	

Note: In 1988, "Northeast" was used for the East region, and "North Central" was used for the Midwest.

Vote by Urbanicity

Residents of urban areas vote heavily for Democratic presidential candidates, and rural residents are solidly Republican. Suburban voters supported Donald Trump in 2016 and Joe Biden in 2020. Since 1992, suburban women have voted for Democratic presidential candidates.

■ Vote for Democratic Presidential Candidate (Percentage)　■ Vote for Republican Candidate　■ Vote for Independent Candidate

———————————————— Exit Polls ————————————————　AP VoteCast

Urban

1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
NA	NA	NA	NA	75 / 34 / 7	61 / 36 / 2	54 / 45	47 / 25	62 / 36	59 / 35	60 / 38	65 / 33

Rural

1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
NA	NA	NA	NA	45 / 45 / 10	37 / 59 / 2	42 / 57 / 1	45 / 53	39 / 59	34 / 62	42 / 57	38 / 60

Suburban

1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
NA	NA	NA	NA	47 / 42 / 8	47 / 49 / 3	52 / 47	50 / 48	48 / 50	45 / 50	50 / 48	54 / 44

Suburban Women

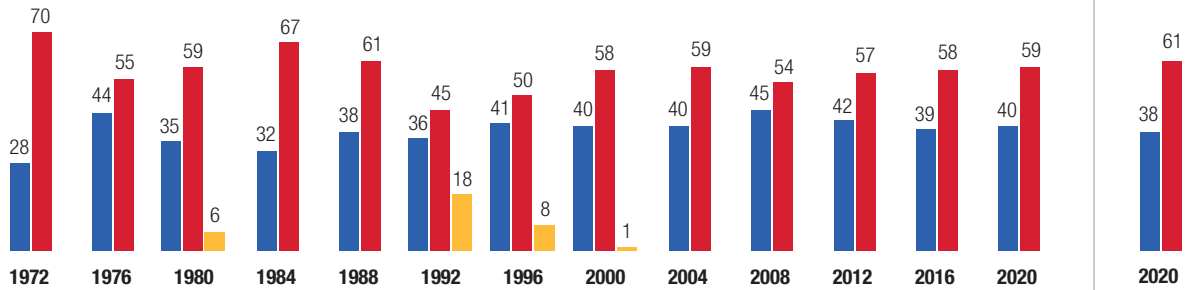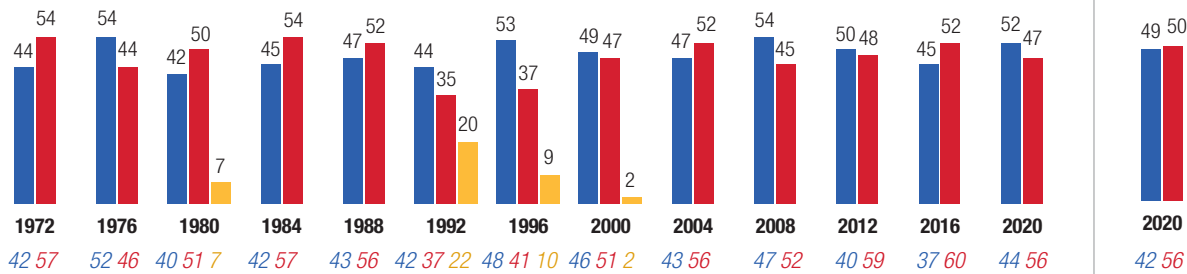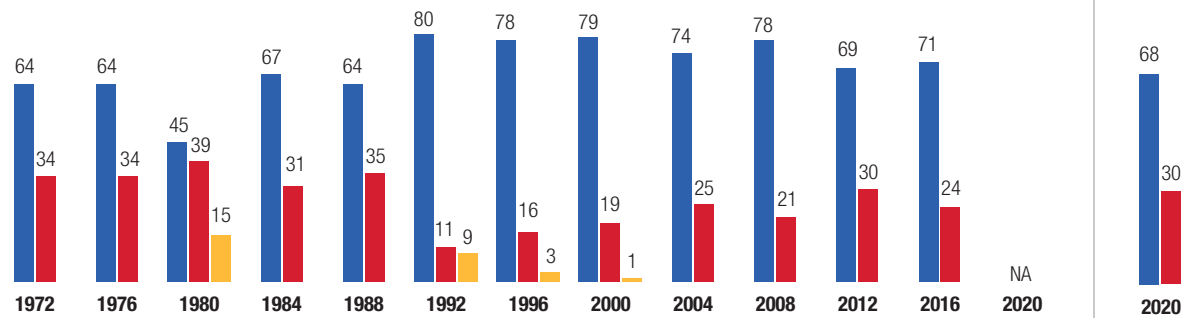| 1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
38 / 52 / 9	43 / 57	46 / 53	42 / 38 / 20	53 / 39 / 7	52 / 45 / 2	50 / 49 / 1	52 / 46	53 / 46	51 / 44	56 / 43	59 / 40

Vote by Religious Group

Protestants tend to vote for Republican presidential candidates, and Jews for Democratic ones. In 2016, Catholics voted for Donald Trump; in 2020, they voted for Joe Biden. In 2020, Protestants were 23 percent of voters, Catholics were 25 percent, and Jews were 2 percent. In 2020, 76 percent of White born-again or evangelical Christians (28 percent of voters) voted for Donald Trump.

■ Vote for Democratic Presidential Candidate (Percentage)   ■ Vote for Republican Candidate   ■ Vote for Independent Candidate

Exit Polls ─────────────────── AP VoteCast

Protestants

	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
Dem	28	44	35	32	38	36	41	40	40	45	42	39	40	38
Rep	70	55	59	67	61	45	50	58	59	54	57	58	59	61
Ind			6			18	8	1						

Catholics

	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
Dem	44	54	42	45	47	44	53	49	47	54	50	45	52	49
Rep	54	44	50	54	52	35	37	47	52	45	48	52	47	50
Ind			7			20	9	2						

White Catholics

	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
	42 57	*52 46*	*40 51 7*	*42 57*	*43 56*	*42 37 22*	*48 41 10*	*46 51 2*	*43 56*	*47 52*	*40 59*	*37 60*	*44 56*	*42 56*

Jews

	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
Dem	64	64	45	67	64	80	78	79	74	78	69	71	NA	68
Rep	34	34	39	31	35	11	16	19	25	21	30	24		30
Ind			15			9	3	1						

White Born-Again or Evangelical Christians

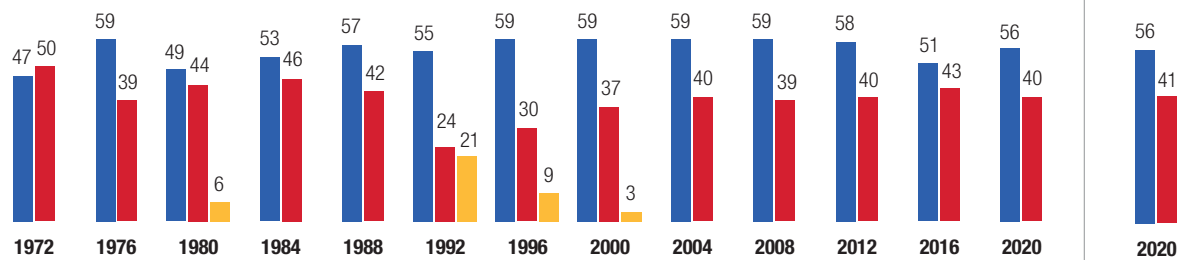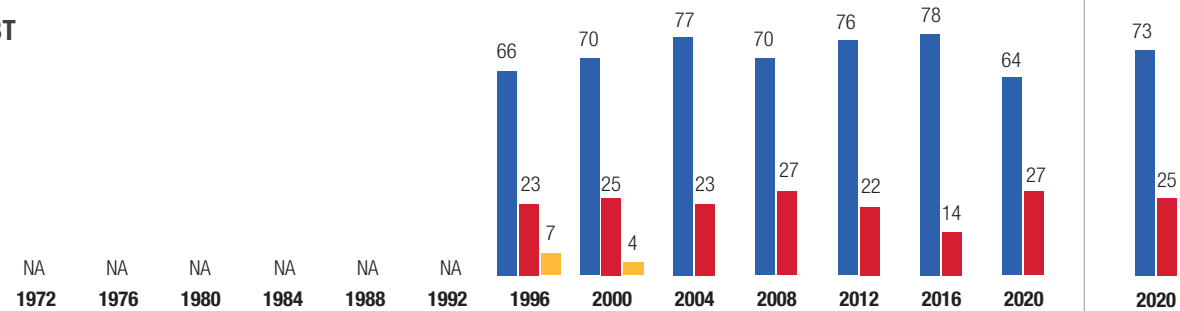|	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2020
Dem	NA	NA	33	NA	NA	23	26	NA	21	24	21	16	24	17
Rep			63			62	65		78	74	78	81	76	82
Ind			3			15	NA							

Vote by Religious Service Attendance

Those who attend religious services once a week or more vote for Republican presidential candidates, while those who never attend vote steadily for Democratic ones. In 2016, 33 percent of voters said they attended religious services once a week or more, 16 percent a few times a month, 29 percent a few times a year, and 22 percent said they never attend.

■ Vote for Democratic Presidential Candidate (Percentage)　■ Vote for Republican Candidate　■ Vote for Independent Candidate
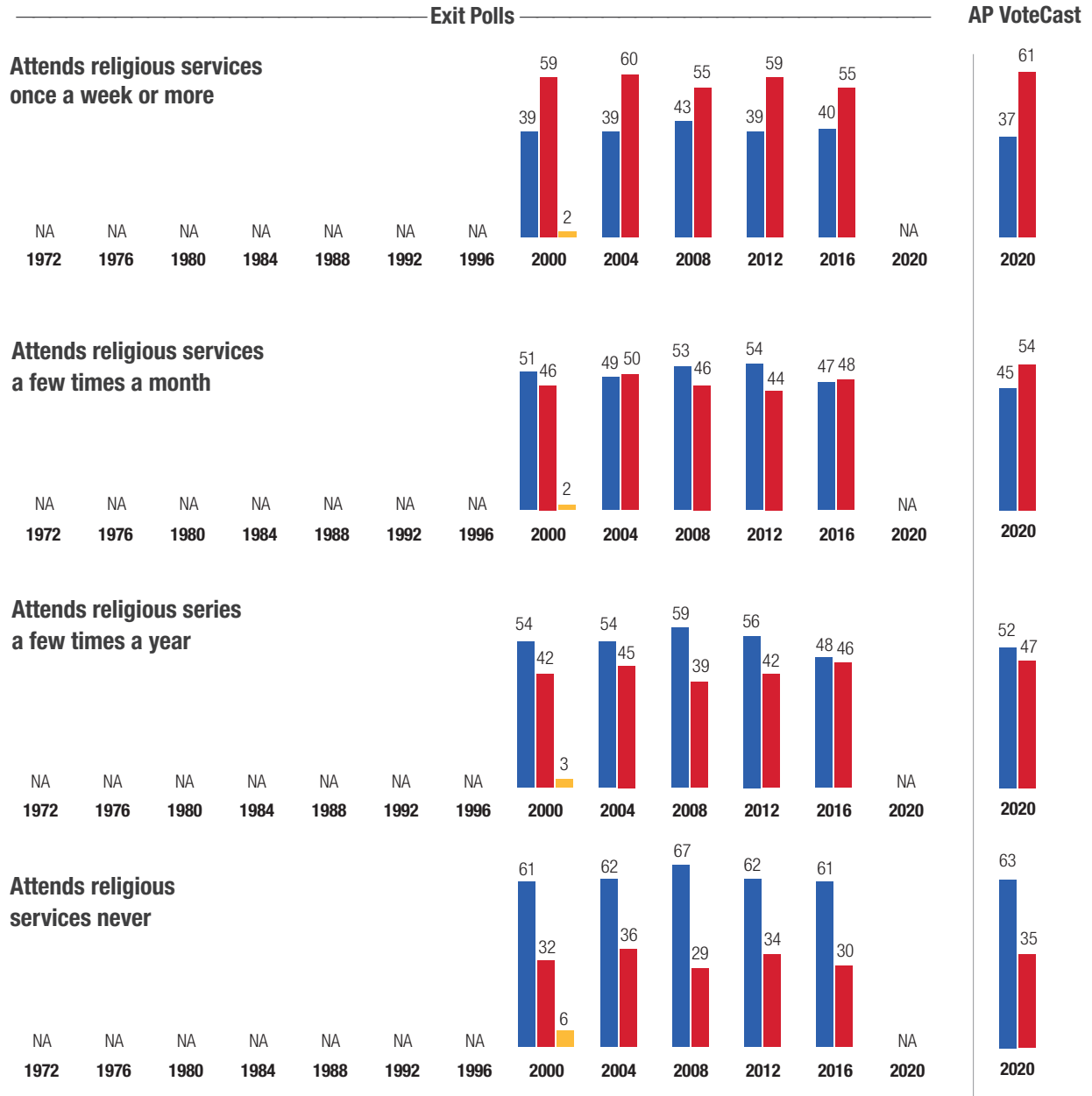
Note: In the 2020 AP VoteCast survey, question wording read "a few times a year or less."

Vote by Other Groups

First-time voters, who tend to be younger, generally vote for Democratic presidential candidates. Members of union households usually vote Democratic. LGBT voters vote solidly for Democratic presidential candidates. In 2020, 7 percent of voters said they were LGBT. Veterans vote for Republican presidential candidates.
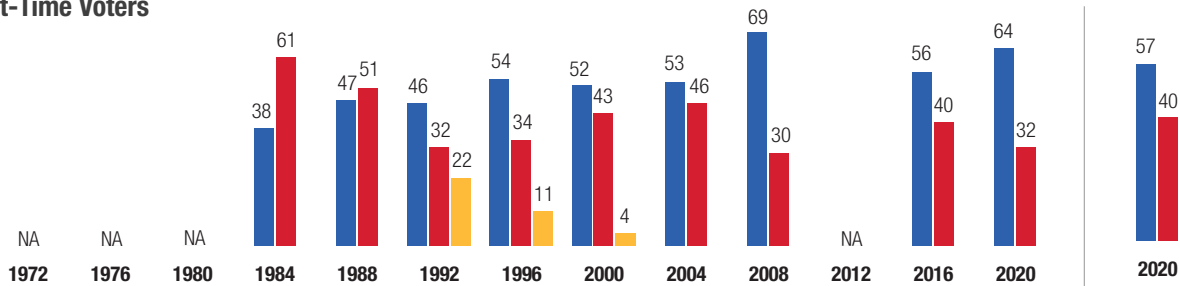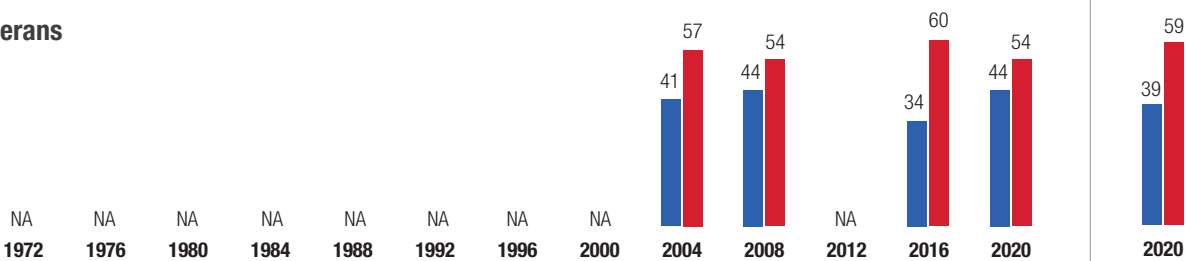
Note: Question wording for LGBT did not include transgender until 2016.

About the Authors

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Acknowledgments